

More Harm than Good: The Misuse of European Biodiversity Funds

Article by Daiva Repečkaitė, Elena Reimerytė, Vaida Pilibaitytė

August 2, 2022

Supported by EU funding, local municipalities are carrying out projects involving the removal of trees and the degradation of natural spaces according to aesthetic landscaping considerations. Activists in the Lithuanian town of Trakai have responded by denouncing a process marked by loopholes and inadequate oversight and scrutiny, in which overarching objectives become distorted and watered down by multiple layers of bureaucracy, and local communities and organisations are excluded and ignored.

Between sound blasts coming from tourist boats, the tiny island of Karvinė in the Lithuanian town of Trakai is enveloped in gentle birdsong. A cluster of birches stands out against lush greenery, and the smell of lilac lingers in the air. “It is so peaceful here,” a tourist tells her companions, as the group returns from a visit to a famous island castle on a neighbouring island. But alongside the footpath the visitors are taking, one of the elegant birches has a red mark, its paint having seeped into the bark like blood. It is marked for an eventual chop. Widespread tree removal and pruning is a part of a local project. Surprisingly, the project is funded by the European Union through funds made available under its biodiversity investment priority. These priorities are agreed between member states and the European Commission, and local institutions can apply for funding on that basis.

Local activists in the region are still puzzled as to how this is possible. After all, the regulation that governs these decentralised funds sets thematic objectives, which include “preserving and protecting the environment”, and these are reflected in the nationally established priorities, often word for word.

“There was a proposal to cut 12 protected trees, which are in a bad or very bad state,” Trakai municipality’s public relations chief Agata Mankeliūnienė explained in an email. Trakai resident Liuda Drižytė, who has studied arboriculture and until recently was a member of the local tree protection and care committee, offers a different interpretation. “There’s a wooden stake [next to the tree] marking the footpath, and it means that the tree will get in its way. It will hover over the footpath and that is [considered to be] dangerous, so [the tree] will be removed.” This is a common observation among local activists – authorities often perceive that trees stand in the way of straight-lined, angular, orderly development, and must therefore be removed.

Our latest edition - Making Our Minds: Uncovering the Politics of Education - is out now.

It is available to read online & order straight to your door.

READ & Order

The tree management project made headlines last year, when the municipality intended to cut one-fifth of the old town's trees for a landscaping project (this included 10 healthy protected trees "to make space" or "improve lighting"), and a subcontractor told us they felled around 250 of them before being stopped by an environmental authority. Under pressure, the municipality hired arborist Renaldas Žilinskas to carry out an additional expert assessment, which activists had called for. "If you remove the trees [in the central streets], we will lose half of Trakai's identity," Žilinskas said. He added that guidelines for labelling a tree as dangerous to people and property are too vague, allowing landowners to fell trees that could still be saved using arborist treatment. Based on his suggestions, the current plan is to provide care solutions to another 170 trees – but this decision was only taken after an outcry from local activists, a court ruling, and local as well as international media attention. The town's story is a cautionary tale of well-intentioned funding streams ending up, without strong safeguards, neglecting nature and biodiversity under pressure to create more vistas for tourists and clear sick and injured, but stable and beloved trees from public spaces.

Funding business as usual

Although the EU's decentralised structural and cohesion funds support many projects in Trakai municipality, this particular project is remarkable by the fact that tree felling, path paving, and even extermination of local weeds using herbicides are financed under a biodiversity priority.

More precisely, the funding for tree removal in Trakai came from the investment priority labelled "Protecting and restoring biodiversity, soil protection and restoration and promoting ecosystem services including Natura 2000 and green infrastructures", found in the document that regulates EU cohesion policy spending in Lithuania. Cohesion policy is the support provided by the EU for regional development. National ministries suggest priorities and priorities are formulated by national governments, who then submit them to the European Commission for approval. Next, ministries draw up measures to implement these priorities, and rules for project selection. The measures are complex – in some, projects can be selected in competitive calls, in others, like the one in Trakai, projects are agreed upon in regional councils, where municipality representatives sit. Civil society participation in these councils is encouraged, but our research showed that in the Vilnius region, which covers Trakai, no nature-related civil society was present when the region's project list was drawn up. The European Commission does not interfere in project selection – only stepping in to retrieve its funds when a project is flagged as problematic.

Surprisingly, the project is funded by the European Union & through funds made available under its biodiversity investment priority.

This, however, is rare, and on its website, the Commission promises further simplification

and less oversight of the process. “The European Commission must actively encourage member states to invest in nature, conservation and restoration, and that should be done not just by setting targets, but also by legal obligations,” said Thomas Freisinger, EU policy officer at EuroNatur, a German NGO, at the launch of a report on the failure to protect nature from potential harm in projects funded by the EU’s Recovery and Resilience Facility. “This experience shows us that if member states have the choice, they tend to do business as usual.”

We take what we can get

The tree management project in Trakai is one of 95 projects funded under the same measure. Of these projects, 68 mentioned “landscape” in their titles, while only 17 mentioned “ecology”. The environment ministry determined the rules of selection, and the minister at the time also signed the list of projects proposed by the region. When, in 2021, we asked the European Commission to explain how biodiversity funds could be diverted to such landscaping work, a Commission official, who did not want to be named, replied that no major risks associated with this investment priority have been identified so far, and that project selection criteria should ensure that funded projects are appropriate.

Nationally, the environment ministry, which approves regional projects, is lenient. “A one-directional view of prioritising only the ecological aspect would be difficult in a city,” Justina Čunderova, senior specialist at the ministry, said in 2021, when asked to explain why 311,000 euros of EU funds were put towards a plan to cut over 450 trees and use herbicides to exterminate local grasses in Trakai.

Selection criteria state that tree care solutions are eligible for funding and set a financial limit to “grey” as opposed to green infrastructure in each project. But, following their habit of using EU funds for construction, municipalities further dilute the green component of the project requirements.

The municipality in Trakai contracted a company to formulate technical specifications and then used these in a public procurement tender. Even though project selection criteria specify that construction cannot be more than one-fifth of a funded project’s budget, the public tender required applying companies to prove only construction, not landscaping or tree care, experience. Accordingly, a construction company won the contract.

“Given the level of [local] capabilities, we should accept the result we get today,” Čunderova says. Whether or not a project like Trakai’s will do anything for biodiversity and ecosystems, the ministry cannot tell, as it has neither the baseline nor indicators to collect that information.

A Commission official replied that no major risks associated with this investment priority have been identified so far.

The pursuit of neatness

“We have become pursuers of sterility, and this is not good for us at all,” says Joana Staniulionytė, who lives in Lentvaris – another town in the same municipality. A designer by occupation, Staniulionytė is critical of the local government’s attempts to “beautify” and bring order to areas that have historically been co-developed by people and nature. “It’s like interior design outdoors. In my house or flat, I can purchase new paintings, buy a carpet, and vacuum the floor. But doing the same in the natural environment, metaphorically vacuuming the environment is just wrong.”

Timothy Beatley, sustainable urban planning lecturer at the University of Virginia’s (US), seconds her thoughts. “Nature isn’t just a pretty thing to add on to buildings, it’s absolutely essential for us to be human beings and to live flourishing lives. We want cities where nature is understood as a birthright. We want a wild city, too.” Presented with an outline of the Trakai project and the official reasoning that trees risk falling on parked cars or need to be removed to open up vistas, he commented, “It’s crazy thinking. We have a lot of evidence that the same home, with trees, carries a much higher resale value. People love trees! I don’t know how you could say otherwise, and how anybody could justify at a public discussion the cutting down of an ancient tree so that you could expand the horizon of a landscape.”

The selection of trees to be cut is based on an assessment by forestry experts. Interviewed in 2021, Julius Bačkaitis, whose company did the assessment, stood by his recommendation to cut hundreds of trees because they are either sick or compete with “more valuable” trees, such as oaks. But Andželika Kriaučiūnienė of Trakai Historical National Park pointed out that Bačkaitis’s tree inventory clearly stated that some trees must be cut immediately, while others can wait five or ten years. “That’s why EU-financed projects, when money is received only once and one wishes to do everything in one go, turn into a kind of disaster,” she said in 2021.

Residents filed numerous complaints about the way trees are managed. Finally, in March 2021 the Environmental Protection Department of the environment ministry intervened because it found procedural faults in the way the permission to cut the trees was issued. The issue reached the Vilnius Regional Administrative Court. In November, it ruled that the municipality was guilty of failing to observe the rules for issuing permits to cut protected trees. An appeal was pending at the time of writing.

Nature as an afterthought in the European recovery package

This story, where high-flying green goals are formulated in a programme, but watered down in project selection criteria and reinterpreted in the projects themselves, is symptomatic of the issues environmentalists see in much of decentralised EU funding, when the rules to choose and monitor projects are established locally.

This is carried over to the Recovery and Resilience Facility, a part of the EU’s largest-ever financial stimulus, designed to respond to the aftermath of the pandemic by investing in a digital and green transition. The research by EuroNatur and CEE Bankwatch, a coalition of environmental NGOs, found that less than 1 per cent of the planned funds are dedicated to biodiversity, and that countries are likely to formulate plans that threaten natural areas even in the name of climate change adaptation – by disrupting rivers to manage floods or by building renewable energy facilities without a detailed assessment of their

environmental impact.

There is no criteria under which the Trakai tree management or similar projects would be rejected.

“The process was such that in less than six months, the regulation was published that allows this Recovery Fund to function. Member states came up with national plans, which are on average 500 pages long. And in the six months, those were also adopted by the Commission and the money was dispersed. So that’s just an insane pace,” says Thomas Freisinger of EuroNatur NGO. “And obviously, for us, I mean for civil society, that means that there will be loopholes.”

“The EU wants to speed up the whole process by cutting corners and not involving the public and civil society. But in the medium and longer term, that’s going to have negative consequences. And it’s actually going to mean that their plans aren’t as ambitious and aligned with objectives as they should have been,” adds Daniel Thomson, who works for CEE Bankwatch and was also involved in the research. Both criticise the tick-box approach to assessing whether a project is likely to harm the environment. Instead, they call for legal obligations to protect nature, in the form of regulation that would send a signal to applicants that nature-oriented funds should not be used for projects that aim to dam a river or cut mature trees – and that the authorities in charge of project selection would have grounds for excluding such projects.

In defence of nature and local communities

Back in Lithuania, Saulius Vasiliauskas, who works at the Environmental Projects Management Agency and curates the measure under which the Trakai project was financed, said that his rulebook does not have criteria under which the Trakai tree management or similar projects would be rejected. “A project has been developed and included in the region’s project list – it means that the project is regionally important. The application was filed on time, the budget was approved as meeting the selection criteria. So we cannot reject this project,” he explained in an interview in 2021, when he also admitted receiving numerous complaints from locals, but was satisfied to hear from the municipality that the project’s plans were still preliminary – and left it at that.

Following the saga that involved local activists, an environmental authority, and courts, Trakai municipality has amended the project. In an email sent in June, local official Mankeliūnienė wrote that a new assessment of some of the trees was carried out in April – this time by a well-known arborist. He proposed arboricultural interventions that could save some “sick” trees. The contract with the previous contractor was cancelled, but with additional scrutiny and tree care requirements, the municipality was struggling to find a willing and able applicant for its procurement tender.

“I was born, raised, and still live in Trakai, and what hurts me the most is that I definitely never do, and none of our specialists ever does, anything that goes against the law or our cooperation with one another. But there are the same three people who [...] are constantly

trying to impede the projects,” Svetlana Žilionienė, who heads the municipality administration’s Strategic Planning and Investment division, said in an interview in 2021. But activist Staniulionytė argues that nobody files environmental complaints to spite the administration. “You get involved because you can no longer stand aside,” she says. Drižytė, who is pursuing an arboricultural qualification, regrets that public consultations are so tense. “Open fighting is not in my nature,” she says, and instead entertains the thought of creating an online platform to visually document what is happening to the environment.

As environmentalists and local authorities waited for the final verdict on the tree removal’s legality, in June the European Commission adopted a legislative proposal on nature restoration. “Member states shall ensure that there is no net loss of urban green space, and of urban tree canopy cover by 2030, compared to 2021, in all cities and in towns and suburbs,” Article 6 reads. To become law, it would have to be approved by the European Parliament and member states.

The tension between speed and consistency with climate and environmental objectives is not unique to Lithuania, and thus will require Europe-wide solutions. Bureaucratic complexity and top-down planning processes that exclude cities and communities are evidently a broader issue. There is a political will to act against environmental destruction, yet even as policymakers adopt more stringent measures, they remain unaware of the scale of disruption to urban ecosystems their funding has led to.

The investigation is a part of “Media4Change – Future Investigative Story Lab” project. The project has been co-funded by the European Commission. The Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Daiva Repečkaitė (@daiva_hadiva) is based in Malta and covers politics, health and environment in text and audio.



Elena Reimerytė (@Elena_Reimer_) is a London-based documentary filmmaker focusing on various social issues and the urban forest concept. The investigation is a part of “Media4Change – Future Investigative Story Lab” project

Vaida
Pilibaitytė
(@vpilibaityte)
is a Vilnius-
based public
radio producer
and
environment
journalist.

Published August 2, 2022

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/more-harm-than-good-the-misuse-of-european-biodiversity-funds/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.