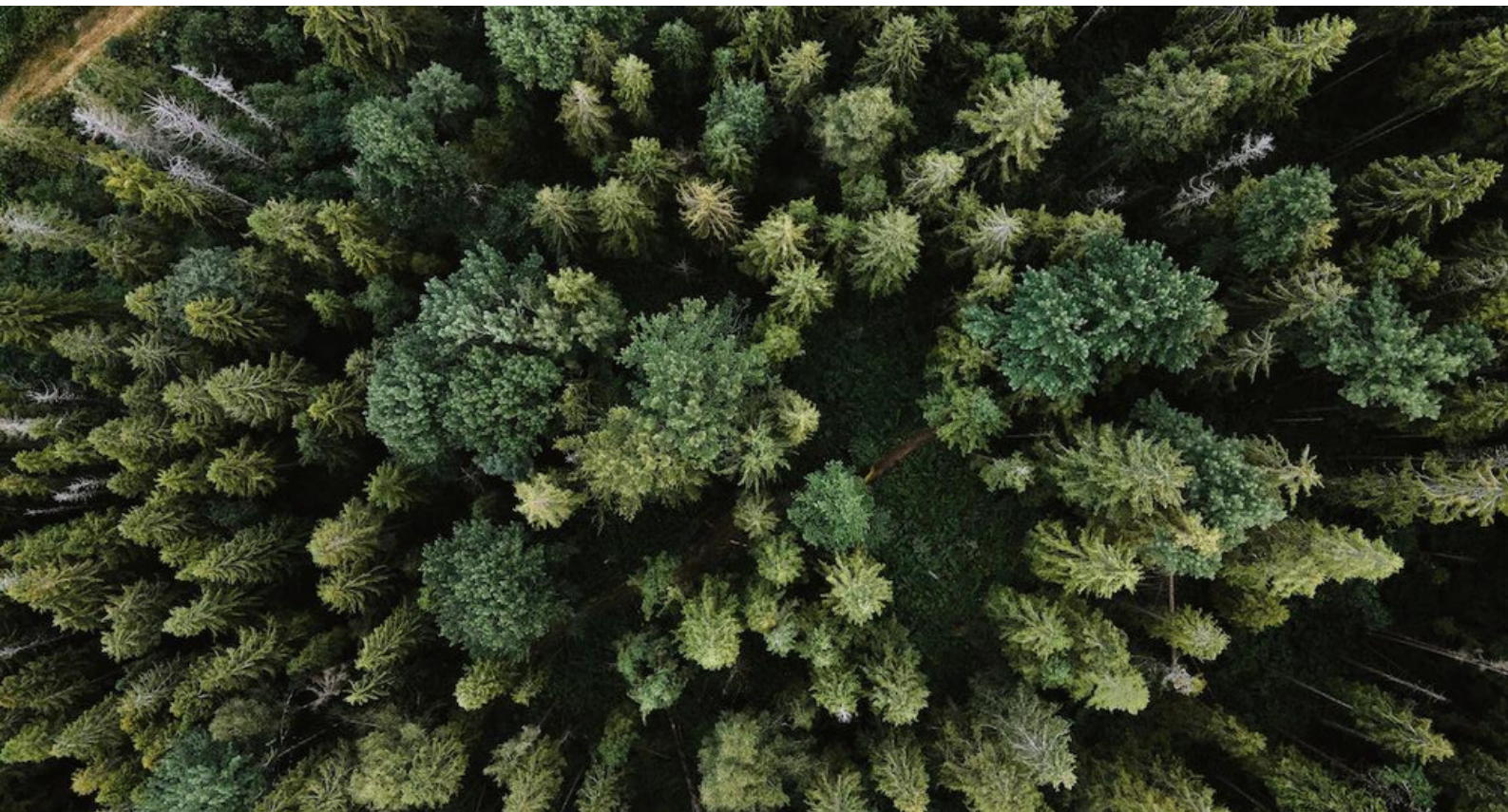




NATIONAL CONVENTION FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA (NCEU-MK)



NEWSLETTER 4

WORKING GROUP 5 ENVIRONMENT



Fourth Session of Working Group 5: Environment (Chapter 27)

„Nature protection through sustainable forest management“

The fourth session of Working Group 5 (WG 5) – Chapter 27: Environment, took place on 23 June 2022, (Thursday) at the MPs Club in Skopje. Attending the session and participating were more than 50 members of the working group, among whom were representatives from all relevant segments of society: MPs; representatives of the Government - Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning (MOEPP), Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy (MAFWE), the Secretariat for European Affairs; representatives from the PE National Forests; Center for Crisis Management; representatives of civil associations; academia; national experts; an expert from Slovakia; and representatives from various diplomatic missions in the country. Hristina Odjaklieska, Deputy Minister (MOEPP), and Bojana Stanojevska - Pecurovska, President of NGO Center for Climate Change from Skopje, both co-chaired the session.

In her opening remarks, **Mileva Gjurovska**, National Coordinator of NCEU-MK, thanked the representatives of the two line Ministries that cover this topic, MOEPP and MAFWE, for their presence and dedication to the work of this session. The fact that this topic is within the domain of two separate ministries, argued Gjurovska, is an indicator that nature cannot be divided per sectorial teams', and why it is essential to

have an integrated approach when it comes to the preservation and protection of nature. In the opinion of Gjurovska, we must all develop an awareness that we are all individually and collectively responsible for nature preservation. This responsibility must not only be imposed on the said Ministries and state institutions. Turning to the present topic of sustainable management of forests, she stressed that we must change the paradigm that there is an abundant forest and that forests are the greatest wealth we possess, because this is simply not true. As Gjurovska underlined, forests are seriously threatened and devastated. They are jeopardized by illegal logging and illegal trade. Referring to the EU Directive 995/2010, she indicated that it is mandatory to take rigorous measures to preserve forests from illegal logging. It is essential to pay more attention to the implementation and compliance with EU legislation. She appealed for greater efficiency in the implementation of the adopted strategies and action plans.



Hristina Odjaklieska, Deputy Minister of Environment and Spatial Planning emphasized that the sustainable management of forests is related to the European Green Agreement, which aims to protect, conserve, and strengthen the natural capital of the EU, hence protecting the health of citizens. This is closely related to the EU biodiversity strategy and the need to protect and preserve ecosystems, which provide essential services such as food, clean water, clean air, and more. Forests mitigate natural disasters and regulate pests and diseases, and contribute to mitigating the impact of climate change. She pointed to the importance of the EU Biodiversity Strategy which identifies specific measures, such as:

- Increasing protected areas rich in biological diversity, which will strengthen the European biological network Natura 2000;
- Strengthening cross-border cooperation for the improvement and restoration of ecosystems;
- Greening European cities and improving the biodiversity of urban environments.



According to Odjaklieska, sustainable management and restoration of degraded forests will increase the absorption of carbon

circular bioeconomy. She emphasized that all policies at the national level should contribute to the preservation and restoration of natural values in our country. The existing division of responsibilities of the various institutions operating in this subject area will be more precisely defined by the new Law on Forests, which is in the drafting stage and it is expected that within the new Law the positions of the two competent Ministries (MOEPP and MAFWE), will be harmonized. The MOEPP recognizes forests as ecosystems in protected areas, and that is precisely why activities are aimed at reevaluation of protected areas. According to her, some progress has been made in this area, as this has been noted by the general public in the country, but also by the EU. The percentage of protected areas has increased to 13.9% of the country's territory. "Natural resources are not inexhaustible, and nature is susceptible to harmful effects from human activities that must be regulated", Odjaklieska pointed out, concluding her introductory presentation.

Abdulshukur Abedini, Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, emphasized the importance of building a strategic approach for the protection of Macedonian forests and forestry. Following the EU strategies for forests, he pointed out that, as early as this decade, we could face even greater risks, primarily due to climate change and natural disturbances that will disable what forests have provided so far, which is ecosys-

tem services. Conversely, opportunities for forestry and the forestry sector could increase, thanks to the application of renewable and bio-based solutions to decarbonize our economy. According to Abedini, "If we want a sustainable future, then our forests are crucial, as they can help transform an economy into a bioeconomy that is nature-positive and climate-neutral." This aspect is central to the European Green Deal and the Green Agenda. However, it is not enough to simply know what to do, it is necessary to actually do it. Enhancing forest biodiversity is the most important investment the forestry sector can make to ensure its long-term economic resilience. Policy frameworks and forest management should ensure this, with incentives and an integrated approach, as well as create an environment, where all relevant stakeholders will be involved – working together to produce new values.



David Geer, Ambassador of the European Union to the Republic of North Macedonia, pointed out that this topic is very important, both for the EU and for North Macedonia, because more than 30% of the territory is covered by forests.

Drawing a parallel with the territory of the EU, where 43% of the territory is covered by forests, he emphasized that forests are a survival system that stabilizes the climate and temperature, purifying both water and air. In addition, they protect villages from floods and landslides, provide wood for processing, but also help increase tourism. Having healthy and resistant forests is significant and a priority for everyone, both for citizens and authorities, as well as for companies.



Referring to illegal logging, the Ambassador called for measures to be taken in the name of the EU Green Deal, which is based on 3 basic foundations: 1) Climate changes; 2) The collapse of biodiversity; and 3) Environmental degradation and the effects of the way we use the planet.

Furthermore, the Ambassador addressed the following issues: preservation of forest biodiversity, reduction of pollution, development of green cities and development of a circular economy to utilize resources to the maximum. All these problems are issues existing in the Union, but also in North Macedonia.

The Green Deal lists several ways to solve these problems. There is the so-called three billion trees project (reforestation by planting three billion trees), by respecting biodiversity in urban and rural environments. The European Commission makes great efforts to restore the destroyed ecosystems throughout Europe, with particular emphasis on the restoration of forests with unequal age of the trees. These are broader measures that include reducing the use of pesticides by 50% by 2030. "Forests are not only the cradle of biological diversity, but also a home for many people and a key part of many people's lives, part of their culture and everyday life, but also a source of means of living," stated Ambassador Geer. He further emphasized that serious work should be done on developing sustainable forest management. In the Republic of North Macedonia, the emphasis should be placed on the protection of forests and previous goals and targets should actually be met and fulfilled. He reiterated that the EU is ready to help in this process in the interest of protecting biodiversity and human lives. Nature protection requires strong institutions, investments in renewable energy sources, greater public awareness, and strong political support from all sides. The Ambassador expressed hope that this debate could be the first step toward that. Finally, he concluded that it is necessary for everyone to understand what the benefits are, but also what the price for noncompliance will be. Action is needed now, here, and globally, and that

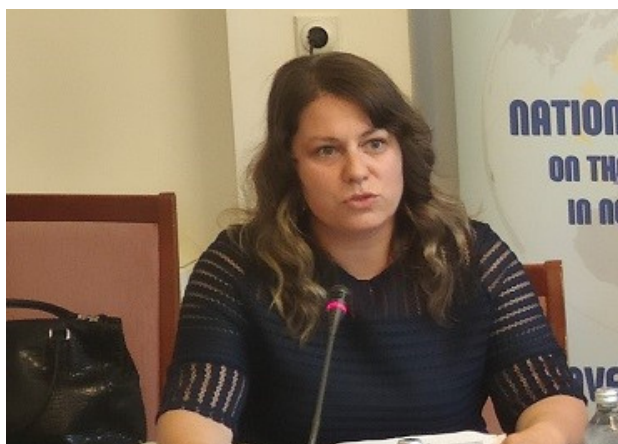
neglect is actually doing irreparable harm.

Henrik Markus, Ambassador of the Republic of Slovakia to North Macedonia, in his address, mentioned his personal experience of cycling through North Macedonia. In his opinion, the country is very beautiful, but greater attention should be paid to the presentation and to greater utilization of the tourist potential. The Ambassador underlined that the biggest problem that needs to be solved unconditionally is pollution, especially the improperly disposed waste in nature.



This is especially a problem in smaller towns and villages because there is no waste management infrastructure, where apart from the financial aspect, there is also a large part that is in the mentality of the local people. Also, illegal logging is a very serious problem, and after talking with the locals in the villages, it was explained to him that this is allowed by the local political elites, in exchange for votes, and this is something that, according to him, must not happen. According to him, the Republic of North Macedonia has potential, but a proper approach needs to be built. He pointed out that

the support from both Slovakia and the EU for these issues will continue and the situations will be monitored with even greater attention.



Bojana Stanojevska Pecurovska, Co-chair of Working Group 5, President of the Center for Climate Change, referred to the previous 3 sessions and the topics that were considered, as well as the organizational details for the implementation of the session.

Vladimir Stojanovski, Professor at the Faculty of Forestry Sciences, Landscape Architecture, and Eco-Engineering "Hans Em", elaborated on the new tendencies for the re-definition of forests, that is, from a traditional sector where wood was considered as the primary raw material towards a new way of management, where in addition to wood, importance is placed on other products (herbs, forest fruits, and other forest products). In the new way of defining forests, a special place is given to the protection of biological diversity, delivery of ecosystem services, and landscape values. This area is regulated by the Law on Forests, which is in the process of being amended. According to the Law, there are three types of forests: economic

forests (exploitation of the wood mass), forests with a special purpose (hunting grounds, park forests, forests for scientific research), and protective forests, whereby a good example is "Vodno", whose protective role is of exceptional importance for Skopje, as this was not the case 50 years ago, before the massive afforestation of this mountain.



According to the area of North Macedonia, about 1.1 million hectares are managed as forests and forest land, that is, about 42% of the territory's coverage, which per capita is close to the European average. However, since 1972, no inventory of the forest and the forest stock has been made, which is a devastating fact. For comparison, Slovenia, as a country that emerged from the same system as North Macedonia, has a wood mass per cubic meter per hectare of 332 sq.m., and here it is 82 sq.m. The increase in our country is about 2 sq.m. per hectare, while in Slovenia it is 8 sq.m. per hectare. Regarding the ownership structure, 10% of the forests belong to private owners, while the remaining 90% are managed by public enterprises (PE). What both groups of owners have in common is that they make their main

income through timber sales, which is a devastating fact for national parks. Public enterprises that manage forests are self-financed. Self-financing is a big problem, and it will be even bigger in the future. According to research, the protected areas declared in the previous system work better than the new ones - declared after the independence, and the reason is the self-financing in combination with other political aspects, pointed out Professor Stojanovski.

Sustainable forest management became a leading term in political processes after the Rio Summit (1992), which gave rise to the action plan "Agenda 21". The concept of sustainability became part of the Macedonian legislation through the Strategy for Sustainable Forest Management (2006/2026). Considering the current trends and the EU Forest strategy until 2030, a change in the concept of forest sustainability can be observed by giving more importance to climate change and the loss of biological diversity. Importers of wood products must pay attention to the origin of the wood, i.e., whether it originates from legal sources in order to prevent the sale of illegally cut timber on the markets throughout the EU. These strategies are partially implemented in our laws, but there is still room for full harmonization.

Professor Stojanovski also referred to the European Green Agreement, which mostly focuses on climate change.

In our country, this agreement is implemented through the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, where the goal is to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. This strategy consists of several elements such as climate action, decarbonization, circular economy, pollution reduction, biodiversity, sustainable systems for food production, and food use.



The European bioeconomic strategy has 5 objectives: food security and safety, sustainable management of natural resources, reducing dependence on non-renewable resources, mitigating and adapting to climate change and strengthening European competitiveness and job creation. Many of these goals should be implemented in the 2030-2050 period, and in our plans by 2030; some of them have been met, but the question of their fulfillment is another matter.

Forestry in the Republic of North Macedonia is a conservative (traditional) sector that does not want to change. Forests are especially threatened by illegal logging. In the annual budget, this sector participates with 0.5-1%, which indicates that it is not a large economic branch. This is precisely what contributes to the small financial capacities of public enterprises

that manage forests. It is important to answer the question: do we, as a society, sufficiently value forests and the people involved in their management? Considering the accumulated problems in enterprises that are left to self-financing, without long-term serious work plans, the answer to this crucial question is - probably not. Forests are a significant factor in the world's pharmaceutical production because 3 out of 5 people use products for their health from forests, 1/3 of the world's cities get their clean tap water from forests, and 75% of agriculture is dependent on watersheds that come from forests. Similarly, forests represent the main source of energy for heating, on which 1/3 of people worldwide, i.e., 2.4 billion people, depend. Forests trap 30% of all CO₂ emissions, about as much as all the oceans, and are home to 80% of the world's biodiversity. According to the UN, in the next 30 years, water needs will increase by 30-40%, and our forests will not be able to supply it. That is why he emphasized that forestry is also key and must be given more attention. It was suggested that all expert analysis and European strategies should be taken into account when adopting strategies, plans and laws. In the Republic of North Macedonia, there is a New Green Agenda which is being implemented through two large projects, and a new Law on Forests, revision of the strategy and formation of a National Strategy for Forests, which has sublimated some of these things, is in the process.

Nikolcho Velkovski, Professor at the Faculty of Forestry Sciences, Landscape Architecture and Eco-Engineering "Hans M pointed out that the Republic of North Macedonia has a specific location that was the cause of clashes of civilizations, which is reflected in the state of forests that were often and excessively devastated. However, there are also positive examples.



There are forest management planning documents dating back to the 1930s. In 1952, the first forest holdings were established and planned management of forests began according to the principle of sustainability, which means that no more may be taken from the forest than the forest gives as an annual increase. This approach gave fine results. However, the new approach to sustainable forest management in our country has not been implemented, because the forestry sector is facing many big problems for which solutions must be sought.

The concept of sustainable forest management is based on 6 pan-European criteria, which were adopted at the EU ministerial conference and which it believes should be practiced.

First criterion. Increasing forest resources and their contribution to the global carbon cycle. To achieve this goal, there must be changes towards planning, which, in addition to economic parameters, must include environmental and social parameters. Furthermore, without appropriate legal legislation, these plans could not be implemented. Reduction and conversion of areas under forests must not happen and there should be an emphasis on native species. Forestry practices must be framed so as not to harm other natural habitats. Although the forest stock in the Republic of North Macedonia has almost doubled in the last 80 years (from 615,000 hectares to just over a million hectares), the quality of these forests has not improved. 70% of forests are of very low quality due to overexploitation or have suffered from disasters. These forests have less protective function, less biodiversity, less CO2 sequestration, and there is a lot of work to do with them to get them back to full strength. In the past, certain attempts have been made to solve this problem, but it is a serious undertaking that requires capital investment and a serious approach that is currently difficult to secure.

Second criterion. Preserving the health and vitality of forest ecosystems. In the legislation, we have certain norms that monitor the health and vitality of these ecosystems, which allows for maintaining a minimum level. However, a big problem is the increasing number of fires and increasing number of harmful insects that disrupt the health and vitality of eco-systems. The capacities are too low to do preventive protection against such problems, and here serious work must be undertaken.

The third criterion. Maintenance and improvement of the productive functions of forests (timber and non-timber). A lot has been done in the past 70 years and we can see certain results in forest management. The area and wood mass in the forest has improved, but it is still among the lowest 5 in Europe (per cubic meters per unit area). The reason is the large percentage of forests that are degraded and cannot achieve high productivity.

Fourth criterion. Maintaining, protecting, and increasing the bio-diversity of forest ecosystems. North Macedonia is a small area, but it abounds with rich bio-diversity, diversity of many different habitats, where different soil, climate and other types meet that make diversity possible. For the protection of bio-diversity, educational activities are especially important to be more widely recognized and better valued in protected territories.



Fifth criterion. Maintenance of the socioeconomic functions of the forests. It means the integration of social, economic, and ecological functions of forests. Ownership rights and the various other functions that forests have with their values should be considered. This criterion is not elaborated enough and deserves further attention.

Ivan Blinkov, of the Faculty of Forestry Sciences, Landscape Architecture and Eco-Engineering “Hans Em,” further elaborated on the sixth criterion. According to him, 1/3 of North Macedonia is affected by strong erosion processes. Almost 30% of the territory is under the threat of desertification, which is not characteristic for the countries of Central and North Europe. Therefore, a special approach must be conceived for the prevention of various natural disasters because of the amount of costs that are seven times greater if not prevented, i.e., a natural disaster would do 7 times more damage. North Macedonia has a long tradition of afforestation that begins in 1914.



From 1960 to 2016, over 250,000 hectares were reforested without knowing the exact percentage of success. In the past (1958), a Law on hydro-melioration systems was passed, which was part of the plan for the development of agriculture. Mass afforestation was foreseen with this plan. Current trends in the world demand to prevent the reduction of the area under forest, with a tendency to increase it. According to the 2003 forestry strategy and other plans, valid until 2030, it is planned to plant 5 billion seedlings. The government has undertaken a commitment for new afforestation of 5,000 hectares of afforestation, however, he argued that a larger area should be covered.

In North Macedonia, most of the afforestation in the past had a primarily ecological character, chiefly for the protection of water and soil. Commercial afforestation was insignificant. During reforestation in the past, the black pine dominated, due to the high percentage of success and the affordable price, however, according to the latest research, at a lower altitude it gives a small growth and productivity, especially below 600 m. sea level.

Referring to the European experiences, he concluded that they are different, and presented Greece as a positive example, where 100% of the forests have a protected status. With regards to financing, the experience so far indicates that this is best solved in Austria, which uses funds from the EU Fund for Agriculture and Rural Development, then co-financing from national provincial funds, the fund for natural disasters, funds from the Forest Fund Act and other funds. In the Republic of North Macedonia, the financing of protected forests is self-financed by public enterprises and national parks. Approximately 300,000 euros is received from the state, which according to Blinkov is too little. In the past, there was a fund for afforestation of forests, from 1970 to 1990, 120,000 hectares of forests were afforested through this fund. Such is the example with the afforestation of the Vodno mountain, where the number of trees has increased almost 10 times. It is a successful example, because the mountain is maintained with regular funds provided by the city of Skopje and there is a special sector that works on exactly this. Professor Blinkov concluded that it is easier to find financing for projects, and many such projects are currently being worked on, but it is much more difficult to find opportunities for implementation, indicating that donors should show more interest in implementation.

Matej Schwatz, Expert from the Republic of Slovakia presented the expe-

riences of Slovakia with Natura 2000. He stated that some of the first challenges were how to make the previously protected areas compatible with the requirements of Natura 2000. The way to solve the problem was to re-map the protected areas that largely overlapped with the old ones. To avoid such problems in the Republic of North Macedonia, he recommended harmonizing the borders of the national and European networks of protected areas.



Schwatz explained that establishing a favorable conservation status created a particular problem for Slovakia. It should be known that conservation status is central to Natura 2000 in the Habitats Directive and each EU member state is obliged to conserve all habitats and species listed in Natura 2000. It must be understood that conservation status should cover the entire territory of the country.

An additional issue Slovakia faced when establishing the Natura 2000 network was the collection and use of data. In his view, North Macedonia is currently in the same position - collecting data for the creation of the network.

In Slovakia, foresters were supposed to submit information to forest management planners, which would contain all the details of the country's forests.

However, the methodology they used was not appropriate with what Natura 2000 requires, which led to misunderstandings, which then resulted in the reduction of the conservation status of the entire country. It is crucial to report, but also to collect the information accurately and according to the methodology required by Natura 2000. Thus, even before implementing the Natura 2000 network, the state should read all types and classifications accurately and have an accurate mapping with everything that has in its territory. It is not good, in his opinion, to overestimate any habitat, which is why it is necessary to be very strict in the mapping process. In his opinion, it is much easier to grow smaller dwellings, than to register a large number of hectares that are not there, because there will be an obligation to restore them, and sometimes this is not possible due to climate change.

With Natura 2000, there were also problems with the management of the areas. It should be based on an integrated system of nature protection and proactive forest management. In Europe there is no single opinion regarding these issues. Currently, the most popular approach is a non-interventionist approach, which leads to problems because if you are in charge of managing the area, it is very difficult to do without management,

especially with climate change.

Schwarz underlined that each Natura 2000 area is designed for several species and several habitats. In his opinion, we must be very careful not to mix many species and habitats in a single area, as this will be very difficult to maintain. For example, if any project, such as the construction of a road that passes near a Natura 2000 area, it must be proven that it will not have an impact on the area with all habitats and species. The recommendation is to design smaller areas with fewer species and habitats. In an ideal world, there would be only 1 species, but this is usually impossible.



In the Forest Europe process, there are 46 members, including North Macedonia, and it is underlined that North Macedonia is very inactive. This platform offers more opportunities and should be used more often. From 2005 to 2020, this process was co-chaired by Slovakia and many activities were organized, and as particularly important Schwarz pointed out the annual meeting that takes place before the end of the year and suggested that North Macedonia take part this year.

He also shared that a multi-year State of Forests report is being prepared, for which North Macedonia did not send any data. The analysis for this report is conducted by an expert from Croatia.

Mare Basova, Assistant Director of PE National Forests, presenting the data pointed out that forestry as a branch faces serious pressures, because, on the one hand, the public interest has to be satisfied, and on the other hand, it has to be profitable. She countered the previous presenters that although the volume of forest areas is on the rise, the quality is still quite low. Basova believes that it is necessary to work on projects to find methods to improve the value of the forest by providing conditions for ensuring the three basic functions of the forest, respecting biodiversity. Illegal logging is the biggest problem for forests, but it is climate change that is causing serious problems by causing droughts, erosion and floods. The forest fires of 2021, which covered 6,300 hectares, represent an environmental disaster like no other in the collective memory of this country. That is why in 2020, the priority of PE National Forests is the protection of the forest they manage.



Forest management has positive effects - for now only on the Osogovo and Maleshevo mountains. For a more effective management of forests, it is necessary to harmonize the legal framework of the two competent ministries, the MAFWE and the MOEPP. In view of Basova, she is happy that there is an environment and desire for cooperation and overcoming problems in both ministries and she wished to be a good example in the region.

Stefko Stefanovski from the Center for Crisis Management (CCM), explained the need for forest protection in conditions of increased risk of forest fires. In the segment of forest protection, there are shared competencies, and therefore shared responsibilities.



He focused on the protective function of forests because this helps reduce the risks of flash floods and soil degradation (erosion and landslides). The sustainable management of forests is a national challenge and all institutions that have competence should do their job. He welcomed the participation of some of the Members of Parliament in the session and expressed his hope that they will initiate a new law provision, which is necessary - primarily for shared and clearly defined compe-

tence of the relevant institutions. The cooperation that the CCM has with partners from other countries was mentioned, highlighting the cooperation with Japan, which helped the process to be digitized, thus leading to improved cooperation between the relevant institutions. The new concept, the so-called “Eco-based solutions to reduce the risks of disasters” aims to contribute to changing the approach to the forest, i.e., from economic forests to be transformed into protective forests. Regarding the development of this concept, the Republic of North Macedonia is a leader in the region of the Western Balkans, because these experiences are being extended to Kosovo and Montenegro, and from next year to Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. By building regional capacities, the risks factors would be reduced because forest fires do not stop at state borders. According to Stefanovski, it is very important to adopt appropriate legal solutions for protective forests. In addition, it might be beneficial to consider the possibility of building a system that exists in Europe, which is - Payment for ecosystem services, to properly manage forests.

Nazif Sefer, Representative from the Forestry Department at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Economy elaborated on the EU-funded forestry reform support project which has three main objectives: updating the strategy for sustainable development, revising the Law on Forests, and creating a new draft National Forestry

Program. He mentioned that a working group was created for this project with all relevant stakeholders from all competent ministries and institutions, and representatives from the EU, who share good practices. Among the future activities to which the MAFWE will devote itself is the Strategy for Sustainable Development, which is in its final stage and hopes to be adopted during this year. Also, the Law on Forests in its draft version is in the final stage and is planned to be submitted for government approval this fall. The proposal for the new national forestry program is in the process of being developed and will be submitted after its adoption.



Sefer also presented the main essential reforms of the forestry sector:

- Reform of the organization of the forestry sector, with the creation of directorates for forestry and hunting, Agency for Forestry, and transformation of PE National Forests into a company for state forests and a new forestry institute, a practice shared by all countries in the world.

- The Directorate for Forestry and Hunting is the highest authority for forestry in the country with greatest competences, and the Forest Police will also belong to the new Agency for Forests.

-The company that will replace the enterprise will be state-owned and will manage state forests, forest protection, production and sale of seed material, processing of wood and non-wood products, etc. To support this model, especially the forest administration and service, a Forestry Institute should be established. All funds will go to the special account that will be managed by the Agency.

-Reform of the system of public financing in forestry, expanded sources of financing, whereby a fund for forests is planned, that is, the opening of a special account that would be titled "informal fund for forests".

Forest management reform, which is the area where there are major problematic points that receive the biggest criticism. It is planned to move from clear cutting to cutting close to nature, including the management of forests in protected areas, because everything that grows must be maintained.

For the implementation of the foreseen institutional changes, it is necessary to secure about 2 million euros, i.e., 0.05% of the state budget, which must be first approved by the Ministry of Finance.

Daniela Kamcheva presented the current situation in terms of nature protection in Macedonia, as well as the activities undertaken by the MOEPP. Now, there are 82 protected areas, most of which belong to national parks (NP 13.92% of the entire territory of the country).



If Studenchishta Swamp and Belchish-ta Swamp are declared protected areas, then the percentage of protected areas is expected to be about 15% of the whole territory of the country. A large part of the forests located in the areas of the protected areas should be managed by the manager of the protected area. The EMERALD network, which was established in Macedonia in 2008, was also presented. A total of 35 localities have been identified, covering an area of 752,223 hectares. This network represents a significant preparatory activity for all candidate countries for EU membership and all signatories of the Berne Convention participate in it.

The Natura 2000 network aims for the long-term survival of the most valuable and endangered species and habitats, in accordance with the EU directives on birds and habitats. The MAFWE works continuously to harmonize the legislation, through the implementation of the two mentioned directives in the national legislation. Identification of habitats and species of European significance has been carried out, and at the national level, 11 areas representing potential future Natura 2000 areas have been identified and standard data forms have been drawn up, as is

the requirement from the EU. The National Strategy for Nature with a validity of 10 years (until 2027) and the National Strategy for Biological Diversity (until 2023), are both strategic documents currently being implemented.

Regarding ecosystem services, Kamcheva emphasized that they are implemented by the Department of Nature at the Ministry. Through the project “Program for the preservation of nature”, financed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, with the coordination of “Pharmachem”, and with the strategic partnership of the MOEPP, 28 basic groups of ecosystems in the country have been mapped so far and the condition of each eco-systems has been determined. Eco-system services have also been mapped at the national level and a pilot mechanism for their payment has been established in one protected area (“Vevchani Springs”). The brochure on ecosystem services is already prepared, as well as a long-term plan to strengthen all stakeholders to pay for ecosystem services.

Mapping ecosystem services is an important prerequisite for identifying the main elements for the proper maintenance of ecosystems. Through field research in North Macedonia, 187 forests with high natural values have been identified, the smallest of which has an area of less than 1 hectare (Popovi Gardens locality), and the largest is the black forest of Kozjak in Mariovo. However, this figure is not final and it is important to continue with the research.

Angela Stavrevska Panajotova, Representative from the CSO Natura – MK emphasized that the purpose of the New Forest Strategy is to make concrete the vision for improving the quantity and quality of forests and to strengthen their protection, recovery, and resilience. However, these three keywords still have no real value in North Macedonia and are totally marginalized. For example, the construction of the Kichevo-Ohrid highway has caused the clearcutting of forests.



The biggest problem in terms of forest protection is the lack of finances. The entire burden falls on the backs of PE “National Forests”. We have legal frameworks in our legislation, but, it is not implemented. In the report on the anti-corruption inspection of the legislation on the Law on Forests, there is an excessive concentration of competencies in a single state body, single sector or unit and single official, and no external control mechanisms are foreseen. “This is one of the main reasons why we are not self-critical and why tasks are not completed. We need to admit that we have a problem and then move forward.” According to her, the EU forest strategy should not be strictly followed, because the EU is years ahead of us.

The goals that the EU sets are too broad and do not have defined ways to achieve the goals, which is why we ourselves need to find ways through greater adaptation to our existing conditions. We do not share the same problems and we cannot expect that if we rewrite the legislation that we have achieved the goal - what is currently happening in all areas.

At the working group on forestry and hunting, at the MAFWE, two priorities regarding forests were indicated: forest monitoring, biotic and abiotic factors and national inventory of forests (Inventory), which are insufficiently ambitious priorities, especially in terms of how serious there are problems with forests. Monitoring the performance of the sector is something that is different in reports and in reality. "On paper, we are very successful, but, it is not like that. Success should be measured according to Pan-European sustainable development indicators. Compared to the problems that are being solved in the EU, we are still suffering from early childhood mistakes, and we are talking about wood inventory, age structure, increase, fragmentation of forests and so on. Funding is a problem because the state has many other problems, and according to our mentality, we should not worry about the trees, they will grow by themselves and therefore we can cut it and get a salary, Stavrevska-Panajotova pointed out.

Special attention should be placed on the problem of diseases, especially to

white and black pine, because if no action is taken now, the forests will be dead within 10 years. There is not enough space in the Strategy for all the various problems in forestry. The state invests insignificant funds in this sector. Thus, in the state investment report for 2019, the only investment in forestry is one employment in the State Forestry and Hunting Inspectorate. "Is that an investment?", asked Stavrevska-Panajotova and gave the answer: "It is not an investment. Investments are machines that will go out in the field in the event of a fire or the technologies for monitoring and remediation of burned environments."



The state of national parks is alarming. For example, NP "Mavrovo" is financed from the use of forest resources. They have no other alternative source of funding. Almost for the first time, an agreement has been made for a unified tariff that will be delivered to the institutions that use their services (installation of antennas and power lines, use of water services, ski centers and hoteliers, but also winter ski homes). If everyone pays a certain fee for using eco-system services, this situation can be overcome. Finally, Stavrevska - Panajotova concluded that "nature presents it's the toll for the lack of financial resources, while we feel the consequences."

Dimitar Nikolovski, Executive Director of Eurotink, Skopje presented results obtained from a project implemented by the “Eurotink” team on illegal logging. He pointed out that during the project some things have changed for the better. A Collective Agreement has been signed with the Forest Police Union, new uniforms have been purchased, the Law on Forest Police is in the pipeline, and the introduction of a system of electronic monitoring of the wood mass is under way. According to the results of the field activities, in the 2010-2020 period, the Forest Police submitted 2380 criminal cases to the Public Prosecutor's Office and 2637 from the National Forests. From the total misdemeanour cases submitted to the basic courts (18,750 from the Forest Police and 11,094 from the PE National Forests), only 16 cases were processed in Strumica, 26 in Veles, while no cases were processed in Prilep and Gevgelija.



The problem becomes even greater when the institutions are unwilling to act. People involved in illegal logging point to the involvement of certain management structures in the National Forests and the Forest Police who allow this kind of logging. Loggers do not even hide.

They feel safe, even when filling up at gas stations and driving on the roads across the country. According to the research, these people can be armed and are organized in a group of 10-25 people. Some of them are protected by the regular police who protect them from the forest police and vice versa, which per se is a big paradox.

DISCUSSION

Kiril Ristovski believes that there must be a recommendation in rule of law in relation to forest management. It is necessary to introduce control mechanisms for the prevention of corruption and organized crime in forest management. The data that more than 600 million euros are appropriated from the illegal business of illegal logging is a serious problem, especially when the share of the forest industry is only 0.5-1% of GDP. If this would be legal money, the role of the forestry sector would receive significant funds to implement the plans. Also, according to him, importance should be given on the smarter use of wood in future. This refers to the implementation of the principles of the circular economy. According to the data, over 60% of the population uses firewood for heating and this trend will not decrease this year due to the economic (energy) crisis and most of the wood mass will be used only for firewood. If alternative mechanisms are found for greater use of wood, the economic parameters will be better and everyone will benefit, households and the state.

Nenad Kocikj Member of Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia believes that the fight against corruption should be included in the recommendations and that should be pointed out that under number 1, because 15 laws can be passed, and experts can make 15 strategies, and if we do not fight against corruption in the institutions, and outside them, then there can be no results. The second priority must be the implementation of what is planned. We always have good plans, but rarely do they come to fruition. He pointed to the example of Mavrovo, in which in 2012, in the first protection zone, 12 small hydropower plants were allowed to be built, which change the natural space. This is an indication of a gap in our system, that is, that the institutions do not function and allow something to be done that should not even be thought of. Also, Kocikj expressed his dissatisfaction with the method of forest protection again pointing toward corruption as the main problem. He mentioned the example where the chief of the Veles police station was attacked by illegal lumbermen and suffered serious injuries. On the other hand, he does not see a critical force that opposes these tendencies. “Regarding reforestation, even after 20 years, we have never looked back to see what results have been achieved. Illegal loggers cut the best trees, and those of the second and third class remain, hence the situation we are in”, said Kocikj. Regarding the measures to be applied, he emphasized that, considering the mental-

ity of the population, the best method seems to be “carrot and stick.” If the loggers are not connected with the forest or regular police or national forest structures, illegal logging cannot operate so easily. We are coming to a situation where illegally cut trees are more expensive than those of national forests, and they are cut to the detriment of PE National Forests. That is why everyone who makes a mistake should be punished, and for that, criminal prosecution is required for all participants.



Stavrevska Panajotova was inspired by the course of the debate and added several arguments about the illogicality of the system. The price of firewood is created directly by the state, but the problem is that it does not correspond to real prices. In all tenders, private illegal loggers have lower prices. She agreed that we are weak when it comes to proper punishment which can give a certain result, but more work should be done in prevention context.

In his reply, **Nenad Kocikj** emphasized that we will partially overcome this problem by gasification of large cities.

He also agreed that the price problem is symptomatic, but he believes that if the municipalities want to, this problem can be solved very easily. The system for electronic monitoring of the wood mass in the National Parks has not been put into use, although it has been included in the Law as binding since 2017, added **Basova**.



To this, the representative from the MAFWE Sefer responded, explaining that a test phase was carried out for the functioning of this system, but it turned out that many other things need to be done for that to function. It is expected that the new forest law will implement the classification of trees with digital tools, such as tracking from the first stage (cutting mark, which would also include logging with a wood barcode) to the last stage when it will be cut according to the special plan. It is a complex procedure and requires new software because the existing one is already outdated. However, in the opinion of Sefer, this is not the biggest problem, rather corruption is the main issue. States all over the world are led by lawyers and economists and have a different logic of functioning, where they are always looking for voters and for that quick results are needed.

In this sector, a long-term approach is needed, where the results would be visible for about 30 years. By having campaigns like “tree day” we do nothing because there is only a 5% success rate. He also shared that since 2006, not a single person has been employed in the Forestry Department of the MAFWE, which means that this sector is rather neglected.

Velkovski was also motivated to speak on the occasion of the mentioned topic of corruption activities in forestry and shared a personal example. As the owner of a private forest, he was surprised to see that someone had illegally cut down 26 trees from his property. After searching, he found the trees and called the forest police, which made an official report and proved that they were the trees that had been cleared from the property. However, the submitted report was negatively resolved, because the report was directed at an unknown perpetrator. In his opinion, most of the cases that have not been processed are precisely for this reason. Above all, the trees were confiscated for the benefit of the state. This example shows that it evades control and responsibility at all levels. He ended his discussion by explaining that we should use the experiences of neighboring countries. Thus, in terms of the electronic system, Bulgaria applies it very successfully, which has reduced the illegal logging of trees by 90%.

Stojanovski pointed out that forestry begins with the letter "Z" (the last letter

in the Latin alphabet), which may affect the way we care about this sector – as our last concern. He believes that it is very easy to blame ordinary people because they cannot do anything. For those who want to cut trees from their own forests, the red tape is very complex and takes too long, so some of the people who are considered illegal loggers are actually people who cut their own trees without any approval. He also spoke about whistleblowers, who are not protected when reporting illegal logging, because the police come to the address of the person who reports, which causes hesitation for the people who report. A special problem is a selective justice. Some people with very minor offences (not having a document) are punished, but organized groups that cause great damage are not punished. This was also confirmed by many participants in the discussion.



Blinkov believes that there are two types of illegal activities, one is the cutting of one's own forest, and the other is classic illegal logging. Vagueness in the law allows people who illegally log to be sanctioned only with misdemeanor charges for illegal transportation, without liability for illegal logging.

According to him, judges and lawyers have to learn a little more about the terminology they work with in these cases, because they can get the opposite role - protectors of crime. But people will also have to pay much more attention to legal procedures and be familiar with legal terminology.

Suli Rushiti, an MP in the Macedonian Parliament, believes that the illegal logging is slowly but surely destroying the Karaorman and Jablanica mountains, which have excellent forests. Cutting is not carried out selectively and on marked trees, but frontally, with clear chopping. They only take first category wood, and the rest of the wood is left to rot in the mountain. A large part of this so-called forest mafia is known, but they are protected by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and down in the hierarchy, and especially by political parties. Investigative procedures are necessary for all persons who are known to be part of this so-called forest mafia.

Margarita Deleva, from the EU Delegation, believes that the Parliament has a nice mechanism called the supervisory hearing. This is a serious problem, where this mechanism should be used and it would be the beginning of a public debate and raise awareness of this problem. She pointed out the problem with the weak interest of journalists in this topic, who consider this issue less significant. According to her, an appropriate medium that can give to this topic an

appropriate meaning is the Assembly TV channel. Furthermore, following up on what Slovak Ambassador Henrik Markus previously stated, there must be a political consensus for resolving this issue. In the Assembly, there are people from all political parties who would support a comprehensive law on forest protection and would stand for a serious approach and the beginning of solving this problem. Thus, the courts and other competent authorities will be authorized to make the right decisions based on the law. Also, according to Deleva, the Ombudsman should devote himself to this problem because it is truly a matter of national interest. She stated that the Delegation of the EU in the Republic of North Macedonia allocates funds for projects for this problem, at the request of the MAFWE. She also presented many other aspects facing the sector, such as the problem of private plots and probate proceedings, which are faced by a very large number of people. Because of the prices of firewood, some countries in the region have banned exports. The state should devote itself to this aspect, which is part of European policies.



Velija Mijagev, from PE Parks and Greenery-Skopje, discussed zoning and ecosystem values. In his opinion, zoning is a very important matter. Forests cannot be considered separately from other elements. It is not possible in a given zone, for one subject to manage the forest, another to manage the game, and another to manage the waters, separate licenses are needed for by-products, especially for pastures, and all these things are part of the same ecosystem. He also referred to the socio-economic situation in society, where people turn to crime because of poverty, but in fact, those who commit these actions see the least harm from it. That is why he proposed a unified system for solving problems. A mechanism should be established so that local municipalities can recover their money and ensure economic growth. For example, in Spain, it costs 400 euros just to observe and photograph birds. Similar measures for payment of services can be introduced in our environment. Ecosystems offer many opportunities. The same problem is with Vodno, there is a parking lot, the cable car, and the restaurants, but all the inflows go to private accounts, and the City of Skopje and its PE Parks and Greenery do not receive anything. Eight forest policemen and about 10 workers are employed, who cannot manage to just collect the garbage left. In a city park, half of the time instead of working on the maintenance of the greenery is used to clean the garbage.

Blinkov responded to the conclusion by noting that everyone wants to profit from nature, but no one wants to bear the costs for it, particularly not the business sector. Regarding the dominance of the non-integrated approach, he believes that it is a way of avoiding responsibility.

Basova, once again, repeated the conclusion that it is necessary to continue to work even harder to get the problem into the public domain. The sustainable maintenance of forests is proof that we do not have a properly functioning system, because the problems they face have not been solved. PE "National Forests" has serious problems, especially with the legal solutions and the division of competence between the institutions and the fact that forests are placed at the bottom of the list of priorities. The culprit is always PE "National Forests" and no one cares if it has resources or if its account is blocked because of certain legal solutions. A common interest for all people is to have a healthy and clean-living environment.

Stojanovski followed up on this discussion and referred to the price of firewood sold by PE National Forests (2800 denars per cubic meter), while the price on the markets is about 4000 denars due to the crisis. This is because of the upper limit that the state has prescribed, which does not exist anywhere else.

The situation in science, young staff and their training was also considered, which **Stavrevska Panajotova** believes is one of the fields where insufficient investment is made. It takes a very long time to hire new staff at the faculty, and this is also the case in the institutions.

Stojanovski joined the discussion with the conclusion that it is necessary to start from the analysis of strategic documents, which are the starting point in changing the situation. He believes that many of the solutions are controversial, and the second point is the absence of political will to look at solving the problems in the long term. All political parties have fully exploited this area, to get votes which undermine the rule of law and encourage crime which Eurotink's research confirms by figures.



The initial solution should be to pass quality laws and make all strategies and other plans realistic. But the most important thing is for the Government to act on them. External control mechanisms are missing, which leads to organized corruption, which must be systematically brought under control, that is, pressured with serious readiness and awareness of the problem.

He pointed out that we are far from that, but today, with European regulations and good European practices, it will not be possible to take a step forward. The civil sector is the goodwill that may give an incentive to go in the right direction, but again the question remains: "Do we, as a state, want to adequately regulate this matter?"

