

BIO-POLICY IN MOLDOVA

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The Republic of Moldova is a small country of 33,840 km² and a population of 4.4 million. The average density of the population is 129 people per km². The country is endowed with fertile soil and a temperate climate. The structure of the economy remains primarily agricultural, with an industrial sector dominated by agro-processing. After the 1991 break-up of the Soviet Union, Moldova declared its independence and made the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-based system.

The territory of the Republic of Moldova includes three natural zones: forests, forest steppes and steppes. It represents a component part of the Eastern European plain and it is situated in 90% of the area between the rivers Dnister and Prut. The natural vegetal cover of the country constitutes only 8-10% of its territory. Its specific character is determined by its geographical position.

Plants and species communities represent three floristic habitats: the Eastern Steppe with Pontic elements, the Samarthian habitat, and the Dacian habitat with Dacian elements of Central Europe. The forest represents the only natural regenerable factor which significantly influences the maintenance of ecological equilibrium. The Republic of Moldova is less forested than other European countries - 8% of all land area - while about 80% of its total territory is agricultural land and pasture.

The energy crisis encountered by the country unfavourably reflects on the forests. Dangerous interferences take place in the structure of the forest ecosystem, which lead to the evident decrease of the production potential of the forest and to the reduction of its biodiversity.

While only 1.42% of the total territory of the Republic of Moldova is protected area, this represents an inferior net index compared to other countries. This percentage is insufficient to maintain an ecological equilibrium. Furthermore, the increasing number of protected species reflects the endangered flora and fauna in the region.

The acceleration of the destruction of biological diversity over the past decades has four major direct causes: over exploitation, the destruction of habitats, pollution, and the introduction of exotic species. However, the principle underlying causes are the population pressure which leads to the clearing of increasingly large areas of land, and the requirements of development. Most importantly, indifference to the consequences of the loss of biodiversity results in a situation where there is little motivation or money to preserve the land.

Furthermore, biological diversity has no recognised owner and, until now, no holder of rights over it, although the Convention on Biological Diversity is a turning point in the latter respect. This lack of ownership means that no one exists legally to speak on behalf of biological diversity. Such representation is particularly important since the conservation of biological diversity may impinge on public freedoms and more immediate human interests.

At the same time, the conservation activities of governments, institutions, and concerned individuals are still too disparate, fragmented and limited to bring about the fundamental changes that are required to reverse this trend. Necessary as they may often be, regulatory measures alone are not sufficient to preserve the natural environment. There are also political limits on the extent to which the State can control land use. In addition, statutory controls cannot oblige a landowner to manage a particular site in a specific way, except in rare cases. Voluntary conservation measures are therefore an essential complement to the State's direct role in conservation.

Landowners are often willing to preserve valuable natural habitats on their land, but may not always be informed of their existence or importance for conservation. It should accordingly be incumbent upon the State to assist private landowners to preserve natural areas. There are many ways in which this can be achieved. These include: the elimination of legal obstacles to conservation, the establishment of financial and fiscal incentives for the preservation of the natural environment, the development of legal tools to facilitate voluntary conservation, the payment of subsidies, the granting of tax incentives, and the provision of advisory conservation services. The first aspect consists of the removal of incentives to destroy the natural environment. Enforcement will often continue to be difficult unless alternatives to the clearing of natural vegetation can be found which provide sufficiently attractive benefits to local populations. The presence of biological diversity, especially at a high level, should be an asset, rather than a liability.

Voluntary measures will always need the support of powers vested in bio-policy to apply regulatory measures and to resort to compulsory procedures when the need arises in order to prevent irreparable damage to important areas. Prudence dictates that we keep as much biodiversity as possible.

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