

**Question for written answer E-007322/2012
to the Commission**

Rule 117

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Subject: Misuse of EU environmental funds in Bulgaria

Since 2007, the European Fund for Regional Development and the Cohesion Fund have been financing nature protection and infrastructure projects under the Bulgarian operational programme Environment 2007-2013. The funding for nature protection is allocated mainly to activities connected with the conservation, maintenance and restoration of valuable habitats and species of European importance under Natura 2000. However, the low level of transparency characterising the operational programme is leading to the approval of project proposals which are not in compliance with EU funding rules.

For instance, in 2012 the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Waters approved¹ the financing of environmental projects submitted by the municipalities of Etropole² and Sapareva Banya,³ which allegedly include hidden financing of private economic activities in violation of EU funding and state aid rules⁴.

1. The project submitted by the municipality of Etropole will finance the repopulation of two hunting species which are not subject to protection at any Natura 2000 site in the vicinity of the municipality – the red deer (*Cervus elaphus*), a popular game species which is not listed in any of the Annexes to Directive 92/43, and the capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*). As a matter of fact, one third of the territory of the municipality of Etropole belongs to the 'Elen' hunting area⁵ ('Elen' means red deer in Bulgarian), where the main hunting species is the red deer.
2. The project submitted by the municipality of Sapareva Banya aims to finance scientific ecological research, assessment of the carrying capacity of tourist zones, and the development of a tourist management plan for the municipality, as part of the preparation of a general spatial plan for the municipality with a view to developing a private ski area and tourist villages. In this way, EU financing for the environment will be misused in order to reduce the costs of the environmental assessments (EIA/SEA) legally required for private projects and development plans.

Is the Commission aware of the alleged misuse of EU environmental funds for the financing of private economic activities, in violation of the EU funding and state aid rules?

What measures will the Commission take to ensure that Bulgaria complies with the EU's funding and state aid rules?

¹ http://ope.moew.government.bg/uf/projects/List-beneficiaries_Bio-BG_05.pdf

² http://etropolebg.com/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1089&Itemid=80

³ <http://saparevabanya.bg/pages/pid/278/Новини/Подписан-е-проект-„Опазване-на-биологичното-разнообразие-и-смекчаване-на-неблагоприятните-екологични-въздействия-от-развитието-на-туризма-в-Община-Сапарева-баня.html>

⁴ A general rule of EU funding is that 'the activities under the OPE projects may not lead to the creation of conditions for profit generation by the subsequent usage or exploitation of the habitat, species or facility'.

⁵ The 'Elen' hunting area (<http://www.elen-hunting.com/>) is a first-class game management unit, privately owned by Emil Dimitrov, a member of the municipal council of Etropole in 2007-2009 and today a vice-Chair of the national parliamentary committee on agriculture and forestry.