

Western Balkans must step up environmental protection now

The European Parliament's latest resolutions¹ on the six Western Balkan countries send a clear signal that robust environmental and biodiversity safeguards are **non-negotiable** for EU accession. In a series of reports on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, MEPs call for urgent action to transpose and implement key EU nature legislation, notably the Birds and Habitats Directives, and to enforce Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) rules. The Parliament also underlined the need for **meaningful public participation** in environmental decision-making, in line with international conventions like Aarhus and Espoo, a right also guaranteed by the national laws these countries. EuroNatur Foundation welcomes the Parliament's focus, noting it echoes long-standing concerns raised by conservationists about the region's faltering green track record.

Albania: EU Parliament demands reversal of controversial law and projects

The European Parliament **expressed serious concern** over recent amendments to Albania's Law on Protected Areas² that would allow large tourism and infrastructure projects in ecologically sensitive zones. MEPs called for these legal changes to be **immediately reversed** to ensure compliance with EU environmental standards. The resolution also *"reiterates its concern over the construction of the Vlora airport in the Vjosa-Narta Protected Area, in violation of national and international biodiversity norms,"* urging the European Commission to address this issue under Chapter 27 (environment) of Albania's accession negotiations³. The Parliament welcomed the designation of the Vjosa Wild River National Park, Europe's first wild river park, but insisted Albania fully respect the park's ecological integrity and **reconsider any infrastructure projects** that threaten it. Crucially, the Albanian authorities are urged to designate and effectively manage key habitats for endangered species, *"in particular the Balkan lynx"*, and to **abandon plans for the Skavica hydropower plant** on the Black Drin river due to its severe ecological and social impacts⁴. These clear demands underscore that Albania's EU hopes hinge on safeguarding its natural heritage, not sacrificing it for short-term "development".

Gabriel Schwaderer, Executive Director of EuroNatur: *"We strongly support the European Parliament's clear message to Albania. The government must show it is serious about EU membership by halting projects that violate conservation laws and by repealing recent legal amendments that weaken protected area safeguards. Europe's last wild rivers and critically*

¹ The European Parliament regularly adopts resolutions on Western Balkan countries as part of its scrutiny over the EU enlargement process. These resolutions are politically significant. They evaluate each country's progress toward EU accession and include recommendations to the European Commission, EU member states, and the countries themselves.

² Berishaj et al, (2024). Biodiversity. The Case of the Western Balkans, EuroNatur Foundation, PG. 14-15, Changes to the Law on Protected Areas; Definition and intent of protected areas; The legal amendments and their implications
https://www.euronatur.org/fileadmin/docs/umweltpolitik/Biodiversitaet/EuroNatur_Biodiversity_Report_211124.pdf

³ Motion for European Parliament Resolution on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on Albania (2025). Environment, biodiversity, energy and transport, sustainable tourism; Paragraphs 52 and 53.
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0106_EN.html

⁴ Ibid. Paragraph 54

endangered species like the Balkan lynx must be preserved, not paved over for profit. The EU should set firm benchmarks: no accession progress without real progress on nature protection.”

Regional environmental commitments under scrutiny

Across the Western Balkans, the Parliament’s resolutions highlight common environmental shortcomings, and the need for collective improvement. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, MEPs urged authorities to **legally protect candidate Emerald Network sites and finalise the legal protection designation for Livanjsko Polje** while fully implementing the EU’s nature directives⁵. They pressed for stronger environmental governance, including rigorous strategic environmental assessments with local community involvement, and enforcement of pollution controls, especially to protect rivers from destructive projects and mining pollution. For **Kosovo**, the Parliament noted as positive the government’s new energy strategy which *“does not promote the construction of hydropower plants due to their harmful environmental impact”*. MEPs called on Kosovo to improve its EIA processes and **expand protected areas** to safeguard biodiversity, including key habitats of the critically endangered Balkan lynx, while working with neighbours on transboundary national parks⁶. In **North Macedonia**, lawmakers stressed the need to fully align the country’s EIA legislation with the EU acquis, *“with a particular focus on ... small hydropower projects”*, given the damage rampant dam construction has caused to rivers. They urged swift adoption of pending laws on nature protection, such as the re-proclamation of Mavrovo National Park, and legal protection of all **Emerald sites** like Šar Mountains and Jablanica, to shield them from harmful development. MEPs also demanded stronger protection for endangered wildlife, *“particularly the Balkan lynx,”* through tougher anti-poaching enforcement and habitat conservation⁷.

In **Serbia**, the European Parliament **criticized loopholes** on the new Law of Environmental Impact assessment, which still allow major projects to evade proper scrutiny. Further MEPs specifically urged Belgrade to designate and **strictly protect Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs)** as national protected sites, and to crack down on illegal wildlife killing in those areas. Throughout the region, foreign-funded projects must abide by EU rules: the EP resolutions warn against non-transparent investments (including from China or Russia) that bypass environmental assessments and public consultations⁸.

Notably, while the **Montenegrin** resolution barely focused on energy transition it lacked detail on biodiversity. During debates, however, MEPs raised red flags about controversial projects.

“Montenegro is also a country of fantastic natural heritage, a lot of jewels... But protecting these jewels like the Komarnica River, Salina Ulcinj and the protected dunes of Velika Plaža will be key to closing Chapter 27 on environment,” emphasized **Thomas Waitz MEP**, Chair of the EP

⁵ Motion for European Parliament Resolution on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on Bosnia and Herzegovina (2025). Energy, the environment, biodiversity, sustainable development and connectivity; Paragraphs 67 and 73. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0108_EN.html

⁶ Motion for European Parliament Resolution on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on Kosovo (2025). Energy, environment, sustainable development and connectivity; Paragraph 63. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0094_EN.html

⁷ Motion for European Parliament Resolution on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on North Macedonia (2025). Environment, biodiversity, energy and transport; Paragraphs 70 to 74. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0118_EN.html

⁸ ⁸ Motion for European Parliament Resolution on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on Serbia(2025). Energy, the environment, sustainable development and connectivity; Paragraphs 69 and 76. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0093_EN.html

Delegation to Montenegro⁹. This statement, referring to proposed hydropower, tourism, and saltworks developments threatening those iconic sites, underlines that even “frontrunners” must not neglect nature conservation. As Waitz urged, fully preserving Montenegro’s wild rivers, wetlands and coasts is essential to “welcome Montenegro as the 28th Member of the European Union”.

Viktor Berishaj, EuroNatur Senior Policy Officer: “The European Parliament has made it plain that meeting the EU’s environmental acquis is **not just a box-ticking exercise**, but a foundational requirement for EU entry. Governments in the Western Balkans need to dramatically improve implementation of environmental laws, from conducting credible EIAs and SEAs with public participation, to ensuring proper designation of protected areas and their management. Aligning with EU acquis now will both preserve the region’s rich natural heritage and accelerate its EU integration. Frankly, there can be no shortcuts: a country that fails to protect its rivers, forests and wildlife cannot credibly claim readiness to join the EU.”

EuroNatur calls on the Western Balkan leaders and EU institutions to act on these resolutions’ recommendations. As accession negotiations intensify, **environmental progress must take centre stage** in the reforms. Whether it’s cancelling destructive airport and hydropower projects, bolstering national park protections or empowering civil society in decision-making, the steps taken in the next months will prove these countries’ commitment to Europe’s nature. “If the Western Balkans truly want to join the EU, they must show it by protecting nature and upholding the rule of law in environmental matters, starting today,” Berishaj said. “The EU shall and will not accept any less.”

⁹ Verbatim report of proceedings (17 June 2025). 2023 and 2024 reports on Montenegro (debate). Thomas Waitz. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2025-06-17-ITM-012_EN.html