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INFORMATION NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Delegations
Subject: 44th Standing Committee of the Bern Convention on the Conservation of
European Wildlife and Natural Habitats
(Strasbourg, France, 2 – 6 December 2024)
– Statements by the EU and its Member States

Delegations will find in the Annex, for information, a compilation of statements delivered on behalf of the European Union and its Member States at the abovementioned meeting.

**44th Standing Committee of the Bern Convention
on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats**

(Strasbourg, France, 2 – 6 December 2024)

– Statements by the EU and its Member States

Agenda Item 1 - Opening of the meeting and adoption of the agenda

Madam Chair,

Mr Executive Secretary,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Hungary speaks on behalf of the European Union and its Member States.

This year marks the 45th anniversary of the Bern Convention – a remarkable milestone in the journey to protect Europe’s wildlife and natural habitats. Since its adoption in 1979, the Convention has stood as a pioneering framework for biodiversity conservation, championing collaboration across nations to safeguard species, habitats, and ecosystems. As we reflect on its legacy, we celebrate the enduring impact of this treaty, whose innovative approaches – like the Emerald Network and the inclusive complaint system – continue to guide us in addressing the pressing challenges of pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss.

The agenda of our meeting includes several items that will be crucial for the future success of the Bern Convention. Here we would like to highlight only some of the topics to be discussed in the next few days.

Predictable and stable long-term financing of the Convention must remain our priority. We believe that the efforts made within the Council of Europe and the Bern Convention must continue to ensure long-term sustainable financing of the activities of the program of work.

As an important milestone in the implementation of the Strategic Plan of the Bern Convention, I am pleased to mention here the adoption of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation, setting ambitious targets to be achieved, in inter-sectoral cooperation, by 2030, 2040 and 2050. We hope the example of the EU will be followed both within and outside Europe, as it is a major contribution to achieving the targets of the Kunming-Montreal-Global Biodiversity Framework.

The EU highly appreciates the efforts of the Secretariat and the Contracting Parties to align the Emerald Network Standard Data Form with the Natura 2000 Standard Data Form as well as to align the reporting system on habitats and species protected by the Convention to the reporting system established by the EU Habitats and Birds Directives. These decisions will provide a pan-European overview of the most important parameters of protected sites as well as on the status of the species and habitats the Convention aims to protect.

Because of its relevance to the implementation of the Bern Convention, we would like to highlight the outcomes of the 14th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Migratory Species held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, from 12 to 17 February, and the 16th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity held in Cali, Colombia, from 21 October to 1 November. The lengthy negotiations resulted in a number of substantive decisions on a series of strategic, administrative and ecosystem-related issues, which will support practical conservation work and advance the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

The populations of certain species of large carnivores have increased in Europe in recent years, which is in part a result of successful conservation efforts of countries in the region. The increasing population has led to an increment of socio-economic problems due to human-wildlife conflicts as well, especially in those countries where the large carnivores had disappeared for several decades. To ensure coexistence with large carnivores and achieve favorable conservation status across the continent, it is essential to address these concerns and provide as many tools as possible to Parties to find the appropriate solutions. Exchange of information both on the experience gained in the implementation of prevention measures as well as on the latest population data and range is crucial. Therefore, the various events organized on large carnivores in 2024 that contributed to this objective are particularly welcome.

The European Union has made a proposal to amend the Appendices of the Bern Convention by moving the wolf from Appendix II to Appendix III, and this proposal will be discussed at this meeting of the Standing Committee. We are aware of the attention on this agenda item by various stakeholders and a great part of public opinion in general. Therefore, we would like to emphasize that while the objective of this proposal is to provide flexibility to Parties in their efforts to improve coexistence with wolves and thus alleviate the impacts of conflicts associated with them, we do not lose sight of the overall objective of the Convention which obliges Parties to take appropriate and necessary legislative and administrative measures to ensure the protection of wild fauna species irrespective of the appendix they are listed in. Thus, if the proposal is approved by the Standing Committee, we urge all contracting parties to carefully consider the measures they will put in place when balancing the different interests and ensure these are in line with the coexistence principle which is also recognized at global level in Target 4 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

We hope this meeting fosters further collaboration, encourages open dialogue, and leads to impactful decisions that contribute to the continued success of the Bern Convention.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Agenda item 2.1 – Follow up to the Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe on 16-17 May 2023 in Reykjavik, Iceland

The EU and its Member States confirm their support to the Reykjavik Ministerial Declaration and express their strong support for strengthening of the Council of Europe's activities in the field of environment in general, and nature conservation in particular, through the Bern Convention. In this regard, the EU and its Member States strongly emphasise that the future Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment and related Action Plan for its implementation should duly consider the activities that are already ongoing within the Bern Convention, so that nature conservation is fully reflected, but without creating any duplication of tasks. In particular, the EU and its Member States consider that the Vision and Strategic Plan for the Bern Convention for the period to 2030 should be integrated into the Strategy and Action Plan.

The EU and its Member States advocate for integrating environmental protection directly into human rights frameworks, in line with Reykjavik process, which aims to reinforce environmental protections and establish a clearer legal basis for the right to a healthy environment across Europe, and to advance coordinated actions to address the "triple planetary crisis" of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, particularly through regional and international cooperation.

The EU and its Member States thus favour ongoing dialogue and multilateral cooperation to ensure comprehensive and enforceable measures to protect the natural environment for current and future generations, and welcome the outcomes from the Ad Hoc Multidisciplinary Group on the Environment (GME) and look forward to the continuation of this discussion.

The EU and its Member States note with concern that following the formation of the Department on the Reykjavik process and the Environment, the Bern Secretariat faces additional workload, as the GME Secretariat is mostly consisting of / overlapping with the Bern Convention Secretariat. The EU and its Member States are of the view that the new momentum for the environment within the Council of Europe should in no way hamper the activities of the Bern Convention. Therefore, the EU and its Member States request the Director of Social Rights, Health and Environment to ensure that the core staff of the Bern Convention Secretariat is not burdened with additional workload that is not related to the implementation of the Convention.

The EU and its Member States also acknowledge the close connection of this issue to the agenda items of financing and budget and might come back with further reflections in this regard under these points.

Agenda item 3.1 - Financing of the Bern Convention

The EU and its Member states would like to thank the Secretariat and the ad hoc drafting Group and its Chair for the work throughout 2024. We take note of the latest developments presented to the Standing Committee.

The EU and its Member States consider that these latest developments require a more thorough discussion, since the Standing Committee needs to provide guidance on the follow up to be given to the work on the Amending Protocol and to take a decision on the next steps, if any, for the ad hoc drafting group.

The EU and its Member States note the positive outlook for the Convention's financing ensured thanks to the increased Ordinary Budget allocation of the host Organisation and the stable and considerable Voluntary Contributions provided by Parties for 2024 and previous years. The EU and its Member States would like to acknowledge and thank all parties financially contributing on a voluntary basis to the Bern Convention.

The EU and its Member States note with concern the reservation expressed by the Secretariat on the Amending Protocol, as it is not in line with previous guidance provided by the Directorate of Legal Advice and Public International Law. In this context, we request the Secretariat to consult with the Directorate of Legal Advice and Public International Law and to provide clear explanations how the concerns of the Secretariat could be addressed so that we could fulfil our mandate given to the Standing Committee by the Committee of Ministers in 2022.

We have always been and remain open to exploring further financing options. The Environment Trust Fund, and its added value for the Bern Convention as briefly presented in document T-PVS/Inf(2024)19 should be further examined, once its provisions, governance system and level of accepted contributions are clarified and presented in writing sufficiently in advance of a next SC meeting.

The document provided by the Secretariat only today does not provide any reassurance as to how to ensure that predictable, stable and sufficient contributions earmarked for the Bern Convention activities would be collected. We also regret the late submission of the document which does not allow for its proper consideration.

Work on sustainable and predictable financing should continue in the intersessional period, including through the extension of the mandate of the ad-hoc drafting group. The Bureau of the Convention should be mandated to ensure that the future CoE Strategy on the Environment fully considers the key role of the Bern Convention, while the Convention Strategy and targets are fully integrated.

The EU and its Member States also require that the current system of VCs is also kept in place.

Agenda item 3.3 – Vision and Strategic Plan for the Bern Convention for the period to 2030

The EU and its Member States appreciate the work of the Working Group on overseeing implementation of the Strategic Plan, including the valuable contribution from the independent consultant.

The EU and its Member States take note of the progress made and acknowledge the next steps suggested in the document Operationalising the Strategic Plan's indicators. The EU and its Member States express their support for the continuation of the work in this regard.

Concerning the indicators, the EU and its Member States highlight the need to aim at streamlined monitoring regimes, wherever possible. Namely, the reporting under specific areas of work under the Bern Convention should be aligned. Close cooperation particularly with the Working Group on Reporting is important. Moreover, the ongoing work in other fora, such as the CBD and its Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework or reporting obligations under the EU legislation should be considered.

The EU and its Member States stress the link between a successful roll out of the second reporting under Resolution No. 8 on the conservation status and the progress in achieving the revised targets on the Emerald Network for the achievement of the Strategic Plan Targets.

The EU and its Member States also welcome that a dedicated website for the Vision & Strategic Plan 2030 has been created with a view to enhancing the visibility of the plan.

Finally, the EU and its Member States take note of the Compilation of the national voluntary updates on the Strategic Plan implementation. The EU and its Member States recognise that the compilation is not supposed to provide a comprehensive overview of the implementation of the plan and providing voluntary national updates cannot be considered as an additional reporting burden to the regular reporting obligations, both under the Bern Convention and other relevant international agreements. Its main purpose is to showcase major achievements or raise attention to considerable challenges, directly related to the implementation of the Strategic Plan.

In this regard, the EU and its Member States agree that it will be useful in the future to contextualise the successes and challenges by identifying the countries that have communicated them. At the same time, the EU and its Member States do not see a need for a strong encouragement to Contracting Parties to provide their voluntary updates, as major achievements or challenges may not be identified every year.

Next, the updated version of the questionnaire could contain a question whether a Contracting Party wishes to make their submission available, for example on the website of the Standing Committee, or it should only be used for the purpose of compiling the responses.

To conclude, the EU and its Member States thank the Contracting Parties that have undertaken this exercise in 2024.

Agenda item 4.2 – Proposal for amendment: Downlisting of the wolf (Canis lupus) from Appendix II to Appendix III of the Convention

The EU submits to the attention of the Standing Committee a proposal for the reduction of the protection status of the wolf under the Convention, proposing to move it from Appendix II to Appendix III. The EU and its Member States appreciate the quick processing of the proposal by the Convention Secretariat and the Treaty office of the Council of Europe, allowing for its transmission to all Parties for consideration at this 44th Committee meeting.

The initial listing of animal species in Appendix II or III of the Convention was based on the available scientific data at the time of negotiation of the Convention in 1979. Article 1(2) of the Convention provides that “particular emphasis is given to endangered and vulnerable species”. Based on these premises, the wolf has been listed in Appendix II as strictly protected species since its entry into force in 1982.

The Bern Convention does not set out explicitly which criteria govern the listing in Appendix II or III, but recommendation No. 56 (1997) sets guidelines to be considered while making proposals for amendment of Appendices I and II of the Convention and while adopting amendments to these Appendices. According to the Recommendation, relevant considerations for listing species in the Appendices to the Bern Convention include ecological and scientific factors, such as conservation status, population trends and threats.

Together, two reports provide the most up-to-date data on the species’ status on the continent, including range, population, and threats, along with data on damages to livestock resulting from wolf predation. In 2022 the Large Carnivores Initiative for Europe (LCIE) assessed the situation of the wolf in Europe for the Bern Convention. In 2023, the European Commission published the study “The situation of the wolf (*Canis lupus*) in the European Union – an In-depth Analysis”.

While all Parties have had access to the most recent numbers available in these reports and in the EU proposal communicated to them, we want to stress that both reports confirm the conservation status of the wolf has shown a positive trend over the last few decades. The species has successfully recovered across the European continent, with a significant expansion of its range, confirmed as well by comparison of its distribution maps over the last 20 years. Today, the species is present in all mainland European countries, some hosting large populations of over 1,000 individuals. In 2022, the LCIE study for the Bern Convention showed the total number of wolves in the EU was likely to be in the order of 19, 000 (compared to about 14,300 in 2016) and the number of wolves in Europe (excluding Belarus and the Russian Federation) was likely to exceed 21,500 (compared to about 17,000 in 2016). Wolf numbers were increasing in 19 out of 34 countries.

The wolf continues to be qualified as “Least Concern” at both the European and EU 27 levels. At the population level, the LCIE concludes that only the Scandinavian sub-population now belongs to the category “Vulnerable”, which is a further improvement compared to the 2018 Red List assessment, where three sub-populations – Scandinavian, Central European and Western-Central Alps – were assessed as ‘Vulnerable’ due to the limited size of their population.

In 2023, the in-depth analysis of the status of the wolf in the EU reviewed once again the available scientific data on the species and confirmed the upward trend in population size as well as the ongoing expansion of the wolf’s range. A total of about 20,300 wolves have been estimated in the EU in 2023, an estimation higher than the one in the LCIE report, and higher than the population estimated at around 11,000-17,000 reported under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive for the period 2013-2018.

With respect of threats to wolves, both reports conclude that these remain multiple and diverse in nature. The most important threats and pressures reported by Parties are linked to wolf poaching, alongside the impact of linear infrastructure on the species covering both direct mortality and fragmentation of populations. Hunting and interactions with agriculture are also frequently reported pressures. New emerging threats include border fences and wolf-dog hybridization.

Despite remaining threats to the wolf, the successful recovery of its population and its increased range across the continent in recent decades are evidence of the strong adaptability and resilience of the species. At the same time, the continued expansion of the wolf’s range in Europe and its recolonisation of new territories have led to increasing socio-economic challenges with regard to coexistence with human activities. This is due, in particular, to harm to livestock, which has reached significant levels, affecting more and more regions in EU Member States and beyond across the Continent.

The main difference between the regimes of protection of Appendix II and Appendix III listed species in relation to the identified threats to wolves is that the protection regime under Appendix III maintains more flexibility concerning the appropriate measures the Contracting Parties to the Convention shall put in place. While Contracting Parties have the possibility to decide on the measures to put in place under the Appendix III regime, the overall objective to be achieved is to ensure the protection of the species and keep it out of danger, as prescribed in Article 2 of the Convention. The overall objective of the Convention applies to all species irrespective of which Appendix they are listed in. In the European Union, the Habitats Directive aims to contribute towards ensuring biodiversity through the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora on the European territory. To do so, measures must be taken to maintain or restore at a favourable conservation status natural habitats and species of wild fauna and flora of Community interest, again irrespective of which Annex they are listed in under the Directive.

Both the hunting and poaching of wolves are threats to be addressed, as appropriate, by legislative and administrative measures to be taken in accordance with Article 7 of the Convention, which governs the protection regime of Appendix III species. It is key to stress that a listing of a species in Appendix III maintains the objective of result to attain or restore the population of the species to a level which corresponds to its ecological requirements.

Therefore, the EU considers that it is appropriate to adapt the protection level of the wolf and place it under the species protection regime of Appendix III. The EU and its Member States acknowledge however that with more flexibility comes more responsibility for each Party. The fundamental principle of co-existence with wildlife, which is also a specific target (Target 4) of the Kunming-Montréal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), remains a key commitment for the EU and its Member States. Efforts to promote and implement prevention and other available coexistence measures and practices will need to be stepped up.

The Convention’s main objective as per Article 1 is “to conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats, especially those species and habitats whose conservation requires the co-operation of several States”. Cooperation in conservation, management and monitoring efforts among states is of particular importance for species that know no borders such as the wolf. The EU and its Member States stand ready to enhance cooperation on transboundary populations with neighbouring states, to guarantee wolves continue to play their key role as an apex predator in ecosystems across Europe. We are prepared to also contribute to any upcoming meeting of the Convention Group of Experts on large Carnivores in 2025 in this regard.

In conclusion, the EU and its Member States call on the Standing Committee to vote in favor of the EU proposal to reduce the protection status of the wolf and place it in Appendix III of the Convention.

Agenda item 5.1 – Conservation of Birds & IKB

The EU and its Member States regret that the planned joint Bern Convention IKB Focal Points and CMS MIKT meeting could not take place in 2024. We stress the importance for the IKB Scoreboard for assessing the progress in combating illegal killing, taking and trade of wild birds and for enabling national governments to adapt their policies and practices to ensure the overall objective of eradicating IKB is achieved. The EU and its Member States welcome the fact that the meeting of the Group of Experts on the Conservation of Wild Birds as well as the joint meeting of the Bern Convention Network of Special Focal Points on IKB and the CMS Intergovernmental Task Force on IKB of Migratory Birds in the Mediterranean are to be held back-to-back in 2025. We invite Contracting Parties to actively engage by participating at the meeting. The EU and its Member States thank all the stakeholders for their efforts to organise the two meetings.

Agenda item 5.2 – Action Plan for the Eradication of the Ruddy Duck

The EU and its Member States take note of the progress in the implementation of the action plan for the eradication of the Ruddy Duck, and would like to thank the countries involved for their efforts. We acknowledge that, despite the significant progress made, the goals of this Action Plan have not yet been reached. Next year marks the final year of the current Action Plan. The EU and its Member States therefore encourage the development of a new action plan for the period after 2025 that supports and guides the actions of parties involved.

Agenda item 5.3 – Conservation of Large Carnivores

The EU and its Member States welcome the decision of CMS on listing the Balkan Lynx in Appendix I of CMS and Eurasian Lynx in Appendix II.

The EU and its Member States acknowledge the information provided by the Secretariat and welcome the planned to organize the meeting of the Group of Experts on Large Carnivores in 2025. The EU and its Member States further welcome the idea of a draft questionnaire on the implementation of the recommendations of the Standing Committee pertaining to large carnivores is prepared and circulated well ahead of the meeting. We recognise the importance of accessible and up-to-date information on large carnivores, to inform decision-making on their conservation and management.

The EU and its Member States encourage Contracting Parties of the Bern Convention to further develop dialogues between experts, NGOs and government officials in the field of large carnivore conservation similarly to those organised in Slovenia, namely the joint conference of the Alpine and Carpathian Conventions for the exchange of practices on management of large carnivores, which took place in March 2024 in Brdo pri Kranju within the project LECA, and in Bulgaria on the “Challenges & opportunities for the conservation of reptiles and large carnivores during linear infrastructure development in South-East Europe”, which took place on 22–24 April 2024 in Kresna and the “Transnational exchange platform for the management of large carnivores in the Dinaric-Balkan-Pindos region”, which took place between 11-13 June 2024 in Sofia.

The EU and its Member States encourage all Contracting Parties of the Bern Convention to further develop cooperation for effective conservation and management of transboundary populations of large carnivores in order to achieve the objectives of the Convention.

Agenda item 5.4 – Pan-European Action Plan for the conservation of Sturgeons

The EU and its Member States welcome the technical guidelines on the assessment of the habitat of sturgeons, on sturgeon monitoring, and on ex situ conservation measures for sturgeons, and support their adoption at the 44th meeting of the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention. These guidelines offer science-based guidance essential for the effective implementation of the Pan-European Action Plan for the conservation of sturgeons.

EU and its Member States invite all range Contracting Parties to raise awareness among relevant authorities and stakeholders regarding the guidelines and to encourage their application to further the development and implementation of conservation measures.

EU and its Member States also recommend that the Secretariat promote and enhance the visibility of these guidelines to ensure accessibility for all stakeholders engaged in the conservation of sturgeons.

Furthermore, EU and its Member States recommend that reference to these guidelines serve as a criterion in the development and funding of project proposals related to sturgeon conservation.

Agenda item 5.5 - Amphibians and Reptiles and Invasive Alien Species (IAS)

The EU and its Member States take note of the information provided regarding the steps undertaken to reinforce the cooperation between the Groups of Experts on Amphibians and Reptiles and on IAS.

The EU and its Member States welcome the proposal that meetings of both groups could be organized back-to-back in 2025, with a view to having a joint session to further discuss the topics of possible collaboration.

Concerning the agenda of the upcoming meetings, the EU and its Member States consider the importance of following up on topics that were addressed at past meetings, such as the ongoing issue of spreading amphibian diseases, in particular the Chytridiomycosis caused by the Bsal chytrid fungus, or the work on important herpetofauna areas, as also confirmed by the replies to the respective questionnaire in 2024.

Regarding the activities on IAS, the EU and its Member States reiterate their invitation to the Group of Experts to consider in their work the key messages of the summary for policymakers of the Thematic Assessment Report on Invasive Alien Species and Their Control of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

Finally, the EU and its Member States also welcome the foreseen online meeting of the Ad hoc Working Group on the conservation of marine turtles, which could consider the implementation of the Guidance tool on the conservation of sea turtle nesting sites.

Agenda item 5.6.1 - Emerald Network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest

The EU and its Member States appreciate the hosting of the meeting of the Group of Experts by Liechtenstein and its outcomes and wish the newly elected Chair of the Group every success in her new role.

The EU and its Member States are satisfied that, as per the request of the Standing Committee, work on the legal requirements of the Emerald Network was given priority in 2024. This has resulted in the submission of a draft Recommendation collating all relevant requirements through the Convention text itself or additional interpretative Resolutions and Recommendations adopted over the last few decades. This is an excellent basis for engaging into further work on the potential strengthening of these requirements and the EU and its Member States support its adoption with one amendment proposal. The amendment proposal concerns the removal of a part of the first bullet point in the Commitments that are legally binding section to align it with Article 4 of the Convention.

The EU and its Member States support the setting of clear and realistic targets for the Emerald Network for the period to 2030, pertaining to the submission of updated and improved Emerald databases, improvement of the sufficiency index of the Network and the adoption of sites by concerned Parties. The EU and its Member States would nevertheless like to remind that the global commitments on protected areas of all Bern Convention Parties under the Kunming-Montreal GBF targets are more ambitious with respect to both the designation and establishment for efficient management of these areas. The targets also appear as not fully aligned with the targets of the Strategic Plan of the Convention (target 1.2 and 1.3 in particular).

The EU and its Member States support the decision on a clear mandate for a revision of the Emerald Network Standard Data Form, to ensure the complete alignment of the Form with the one used within the EU Natura 2000 Network. We want to stress that the formal use of the new SDF for EU Member States is to start as of 1st of February 2025. We consider it essential that the Convention secures the quickest possible alignment of the Emerald and Natura 2000 SDFs, to ensure the progress in the Network designation continues. The revision of the Emerald SDF is also a prerequisite for the compatibility of the Emerald Network database with EEA's Reportnet 3 platform and the ever-evolving online Viewer technology. It is also necessary that the appropriate financial provisions for these tasks are included in the Programme and Budget of the Convention.

The EU and its Member States fully support the adoption of two sites in Liechtenstein and we congratulate the country for this progress.

However, the EU and its Member States note the lack of progress in the establishment of the Network in Contracting Parties. For some countries, the last update of their Emerald database dates back to several years, even decades. This situation is very worrying, and it jeopardises the credibility of the Convention in its role of catalyst of progress towards the achievement of the Kunming Montreal GBF targets on PAs at regional continental level. Many projects implemented for example in EU candidate countries have led to an improved knowledge on the listed species and habitats, to be subject to site-based conservation. Nonetheless, the gathered data is not used for an update of the Emerald Network databases and therefore there is no progress towards the Network completion, while valuable nature rich areas are left with no legal protection for the time being.

In order to address this situation, the EU and its Member States suggest that the Standing Committee ensures the mobilisation of the necessary resources, including financial ones, allowing for consultants to support the engaged actors and stakeholders at national level in the relevant countries and ensure updated databases are submitted over the next couple of years.

Agenda item 5.7 – Reporting under Resolution No. 8. (2012) on the conservation status of species and habitats

The EU and its Member States welcome the progress achieved by the Ad hoc Working Group on Reporting (WG). We are pleased that the recommendation of the WG aims at ensuring the necessary compatibility of the data gathered through the reporting by non-EU CPs under Resolution No. 8 (2012) with the one gathered by EU Member States under Art 17/12 of the Nature Directives. Using the same format will facilitate this, even if the recommendations of the WG are to reduce the number of features reported on. We accept the reasoning behind this recommendation, based on the fact that a fully-fledged reporting would create financial and staff capacity issues for non-EU CPs. We therefore support the recommendations of the WG. We recall once again that these decisions will allow for the Convention to have a mechanism for measuring how well all Contracting Parties are complying with their obligations under the Convention and provide a pan-European overview of how the species and habitats the Convention protects are faring.

As for the list of invasive alien species (T-PVS/PA(2024)12), we agree with the steps of shortlisting the potentially long list of invasive alien species that will be subject to voluntary reporting, and with the overall result. In the Recommendation chapter, Parties are requested to check the shortlist of invasive alien species from several aspects (native to any Party; necessity to add species from the GRIIS datasets; single-country IAS to place back; any other species to add). In addition to the aspects listed in the Recommendations chapter of the document, we would like to draw attention to the fact that the list of species of Union concern as of Regulation (EU) 1143/2014 is regularly updated, so the shortlist of the Bern Convention will need to be checked against it regularly (just like against the other aspects listed). We also note that *Ludwigia grandiflora* is listed as a species of Union concern, therefore, it should be deleted from the shortlist of the Bern Convention (based on Step 6 of the shortlisting exercise).

The EU and its Member States agree with the endorsement of the reporting documentation presented to the Standing Committee. We warmly thank all Parties that participated in the preparation of the reporting documentation, including the EEA for the support provided to the Convention, recalling that Reporting under Resolution No. 8 is a priority dataflow for the European Environment Agency (EEA) and its EIONET Network.

The EU and its Member States consider that given the iterative and continuous nature of the reporting exercise, it is strongly advisable that the Ad-Hoc Group on Reporting is transformed into a full-fledged Group of Experts, which would benefit from regular meetings. A revision of the Ad-Hoc Group of experts' ToR in this respect might be necessary. The EU and its Member States remain available during the Standing Committee meeting for contributing to their revision, to ensure they are adopted already during the 44th SC meeting.

Agenda Item 13 - Closing of the meeting

Madam Chair,

Mr Executive Secretary,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Hungary speaks on behalf of the European Union and its Member States.

As the 44th meeting of the Standing Committee is coming to an end, we would like to thank the Secretariat and all Contracting Parties, organizations and observers for the fruitful negotiations, the valuable insights provided and the successful outcome of a number of agenda items, some of which have taken several years of preparation, such as Reporting under Resolution No. 8 (2012) or the Emerald Network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest. The Bern Convention has once again proved to be a strong framework to combine nature conservation efforts in a Pan-European context, as it has over the past 45 years.

If we are to highlight some of the most important achievements of this meeting, we would like to mention first the strengthening of the Emerald Network of sites, by providing further clarification on the legal framework of the obligations of Contracting Parties regarding the conservation of the network, laying out both mandatory commitments and non-mandatory measures that contribute to the protection of sites. The EU and its Member States greatly appreciate the alignment of the Emerald Network Standard Data Form with the Natura 2000 Standard Data Form. These decisions will advance the standardization of site protection regimes across the continent, increasing the efficiency of nature conservation efforts in Europe. At the same time, we would like to urge Contracting Parties to work towards achieving sufficiency of their network of protected sites, also in light of the relevant targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Of course, the 44th meeting of the Standing Committee will be remembered by the public as the one that took a decision to downlist a conflict species, namely the wolf. While taking this step was considered necessary by the European Union and its Member States, we consider it equally important to emphasize that downlisting the wolf to Appendix III of the Convention does not mean it is no longer protected: on the contrary, while providing more flexibility to manage human-wildlife conflicts, the obligation remains to achieve or maintain a conservation status of the species that meets the ecological and scientific requirements as laid down by the Convention. The EU and its Member States look forward to the establishment of the new Working Group on exploring mechanisms to guide amendments to the appendices of the Bern Convention. We feel this will be a valuable addition to the tools available to the Convention in its efforts to protect nature.

The EU and its Member States welcome the fact that the Standing Committee remains committed to delivering on an instrument setting a financial mechanism to the Convention, which corresponds to the principles set in its decision from 2018. The financing of the Convention should be stable, sufficient, predictable, long-lasting and fair. We look forward to continue contributing to the work of the respective Working Group in 2025.

We hope the year ahead of us will see further progress in the implementation of the Strategic Plan of the Convention, following the new and for the first time prioritized Programme of Work. Finally, we would like to mention that the 60th anniversary of the network of European Diploma Protected Areas will be a great occasion to celebrate the achievements of the Convention and raise awareness in society to the continued successes of the Bern Convention.

Madam Chair, we would also like to express regret – that the three years of you serving as the Chair of this Standing Committee are coming to an end. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to you for your exceptional leadership and tireless commitment to the Bern Convention. At the same time, we are confident that the newly elected Chair will follow in your footsteps and guide us wisely through our future deliberations, with important support from his Bureau team. Congratulations to all of you.

Thank you, Madam Chair.
