

TRANSBOUNDARY COOPERATION IN THE PRESPA BASIN: EXPERIENCES, PERSPECTIVES AND LESSONS LEARNED

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The Prespa region, combining the two Prespa Lakes and their catchment basin, is situated in South Eastern Europe and shared by Albania, Greece and the FYR of Macedonia. The international ecological significance of the area, and especially the need for sustainable water management for the benefit of both nature and the inhabitants, led to the establishment of the Prespa Park – the first transboundary protected area in the Balkans – with a Joint Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the three littoral countries, in February 2000. Following the Declaration, an interim joint body, the Prespa Park Coordination Committee (PPCC), was established by the three Governments, for the coordination of planning and activities in the region. The PPCC is a non-legal entity that consists of representatives of the Ministries of Environment, the local Municipalities and the NGO community of each state, as well as a permanent MedWet/ Ramsar observer. The PPCC holds regular meetings (twice a year) and is supported by a trilateral Secretariat consisting of three officers from the collaborating NGOs.

Stakeholder participation permeates many aspects of the trilateral cooperation. The completion of the Strategic Action Plan (SAP) for the Sustainable Development of the Prespa Park, in 2001, has been one of the main early accomplishments of the PPCC. The SAP lays down a joint vision for the transboundary protected area, identifies the main management issues and aims to guide future activities in Prespa. What is significant is that the SAP was developed with the participation of experts from all three countries and endorsed following consultations with local, regional and national stakeholders in each side of the basin.

Furthermore, within the eight years of transboundary cooperation a series of sectoral collaboration initiatives have been set out in the Prespa region. In this frame, meetings have been held between the national protected area authorities, the veterinary services and the fire-fighting services of the three sides of the basin. The most successful example is probably the trilateral collaboration of the local authorities, which have adopted a trilateral Memorandum of Understanding and hold regular contacts and cross border meetings.

Transboundary water management constitutes a priority issue in the Prespa Park process, as affirmed in the endorsed SAP and various PPCC meetings. Divergent perceptions on the causes of water problems in the basin are slowly converging through time, discussions and joint studies carried out in the region. Indeed, at the PPCC level consensus is reached among the stakeholders on the necessity of special cooperation on water management on the basis of Directive 2000/60/EC (EU WFD). This is of great significance taking into consideration that two of the three countries sharing the basin are not – as yet – EU member states. Nevertheless, the Directive objectives for coordination of activities at transboundary level, setting up international river basin districts and seeking integrated river basin management are adopted and pursued by the PPCC. The first meeting of the respective water authorities of the three parts of the basin (held in Autumn 2006 as a side event to the 9th regular PPCC meeting) concluded in the need for the establishment of an *ad hoc*, trilateral working group on water management issues – composed of water management authority officials from each country – and the development of a transboundary monitoring system in the Prespa basin, which will incorporate the EU WFD provisions. The water authorities of the three sides have already nominated their representatives in the technical working group, the specifications and final composition of which are expected to be developed soon, within the frames of a much wider multi-annual international project for the Integrated Ecosystem Management of the Prespa Basin. This five-year project

is co-funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Governments of the three littoral states and other international donors. In regard to water management, the project foresees the development of water management plans in Albania and the FYR of Macedonia – the two recipient countries – the strengthening of institutional cooperation on water issues, and the operation of a trilateral working group on water management, which will seek the coordination of efforts and the formulation of an integrated water management plan for the basin in line with EU WFD principles.

The transboundary Prespa Park was established by a high level political Declaration among Albania, Greece and the FYR of Macedonia, proving that cross-border cooperation focusing on environmental objectives is feasible despite any political tensions in a region. The role of NGOs [Society for the Protection of Prespa (Greek local NGO) and WWF Greece] as well as that of international initiatives (Ramsar Convention and its Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative-MedWet) was catalytic to the launching of the Park and the development of the process. Although the trilateral collaboration was established with a non-binding agreement of the three countries, and its provisional institutional bodies do not have the authority to take binding decisions, yet substantial joint activities have been carried out, especially so at local and sectoral levels. The establishment of an institutional structure, regular contacts and involvement of key stakeholders in the process have proven to be fundamental elements for building trust and confronting the difficulties and constraints transboundary cooperation is unavoidably faced with. In respect to water management, consensus is reached among the Committee members on delicate water issues and the need for adoption of the EU WFD provisions for the area. Moreover, transboundary projects concerning water management are being implemented in the basin incorporating the EU Directive principles. Still, political tension seems to have hampered the evolution of the Prespa Park initiative over the years. The adoption of a high-level trilateral agreement for the Prespa Park with specific provisions for integrated water management on the basis of the EU WFD, which has been pursued systematically since 2004 by the PPCC, has not been accomplished mainly because of the continuing tension between Greece and the FYR of Macedonia.

The contribution of the international donor community has been fundamental for the development of the Prespa Park initiative, the support of the process since its takeoff, and the realization of joint projects and activities in the region. German bilateral development assistance funds have been supporting conservation work in Prespa since the mid-90s. The construction of wastewater treatment plants in the FYR of Macedonia part of the basin with KfW (German Bank for Reconstruction) funding is an example. The multi-donor GEF project, initiated in early 2007, foresees the institutional maturation of the Prespa Park, joint environmental monitoring and conservation activities, as well as specific outputs related to transboundary water management on the basis of the EU WFD.

The Prespa Park is a dynamic cooperation initiative that has significantly evolved in time, and at various sectors and levels, despite of the unfavorable political climate in the region. Still, the fact that eight years after the Prime Ministerial Declaration it has not received a formal status as yet poses significant constraints on its effectiveness. The formalisation and institutionalisation of the process is essential for the evolution of the collaboration and the further progress in adoption of joint management measures in sectoral areas. In the specific area of water management a combination of donor support for specific projects, studies and measures with the establishment of an *ad hoc* working group composed of competent state officials paves the way for substantive progress.



Basic References

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