60 civil society organisations have sent a joint letter to the EU Commissioner for Environment, Virginijus Sinkevičius, calling on the EU to better protect nature during energy infrastructure development under the Energy Community Treaty

Recent years have seen increasing conflicts between energy infrastructure and nature protection in the Energy Community region. In particular, rampant hydropower construction has damaged rivers and streams in some of the most precious and pristine areas of the Western Balkans, Dniester River basin, and Georgia.

The Energy Community countries represent global biodiversity hotspots, with extensive mountains, river and lake systems, that are home to numerous endangered and endemic species and important habitats.

Many rivers are still in good or pristine condition, but are desperately under-protected. The countries' Stabilisation and Association agreements and Association Agreements require them to enact EU nature protection legislation, but in many cases there are no clear deadlines for this.

In December 2022, the countries committed to 2030 targets for greenhouse gas reductions, energy efficiency and renewable energy, likely accelerating the construction of renewable energy of all kinds – both low-impact such as rooftop solar as well as high-impact like hydropower and forest biomass.

The groups are therefore asking the Commission to take urgent steps to include relevant parts of the EU Habitats, Birds and Water Framework Directives in the Energy Community Treaty, in order to ensure a balance between nature protection and energy sector development.

A major expansion of sustainable forms of renewable energy is '*a welcome and necessary step towards tackling air pollution and climate change*', according to the groups.

But, they warn, '*If not accompanied by adequate environmental safeguards, the widespread construction of new energy facilities will damage nature and generate public opposition, as already seen with hydropower. We cannot afford such a backlash to jeopardise the transition towards an energy-efficient economy based on sustainable forms of renewable energy*'.

In November 2020, the European Commission indicated willingness to include the relevant parts of these Directives in the Energy Community Treaty. However there has been little progress since then.

Pippa Gallop, Southeast Europe Energy Advisor at CEE Bankwatch Network – '*It is becoming increasingly urgent to strengthen the Energy Community's nature legislation.*

Accelerating energy infrastructure development without proper environmental safeguards in place won't end well.'
'When properly applied, the EU's nature protection legislation is strong enough to protect nature, but flexible enough to ensure appropriate renewables development. The Commission must propose to include it in the Energy Community Treaty as soon as possible', Bankwatch writes.