



The subsidy challenge

In the Rhodope Mountains, agricultural subsidies are promoting the intensification of grazing, which is negatively impacting nature and local rewilding efforts.

A rich and varied landscape

The sparsely populated Eastern Rhodope Mountains of southeast Bulgaria are one of Europe's great biodiversity hotspots. Varying in elevation from 300 to 1200 metres, the landscape here is bisected by dramatic river valleys and plunging gorges lined with black basalt and white limestone cliffs. Mediterranean forests alternate with maquis (Mediterranean shrubland) and lush, flower-filled meadows, which eventually give way to rocky slopes and rugged mountaintops.

Thanks to the varied and pristine nature of the region's habitats, minimal human disturbance, and a strategic location between Europe and Asia, the Rhodope Mountains are home to an astonishing number of plant and animal species. Nowhere in Europe is the flora so rich, or the amphibian and reptile diversity so high. Of the 38 European birds of prey, 36 species can

been seen here, while a healthy wolf population manages the densities and distribution of wild herbivores. Even the brown bear, absent for many decades, is staging a comeback.

Perverse subsidies

One of the key ecological process supporting the great biodiversity of the Rhodope Mountains is extensive livestock grazing, which has always been the main land use in the region. While most of the area's wild grazers have long since disappeared, domesticated livestock have acted as their proxies for centuries. Low-intensity farming

with cattle, in particular, helps to maintain the area's nature-rich mosaic landscapes, with their mixture of open grassland, forest edges, open woodland and scattered groves.

"The main business in the Rhodope Mountains rewilding landscape is the breeding of livestock, mostly cattle," explains Hristo Hristov, a rewilding officer attached to the Rewilding Rhodopes team. "Most of the herds are small, between 100 and 200 cows, and the cattle within them have assumed the ecological role of natural grazers in the landscape. Herds have defined social structures and are free-roaming

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RHODOPE MOUNTAINS

BULGARIA



- **Country**
 Bulgaria
- **Focal landscape**
Eastern Rhodope Mountains
- **Size of landscape**
260,000 ha
- **Work started in**
2014
- **Larger landscape**
Part of large escarpment between Greece and Bulgaria (the Rhodopes and Orvilos Mountains), including a number of Natura 2000 sites and national reserves.
- **Main habitats**
Mediterranean and continental temperate forests, river valleys, cliffs, grasslands, and steppe.
- **Focal species**
Griffon vulture, cinereous vulture, Egyptian vulture, red deer, fallow deer, wild horse, wolf, brown bear, European bison, European souslik.
- **Team leader**
Andreana Trifonova

A skewed system

In Europe, as in many other parts of the world, intensive livestock farming exerts unsustainable pressure on the land, leading to biodiversity decline and severe environmental pollution, as well as significant greenhouse gas emissions and negative impacts on human health. Intensive livestock rearing systems are also driving antimicrobial resistance and have been linked to a higher risk of zoonotic diseases (diseases transferred from animals to humans).

This twentieth century model of animal production cannot continue – for our own sake, as well as that of the planet. On the other hand, many European ecosystems – such as those in the Rhodope Mountains – have developed alongside human management and the extensive (low intensity) rearing of livestock. When adequately managed, these landscapes can maintain and enhance biodiversity, lock up significant amounts of carbon, and provide a wide range of other benefits.

Unfortunately, the CAP – a complex system of agricultural subsidies and other programmes accounting for over 350 billion euros, or around one-third, of the entire 2021–2027 EU budget – is failing to provide enough support for those engaged in extensive grazing, pastoralism, and the management of semi-wild and wild animals across Member States. This is pretty short-sighted, given the pivotal role these practices play in carbon sequestration,

for most of the year. As a result of wolf predation, they are also an important part of the circle of life, which supports scavenging species such as vultures.”

While extensive farming has long played a role in maintaining biodiversity in the Rhodopes, Hristov is concerned by a worrying trend. This has seen the subsidies of the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) support the steady intensification of local livestock farming, with one farm of over 1000 cows already present in the landscape.

“This level of grazing leads to degradation of the land and the wild nature it supports in many ways,” says the rewilding officer. “These subsidies, without which this huge farm wouldn’t exist, create financial incentives for people to raise more and more livestock. On top of this, veterinary and animal welfare regulations effectively mean the cows are removed from the circle of life – they are locked up at night, they are fenced off, they are not part of nature any more. It’s fair to say subsidy-based pressure is a clear and present danger to biodiversity in the Rhodopes.”

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HARSTO HARSTOV / REWILDING RHODOPE

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biodiversity protection, and soil and water conservation. Counterproductively, CAP subsidies are instead heavily skewed towards more intensive, less sustainable farming.

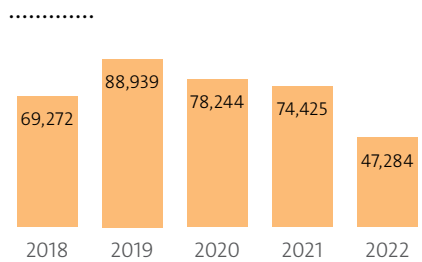
Big vs small
 Since Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, the impact of the CAP on Bulgarian livestock farming is further slanted by the country’s agricultural system. While the largest share of land remains divided between numerous small owners, most of them are urban dwellers incapable of organising a substantial level of agricultural production. Rural land is therefore managed predominantly not by its owners, but by big *arendatori* (land tenants), who appropriate a disproportionately large chunk of the EU subsidies on offer.

In 2018, for example, 82 per cent of Bulgarian beneficiaries received less than 18 percent of CAP subsidies, with many of the smallest farmers remaining outside the CAP system altogether. The current design of the policy, which allocates subsidies mainly per unit of land cultivated or managed – while simultaneously overlooking a whole range of environmental and socio-economic factors – has seen many high-biodiversity areas of mosaic landscape in Bulgaria ploughed into arable fields.

Impact on rewilding
 In 2020, a new way of evaluating rewilding progress – developed by Rewilding Europe in collaboration with a range of partners – was applied across seven of our rewilding landscapes. A range of indicators, collectively selected as a way of measuring the ecological impact of rewilding interventions, were measured in each landscape and compared to their value in the year rewilding began. Changes in these indicators were then used to generate an overall rewilding score.

While five of our landscapes generated a positive rating, the Rhodope Mountains registered a score of -13%. This doesn't mean that rewilding interventions at specific pilot sites within the Rhodope Mountains are failing to have a positive impact, but reflects changes happening in the larger landscape around them. A major contributor to the negative outcome of the assessment are the subsidies of the CAP.

“It’s unfortunate that the people taking the decisions in national government don’t really understand extensive grazing and the important role it plays in supporting the health of wild nature in the Rhodopes and other parts of Bulgaria,” says Rewilding Rhodopes team leader Andreana Trifonova. “The distribution of CAP subsidies is carried out



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 Cattle numbers in the landscape are decreasing because small farmers practicing extensive grazing are being forced to close their farms due to CAP requirements.

- ◀ Rhodope Shorthorn cattle in the Rhodope Mountains.
- ▶ Livestock breeder Izetin Sali.
- ▼ Rewilding Rhodopes team leader Andreana Trifonova.

according to strict guidelines and there is no allowance for such grazing. There is also a strong lobby in this country for farmers who are carrying out intensive agriculture, so the dice are loaded in their favour."

Countering the trend

Farms with livestock that are extensively grazed represent modern, multifunctional agriculture because they provide numerous public goods at low cost. They make a valuable contribution to effectively tackling the European challenges of protecting and enhancing biodiversity and minimising the impact and scale of climate change.

In terms of the CAP, bold policy action is required to not only better support extensive farming, but to develop subsidies which initiate a just transition for intensive livestock farms towards lower animal numbers, and which take into account the ecological requirements of habitats and species. Rural policies may need to be better targeted to allow people to make better use of the socio-economic benefits that rewilding can provide.

Recommendations for how the CAP could be amended already exist. A report produced through the three-year, Rewilding Europe-coordinated GrazeLIFE initiative (2018–2021), which considered the Rhodope Mountains as one of its study areas, outlined how European policies – particularly the CAP – could better support extensive grazing. The initiative was funded through the EU's LIFE programme and carried out at the request of the European Commission.

As for the Rewilding Rhodopes team, they are determined to keep championing extensive grazing.

"We won't give up on this issue," says Andreana Trifonova. "Over the last 15 years there have been multiple meetings with the government, and we



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will continue to lobby. We really need actions to be taken on a national level, which will better support extensive grazing, and maybe also explore opportunities within the market for extensive farmers to get a better price for their products, which would reduce the reliance on subsidies."

Hristo Hristov takes heart from the fact that many farmers engaged in extensive farming in the Rhodopes are very knowledgeable and still want to protect nature in their own way. Izetin Sali, for example, is a 59 year-old livestock breeder who owns around 70 Rhodope shorthorn cattle.

"My animals are free – there are no fences," he explains. "They know where to graze, where to find the best grass throughout the year, and the best water. They live alongside deer, wild horses, and European bison. I lose two or three cattle to wolves annually, but generally they know how to protect themselves.

"I take CAP subsidies for animals, which meant I had to build a stable, but the animals never go inside it. I don't accept subsidies for pastures, because I would have to clear them, which is bad for animals such as birds, tortoises and lizards. We do the best that we can with regard to nature, but I would love to see subsidies working here that actually help us."