

EuroNatur Award 2023

to

Koalicja Ratujmy Rzeki – Save the River Coalition

presented

to Dorota Chmielowiec-Tyszko, Justyna Choroś und Piotr Nieznański
on behalf of all persons engaging within the coalition for the sake of
living rivers in Poland and connecting European regions

Schloss Mainau, Lake Constance, 26. October 2023

Laudation

by **Prof. Dr. Thomas Potthast** (President of EuroNatur)

Esteemed Graf Björn and festive assembly, dear friends,

serdecznie państwa witamy!

It is with great respect and pleasure that the Board of EuroNatur Foundation nominated **Koalicja Ratujmy Rzeki – Save the River Coalition** – and this means all the persons engaging within the coalition – for the EuroNatur Award 2023. I am very happy to present the award today to Dorota Chmielowiec-Tyszko, Justyna Choroś und Piotr Nieznański, who came to the Island of Mainau on behalf of the whole coalition and its members. This is to honour your outstanding engagement for the protection and good future of living rivers in Poland and connecting regions in Europe, as a network of initiatives and part of an international movement for safeguarding rivers in Europe and beyond.

Our Vice-President Anna Katharina Wöbse already set the stage and context of why rivers matter and what the connections between different movements and political agendas in Europe are to put care for rivers in action.

I. Wars and waters

Please allow me to start my laudation for Save the Rivers Coalition with a poetic-political remark. In his poem *To Those Born After* (“An die Nachgeborenen”), created in exile between 1934 and 1938, Bertholt Brecht wrote the famous – or infamous? – words:

What kind of times are these, when
To talk about trees is almost a crime
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?

Was sind das für Zeiten, wo / Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist. / Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!

Be it trees or rivers – we are facing terrible times of warfare not only in Poland’s neighboring country Ukraine attacked by Russian forces but also terrorism by Hamas and long-standing bloody conflicts in Israel and Palestine these days. One might really think: why talking about rivers these days? Well, we must. Because nature already is part of these conflicts. Of course, we have imperial, nationalist, religious, and ethnic ideologies, we are witnessing violent histories and their implications. But war also is about arable land to produce food, and it is about access to water, especially in Jordan River and the deserts around in the Middle East. And looking into the current situation in several parts of Germany as well as in Poland – we already are facing water scarcity in the soils in regions where people hitherto never have thought about. I recall being a biology student in the late 1980ies in Freiburg not so far from this wonderful Island of Mainau at Lake Constance, when a professor told us with all his imposed authority that we in the State of Baden-Württemberg will never be a region of water scarcity. Well, 30 years later this proved to be false and people at Lake Constance are discussing what will happen when the glaciers in

the Alps feeding river Rhine and many others in summer will have been melted and less snow will fall in winter.

Industrial modernity since the 19th century saw rivers as transport and sewage and energy providing 'waterways' – and as a means for melioration of arable land, which simply means to get water out of the soil as much and as quick as possible. Extractivism of different forms. But we are also facing contradictory changes: On the one hand, straightening and deepening rivers as a means of getting water out of the landscape fast, on the other hand and at the same time dams interrupting the flow, the annual dynamics, and blocking the way for many animal organisms to move up and down, with salmon and sturgeon as the symbol taxa for this. This way of treating rivers, the industrial modernity approach, still prevails in many countries and their authorities and administrations – and precisely here Save the Rivers Coalition in Poland comes into play.

II. KRR – who and what they are

There is a long tradition of river protection, moreover: the opposition to building river dams this is one of the roots of nature protection in Europe as well as North America. In Poland, Save the Rivers Coalition has made an important next civil society movement step: Networking the existing organisations, initiatives, and individuals in order to become more visible and stronger in their country, Poland, but also connecting to neighboring countries and their civil society movements. What a wise, laudable move, and an exemplary blueprint for other countries.

What exactly is and who builds this Coalition? Let me quote the mission statement: "Save the Rivers Coalition brings together organisations which protect Poland's rivers, streams and wetlands, as well as scientists, individual persons, local authorities and institutions, for whom the fate of Polish rivers and ecosystems is important. Coalition works actively on international field according to "rivers have no boundaries" attitude."

(<http://www.ratujmyrzeki.pl/english>). The Coalition works together under five principles, as explained in a recent declaration:

1. Effective and systemic conservation of the rivers' natural environment and natural retention.
2. Evidence-based water and stream management practices, including potential rivertraining, which respect contemporary knowledge about the geo-ecosystems of rivers; as well as large-scale re-naturalisation of rivers and streams.
3. Conservation and restoration of the continuity of wildlife corridors.
4. Inland navigation plans conforming with the character of the rivers.
5. Economic development plans that conform with the character of the rivers

KRR is successful because of its diversity of member organization and people: conservationists and scientists, administration people as well as artists and other professions through the whole spectrum of civil society. 50 organisations are listed on the website, complemented by 42 individual persons, two foreign partners from Brandenburg and four supporting media partners, the latter not unimportant in a country with a public media system for some time fully controlled by the government in power. And KRR and the constituting partners

had and still have a lot of issues with access to information, not least from government institutions.

The work of the steering committee is voluntary; they are meeting once per week; currently no coordinator is paid; the KRR isn't officially registered as of now; the costs of the activities are covered by different projects implemented by member organisations. This situation is not easy of course but maybe there also lies a source for success: the Coalition is networking and supporting, but not taking over the job away from or dominating the members. The members do their local or regional activities with all due competence, knowledge and engagement. And just one example for international connections: Roberto Epple, EuroNatur laureate of 2019 told me that the European River Network is well connected to one of KRR partners hence really making connections in whole Europe.

Let me just mention some of the main activities of the Coalition and its members on the two major rivers in Poland. Vistula (Weichsel) has been in the centre of KRR from the start, then complemented by work for Odra (Oder).

On Vistula:

1. The hydroelectric power plant Siarzewo, and I quote from a conversation with KRR members: "a monster that will probably never die; but we keep these monsters quiet". KRR is striving for a free-flowing Vistula and the dismantling of the existing large power plant Włocławek, the largest run-of-river power plant in Poland, which provides for almost all known problems of hydroelectric power on Vistula.
2. Channel waterway E 40 from the Baltic to the BlackSea:
In 2013, a partnership of the governments in Poland, Belarus and Ukraine was established to develop a waterway from the Baltic Sea to

the Black Sea, from Gdansk to Kherson. This planned project has Babylonian dimensions: 2,000 km – more than 25 times the length of the Panama Canal. It would be designed for ships more than 80 meters in length. To accommodate them the channel must be at least 2.5 meters deep. It would dry up rivers, directly impact 73 internationally protected areas (25 of which are in Polesia) and indirectly impact 120 more (59 in Polesia), threaten species, and potentially disturb radioactive pollution in the Chernobyl exclusion zone. Polesia? This might really be Europe's Amazon, connecting parts of Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. Is the continent's greatest intact floodplain region with river Bug in Poland, Dniro in Ukraine, and the 750 km-long Pripyat, one of Europe's most pristine rivers, altogether 186,000 km² region. E 40 would destroy the heart of Polesia. Given current political situations: would the project have any chance of realization in the foreseeable future? One has to be careful if hopefully soon the war on Ukraine would stop and money might flow in the region. KRR has intensively opposed the project and we all should keep a critical look on developments.

And Odra/Oder:

1. Odra as International Waterway: The current Polish government under leadership of PIS has pushed at the EU level to designate the entire Oder River as an International Waterway and include it in the EU's network of major waterways. The Czech government has opposed this. Save the Rivers Coalition is working on this critical threat on political levels.
2. Danube-Elbe-Oder Canal: This project has a history of about 150 years, probably the first considerations go back even further. It would

require making the Oder and Elbe navigable far into their upper reaches and would result in an almost complete destruction of these river systems. Although such project ideas seem to uncountable lives, the D-E-O Canal now actually seems to be disappearing from the scene. The Czech government has probably released the land previously kept free for the development of the waterway for other purposes. Here the networking of KRR with Czech partners was important for preparing these protective political measures.

3. Hydroelectric power plants: The largest hydroelectric power plant on the Odra River currently is Brzeg Dolny, located at river kilometer 280. It has an installed capacity of about 10 MW, which is not much in comparison to the ecological damage caused. Now, according to current plans, between river kilometer 380 and 450, a whole series of hydroelectric power plants are planned. Their costs have tripled in the last 10 years. KRR again has put the focus on these unsustainable plans.

I would now like to provide some views on KRR, its way to work and its agenda in the own words of some members with whom Gabriel Schwaderer and me had the privilege to exchange recently.

- KRR is important for all people working in the field; we were successful because we are a coalition. United we are stronger; also Czech NGOs are involved in KRR and there are contacts to German NGOs as well; so we have an international view. We work as KRR on local, national and international levels.

- The human aspect of working together is a strong sign – diversity as a strength. The most important is that we collaborate; not the single achievements.
- KRR is not only producing statements, but is working in the field; good and best practice as it can be done.
- Also artists are involved, to allow to bring the message in different language and to broader public.
- The main message is: I care for rivers.
- We believe, change is possible.
- We have to be radical and we have to be brave and clear; we are talking about a constructive radicalism.

III. Water politics and government

KRR now is known and recognized as a player by the government. There has been and still is a positive vision for Odra: “We have a dream”. This vision received some attention also during the election period; three parties replied to this vision. This was the first time that river protection became part of all political programs. And the three major opposition parties took over positions from KRR.

Now: Of course not by coincidence but following a secret hidden plan, this award comes at a perfect moment: Two weeks ago, elections to the Parliament in Poland took place, and the three parties subscribing to the ideas of KRR to put river protection on the political agenda will hopefully build the new government! Thanks to KRR also for supporting democratic change! We are looking forward to more river-friendly politics as a result and we hope that this also will support not only to safeguard the free-flowing rivers around Odra and

Wisla but also the abolishment of the transnational channel in Polesia in international context, and many, many more issues.

IV. Final remarks

Brecht's above-mentioned poem *To Those Born After* closes by

“But you, when the time comes at last

When man is helper to man

Think of us

With forbearance.”

Ihr aber, wenn es so weit sein wird / Daß der Mensch dem Menschen ein Helfer ist /

Gedenkt unsererer / Mit Nachsicht.

Although Brecht opened his poem with the allusion to trees, in the end he somehow forgot that humans may not only be helpers to their fellow humans. At the same time humans may also be helpers of and friends with the whole more-than-human world around them. Being connected between humans and nature – this is why your work, dear friends from the Save the Rivers Coalition, is more timely than ever for our commitment for a sustainable shared presence as well as future in Europe and beyond.

Thank you very much!