

Summary of the audit on environment and nature protection in the border area to Austria and Slovenia

In case of environment and nature protection intensive international cooperation is necessary, mainly with the aim to prevent, respectively decrease cross-border pollution. In order to examine the respective cooperation of their countries, the heads of the supreme audit institutions of Austria, Hungary and Slovenia agreed to carry out an audit on the treatment of the often identical environmental problems their countries are facing in the region around the point where borders of the three countries meet.

The purpose of the audit was to evaluate how the activity of the regional implementing institutions, and the resources provided into the region for operation, respectively capital investment purposes had ensured environment and nature protection in the region. Furthermore, SAO also intended to detect, if the exchange of data and information between the responsible bodies of the three countries under the auspice of international cooperation could assist in the termination of unfavourable environmental impacts on the region.

In Hungary the respective Acts on (1) Environment Protection, (2) Water Management and (3) Nature Protection have been adopted, however the SAO-audit established that in some cases the provisions of the individual Acts have not been in line with one another, and detailed implementation rules were missing.

In the audited period several changes were effected regarding the organizational background, the scope of services to be provided, the way in which different bodies can exercise their respective authorities, and the way in which the authorities are divided between different territorial bodies, institutions. The purpose of the changes was to separate the authorities' official services from technical services related to environment management.

Implementation of environment protection objectives was constrained by the fact that the fines, which were sometimes imposed repeatedly by the authorities, did not have an appropriate impact. This applies especially to sewage plants, as pollution by sewage plants continued. The main reason is that compliance with the required limit values of pollution would demand the investment of tens or hundreds of millions of forints, and neither the operators nor the owners of the facilities can raise the required resources. The owner of a communal sewage plant is the local government, which gets 30 % of the fine imposed on the facility operator. Therefore, the fine cannot

force the local government to take actions with the aim to reduce pollution. Another deficiency is that mainly for the reason of lack of resources, the communities did not develop – or not for the full scope to be covered - their respective environment protection programs and waste management plans, required by law.

In the reviewed region the environmental loads resulting from the utilization of the environment are smaller than the respective values measured in the major urban and industrial centres of Hungary. The air cleanliness is adequate, and investments like the set up of the biomass power plant in Körmend have contributed to the preservation of this situation.

From among the individual environmental elements, mostly the surface and under surface waters are exposed to risks. Pollution of surface waters is usually ranked as “medium” or “polluted”. One of the reasons is the pollution coming from Austria through the River Rába, respectively the sub-standard sewage waters, which are discharged from the Hungarian sewage plants into the rivers, despite repeated fines. Groundwater bodies are polluted and are not exploitable for the purpose of drinking water. The ratio of households with sewage network connection and the total number of households also influence the extent of the waters’ pollution. Despite massive investments, this ratio was only 42 % in the reviewed region. Half of the water reserve bodies lie in a geologically sensitive environment, their protection is constrained by the condition that the appropriations assigned to them under the annual central budgets of Hungary are regularly less than the values budgeted for them under different government decrees.

The SAO’s audit revealed numerous shortcomings as regards the solid waste management. Only half of the operating waste dumps were subjected to the compulsory environmental and engineering examinations, and about two third of the communities did not developed their respective communal waste management plans. In case of the 39 non-operating dumpsites of the region, the environment is exposed to medium-level risk at 26 sites, and to high-level risk at 9 sites. A regional solid waste management program, which covers also the communities of the border area to Slovenia, will probably mean a solution of the problems. The program includes, among others, selective waste collection, the establishment of storage sites, waste collection facilities, the environmental rehabilitation of operating and non-operating dumps sites, and the set up of an up-to-date dump site that complies with Hungarian and EU legislation. 70 % of the funding of this program is non-refundable ISPA financial assistance.

With the aim to transfer protected natural areas into public management, in 2002 the Őrség National Park Administration has purchased 368,6 hectares

(mainly arable land and pasture) in the reviewed region. Protected natural areas were utilized on the basis of management plans. 'Natura 2000' network ensures the natural preservation of biotopes and species valuable for the European Union; the designation of the relevant Hungarian sites was implemented in line with legislation adopted in 2004.

Some problems can be experienced in environment and nature protection, and especially in water management despite the considerable amount of subsidies that the region received mainly for sewage network development, protection of drinking water reserves and flood control related investments. The resources in question were various and quite different, e.g. the projects to increase the number of households with sewage network connection were implemented with the employment of PHARE financial assistance and national resources, the latter ones came from six different central budget appropriations. In spite of the subsidies there is a shortage of financial resources. The Regional Water Directorate had not been assigned a separate appropriation for the maintenance of flood control and drainage facilities. The special risk is that the costs arising at a possible flood because of the default in maintenance could be a multiple of the necessary maintenance cost. The central budget resources for the purpose of transferring protected natural areas into public ownership are also short; therefore the national and local implementation of the relevant Act is in delay.

An organized and harmonized cooperation evolved on the basis of the agreements signed with Austria and Slovenia on the protection of cross-border surface waters and water reserves. The agreement with Slovenia allows a wider scope than the Hungarian-Austrian agreement for actions; this applies both to the territory covered by and content of the cooperation. Under the implementation of the agreements joint water samplings were carried out. However, the different national systems of water quality grading and classification presented a problem. Only ad hoc cooperation evolved on the cross-border water reserves, the full protection of which is constrained by the fact that the respective areas in need of protection stretch from one country to the other, and the legal arrangements for their exact designation are not elaborated yet. Close cooperation evolved on planning and setting up protection facilities, respectively in the field of implementing investments of common interest to all the three countries, like sewage water and waste treatment.

The SAO recommended to the Minister of Environment and Water to initiate an amendment of the legal force of the international water management agreements with the two neighbouring countries; in line with the statutorily specified schedule, to ensure the resources required for the transfer of protected areas into public management, so that natural protection thereof be

safeguarded; to ensure that the requirements specified on the protection of drinking water reserves by the Act on Waste Management be complied with.