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CEE Bankwatch Network
BirdLife International
Polish Society for the Protection of the Birds (OTOP - BirdLife in Poland)

Via Baltica - Another landmark victory for Poland's nature, environmentalists remain vigilant

21 October 2009 - Warsaw / Brussels -- Yesterday's decision by the Polish Council of Ministers on a new routing for the Via Baltica expressway [1] has been welcomed by campaigners from CEE Bankwatch Network, BirdLife International, OTOP - BirdLife Poland and other environmental groups as major progress for the conservation of Poland's unique nature and represents a significant step in the right direction towards the proper implementation of Polish and European environmental legislation.

Nonetheless, the groups that have campaigned on a range of highly controversial major road plans in north-east Poland for some years now stressed that the new decree on the Via Baltica motorways and expressways' network does not mark the end of their efforts to save a number of valuable sites – protected under the EU's Natura 2000 network – from road construction plans in the region. [2]

According to yesterday's decree, the Polish part of the Via Baltica expressway – part of the EU's Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) – will have to be constructed in line with the recommendations made by experts and the findings of a Strategic Environmental Assessment that has taken several years to complete.

Such an outcome has been demanded by the European Parliament and Bern Convention as well as by environmental groups. This routing of the road via Lomza, confirmed now by the government, is not only the environmentally sound option but it is also valid on economic, traffic and social grounds. The decision means that the expected stream of heavy good vehicles will not have negative impacts on three Natura 2000 sites: the Biebrza Marshes, and the Knyszyn and Augustow Primeval Forests. However, it does not bring an automatic halt to current road construction work inside the Knyszyn Forest or other environmentally harmful road development plans in north-east Poland.

Marta Majka Wisniewska, Polish national coordinator for Bankwatch, said: "Yesterday's decision from the Council of Ministers does not close the case of egregious road development in north-east Poland. There is a further need to change other strategic documents, in particular the current list of investments under the Operational Programme 'Infrastructure & Environment' and the Polish proposal on TEN-T revision. And, of course, the devil will be in the final implementation of yesterday's positive outcome."

Malgorzata Gorska, Casework Officer of OTOP (BirdLife in Poland), commented: "As these road developments have been proceeding at high speed, Natura 2000 sites like the Knyszyn Forest and the Biebrza Marshes are still under threat. Our task is to ensure that all environmentally harmful road projects along the old routing of the Via Baltica, as queried by the European Commission, are halted or modified. With the new route for the Via Baltica corridor settled there is no need to continue with these large scale projects on the old route which will needlessly damage Natura 2000 sites."

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Notes for editors:

1. Key Natura 2000 sites in north-east Poland are under threat of damage by a series of road projects on the so called 'Via Baltica' international road corridor, which will link Helsinki to Warsaw via Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The corridor upgrade is taking place as a series of separate individual projects (an approach commonly referred to as 'salami-slicing') rather than being planned in a strategic way. Polish NGOs have been campaigning on the Via Baltica case for over seven years, including referring the case to the Bern Convention and in 2006 submitting a complaint to the European Commission.

In March 2009 the Polish government decided to save the famous Rospuda valley in north-east Poland from destruction by one of the road projects. This particular section of Via Baltica had been routed through the Natura 2000 site "Augustow Forest" in north-east Poland, which includes the unique mires of the Rospuda valley. While the NGOs welcomed this decision they remain extremely concerned that the Polish authorities are continuing to progress other damaging 'Via Baltica' road projects such as the Białystok-Katrynka and Katrynka-Przewalanka Upgrades which will damage Knyszyn Primeval Forest.

For more background information about the Via Baltica controversies in Poland, see:

<http://www.viabalticainfo.org/en->

2. The EU Birds and Habitats Directives require Member States to designate Natura 2000 sites to ensure the survival of the EU's most threatened animal and plant species and their habitats. The 'Natura 2000' network of the EU covers about 18% of the EU's territory, and aims to reconcile human activities with nature conservation. Together with the Habitats Directive, the Birds Directive forms the cornerstone of EU action to address the decline of biodiversity, which in combination with climate change is seen as the most pressing environmental problem of the 21st century. EU governments have committed to halting the loss of wildlife by 2010, and to implementing its nature legislation.

Natura 2000 sites are not fenced-off areas, but encourage sustainable and nature-friendly land-use and business. Article 6 of the Habitats Directive describes the process that needs to be followed for any plan or project to assess whether it would have a significant impact on the site. Such plans or projects, which could include mining, infrastructure or housing development, can generally only be authorised if they do not have a negative effect on the ecological integrity of the site. In other words, the species and/or habitats for which the site was selected as Natura 2000 site must be maintained in a good status.

CEE Bankwatch Network is an international non-governmental organisation with member organisations currently from 12 countries across the central and eastern European region. The aim of the network is to monitor EU funding flows and the activities of the international financial institutions which operate in the region, and to propose constructive alternatives to their policies and projects in the region. See: <http://bankwatch.org>

BirdLife International is a global alliance of conservation NGOs working in more than 100 countries and territories that, together, are the leading authority on the status of birds, their habitats and the issues and problems affecting them. BirdLife is represented in 42 European countries and in all 27 Member States. For more information about BirdLife's current campaigns to protect key European sites, including Via Baltica, see: http://www.birdlife.org/eu/EU_policy/Birds_Habitats_Directives/campaign_intro.html

Polish Society for the Protection of the Birds (OTOP) is the BirdLife Partner in Poland. It is a membership organization established in 1991. It aims to protect birds and their habitats, establishes and manages new birds reserves in Poland, lobbies local authorities for the promotion and protection of Important Bird Areas, promotes knowledge of birds and their life. OTOP prevents human activities which harm nature, supports nature-friendly land use, supports research for bird protection, and constantly promotes birdwatching movement in Poland. See: <http://www.otop.org.pl/>