

Via Baltica – not this way!

Environmental NGOs (OTOP - the Polish Society for the Protection of Birds, BirdLife International, WWF, CEE Bankwatch Network) are extremely concerned about the possible impacts arising from the development of expressways in north-eastern Poland. One of the most harmful of such plans in terms of nature impacts is expressway S-8 which is already under construction as part of the Pan-European Transport Corridor from Helsinki to Warsaw – the so called “Via Baltica” along the route of the current road no. 8. There are advanced plans for the construction of new sections along this route, such as the Augustów by-pass through wetlands in Rospuda River Valley. Other sections of road no. 8 are being upgraded step by step to higher standards (ultimately expressway). Despite the fact that officially it has not yet been decided that the international expressway will follow this route!

This route along road no. 8 may cause irreversible damage to five sites of EU importance for the conservation of birds and other animals, plants and habitats (Special Protection Areas and potential Special Areas of Conservation within the Natura 2000 network):

- the Biebrza Wetlands (including Biebrza National Park, a Ramsar site),
- the Narew Marshes (including Narew National Park),
- the Augustowska Primeval Forest (including a planned nature reserve in Rospuda river Valley),
- the Knyszynska Primeval Forest (including Knyszynska Primeval Forest Landscape Park),
- the Wigry National Park

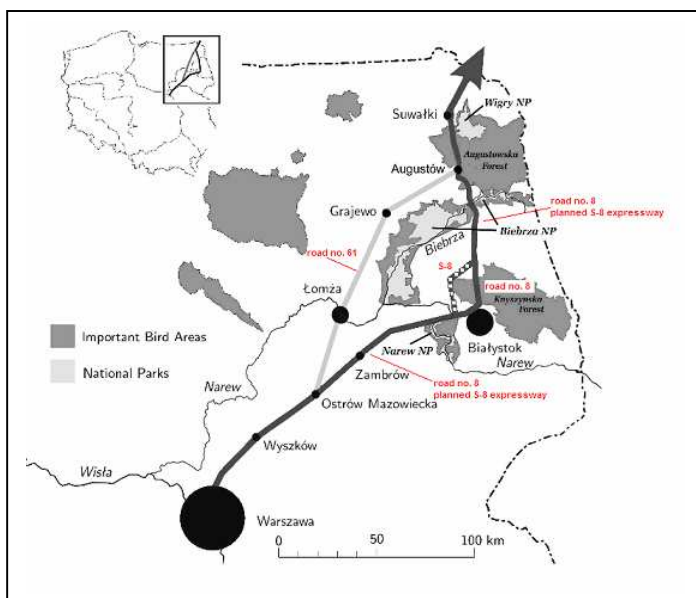
These sites hold important species populations and extensive habitats listed in the Annexes of the Birds and Habitats Directives and they are designated as **Natura 2000 sites**.

There is at least one possible alternative route for international transit traffic (Warsaw - Polish-Lithuanian border-crossing in Budzisko). The route

could cross the city of Lomza – this would not only make the route shorter but would also bypass the endangered Natura 2000 sites. The existing road through Lomza (road no. 61) served for years as the international transit road, but this has been closed to heavy lorry transit for the last few years due to modernisation works which have been supported by EU funds, but are to lower technical parameters than is required for the international road. Although the road works are already finished, all of the transit traffic continues to be directed via road no. 8, threatening the most valuable nature areas in the region and at the same time causing a lot of danger for drivers and local people.

Following several months of NGO campaigning, in August 2003, **the Polish government's representatives initially agreed to carry out a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)** for Via Baltica. Additionally, in December 2003, **the Berne Convention Standing Committee** in Strasbourg, released recommendations (no. 108) to *“Complete a full Strategic Environmental Assessment, followed by a detailed in-depth Environmental Impact Assessment Report, considering all possible alternatives and variants, in order to minimise as far as possible any deterioration of important areas, especially in view of the recognised nature values of international importance of the Augustow Forest, the Biebrza National Park and the Knyszynska Forest. The SEA/EIA should take into account potential effects on the Narev and Wigry National Parks as well. These reports, in conformity with EU procedures, should include the possible alternatives, assessing costs, including those of mitigation and compensation measures of all possible variants.”*

Although the Polish government agreed to take a final decision on the “Via Baltica” route only once a SEA was completed, this is not happening in practice.



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The SEA is due to be completed by the end of 2006, but the process is running behind schedule. Furthermore, NGOs have some very significant concerns about whether the SEA will be able to influence the route selected for the international corridor given the large number of current road projects on road no. 8 which are being taken forward in advance of the SEA results.

Another worrying recent development is the appearance of a tender for the “S8 concept paper” on the website of the General Directorate for Public Roads and Motorways (GDDKiA – the investor). This provides a commitment to upgrade road no. 8 between Warsaw-Bialystok and further to Suchowola (via Dobrzyniewo – Knyszyn – Korycin) and Sztabin to expressway status (S8) regardless of the SEA results. It states the intention to upgrade road 8 to national expressway status even if it is not the international road corridor. This means that the worse case scenario could be that there will be two large roads through the Podlasie region - an international one (“Via Baltica”) plus the upgraded S8. This lack of joined-up strategic transport planning is extremely worrying.

Current and planned upgrade projects on (or on roads closely related to) the S8 are:

- Upgrade of the Sztabin-Kolnica section of road no. 8 (in the Augustow Primeval Forest)
- Augustow city bypass (Rospuda Valley in the Augustow Primeval Forest)
- Upgrade of S8 between Bialystok and Katrynka (in part in the Knyszyn Primeval Forest)
- Bypass at Wasilkow on road number 19 (in part in the Knyszyn Primeval Forest)
- A bridge over Biebrza river near Sztabin (the Biebrza National Park)
- The construction of S8 section: Dobrzyniewo - Knyszyn – Korycin (the Knyszyn Primeval Forest)
- A bypass for the villages of Korycin and Suchowola (which will indirectly effect Knyszyn Primeval Forest and the Biebrza National Park)
- Upgrade of S8 between Katrynka and Przewalanka (the Knyszyn Primeval Forest)
- Upgrading road number 19 to Belarus (the Knyszyn Primeval Forest).

There are further concerns that the EIAs carried out for the projects for which consent has already been granted (which were carried out in advance of the SEA) do not fully conform with EU procedures (particularly article 6 of the Habitats Directive). The above-mentioned concerns of environmental NGOs have been the subject of a complaint to the EU Commission.

The Polish government continues to deny these facts in front of the EU Commission, saying that the decision will be made indeed on the basis of the SEA. Meanwhile it is confirmed in official documents that the presently modernised sections of road no 8 are parts of the “Via Baltica” corridor. Therefore it's clear that the strategy of the Polish government, regional authorities and the investor (GDDKiA) is to construct the S8 to force the selection of road S8 as the route of the international road corridor, regardless of a proper Strategic Assessment and EU requirements for nature protection.

The NGOs continue to highlight the necessity of ensuring proper implementation of the relevant EU environmental legislation in the new accession countries. In the case of the “Via Baltica”, the routing decision was made by the Polish government despite the non-fulfilment of the requirements of Article 6(3) and 6(4) of the Habitats Directive. An appropriate assessment procedure should be carried out before the authorising of investments that have the real potential to cause irreversible damage to valuable European Natura 2000 sites.

Summary

The NGOs call for:

- The suspension of all upgrade works on road no. 8 until the results of the SEA are available.
- The selection of the route of the international road corridor to be made on the basis of the SEA results

