

# Uniting People through Nature in Southeast Europe: The Role (and Limits) of Nongovernmental Organizations in the Transboundary Prespa Park

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*Using the example of the Prespa Park, the first transboundary conservation cooperation initiative of its kind in South Eastern Europe, this article demonstrates that cross-border cooperation regimes organized around environmental and development objectives can be built despite political tension. The article emphasizes the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in creating the momentum for the establishment of such initiatives, catalyzing joint efforts and bringing about concrete results, while taking particular note of the role of the donor community. The article concludes that despite their significant contribution, NGOs cannot fully substitute for other actors—especially for the responsibilities that lie with states and governments.*

## Introduction

The region of South Eastern Europe (SEE) is often characterized by tensions and conflict. Yet, despite a climate of political instability, the Prespa Park was born: the first transboundary park in the region. The first sections of this article presenting several transboundary cooperation examples from SEE demonstrate that cross-border cooperation organized around environmental objectives can be built despite political tension. Drawing from a detailed account of the Prespa experience and evidence from the other examples, the following sections emphasize the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the establishment of such initiatives and their continuous contribution as catalysts of joint efforts and concrete results. The article reaffirms the role of non-state actors in world affairs while identifying the limits faced by NGOs and

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suggests that they cannot fully substitute the responsibilities that lie with states and governments.

### **The Political Context: Review of Bilateral Relations between Greece, Albania and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia**

Although this paper seeks to highlight a process that has resulted in an ongoing trilateral cooperation between Greece, Albania and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) for the 'Prespa Park', it should be remembered that forging relations among these three countries hardly constitutes an easy task. During the Cold War, these three neighbours had little political contact and a military zone formed their borders. While the situation improved with the fall of communism, which made communication across borders easier, political relations remain fragile. The explosive breakdown of Yugoslavia and the eruption of violent conflicts in the broader SEE region have cast a background of instability and uncertainty on the relations of the three countries.

Relations between Albania and FYROM could be characterized generally as friendly; however, the fact that the second largest ethnic group in FYROM consists of Albanians often creates tensions. Frictions stem from allegations of discrimination against the minority and disrespect of their political rights by the FYROM government despite Tirana's differentiation from both ethnic Albanians in FYROM and Kosovar Albanians. Nonetheless, the potential for tension remains as concerns over aspirations of a 'Greater Albania' trouble the region (Batt 2004: 92–95). No doubt any instability in FYROM can affect the two countries' relations. Throughout the 1990s, FYROM avoided the eruption of violence within its territory, including with respect to its Albanian minority (ICG 2000). However, the situation changed as a consequence of the Kosovo conflict. Kosovar Albanians were deported from their home to neighbouring countries, including FYROM, creating instability in the region (Daalder & O'Hanlon 2000: 109, 151). While international assistance controlled the inflow of refugees, thus calming the situation, in 2001, incidents of violence between FYROM forces and Albanian insurgents, occasional and sporadic until then, became frequent and continuous (Triantaphyllou 2001: 42–43, 89–90, 95). The localized outbreak of violence threatened the stability of the country and its relations with its neighbours. Consequent to international attention, the Ohrid Framework Agreement was ratified in 2001; Skopje guaranteed the rights of its Albanian minority, while NATO oversaw the ceasefire. Since then, FYROM and Albania have tried to cooperate; however, tensions on their borders continue to strain their relations (ICG 2003).

Following the 1992 regime change in Albania, relations between Greece and Albania became tense as Greece demanded the end of the mistreatment of the Greek ethnic minority in the south of the country. The Greek position was received with scepticism in Albania, where fears were expressed against the 'imperialist' objectives of a 'Greater Greece' (ICG 2001). In parallel, Greece was undergoing the foreign experience of receiving economic immigrants, largely illegal, from Albania (Koliopoulos & Veremis 2002: 200, 207). A simultaneous surge of crime in Greece correspondingly led to xenophobic expressions against Albanians and tighter, even abusive, border controls.

While relations were sore for some time, today the two countries enjoy friendlier relations after much negotiation and mutual guaranteeing of rights, with Greece and Albania being strong economic partners and Greece supporting Albania's membership to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) (ICG 2003).

The naming of the independent state of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has strained the bilateral relations with Greece. Based on expressed public fear of irredentist tendencies, reflected in the new state's constitution, Greece has refused to recognize it as the 'Republic of Macedonia' claiming the term 'Macedonia' to be intrinsically Greek and related to Macedonia, a northern region within its territory (Koliopoulos & Veremis 2002: 236). Following constitutional changes, an *interim* agreement was reached for use of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) name while negotiations would continue under United Nations (UN) auspices (Lund 2000: 179). However, several countries recognized FYROM with its constitutional name. When the United States considered recognizing the name 'Macedonia', Greece imposed a trade embargo, which was lifted a year later. Negotiations ensued improving the relations between the two countries. Greece is now an important economic partner to the country, supporting its membership to NATO and the EU, provided that the name issue is resolved (for the period 1995–2002, see Kofos & Vlasidis 2005). Bilateral relations continue to experience some stress, as was the case when the United States officially did recognize the 'Republic of Macedonia' on 4 November 2004.

### **The Prespa Park Initiative: A Brief Account of the Trilateral Cooperation**

Despite this thorny political context, the three countries agreed to the establishment of a transboundary protected area in the Prespa basin in 2000.<sup>1</sup> The idea of a 'Prespa Park' was presented by the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP), a Greek local NGO,<sup>2</sup> and WWF-Greece to the Greek government in the summer of 1999, while the crisis in Kosovo was still unfolding and the prospect of a spill-over in other parts of SEE was considered a real threat. The Simitis Government in Greece recognized in this proposal a chance for Greek leadership for peace and development in the region, thus establishing the transboundary cooperation that would focus on the conservation and sustainable development priorities of Prespa. The Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar Convention 1971) and its Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MedWet)<sup>3</sup> played a catalytic role. In early 2000 and on the occasion of the World Wetlands Day (2 February), the prime ministers of the three neighbouring countries issued an ambitious joint *Declaration on the Creation of the Prespa Park and the Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development of the Prespa Lakes and their Surroundings*.

For the past six years, the members of the Prespa Park Coordination Committee (PPCC), including the representatives of the three governments, sit alongside other stakeholders deliberating on ways to make the transboundary protected area endeavour more effective. For example, in June 2001, when political conditions were tense in FYROM with government forces practically fighting ethnic Albanian insurgents in the north and west of the country, the PPCC held an extraordinary meeting in Thessaloniki,

Greece, to discuss the development of a large project for the Prespa Park area to be funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) with full participation of the Albanian and FYROM delegations. Similarly, the Prespa Park Secretariat conducts its daily work without allowing foreign and security policy issues to intervene with its purpose and objectives.

The Prespa Park initiative demonstrates that even when a region is surrounded by uncertainty and political tension, the potential for cooperation can emerge in other fields of policy that are considered 'de-politicized' such as conservation and sustainable development. Indeed, although the Prespa cooperation constitutes the first transboundary park in SEE, other biodiversity conservation projects have also promoted cooperation across political borders in this region. Hence, before proceeding with a more detailed exploration of the Prespa Park and its implications, we provide a brief overview of other conservation cooperation examples.

### **Other Examples of Transboundary Conservation Cooperation and Identification of the Actors Involved**

By briefly describing five examples of transboundary cooperation in SEE and making reference to a few more, this section presents the different levels that each transboundary project has reached and identifies the actors involved in the formation and evolution of each one.<sup>4</sup> We then contrast our findings with the Prespa experience and focus on the role of non-state actors, in particular of NGOs, in transboundary initiatives.

#### *The Danube River*

Perhaps the longest standing multi-country project, which extends beyond the limits of SEE to other European countries and dates back to the 1856 Treaty of Paris, has been along the Danube.<sup>5</sup> Today, 17 countries share the river basin, topping the list of shared international river basins (Gleick 2000: 31). With the signing of the 1985 Bucharest Declaration, transboundary pollution prevention was added to the scope of common concern. In 1992, the establishment of the Environmental Programme for the Danube Basin expanded the focus of the Danube cooperation, aiming at the strategic and integrated environmental management of the basin (Kliot et al. 2001: 238), which was codified by the 1994 Sofia Convention on Cooperation for the Protection and Sustainable Use of the Danube River (ICPDR 2005).

This cooperation along the Danube is *not* characteristic of the recent developments in SEE in two ways. First, the recent focus on environmental issues constitutes an evolution of an already established cooperation of the Danube states mostly on non-environment-related issues such as free navigation, for more than 100 years—a case dissimilar to the examples presented below.<sup>6</sup> Second, the Danube cooperation was institutionalized through an international legal agreement. This is not a typical development in the examples that follow, although the conclusion of an agreement often constitutes a long-term objective of transboundary projects.

*The Lower Danube Green Corridor*

Hence, the recent initiative of creating a Lower Danube Green Corridor constitutes a more appropriate example of the SEE transboundary conservation trends. Despite international recognition of the Danube Delta, which is shared by four countries (Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania and Ukraine) as a region of high ecological importance, degradation continues to be a threat. As a result, the Danube Delta countries declared in 2000, on the occasion of the World Environment Day, their intention to expand their cooperation in order to protect and restore the floodplain and the wetland (Ramsar Convention on Wetlands 2005a). The Green Corridor initiative, which has been supported by WWF International, seeks to reconnect the floodplains in order to restore damaged wetlands to their prior state, with successful projects already taking place in Romania and Ukraine, while a further project is to begin in Bulgaria (WWF 2006). The Lower Danube initiative has so far demonstrated the greatest level of success in translating a non-binding declaration into joint projects that relate directly to the objective of biodiversity conservation. The role of WWF, a leading global conservation NGO, was crucial at the early stages of the establishment of this scheme and, working together with partners from the Danube Delta region, remains instrumental in the project's implementation.

*Lake Ohrid*

A few kilometres northwest of Prespa, Albania and FYROM share another lake, Lake Ohrid, which is one of the most important water bodies in SEE in terms of its ecological and geological value. Following earlier discussions on the need for cooperation, in 1996, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding, paving the way for the establishment of the Lake Ohrid Management Board. These first steps, undertaken with the support of international institutions and funding from the Swiss and German governments, were strengthened through the GEF/World Bank Ohrid Lake Conservation Project, whose implementation began in 1998. The project aimed at the development of the institutional, legal and regulatory framework for the environmental management of the lake and initiated participatory monitoring and watershed management activities (Spirkovski et al. 2001: 240–242). Despite the conclusion of the project, the collaboration continues due to the adoption in 2004—as the last output of the project—of a bilateral Agreement for the Protection and Sustainable Development of Lake Ohrid and its Watershed, through which a joint Watershed Management Committee for Lake Ohrid has been established.

The Lake Ohrid project has been largely mobilized by the donor community, both by bilateral agencies and by the multilateral GEF. Indeed, it was due to the donor-set requirement that the GEF project concluded with the signing of a legal agreement between the two countries, solidifying the transboundary cooperation. The cooperation scheme has moved forward with the establishment of transboundary institutions and has shown progress towards the development of a culture of cooperation, at least in conceptual terms. However, and despite international funding, little progress is

noted in terms of taking joint decisions, implementing joint activities (particularly projects that result in joint management of the valuable ecosystem) or, at the very least, a coordination of policies and measures regarding conservation. Nonetheless, the Lake Ohrid case, as does that of the Sava River that follows, demonstrates the role that the international donor community can have in influencing state behaviour—in this case, towards the objective of biodiversity conservation (for GEF's role on transboundary waters, see Gerlak 2004).

### *The Sava River*

The Sava River is shared by Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, and Slovenia. The four countries formed a Sava River Protection Commission in July 2005 with the support of the Danube Regional Project (DRP), an ongoing United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and GEF project. As a follow up, in March 2006, the riparian countries agreed to develop a joint Sava River Management Plan, through which common environmental issues will be studied and monitored. The Management Plan will be developed in accordance with the EU Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC-WFD), despite the fact that Slovenia is the only EU Member State (Danube Regional Project 2006). This is probably because the other three countries aspire to EU membership.

The initiative for the Sava River cooperation lies largely with the donor community, which has chosen this region as a pilot site in river basin management as set out in the innovative EU WFD. However, the foundations of this cooperation can be traced to a 2002 International Framework Agreement between the four countries that was produced under the auspices of the Stability Pact for SEE and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The evaluation of this cooperation is difficult since the developments along the river have been so recent. So far, it has been dependent on international assistance and coordination, leaving it open to speculation whether cooperation will continue when the project ends. Due to its magnitude and importance, it is believed unlikely that the project will be left unattended.

### *The Neretva River*

The Neretva River flows through Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia to its delta, which is also shared by the two countries. Within the framework of the Ramsar Convention, which has been instrumental in promoting transboundary wetland cooperation schemes around the world, several studies were undertaken, with funding provided by the EU LIFE Third Countries programme, which revealed the need for protection and restoration of the sensitive ecosystem (Ramsar Convention on Wetlands 2005b). Consequently, the two countries decided to proceed with transboundary collaboration along the Lower Neretva Valley to further their conservation objectives. Collaboration was promoted with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding by the two countries, the Principality of Monaco (which is the main donor)

and the MedWet Initiative in 2003. Seeking to benefit from the lessons learned in other transboundary projects, the Neretva River Delta Coordinating Committee has decided to adapt the model of the Prespa Park to its own cooperation. Thus, Neretva Delta representatives participated at the November 2003 PPCC meeting.

Unlike the two previous examples, the Neretva project has largely been driven by the MedWet Initiative—notwithstanding crucial financial support by Monaco. The MedWet Initiative was also influential in the early years of the Prespa Park, demonstrating the dynamics of international regimes (Young 1994; Peterson 1997). Indeed, international institutions, as part of an international regime, can act *quasi*-autonomously, influencing the development of norms as well as the behaviour of states (Barnett & Finnemore 1999).

#### *Other Cases of Transboundary Conservation Cooperation*

Several other examples of transboundary conservation cooperation are at an early stage of development in SEE. Most constitute recent developments, making the evaluation of their effectiveness difficult. First, Albania and Montenegro, which share the Shkodra Lake, are conducting studies to fulfil the need for data, with backing from the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) and the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC).<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the Ministries of Environment of the two countries have signed a Memorandum of Understanding for Cooperation in the Field of Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development Principle Implementation in May 2003. Another example involves discussions and joint projects along the Nestos River between Bulgaria and Greece. The initiative for this project lies with Greek and Bulgarian universities using EU funds.

It goes without saying that transboundary biodiversity conservation projects need not, by any definition, be encountered only near a water resource. Indeed, Bulgaria and Serbia and Montenegro have held preliminary discussions for biodiversity conservation along the shared mountainous region of West Stara Planina, with momentum provided by the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Program for SEE (REReP) and REC and Swiss development assistance.

The few examples offered here reveal the regional momentum in developing transboundary conservation projects even in the absence of an international legal requirement. As states are faced with environmental problems that do not recognize national borders, international cooperation becomes essential, even when surrounded by a climate of political instability. The response to ecological threats cannot be resolved by mere implementation of domestic policies. 'In order to address global environmental and commons issues, nations must soften the rigid edges of sovereignty and cede some autonomy to achieve a common good' (Moomaw 1997: 14). National sovereignty over a state's natural resources is being challenged by the imperative of biodiversity conservation (Breymer & Noble 1996). Although many of the SEE initiatives mentioned here are at their early phase, there is little doubt that they could result in successful collaborations. No state alone can fully protect a resource that is shared across a political border (for water resources, see McCaffrey 2001, esp. Chapter 11; Wolf 2003: 164–179).

Although in all cases there is state involvement, it is hardly ever the case that the initiative lies with a government. This is why the Convention-based Danube cooperation is not typical of the recent regional developments. In fact, as has been highlighted, transboundary conservation projects in SEE are either NGO- or donor-driven initiatives. The discussion of the Prespa Park initiative that follows elaborates further on the influential and multiple roles that NGOs have in fostering transboundary cooperation in SEE and, as a result, influencing relations among states (for the role of environmental NGOs in international relations, see Tarlock 1992/93; Wapner 1996; Keck & Sikkink 1998) and thus serves as a model from which other projects can benefit. Indeed, the fact that the Prespa Park is used as a model for the Neretva project demonstrates the non-material role of institutions in sharing lessons learned, iterating practices and creating networks of knowledge and attitudes (Wendt 1995).

At the same time, however, the six-year long Prespa experience cautions the reader as well as the practitioner on the limits NGOs face when involved in transboundary cooperation. In addition to the momentum that NGOs provide, there is a need for an institutional basis, international (and national) funding, among others, that cannot be provided by NGOs. No doubt NGOs have become active members of the world community in which the state is not the sole actor. However, it should be recognized that NGOs face or self-impose constraints on the influence they exert (Breitmeier & Rittberger 2000: 133–142). At this moment, other actors, whose role cannot be substituted (in particular the states involved in cross-border cooperation) need to become more engaged and fulfil the expectations assigned to them in each case.

### **The Evolution of the Prespa Park Initiative and the Role of Nongovernmental Organizations**

It is now time to proceed with a closer examination of the Prespa Park that highlights the role of NGOs in driving a process forward. As mentioned, the initiative for the establishment of the Park should be ascribed to SPP and WWF-Greece: both Greek NGOs—albeit with extensive international linkages—that played a crucial role in the adoption of the 2000 Declaration between the prime ministers of Greece, Albania and FYROM. This high-level Declaration recognizes the ecological unity of the basin and the interdependence of development within it. It sets out as ultimate targets of trilateral cooperation the notable improvement of the standard of living of the inhabitants of Prespa and the model development of the area through the preservation of the extraordinary natural and cultural values of the region, as well as the promotion of peace, friendship and cooperation between the three peoples that could create a model for the development of similar areas in the Balkans and elsewhere. In this framework, cooperation among competent authorities would be considered in order to:

- a) maintain and protect the unique ecological values of the Prespa Park, b) prevent and/or reverse the causes of its habitat degradation, c) explore appropriate management methods for the sustainable use of the Prespa Lakes water, and d) to spare no efforts so that the Prespa Park become and remain a model of its kind as well as an additional reference to the peaceful collaboration among the three countries. (Transboundary Prespa Park 2006a)

The Declaration explicitly ‘recognize[s] and value[s] the importance of the work done by the Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations’, especially the SPP, ‘and present[s] this initiative as a “Gift to the earth” in the context of the WWF Living Planet Campaign’.

### *Institutional Setup*

Following the signing of the Declaration, the three Ministries of the Environment (MoE) established an interim Prespa Park Coordination Committee (PPCC) as a non-legal entity whose members are appointed by the three MoEs. Membership of the PPCC is comprised of the following from each of the three countries: one MoE representative, one NGO representative, one local government representative and a permanent MedWet observer. The responsibility of the PPCC is to build permanent links of communication, information exchange, collaboration and mutual trust between the three sides at various levels that would enable coordination of action and adoption and implementation of joint management and development interventions in Prespa. The PPCC has held regular meetings twice a year and has twice held extraordinary meetings (with a total of 10 meetings from January 2001 until November 2005) in order to ensure consensus on strategic steps forward, mostly related to the development of a GEF/UNDP project.

The PPCC has no substantial budget from the three countries and, indeed, the three governments have not obligated themselves to support the PPCC, financially or otherwise. Although set up as a two-year pilot phase to test the ground of this innovative trilateral cooperation, draw conclusions and later formalize the institutional setting of the Prespa Park, the provisional scheme has not yet been replaced by a more permanent and formal one. The PPCC operations have thus far have been supported by *ad hoc* funding provided by the Greek government, as well as occasionally by the German bilateral development aid institutions KfW (Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau) and GTZ (Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit) and the Municipality of Prespa in Greece.

The system was complemented by a technical Secretariat of the PPCC consisting of three NGO representatives, one from each country seated at the SPP offices in the village of Aghios Germanos, Greek Prespa. In other words, the day-to-day operation of the Park upon the guidance of the decisions of the PPCC is undertaken by the NGOs. The Albanian NGO partner, PPNEA (Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania), the oldest national environmental NGO in the country with a long presence in the region, has lobbied and provided international support for the establishment of the Prespa National Park in Albania. On the FYROM side, an alliance of 25 small local NGOs is participating in the Prespa Park process; but has minimal capacity and faces internal coordination problems, hindering any substantial input to the trans-boundary cooperation. In fact, the main responsibility of the Secretariat lies with the largest and most skilled NGO, the SPP, which informally guides and oversees its operations and provides the necessary administrative, technical and scientific support for its work. Although for the first year, the Secretariat operation cost was covered through

funding by the Greek government, it has since been dependent on support from WWF-Greece, through SPP, with some funding directed to 'external' communication activities (website creation, newsletter publication, promotion in media and meeting organization) from the German GTZ.<sup>8</sup>

### *Joint Activities*

The scope of the Prespa Park, as defined by the three prime ministers, is not restricted only to conservation, but expands to practically all aspects of economic activity in the area, hence involving a multiplicity of stakeholders. This trilateral cooperation system, has from the start, been conceived by its NGO initiators not as a typical 'NGO project' of limited scope and specified duration, outputs and results, but as an open-ended process of transboundary cooperation among various stakeholders, and most importantly local communities and authorities and central administrations of the three countries (Figure 1). This creates considerable complications for the work of the NGOs, which must not only initiate, but also encourage, facilitate, provide incentives or even 'force' the governments involved to follow up on their initial commitment. In this context, one could distinguish two levels of progress with the Prespa Park initiative, albeit inextricably linked and interdependent: one, and in fact the more advanced, is on the abstract, conceptual level, while the other is more practical and concrete.

*Building Working Relationships and a Common Vision.* The first level of progress refers to building and entrenching a sense of unity and interdependence between the three sides of the basin, ultimately between the three peoples, along with the development of a climate of trust and good working relationship among the services, authorities and stakeholders involved in the process and a dynamics of joint planning and action for the protection and sustainable development of Prespa. This has passed largely through the operation of provisional Prespa Park institutions, which has been painstakingly ensured by the collaborating NGOs through the organization, fundraising, preparation of background papers, and, in general, attendance of all practical and substantial aspects of PPCC and other trilateral meetings, as well as through provision of a flow of information and facilitation of long-distance discussions between meetings.

Other sectoral contacts and meetings were also initiated, organized and facilitated by the Secretariat in order to diffuse the culture of trilateral cooperation to various groups of stakeholders and authorities. These include protected area authorities around the lakes, fire-fighting services and, more recently (since November 2005), veterinary services that hold meetings organized by the PPCC Secretariat to exchange information and coordinate preparedness and response in the event of an avian influenza outbreak in the Prespa or the wider region. Yet the effort has concentrated on local authorities (i.e., municipalities and communes in the Prespa basin), which are obviously crucial actors in the process, but have minimal capacity in terms of funds,



Figure 1 Prespa Park Area (Source: Transboundary Prespa Park 2006b).

trained personnel and know-how to develop their potential for transboundary cooperation. Thus, the Prespa Park NGOs organized working meetings between mayors

and their staff, provided logistical support, such as translation of the main documents of the Prespa Park into the national languages and often interpretation services, to enable the local authorities to participate actively in the Prespa Park process. This effort has started to pay off as the Prespa municipalities have recently started to have direct communication among them, without NGO assistance and interference, hold cross-border meetings, mutually attend events and so on. The challenge they face today is to embark on a more mature phase, which will involve organization and implementation of joint projects and programmes; to this effect, the INTERREG programme, which requires cross-border collaboration between neighbouring municipalities, has provided an appropriate framework and incentive and is more likely to do so in the future.<sup>9</sup>

An important ally to the NGOs in this effort of climate and institution building has been an international institution, the MedWet Initiative, which contributed significantly in building and consolidating the Prespa Park institutions and working relationships, although recently its involvement has been limited. The MedWet Initiative acted as an external, impartial actor during the first crucial years of trilateral cooperation in Prespa proposing internal arrangements and compromise solutions to difficult issues, constantly reminding the parties of their international obligations to protect and wisely use shared resources, and promoting and publicizing the Prespa Park initiative to wider audiences and *fora*. It should be noted here that the first working meeting of the three sides in Tirana in October 2000 was held at the initiative and under the chairmanship of the Ramsar Convention Secretary General demonstrating the catalytic role that international institutions and the secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements can have in regime building (Churchill & Ulfstein 2000).

The most far-reaching accomplishment that the PPCC has undertaken to date has been the completion of the Strategic Action Plan (SAP) for the Sustainable Development of the Prespa Park in 2002 (Transboundary Prespa Park 2006b). The aim of the SAP is to lay down an initial joint vision for the future of the area and describe in some detail the institutional, economic and management measures and procedures that may lead to the fulfilment of the Prespa Park objectives; to identify the main management issues that call for a common strategic approach; and in general serve as a tool for the rational planning of the future of the transboundary protected area, on the basis of which all possible national and international funding could be drawn together. The SAP constitutes the first joint project aiming to translate the political commitment on the transboundary park into a tangible reality for the environment and the people of Prespa. The NGOs were instrumental in the preparation of the SAP, which was carried out through national working groups, coordinated by the Prespa Park Secretariat member in each country.

*Implementing Joint Projects.* This brings us to the second level of progress in the transboundary Prespa Park: the practical one of concrete joint decisions, measures, activities and projects that contribute directly to the conservation and sustainable development of the Prespa basin. The first such project was the above-mentioned SAP. After the Plan

was adopted by all three states and the PPCC in 2002, the long process of its implementation began. Several areas of intervention addressed in the SAP, especially regarding basic infrastructure in Albania and FYROM, have shown some progress. However, the centre of attention of the Prespa Park stakeholders has been what they call the 'GEF project'. Development of a large multi-donor international project has in fact been the major driving force for the Governments of Albania and FYROM and their representatives in the Prespa Park process. The project development phase has been long and cumbersome—as is often the case with projects prepared for GEF co-funding. In the end, a full project proposal with a budget of US\$13.5 million was submitted in July 2005.

The full project proposal entitled 'Integrated Ecosystem Management in the Trans-boundary Prespa Park Region' was approved in the winter 2005–2006 and includes several outputs related to water such as pilot ecosystem-oriented water management at local scale, including the development of water management plans; capacity-building for water and watershed management at municipal and commune level in the three countries; and establishment of a trilateral Prespa Working Group on Water Management as a subsidiary organ of the PPCC. Joint environmental monitoring and conservation activities for key species such as the pelicans and habitats in the Prespa basin are also foreseen, as well as forest restoration and management, fisheries management and so on. However, this type of project, being a pool of various donors, created hope and expectations for significant development investment to the Prespa Park stakeholders, and especially the local people in Albania and FYROM. These expectations do not seem to be met in the final project proposal, which leans heavily towards environmental conservation rather than basic infrastructure and sustainable development in the sense of alternative economic and productive activities that would directly raise the standard of living in the basin and would guarantee local ownership and continuity of envisaged results.

The NGOs involved in the Prespa Park process, especially the SPP, have been instrumental in enabling the PPCC to carry through the GEF project development through their Secretariat work, facilitating consultations and organizing several meetings devoted to this end, but also through provision of scientific and technical assistance to the various agencies and consultants involved. Although NGOs were able to influence the content of the proposal, they were not able to enrich it with sustainable development components. Beyond the GEF project context, the SPP tried to mobilize Greek development assistance resources in early 2004 for a sustainable development project on the other two sides of Prespa. The proposal included the introduction of organic and 'integrated' agriculture in Albania and FYROM, the preservation of local breeds of animals, an integrated assessment of fish stocks in the basin and an assessment of the potential for the development of alternative energy sources, especially biomass. The project was never approved by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Instead, in late 2004, the same donor approved a project touching upon a crucial environmental problem in the Prespa basin: the sedimentation of Lake Micro Prespa by the diversion of the Albanian River Devolli into it in the 1970s. The project, currently implemented by SPP in collaboration with its Albanian counterpart PPNEA,

is in fact a scientific study aiming at better understanding the hydrology of the area, the interaction between the river and the lake and its negative environmental and socio-economic impacts, and at assessing the irrigation needs of the wider Korcha area in Albania for which the diversion was implemented in the first place. In this regard, it will be a useful tool for the integrated management of water resources in the Prespa basin—a priority issue for all three countries in the Prespa Park cooperation. However, this is only a small part of what the Prespa Park NGOs tried to achieve with regard to water management through the Prespa Park process. Working inside and outside the Prespa Park Secretariat, they have tried to put together and secure funding for a comprehensive hydro-geological study of the basin, which would provide the scientific basis for the approval and implementation of a joint water management plan and the adoption of relevant decisions. This effort was fruitless, despite political consensus at the PPCC and financial pledges by the Greek and German governments that never materialized.

*Formalizing Trilateral Cooperation.* Water is still at the centre of attention for the Prespa Park and NGOs. The most recent related action that NGOs took was the drafting in July 2004 of a trilateral agreement for the Prespa Park. It foresees concrete commitments for the effective protection, management and sustainable development of the Prespa Park area, and the establishment of formal trilateral institutions, such as a Working Group on Water Management, that would organize the implementation of joint actions based on the EU WFD. Such a formalization and streamlining of the process—six years after its inception—and an elaboration of commitments have wider significance and would launch a new phase of maturity of the Prespa Park system, leading the countries involved to fulfil their responsibilities (both financial and decision-making) and bringing about tangible changes towards conservation and development of Prespa. According to PPCC discussions, the draft agreement was to be signed by the MoEs of the three countries by the end of 2004. This has not been possible mainly due to the increased tension in the bilateral relations between Greece and FYROM at the end of 2004 after the United States recognized the latter by its constitutional name.<sup>10</sup> A second deadline also failed and at the time of writing there was no sign that foreign policy considerations could allow for a positive development.<sup>11</sup> Since one of the objectives of the GEF project is the strengthening and formalization of joint institutions, considerable pressure will be exerted by the project on the governments, especially of the two recipient states, Albania and FYROM, to act for the adoption of legal agreements. Yet it is unlikely to succeed where the NGOs have failed, as it has no direct leverage on the Greek government, which seems the most reluctant to enter into binding arrangements.

### **The Role and Limits of Environmental Nongovernmental Organizations: Concluding Thoughts**

Summing up the preceding discussion, NGOs in the transboundary Prespa Park context have played a central role as initiators, facilitators, executants and so on of

trilateral action. NGOs were the mobilizing force behind the prime ministerial declaration for the establishment of the park. NGOs acted as ‘norm entrepreneurs’ as they introduced the concept of ‘transboundary conservation’ to the three neighbouring countries whose relations have been upset on several occasions (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998). This was also the case at the Lower Danube where NGOs introduced the concept of ‘green corridors’ to the four Delta countries. Through the Prespa Park Declaration, Greece, as the initiating state, was legitimized as an agent of peace in the region, while Albania and FYROM, by embracing the idea, improved their outlook as young members of the global community and increased their potential for receiving international funding. Actually, in each transboundary initiative, states identify additional benefits beyond the direct conservation objectives to cooperating, marking such schemes as *win-win* scenarios.

Be that as it may, conclusion of the Declaration in itself could not lead to a sudden conceptual change across the borders, or lead to tangible results. This is not because the Declaration is a form of ‘soft law’, since soft law, like hard law, creates a sense of obligation and has the potential to influence state behaviour (Weiss 1997). Rather, it is because several factors influence the dynamic process of compliance as is evinced by the study of multilateral environmental agreements (Weiss & Jacobson 1998). Indeed, within each regime, the participation of all actors involved creates a process of ‘justificatory discourse’ that leads to stronger or weaker levels of compliance (Chayes & Chayes 1995). In the case of the Prespa Park, the discourse has largely been shaped by the NGOs, who have laboured to create a climate of cooperation across the Prespa stakeholders. As members of the PPCC and the Secretariat, NGOs have been crucial in ensuring the generation of this climate, an effort that has produced results. Today, we witness cross-border collaboration (e.g., at the municipal level) without direct NGO involvement.

However, this has not influenced ‘high politics’ between the three countries. In other words, there is no indication that the progress achieved in Prespa reaches the political leadership of the states involved—even the leadership of the MoEs for that matter. In other words, although at its beginning the Prespa Park was a top-down initiative, today it is the other way around and, at the level of national politics, the situation evolves—or remains stagnant—unaffected by the Prespa Park experience. Having said that, climate and institution building—although its results are not clearly visible to the outside observer—has been an absolutely necessary precondition and is quite demanding in an area where there was little official communication and collaboration in the past, where a variety of preconceptions and stereotypes exist, where there is often an adverse wider political setting, and where there are still no border crossings between Greece and the two neighbouring countries to generate a sense of unity and communication among the people of the region.

In addition to developing collaboration, NGOs have been instrumental in acting as ‘channels of implementation’ for the objectives of the Prespa Park (Najam et al. 2004: 32). Their actions have led to the attainment of concrete decisions and have resulted in the implementation of joint projects. Here, the presence of a donor community is also significant. Indeed, the donor community has been a partner since the preparatory

stages of the trilateral cooperation, preparing the ground for its implementation. In fact, the presence of mainly German bilateral development assistance in both Albania and FYROM since the mid-1990s has contributed substantially to local conservation efforts in Prespa. The donor community continues to stand by the side of the Prespa initiative providing the means for progress at the practical level. Nevertheless, there are times when the priorities of NGOs—and even concerned governments for that matter—and the donor community diverge or contradict each other. In such cases, the donors largely impose their own agendas and priorities since, in practice, no actor can or will actually refuse or veto external funding unless directed to destructive interventions. The content of the Prespa Park GEF project discussed above is an example of this, as is the inability of the Prespa Park stakeholders to ensure financial support for their stated top priority (i.e., a comprehensive hydro-geological study). However, as the Prespa Park matures, the potential for external funding acts or should act as an additional *carrot* to the trilateral cooperation rather than a determinant of the nature or progress of the collaboration.

This scheme is distinct from Lake Ohrid, where the GEF project was the driving force for collaboration, rather than the opposite, and where bilateral cooperation now has to survive on its own dynamics without the involvement of a major donor. In the case of the Prespa Park, NGOs and the joint institutions established (PPCC and the Secretariat) were the ones that ensured the achievement of progress conceptual and practical. As such they have contributed in creating a regional ‘non-state form of governance’ to bring about change in the management and conservation of a transboundary resource (Wapner 1996: 153). Thus, the Prespa Park fits the model of Type II partnerships that was presented as a formal implementation tool of sustainable development at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development. Such partnerships seek to complement other initiatives that promote sustainable development, by creating voluntary, multi-stakeholder schemes enabling all stakeholders through the unique added value of each to the realization of the objectives of the partnership. Even the most successful partnerships, however, cannot operate in a political vacuum. In fact, Type II partnerships are not considered substitutes for government and state initiatives, policies and legislation; rather, as supplements to these initiatives highlighting the potential synergistic and multiplying effect of collaborations for the attainment of sustainable development.

Taking into account the above, it should be noted that there are limits—and significantly self-imposed limits—on the role of NGOs in the Prespa Park and, arguably, in other similar regimes. The Prespa Park NGOs could in fact have done more fundraising and implemented more small or large projects. Had they done so, however, they would risk turning the interstate collaboration process they envisaged into another conventional ‘NGO project’. Prespa Park, though, aims at being a genuine, multi-stakeholder sustainable development transboundary cooperation. In this vein, and to attain the goals listed in the founding Declaration, there is a need for continuous political commitment at all levels. The success of the transboundary Prespa Park is dependent on factors that are external to the actual trilateral collaboration system (Haas et al. 1993: 18). It is dependent on the definition of state interests, as these may vary at times, and other political forces.

Despite the fact that the PPCC and the Secretariat have tried consistently—and so far successfully—not to be influenced by the broader political context in which they operate, there is no doubt that the uncertainty and instability in SEE has slowed down the Prespa Park cooperation. Indeed, the governments involved have not been able to grant the necessary resources in order for the Prespa Park to move at a faster pace. Foreign policy concerns have at times intervened in the progress of the Prespa Park, in particular with regard to the name of FYROM, preventing the conclusion of a binding agreement that would lead to a formalization of the cooperation and legal obligations. Instead, pledges made by donors are not always fulfilled, resulting in difficulties to ensure stable human and constant financial resources. Hence, there is a delicate balance that the NGOs are trying to maintain in order to achieve their objective of making governments commit to substantive targets and provide (national or international) funds. This is of course a double-edged sword: more tangible results could have been achieved in terms of joint research and conservation projects, but that would not have guaranteed the sustainability of conservation and sustainable development of the basin, which has to undergo formal trilateral discussion and agreement on a variety of sectors, accompanied by serious investment.

In sum, the Prespa Park and other similar NGO initiatives are worthwhile endeavours for purposes much wider than nature conservation and sustainable development. In fact, they might contribute more in creating a culture of peace and development cooperation and in bringing about a rapprochement on the ground that helps people in troubled regions to look optimistically at their future than in attaining strict conservation objectives. The governments of the region, on the other hand, have yet to prove that they are able to rise to the occasion and fulfil their minimum obligations towards nature and their people, and guarantee that they will not risk reversing these new realities in Prespa and elsewhere through short-sighted high-level politics.

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### **Notes**

- [1] Prespa is a remote, high altitude, rural border area (c. 1,400 km<sup>2</sup>) characterized by depopulation (c. 24,000 inhabitants), unemployment, inadequate services and difficulties in the marketing of local products. It contains two lakes, Micro and Macro Prespa, and the surrounding forested mountain slopes. Best known internationally for its natural beauty, biodiversity and populations of rare water birds (including the world largest breeding colony of the Dalmatian pelican), it is also remarkable for its cultural values, which include Byzantine monuments, examples of traditional architecture and local practices in the use of natural resources.

- [2] The SPP is an 'umbrella' organization established in 1991 with ten Greek and other European NGOs as founding members. Its mission is to 'maintain and strengthen the relationship between people and nature in the region and to preserve the natural and cultural heritage of Prespa for the benefit of its inhabitants and of all those interested and concerned, today and in the future' (on its activities, see [www.spp.gr](http://www.spp.gr)).
- [3] MedWet, established in 1991, is the first regional initiative of the Ramsar Convention. It is guided by the Mediterranean Wetlands Committee, which consists of 25 states and the Palestinian Authority, three international conventions (Barcelona, Bern and Ramsar), the European Commission, the UNDP and seven international NGOs and wetland centres.
- [4] The examples provided are limited to those from the broader SEE; however, many such examples can be found globally.
- [5] For a brief overview of the post-World War II history of the legal institution governing the Danube River, see Margesson 1997: 26. For navigation cooperation along the Danube, see the website of the Danube Commission (<http://www.danubecom-intern.org>).
- [6] The conclusion of international agreements on specific water resources is quite typical of international water law. Indeed, 'a striking aspect of treaties concerning international water-courses is their sheer number' since more than 2,000 have been listed (McCaffrey 1993: 97). This does not imply that environmental or sustainability concerns are included therein as most agreements have a narrow focus commonly on water use allocation (Hunter et al. 1998: 809; on transboundary river basins, see Kliot et al. 2001).
- [7] The REC is an international organization founded in 1990 by the United States, the European Commission, Hungary and 28 other states to act as a non-partisan facilitator of cooperation among environmental actors in the region.
- [8] It is noteworthy that the GTZ contributed considerably to the consolidation of a transboundary cooperation culture in the wider region in the period 2001–2004 through its Prespa-Ohrid programme, which provided modest but crucial funding to various NGO cross-border projects on environmental, cultural and other social themes.
- [9] INTERREG is an EU funding instrument aimed at cross-border, interregional and transnational cooperation.
- [10] A parallel initiative, the signing of a memorandum for the establishment of the Prespa-Ohrid Euroregion under the auspices of the Council of Europe, due to take place the first week of December 2004, was also canceled by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- [11] Note also that in September 2005 the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected co-financing of a project for setting up a transboundary, basin-wide environmental monitoring system—an activity earlier presented by the Greek Ministry of Environment as a possible Greek state co-financing of the Prespa Park GEF project. This decision was arguably influenced by the status of bilateral relations with FYROM.

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