



ENVIRONMENT FORUM

RENA MINISTERIAL MEETING

Brussels, 30 September 2010

ENVIRONMENT FORUM NGO STATEMENT

Mr. Chairperson, thank you for the opportunity to address this meeting!

My name is Toni Vidan, I am an energy campaigner in Zelena akcija, Friends of the Earth Croatia, and I am delivering this statement on behalf of the Environment Forum, a platform of 18 environmental NGOs from 8 countries involved in a process to improve communication between the European Commission and the environmental NGOs from a candidate and potential candidate countries. The statement itself is a result of a broad process of regional, but also national consultations, on which level we organized meetings in all countries, involving 271 representatives from civil and other sectors.

We support declared overall objective of the Regional Environmental Network for Accession (RENA), and we are keen to actively participate as a relevant stakeholder in its accomplishment. We see RENA process as an excellent opportunity to strengthen public participation in decision making related to the environment, with the aim to improve environmental situation in the region, as well as to build a culture of transparency and public involvement.

But, as we remember how previous attempts with similar objective left much to be desired, we would like to make clear that we will warn on any signs of possible shortfalls in this process, too. We strongly support stakeholder participation in the process, and, as most environmental issues in the region are cross border indeed, we support strengthening of the regional cooperation.

We believe that accession process could be a real opportunity for candidate and potential candidate countries to undertake substantial reforms



beneficial for their societies and environment. Unfortunately, current experience with accession process is that governments are focused on formal adaptation of environmental acquis, without political will to develop public participation and undertake real reforms. For us in Croatia, especially frustrating is a lack of transparency and public participation in formulating of the national priorities for transitional measures, and we hope that practice will not be repeated in other countries of the region.

We would welcome stronger intervention from the side of the European Commission and DG Environment, especially when some countries are misusing EU accession process for promotion of highly controversial projects and legislation. We would also support pressure from the EC for better co-operation among sectors, using position of the DG environment and other DGs, to assure that national authorities involve environmental concerns in other sector development policies.

As we are witnessing escalation of global environmental crisis and further degradation of local environmental resources, in our opinion, public in our countries is, despite economic problems, more and more concerned with environmental issues, and environmental movement is, despite very limited funding opportunities, growing stronger and better organized.

This can be illustrated by recent example of broad movement under development in Turkey, where, as the debate on over 2.000 planned small hydroelectric power plants is getting harsher each day, more than 50 local and national NGOs joined their forces under the umbrella of the "Turkey Water Parliament" platform to strongly oppose new constructions.

Even on the regional level we have more and more successful examples of cooperation, both on grassroots level, like regional grassroots ecological campaign "Necu baru hocu Taru" for protection of river Tara, and on regional NGO cooperation level, with examples like:

- **Bells movement**, involving 7 NGOs active in 6 countries of the region, coordinated by "Environmental Ambassadors" from Serbia, which "promotes and



advocates EU environmental values and *green* values, convicted that there is no administrative borders or political party colors around environment issues". In their work they cooperate with Members of Western Balkans Parliaments (120 MPs), Representatives of Civil and Business sector, Government officials and Representatives of different Ministries, Local Government Representatives, Media Representatives, and Active Citizens.

- **Natura 2000 resource centers** in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Montenegro, the network of more than 80 nature protection orientated NGOs work jointly in region on the process of implementation of Bird and Habitat directives. The network has a clear aim of implementation the Natura 2000 in countries, and a series of capacity building programs, data collection and consultative meetings with authorities are already implemented.

- **SEE.NET**, recently established regional network for sustainable energy and transport, which already organized a conference in Skopje, and a seminar in Zelena akcija's educational center "Solar academy" on island Sholta in Croatia, with more than 40 participants on those two events.

Unfortunately, environmental campaigns and NGOs in a region, probably as they are becoming more effective, are facing unacceptable pressure from public institutions, which are, in our opinion, in clear conflict with basic conditions of "Copenhagen criteria". Some of the most drastic examples are:

- in Albania, 3 leaders of the movement "Civic Alliance for the Protection of Vlora Bay" against the government plan for building up an energy park in tourist bay of Vlora, where arrested and spend two weeks in prison in 2008.

- from Turkey, we have a case that The Minister of Environment and Forestry has sued the president of an environmental group over verbal insult, and is demanding 7500 € in compensation.

-from Montenegro, we have an example that during the public hearing, related to the project of the construction of HPs on river Moraca, the organizers of the campaign, opposing their construction, were under the pressure from government institutions. Financial and other inspections were in the office of



environmental NGO Green Home every day during the public hearing lasting for a month.

-and, most recent case in Croatia, where in one day, 150 citizens were arrested and issued restriction in approach to the area, during legal and non violent demonstration!

On the two topics of thematic sessions of this meeting, climate change and nature protection, we would like to express the following:

On climate change, we share a regional vision in which fossil and nuclear fuels are phased out before mid century, and replaced by local renewable energy sources, creating environmentally and socially sustainable energy and transport sectors. Due to the rich, both natural and human, local resources for this transformation, a region could serve as a show-case for a rapid transformation of these sectors toward sustainable ones.

We appreciate very much a capacity building efforts planned under RENA, but a main problem at the moment is that energy and transport national policies are in clear conflict with EU climate policy, and that "business as usual" policies are resulting with absurd and unacceptable amount of planned coal fired power plants, large hydro power plants, and highways.

On nature protection, we believe that the state of biodiversity conservation and nature protection in the region is far from satisfactory. There is serious lack in data, gaps in policy, conservation measures and institutional capacity for nature protection. EU integration process, especially implementation of Bird and Habitat directives and designation of Natura 2000 sites we see as a big chance. Unfortunately, we think that biodiversity is not high on the priority list of Governments in the region.

We are aware that capacity building is needed both for NGOs and administration. Thus for, we expect that through the RENA working group III we will have a



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progress in nature protection field and establish dialog and cooperation between Governments and NGOs.

We call officials from each country in the region to strengthen involvement of nature protection NGOs in decision making processes, to go inline with EU and global strategic plans and take concrete measures in nature protection.

On the end, I would like to again express our interest to participate in RENA process and implementation of cross-border actions, and inform you that within the Environment Forum we selected our working groups with coordinators with the mandate to follow and participate in four RENA working groups activities and meetings.