

Water Governance in the Transboundary Prespa Basin: The Way Forward

Executive Summary

PrespaNet is a network of three environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in each of the littoral states sharing the transboundary Prespa basin. The NGOs, namely the Macedonian Ecological Society (Skopje, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), the Protection and Preservation of the Natural Environment in Albania (Tirana, Albania) and the Society for the Protection of Prespa (Aghios Germanos, Greece) have been active in the region for many years and decided to join their forces for the conservation of the area in 2013. PrespaNet aims to enhance co-operation between stakeholders across the borders, influence environmental policies, and promote conservation and sustainable development in the wider region. To this effect PrespaNet co-operates with international NGOs, such as EuroNatur, KORA, Plantlife, the SAVE Foundation and the Frankfurt Zoological Society.

Water is the key uniting element in the transboundary Prespa basin, providing habitat for endangered species and connecting a variety of ecosystems of immeasurable wealth. The necessity for co-ordinated water management in this globally significant freshwater ecosystem is more crucial today than ever, as scientific research points to the accelerating deterioration of its water resources as well as to the exceptional vulnerability of the basin to climate change.

The entry into force of the International Prespa Park Agreement in 2017 forms a milestone in the cross-border co-operation initiated in Prespa in 2000 with the prime-ministerial declaration of the transboundary Prespa Park. Providing for the set-up of permanent institutional mechanisms for water co-operation, the agreement opens up new opportunities for co-ordinating action and the integrated management of the basin's shared water resources.

The environmental NGOs active in the region applaud the three states for their commitment to deepen interstate co-operation, and especially to implement the European water policy principles in the Prespa basin. Wishing to foster integrated water resource management in the region, the PrespaNet partners invite the governments, the water policy-makers and the regional stakeholders to pursue innovative and effective measures in order to protect this sensitive international river basin.

In particular we call on the parties to the Prespa Park Agreement to undertake specific action to:

- ✓ Consolidate institutional water co-operation and establish cross-border dialogue mechanisms
- ✓ Implement integrated river basin management principles basin-wide
- ✓ Strengthen participatory water governance
- ✓ Implement concrete measures and actions at national and transboundary level

1. Introduction

A worldwide renowned hotspot for biodiversity, the international Prespa basin comprises the Great and Lesser Prespa Lakes and extends over Albania, Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia¹.

Freshwater is the single most valuable natural resource in Prespa, an area which is currently protected under international, European and national legislation². Nevertheless, water status deterioration has been identified as a priority concern, with potentially detrimental effects on the globally significant biodiversity of the region. Indeed³, both lakes fail to achieve the European water legislation standards of good ecological status according to the endorsed national Prespa basin management plans³, as well as independent research⁴. Furthermore, independent scientific research indicates an increasingly eutrophic status for the lakes and suggests that water quality deterioration is linked to human activities and unsustainable practices. What is more, international research has acknowledged Prespa as one of the wetlands most sensitive to climate change in Europe⁵.

¹ Prespa hosts a diversity of globally important ecosystems and species and the world's largest breeding colony of the Dalmatian pelican.

² National protected areas have been established over the last 70 years in the three countries sharing Prespa and parts of all sides are characterised as wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar Convention.

³ Lesser Prespa Lake is classified as having 'poor' ecological status and Great Prespa Lake as having 'moderate' status, based on the Water Framework Directive five-class ecological status classification system (high, good, moderate, poor or bad); see Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning - Republic of Macedonia (2012) & Special Secretariat of Water, Ministry of Environment and Energy - Greece (2014)

⁴ GIZ (2017) - Great Prespa Lake is classified as having 'moderate' ecological status based on fish monitoring and shore-zone functionality.

⁵ Markovic et al (2017)

Today Prespa's water resources are managed in a fragmented manner. The water policy and governance situation in the three littoral states is characterised by disparities, while there is a lack of co-ordination in water planning and management across and within the countries. Separate Prespa basin management plans have been completed for the Greek and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia sides, while the development of an Albanian plan which will only address part of their side of the basin, is under-way⁶. Moreover, the water monitoring systems that have been set and operate in the littoral states are not aligned.

Nevertheless, in order to address current and future challenges and preserve this exceptional part of the planet it is imperative that the water resources of Prespa are managed in an integrated manner throughout their natural catchment, irrespective of administrative or national boundaries, following the paradigm of other European transboundary river basins such as the Danube, the Rhine and the Scheldt⁷. The EU water legislation, the Water Framework Directive (WFD)⁸, provides a common water policy foundation for all three sides of the basin, which are bound, directly or indirectly, to its requirements⁹.

Sustainable water management was given top priority under the cross-border co-operation initiative set out between the three countries in early 2000 with the prime ministerial declaration for the Prespa Park¹⁰. Indeed, the three sides agreed to embrace the WFD principles for co-ordinated water management and pursue the establishment of permanent water co-operation mechanisms over the decade of informal interstate co-operation that followed. Local collaboration initiatives have further fostered cross-border information exchange and water dialogue in the region, and co-operation protocols signed by the

⁶ Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Water Administration, Albania (2015)

⁷ DG Environment EU (2012)

⁸ 2000/60/EC - WFD

⁹ Greece has transposed the WFD in its national law, while Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia have also aligned their legislation accordingly as part of their approximation to the *acquis communautaire*.

¹⁰ Declaration on the Prespa Park (2000)

littoral municipalities and the environmental NGOs active in Prespa are outcomes of this mobilisation of local stakeholders.

What is more, the International Agreement for the Prespa Park, signed by the three littoral states and the EU in 2010, reiterates the states' political will to join forces and declares their intention to pursue integrated water management basin-wide as a priority.

2. Policy asks

The entry into force of the International Prespa Park Agreement is a milestone in cross-border water co-operation in the region. The agreement specifically requires that the three states establish a permanent cross-border structure for the planning of water policy and actions across the Prespa basin on the basis of the WFD.

The network of environmental non-governmental organisations for Prespa, PrespaNet¹¹, applauds the initiative and invites the governments, the water management authorities and the interested parties to undertake concrete measures and actions for the protection of the water resources of Prespa and the conservation of their ecosystem services.

2.1 Consolidation of institutional water co-operation and establishment of cross-border dialogue mechanisms

The 2010 Prespa Park Agreement foresees the establishment of a formal institutional structure¹² for the promotion of water dialogue and management planning in Prespa. The Working Group on Water Management will include representatives of the competent water authorities of the three countries and the EC.

At the same time, the set-up of permanent cross-border communication schemes for diverse stakeholder groups such as academia, productive associations and NGOs would further build regional knowledge and mutual understanding of the basin's water resources, and enhance effective water planning and management.

We therefore urge national governments, water authorities and interested parties to:

- ✓ Proceed with the establishment and operation of the transboundary **Working Group on Water Management** in compliance with the International Prespa Park Agreement;
- ✓ Set up **cross-border dialogue mechanisms**, such as forums, to enhance regular communication and exchange of experience on water issues in specific sectors, such as academia and research institutions, protected areas, primary sector co-operatives and practitioners, local authorities, non-governmental organisations and civil society groups;
- ✓ Establish appropriate structures and tools for the **exchange of water data** across borders, such as a reliable online Prespa water database;

2.2 Implementation of integrated river basin management basin-wide

Water management in Prespa is practiced in a piecemeal manner, as monitoring, planning and management measures are artificially separated by the borders. National water monitoring networks have been set up in each of the three littoral states, however, an overall picture of the status of the water bodies cannot be attained as the parameters measured and the methodologies used vary significantly between countries. Distinct national Prespa basin management plans have been developed for the Greek and the former Yu-

¹¹ See box at the end of the text on p.7.

¹² Transboundary Working Group on Water Management

goslav Republic of Macedonia parts of the basin¹³, while preparatory work has also commenced in Albania for the development of a management plan for the greater Semani basin district, however this plan does not address the Albanian Prespa basin as a whole¹⁴.

Nevertheless, the protection of the water resources of Prespa can only be effective if applied within the basin's natural boundaries, i.e. at cross-border level.

We therefore call the respective authorities of the three countries to:

- ✓ Establish appropriate **river basin management authorities** and build institutional capacity so as to ensure effective water management at local and regional level;
- ✓ Implement a harmonised **transboundary water monitoring** programme¹⁵;
- ✓ Facilitate knowledge-sharing and **joint scientific water research** across the borders;
- ✓ Ensure the successful implementation of the national Prespa **basin management plans**;
- ✓ Co-operate for the development of an **international river basin management plan** for Prespa in accordance with the spirit of the WFD;
- ✓ Utilise the **European Commission's expertise** on cross-border co-operation and water management;
- ✓ Seek appropriate **technical and financial support** to accomplish the above.

¹³ Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning - Republic of Macedonia (2012) & Special Secretariat of Water, Ministry of Environment and Energy - Greece (2014).

¹⁴ Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Water Administration, Albania (2015)

¹⁵ M. Kolaneci (2011)

2.3 Strengthening of participatory water governance

Local stakeholder engagement in water planning is one of the most crucial elements for sustainable water management and has been emphasised by the numerous international legal instruments in force¹⁶. The Wetland Management Committee, active for a decade in the Greek part of the basin, is a successful multi-participatory water governance scheme. The committee provides for a permanent mechanism for dialogue on water management between users and policy-makers¹⁷ and acts as an advisory body to the Management Body for the Prespa National Park, which is responsible for wetland management in Prespa, Greece. Respectively, in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Prespa Watershed Management Council was established in 2012 to support the development of the Prespa Watershed Management Plan¹⁸. However, having been convened once the scheme has remained inactive ever since.

Participatory schemes offer a platform for local stakeholders and users to contribute to water governance and their operation in Prespa scales up their engagement moving sustainable water management forward.

We therefore urge the authorities to:

- ✓ Improve water planning transparency and create appropriate mechanisms for wider **access to water-related information**;
- ✓ Ensure **effective consultations** during water management planning at both national and transboundary level;
- ✓ Promote **participatory water governance schemes** in each littoral state by ensuring:

¹⁶ E.g. the EU WFD and the Aarhus Convention

¹⁷ The Wetland Management Committee is comprised of representatives from the relevant ministries, regional and local water authorities, the local land reclamation service, local animal husbandry and fishery associations and the SPP.

¹⁸ The Watershed Management Council includes representatives from the ministries, the local authority, the forest enterprise, the public utility enterprise, protected areas, NGOs, primary sector associations, research institutions, the irrigation company and water-user groups.

i) the regular operation of the Wetland Management Committee in Greece, ii) the re-activation of the Watershed Management Council in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and iii) the establishment of an appropriate corresponding multi-stakeholder institutional mechanism in Albania.

2.4 Implementation of concrete measures and actions

Along with the aforementioned institutional, legislative and administrative measures, certain concrete actions at national and/or transboundary level are imperative for the conservation of the water resources of Prespa. Considering the current situation in the three countries, as well as the main measures included in the national Prespa basin management plans, we urge the authorities to undertake the following measures, separately or jointly as appropriate:

- ✓ Implement concrete actions to address the mutually identified **eutrophication problem**;
- ✓ Conduct **cross-border research** to: i. assess the extent of **water resources degradation** in the basin, including priority hazardous substances, ii. identify the main causal factors, iii. estimate its impact on the biodiversity and natural environment; and design and undertake appropriate measures to **reverse the situation**;
- ✓ Implement measures to improve **drinking water** quality and supply networks;
- ✓ Build and maintain appropriate **water-saving irrigation** infrastructure in all three countries, and in particular proceed with the construction of a drip-irrigation system in Greece and the improvement and extension of the drip-irrigation system in the Resen plain;
- ✓ Support **environmentally friendly agricultural practices** (e.g. diversification in farming activities and organic farming) and implement appropriate agro-environmental measures;
- ✓ Ensure the operation of appropriate **wastewater treatment systems** for the municipal and industrial effluents and investigate the option of wastewater treatment at domestic scale;
- ✓ Develop and maintain adequate **solid waste management** systems, and close and sanitise illegal dump sites;
- ✓ Develop and implement an effective **hazardous waste management** system, especially so for the collection and safe disposal of agro-chemical packaging waste;
- ✓ Conduct a basin-wide assessment of **fish resources** (fish stocks and fishing capacity) and undertake appropriate measures for the recovery of fish populations;
- ✓ **Prevent hydrological alterations** caused by unsustainable spatial development or the operation of dams for hydroelectric power, which impact free water flow and the ecological quality of the rivers;
- ✓ Undertake appropriate **wetland restoration** activities;
- ✓ Assess the vulnerability of the basin to **climate change** and its ability to adapt, and formulate contingency plans for extreme climatic events;
- ✓ Implement extensive **awareness-raising campaigns** on the value of the Prespa wetland ecosystems, the main water challenges and the sustainable use of its water resources.

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