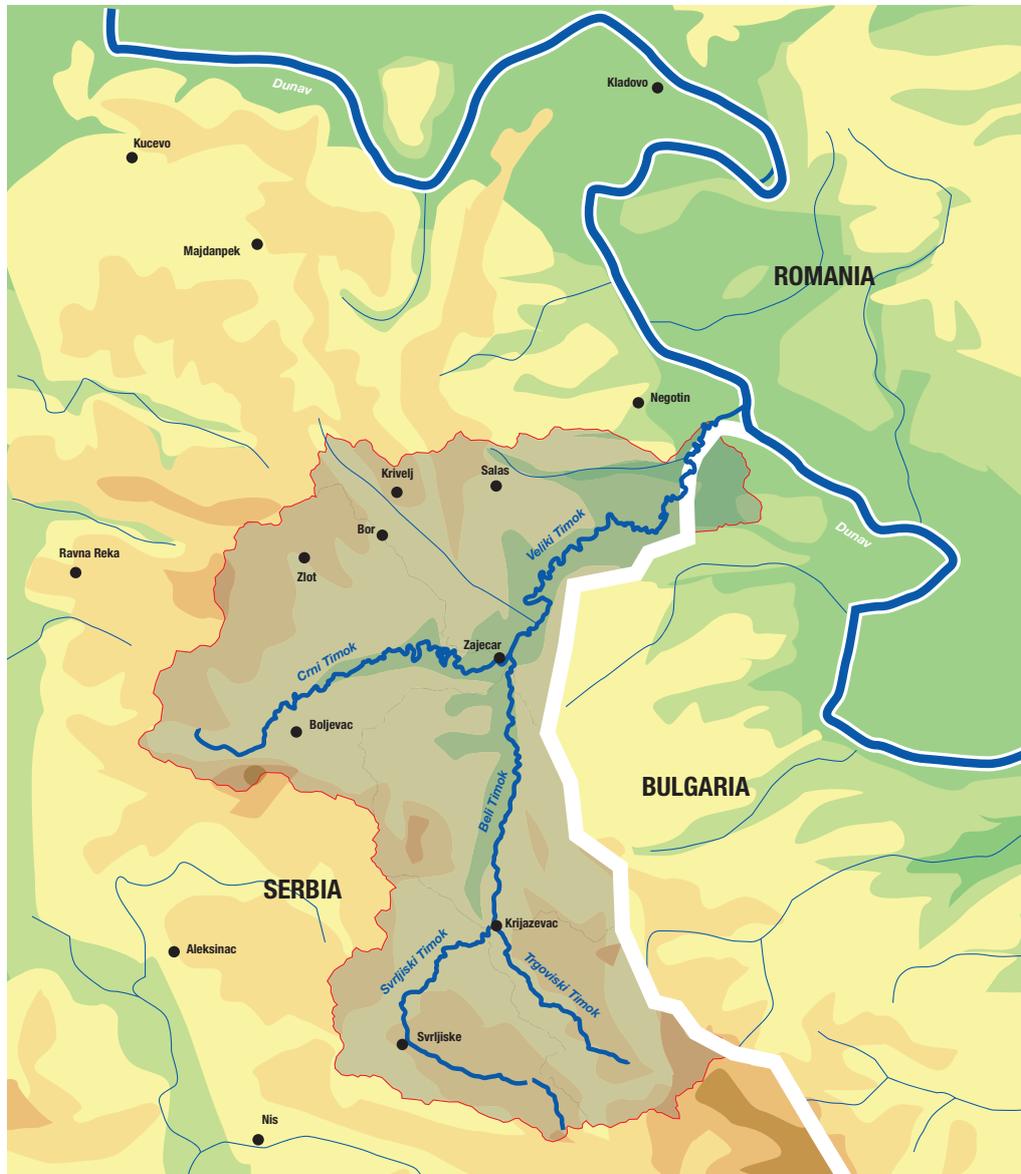


The Timok River basin project: Bilateral arrangements for the transboundary management of water resources



The Timok River originates north of the Svrlij Mountains in the Carpathian-Balkan region in eastern Serbia. Almost the entire river basin (98 percent) is located in Serbia, covering an area of 4,607 km², and the remaining 2 percent (93 km²) is in Bulgaria. The Timok River is an internationally significant waterway: the lower 17.5 km of the river forms a border between Serbia and Bulgaria, and the Timok flows into the Danube at a point common to the frontiers of Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania.

For many years, the Timok River basin has been subject to serious degradation and deforestation as a result of uncontrolled mining activities. In particular, ecological damage has been caused in recent years by heavy metal pollution from mines in the municipality of Bor. The continued exploitation of the area threatens livelihoods on both sides of the border and is a source of pollution of the Danube River.

Although an agreement was signed in 1958 between the governments of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria concerning water management issues, this cooperation was discontinued in 1982.

Timok River basin project

PROJECT VISION

A multi-year project (2007–2010) has been launched by the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), in cooperation with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the Secretariat of the UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention). The Timok River basin project, which is part of the Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC), seeks to facilitate a process of dialogue and cooperation between Serbia and Bulgaria and among communities and stakeholders on both sides of the border.

The goal of the project is to support the development of communication and collaboration for the joint management of this shared water body, and to investigate opportunities for bilateral agreements.

A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

The project builds on activities previously implemented in the area, including those in West Stara Planina under the project “Transboundary Cooperation through the Management of Shared Natural Resources”, which promoted cross-border exchanges between local people as well as the creation of technical networks to support the effective management of transboundary sites at regional and international level.

Priority is given to capacity building towards sustainable development. This includes the establishment of the Timok River Forum — a forum of stakeholders involving authorities at all appropriate levels, water experts, the public, NGOs, and users of the river from both Serbia and Bulgaria. The Timok River Forum is developing dialogue and helping to identify priority areas for action.

The first stage of the project includes a preliminary assessment. Multi-stakeholder meetings and consultations are organised regularly, at both national and regional level, to discuss the elaboration of a sustainable development programme for the river basin and to determine further activities. Various possibilities for cooperation and the joint management of the river will be discussed, including the preparation of a bilateral agreement for cooperation and the sustainable management of the Timok River.

MOVING FORWARD

Based on the results of these consultations, the REC and UNECE will implement stakeholders’ recommendations. Activities may include assistance in the development of the necessary legal and non-binding instruments as tools for sustainable development. In this case, legal advice and expertise will be provided. A results-oriented action plan, including concrete actions directed at relevant actors and authorities, will also be developed (including, for example, measures to build confidence, the elaboration of agreements, the creation of partnerships, etc).

In order to ensure that any actions carried out are effective and acceptable to those living in the river basin, local communities will be involved in the planning process.

BENEFITS

Joint effort on the part of the countries that share the river basin is crucial. Fragmented responsibilities and disjointed approaches often lead to inappropriate water management and environmental decline, mainly because practices in one country can offset progress made by another.

The Timok River basin project is shaped to create conditions for a unified effort towards the sustainable development of the Timok River basin, and especially towards environmental gains such as improved water quality. It also contributes to helping countries to comply with their current and future obligations under the UNECE Water Convention and the Water Framework Directive.

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