

# CRY ME A RIVER

## POLAND'S THREATENED WATERWAYS

ARTICLE BY

**RADOSŁAW  
GAWLIK & EWA  
SUFIN-JACQUEMART**

The Polish government's waterways plans for the country's rivers promise to bring economic development and better flood protection. In reality, the plans will likely lead to worse floods, droughts, conflicts, and the destruction of invaluable habitats. Rather than used to serve the interests of a narrow lobby, the environmentally unique Vistula and Odra rivers should be controlled and governed by, or at least with, local communities, with their welfare in mind.

**W**ith its professed commitment to sustainable development, the European Union should be at the forefront of environmental protection, climate action, and long-term preservation of life-sustaining environmental resources, including waters. As clear water is essential to life, rivers, lakes, coastal waters, and underground waters are the commons (common resources) of Europeans that the legislation and institutions of the EU must protect for the welfare of present and future generations. The Water Framework Directive, which EU Member States were expected to implement by the end of 2015, was intended to ensure the 'good status'<sup>1</sup> of all water resources in Europe. The directive seeks to reconcile environmental protection with the needs of citizens. A difficult exercise, as the legal text does not say anything about the regulation of river flows or the priority order of the potential uses of rivers, nor does it prescribe how to best protect people from their own destructive potential. Meanwhile, rivers have many different functions and, as common goods, are the object

<sup>1</sup> The Water Framework Directive sets the following main goals:

- expanding the scope of water protection to all waters, surface waters and groundwater
- achieving 'good status' for all waters by a set deadline
- water management based on river basins
- 'combined approach' of emission limit values and quality standards
- getting the prices right
- getting the citizen involved more closely
- streamlining legislation

of a bitter struggle between competing interests over how they should be used and whose needs they should serve. Today in Poland and more widely in the European Union, local communities have little influence on decisions concerning their rivers, despite these being a crucial resource for their welfare.

Poland's rivers are a common good under threat, but this is a fact of which only a narrow group of experts, environmentalists, hydrologists, and some self-organised groups of anglers and ecotourism promoters is aware. The media and public opinion still tend to believe in the falsehoods propagated by the hydro-engineering lobby. In a post-communist country such as Poland – Christian, very traditional, strongly anthropocentric, and extremely individualistic – citizens are not aware enough to reclaim the commons, in order to resist the hyper commodification and privatisation pushed for by the productivist neoliberal ideology.

## **AMBITIOUS PLANS PUTTING RIVERS AT RISK**

The Odra and the Vistula, the two largest rivers in Poland, are currently the objects of ambitious inland waterway development plans. The Odra had its flow regulated in the late 19th and early 20th century, and used to be Poland's longest waterway, gradually fall-

ing into disuse because of the ever lower water levels and the scarcity of funding needed to maintain the hydro-technical infrastructure and ensure navigable depth. The Vistula, on the other hand, is probably the largest mostly naturalised river in the European Union. It runs through twenty Natura 2000 sites, sixteen nature reserves, five landscape parks, and thirteen protected landscape areas, as well as the buffer zone of the Kampinos National Park near Warsaw. Apart from a short navigable stretch on the Upper Vistula near Kraków, the remaining 900 km of the river has just one barrage, built between 1962 and 1970.

The Polish Government's new waterway plans for 2016-2020<sup>2</sup> lay down grand plans for the development of inland navigation on the Odra and the Vistula, and the construction of a canal to connect the two rivers. If they are implemented, the scenic and environmentally invaluable Middle Vistula Valley, protected in its entirety as a Natura 2000 site, will become a part of the E40 Odessa-Gdansk waterway. In protest against these plans, a group of organisations, such as Ecological Association EKO-UNIA, which have been monitoring the status of rivers for years, supported by some scientists and local governments, published a letter in which they question the rationale behind this strategic undertaking. They discredit the government's claims that the water-

<sup>2</sup> *The Polish inland waterway plans for 2016-2020 with perspective to 2030*, drafted by the Ministry of Maritime Economy and Inland Waterways and adopted by the Council of Ministers.

way plans would generate benefits such as increasing the volume of water transport on rivers, improving the competitiveness of the sea ports at the mouths of the Odra and the Vistula, stimulating economic activity, reducing the risk of flooding, and enabling renewable power generation at the new barrages.

The authors of the letter also call into question the government's argument that Poland needs to 'catch up with Western Europe'. They write: "Inland navigation on the Rhine should by no means serve as a model for us today – it developed in the previous century during a different economic era, when attitudes towards protecting biodiversity were completely different, and under different climate conditions." Notwithstanding, there are also much more valuable examples to imitate in Western countries, like the Loire and the Dordogne rivers in France, with many local collective initiatives based on the principle of adapting the boat to the river, not the other way around.

There are many reasons why these plans are completely at odds with the common interest: they would lead to increased risk of flooding, more severe droughts, economic losses, deeper budget deficits, potential conflicts over water, and the destruction of Poland's natural sites of European importance. Public investment to implement them would therefore be, most of all, in the interests of the hydro-engineering industry.

## **GENERATING CONFLICT AND INSECURITY**

Poland does not have much water; in fact, its water reserves are among the lowest in Europe. If the government plans go ahead, publicly-funded inland navigation may rob other sectors of the water they need, and cause shortages of drinking water and conflicts over water. Industrial processes, especially coal-based energy generation, account for the largest share of water consumption in Poland, followed by municipal water supply and irrigation systems. Poland currently generates 88 % of its electricity in coal-fired power plants, where water is necessary to cool the installations. Meanwhile, as the climate continues to warm and droughts become more frequent, researchers warn that this is likely to aggravate shortages and lead to massive development of field irrigation systems, as in Southern Europe. Thus, there is a real risk that Poland's rivers will be turned into expensively built canals without water.

The Polish government's project overlooks the natural contradictions between navigation and flood protection. Navigation will require storing water in multi-purpose reservoirs in order to feed water into rivers during barge transports in periods of low water levels. Yet from the point of view of flood protection, those reservoirs should be kept empty in the event of suddenly needing to absorb heavy flood waves on the straightened and regu-

lated rivers. Furthermore, river transport and the generation of electricity in hydro power plants on the new impoundments conflict with the demand for water by conventional power generation, which Poland wishes to retain as the principal power source for decades to come, and which relies on river water for its technological processes.

### **HIDDEN COSTS: THE RISKS OF FLOODING AND IRREPARABLE ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE**

The government's waterway development plans do not mention the damage that Poland's close-to-natural rivers and their valleys will suffer if these plans are implemented. Poland's rivers are still environmentally unique, admired in Europe, and are part of the biodiversity heritage of Poland and Europe. For the most part, the large river valleys in Poland are Natura 2000 sites, protecting plant and animal habitats of European importance, including bird habitats. If the Vistula and the Odra become regulated and if the Odra–Vistula waterway is built, these sites and habitats will suffer damage on an enormous scale. Thus those projects would violate not only the Water Framework Directive, but also the Habitats and Birds Directives.

According to the government documents, making the large rivers navigable will reduce the risk of flooding. However both science and

the experience of several decades of river flow regulation and management in Europe show that extensive regulation of rivers and the construction of reservoirs and barrages that will be needed to reach the targets for navigation actually lead to an increased risk of flooding, due to the inevitable low water periods and the increasingly frequent torrential rains. The development of inland navigation can hardly be reconciled with flood protection. Moreover, new flood protection measures will have to be built and maintained at no small cost. Thus, the 20 billion euros to be spent on the inland navigation programme is not the end of public expenditure, but just the beginning.

### **PUBLIC MONEY BEING USED AGAINST THE COMMON GOOD**

Inland cargo transport in Poland is a dying subsector that faces a great degree of uncertainty due to climate change. Reviving it at a great cost is pointless. The Ministry of Maritime Economy and Inland Waterways maintains that 20 million tonnes of cargo will be carried along the Odra and 7.8 million tonnes along the Vistula by 2020, but these numbers are entirely unrealistic.

The plans would therefore mean spending Polish taxpayers' money and EU funds on creating competition for the Polish railways, which have received billions of zlotys and euros in investments in recent years, have been modernised,

and will possess an unused transport capacity much greater than what the Polish rivers transformed into canalised waterways can offer.

The development of inland waterways in Poland is expected to cost nearly 20 billion euros by 2030, including around 2.3 billion euros by 2020. The inland waterways project does not serve the public interest and will bring no general social, economic, or environmental benefits, and certainly not for local communities.

## **FUNDING THE DESTRUCTION OF RIVERS: THE PUZZLING ROLE OF EU FUNDS**

The Polish government's inland waterways development programme is a continuation of the previous liberal government loan deal with the World Bank to finance the Odra-Vistula Flood Management Project, allegedly a flood protection project, which in reality was about regulating the flow of these rivers and making them navigable.

This unexpected World Bank project was drafted in secret and adopted following a very limited public consultation which involved no major non-governmental organisations dealing with water conservation. Worth more than \$1.317 billion, the project will be funded from loans provided by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (\$504 million) and the Council of Europe Development

Bank (\$329 million), as well as a subsidy from the European Union (\$219 million).

The project poses an unprecedented threat to the environment of the river valleys concerned. It is a continuation of the last several decades of 'river taming', an approach which has left the natural functions and unique ecosystems of rivers devastated. The plans have been designed despite experience and science having long ago demonstrated that natural, meandering rivers, which constantly change shape, swell onto their floodplains and then gradually recede, provide incomparably better ecosystems and contribute much more to the well-being of local communities, while also ensuring much better protection from disastrous floods.

Yet the World Bank has agreed to finance these investments, despite the criticisms and the multiple negative experiences with regulation and canalisation of rivers in many parts of the world. Even more surprisingly, the project is due to be funded to the tune of \$219 million by the European Union, which previously rightly objected to the EU financing the regulation and destruction of rivers between 2007 and 2013. The EU also questioned the drainage and hydro-engineering expenses in Poland worth hundreds of millions of euros, when thousands of kilometres of rivers were dredged in Poland in the name of so-called revitalisation and flood protection, despite being in glaring

contradiction with the objectives of *European Water Policy*.<sup>3</sup> Yet now the European Commission seems prepared to finance activities which violate the Habitats and Birds Directives and the Water Framework Directive.

## SAVING RIVERS MEANS EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

It is time to remind the decision-makers and the public, not only in Poland, that rivers provide crucial ecosystems and that they are part of the common goods, shared by people and other beings. The management of rivers at all levels should serve local communities and future generations, and be subject to public participation and control. Thus those common goods should progressively become the commons. However, in order for such participation and control to be exercised effectively, first the myths about the alleged necessity and benefits of river flow regulation have to be dismantled, and communities must be made aware of how natural rivers function and how their waters should and could be managed and used in their interest and in respect of future generations and ecosystems.

Rather than promoting unrealistic dreams of new waterways, national and local authorities should promote local participation and

self-governance by the communities living close to rivers, to reclaim those special common goods from their appropriation by the state-market productivist system. The citizens should be actively involved in maintaining the floodplains for flood protection and ensuring shared and sustainable use of rivers for ecotourism, fishing and small local transport, in order to protect their natural functions and the unique ecosystems of the last natural big rivers of Europe.



**RADOSŁAW GAWLIK**

is a Polish activist, ex-politician, and writer. He has organised anti-nuclear power protests, participated in the development of *Solidarność*, and founded and presided over the Ecological Forum UW. He sat in parliament for 12 years and was secretary of state in the Minister of Environmental Protection, Natural Resources and Forestry.



**EWA SUFIN-JACQUEMART**

is a sociologist at Warsaw University and the Sorbonne in Paris. Currently she is director of the Green Polish foundation "Strefa Zieleni", writes for their publication, and coordinates the Green Centre of the Congress of Women.

<sup>3</sup> As WWF has demonstrated, Poland, the biggest beneficiary of EU funding, has already destroyed or seriously impoverished the ecosystems of around 20,000 kilometres of small rivers by canalising and deepening them, straightening them out, removing vegetation or lining their banks with concrete as part of EU funded projects between 2007 and 2013.