



Petr Roth - intervention at the seminar/press conference in Chisinau, 16/05/2024

1. Introduction (of myself)

2. Why I am here – to briefly share experience with meeting of one of most demanding obligations linked to the EU membership – establishment of so-called Natura 2000 network.

3. In 1990s, an agreement was made between the European Commission and the Council of Europe: the EU MS would build up a network of conservation areas called Natura 2000 while the other countries would follow the rules of the Bern Convention and build up the so-called Emerald network. Officially, both networks should be identical.

4. Republic of Moldova ratified the Bern Convention in 1993, and in May 2000, the first pilot project on Emerald network started. 24 years later, there are about 60 Emerald sites proposed, and according to international assessment, these sites represent about 26 % of what would be called “sufficient Emerald network”. At this speed, the network would be completed in about 2100. We should bear in mind that the objective of the Emerald network is not to establish the Emerald network. It should be an active tool serving conservation of most valuable and endangered habitats and species. A network to be built in upcoming 70 years will hardly serve this purpose now.

5. How it comes that we are about 70 years from the ultimate target? The reason is, unfortunately, simple. International conventions (and obligations stemming from them) are binding – but are not enforceable. If there are no resources, no capacities, there is no way how to make any country to actively implement the obligations. And then, any implementation depends on occasional projects from abroad. Exactly this has been the reality in Moldova – similarly like in many other non-EU countries – until now.

6. However, times have changed. In December 2023, the EU agreed to start pre-accession negotiations with Moldova which became an EU candidate country. The goal of these negotiations is to check that Moldova has met all obligations stemming from *acquis communautaire* of the EU. In Chapter 27 of this *acquis*, there is a protruding obligation in the field of biodiversity conservation: to identify, propose and submit to the European Commission the national list of sites of the Natura 2000 network. There is no timetable set by the EU: simply once the candidate country has met its obligation and submitted its national list of sites to Brussels, then accession is possible – but not before.

7. As a person responsible for Natura 2000 establishment in the Czech Republic I can tell you that Natura 2000 is an extremely demanding task. It requires an absolutely different approach than Emerald network. Let me to briefly mention at least the most serious differences.

8. First of all, Natura 2000 is based on field data on habitat types and species listed in EU directives. Historical, published data can only serve as a guidance for proper directing the field activities. Data on habitats and species are needed from the entire territory of the country, not only from selected sites. The principle is that in order to be able to propose sites, it is necessary to know the situation in all the country. This requires extensive habitat and species mapping and gathering of data in agreed format. These data have to be centrally stored and processed.



9. Secondly, it requires a systematic, well-organised approach. The whole process should be supervised by the Ministry of Environment, but it cannot be managed by the Ministry itself. A nature conservation agency is desperately needed. MoldSilva, an enterprise currently managing all protected areas of Moldova, is very good at forestry, but it cannot replace a dedicated expert conservation institution.

10. Thirdly, a team dealing only with Natura 2000 preparation – not necessarily numerous but dedicated – is a must. A few people with good knowledge of habitat types and species of Community interest who would prepare a strategy, mobilize scientific and expert capacities, and assign particular activities are needed, complemented by wider network of collaborators from NGOs. NGOs can play an important role, but they can never replace the central structure in charge of Natura 2000 preparation. This core team should be paid by the Government, not depend on any short-term project.

11. Fourthly, funding. Projects funded from abroad can play an important role, but:

- it must be large projects (EU aid) – not tiny one-off projects by various donors who often have no idea on Natura 2000 rules and obligations. However, as mentioned before, it is of paramount importance that the structure in charge of implementation is funded from state budget.

It is also necessary to take into account that once Natura 2000 sites are identified, proposed and agreed by the EC, they have to be actively managed. I am talking now about the period after the EU accession: EU MS do not receive any subsidies for Natura 2000 conservation management, this is a national obligation. And meeting such obligation will require resources – domestic financial resources which have to be established well in advance. Until now, nature conservation has almost not been funded from national resources in Moldova. This situation is not sustainable. EU MS have a plenty of financial incentives from the EU budget available, but the elementary activities have to obligatorily be funded from the state budget.

12. What to conclude? A month ago, Republic of Moldova introduced a new Roadmap for establishment of the Emerald network at a dedicated meeting of experts of the Bern Convention. Many elements of that Roadmap – which in fact is a country strategy – will for sure be applicable to Natura 2000, with smaller or larger modifications. I recommend that the issue of “transition” from Emerald to Natura starts to be discussed as soon as possible, and a national strategy for Natura 2000 is gradually developed – but I mean a real strategy, not just a sheet of paper not used by anyone in practice. Natura 2000, if correctly prepared, will automatically meet all the requirements of the Emerald network. But the reverse is not true: Emerald will never meet the Natura 2000 requirements.

Should there be an interest, we will be happy to share our vast experience with Natura 2000 with Moldovan colleagues.