

Gerta Lubonja:

EU AND AUSTRIAN SUPPORT TO WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT IS CRUCIAL!

“EU Support to Integrated Water Management (EUSIWM) project has been crucial in order to enhance the implementation of the National Water Reform and the progress of Albania towards the approximation of EU water legislation requirements into the national legislation,” says Gerta Lubonja, the General Director of Water Resources Management Agency in Albania (WRMA/ AMBU) in an exclusive interview with TRAILBLAZING MAGAZINE.

EUSIWM, a project co-founded by the European Union and Austrian Development Cooperation, is implemented by the Austrian Development Agency. This project, according to Lubonja, has been supporting the Albanian water authorities. “Currently, AMBU, supported by the EUSIWM project team is working on drafting the new Law on Water

Resources Management and bylaws,” she said.

Full interview below:

Can you do a panorama of Albanian Agency on Water Resources Management Agency in Albania (AMBU)? How important is its role to guarantee a proper water resources management of the country?

Albania has abundant water resources, split in seven river basins (Drin-Buna, Vjosa, Semani, Shkumbini, Mati, Ishëm, Erzeni), of which two are transboundary: Drin-Bunë is shared with Greece, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia, and Kosovo; Vjosa is shared with Greece. Albania is also home of three major natural lakes (Ohrid (the deepest and oldest lake in Europe),



Prespa and Skadar), 247 small natural lakes, and 630 artificial reservoirs. The country has access to the Adriatic and Ionian Seas with a coastline of 427 km, of which 273 km on the Adriatic Sea and 154 km on the Ionian Sea. The coast also homes several major protected natural lagoons: Kune-Vain in the north, Karavasta and Narta, and Butrinti in the south. Groundwater resources are abundant, between 9 billion m³/y and 13 billion m³/y. Albania has close to 10,000 m³ of freshwater available per person per year, ranking in the top 10 in Europe.

However, the available quantity of surface water (and to a lesser extent, of groundwater) drastically decreases during the summer dry season (July-September), with only 6-9% of annual runoff).

AMBU, is responsible for the development, management, and implementation of an integrated water resources management agenda, for all surfaces and groundwater bodies in the country.

The protection, and sustainable use of all waters at river basin level will be



achieved through the implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) principles – and here in particular, through the establishment of a river basin management planning, and implementation process as defined in Annex VII of the EU WFD.

Institutionally, the AMBU is reporting to the Prime Minister’s Office. Four local offices (Water Basin Administration Offices) WBAOs for water resources management at river basin level are reporting to the AMBU Head Office in Tirana. In total, the AMBU consists of the following five offices:

- AMBU Head Office in Tirana (central level);
- WBAO for Drin-Bunë river basin -

with office at local / river basin level in Shkodër;

- WBAO for Mat, Ishëm, Erzen river basins – with office at local / river basin level in Tirana;
- WBAO for Shkumbin and Seman river basins – with office at local / river basin level in Fier;
- WBAO for Vjosë river basin – with office at local / river basin level in Vlorë.

As of 2021, the AMBU employs 64 staff members, out of 82 positions available.

As the main institution responsible for policies and strategies in the integrated water resources management its role is substantial for guaranteeing an adequate administration of the country’s resources and potential in order to preserve quantitative and qualitative status of water and thus contributing to the sustainable development.

How fast is the AMBU moving in transposing and implementing the European Union Water Framework Directives?

The transposition level of EU legislation within the national one in the field of water management remains partial, in

relation to some important directives. The transposition level was increased by the adoption of the Council of Minister’s Decision no. 1015, date 16.12.2020, “For the content and implementation of the National Water Resources Management Strategy, of the River Basin Management Plans and Flood Risk Management Plans”, as it partially transposes four more European Commission Directives.

Currently, AMBU, supported by the EUSIWM project team is working on drafting the new Law on Water Resources Management and bylaws. The new legal package aims the full transposition of the WFD and other 9 EU Directives The new legal framework, once into force, will set the stage for the AWRM to prepare river basin management plans (RBMP) as key mechanisms to ensure effective

integrated water management.

How important has been the impact of EU Support to Integrated Water Management project for the Agency you lead, in achieving a sustainable financing of water resources management? Can you mention other aspects that EUSIWM has helped the AMBU?

The support of the project has been crucial in order to enhance the implementation of the National Water Reform and the progress of Albania towards the approximation of EU water legislation requirements into the national legislation.

EU Support to Integrated Water management, is a project co-founded by the European Union and Austrian

Development Cooperation. The project is implemented by the Austrian Development Agency and has been supporting the Albanian water authorities - mainly the Agency for Water Resources Management and its Local Administration Offices - in the preparation of River Basin Management Plans for Mati/





Ishem/Erzen river basins in compliance with the requirements of the EU Water Framework Directive. EUSIWM will also focus on the Vjosa river basin for the preparation of a Gap Assessment aiming at follow-up actions.

Other aspects include the continuous support in preparing a comprehensive analyses of the budgetary framework and economic aspects of water extraction and water use at basin level in line with water framework directive principles, the tariff structure will be reviewed and enforced.

What are the current challenges of AMBU?

Water management competencies are shared among several institutions with insufficient capacities and coordination.

Furthermore, the sector has incomplete and partially obsolete water and wastewater infrastructure, inefficient cost recovery policies for water related services, insufficient financial means for infrastructure development and

maintenance. Inadequate management and water services tariffs are in general excessively influenced by political considerations. Furthermore, there is limited integrated monitoring, weak enforcement and insufficient coordination of planning and budgeting of investments.

As an economy in transition, Albania is confronting a fast development trajectory. Rapid urbanisation, economic and infrastructure development, notably mass tourism infrastructure in coastal areas threaten increasingly the quality and quantity of water resources available, impacting the ecological health of water bodies and the environment. Other concerns include the multiplication of

hydropower plants, deforestation in river basins, gravel extractions. Climate change is an additional worsening factor. There is a lack of river basin management approach and cooperation to tackle situations where water bodies show receding water levels due to climate change, or over-abstraction or pollution and deterioration of river water quality downstream of large urban centres.

Do you think there is an immediate need for funding a sustainable financing of water resources management?

Capacities and knowledge at all levels in all River Basins have been increasing in the recent years but an adequate funding mechanisms for implementing the RBMPs and the PoMs is sorely missing. Albania needs to proceed with the completion and adoption of the remaining RBMPs including transboundary dialogue and consultations.

More specifically: the full transposition of EU water legislation into national laws and regulations for all WFD related directives, completing of River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) develop an operational national water monitoring system based on accredited reference

laboratories, to designate, assess and promote good water status for all water related EU directives and all water bodies in the country, increase access of populations to waste water collection with centralised treatment systems, and enhance the sustainability of water and sewerage utilities.

Despite all the difficulties and challenges in the sector through the support of all donors and particularly the Austrian Development Agency, Albania is on its way to join the European family hopefully soon.

