

## 04. WATER QUALITY

### OVERVIEW

Water quality is often referred to as one of the most demanding areas in the process of EU accession, given the necessary resources and capacity demanded. Unfortunately, the current development of the situation in the Republic of Serbia indicates that the Government has decided not to deal more seriously with this area. Although the need is great, the increase in investment and strengthening of professional capacities in the relevant institutions is still lacking.

Among the main problems in this area is the small percentage of wastewater treatment, poor control of the use of groundwater, poor control of the use of river sediments, illegal construction along the rivers, uncontrolled and rapid construction of small hydropower plants. Also, the insufficient integration of sustainable water resources management into other sectors continues to be an obstacle for the systematic improvement of the state of the water system.

The development of specific implementation plans for the four EU directives in the field of water is underway: The Water Framework Directive, the Nitrates Directive, the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive and the Drinking Water Directive. The implementation of several international projects (GEF-DYNA, FORRET) are underway, which can initiate the improvement of water resources management practice in Serbia.

### LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The following documents have been adopted so far:

- The Strategy on Water Management in the Republic of Serbia until 2034, ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", No. 3/2017);
- The Law on Amendments and Modifications to the Law on Waters ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", No. 101/2016).

Even after the adoption of the Law on Amendments and Modifications to the Law on Waters water legislation in the Republic of Serbia has not been fully harmonised with EU legislation.

A Water Management plan for the Danube River Basin in the territory of the Republic of Serbia has not been adopted. The Draft Plan has been prepared, however, since the Plan does not fully follow the provisions of the Water Framework Directive, it has been decided not to adopt this draft. The drafting of a new Law on Waters is underway. It will fully implement the EU water legislation, and in accordance with this new Law, water management plans will be timely harmonised with the third cycle of the development of river basin management plans in the EU (2022-2027). The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management has established a working group to develop elements for the development of water

management plans, which also includes the civil sector. The working group has held one working meeting so far.

Drafting of specific plans for the implementation of the EU water directives (DSIP) is underway: The Water Framework Directive, the Nitrate Directive, the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive and the Drinking Water Directive. The process of development of DSIPs is carried out within the project "Further Implementation of the National Environmental Approximation Strategy"<sup>64</sup>, which has been participatory from the very beginning and includes representatives of civil organisations (representatives of the member organizations of Coalition 27 are members of the working groups). All members of the working groups were required to sign confidentiality statements obliging them not to share information they receive during working groups with third parties and with the general public. In a letter from the Water Directorate addressing all members of the working groups, this information was designated as part of the negotiating platform and, in accordance with the Regulation on Office Management, it becomes available to the public only with the opening of the negotiating chapters with the EU.

## IMPLEMENTATION OF LEGISLATION

The problems in the application and implementation of planning and legal documents in the area of water management are still numerous. In the previous period, there were no significant breakthroughs in terms of capacity building of relevant institutions and organisations. **On the contrary, the impression is that the capacities are getting weaker, that is, there is a loss of quality professional personnel.**

The main problem remains the control and prevention of water pollution, the control of the use of river sediments, the control of the use of groundwater, as well as the control of construction and the prevention of illegal construction along the rivers. According to the Water Directorate, **Serbia currently has 17 water management inspectors, which is insufficient to adequately cover the entire territory of Serbia in all aspects of water management.**

The intensive and poorly controlled exploitation of river sediments, primarily of the gravel on the Drina and Morava, continues to be a serious problem both for water management and for other related sectors (nature protection, agriculture, and tourism). Through the publication "Natural Resources and Corruption Practices", compiled by a group of civil society organisations<sup>65</sup> published in 2017, the main problems in this area were explained, and they can be summarised as follows:

- The criteria for deciding upon exploitation are extremely low. Regardless of the obvious impact on water and natural resources, the application approval rate is very high. According to the available information, there is not a single

case of exploitation of gravel for which a study of the environmental impact assessment has been carried out,

- lack and poor quality of the inspection control of gravel exploiting companies,
- inadequate reporting of quantities excavated (users report quantities themselves) and consequently inadequate collection of fees for the use of public goods,
- non-compliance with the prescribed conditions (water conditions, conditions of nature protection).

The local population around the area with a large number of exploitation sites became aware of the seriousness of this problem and the consequences which result from inadequate planning and the exploitation of river sediments. Baring this in mind, the absence of reaction by the relevant authorities is strange. Apart from defensive reactions to the above-mentioned publication<sup>66</sup>, there have been no particularly serious intentions to address this problem. With the last amendments to the Law on Waters, the obligation to develop a plan for the extraction of river sediments has been introduced. The first plan of that kind was adopted in September 2017<sup>67</sup>, but the public was not involved in its development. It remains to be seen whether this document will provide better planning and control of the use of river sediments.

The second worrisome point of management and conservation of water resources in Serbia is the construction of small hydropower plants. **Similar to the case of exploitation of river sediments, there is an obvious absence of a strategic approach to planning and controlling the construction of these facilities, as well as their exploitation.** An EU-funded project for developing a cadastre of small hydropower plants (EuropeAid/135623 IH/SER/RS) is under implementation. The details of this project, as well as the mere fact of whether public participation has been planned and made possible, are not known.

The area of water quality is often referred to as the most financially demanding within Chapter 27. The largest funds are needed for infrastructure measures to improve water quality, that is, to construct a wastewater treatment plant. Funds are also required to solve the problem of drinking water consumption and to build a flood protection system. It is clear that Serbia with its economy will not be able to finance these costs alone, which are estimated at several billion euros. **What is worrying is the absence of a strategic approach to addressing this challenge and seeking alternative solutions to reduce costs.** Certainly, part of the costs could be reduced through the development of special technologies, transfer of knowledge, application of natural solutions in water purification and flood mitigation.

64 The project EuropeAid/135629/IH/SER/RS

65 "Natural Resources and Corruption Practices", Belgrade Open School, Podrinje Anti-Corruption Team and "Rzav-God save Rzav", The publication available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0ByE6Kk5HRKJDZVJvNWR0RUuN3c/view>

66 The response of the Water Directorate to the publication: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mFvZigR2q97vTFInO-ETxdqNt7Tgy6KeS/view>

67 Rulebook on establishing the plan for river sediments extraction for the period from August 2017 to August 2019. "Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", No. 82/2017

Positive examples of water management practice in Serbia are reflected through good cooperation with international institutions, primarily with the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) and with the International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC). Through the cooperation of the relevant institutions in Serbia with these two international institutions, several important projects have been realised, such as:

- Development of a cross-border forest retention project for integrated risk management of floods, environments and forests – FORRET, realised within the framework of the Interreg Cross-Border Cooperation Program between Serbia and Croatia
- Danube River Basin Hydromorphology and River Restoration – GEF DYNA<sup>68</sup>.

Within the implementation of the EU water legislation; the Water Framework Directive, special attention must be paid to restoring rivers and wetlands habitats, that is, improving their ecological status. We hope that the two projects mentioned above will initiate Serbia's stronger progress in this aspect.

The challenge of better inter-sectoral collaboration and cooperation in water management remains a serious obstacle to progress in this area.

## FINANCING

Total budgetary allocations for water management are difficult to assess since they are executed through several budget lines and several ministries (capital investments, co-financing of international projects, etc.), but there is a consensus of the professional community that those allocations are, in total, still much lower than needed.

According to the Regulation on Determining Water Management Programme in 2017<sup>69</sup>, 2.5 billion dinars have been allocated from the Budgetary Fund for Waters for water treatment and use, protection of waters against pollution, watercourse regulation, protection against adverse effects of waters and for planning and international cooperation in the area of water. In 2018, 3.3 billion dinars were allocated for the same purposes<sup>70</sup>. This increase in budgetary resources in the water sector should not be taken for granted, because it only applies to the part of the finances that flow into the water sector, but it does give some hope that those essentially needed funds will be strengthened.

<sup>68</sup> Project details available at <https://www.thegef.org/project/danube-river-basin-hydromorphology-and-river-restoration-dyna>

<sup>69</sup> "Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", No. 17/2017.

<sup>70</sup> Regulation on Determining Water Management Programme in 2018. "Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", No. 13/2018.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Legislative framework*

- Integration of nature directives (Birds and Habitats Directives) in water management. Better coordination between the water management and environmental protection sectors is needed with regard to the implementation of EU directives.
- Development of a concrete plan and measures for improvement of monitoring of water quality according to the Water Framework Directive requirements.
- Develop specific strategies to improve investment in wastewater treatment facilities. Initiate development of strategies and models for knowledge transfer on wastewater treatment technologies to reduce the costs and mobilise domestic capacities.

### *Implementation of Legislation*

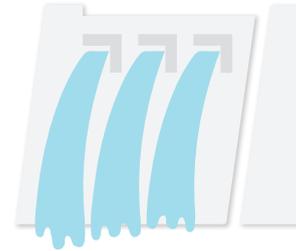
- Develop and consolidate the capacity of public institutions in charge of water management, particularly at the local level – the complexity of water management issues demands much more human and technical capacities. Responsible institutions should analyse existing capacities and develop a plan to improve them as soon as possible. To succeed in this, expert institutions, as well as CSOs, should advocate for better political and financial support for the water management sector.
- Develop structured cooperation with other relevant sectors: environment protection, energy, agriculture, and spatial planning. This should involve establishing permanent communication and information exchange between these sectors.
- Further improvement of public participation in policy development in the water management sector is of crucial importance. Public consultations should result in far more than minimal legal requirements. Involvement of interested parties should start at the earliest stages of policy development.
- Integration of nature based solutions in water management practices and better consideration of ecosystem services. Specific capacities for these issues should be developed in relevant institutions.
- A more decisive approach to water pricing policy.
- Improve control and mitigation of the main identified threats: intensive and poorly planned mini-hydropower plant development, gravel extraction, pollu-

tion, uncontrolled use of ground waters, illegal construction along the rivers. River habitats, wetlands and water resources in general are highly threatened in Serbia. Immediate action at a national level is required.

**Financing**

- A permanent increase of the budgetary allocations for financing activities in relation to water management and protection.

# WATER QUALITY

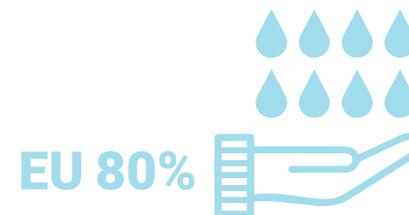


There are over **350** allocated sites for the construction of mini hydro power plants in Serbia.

If all of them are built, at least **350 kilometers** of rivers in Serbia will be captured by pipelines.



**LESS THAN 10%** OF THE POPULATION IN SERBIA IS COVERED BY SOME LEVEL OF MUNICIPAL WASTE WATER TREATMENT. IN THE EU THAT NUMBER IS



**ABOVE 80%**

Healthy and preserved freshwater ecosystems can significantly contribute to flood mitigation and reduce the effects of climate change.