The illegal bird trade from the Western Balkans into the European Union: Drivers and responses
Executive Summary

Current EU policy regulating the trade in birds does not sufficiently recognise the European dimension of the illegal bird trade. While the EU Birds Directive prohibits the sale of wild birds within the European Union, it permits the introduction of national and regional derogations (Article 9). This creates a highly complex legal context, which hampers the coordinated implementation and enforcement of existing regulations, particularly at Customs. In addition, action taken to tackle the illegal bird trade disregards the role of the European consumer market in driving illegal trapping, killing and trade of birds. Even where European regulations are tightened to curb the trade (e.g. with amendments to the Annexes of the EU Birds Directive or the classification of illegal bird trade as environmental crime), there is evidence to suggest that existing legal grey areas externalise illegal activity to the EU’s immediate neighbourhood in the Western Balkans. EU policy should shift its focus from predominantly tackling the illegal bird trade in source countries and instead increase coordinated efforts to target consumer demand in EU Member States where demand for illegal bird products is particularly high.

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Extent of the problem

Data on the illegal bird trade in Europe is largely based on estimates as reliable Customs seizure data are unavailable and other data are not centrally collected. However, reports by the EU Network for the Implementation and Enforcement of Environmental Law (IMPEL) network give a useful insight into the extent of the issue. Recent studies estimate that between 11 – 36 million birds are illegally trapped and/or killed in the Mediterranean alone. This is a grave concern for conservation policy given that many of the affected bird species are migratory and may be protected in certain geographic locations. However, although broad data on the illegal trapping and killing in Europe exist, the commercial dimensions surrounding it are largely unknown. Some studies estimate the profits from the illegal bird trade in Europe at around €10 million.

Underlying drivers

Contrary to the widespread perception that poverty sustains the illegal bird trade, evidence suggests that it is in fact wealth that drives it. Birds, particularly songbirds, such as skylarks (Alauda arvensis), goldfinches (Carduelis carduelis) and blackbirds (Turdus merula), are illegally trapped and killed for human consumption, pleasure or sport. In countries such as France, Italy and Cyprus, bird dishes are often framed as integral parts of the traditional regional cuisine and marketed as a cultural experience of consuming ‘forbidden delicacies’, conveying a sense of luxury. In addition, the tightening of European regulations has contributed to a shift of illegal activity towards the European neighbourhood. For instance, EU citizens are the primary driver of illegal activity associated with hunting tourism in Serbia. Here, legal and illegal activities are thought to be closely intertwined: while a hunting trip per se is legal, hunting quotas are often ignored, or prohibited hunting equipment is used to attract and kill birds in greater numbers. Evidence suggests that birds which are hunted by EU citizens during hunting trips in the Western Balkans are then illegally trafficked into the EU for consumption. Corruption plays a crucial role in this regard. Although the motivation to increase individual profits in source countries does matter, consumer demand appears to be the key driving force behind the European illegal bird trade, which is yet to be more prominently addressed in EU policy.

Recommendations

EU policy needs to recognise that EU citizens play a key role in driving the illegal bird trade in Europe. Rather than focusing on increased conservation efforts or the development of alternative livelihoods in source countries, consumer demand needs to be curbed. This can be achieved by

- recognising that the consumption of illegal bird products plays a crucial role in regional cultures and working with local communities to change public narratives surrounding these traditions;
- increasing transparency of regional derogations with a view towards harmonising legislation across the EU and facilitating implementation of existing legislation;
- increasing capacity-building and transnational cooperation of customs officials to support enforcement of legislation.

Crucially, these processes require a coordinated approach by a variety of stakeholders, such as EU institutions, national authorities and civil society. For instance, tackling illegal activities associated with hunting tourism cannot only rely on increased law enforcement in consumer and source countries. In fact, addressing the illegal dimensions of hunting tourism and its role in the illegal bird trade can only be achieved by devising a coordinated approach of national hunting and tourism associations, conservationists and national and regional authorities.
About the Author

Dr Teresa Lappe-Osthege works as Research Associate on the BIOSEC project. She researches the illegal bird trade in the Western Balkans, exploring the socio-economic interests that sustain the trade and how certain stakeholders, such as national governments or non-governmental organisations, respond to it. Her expertise lies more broadly in issues related to green political economy, political ecology and environmental governance in contexts of peace and conflict, with a regional focus on the Western Balkans and the EU.

About the BIOSEC Project

The BIOSEC Project is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) 2016-2020. More information on our outputs, our team and our research is on our website.

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