

The CEE Bankwatch Networks Mission is to prevent environmentally and socially harmful impacts of international development finance, and to promote alternative solutions and public participation

Expressway R1 in Slovakia, section Žarnovica–Šášovské Podhradie will harm the environment, health, and property of the local citizens

Project

The R1 expressway will link the two biggest Slovak cities — Bratislava in the west and Košice in the east — via the country's south. This southern corridor is shorter than the northern highway corridor (part of the TEN-T Corridor V/A). It is a part of the European road network E 58. The 18 kilometres long section between Žarnovica and Šášovské Podhradie lies in central Slovakia, and its 8.5 kilometres long problematic second part is projected to pass through the town of Žiar nad Hronom.

Context: the town of Žiar nad Hronom

Žiar nad Hronom (with approximately 20 000 inhabitants) is one of the most polluted industrial towns in Slovakia with an unfortunately damaged environment. The aluminium smelter companies Slovalco and ZSNP – the main employers in the region – and some smaller companies are located in an industrial zone south-west of the town. This zone is divided from the rest of the city by the river Hron which at the same time creates a natural border between the city's urban area and outer areas (*intravilán* and *extravilán*). The change in the technology of aluminium production – supported by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development – has resulted in an improved environmental situation for local citizens.

The first EIA

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the whole road section Žarnovica–Šášovské Podhradie was performed in 1998-2001. Four variants were proposed and considered for the first segment of this section; the chosen one was accepted by local citizens with no reservations. However, for the second segment of the whole section, the EIA essentially considered only one variant (see Map 1). Officially there was one “sub-variant” but it was placed directly on the route of the major (and virtually the only) variant and was rather short. This “sub-variant” was parallel, practically identical, and seemed to be created only to theoretically fulfil the tenor of the EIA Act requesting different alternatives. **In fact there was only one alternative considered for this part of the road that goes through the town, and all other possible variants, such as the southern bypass of the town, were ignored.**¹

Information and consultation with affected citizens

Information disclosure and consultation with affected citizens is requested by Slovak law, especially in relation to the permit processes governing EIA and land usage planning and construction. Local officials, most probably due to their knowledge of possible local opposition, circumvented the legal requirements for transparency.² Therefore the local inhabitants created a devoted NGO that subsequently submitted a court case appealing against the legality of the project's construction permit decisions.

Slovakia's Supreme Court decided in September 2005 that the citizens' rights for timely information were not respected by the investor and the local authorities. As a result of this court decision, the EIA procedure had to be repeated from scratch.

The second EIA

The second EIA process started in 2006. The developers from the National Motorway Company divided the section into two segments and projected this second EIA only for the segment that was problematic in the first EIA. However, the developers again propose only one variant of the road, this time supplemented by two sub-variants on a part of the route. Both sub-variants are unacceptable as they are on the same route that was considered by the first EIA and only formally supplement the only and repeatedly proposed routing of the road.

The problematic segment of the route is projected for the cadastral territory of the town of Žiar nad Hronom, north of the river Hron, i.e. along the whole southern part of the urban area. The EIA documentation **wrongly** states that the route passes through the city's outer areas, thereby claiming the impacts on local inhabitants will be mitigated. The fact is that the two kilometres of expressway would cross the urban area and, paradoxically, there would not even be a feeder road from the city, meaning that those who would be most affected by its negative impacts could not even get onto the road.

¹ People from the local NGO S.O.S. predict that the southern bypass variant that was originally a part of the public tender winning project was missed out of the EIA because it was projected in the cadastral territory of Ladomerská Vieska, the hometown of Vladimír Mečiar, Slovakia's then authoritarian prime minister.

² For example, only a tiny article without any map appeared in the local newspaper and, what is more, this was only on the last day of the period when citizens were allowed to comment on the project proposal. Another example is that there was an announcement about the plan of the road on the public notice board but inside the municipal office building (instead of outside, as required by law), and again featuring no maps at all.

Environmental problems

Many local people are opposing the routing of the expressway on the territory of the town. The main reasons for local opposition are the road's inevitable noise, visual and air-pollution impacts. The R1 expressway will be one of the busiest road connections in the country, predominantly involving transit transport.

The presently planned routing of the expressway would pass at a distance of less than 100 metres from the town's main municipal park which has a swimming pool and sports facilities, and thus would increase noise levels above the permitted norms at almost the only recreational part of the dirty town. The baroque park indeed is the only green site in the city – it is part of the national cultural heritage – and currently public money from the Ministry of Environment is being used to revitalise it. The park and its ponds are part of the river Hron. The expressway is to be built right in the middle of this – it will separate the river from the park and ponds.

The lives of about 800 citizens, whose houses are located less than 100 metres from the planned expressway route, would be inevitably influenced not only by the high noise levels, but also by the serious decrease in the value of their property. Moreover, the expressway would be built on a 5-12 metres high bank which would create a "Chinese wall" between the housing estate and a nature zone by the river Hron.

Alternative

Local citizens are not only protesting against the proposed routing of the expressway and its future impacts, but they are also proposing feasible alternatives. Local NGO S.O.S. says that the second EIA should respect the law, i.e. consider at least two real variants. One option would be the southern variant that was missed out from the first EIA (see footnote 1). Another option would be to widen the existing road. And the last alternative proposal is a northern bypass of the city.

An existing independent urban study³ compares this alternative to the one pushed by the developers and clearly prefers the former one. The reasons are that it is more logical from the transportation perspective; it is environmentally friendlier, as well as being more economic. This option directs all the transit transport around the city; it does not put any additional environmental burden on to an already critically impacted area; it is approximately three kilometres *shorter* than the two projected roads R1 and R2⁴ together and could fully substitute for them; it will not affect the recreational zone of the city with noise and pollution; it will not separate the river Hron from the city by a high wall; and it will not pass through the inversion area of the river Hron alluvial plain.

Financial aspects and the involvement of the EU funds

The project is planned to be co-financed from the EU Structural funds – the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) should finance 75 percent of the costs assessed at approximately EUR 80 million, just for the problematic section.⁵ The original time framework, which assumed that the construction would start in 2005 and finish in 2008, will not be fulfilled due to the need to repeat the EIA and other project permit procedures. **It is important to note that it would be paradoxical for EU funds to be used for destroying the surrounding environment when at the same time EBRD and state budget funds are being used to stabilise the environment and revitalise the baroque park.**

Conclusion

This case shows that the involvement of the EU funds does not bring any added value for people – such as, for example, the assessment of environmentally friendlier alternatives – when compared to Slovakia's "business as usual" scenario. The case also proves that the Slovak authorities are willing to circumvent the legal requirements for transparency and public consultations even in the case of projects planned to be co-financed from the EU funds. However, local citizens and the NGO S.O.S. are ready to appeal also against the second EIA, should it too not fulfil the necessary legal requirements. The release of the final EIA statement is expected in the very near future.

Attachment: Maps

1. Map 1 shows how the proposed R1 variant (light green dashed line) would cut the city's park and recreational zone (purple sign) from the river (blue line). The red line represents the existing road, the black line stands for the railway, and the dark green dashed line is the planned R2 road.
2. Map 2 presents a closer view of how the proposed expressway variant (red line) would cut the city off from the river Hron.

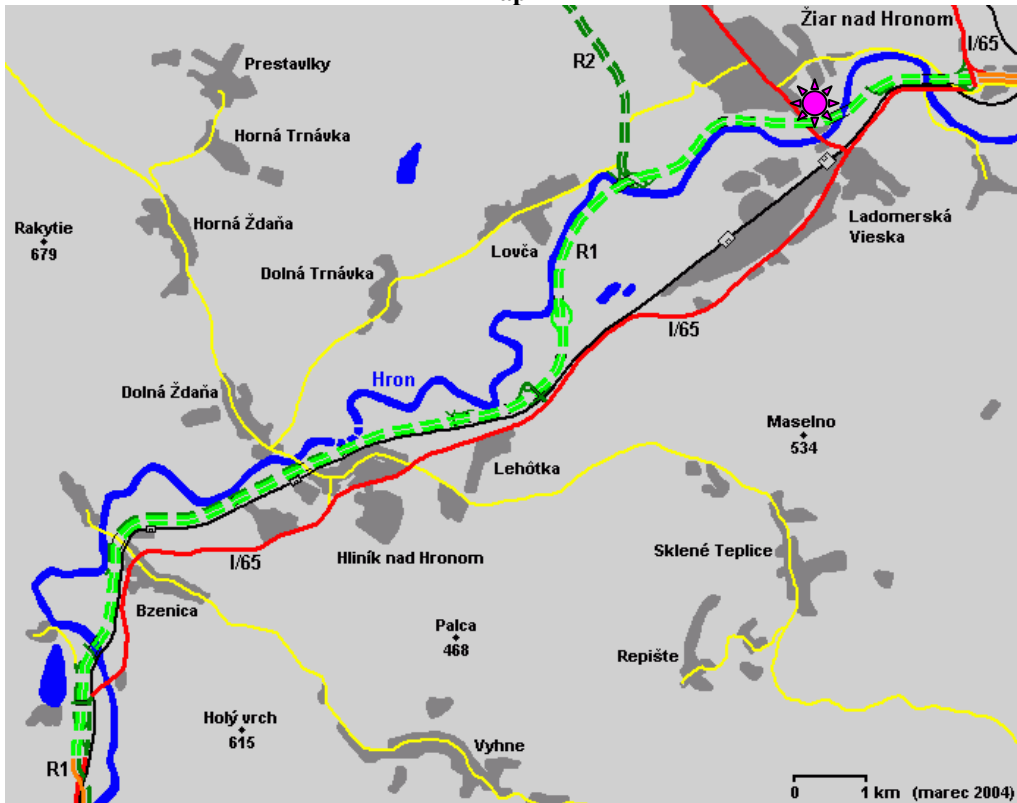
³ This study was ordered in 1996 by the Slovak Ministry of Environment and District Environment Authorities in Žiar nad Hronom. Reference: *Urbanistická štúdiá vo variantoch* [Urban Study in Variants], Banská Bystrica: A.U.R.A, 1996.

⁴ The R2 road is planned to be constructed west of the city of Žiar. See Map 1.

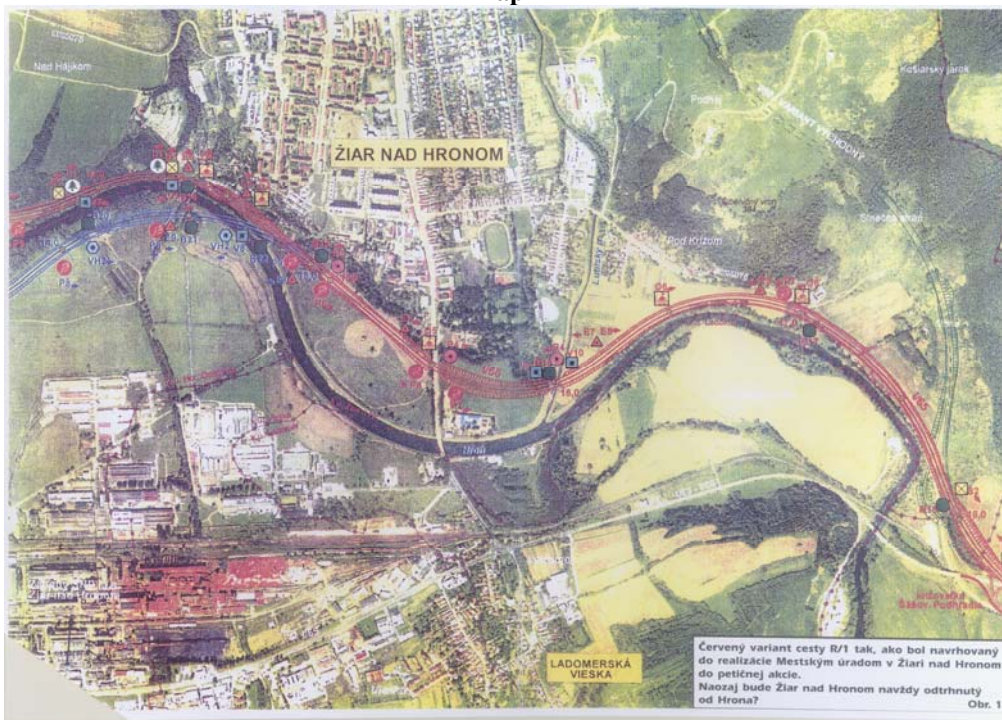
⁵ Recently, the costs have been estimated at approximately EUR 80 million for one section. The price for both sections is similar, i.e. the whole 18 kilometre section will cost some EUR 150 million.

3. Map 3 shows the proposed variant through the town (thick black line) in a wider setting. It is copied from the cited urban study. The variant through the town was considered in the study; however, it was refused as inconvenient.
4. Map 4 shows the alternative route (thick black line) with the northern bypass of the town. It is also from the study. It can be seen that the expressway bypass recommended by the collective of authors would not go through the critical part of the city and makes the whole R1-R2 connection shorter.

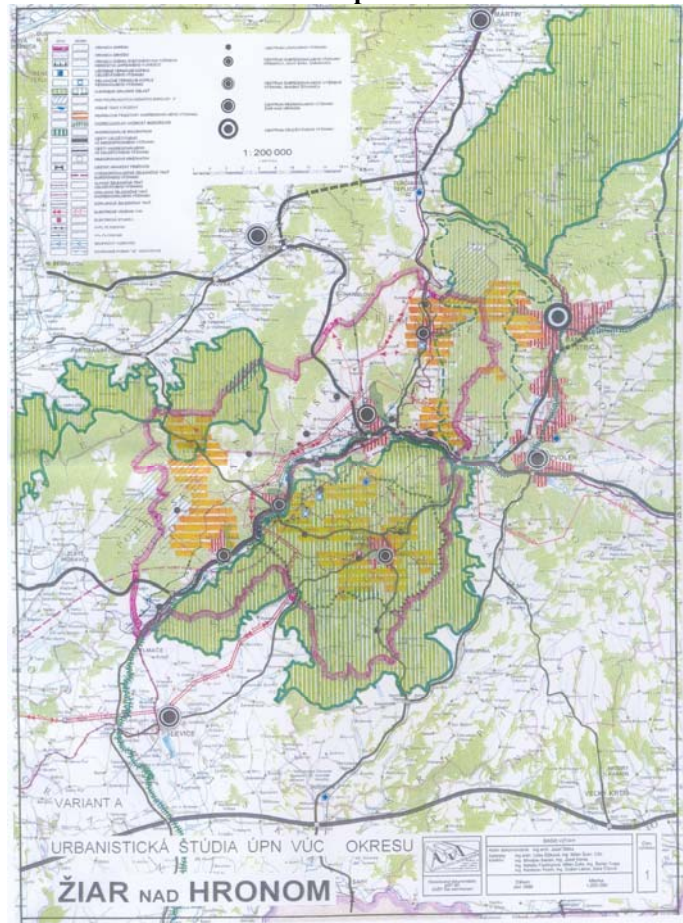
Map 1



Map 2



Map 3



Map 4

