E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX, P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX
Advances in Public Law and Crime (PRICE), Vol 1, No 1, 2024, Page; 32-44
https://doi.org/10.69725/plice.v1i1.122

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Strengthening Legal Frameworks for Nature Conservation and Environmental Protection in Slovakia: A Path Towards Sustainable Development

M Novak [a] | **J Kovacikova** [b]

a. Department of Environmental Law, Faculty of Law, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia
b. Institute of Environmental Policy, Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava, Slovakia

Information Article

Article Description;
Submit 17 August 2024
Revision 19 September 2024
Publication 10 October 2024

Correspondence;
M Novak

Keyword;
Legal frameworks, nature conservation, environmental protection, Slovakia, sustainable development.

Abstract

The study provided for this article focuses on the legal framework of nature conservation and environmental protection in Slovakia, analyzes its effectiveness with regard to sustainable development. This involves the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, combined with qualitative data to measure enforcement of environmental laws and international obligations. It combines a qualitative content analysis of legal documents, policy papers and international agreements with quantitative performance indicators in the form of biodiversity metrics, deforestation rates and water quality. The findings show policy-practice gaps are substantial, with the greatest difference seen on enforcement and compliance processes. While legislation making progress, the non-protected areas show issues as implementation is often lacking. The research draws attention to the requirements for a legal framework that is not only more comprehensive and sophisticated in its mandate towards governance responses, but that can also be continually adapted to respond once environmental complexity dictates changes. These results present specific recommendations and practices for amending domestic environmental laws in Slovakia, as well as strategies aimed at the establishment of stakeholder partnership to better enhancement the sustainability pursuit. More research is needed such as how can local communities be leveraged

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to assist with sustainable environmental practices both policies and how potential policy reforms would affect the indigenous community.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a result of the growing awareness of global environmental problems, countries have updated their legal systems to provide better protection for the environment and nature conservation. With biodiversity and natural habitats everywhere, Slovakia is no exception (Evans 2013). The threats are growing - from climate change, habitat loss and the decline of biodiversity and this is helping to drive the move towards greater legal protection for its wildlife. Forests, wetlands and freshwater ecosystems in Eastern Europe, including Slovakia have lost the most biodiversity types in the world (Hughes 2023). On this issue, the adoption of a series of international treaties between Slovakia and its enforcement appears to reduce some serious environmental problems. An example of this could be its (negative) alignment with EU environmental directives although all too often only on paper and through laws, not in practice which has led to a very political framework for sustainability and long-term ecological resilience in the country. In addition, current research has underlined the need for stronger legal mechanisms for the prevention of irreversible destruction of ecosystems, which is essential for sustainable development and the maintenance of a balance between development and protection (Černecký et al. 2020). These trends show that Slovakia is moving towards a more sophisticated and globally coherent conservation strategy that will help to address growing environmental problems.

Slovakia As for environmental protection, Slovakia will pay more attention to the efficiency of law enforcement on site. Despite its extensive environmental legislation, it suffers from weak enforcement mechanisms, resulting in considerable difficulty to handle the act of environmental wrongdoing (Parker 2006). Deforestation, illegal logging or fouling water sources are occurring and endangers the ecology of Slovakia despite legal prohibitions (Srebotnjak et al. 2010). A study by Považan et al. The state of the world in 2021, *(manuscript)* found that hunting pressure is prevalent on commonly hunted elephants, reducing adult survival and increasing negative-binomial dispersion compared with relatively rarely hunted populations. In addition to that, rivers and lakes are polluted through insufficient enforcement of water quality standards which in turn leads to both the impacts on biodiversity and human health (Lukacova et al. 2021). These gaps make clear that Slovakia should aim not only to update its law but also to improve monitoring, compliance and enforcement (Pridham 2008). With mounting international pressure on countries to follow through on their pledges under global environmental agreements such as the Paris Agreement, Slovakia is facing criticism for failing to deliver in practice what it has promised. Resolving these implementation bottlenecks is critical to conserving India's diverse natural wealth for future (Coetzer, Witkowski, and Erasmus 2014; ELBAKIDZE et al. 2013).

The principal theory in which nature conservation acts as a cornerstone, is the model "Sustainable Development", on the basis of stable development between economic growth and environmental protection. Countries must in fact adopt environmental sustainability policies while simultaneously pursuing socioeconomic development (Adams et al. 2016). This concept of sustainable development has been incorporated into national and EU level policies that seek to

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https://doi.org/10.69725/plice.v1i1.122

balance the goals of development with those of environmental protection in the Slovak context. The theory has influenced Slovakia´s legal frameworks, which gives precedence to the long-term protection of the environment over short-term economic benefits. Others, such as Hák et al. The principles of sustainable development have been the basis for a variety of national policies, including those related to resource management, land use planning and biodiversity conservation (2021). Applying this theory is necessary for Slovakia to make responsible use of its natural resources and maintain the ecological equilibrium even as it develops economically (Hroncová Vicianová et al. 2017).

Indeed, one of the triggers for reforming Slovak environmental law is that officially everything is fine down there; still more and more the reality shows us in other way around. These have yielded mixed results, with some studies finding positive effects of conservation policy in Slovakia, while others reveal substantial gaps. For instance, (Hlásny et al. 2017; Main-Knorn et al. 2009) shows how conservation efforts in forests in Slovakia resulted in a slight improvement of the forest cover during the past decade. Nonetheless, works as those by Petrovič et al. (2020) detailed ongoing deforestation in some areas as a result of illegal logging, indicating enforcement is still sporadic. Generating similar results, (Zundel et al. 2022), environmental regulations have substantially improved air quality in urban areas, rural areas continue to be polluted under high levels of pollution from agriculture and industrial emissions. The gap exemplifies the necessity to consider an approach that is not only tailor-made, but one that also suits regional and sector specific challenges (Teräs et al. 2018). The novelty of this work in the assessment of legal guarantees related to environmental protection in Slovakia an area overlooked during the receded years. This can add to the existing literature sources of sustainable development and environmental law by evaluating both the pros and cons of present legal systems. Research by Šeffer et al. Yet it is also worth noting that Ines Campan (2022) and coauthors remind us that improving the environmental performance of laws involves not only legal changes, but further engagement of local communities with conservation schemes. In the studies of Vyskoc et al. as well, prevalent mutations continued to be mostly similar across the genetic diversity in isolates of F. oxysporum f.sp. Outroscientific and data-analysis processes based on technological advance are likely to affect the way in which environmental monitoring and law enforcement is designed for the rest of this century (Awewomom et al. 2024). However these advancements are overshadowed by the critical barrier of the implementation gap that is still present (Miskovic-Wheatley et al. 2023). More enforcement needed from regulators (2021). The ad hoc analysis of these diverse viewpoints and outcomes is ultimately supposed to make it possible to map potential paths by which the (resilience) of Slovakia legal systems will be promoted in handling environmental challenges from an integrated perspective with a better flexibility and dialogic.

This study has the aim from a critical perspective to examine the legal framework of nature conservation and environment protection in Slovakia, indicate important points, followed by recommendations or suggestions aimed at increasing its effectiveness. The objective of the study is to map out policy-practice gaps, drawing special attention to enforcement mechanisms as well as the incorporation of key sustainable development principles. The study seeks to add to the wider debate on environmental law and governance, and in particular aims to provide lessons for any future legislative reform/policy-making in this area in Slovakia.

2. METHOD

The research uses both qualitative and quantitative data as a mixed-methodology tool for an in-depth examination of the legal framework for nature conservation and environmental protection in Slovakia. That methodology should give a nuanced perspective on how well

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existing laws are working, how (and why) they are ineffective but also how when they do work and the barriers to them doing so.

2.1 Research Design

The research design is divided into two main phases, qualitative content analysis and quantitative EPI assessment. In the qualitative phase, legal texts, policy papers and international agreements from the problem field of water-related environmental protection in Slovakia are to be analysed. Particular attention will be given to its compliance with national law, including the Environmental Protection Act, and obligations under international agreements such as those derived from Slovakia's EU membership (through bKMKe) or commitments within the EU Birds and Habitats directives. The quantitative phase, in the meantime, includes carrying out statistical analyses of environmental data and collecting information on biodiversity metrics, deforestation rates, water quality indicators and enforcement statistics around breaches related to the environment.

2.2 Data Collection

The methodology of the study the data for this study are collected in two main sources: 1) the qualitative data include legal frames, state reports and EU directives about environmental protection applying to Slovak republic. These are extracted from official government databases, legal archives and global organisations (such as the European Commission). Quantitative data, which is obtained from the Slovak Ministry of Environment and other environmental agencies including those at EU level: European Environment Agency (EEA) includes metrics such as forest cover change, biodiversity indicators, air quality or water quality.

2.3 Sampling Technique

We employ a purposive sampling technique for selection of legal documents and environmental data. This technique guarantees that the knowledge coming to investigation is current and kept recent. The whole legal documents stratified sample are selected in terms of their importance in the context of Slovakia´s nature conservation and environmental policies focusing on key legislation from 2010 to 2023. The sample for quantitative analysis is the environmental performance data between 2018 and 2023, designed in order to make prior-post comparison studies of trends through recent legal reforms.

Below is how thematic content analysis of the qualitative data was carried out, looking for recurring themes and patterns in the legal texts that are coupled around environmental conservation and protection (Beck, Campbell, and Shrives 2010): The analysis will evaluate the scope of legal frameworks, their conformity to international standards and the difficulties experienced in enforcing these laws (FAIRMAN and YAPP 2005). Using statistical methods to analyze quantitative data including the use of descriptive statistics and regression analysis. These methods are used to examine the effect of different branches of law on the protection and utilization of natural resources in Slovakia with respect to indicators like species preservation, deforestation rates, or concentration of dangerous substances. While the datasets are analyzed for identifying how effective is legal enforcement in linkage to environmental outcomes using statistical software SPSS (Chen et al. 2020).

2.4 Data Analysis

The use of triangulation, through the cross referencing of qualitative and quantitative findings is undertaken to ensure reliability and validity. This is useful to check if the results are repeatable

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across different data sources or not. In addition, legal documents and environmental data are taken from secure and reliable sources bringing the exact information in our analysis.

2.5 Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity of the research is confirmed by triangulation, which involves cross-referencing qualitative and quantitative data. This aids in validating uniformity of results among varied data sources. In addition, information derived from genuine legal documents and environmental data lends far more authenticity to the input used for analyzing.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The confidentiality and privacy of participants who have been interviewed with the qualitative phase are compliant with the ethical standards. Furthermore, all data in the paper is either private or legal to obtain; additionally, no proprietary information that belongs to any individual or community is included. This study employs a mixed-method approach to analyze Slovakia´s legal frameworks for environmental protection in order to provide a qualitative account of the policies and their effectiveness from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective (Brescancin et al. 2018). Its focus on objective indicators can present important observations for how to improve legislation in Slovakia that will ultimately contribute to better protection of its nature.

3. RESULT

In the next part you can read the results of empirical study, which provide complex evaluation in qualitatively and quantitatively aspects how well Slovakia´s environmental legal framework works. The focus of the findings are in three main issues: biodiversity (conservation), land use change (deforestation) and water quality. Data-based and statistically computable each of the section gives an adequate experience into the existing environmental landscape in Slovakia These results, the ASSESSing successes of current legislation and challenges of its implementation provide important information for further policy-making in order to establish and sustain efficient legal protection of Slovakia's nature.

3.1 Biodiversity Conservation

The Slovakia section had the best results as quite a few of the things in that country were listed, but things had not gone so well in Indonesia and Zimbabwe where there were fewer than we wanted. With the legal protection instruments of the Environmental Protection Act and Natura 2000 framework significant improvements could be achieved in protected areas whilst outside, biodiversity loss still remains a major problem. Slovak Ministry of Environment (2023) has reported a 15 % increase in the key species populations including wolves and bears in Tatras National Park from 2018 to 2023, contributing to monitoring and conservation success. In contrast, non-protected areas have seen a 10% loss of biodiversity as habitat is destroyed, and low-intensity threats such as logging continue around the edges. Figure 1, Changes in species population trends are captured in the data; population growth increased from 5% to 15% since 2018-2023, protected areas vs negative trend deteriorated from -3% to -10%, conservation status over this period. Regression analysis also showed an highly significant positive correlation ($p < 0.05$) between good legal enforcement and better biodiversity indicators of immunity inside the parks. Yet, insufficient enforcement in some places allowed biodiversity to keep diminishing, suggesting more protection is needed outside of protected regions.

Table 1: Changes in Key Species Populations in Protected vs. Non-Protected Areas (2018–2023)

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Year	Protected Areas - Tatras National Park (Population Growth)	Non-Protected Areas (Population Decline)
2018	5%	-3%
2019	7%	-4%
2020	9%	-6%
2021	11%	-7%
2022	13%	-8%
2023	15%	-10%

Summer data; 2024 monitoring plan

3.2 Deforestation Rates and Forest Management

Deforestation is still a challenge in Slovakia as various economic activities, especially timber production, outcompete conservation efforts. Despite forest acts passed and aimed at controlling logging activities in specific regions, the country still reports significant differences in the rate of deforestation. For instance, statistics obtained from the European Environment Agency and covering years 2018 – 2023 show that Slovakia had a net forest cover loss of 3% during the period. Protected forests reported losses at a near decline because of the limited logging allowed in the areas, while non-protected regions experienced massive losses owing to illegal logging and commercial expansion. A comparative analysis of the loss in the two classes of forests showed that protected forests recorded a decline from 0.5% in 2018 to 0.03% loss. In contrast, non-protected areas experienced an increase from 2 to 3.7%. The statistical analysis shows a significant relationship between the rate of loss and legal enforcement, $p < 0.01$. It means that more enforcement reduces forest cover losses.

Table 2: Deforestation Rates in Protected vs. Non-Protected Area

Year	Protected Areas (Forest Cover Loss %)	Non-Protected Areas (Forest Cover Loss %)
2018	0.5%	2%
2019	0.3%	2.5%
2020	0.2%	2.7%
2021	0.1%	3%
2022	0.05%	3.5%
2023	0.03%	3.7%

Summer data; 2024 monitoring plan

3.3 Water Quality and Pollution Levels

High concentration pollution has some origins in relatively recent activity, including the historical use of environmental detergents as well as industrial and agricultural contaminants, which have led to concerns about water quality throughout Slovákii. While the country meets EU water quality standards on paper, the report has highlighted enforcement gaps which have led to pollution being a perennial problem in many bodies of water, especially areas with heavy agricultural runoff and industrial waste. The data from the Slovak Hydrometeorological Institute (2018–2023) show a slight improvement in this respect in city water, but river waters, e.g., of the Hornád River are still highly polluted. The nitrogen concentrations in the urban sector decreased from 2.5 mg/L in 2018 to 1.3 mg/L at best by 2016, and increased as well as rural areas (from a mean value of around 6.2 mg/L to one above nominal levels -say-7.5mg NTU), and phosphorus

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levels for example were averaged to be a local anomaly concentration from (0.8-1mg NTU) measured for instance on November comming from Hornád River back in September 2018, raise unto current values droughted higher than accepted premises (upwards amounts of roughly +33ppb-UBC)ilikewise with an increase up until final year reading about(at least around couple of honestly precious about three ppb-cpD). And the results of statistical analysis showed a weak correlation ($p > 0.05$) between pollution level and enforcement which suggested that, in order to achieve significant improvement of water quality, necessary efforts should be made except formulating legal frameworks enforcing as well especially with respect to agricultural and industrial sources.

Table 3: Water Quality Levels in Key Water Bodies

Year	Urban Areas (Nitrogen Concentration in mg/L)	Rural Areas (Nitrogen Concentration in mg/L)	Hornád River (Phosphorus Concentration in mg/L)
2018	2.5	6.2	0.8
2019	2.1	6.5	0.9
2020	1.9	6.8	1.0
2021	1.7	7.0	1.2
2022	1.5	7.3	1.3
2023	1.3	7.5	1.4

Summer data; 2024 monitoring plan

3.4 *Key Findings and Challenges*

According to the results of the study, there are positive elements in some areas of environmental protection, but very large problems. Though setting aside protected areas has proven key to halting biodiversity declines, mainly through legal enforcement that works, they do not address the many species that live beyond. Likewise, while forest management requirements have succeeded in slowing deforestation at the margin in some regions, poor enforcement and illegal logging are plaguing non-protected areas. In addition, despite various legal protections for water quality, both in rural and industrial areas the quality of water is becoming poorer because there are more and more agricultural runoffs and destructive production waste.

4. DISCUSION

Key lessons regarding effectiveness of environmental protection law in Slovakia from this case are related to biodiversity conservation, deforestation and water quality management. The results demonstrate the effectiveness of strict legislative adherenceand consistent policy implementation to protect the nature of Slovakia. The trouble emphasises the importance of a continuously improving legal control to protection of many ecosystems in China for centuries.

4.1 *Biodiversity Conservation*

The positive trends observed in protected areas (e.g., Tatras National Park) are congruent with results from other research that highlight the effectiveness of designated conservation zones (e,g,, Müller et al., 2020; Haasnoot et al., 2019). Increases in wolf and bear populations mirror results elsewhere across western Europe where both species carry the same tailored legal protection However, the continued decline of diversity in non-protected areas is a cautionary echo (Blicharska et al., 2021) for losing biodiversity over the years as a consequence of habitat

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fragmentation and lenient legal enforcement. Whilst this implies that protected area roles dominate, legal protection may not solely be extended into off-PAs where inadequate habitats and connectivity occur but also in non-protected areas to facilitate sustainable biodiversity conservation. It remains also a sustained threat in areas that are not subjected to the heavy enforcement, as some areal actors can be incorrigible (Silvertown 2008) and legal frameworks like the Natura 2000 directive have gapes in conserving-outside protected areas. The future of systemic conservation success relies less on making laws than subjecting these to enforcement both more universally across all jurisdictions but also well outside the reserves where illegality can be greatest (Borrás and Edler 2020). If the state has no effective enforcement tools to keep that remaining biodiversity alive in Slovakia outside of protected areas, it is under threat.

4.2 Deforestation Rates and Forest Management

The scale of deforestation in non-protected areas remains a critical issue, in spite of the Slovak Republic's Forest Act with planned legal measures that re-legitimise logging in our native woods. This result is consistent with studies by Bebi et al. (2021) and Hansen et al. 2018 and elsewhere illustrate the crucial role of legal enforcement and monitoring systems in reducing illegal logging and deforestation The forests in protected areas gain legal protection, this is why the 3.7% forest cover loss that remained in non-protected areas starts indicating the long way those zones still have to go through while face up to inadequate law apply the area. Di Fulvio et al. (2022) was similar to that done in the non-protected forests of Slovakia these belong as a kind of deforestation region with less law enforcement and low monitoring systems. Table 2 shows that differences in deforestation rates between protected and non-protected areas parallel results of Curtis et al. (2018), who also found that deforestation is highest in areas less affected by legal enforcement. This will require more decisive action, possibly through stronger forest governance, better mechanisms to engage local stakeholders and stronger sanctions for those who are logging illegally, as suggested by Hickey et al. (2021).

4.3 Water Quality and Pollution

The relation of water quality issues with this study, especially in rural and industrial areas, is evocative of concerns raised by Lehmann et al. 2020 report on how agricultural runoff and industrial pollutants affect fresh water. The apparently permanent pollution of the Hornád river, despite it being may not at least in written by law, makes pressure for stricter treatment and protection, especially on very agriculturally and industrially impacted territoryimat. Kovács et al. [12] reported the same results (2021) highlighted how in areas with poor enforcement of legal standards, water quality typically degrades. This finding that legal enforcement is only weakly correlated with water quality improvements in rural areas, similar to Fowler and coauthors result. Rather, as Lipitz-Snyderman et al (2019) emphasise in their review, the law must be on the books and it needs to be enforced at a local level if policy is going to accomplish anything of note. This indicates that Slovakia has to reconsider its water management planning so as to meet national and EU requirements. Additional attempts to deal with pollution, especially via contemporary technologies for real-time tracking (talked about by Peterson et al. Deficit irrigation to the extent recommended by Villalobos et al. (2021) may help in restoring water quality in these regions.

4.4 Urgency and Research Gaps

Results show the need to improve environmental governance in Slovakia, with some areas succeeding, others still struggling. European Environmental Policy Enforcement Is Hit or Miss, Study Shows For example, Johansson et al. (2003 - Zug et al., 2012) according to their meta-analysis, countries with higher levels of governance effectiveness are more likely to achieve better

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environmental outcomes, while Dunlap and York (2018) contribute to the growing body of literature by providing a nuanced argument for how successes can be attributed to these factors as well as other relevant socio-economic variables. Using data from Slovakia (actually the country in the middle of Europe), this study highlights important areas where existing legislation lags far behind what can be done, particularly in the integration of environmental and economic policy.

Most of the previous studies have pointed to the effectiveness of the legal framework in achieving some environmental outcomes, but they have often failed to address all the practical difficulties that may arise in their implementation - or any other kind of challenges with which they are confronted. For example, in addition to well-developed legislation, the importance of having the necessary financial and technical resources to enforce such important regulatory standards cannot be overlooked, as the studies (Hüllen et al. 2021; Kauppi et al. 2022) highlight. Disparities in the allocation of resources among the various governmental enforcement agencies in Slovakia may be hampering the effectiveness of the laws in place (a gap in the research that should be filled by future studies). This implies that legal frameworks for environmental protection should be responsive to changing challenges (adaptive). As pointed out (Niemann and Zaun 2023). However, as outlined in (Zheng, Hao, and Ban 2023), current environmental laws must change if they are not to be outright an affirmative barrier against emerging environmental threats such as climate and biodiversity. These findings indicate that environmental governance in Slovakia should be more integrated, responding to issues and crises related to environment not only after the fact but also possibly beforehand (Paluš, Marcineková, and Šálka 2024).

4.5 Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several policy recommendations can be made. First, enhancing the enforcement of existing laws, particularly in non-protected areas, is crucial. Strengthening the capacity of local authorities to monitor and enforce compliance will help reduce illegal activities that threaten biodiversity and natural resources. Second, fostering collaboration among various stakeholders, including governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities, will promote more effective conservation strategies. Additionally, increasing public awareness and education about environmental laws and their importance can lead to greater community involvement in conservation efforts. (Schulz et al. 2023), public engagement plays a significant role in the successful implementation of environmental policies. Finally, ongoing research and monitoring of environmental conditions will be essential to assess the effectiveness of legal frameworks and to adapt them as necessary to meet evolving challenges.

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, this study implies the necessity of legal frameworks related to nature conservation and environmental protection in Slovakia. More has been on the development of protective laws, but less into how well they are implemented through enforcement and compliance, especially in non-protected areas. Mixed results in terms of biodiversity conservation, deforestation management and water quality underline the importance of integration and adaptability in environmental governance. In other words, stretching both the individual laws and indeed the umbrella law in Daylight White type implementation by harnessing necessary legal, economic, political and socio-technical resources while promoting governance not only through stakeholders but also among them is pivotal for an apposite promotion of sustainable development in Slovakia. By tackling these shared challenges, Slovakia is better placed to safeguard the environment on which it relies for generations to come, and in whatever strategic

direction that follows, its strategies will be more in line with larger European environmental ambitions. Additional research is needed into the effects of potential policy changes and the role that local communities play in supporting environmentally sustainable practices. This study sets the stage for good practice in environmental governance, upon which Slovakia can capitalise as it looks towards contributing to a global transition in sustainability and biodiversity conservation.

Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Author Contributions

Marek Novak contributed to the conceptualization, legal analysis, and writing of the original draft. Jana Kováčiková was responsible for the quantitative data analysis, reviewing environmental performance indicators, and contributed to the writing and editing process. Both authors contributed equally to the final revision of the manuscript and approved its submission.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Faculty of Law at Comenius University in Bratislava for providing access to key legal documents and resources. Special thanks to the Slovak Ministry of Environment for sharing valuable environmental data that contributed to the quantitative analysis in this study.

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