

Stunning European nature jewel threatened by EU-funded motorway: **Save Kresna Gorge, Bulgaria**

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A spectacular nature haven in southwestern Bulgaria, home to twice as many butterfly species as the whole of the UK and protected by EU nature laws, is under threat from an EU-funded motorway from Sofia to Greece.

The Bulgarian Government in [October 2017 decided](#) it will carve an international highway through the 16km-long Kresna Gorge, supported by hundreds of millions of EU taxpayer funds, in defiance of an EU order to bypass the Gorge.

The narrow Gorge is Bulgaria's richest biodiversity site – containing EU protected snakes, tortoises, 12 species of bat, golden eagles, and griffon vultures. Linking the Balkan interior with the Mediterranean, the Gorge is a crucial north-south migratory corridor for bears, wolves and other species, and it is a Natura 2000 site specially protected by EU law as a haven for 35 rare European habitats and 92 rare species.

This is the latest move in a dispute spanning 20 years and hundreds of millions of EU taxpayer Euros. But Kresna Gorge's wildlife and the livelihoods of its local people are both at risk, if the construction of the E79 Struma motorway linking Hamburg with Sofia and Athens – Trans-European Corridor 4 – goes ahead through the Gorge.

[NGOs](#)¹ warn the **Bulgarian Government's plans violate EU law, and could trigger a dispute with the European Commission (EC). Good alternatives exist to complete the last remaining section of the road outside the protected Gorge.** But time is running out to find a solution, as EU funding rules require completion by 2023.

Bulgarian Government plan

The Bulgarian government [decided](#) on 19 October 2017 that it will construct the last remaining segment ('Lot 3') of the European highway along its preferred route: half down the length of the Gorge. The plan (named 'G10.5 Eastern') is expected to modify an existing local road through the Gorge into a fast south-bound dual-carriage way, and construct a north-bound road separately outside the Gorge. This will involve building a two-lane road on the eastern hills above the Gorge; and within the Gorge widening and straightening the existing small road to attain highway speeds, constructing commercial zones and parking areas, and cutting a bypass around Kresna town through fields and vineyards. Construction is about to begin to bring the motorway to the edge of the Gorge.

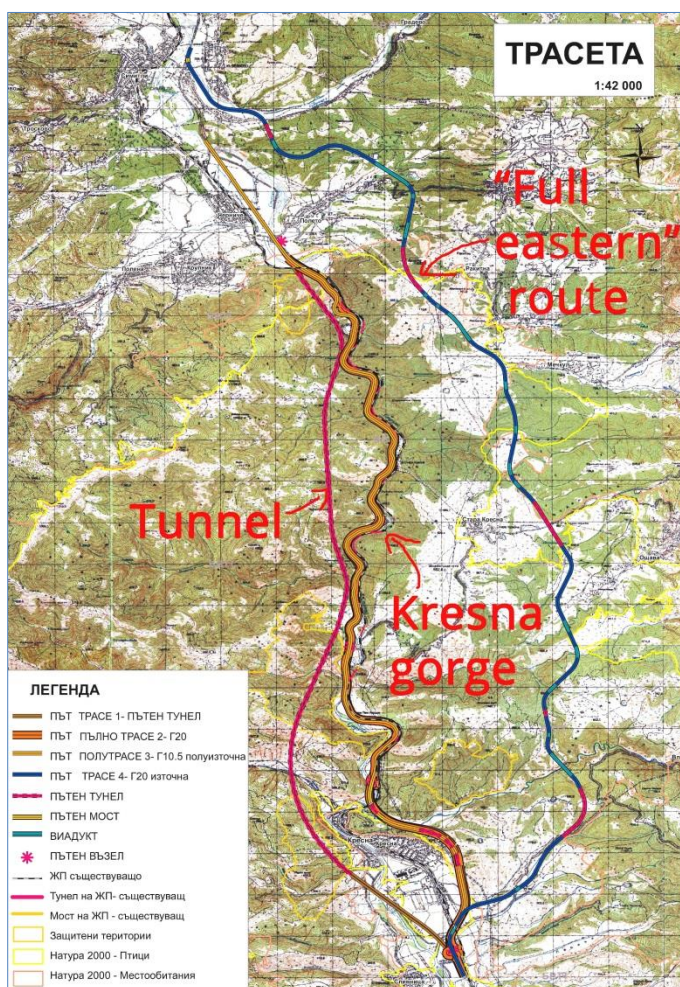
Impacts

Severe damage to wildlife is likely. The road is a particularly deadly obstacle to wildlife in the Gorge – owing to its steep sides and narrow river bottom, and the fact that animals constantly move up, down and across the Gorge to reach the river and habitats on the slopes. This will only worsen with a busier, wider, faster highway:

- In 2002, a Bern Convention appraisal found that: *"the passage of a road in the gorge... obligatorily involving irreversible impacts of great influence in a single site of recognized importance and without possible measures of compensation [...would be] unacceptable"*.²
- The principal EU-approved assessment decided in 2008 that the existing road was already causing significant deterioration of protected species populations, and that directing a motorway through the Gorge *"may exceed the thresholds of the adaptation of populations and lead to their full extinctions along the bio-corridor"*.³
- A study of animal roadkill in 2015 shows that the population abundance of all protected bats in the Gorge decreased by 92%, protected tortoises and snakes by 60%, and all vertebrates declined by 84%, as a result of increasing transit traffic over 12 years.

Common 'mitigation measures' such as animal crossings or bridges aren't suitable.⁴

The impacts on local people would similarly be stark. Already there are dozens of road accidents and fatalities from the existing road each year;⁵ the south-bound motorway will pass 30m from the local school causing noise disturbance and air pollution; the motorway is expected to upend farmers' fields and vineyards; with no northern access through the Gorge but for a 60km detour, local people will be cut off from accessing their homes, businesses and fields; burgeoning sustainable tourism and rafting businesses attracting 20,000 tourists annually may become inoperable.



Where the law stands

Strong EU nature laws – the Birds and Habitats Directives, which received overwhelming backing from European public and EU lawmakers in 2016⁶ – should protect Kresna Gorge Natura 2000 site. **NGOs believe that there are already several violations of EU law**, and have [lodged a complaint](#) asking the EC to take infringement action against Bulgaria. They claim Bulgaria has:

- **failed to avoid the deterioration of EU protected habitats and species:** instead Bulgaria has allowed transit traffic to increase through Kresna Gorge, resulting in considerable wildlife loss;
- **failed to implement the 2008 EU order to complete the Kresna section ('lot 3') as a priority and to bypass the Gorge:** instead Bulgaria has left it to last, creating a bottleneck of transit traffic through the Gorge;
- **failed to carry out a proper impact assessment** of all the impacts of its preferred 'G10.5 Eastern' plan: instead Bulgaria has presented a substandard report that ignores several wildlife threats and does not thoroughly assess good alternatives;
- approved its 'G10.5 Eastern' plan that will adversely affect the integrity of Kresna Gorge, even though **other safer viable alternatives exist:** EU law says that less damaging alternatives must be prioritised.



Where the EU stands

The European Commission is responsible both for enforcing the EU's laws, and funding regional development in a sustainable way. It has promised Bulgaria €781 million of EU taxpayers' funding to complete this major Trans-European Corridor motorway.

In 2008, the official assessment approved by the EC set conditions for the Struma Motorway to avoid damage to Kresna Gorge: (i) a route must be chosen outside the Gorge, via a tunnel (or alternatively a bypass), and (ii) the Kresna section must be built first, to avoid a bottleneck through the existing Gorge road.⁷ ***Neither of these conditions have been met.***

In 2013, the EU released €274 million to Bulgaria for the motorway, provided that tunnels (or a bypass) be designed and constructed as soon as possible. However most of this money has been spent on constructing the other sections of the highway north and south of the Gorge first, and on controversial reports recommending the tunnel option be abandoned.

In November 2017 the [EC granted a further €330 million](#) to extend the motorway right to the edges of the Natura 2000 site, without conditions – despite the legal complaint pointing out that the bottleneck of Gorge traffic damages wildlife and breaches EU law. **This has left the most technical and costly part of the motorway for the last stage.**



The EC will soon face a decision on whether to approve an official application to release the final tranche of funds allocated to complete the road (expected January 2018) – including for Bulgaria’s preferred ‘G10.5 Eastern’ plan through the Gorge; and will also have to give its opinion on whether a derogation to EU nature protections be allowed.

The EC has been following the case. However, following heavy lobbying by four Bulgarian Ministers, European Commissioners Cretu (regions) and Vella (environment) in October 2017 [failed to raise concerns](#).

Urgent need for the EU to intervene

Evidence shows that Kresna’s wildlife is already alarmingly deteriorating as a result of the failure to uphold previous EU requirements, and would be devastated by Bulgaria’s plan to tarmac the Gorge. Better alternatives for nature and local people are available and viable. Nevertheless the threat of irreversible biodiversity loss in Kresna Gorge – in breach of EU law – yet funded by EU funds – is real and imminent. Unless the EC, the EU’s rules enforcer, steps in.

We call upon the European Commission to intervene to protect European nature and the rule of law, and to ensure European taxpayers’ money is not misspent on a damaging, unlawful project. In particular we urge the EC to:

- **launch an infringement procedure against Bulgaria for significant breaches of EU law, to protect Kresna Gorge Natura 2000 site;**
- **work with Bulgaria and condition use of EU funds to ensure successful completion of the project by 2023 in full compliance with the Birds and Habitats Directives, by removing transit motorway traffic from Kresna Gorge via a route outside the Gorge.**

We call upon European Parliament to closely scrutinise the Commission to achieve a successful outcome for environmental protection, EU taxpayers, and local people.

1 The “Save Kresna Coalition” is made up of: Balkani Wildlife Society, Wilderness Fund, Environmental Association “Za Zemiata” / Friends of the Earth Bulgaria, Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds, Green Policy Institute, Centre for Environmental Information and Education, Nature school – Vlahi, Association “ECOFORUM”. <http://kresna.org/en/home/>

2 Bern Convention on-the-spot appraisal [document T-PVS/Files(2002)7]

3 2008 EIA/AA Decision 1-1/2008 of the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Water

4 2007 Appropriate Assessment report of the Bulgarian National Road Infrastructure Fund

5 In the 17 kilometer of Kresna Gorge in the last 3 years 172 car accidents with 15 deaths and 82 injured have been registered – the highest road accident rates in Bulgaria.

6 The Fitness Check of the EU Birds and Habitats Directives found they are ‘fit for purpose’ <http://www.foeeurope.org/nature-dodges-bullet-huge-campaign-saves-nature-laws-071216>

7 2008 EIA/ AA decision 1-1/2008 of the Ministry of Environment and Water

