



Briefing on Via Baltica expressroad in Poland for the Bern Convention Standing Committee meeting

17 November 2009

Six years after Recommendation No. 108 (2003) on the proposed construction of the 'Via Baltica' expressroad (Trans-European road corridor I, Poland) there is now significant progress in its implementation, although some aspects remain outstanding.

Good news

On 20th October 2009¹ the Polish Council of Ministers decided² on a new routing for the Via Baltica expressway. This has been welcomed by NGOs (CEE Bankwatch Network, BirdLife International, OTOPI - BirdLife Poland, WWF Poland) and other environmental groups as major progress for the conservation of Poland's unique nature and represents a significant step in the right direction towards the proper implementation of Polish and European environmental legislation. The new route follows the recommendations made by experts and the findings of a Strategic Environmental Assessment that has taken several years to complete and was finished in 2008.

The decision to route the international corridor on the western route via Lomza means that the expected transit stream of heavy good vehicles will not have negative impacts on three Natura 2000 sites on the 'old' eastern route via Białystok: Biebrza Marshes, and Knyszyn and Augustów Primeval Forests (see maps at the end of this brief). However, it does not bring an automatic halt to current road construction work inside Knyszyn Forest and Biebrza Valley.

Next steps needed by Poland

There is now a further need to:

- change the relevant Polish strategic documents, in particular the current list of investments³ under the Operational Programme 'Infrastructure & Environment' and the Polish proposal on TEN-T revision.
- ensure that all environmentally harmful road projects along the old routing of the Via Baltica (including the planned Katrynka-Przewalanka upgrade through Knyszyn Forest and Sztubin Bypass through Biebrza Wetlands) are halted or modified. With the new route for the Via Baltica corridor settled there is no need to continue with these large scale projects on the old route which will needlessly damage Natura 2000 sites.
- ensure implementation of the new route decision by the Ministers Board.

As the amended Decree on the network of national roads and expressways also changed the route of a second expressroad in NE Poland (S-19), an additional SEA should now be carried out to inform the overall routing decision for this corridor. The S-19 express road as now proposed (see maps) is going to bypass Knyszyn Forest to the north and west (which is good). However, further

¹ NGOs press release: http://www.otop.org.pl/kat_41_378_379_717_865/NEWS.html

² By amending the Decree on the network of national roads and highways

³ Indicative list of major projects

south from Bialystok it may affect approximately 15 Natura 2000 sites (SPAs, SCIs, pSCIs), e.g. Upper Narew river Valley, Bug Valley, Lasy Janowskie, Lower San Valley, Middle Wislok river with tributaries, Zdziary, Uroczyska Puszczy Sandomierskiej, Polichna, Trzciana, Jasiolka, Schrony Brzeskiego Rejonu Umocnionego, Murwy kserotermiczne w Hackach, Dolny San i Wislok, and Ostoja Czarnorzecka.

Current status of individual road projects

- Bialystok-Katrynka Upgrade - construction works started in February 2008 and are now very advanced. It is expected that the project will be completed at the end of 2009, however the ecological compensation program has not been completed.
- Wasilkow Bypass - construction works are halted. A new EIA report with Appropriate Assessment has been prepared recommending modifying the project to lower parameters to avoid negative impacts on Knyszyn Forest Natura 2000 site, and a new environmental consent is expected soon. However, no cumulative impact assessment of potential impacts of this project on Knyszyn Forest together with the other road projects has been made available for public consultation.
- Katrynka-Przewalanka – the procedure for the environmental consent has been continued, and the environmental consent is expected at the beginning of 2010. There are some signals from the Road Agency (investor) that the project will be modified (to lower parameters) to avoid negative impacts on Knyszyn Forest Natura 2000 site, but official documents on the subject are not available yet.
- Sztabin Bypass/Biebrza Bridge – the old environmental consent has been cancelled, and a new procedure for the environmental consent is expected to start soon. Project modification to lower technical parameters than express road standard is needed to minimise damage to Biebrza Natura 2000 site.

Request to Standing Committee

While we are delighted by the change to the overall Via Baltica corridor route and believe that the Bern Recommendation played a key role in facilitating this positive outcome, we do still have some concerns about the next steps needed to implement this new decision and about ongoing work on individual road projects. We would therefore ask the Standing Committee to keep the file open until there are new environmental consents granted for Wasilkow Bypass, Katrynka-Przewalanka Upgrade, Sztabin Bypass as well the compensatory program for Bialystok-Katrynka Upgrade is implemented. We ask the Committee to continue to scrutinize the road infrastructure development in NE Poland closely and to take further action in relation to Poland as appropriate.

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Planned expressroad network in NE Poland before 20/10/2009



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