



Draft

Title: **Let's give rivers a new life to save our own**

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Draft text

1 In recent centuries, Europe's rivers have faced increasing exploitation and
2 transformation, gradually losing their ability to host a rich wildlife and to
3 undergo natural cycles that maintain the hydrological balance of our
4 landscape. Today, cleaner and more sustainable modes of moving goods and
5 generating electricity than waterways are available. We need rivers to take on
6 an entirely different role which they can only play if they are protected and,
7 if needed, restored – wherever possible and as soon as possible – to their
8 natural state.

9 First, as climate change increases the frequency of droughts and disrupts
10 precipitation patterns, healthy natural river basins with their unmatched water-
11 retention potential are essential for storing and providing water for drinking,
12 agriculture and industry. Secondly, the ambition to achieve climate neutrality
13 means that we are going to need all the available carbon sinks and thus will
14 have to restore, as much as possible, wetlands which used to exist in river
15 valleys. Finally, natural rivers and their valleys are biodiversity hot spots
16 and important wildlife corridors which are crucial for reversing the
17 biodiversity decline which threatens our very existence.

18 **Therefore, the European Green Party demands:**

19 **1. The effective and systemic conservation and restoration of rivers' water-**
20 **retention and carbon-sink potential**

21 Wetland restoration is one of the most important ways to stop carbon emissions
22 from degraded wetlands (which account for around 5% of global emissions) and
23 turn them back into carbon sinks which we need to achieve climate neutrality.
24 Climate change means longer and more frequent droughts and different patterns of
25 precipitation which will increasingly take the form of infrequent but torrential
26 rain. Restored river-valley wetlands can store that water and prevent it from
27 flowing into the sea and flooding towns and cities along the way.

28 This requires the conservation and large-scale management of wetlands and river
29 valleys, from the sources to the estuary, over the entire catchment area,
30 promoting permanent grasslands and flood plain and wetland forests. Such nature-
31 based solutions are effective, environmentally friendly and low-cost ways to
32 mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

33 **2. Conservation and large-scale restoration of habitats and wildlife corridors** 34 **along rivers and river valleys**

35 Rivers, streams and their valleys are important habitats and wildlife corridors,
36 connecting water and land habitats in increasingly fragmented landscapes. They
37 enable short-distance movements and long-distance migration of various animal
38 species. Rivers and river valleys should be kept unobstructed by dams and other
39 infrastructure, preserved and restored to their natural state wherever possible.
40 Rewilding rivers and river valleys goes hand in hand with the aims of protecting
41 and restoring carbon sinks and improving the water-retention potential of our
42 landscapes. It also improves a number of other ecosystem services provided by
43 rivers, such as: water self-purification which is essential as we face the risk
44 of drinking-water shortages; nature-based flood protection that involves giving
45 rivers room to freely overflow; as well as recreational and cultural functions.

46 **3. Urgent cessation of new waterway and hydropower development plans for** 47 **Europe's remaining natural rivers**

48 Rivers and their ecosystems are threatened by national and European plans for
49 the development of class IV international river waterways as a part of the
50 European TEN-T Network. In this context, it is of concern that, from 2021, the
51 European Green Deal Roadmap is planning 'initiatives to increase and better
52 manage the capacity of railways and inland waterways'. In particular, we
53 consider as inadmissible the E40 Waterway project extending more than 2 000
54 kilometres across Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. It will cause irreversible

55 hydrological changes, flooding in certain areas and re-draining in others,
56 destruction of river-related ecosystems, as well as the inevitable spread of
57 radionuclides accumulated after the Chernobyl disaster. The project is also
58 extremely questionable from the economic aspects.

59 The development of river transport is much more expensive, slower and more
60 carbon-intensive than rail. For example, the feasibility study procured by the
61 Czechian government for the controversial Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal project was
62 widely criticised by experts for having serious flaws, such as omitting
63 significant external costs and downplaying environmental risks to unique
64 habitats protected by EU legislation, whilst largely exaggerating benefits to
65 local economies, flood protection, or reducing carbon emissions.

66 We also urge governments in the Balkans to stop building small hydropower plants
67 in protected areas and call for a rethink of the subsidy schemes that foster
68 development of small hydropower plants. Constructing these plants means that
69 forests are cut down and river flows are disturbed, damaging river plants and
70 fish. Rivers are also diverted into pipes which dries out the ground and opens
71 the way for potentially deadly erosion. Some villages have lost access to water
72 for cattle or agriculture, while the loss of forests is contributing to more
73 frequent flash floods.

74 **4. Evidence-based water and stream management practices**

75 Water and stream management must be based on science and experience and must
76 respect contemporary knowledge about rivers' geo-ecosystems. The practice of
77 water-course maintenance must be modernised so that it can be based
78 on 'cooperation' with the natural processes of river dynamics, which should also
79 include a considerable scaling down of maintenance works. River training, if any,
80 should use solutions which take into account rivers' hydraulic, geo-
81 morphological and natural conditions, while water courses regulated according
82 to the old concepts need to be rewilded on a large scale. Continuation of the
83 technical approach to the management of river systems and their drainage basins
84 will inevitably exacerbate existing problems, droughts, floods and unfavourable
85 changes in our continent's landscape. Rewilding the rivers and streams which
86 were transformed in the past – or, in some cases, simply allowing such rivers to
87 re-naturalise themselves through natural processes – will reinstate their
88 characteristic species and habitats, slow down the run-off from the river basin,
89 and enhance river valley retention.

Background

This will not be voted on by the EGP Council but will help the delegates to understand, discuss and approve the resolution.

Why rivers should be more than waterways or power-generating dam cascades

Waterways? Rail is better

In the 19th and 20th centuries, many European rivers were transformed into inland waterways which, in their day, played an important economic role as transport routes. Today, however, the modal share of inland waterway transport is around 6 % and declining. The Rhine basin alone accounts for around 80% of the transport activity but, even there, dry summers are increasingly severely disrupting the traffic. Moreover, keeping large stretches of a river navigable for most of the year is extremely expensive and requires constant investment and effort, which is not always economically justified. In its 2015 Inland Waterway Transport in Europe report, the European Court of Auditors stated that there had been no significant improvements in modal share and navigability conditions since 2001.

In view of the European Union's ambition to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, until then, greenhouse gas emissions from transport in the EU will need to be at least 60% lower than in 1990 and firmly on the path towards zero. Sustainable transport means modes of transport with low or zero emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants, and minimising other harmful environmental impacts such as noise or fragmentation of natural habitats.

Only rail meets those criteria when it comes to developing new infrastructure for long-haul freight transport. Inland navigation remains useful in places where it already exists and its maintenance is possible and justified but, overall, water transport is much less sustainable than rail. According to the WWF Poland 2020 report, CO₂ emissions from rail transport are 15.6 g/tkm (grams per tonne-kilometre of transport performance) while for inland shipping they are 50.63 g/tkm. Moreover, it should also be noted that artificial deepening of riverbeds for navigation or extraction of sand and gravel increases the risk of drought and flooding.

Dams? Do more harm than good

Rivers have also been transformed by building dams for electricity generation, as hydropower is considered to be clean, renewable energy. However, dams are expensive to build and maintain and have a limited lifetime, something politicians and hydro engineers often refuse to acknowledge. When a dam is damaged and threatens the risk of collapse, it should be dismantled, thereby

restoring the free flow of the river. However, one popular proposal is to build another dam further downstream to support the endangered one, delaying the 'release' of the river. This approach fails to take into account the impact on biodiversity and the carbon footprint of dam reservoirs. In 2012, dam reservoirs were estimated to absorb 2.5% of anthropogenic carbon emissions globally, but global carbon emissions (of CO₂ and methane) from their surface can be even 60% higher than the amount they accumulate. High emissions are emitted not only in tropical dam reservoirs, but also in old, degraded reservoirs in Europe. Thus, while limited production of hydropower can be justified in some mountainous regions, in the lowlands it usually causes more harm than good. Hydropower should only be allowed where it causes minimum interference with natural riverbeds, i.e. on side channels, with a fair division of the river's flow between the natural bed and the hydropower side channel.

The EU Framework Water Directive is far from being achieved

According to the European Environmental Agency, only 40% of surface waters in the EU are in good ecological condition. Hydromorphological pressures, including barriers on rivers, are among the main reasons for such a low number. Other reasons include increasing pollution, caused by intensive field fertilisation and the washing down of nutrients, as well as contaminated rainwater from roads and cities. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that rivers are no longer protected by wetland buffer zones along their banks. The objectives of the Framework Water Directive are far from being achieved.

Damming, canalisation of rivers, straightening their beds, removal of riverside vegetation, dredging and draining of adjacent swamps and peatlands to enable inland navigation, hydropower generation and releasing land for agriculture and development while, at the same time, reducing the natural water-retention potential and the self-purification capacity of rivers, destroy important wetland carbon sinks and contribute to the collapse of biodiversity. In other words, they destroy the rivers' ecosystem services which, during the climate and biodiversity crises, have become more essential than the economic activities for which natural, free-flowing rivers have been sacrificed in the past.

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