



To:
Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forests of Bulgaria
Executive Forests Agency

POSITION

BY

The Vulture Conservation Foundation (VCF), registered as a private non-commercial entity in the Netherlands, Arnhem, 6816SH, Antoon van Hooffplein 1, under registration number 41157333, represented by Dr José Tavares, Executive Director, with regional offices registered in Switzerland, Wuhrstrasse 12. CH-8003 Zurich and Spain, Rambla Catalunya 98 Planta 5, Puerta 2 08008 Barcelona

REGARDING: Draft Decision of the Council of Ministers for approval of a draft Law for amendment and supplement of the Hunting and Game Protection Law.

To whom it may concern,

In accordance with the procedure for public consultations under Art. 18a, Art. 26(2) of the STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS ACT and Art. 85(1) and Art. 85(2) of the RULES OF PROCEDURE of the Council of Ministers and its administration in connection with the Draft Decision of the Council of Ministers for approval of a draft Law for the amendment and supplement of the Hunting and Game Protection Law (HGPL), and on the basis of the information and expertise we have in the field of vulture conservation, we would like to state the following opinion in relation with the proposed amendments to the Hunting and Game Protection Law:

I Principle points

The proposed amendments to the HGPL pose a significant threat to biodiversity and the environment in Bulgaria. The proposed amendments would legalize the use of poisons, narcotics and explosives, traps, snares and other illegal methods and means of hunting in nature. The use of these non-selective hunting methods would certainly lead to the uncontrolled destruction of numerous protected and endangered species of wildlife in Bulgaria and environmental pollution. The use of poison baits in particular would pose a threat to a large number of animal species, including those that are threatened globally and therefore protected under international, European and national legislation, including international conventions, directives, regulations, laws and bylaws. Vultures, being mostly obligate scavengers, feed on carrion, removing decomposing material and contributing to human health and wellbeing via a regulating ecosystem service (O'Bryan et al. 2019; Plaza et al. 2020). This scavenging behaviour, however, makes vultures particularly susceptible to poisoning, particularly if it is used for intentional killing of animals, both wild and domestic.

II Biodiversity loss

The use of poison baits is the single most important threat that vulture populations are currently facing worldwide (Botha et al. 2017; Plaza et al. 2019), as well in the Balkan Peninsula, and has contributed to national and regional extinctions or severe depletion of all the species in the region (Pantović and Andevski 2018). The vulture populations of the Balkan Peninsula had been reduced to the brink of extinction by the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries mainly because of illegal wildlife poisoning. Of the four species that were once commonly spread throughout the region, the Bearded Vulture and Cinereous Vulture are now reduced to single, isolated populations. The last population of Bearded Vultures in the region is found on Crete (Greece), numbering eight breeding pairs and the Cinereous Vultures in Dadia-Lefkimi-Soufli Forest National Park in Greece, ~35 pairs. The number of Egyptian Vultures (listed as globally Endangered by the IUCN (BirdLife International 2019)), has suffered an ongoing decline of more than 50% in the last ten years and is the most threatened vulture species in Europe, mainly due to the decline of the Balkan population. This species' stronghold in the region is in Bulgaria (24 breeding pairs), while it is still present in small numbers in North Macedonia (13 breeding pairs), Greece (3 breeding pairs) and Albania (6 breeding pairs), totalling less than 40 breeding pairs in 2019 for the entire Balkan Peninsula. All of these national populations are now vulnerable to extinction (Velevski et al. 2015), primarily as a result of widespread poisoning in the past and continued poisoning in some areas (Pantović and Andevski 2018).

The VCF has been working for more than a decade in the region, in close collaboration with many conservation NGOs from Bulgaria, and has acquired significant experience in vulture conservation and wildlife poisoning through the implementation of the Balkan Vulture Action Plan (BVAP) and Balkan Anti-Poisoning Project (BAPP). During the course of the last 20 years a least 227 poisoning incidents with vulture mortality have been registered throughout the Balkans and in the majority of these incidents more than one individual bird has been found poisoned. From the recorded incidents, a total of 465 vultures have died from poisoning during this period, 385 Griffon Vultures, 36 Egyptian Vultures, 12 Black Vultures and one Bearded Vulture. This data are not estimates, but concrete figures obtained from poisoning incidents from the region. An average of 23 vultures are poisoned annually on the Balkan peninsula. If we take into account that approximately only 20 % of poisoning incidents are ever discovered and documented, we can estimate that about 115 vultures are potentially being poisoned annually throughout the Balkans.

The illegal use of poison baits for extirpating in particular wild boars, which occasionally inflict damages to livestock breeders and farmers, is a well-documented practice, which has already caused severe damages to populations of vultures and other scavenger species on the Balkan Peninsula. The intentional use of poison baits to eliminate introduced wild boars and other undesirable wildlife on island ecosystems of Kvarner islands (Croatia) is the single most important threat that current vulture population are facing today in that country. In a single poisoning

incident on the island of Rab 17 Griffon Vultures were poisoned, while a total of 49 Griffon Vultures have been found poisoned in Croatia during the last 20 years for these reasons alone.

It is well documented that the illegal use of poison baits for extirpating primarily predators (including feral dogs) in Bulgaria has caused and continues to cause severe vulture mortality. This practice represents to this day the most severe threat to vultures in the country. During the past 20 years 59 vultures have been found poisoned from poison baits set originally for mammalian predators in Bulgaria within 16 separate incidents. Illegal poisoning caused the death of 10 Egyptian Vultures, 1 Cinereous Vulture and 48 Griffon vultures. The most recent registered mass poisoning vulture incidents in Bulgaria were in March 2017, where within a single poisoning incident in Kresna Gorge a total of 18 Griffon Vultures were found poisoned, and up to 30 presumed poisoned in total; and in September 2019, near Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park, where 5 Griffon Vultures and one Golden Eagle were found poisoned in the vicinity of the poisoned bait (a calf carcass in this case). The former single poisoning incident catastrophically reduced the Griffon Vulture breeding population in Kresna Gorge, which will take many years to recover due to the delayed maturity of the species.

III Legal implications

The HGPL draft would be in direct conflict with officially adopted action plans for the protection of endangered bird species in Bulgaria and in Europe. The amendments to the HGPL would pose an immediate and severe threat to scavenging bird populations, primarily vultures, which are already vulnerable to extinction in the country – Griffon Vulture, Cinereous Vulture and Egyptian Vulture. Their long-term conservation in Bulgaria has been regulated by the implementation of four strategic documents – the Multi-species Action Plan to Conserve African-Eurasian Vultures (Vulture MsAP, adopted by Bulgaria as a CMS party during the CMS COP12; Botha et al. (2017)), and the National Species Action Plans for conservation of Griffon, Egyptian and Cinereous Vultures officially adopted by the Ministry of Environment and Water (MoEW). Furthermore, in 2014, the 11th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CMS (COP11) passed Resolution 11.15 – Preventing Poisoning of Migratory Birds, recalling CMS COP10 Resolution 10.26 - Minimizing the Risk of Poisoning to Migratory Birds. These Resolutions called on Parties to the Convention, non-Party Range States and other stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations, to engage in co-operative activities and to elaborate strategies to address poisoning of migratory birds.

Regarding the CMS, the three vulture species are listed on CMS Appendices. The Egyptian Vulture is on App I, which requires strict protection; habitat conservation and restoration; and eliminating or minimizing threats to the conservation status of listed species; In other words as a CMS Party Bulgaria has an obligation to protect App I species it is a range state for; The CMS App II listing requires Bulgaria to cooperate to maintain or improve Griffon and Cinereous vultures conservation status. Since these are shared populations, actions taken in Bulgaria could undermine the

conservation status of the species listed not only in the country but in other countries as well.

Additionally, the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern, 1979), which was ratified by Bulgaria on 25.01.1999. and put in force in Bulgaria since 01.05.1991 (State Gazette 1 23/1995), clearly prohibits the use of any non-selective means of capture or killing as well as of means that may induce local extinction or heavily disturb the populations of a species, namely means listed in Annex IV. The same Annex IV of the Law, which is entitled “Prohibited means and methods of hunting and other forms of exploitation”, refers to poisons and poison or tranquilizing baits” as prohibited methods.

As a result, many of the conservation activities developed in these documents are aimed at reducing the threat and effect of poisons on target species. In this regard, in September 2020, a draft proposal for an action plan for combating poisons in Bulgaria was submitted to the MoEW, which had been developed by the leading NGOs in Bulgaria and relevant governmental institutions and had been undergoing public consultations for one year. Similar strategic documents have been developed, and specific activities are currently being implemented in most Balkan countries (Serbia, North Macedonia, Greece, Albania, Croatia) under the auspices of the BAPP project.

IV Financial implications

Numerous activities to combat the illegal use of poison baits have been developed, tested and are currently used in a number of projects funded by the EU LIFE programme, implemented by environmental NGOs in Bulgaria and officially supported by the MoEW. Most recently, the VCF has developed the BalkanDetox LIFE project, which has started this month (October 2020), and aims to further reinforce the struggle against illegal wildlife poisoning in the Balkan Peninsula. Additionally, significant other vulture conservation efforts have also been invested in Bulgaria. Most recently, in 2018, within the scope of the Vultures back to LIFE project (LIFE14 NAT/BG/000649) the Cinereous Vulture reintroduction programme in Bulgaria began. In a landmark moment for the conservation of the species in the region, the first two birds were released in July 2018 in the Eastern Balkan Mountains. Since then, 11 more birds were released in Bulgaria into the wild. The efforts to reintroduce the species will continue over the next four years as the Vultures Back to LIFE project aims to release many more birds. These birds would be at significant risk if poison baits were to be legalised, and put in jeopardy this conservation programme.

It is very important to point out that significant financial resources have been invested in preserving the populations of the four vulture species native to Europe. The European Commission (EC) has for the past 20 years financially supported over 40 vulture conservation projects throughout Europe with a total of over €92M in funding through the LIFE Programme alone, from which around €57M was directly provided by the EC, while over €35M were provided by beneficiaries of these projects. In Bulgaria alone the European Commission has invested 19% of total funding

dedicated to vulture conservation in Europe through the LIFE Programme, amounting to almost €11M, while €5M were provided by project beneficiaries from Bulgaria (Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/project/Projects>). Most of these vulture conservation projects have implemented conservation actions associated with diminishing the negative effect of major threatening factors, none more important than illegal poisoning.

We strongly believe that such a draft proposal as this one would render the current measures and activities and invested financial resources meaningless, since it would be in conflict with all international, European and national norms adopted by the national government, and is highly probable to have a devastating effect on vulture population in Bulgaria. Furthermore, we strongly believe that legalizing the use of such methods, which have been and currently remain prohibited, would encourage other prohibited activities, such as illegal shooting of protected wildlife.

Furthermore, in addition to their important role as consumers of carrion, vultures also have the potential to contribute to the local and national economy by providing a charismatic attraction to both national and international ecotourists and nature enthusiasts. For example, it has been shown that vultures could increase local revenue around nature reserves by 2.4-2.9 million USD annually (Becker et al. 2009), confirming that attracting bird watchers to an area can be more lucrative than harvesting natural resources on which those birds depend (Czeszczewik et al. 2019). **To modify legislation that would enable poisoning of threatened species that play important ecological roles would therefore not only be environmentally irresponsible, but it would also be a missed opportunity to support economic opportunities at the local and national level. We therefore urge the government of Bulgaria to withdraw this proposal.**

For and on behalf of the Vulture Conservation Foundation,



José Tavares

Director

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