

[Commission refers Portugal to Court over its failure to adequately protect natural habitats and species](#)

The European Commission is referring **Portugal** to the Court of Justice of the EU for not designating Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) for the protection of natural habitats and species included in the Natura 2000 network and for failing to establish the necessary conservation measures for these sites.

Portugal had to designate seven SACs in the Atlantic region by 7 December 2010 and 54 SACs in the Mediterranean region by 19 July 2012. Portugal has also failed to establish the necessary conservation measures to maintain or restore the protected habitats and species in these sites. The current measures adopted in the framework of the Portuguese Natura 2000 sectorial plan (PSRN2000) and the other sectorial and special plans (e. g. the rural development plans (PRODER) and the municipal plans) are not comprehensive and precise enough to allow for an adequate level of protection and SACs designation. As recognised by Portugal, the designation of the SACs requires a prior mapping of natural habitats and species as well as the adoption of management plans for each site.

The Commission has repeatedly urged Portugal to fulfil its obligations. A letter of formal notice was sent in February 2015 and a reasoned opinion in [May 2016](#). So far, Portugal has not been able to respect its own commitments for SACs designation, and establishment of conservation measures.

Background

[The Habitats Directive](#) ([Council Directive 92/43/EEC](#)) requires the establishment of the Natura 2000 network, the EU-wide network of protected natural areas, made of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), and Special Protection Areas for birds (SPAs) under the [Birds Directive](#). Each Member State identifies and proposes sites that are important for the conservation of species and habitats occurring naturally in their territory. The Commission subsequently adopts them as Sites of Community Importance (SCI). Member States then have up to six years to designate them as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) but also to introduce the necessary management measures to maintain or restore the species and habitats present to a favourable condition. These are key requirements to protect biodiversity across the EU and consequently these cases rank high on the enforcement agenda of the Commission.

For More Information

-On the key decisions in the January 2018 infringements package, see full [MEMO/18/349](#).

-On the general infringements procedure, see [MEMO/12/12](#) ([an info graph](#)).

-On the [EU infringements procedure](#).

[More growth and jobs: EU invests €873 million in clean energy infrastructure](#)

Europe's transition to a clean and modern economy is the goal of the [Energy Union](#), a priority of the Juncker Commission. It is now becoming the new reality on the ground, and one important building block is adapting the European infrastructure to the future energy needs. Properly interconnected electricity lines and gas pipelines form the backbone of an integrated European energy market anchored on the principle of solidarity. Thus, supporting these [17 selected electricity and gas projects](#), signals Europe's willingness to upgrade and *make the European energy system more competitive that will ultimately deliver cheaper and secure energy to all European consumers.*

The EU funding for the chosen projects comes from the [Connecting Europe Facility](#) (CEF), the European support programme for trans-European infrastructure.

Commission Vice-President for Energy Union Maroš **Šefčovič** said: *"Once more we demonstrate that cooperation and solidarity pays off and that the Energy Union is becoming a reality with tangible impact on the ground. These are important projects with major cross-border benefits and by implementing them we strengthen energy resilience of EU Member States. The Connecting Europe Facility has yet again shown tremendous added value in the modernisation of the European economy."*

Commissioner for Climate Action and Energy Miguel **Arias Cañete** said: *"The construction of the Biscay Gulf France-Spain interconnection marks an important step towards ending the isolation of the Iberian Peninsula from the rest of the European energy market. Only a fully interconnected market will improve Europe's security of supply, reducing the dependence of single suppliers and giving consumers more choice. An energy infrastructure which is fit for purpose is also essential for renewable energy sources to thrive and for delivering on the Paris Agreement on climate change."*

Of the 17 projects selected for funding:

- 8 are in the **electricity** sector (EU support **€680 million**) and 9 in the **gas** sector (EU support **€193 million**).
- 4 relate to construction works (EU support €723 million) and 13 to studies (EU support €150 million).

In the electricity sector, a grant of €578 million, the largest Connecting Europe Facility-Energy grant ever awarded, will be decisive the construction

of the **Biscay Gulf France-Spain interconnection**. The new electricity link will better integrate the Iberian Peninsula into the internal electricity market. The project, with a 280 km long off-shore section, incorporates technologically innovative solutions regarding the design of the route over the Capbreton canyon and the French land section, which is fully underground. This new link will nearly double the interconnection capacity between both countries – increasing it from 2,800 MW to 5,000 MW, and will bring Spain closer to the 10% interconnection target from the current level of 6%. Such a leap will allow for an enhanced incorporation of renewable energies, thus contributing strongly to the clean energy transition and to the EU's clean energy transition policy.

SuedOstLink, one of the largest German energy infrastructure projects, will receive €70 million for activities to enable the construction works to start. The project consists of 580 kilometres of high-voltage cables laid fully underground. The power line will create an urgently needed link between the wind power generated in the north and the consumption centres in the south of Germany. It will thus ensure better integration of renewable energies, as well as enhance the cross-border exchange of energy with neighbouring EU Member States.

A grant of €27 million will also be allocated to support the construction of a new 400 kV **internal power line between Cernavoda and Stalpu** (RO), which will contribute to increase the interconnection capacity between Romania and Bulgaria and help integrate wind power from the Black Sea coast.

In the gas sector, the Connecting Europe Facility will support infrastructure projects important for two island Member States. First, the introduction of natural gas in Cyprus through the **CyprusGas2EU** project (EU support €101 million) will end the current energy isolation of the Cyprus, bring diversification to a region mostly dominated by one single source of supply and help reduce air pollution and emissions by allowing switching from heavy fuel oil to gas for power generation. It will also improve energy security and price competitiveness. Secondly, a €3.7 million grant will be awarded for a study on the **Malta-Italy Gas Interconnection** which aims to end Malta's isolation from the European Gas network. This interconnector will link Malta to the Italian market, enhancing the island's security of supply in gas in similar way a sub-sea cable funded by an earlier EU programme has done for the electricity sector.

Funding will also be allocated to a study on the permit-granting process of the **STEP project** (€1.7 million), which aims at creating a new gas interconnection point between France and Spain to increase the bidirectional flows between the Iberian Peninsula and France and improve the interconnection with the internal gas market through the development of the Eastern gas axis.

The Commission will also invest in studies to support the synchronisation of the Baltics with the central European electricity network. Today's decision is of key importance for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and Poland to agree on the way forward to find, by the end of May 2018 at the latest, a solution on the best way to synchronise the Baltic States' electricity grid with the

continental Europe system, in line with the results of the ministerial meeting from December 2017 (see [STATEMENT/17/5271](#)).

Background

Under the Connecting Europe Facility, a total of €5 billion has been allocated to trans-European energy infrastructure for the period 2014-2020. In order to be eligible for a grant, a proposal has to be [‘a project of common interest’](#). When completed, the projects will each result in significant benefits for at least two Member States, enhance security of supply, contribute to market integration, and enhance competition, as well as reduce CO₂ emissions. The list is updated every two years. The [latest PCI list](#) was published by the Commission in November 2017. The Connecting Europe Facility (Energy) already granted €647 million to 34 projects in 2014, €366 million to 35 projects in 2015 and €707 million to 27 projects in 2016.

For More Information

[List of all projects receiving EU support under the current call](#)

[Overview of projects financed by Connecting Europe Facility – Energy in 2014-2016](#)

[Current list of ‘projects of common interest’](#)

[Innovation & Networks Executive Agency \(INEA\)](#)

[7/2018 : 25 January 2018 – Judgment of the Court of Justice in Case C-498/16](#)

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[EASO publishes a Country of Origin Information \(COI\) report on Networks in Afghanistan.](#)

Today, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) published the Country of Origin Information (COI) Report titled [‘Afghanistan: Networks’](#). In 2016, Afghanistan ranked second in the top countries of origin in EU+ countries¹, with more than 175,000 applicants. In the first eleven months of 2017, close to 45,000 applications have been lodged in the EU+ by Afghans, ranking third

(in the overall applications to date). In addition, the Afghan applications constitute the largest backlog of all countries of origin. At the end of November 2017, there were more than 53,000 asylum applications from Afghan nationals in the EU+ pending at first instance.

The report was drafted by COI researchers from the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre, Landinfo, in accordance with the [EASO COI Report Methodology](#). The report was reviewed by COI researchers from Austria, the Netherlands and EASO.

The report describes various types of networks in Afghanistan and the significance of these networks for individuals and families, be it during displacement, or for reintegration after return from abroad or after internal displacement within the country. Firstly, a number of types of networks are described, ranging from the extended family to tribes, clans, ethnic and other networks. Core principles, obligations and loyalties exist within these networks, and are discussed accordingly. The second chapter looks at the role networks play when it comes to individual and group decisions concerning internal and external migration. A separate sub-chapter examines the situation for unaccompanied minors. The third chapter looks at how migrants and networks maintain contact. Finally, the report focuses on issues relevant to networks in relation to settlement and reintegration (employment, housing, etc.) upon return from abroad or after internal relocation.

In 2017, EASO published several COI Reports on Afghanistan, titled [Key socio-economic indicators, state protection, and mobility in Kabul City, Mazar-e Sharif, and Herat City](#) (August 2017); [Individuals targeted by armed actors in the conflict](#) (December 2017); [Individuals targeted under societal and legal norms](#) (December 2017); and [Afghanistan – Security Situation](#) (December 2017). A further update of the EASO COI Report Afghanistan – Security Situation is expected in spring 2018.

It is EASO's intention to continue to produce such reports on important countries of origin and to update them regularly in order to raise and harmonise COI standards in the EU and to further support the practical implementation of the Common European Asylum System.

Download Report [\[EN\]](#)

Any further information may be obtained from the European Asylum Support Office by contacting press@easo.europa.eu

European safety and health experts meet with EU Commissioner to confront challenges for micro and small enterprises

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) welcomes Commissioner Marianne Thyssen and other stakeholders to a seminar on how to ensure workers' safety and health in micro and small enterprises (MSEs). The seminar takes place on 25 January in Bilbao and coincides with the publication of two new reports that explore the latest findings of EU-OSHA's project on MSEs. The reports, as well as the seminar, focus on good practice examples from throughout the EU, identifying key success factors and challenges, and the important role of intermediaries when it comes to improving occupational safety and health (OSH) in MSEs.

Protection of health and safety at work is one of the key principles of our European Pillar of Social Rights. It is imperative that employer and worker representatives, national authorities and OSH advisors work together to ensure that workers in micro and small enterprises can enjoy safe and healthy working conditions.

Many MSEs find managing OSH challenging, and workers are more likely to be at risk of safety or health issues in these enterprises than in other, larger enterprises. In fact, more than 80% of all occupational injuries in the EU occur in micro, small or medium-sized businesses – and the smaller the business, the higher the risk. The findings of the latest reports shed light on MSE-specific problems and concerns, OSH attitudes and behaviours, and the drivers of and barriers to the implementation of OSH measures in such enterprises. The good practice examples from MSEs, analysed in depth during the course of the project, provide experts with a view of what works, for whom and under what circumstances. Successful approaches to supporting OSH include those involving awareness-raising activities, training, the provision of practical tools, and economic incentives. The instrumental role played by intermediaries in supporting OSH in MSEs is also clear from the reports, and is a key topic of discussion at the seminar.

Marianne Thyssen, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, emphasises that: *'Protection of health and safety at work is one of the key principles of our [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), as well as social dialogue and involvement of workers. As part of this and as the good examples demonstrate, it is imperative that employer representatives and worker representatives as well as national authorities and occupational safety and health advisors work together to support safety and health in micro and small enterprises and to ensure that workers in these enterprises can enjoy safe and healthy working conditions.'*

Good practice examples

The value of cooperation among different stakeholders and the incorporation of OSH into the supply chain is particularly well illustrated by the British Olympic Park project. During the construction of the Olympic Park, all relevant stakeholders – including the national OSH regulator, the contractors and the unions – were consulted before the project began and at all stages throughout. Safety and health was a top priority and – through supply chain management – all subcontracted MSEs were required to adhere to strict OSH standards which led to an outstandingly low rate of accidents during construction. Motivating MSEs to take action and raising awareness of relevant tools and legislation are key to improving OSH. In Denmark, under a nationwide labour inspection initiative, inspectors systematically visit MSEs and provide OSH-related guidance and resources, with the aim of reaching and opening up dialogue with all MSEs.

EU-OSHA Director, Christa Sedlatschek, highlights another example of how the actions of intermediaries at the national level can help MSEs deal with OSH: *'In France, Online interactive Risk Assessment (OiRA) tools have been integrated into the preventive approach to OSH. Using the framework developed by EU-OSHA, [the National Research and Safety Institute has tailored OiRA tools](#) to the needs of two MSE-dominated and vulnerable sectors – the road transport and restaurant sectors – enabling businesses to assess their own risks and implement measures to improve safety and health. What is particularly impressive about this example is how the concerted actions of several regional and national OSH institutes, professional organisations and other relevant sectoral partners have enabled the development and dissemination of these tools to MSEs.'*

Although all of the examples provide evidence that effective tools and well-designed interventions can successfully support OSH in MSEs, many of the initiatives are voluntary and therefore will not reach MSEs that take a reactive approach to OSH and do not actively engage with OSH institutions.

So how can policies and programmes be shaped to meet the needs of the hardest-to-reach MSEs? The project's final analysis report, to be published later in the year, will discuss this in detail, by focusing on the transferability of good practices and exploring the role of policies and programmes in a regulatory and socio-economic context.

Links: