

National policy frameworks for implementation of EUTR requirements in the Western Balkans: a comparative analysis of Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia

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Although the European Union Timber Regulation (EUTR) entered into force nine years ago, its implementation is uneven among EU member states. In addition, some Western Balkan countries are still characterized by weak legality monitoring which increases the risk of trade in illegally harvested timber both originating from the region and from other sources. Regardless of this, research on the policy frameworks for the implementation of EUTR in the Balkan countries is limited. Our study aims to contribute to filling this gap by deepening the analysis of policy frameworks for the EUTR implementation in the Western Balkan countries (Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia). Qualitative content analysis was conducted on 22 policy documents from the three countries. Documents were coded deductively, using coding categories derived from EUTR. Targeted countries do not have policies directly addressing illegal logging or the prevention of illegal activities and show differences with reference to how EUTR requirements are embodied within national legislation. As EU member states, Slovenia and Croatia implemented EUTR through laws, however, while the Slovenian Forest Act addresses all EUTR obligations, the Croatian Law on EUTR Implementation does not directly address the obligation of legality. This obligation is addressed by the Croatian Law on Forests. As Serbia is not an EU member, it did not implement EUTR, nevertheless, Serbian Law on Forests addresses all EUTR obligations yet has some discrepancies regarding traceability obligations. Our findings indicate that the reporting quality of Competent Authorities in Slovenia and Croatia should also be improved, which is in line with the findings of existing grey literature and technical reports, such as WWF (2019), the European Commission (2020), and ClientEarth (2020). With ongoing discourses on Green Deal policies, the increasing focus on “deforestation-free” commodities, and the emerging of an EU taxonomy for environmentally sustainable economic activities, stricter implementation of EUTR (or EUTR-like) requirements might be expected at the EU level. Western Balkan countries will be no exception, and decision-makers, forestry professionals, as well as operators and traders, will face new challenges. To successfully implement EUTR, an increased number of checks, as well as stricter fines, will be needed along with improvements in the forest governance and policy: targeted countries will need to become more transparent and responsible concerning information availability.