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Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Romania, IPA/ISPA accession negotiations
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Dear Mr Hlebarov,

Subject: Struma Motorway Major Project and the Kresna gorge

Ref.: Your letter of 23 July 2009

Thank you very much for your letter of July 23 to Director-General Mr Dirk Ahner on the Struma Motorway project, which has been proposed by the Bulgarian government as a Major Project to be co-financed out of the Cohesion Fund under the Operational Programme 'Transport' 2007-2013.

In your letter you express concern over the recent decision of the Monitoring Committee of the OP Transport taken on 9 June to decrease the amount reserved for the programming period 2007-2013 for the construction of the Struma Motorway. You also write that postponing actual construction of the part of the Struma Motorway going through the Kresna gorge (lot 3) may pose difficulties for its preparation.

During the meeting on 26 September 2007 in the Ministry of Transport between representatives of the Bulgarian ministries for Transport, Finance and Environment & Waters, in the presence of the Commission (DG REGIO, DG ENV), it was agreed that several alignments of the motorway (by-)passing the Kresna gorge would be assessed on their environmental impact, one of which was via a 20 km tunnel through the mountains west of the gorge. In January 2008 the Ministry of Environment & Water issued Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Decision (No 1-1/2008) stating that efforts should be made to ensure the most environmentally friendly, technically viable and economically feasible variant.

Now as you know, the budget allocated out of the Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund to the OP Transport available for the programming period 2007-2013 has been divided over seven budget years. Each annual amount has to be spent within three to four years otherwise the (remaining) funds for a particular year will be forfeited and flow back to the EU budget. That is why the European Commission has actually encouraged the Ministry of Transport as Managing Authority and the National Road Infrastructure Agency to review the *indicative* list of Major Projects with an eye to implementation maturity and subsequent absorption of Structural Funds.

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Transport infrastructure projects take a long time to be prepared, procured and constructed. Initially 480 million euro under the Cohesion Fund had been reserved for the Struma Motorway, making it the biggest of all projects in Bulgaria for the programming period 2007-2013. Preparations have taken a long time, with the procurement of the works for Lot 1 and 4 expected to be completed only in June 2010, for Lot 2 not until August 2011. Given the experience so far with transport infrastructure projects in Bulgaria, this schedule does not leave a lot of time for the actual construction of these lots, which are supposed to be the most ready to be implemented. Moreover, as you rightfully conclude, the design of a tunnel or tunnels through the Kresna gorge in Lot 3 would be a very complicated and costly engineering challenge, also given the nature of the terrain, the required length, safety precautions, etc. Realisation of this part of the Struma Motorway is therefore highly unlikely within this programming period. This is unfortunate but, in order to make maximum use of the available funds and to relieve transport bottlenecks elsewhere, alternative projects have therefore been presented by the Bulgarian authorities.

This does not mean, however, that finding a solution for the Kresna gorge has been halted. On the contrary, the latest information from the Ministry of Transport and the Road Agency shows an amount of 11,760,000 euro having been earmarked for technical studies into the feasibility and design of a tunnel through the Kresna gorge.

For your information, the Struma Motorway project has not been submitted to the Commission yet. As the Commission cannot anticipate the conclusions of feasibility studies and cost-benefit analyses, you will understand that it is not possible to guarantee any alignment at this point. I can assure you, however, that once the Bulgarian authorities will have presented the Major Project application form, the Commission will thoroughly assess all documents, including whether the analysis of the environmental impact, which is to cover all four lots of the motorway, complies with EU guidelines and legislation. The Bulgarian authorities in this respect are to submit all relevant environmental information regarding the Struma Motorway project. With regard to the Kresna Gorge, the Commission will pay special attention to the nature protection and conservation measures in order to ensure that the provisions of the Birds and Habitats Directives are met.

As far as a project steering committee is concerned, its establishment and composition are the prerogative of the Bulgarian authorities. Although it is not obligatory according to the Structural Funds regulations, the Commission encourages transparency and fruitful cooperation between all stakeholders.

Yours sincerely,



Renaldo Mändmets
Head of Unit

Copies: Ms N. Yordanova, Ministry of Transport, Bulgaria
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