

POSITION PAPER

Protecting the Integrity of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves

*Governance Challenges Affecting the Vjosa Valley Biosphere Reserve and the Narta–Pishë
Poro Protected Landscape*

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July 2026

Protecting the Integrity of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves

The credibility of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve does not rest on designation alone. It depends on whether the territory continues to demonstrate, in practice, that biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, scientific learning, and public participation can be pursued together. The Vjosa Valley was admitted to UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves in 2025, recognising one of Europe's last largely free-flowing river systems and the communities whose lives and livelihoods are connected to it.¹ That recognition creates an opportunity for Albania and the wider EuroMAB community, but it also creates a responsibility to examine whether decisions affecting ecologically connected landscapes remain consistent with the principles that justify international recognition.

The EuroMAB Youth Network and Norma Center therefore submit this position in a spirit of cooperation. The purpose is not to dispute Albania's sovereignty or to prejudge the legality of any individual land-use decision. It is to invite a careful examination of whether recent legal, planning, and governance developments affecting the Narta–Pishë Poro Protected Landscape may weaken the ecological coherence and participatory foundations of the Vjosa Valley Biosphere Reserve. A Biosphere Reserve is strongest when difficult questions can be addressed openly, on the basis of evidence, and without reducing the discussion to a choice between environmental protection and economic development.

The central ecological concern is the relationship between the Vjosa River and its delta. The Vjosa does not end, in ecological terms, at an administrative boundary. Its hydrological and sedimentary processes have shaped a broad transitional landscape extending from the river mouth through wetlands, dunes, lagoons, forests, islands, and coastal habitats, including the Narta Lagoon. Scientific assessments describe the Vjosa Delta as an area of more than 200 square kilometres formed through the combined activity of the river and the Adriatic Sea over centuries, and identify the Pishë Poro–Nartë landscape as part of an indivisible hydrodynamic and ecological entity with the river.² Decisions affecting this landscape may therefore influence habitat connectivity, biodiversity, flood regulation, sediment dynamics, and the resilience of the wider river system.

This ecological relationship has long been reflected, although imperfectly, in Albania's protected-area framework. Council of Ministers Decision No. 680 of 22 October 2004 declared the Vjosë–Nartë wetland system a protected water and terrestrial landscape. In 2022, Council of Ministers Decision No. 694 changed the status of the Pishë Poro–Nartë ecosystem from a Category IV Managed Nature Reserve to a Category V Protected Landscape, reduced its area from 21,238 hectares to 16,124.61 hectares, and removed protected status from 5,551.7 hectares.³ Whatever the policy reasons advanced for this change, the reduction raised a

¹ UNESCO, "26 New Biosphere Reserves: UNESCO Continues Unprecedented Expansion of Its Global Network," 27 September 2025; UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme, "Vjosa Valley," official Biosphere Reserve profile (accessed 17 July 2026).

² Aleko Miho, Ferdinand Bego and Sajmir Beqiraj, *Why the Delta of Vjosa under the Science Focus? Critical View* (Tirana: Faculty of Natural Sciences, University of Tirana, 2023), especially pp. 4–12 and 31–32.

³ Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, Decision No. 694, 26 October 2022, "On Changing the Status and Area of the Natural/Wetland Ecosystem 'Pishë Poro–Nartë' from 'Managed Nature Reserve' to 'Protected Landscape' and Removing the

broader governance question: whether protected-area boundaries can provide durable ecological safeguards when they are revised in parallel with major infrastructure and tourism ambitions.

The legal framework changed again in 2024. Law No. 21/2024 amended Law No. 81/2017 on Protected Areas, reconfigured elements of zoning and permitted activities, and expressly included five-star or higher “accommodation structures of excellence”, together with supporting infrastructure, among activities that may be authorised in protected areas.⁴ Economic development is a legitimate element of the Biosphere Reserve model, and Category V landscapes are not intended to exclude human activity. The concern is narrower and more practical: whether the scale, location, cumulative effects, and decision-making process for major developments remain compatible with conservation objectives and with the long-term resilience of a fragile coastal wetland system.

The question of the delta’s relationship to the Biosphere Reserve is especially important because river systems operate through continuity. Floodplains, estuaries, coastal wetlands, and deltas are not secondary appendices to a river. They are places where hydrological, geological, and biological processes converge. Comparable practice within the EuroMAB region supports this integrated view. The Terres de l’Ebre Biosphere Reserve in Spain includes both the Ebro watershed and the Ebro Delta, whose marshes, lagoons, alluvial landscapes, and coastal habitats form a defining component of the reserve.⁵ The comparison does not require Albania to reproduce another reserve’s boundaries. It does, however, demonstrate that treating a delta as part of the river’s ecological system is a well-established approach within the World Network of Biosphere Reserves.

This matters because Biosphere Reserves are not simply conservation labels. UNESCO describes them as territories that integrate three mutually reinforcing functions: conservation of biodiversity and cultural diversity; socio-culturally and environmentally sustainable economic development; and logistical support through research, monitoring, education, and training. Their planning and management should involve local communities and relevant stakeholders.⁶ These functions cannot be separated without weakening the model. Development that disregards ecological thresholds is not sustainable development, while conservation imposed without meaningful public participation is unlikely to produce durable legitimacy.

Recent events around Pishë Poro–Nartë show that this legitimacy is under strain. In May 2026, fencing, heavy machinery, and reported disturbance of protected coastal habitats triggered local protests that expanded into a sustained civic movement known as the “Flamingo Revolution”. The movement developed from demonstrations near the Narta Lagoon into major protests in Tirana and attracted international attention from

‘Protected Area’ Status from the Reduced Area.” The decision also refers to and repeals Council of Ministers Decision No. 680, 22 October 2004, concerning the Vjosë–Nartë protected water and terrestrial landscape.

⁴Republic of Albania, Law No. 21/2024, 22 February 2024, “On Some Additions and Amendments to Law No. 81/2017 ‘On Protected Areas’,” particularly the amendments concerning permitted activities and accommodation structures of excellence.

⁵UNESCO, Biosphere and Geopark Resource Hub, “Terres de l’Ebre, Catalonia,” official site profile (accessed 17 July 2026).

⁶UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme, “What Are Biosphere Reserves?” (accessed 17 July 2026); UNESCO, Statutory Framework of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, SC-2019/WS/17.

environmental organisations, European institutions, and international media.⁷ Participation estimates have varied, and the scale of protest is not in itself proof that a legal violation occurred. It is, however, clear evidence that a significant section of the public does not consider the available information, consultation, and institutional safeguards sufficient.

For a Biosphere Reserve, such conflict should be treated as a governance signal rather than merely a political inconvenience. The MAB model depends on collaboration among public institutions, scientists, local residents, landowners, civil society, young people, and economic actors. When these groups lack a shared factual basis, or when decisions are perceived as having been made before consultation occurs, confidence in the management framework deteriorates. An internationally recognised reserve should offer a platform for resolving these tensions through transparency, independent expertise, and structured dialogue.

The implications extend beyond Albania. Many EuroMAB Biosphere Reserves face pressure from tourism, transport infrastructure, urbanisation, energy projects, and climate change. The Vjosa case is therefore not exceptional in the nature of the pressures involved. Its importance lies in the precedent created by the response. If the EuroMAB community can engage constructively with difficult cases, it demonstrates that the Network is capable not only of celebrating new designations but also of supporting member reserves when conservation, development, and governance objectives come into tension.

Accordingly, the EuroMAB Youth Network respectfully invites the EuroMAB community and the UNESCO MAB Programme to encourage an independent technical reflection on the cumulative effects of recent legal, planning, and management changes affecting the Vjosa Valley Biosphere Reserve and ecologically connected protected areas. Such a reflection should assess ecological connectivity, compatibility with the three functions of Biosphere Reserves, the adequacy of stakeholder participation, and the capacity of the existing governance framework to support adaptive management. It should respect national sovereignty and avoid prejudging individual projects, while still providing a credible and evidence-based assessment.

The same issues should receive appropriate attention during future periodic reviews of the Vjosa Valley Biosphere Reserve. Periodic review is not a punitive mechanism; it is a means of ensuring that designation remains connected to effective practice. Governance arrangements, boundary coherence, the relationship between the river and its delta, cumulative development pressures, public access to information, and meaningful participation should therefore form part of the review process.

EuroMAB can also play a practical convening role. Dialogue should be facilitated among the Albanian MAB National Committee, national and local authorities, protected-area managers, scientists, community representatives, civil society organisations, youth groups, landowners, and responsible investors. The purpose should be to establish a common evidence base, identify areas of agreement and disagreement, and develop safeguards capable of reconciling legitimate development objectives with the ecological limits of the landscape.

⁷Reuters, “‘Albania Is Not for Sale’, Protesters Say over Kushner-linked Luxury Resort near a Protected Wetland,” 5 June 2026; BirdLife International, “European Parliament Backs Nature as Albania’s Flamingo Revolution Reaches Strasbourg,” 17 June 2026.

Beyond the immediate case, the Network should promote ecological connectivity as a management principle across Biosphere Reserves, particularly where rivers, floodplains, wetlands, estuaries, and deltas cross administrative or protected-area boundaries. It should encourage long-term monitoring of the relationship between the Vjosa, its delta, and the Narta Lagoon; support knowledge exchange with reserves that have balanced conservation with tourism and infrastructure; and strengthen mechanisms through which local communities, researchers, landowners, civil society, and youth organisations can shape decisions before they become sources of entrenched conflict.

The EuroMAB Youth Network accepts its own responsibility within this process. Young researchers, professionals, practitioners, and community leaders are increasingly involved in the stewardship of Biosphere Reserves, and their participation can help connect scientific knowledge, public concerns, and long-term institutional thinking. The Network is prepared to facilitate exchange between reserves, support interdisciplinary collaboration, contribute policy and scientific perspectives, and work with UNESCO, National MAB Committees, and local stakeholders to strengthen the resilience and credibility of the EuroMAB region.

The Vjosa Valley Biosphere Reserve represents an important achievement for Albania and for Europe. Protecting that achievement requires more than defending a title. It requires governance capable of recognising ecological continuity, evaluating development honestly, responding to public concern, and adapting when existing safeguards appear insufficient. By addressing the challenges surrounding the Narta–Pishë Poro landscape through independent assessment, periodic review, transparent dialogue, and long-term monitoring, the EuroMAB community can show that Biosphere Reserves remain living institutions: places where conservation and development are reconciled through knowledge, participation, and shared responsibility.

EuroMAB Youth Network

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