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### 3 **CAS R2: Let's give rivers a new life to save our own**

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5 In recent centuries, Europe's rivers have faced increasing exploitation and transformation,  
6 gradually losing their ability to host a rich wildlife and to undergo natural cycles that  
7 maintain the hydrological balance of our landscape. Today, cleaner and more sustainable  
8 modes of moving goods and generating electricity than waterways are available. We need  
9 rivers to take on an entirely different role which they can only play if they are protected and, if  
10 needed, restored – wherever possible and as soon as possible – to their natural state.

11 First, as climate change increases the frequency of droughts and disrupts precipitation  
12 patterns, healthy natural river basins with their unmatched water-retention potential are  
13 essential for storing and providing water for drinking, agriculture and industry. Secondly, the  
14 ambition to achieve climate neutrality means that we are going to need all the available  
15 carbon sinks and thus will have to restore, as much as possible, wetlands which used to  
16 exist in river valleys. Finally, natural rivers and their valleys are biodiversity hot spots and  
17 important wildlife corridors which are crucial for reversing the biodiversity decline which  
18 threatens our very existence.

19 **Therefore, the European Green Party demands:**

#### 20 **1. The effective and systemic conservation and restoration of rivers' water-retention and** 21 **carbon-sink potential**

22 Wetland restoration is one of the most important ways to stop carbon emissions from  
23 degraded wetlands (which account for around 5% of global emissions) and turn them back  
24 into carbon sinks which we need to achieve climate neutrality. Climate change means longer  
25 and more frequent droughts and different patterns of precipitation which will increasingly  
26 take the form of infrequent but torrential rain. Restored river-valley wetlands can store that  
27 water and prevent it from flowing into the sea and flooding towns and cities along the way.

28 This requires the conservation and large-scale management of wetlands and river valleys,  
29 from the sources to the estuary, over the entire catchment area, ensuring their ecological  
30 flow both in terms of volume and chemical composition, and promoting permanent  
31 grasslands and flood plain and wetland forests. Such nature-based solutions are effective,  
32 environmentally friendly and low-cost ways to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate  
33 change.

#### 34 **2. Conservation and large-scale restoration of habitats and wildlife corridors along rivers** 35 **and river valleys**

36 Rivers, streams and their valleys are important habitats and wildlife corridors, connecting  
37 water and land habitats in increasingly fragmented landscapes. They enable short-distance  
38 movements and long-distance migration of various animal species. Rivers and river valleys  
39 should be kept unobstructed by dams and other infrastructure, preserved and restored to  
40 their natural state wherever possible. Where barriers are already built, the obligations for  
41 owners of such facilities must be strengthened in order to better protect migratory fish. In  
42 addition to removing barriers, solutions for helping fish pass such barriers must also be  
43 introduced. Rewilding rivers and river valleys goes hand in hand with the aims of protecting

44 and restoring carbon sinks and improving the water-retention potential of our landscapes. It  
45 also improves a number of other ecosystem services provided by rivers, such as: water self-  
46 purification which is essential as we face the risk of drinking-water shortages; nature-based  
47 flood protection that involves giving rivers room to freely overflow; as well as recreational  
48 and cultural functions.

### 49 **3. Urgent cessation of new waterway and hydropower development plans for Europe's** 50 **remaining natural rivers**

51 Rivers and their ecosystems are threatened by national and European plans for the  
52 development of class IV international river waterways as a part of the European TEN-T  
53 Network. In this context, it is of concern that, from 2021, the European Green Deal Roadmap  
54 is planning 'initiatives to increase and better manage the capacity of railways and inland  
55 waterways'. In particular, we consider as inadmissible the E40 Waterway project extending  
56 more than 2 000 kilometres across Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. It will cause irreversible  
57 hydrological changes, flooding in certain areas and re-draining in others, destruction of river-  
58 related ecosystems, as well as the inevitable spread of radionuclides accumulated after the  
59 Chernobyl disaster.

60 The project is also extremely questionable from the economic aspects. Due to the climate  
61 change many rivers have a much lower water flow than they used to or completely dry out in  
62 the summer time, thus being unusable for transport. Investments into their restructuring are  
63 mostly wasted, also because they are based on an old geography of the water flow that does  
64 not correspond to the present reality.

65 Inland navigation remains useful in EU countries like Belgium and The Netherlands, where it  
66 already exists and where its maintenance is possible, justified and does not harm the  
67 environment, especially where vessels can be electrified. However, the development of new  
68 river transport is much more expensive, slower and more carbon-intensive than rail. For  
69 example, the feasibility study procured by the Czechian government for the controversial  
70 Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal project was widely criticised by experts for having serious flaws,  
71 such as omitting significant external costs and downplaying environmental risks to unique  
72 habitats protected by EU legislation, whilst largely exaggerating benefits to local economies,  
73 flood protection, or reducing carbon emissions.

74 We also urge governments in the Balkans and all over Europe to stop building dams and  
75 small hydropower plants in protected areas and call for a rethink-ban of the subsidy  
76 schemes that foster development of small hydropower plants. Constructing these plants  
77 means that forests are cut down and river flows are disturbed, damaging river plants and  
78 fish. Rivers are also diverted into pipes which dries out the ground and opens the way for  
79 potentially deadly erosion. Some villages have lost access to water for cattle or agriculture,  
80 while the loss of forests is contributing to more frequent flash floods. Construction of small  
81 hydropower plants not only lead to irreversible ecological devastation but can destroy  
82 livelihoods of communities through the destruction of their agricultural land and by causing  
83 displacement of these communities. Dams should not be built in earthquake prone areas  
84 such as the Balkans.

### 85 **4. Evidence-based water and stream management practices**

86 Water and stream management must be based on science and experience and must respect  
87 contemporary knowledge about rivers' geo-ecosystems. The practice of water-course  
88 maintenance must be modernised so that it can be based on 'cooperation' with the natural  
89 processes of river dynamics, which should also include a considerable scaling down of

90 maintenance works. River training, if any, should use solutions which take into account  
91 rivers' hydraulic, geo-morphological and natural conditions, while water courses regulated  
92 according to the old concepts need to be rewilded on a large scale. Large-scale and long-  
93 distance water transfers between basins for economic purposes is an old-fashioned  
94 practice with severe ecological consequences that should be discarded by default.  
95 Continuation of the technical approach to the management of river systems and their  
96 drainage basins will inevitably exacerbate existing problems, droughts, floods and  
97 unfavourable changes in our continent's landscape. Rewilding the rivers and streams which  
98 were transformed in the past – or, in some cases, simply allowing such rivers to re-  
99 naturalise themselves through natural processes – will reinstate their characteristic species  
100 and habitats, slow down the run-off from the river basin, and enhance river valley retention.

101 **5. Give a protection status for a minimum of 30 % of wild rivers.**

102 It is necessary to give a strong protection status to rivers in an objective of preservation but  
103 also of reclaiming degraded space. This protective approach considers the entire river.  
104 Providing a strong legal footing for our rivers and wild rivers by relying on processes such as  
105 the Water Parliaments - deliberative bodies which bring together all the stakeholders for  
106 each water catchment - is a crucial step to be taken in order to protect these.