Scientists generally agree that population growth, unsustainable lifestyles, and economic and political short-sightedness all pose grave threats to the planet, but there is less agreement about how to best put thought into action.
‘We simply are not in a sustainable situation.’
Dennis Meadows
Author of Limits to Growth

‘The question is whether we’re able to turn limits into opportunities.’
Wolfgang Sachs
Wuppertal Institute

Leading thinkers confront humankind’s key dilemmas at the 3rd World Science Forum

Experts from five continents discussed global conditions for achieving sustainable development during the session “Investing in Knowledge for Sustainability,” which was organised by the Regional Environmental Center (REC) with generous financial support from the Italian Ministry for Environment, Land and Sea.

The November 8–9 session was part of the third World Science Forum, which took place at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in partnership with UNESCO, ICSU and the European Commission.

Watch the videos at www.rec.org/wsf

The Italian Trust Fund

The Italian Trust Fund (ITF) is a targeted contribution of the Italian Ministry for the Environment, Land and Sea to the Regional Environmental Center (REC). The ITF operates within the framework of environmental improvement and cooperation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Its activities are consistent with the REC’s mission and complementary to other REC programmes — sharing the same ambition to strive for a solution of environmental problems afflicting the CEE region. For more information on ITF’s activities visit www.rec.org/rec/programs/itf.
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Mois Moshev

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The Italian Trust Fund has pledged full sponsorship for this special issue on knowledge and science, especially devoted to and inspired by the third World Science Forum held in Budapest in November 2007. Support for this issue has been also offered: by the SPUTNIC and CURACAO projects, funded by the EC’s 6th Framework Programme for Research and Development; and SECTOR, funded by Sida.
Anthropologists generally claim that group thinking is deeply embedded in human nature. If this is true, the ‘group-think’ trait became even more encouraged within the Soviet system of working class domination, Communist Party leadership, collective or one, pioneer teams and pensioners’ clubs. Private responsibility was limited, discouraged and systematically uprooted—even more so than was private property. Even the authoritarian decisions of top-level leadership were often attributed to groups, such as the Communist Party Politburo, Central Committee, factor rings, or regional or local council. In this way no one could be held individually accountable for taking such decisions. The subversive effect of such a practice was that ordinary people gradually accommodated themselves to a system in which personal responsibility was neither sought nor expected.

During the period of transition to democracy and market-based economies, the nations of Central and Eastern Europe embraced individualism in various guises, whether in terms of wealth, entrepreneurship or political leadership. But while private, group-oriented, and collective interests have thrived over public or group-centred concerns, the concept of individual responsibility has been slower to catch on. I am constantly amazed at the general reluctance of people living in CEE to demand accountability from elected representatives or paid service providers who are often guilty of private interests, or political or ethical malfeasance. As a result, corrupt officials and incompetent professionals—even rude taxi drivers and waiters—have a much better chance of staying on the job and making life more miserable for all of us.

As a consequence, individual leadership and environmental vision have become very rare commodities at the state level. At the same time, environmental activism with quite a bit at stake personally have been largely ignored by governments, or at least marginalised and ridiculed by mainstream media and society.

Things have, however, started to change with recent EU accession. To begin with, and thanks to Brussels, activists and civil society have started to gain increased domestic clout. The EU architecture is built on societies where individual opinions, voter approval and customer satisfaction matter, which is why activist opposition to motorway construction in Poland, gold mines in Romania or nuclear plants in Lithuania is heard more clearly at home in these new EU countries. New members must not only enforce EU laws, commitments and rules to protect the environment, but also buck EU opinion in international discussions, of which the Environment for Europe forum in Belgrade is one example.

A strong political commitment to the environment requires strong vision and leadership. Inspiring examples from the ‘old’ EU have found their way into CEE politics. Take Svend Aukens, the Danish Social Democrat who during his tenure as minister of environment turned his country into a world model for using renewable energy and sowed the seeds of the pioneering Aarhus Convention. Aarhus has provided societies with vital ingredients for cultivating individual responsibility and environmental action, securing citizens’ access to information, participating in decision making, and gaining access to justice on environmental issues.

In Belgrade, Europe’s ministers demanded stronger political commitment to nature protection from the countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA region). These countries have thus far relied on international help to improve their state of environment, but should now develop their leadership and demonstrate by doing—which means travelling the route once taken by the CEE region, and learning, if possible, from the region’s experiences. One such experience is learning the importance of individual responsibility at all levels.

But the Aarhus Convention cannot bring about sufficient change by itself. Now well past the point when green leadership was a no-go, Aukens are now emerging among the region’s state officials, politicians and experts. The success of the ‘Green Presidents’ initiative, launched by Hungary’s head of state Laszlo Solyom, is just one regional example of individual vision and environmental commitment. Not surprisingly, at the recent World Science Forum, held in Budapest, the initiative successfully brought scientific knowledge into real life. In order to take responsibility, people need to be well informed and knowledgeable about the state of environment, and be made aware of the consequences of individual choice.

Taking individual responsibility for the environmental impacts of daily existence is the key for successful environmental policy and real life improvement. Indeed, Dennis Meadows, the American who co-wrote Limits to Growth three decades ago, warned that old habits will likely prove too difficult to break—and especially in CEE where consumerism is still gaining power. But indications are that the region possesses a critical mass of citizens, officials and leaders who are well informed, connected to the internet and poised to take action. If this is true, Meadows’ grim forecast may be proven wrong—which is, of course, what he and all of us should hope for.
Is interactive learning your new way of getting the point across about nature protection?

Last night in Berlin I received a UNESCO peace prize. I spoke for 20 minutes about some very serious problems and I played two games. My guess is, if you asked somebody: “You went to Meadows’ ceremony, what did he have to say?” they would answer: “Well, I don’t exactly remember. He got this prize and we played some games.” The idea behind interactive learning comes from an old, Chinese saying: ‘When I hear, I forget. When I see, I remember. When I do, I understand.’ In other words, learning by doing. Environmental [sustainability] touches two issues. One is to get people to understand it, and the second is to help them convert that understanding into changed behaviour.

How does such a game work?

Cross your arms, look down and remember which one is on top. Repeat it again. Ninety-five percent of people always cross their arms the same way. Half the people put their left wrist on top, and the other half the right one. This is very interesting: Each person always does the same, but half do it one way and half do it the other. When you get into a habit you stick with it and don’t change it any more. You keep doing the same thing automatically. And it’s the same with our habits of using energy and generating CO₂ or driving our car. They don’t cause us any problems so we quit thinking of them and think about other things instead. Which is good. I mean, if we had to think hard every time we crossed our arms we’d never get anything done. You need to have habits. But now I say we have to change these habits because they don’t work for us anymore. So, change your habits and cross your arms the other way!

(After trying to cross arms the other way.) It’s difficult!

But you could do it! Try again. This shows three things about habits that apply to energy use and all other [sustainable behaviour] stuff: First, it’s possible to change them. Second, you have to think about it. It doesn’t happen automatically. Third, it’s uncomfortable at first.

And that’s the way it’s going to be with these other habits that we have to change. It will be uncomfortable at first, and we have to be ready to go through a period of being uncomfortable, because otherwise we’ll never manage to make a change.

Have Eastern Europeans even had time to think about practicing sustainable development and changing habits, given that they’ve only recently grown accustomed to higher living standards?

Dennis Meadows has been “a system thinker for nearly his entire life,” according to the scientist’s Wikipedia page. The co-author of Limits to Growth (published in 1972) wrote in this important work that, unless things change radically, humanity’s existence could become impossible for nature’s system to sustain. A cycling enthusiast and advocate of interactive learning games, Meadows can now say: “I warned you 35 years ago, and now it’s too late!” Nonetheless, he is not without optimism.

**We need to change our habits!**

By Pavel Antonov

**Is interactive learning your new way of getting the point across about nature protection?**

Last night in Berlin I received a UNESCO peace prize. I spoke for 20 minutes about some very serious problems and I played two games. My guess is, if you asked somebody: “You went to Meadows’ ceremony, what did he have to say?” they would answer: “Well, I don’t exactly remember. He got this prize and we played some games.” The idea behind interactive learning comes from an old, Chinese saying: ‘When I hear, I forget. When I see, I remember. When I do, I understand.’ In other words, learning by doing. Environmental [sustainability] touches two issues. One is to get people to understand it, and the second is to help them convert that understanding into changed behaviour.

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Have Eastern Europeans even had time to think about practicing sustainable development and changing habits, given that they’ve only recently grown accustomed to higher living standards?

**Will that bring great loss of human life?**

Yes, and no. Part of humankind dies every year anyway. We are all going to die sooner or later, but the key point is that global population is going to come back down again. As to when, it’s an interesting question, as it depends on so many things. It depends on attitudes towards equity. If you want to have the

Continued on page 21
The Sea of Azov, which forms a link between Russia and Ukraine, was the scene of a violent storm on November 11 that resulted in the sinking or running aground of at least 10 ships and the deaths of at least six sailors. One of the sunk vessels, the Volganeft-139, was an oil tanker carrying 4,800 tonnes (1.3 million gallons) of fuel oil when it split in two during the storm. Roughly half of the oil spilled into the water and began washing up on shore soon afterward. Experts are still assessing damages to the environment and wildlife.

The Volganeft spill took place in the narrow Kerch Strait, which separates the Sea of Azov from the much larger Black Sea, and could take years to clean up, environmental officials have warned. Cold winter temperatures are likely to push most of the oil far below the surface, making location and removal efforts even more difficult. According to Novosti, Vitaly Spiri donov of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in Russia claimed that the seabed’s fauna and flora would suffer most, as “most of the fuel oil will settle on the bottom and will be thrown ashore only gradually.”

The accident is also particularly devastating for the area where the spill took place, as the Kerch Strait serves as a passage between the two seas for migrating fish, including many endangered varieties. The strait is also a major route for southward bird migrations, and is also home to the Black Sea porpoise. Preliminary estimates reveal that some 30,000 birds have been killed as a result of the pollution, and Russian weather service experts have published a statement that water samples in the strait taken on November 13 contained 2.5 milligrams of oil per litre—“50 times above the acceptable concentration level.”

As the WWF was committing some 4,000 volunteers to assist with cleanup efforts and called at the same time for Russia to adopt stricter transport legislation to prevent future disasters, Times Online reported allegations that 24 captains had been warned well in advance about approaching heavy weather, but that several had put to sea Nonetheless. As for the Volganeft, it was originally designed for oil transport on rivers, and was not built to withstand such a storm.

Alexander Minin, a senior academician at the Institute of Global Climate and Ecology, explained to Novosti that the cyclone causing the type of storm that occurred in the Kerch Strait is an annual phenomenon in the area, but that the storms have been moving further and further north, which Minin attributes to global warming.
**European Union update**

- **Stricter pesticide regulation on the cards**
  
The EU’s Environment Committee voted on September 12 to take a more precautionary approach in regulating the sale of pesticides in the EU. Various environmental groups believe that the MEPs’ shift of emphasis is a vast improvement on the European Commission’s originally weak proposal. The key component of the new approach is a clear rejection of a three-tier solution in which countries are forced to accept existing pesticide protocols of neighbouring countries.

  “This vote shows that [the European] Parliament has begun taking into account increasing scientific evidence that pesticide exposure, even at low doses, is a threat to people’s health,” said Monica Guarinoni, pesticides policy officer at the Health & Environment Alliance.

- **MEPs tackle airline emissions**
  
On October 2, the Environment Committee voted to back a tighter emissions cap, thereby strengthening EC proposals to bring airlines into the EU’s carbon emission trading scheme (ETS). Prior to the vote there had been a failure to achieve consensus on key issues such as allowance distribution and the cap itself.

The committee recommends that airlines, upon joining the EU ETS, should cap their emissions at 75 percent of average levels during 2004–6. Rapporteur MEP Peter Liese, who had proposed a 90 percent cap, opined following the vote that 75 percent is “not feasible technically” and threatens the competitiveness of EU airlines. The EC, meanwhile, had proposed a 100 percent cap.

MEPs confirmed their support for the aviation sector’s inclusion in the ETS from 2010, while industry groups expressed derision over the vote.

- **EU slow to heed Agrofuel warnings**
  
Friends of the Earth Europe (FoEE) published in September warnings about the hazards of agrofuels (or biofuels), and is urging the EU to take greater interest in the perceived threats. Earlier, the OECD had raised concerns that biofuels could take a greater toll on the environment than petrol and diesel usage, and could also lead to rises in food prices.

The World Land Trust got in on the act by writing last August in *Science* that the EU target of biofuels comprising 10 percent of petrol and diesel consumption by 2020 will not effectively result in fewer carbon emissions.

The starkest assessment, however, has been provided by the United Nations. The UN warned in April that a wide-scale changeover to biofuels will be particularly harmful to the world’s poorest people and to farmers who do not own their land. At worst, the UN forecasts, biofuel-oriented crop cultivation could result in concentrated land ownership that could drive the poorest farmers off their smallholdings and into even deeper poverty.

- **Dimas calls for GM maize ban**
  
Green groups applauded an October 25 call from Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas for an EU-wide ban on two varieties of genetically modified (GM) corn. The proposal is based on allegedly clear scientific evidence that cultivation of the two crops would cause environmental harm. The crops in question, Syngenta’s Bt11 and Pioneer Dow’s 1507, are engineered to produce a Bt toxin that is poisonous to certain pests; but study results have raised fears that the crops are toxic to certain butterfly species and could cause long-term soil damage. Other published studies show that effects from GM Bt corn could prove even more widespread and unpredictable, which is why green groups are arguing that the EU’s existing risk-evaluation procedure for such agricultural products is inadequate.

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**EEA report: pollution not down**

- A European Environment Agency (EEA) report published on November 13 revealed that Europe has made substantial cuts in air pollutants across the continent since 1997, but that concentrations of ozone and particulate matter have remained constant. An EEA press release announcing the study results outlined three key points of interest.

  First, from 1990–2004 up to 43% of Europe’s urban population was exposed to PM10 concentrations in excess of the EU’s air quality limit value, the worst affected areas being Belgium, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy’s Po Valley, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and southern Spain.

  During the same period, Europe’s urban population was exposed to similar excesses of ozone concentrations, and crop and forest exposure to ozone exceeded “limit/critical values” over very large areas of Central and Southern Europe.

  Finally, human exposure to other potentially harmful air pollutants has decreased markedly because of effective continent-wide air quality policies. This is particularly true regarding sulphur dioxide emissions from power and heat generation, and lower carbon monoxide and lead emissions from passenger cars.

**Automobile industry idling on carbon dioxide cuts**

- The Transport and Environment group (T&E), having been granted access to documents concerning carbon dioxide emissions of new cars sold in the European Union, published its findings in September. The T&E analysis was based on sales figures used by the European Commission to compile its own reports on the car industry’s progress towards meeting a voluntary CO2 emissions target of 140 grams per kilometre by 2008/9. Prior to the study, the most recent official commission provided data up through 2004.

  European carmakers, according to the study, accounted for 81 percent of total EU sales last year, but cut emissions by just 0.2 percent, for an average of 160g/km.

  Based on the evidence, T&E campaigners argue that carmakers will almost certainly miss a voluntary industry target of 140g/km. Manufacturers would have to reduce CO2 emissions by 5–6 percent annually over the next two or three years, which far exceeds the reduction rate of previous years. If T&E’s predictions hold true, the European car industry will shoot wide of its 2008 target by approximately 15g/km.

  ACEA, the European carmakers’ association, declined comment on specific T&E figures, but ACEA spokeswoman Sigrid de Vries told ENDs that “counterproductive” safety and air quality regulations prevented the industry from being able to achieve more significant cuts in CO2 emissions, claiming that such requirements actually increased emissions by 15g/km.
Much to the chagrin of Italian and Albanian activists and pressure groups, the Albanian Central Election Commission rejected on October 25, 2007 a public referendum on development of an oil and gas terminal in the port city of Vlora (pop. 150,000). In early October the Vlora City Council, responding to environmental concerns and protests, approved the holding of a citizens’ initiative on construction of the terminal, the latest component of a no less controversial industrial and energy park located just six kilometres north of Vlora.

Italian company La Petrolifera Italo Rumena is promoting construction of the EUR 50 million terminal, while some of the power-plant projects have already received backing from financial institutions such as the World Bank. An investigation is pending into legal controversies surrounding details of financing and terms surrounding the deal.

Project opponents claim that La Petrolifera received extremely favourable concessions from the Albanian government in 2004, among which was a ‘purchase price’ of one euro for 150,000 square metres of waterfront property on which to construct a storage facility. Also, under terms of the deal, the property is to become completely Italian-owned after a period of 30 years, while La Petrolifera has been granted the right to become sole operator in Vlora Bay.

“This agreement will not only create a monopoly situation for a foreign company in the Albanian energy sector, but also provides full legal immunity for Petrolifera should there be any environmental and social damage in Vlora Bay,” said Catarina Amicucci from Rome-based Campagna per la Riforma della Banca Mondiale.

Commenting on potential environmental impacts, Gani Mezini from the Civic Alliance for the Protection of Vlora Bay said: “The [bay] will suffer irreparable harm from the oil industry development, and from the immense oil traffic accompanying it. We are ready to repurchase the land at a premium price and completely decontaminate and rehabilitate it.”

Development plans have also raised concerns for the local tourist and fishing industries, as well as fears that coastal ecosystems and the protected Narta Lagoon could suffer significant environmental damage.

**ALBANIA**

**Defying spirit of Aarhus, commission quashes Vlora Bay referendum**

Twenty years after the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) brought out its highly influential report, *Our Common Future*, a new study warns that humanity is at grave risk unless it finds ways to combat climate change and species extinction and feed a growing global population.

In October 2007, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) announced the publication of *Global Environment Outlook: Environment for development (GEO-4)*, the latest in UNEP’s series of flagship reports. Prepared by approximately 390 experts and reviewed by more than 1,000 others residing worldwide, *GEO-4* “assesses the current state of the global, atmosphere, land, water and biodiversity, describes changes since 1987, and identifies priorities for action,” according to UNEP’s October press release.

*GEO-4* echoes the Brundtland Commission in claiming that the ‘environmental crisis,’ ‘development crisis’ and ‘energy crisis’ are actually one single crisis, and that growing human numbers alone are leading to: declining fish stocks; loss of fertile land through degradation; unsustainable pressure on resources; dwindling amounts of available fresh water; and, risk that environmental damage could pass the point of no return.

In terms of climate change, *GEO-4* says the threat is so great that “large cuts” urgently need to be made in greenhouse gases by mid-century. The report also warns that “we are living far beyond our means” and that “humanity’s footprint is 21.9 hectares per person while the Earth’s biological capacity is, on average, only 15.7 hectares per person.”

Despite the fact that political will and leadership is needed to make climate change a global priority, the report brands today’s global response as “woefully inadequate” and finds “a remarkable lack of urgency” in tackling the problem.

While the report avows that technology can reduce human vulnerability to environmental stresses, it also identifies a need “to correct the technology-centred development paradigm.”

“I sincerely hope *GEO-4* is the final [wake-up call],” says UN under-secretary general and UNEP executive director Achim Steiner. “The systematic destruction of the Earth’s natural and nature-based resources has reached a point where the economic viability of economies is being challenged—and where the bill we hand on to our children may prove impossible to pay.”

The entire contents of *GEO-4* can be found at <www.unep.org/geo/geo4/>. 
The Sixth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference may not have produced breathtaking results, but at least the process remains alive and kicking

What happened in Belgrade

By Pavel Antonov

A s a communicator by profession and networker by inclination, I am not particularly hard-wired to produce an unbiased critique of the ministerial summit in Belgrade, which took place on October 10–12. For one thing, I tend to be overly positive about events that offer a melting pot of ideas, projects, politics and investment—and the Belgrade conference is certainly an example of such an event. Indeed, Belgrade drew the largest crowd of decision- and policy makers, professionals, donors, activists and passers-by to talk about the environment since the previous UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) conference, held five years ago. In the end, there was a final declaration, a few thematic statements and countless side events to solidify Belgrade’s legacy; but to better understand what actually happened there, I took on board the assessments of a person who was involved with the particularities of the process, both before and during Belgrade. Tibor Farago, Hungary’s chief environmental negotiator for the past decade, suggested that I write about what didn’t happen in Belgrade. With little hope that he would take my advice on, say, how to draft a ministerial statement, I took his advice.

DIAGNOSIS AND REFORM

The European Environmental Agency announced in Belgrade its diagnosis of the state of Europe’s environment. Europe, according to the report, suffers from unsustainable consumption and production, improper disposal of hazardous waste, and air pollution by particles and gases such as ozone and nitrogen oxides. Among the listed symptoms: more than 100 million people without clean water, loss of biodiversity; growing greenhouse emissions and climate change impacts. Problems are generally more serious in Eastern Europe, where government response also appears to be the least efficient, according to Policies for a Better Environment: Progress in EECCA, a report by the Environmental Action Programme.

Ministers and delegations from 51 countries, along with the EU Commission, agreed in Belgrade that reform is needed in order for the EIE process to be able to rise to these challenges. In their final declaration, delegates recommended further impact assessment: refocusing, reformating, and a resetting of priorities. They called for stakeholders (the business community in particular) to become more active, and asked for external resources and expertise. It remains unclear what the reforms will lead to, but at least the talks have given some indications, Farago said.

STILL BREATHING

One of the main themes in Belgrade was that countries lagging behind are either not recognising the environment as a top priority, or lack sufficient resources to place it higher on the agenda. Ministers pledged that EECCA will remain a focus of the process, but added that countries in the region should strengthen their own political commitments to the environment, and not just make calls for support. NGOs have also expressed dissatisfaction with the low level of European cooperation between developed and transitional countries.

Biodiversity was another important theme. Nature conservation across the pan-European region was the subject of a long debate—mostly concerning whether conservation should remain part of the EIE Framework, or proceed instead under the UN’s Biodiversity Convention. After all, the ministers reaffirmed their Kiev commitment to halt biodiversity loss by 2010 and issued a special statement.

Education was another focus in Belgrade. Education and environment ministers from the UNECE region met for the first time within the EIE framework and, in a joint statement, pledged a regional commitment to education for sustainable development. But behind closed doors, there was heated discussion as to whether education belongs to the process—prompting Farago to refer to the outcome as “a happy end with some headache.”

The topic of energy caused even severer headaches, with the EU, Russia and Turkey eyeing renewable, nuclear energy and hydro solutions, respectively. Fireworks emerged during attempts to define renewable energy, the end result of which was a minimal compromise in the declaration text with no mention of specific low-carbon solutions. Repeated calls for energy efficiency were partial compensation.

Climate change was another dividing issue on the agenda. Russia suggested ignoring the issue completely, arguing that the issue already claims too much attention. The EU insisted on stronger wording, while the US played the position of broker. “At times during negotiations you had a feeling that pan-European cooperation on every issue has turned into a triangle between the EU, Russia and the US. These are the three most important constituent stakeholders,” Farago recalled.

But in the end, Farago’s Belgrade assessment was not entirely negative. “Most importantly, the process did not die!” he exclaimed. And where there is life, there is hope for improvement. On this we both agree.

EU regulation could rein in discounts for public transport by making municipal authorities more accountable for their demands on fleet operators

Tickets, please

By Greg Spencer

On the eve of Hungary’s parliamentary elections in 1998, things looked grim for incumbent Premier Gyula Horn. His Social-Liberal coalition had instituted a harsh austerity programme and opposition parties were riding high on the public furor it provoked. Horn’s campaign desperately needed some first-aid to patch up his bruised Socialist credentials. So just before the vote he made an announcement: Pensioners over 70 years of age could ride free on trains and public transport Ltd.

The move was a time-honoured gambit of European politics, where state control over public transport makes it a handy electoral tool. In Hungary’s case the 1998 decree failed to rescue the Horn government, but it saddled Budapest’s public transport company, as well as the country’s national rail system, MAV, with a financial burden that still exists today.

This kind of political fiddling is likely to become less common under a regulation agreed to in September by the European Parliament and European Commission. According to the new stricture, cities whose public transport is run by independent companies will no longer be able to award fare discounts by unilateral decree. The regulation will require working relations between city administrations and their transport operators to be spelled out in detailed contracts, with agreed-upon funding for social discount compensation going from the city to the operator.

The regulation could have a particularly dramatic effect in new member states of the EU (as well as in candidate and aspiring member countries), where public transport administration is less evolved than in Western Europe. In candidate state Croatia, for example, just three municipalities have formal contracts with their public transport operators; the rest operate at the whim of politicians, and with all the financial insecurity that this situation entails.

Capital Ideas

The new regulation, which will be binding for all European public transport systems in two years’ time, was a topic of keen interest at a meeting of public transport professionals earlier this fall in the Croatian capital of Zagreb. The event was a working group meeting of SPUTNIC, a project funded by the European Commission under the Sixth Framework Programme, which is dedicated to addressing challenges faced by local and regional public transport systems in transition economies. Participants included representatives from public transport operators, as well as local authorities from across Europe.

Operators at the Zagreb meeting agreed that unfunded social discounts can be a serious problem. In virtually all cities, passengers with discounted passes make up a large share of ridership. In the city of Warsaw, for example, there are social discounts for 29 categories of people. Along with the usual categories (e.g. pensioners, students, physically handicapped) are: victims of Nazi and Soviet persecution, blood donors, Second World War veterans—and persons who can certify that they were born in public transport vehicles! Due partly to this wide range of discounts, public transport in Warsaw is 66 percent dependent on public subsidies, the highest rate in Europe.

In the Bulgarian capital of Sofia, discount transport passes are given to more than 200,000 users. Metodi Avramov, head of the economic department at Sofia Public Transport Company Ltd., said his city is grappling with the financial burdens of discounts that were decreed by the city council 10 years ago. The problem with such breaks is not that they exist; the difficulty is when the city gives discounts without budgeting for it, according to the department head.

“A city can’t have a social policy of discounted public transport fares without paying for it,” Avramov added, “because in the end, the burden will fall on the operator.”

Contracts and Competition

Reduced transport subsidies are just one possible impact of the new regulation, the main purpose of which is to increase accountability and transparency in public transport services. Under the regulation, if public transport service is handled by one or more independent service providers, all terms of service must be spelled out in written contracts that specify obligations, regions covered by the service, parameters of compensation by the local authority to the operator, and duration of the agreement.

Such contracts would have to be awarded through public tendering—the better to encourage competition. Although cities with single, so-called ‘in-house’ providers will at first be allowed to award their contracts to existing vendors without a tender, they will have to make public all the terms of the agreement. After a period
of time, competing vendors who have had an opportunity to inspect the contracts will be allowed to bid for the work.

The regulation was intended to encourage greater efficiency and competition, according to Peter Faross of the European Commission’s Directorate General for Energy and Transport. At the time the regulation was first proposed, in 2000, public transport operators in Europe, on the whole, were actually overcompensated for their services, Faross said. Transport companies would fight fiercely for service agreements, and when they lost they would inevitably sue and demand that the city show the basis on which the winner got the contract.

Faross believes greater transparency and stricter tendering regulations should help alleviate this problem, while also fostering better public transport service. He noted that the regulation allows municipal authorities to put quality criteria into contracts and to stipulate penalties and rewards based on how well an operator meets these standards.

However, the representative of one municipality has doubts about whether the regulation will work. Stanislaw Jedlinski represents Warsaw’s Public Transport Authority, which works with a single, independent operator of the type that will be allowed to keep its exclusive working contract under the new regulation. Jedlinski believes this arrangement will hinder improvements to local public transport.

“The European Commission says the essence of the new regulation is that the relationships between authorities and operators are governed by contract, but this has been the case in Poland for years,” Jedlinski said. “Rather, it seems a step back. You may have a contract with an in-house operator, but if he’s the only one supplying service, he’s not really exposed to the market.”

Although common in Poland, contracting is still new to countries like Croatia. Zagreb City Hall and its transport operator, Zagrebacki Elektricni Tramvaj (ZET), signed a formal operating agreement for the first time ever just last year, joining the ranks of Pula and Dubrovnik as cities where public transport is regulated by contract.

In point of fact, the contract hasn’t changed much in Zagreb, according to Branimir Valasek, an advisor at ZET. Even before ZET and Zagreb City Hall sealed their relationship in writing, the city had provided adequate support for public transport, he said. However, a worry came prior to recent elections, when political opponents of the incumbent administration accused City Hall of spending too much on public transport. The sitting city council won the election, but the close race was enough to convince Valasek of the merits of a long-term contract—one that provides some shelter against the vicissitudes of politics.

GET IT IN WRITING

Along with providing a sense of stability, contracts can also give transport operators a financial advantage. This has already been demonstrated in Dubrovnic, which formalised its public transport agreement in 2004 under pressure from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). There, the local transport company Libertas Dubrovnik had applied for a EUR 7.5 million loan to buy a fleet of buses, and the bank said it would approve the loan only if Libertas had an operating contract with the mayor’s office.

In fact, it was also EBRD that spurred ZET to get a contract. The company had gone to the EBRD for credit to buy a new fleet of low-floor, articulated trams, and during due diligence the bank took note that ZET did not have a contract.

“The EBRD looked at everything: our budgets, our assets, our staffing and so on,” said Valasek. “They insisted they wouldn’t make a loan unless we had a proper contract with the city.”

BLUE STREAK: Zagreb’s new tram fleet will feature 60 Koncar-manufactured carriages, each costing about EUR 2 million.
Russia’s successful Winter Olympic bid will draw even more visitors to Europe’s highest peak, but climate change and runaway development are marring the mountain’s majesty

Elbrus under siege

Text and photos by Pavel Antonov

Unless you lived in pre-1989 Central or Eastern Europe, the name of Vladimir Vysotskiy is unlikely to ring a bell. Vysotskiy was a singer with a voice as harsh as the system we all had to live in, but also as beautiful as things beyond the system’s reach. “Like Mount Elbrus, and the mountains we still haven’t been to,” he once sang.

Now, 30 years on, Elbrus has many visitors—and an even greater number of visitors appears likely. Europe’s highest peak will likely serve as an alpine skiing venue for the 2014 Winter Olympics, but the effects of climate change are being felt here nonetheless. Continuous glacial melting and extreme temperatures are making avalanches more frequent and less predictable—a catastrophe waiting to happen. In addition, ongoing human activity, much of it poorly planned, is ensuring continued disruption of the mountain region’s natural balance.

Mount Elbrus actually consists of two peaks: Western and Eastern. At 5,642 metres, the ‘Caucasian prince’ stands 832 metres higher than its Alpine runner-up, Switzerland’s Mount Blanc. Surroudbing Elbrus like loyal vassals dressed in icy armour are a number of peaks that are imposing enough in their own right: Kogutay, Chegét, Uzhba, and Dongozarun Azau Git Chiget Kara Bashi—the latter meaning ‘Black Peak on the Ridge between Dongozarun and Azau.’ Gurgling steams and waterfalls lay hidden deep within the protective shade of thick forests, while indigenous Caucasian wild goats (turs) frolic undisturbed over moraines and volcanic rock.

A chairlift reaches heights and sights that can make visitors dizzy, and an occasional snowboarder or two cuts back and forth over snows lasting into midsummer. Tourism in the Northern Caucasus has revived quickly since the end of the war.
CLOSE TO THE EDGE: (clockwise from left) crystal-clear water from a recent melt; a 1980s-era gondola is still in service; rusty remnants of human presence on Elbrus; a chairlift, not for the faint of heart, offers a bird’s-eye view; clothes drying at the lift station; a marvelous rock formation known by locals as ‘the dinosaur’. 

Hussein Sottaiev, a tough-looking 45-year-old, owns the tiny Kogutay Hotel at the base of the Mount Cheget chairlift, near Elbrus. He got his start 15 years ago selling food and drink out of a stall to skiers. The business grew “slowly” into a café, and eventually into an eight-room hotel and restaurant. “I’ve been dragged to court more than ten times, but never sentenced,” said Hussein, whose cases were either terminated or transferred to other courts.

Meanwhile, the administration of the republic’s capital, Nalchik, is expressing concern, at least verbally, about the environmental situation. A RUB 52 billion (USD 2 billion) programme to study and resolve the republic’s environmental problems by 2022 is now in the planning stage, claimed Sergey Tsory, a press officer under the newly appointed president of Kabardino-Balkar, Arsen Kanokov. While the exact sum is only an estimate, it remains unclear as to where this huge amount of money will come from. Tsory, despite his World Wildlife Foundation credentials, carefully avoided any discussion with Green Horizon of illegal construction and lack of waste collection services in the national park.

The Elbrus region is still giddy from the euphoria (hysteria, rather) that swept across Russia after the International Olympic Committee granted the 2014 Winter Olympics to Sochi. With pistes being groomed in preparation and a super-highway project nearing completion, Tsory revealed that a resort mega-project is underway on the mountain’s slope—the completion of which seems much more a reality than the administration’s and environmental programme. President Kanokov and InterRos co-owner Vladimir Potanin signed a memorandum on the project in June. According to Interface, the project cost is around USD 1 billion.

Russian oligarchs are evidently joining with Balkar businessmen in trying to exploit the region for profit, and quite cynically, projected global warming trends are being pitched as part of the business strategy. According to a December 2006 report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 87 percent of Europe’s Alpine ski areas will lose their natural snow cover if mean temperatures rise by just two degrees Celsius. Such a development would send catastrophic danger zone, and that current protection measures are wholly inadequate. The only hotel at the moment with effective anti-avalanche protection was built in 1968, and is protected by the new buildings around it, Volodycheva added.

Hussein, like most hotel owners in the republic, has no property insurance. “If something happens, I’ll rely on my neighbours. They’re my best insurance,” he said, and not without good reason. Neighbours helped out when Hussein’s café was destroyed by fire in 2005. Hussein’s, but it is difficult to imagine what help would be available if everyone were struck at once. 

in Chechnya. Over 350,000 visit the area each year, and numbers are constantly on the rise, according to Amiran Zamilov of the Prielbrusie National Park Directorate. A brand new Poma gondola lift began operating on Elbrus last January alongside its Soviet-era predecessor. Shops, marking at the foot of the skipistes, and rooming at the foot of the ski slopes, are being chewed away because of excavation work for new buildings and parking lots. Construction equipment, debris and waste are accumulating in the verdant valleys, which is typical of the poor planning and lack of state control mechanisms throughout many parts of Eastern Europe. 

Man vs. mountain

Elbrus is situated in Kabardino-Balkaria, one of the Russian Federation’s more politically explosive regions, and the mountain’s ridge marks a national border with Georgia. Thus any local antagonisms take on a political—or, more specifically, ethnic—character, Zamilov explained. Balkar businessmen are adept at playing the ‘nationalist’ card when confronted with federal laws—laws whose ostensible purpose is to protect the park’s natural environment.

Mountain vs. man

In spite of Russian scientists’ unwillingness to back global consensus on anthropogenic global warming, experts from the Azau glaciological research station admit that the Elbrus glaciers have recently been melting at record speed. “Global climate change shows through intensive local and regional differences,” station head Alexander Oleynikov explained, adding that while climate change might not be greatly felt in the region by 2014, the growing number of foggy days could quite literally cast a shadow over the Winter Games. 

Also worrisome is that ‘avalanches one on top of the other’ are becoming less of a political allegory and a more frequent reality. More than 50 visitors have lost their lives around Elbrus since 2002. In May an avalanche swept through a regular overnight camp, claiming the lives of several Japanese mountainaineers. “In the past, avalanches were unlikely between December and February, but the danger is now present through the entire winter,” Oleynikov warned. Besides, the unpredictability and treacherousness of avalanches now pose a threat to those outside the climbing community. Right near the research station, two among a group of students preparing to celebrate New Year’s Eve in 2005 were whisked from their dormitory window when an avalanche veered from its usual path.

Glaciers, however, are becoming shorter and thinner, allowing new passages for tumbling snow, scientist Natalya Volodycheva told journalists visiting the Azau station in August. The trip, organised by Green Horizon and the Russian Regional Environmental Centre, aimed to provide journalists with knowledge and skills for covering climate change.

Investors and owners of the new tourist facilities, as well as their clients and visitors, have not the slightest idea of the threats they are facing, said Volodycheva. Hussein, for example, has invested more than USD 100,000 in his Cheget hotel. The investment has so far paid off, even with the tourist season lasting only three months and two summer months, but the Balkar businessman remains undaunted about the prospects of being buried under snow. Assured that avalanches will continue to pass “to the side,” Hussein is also confident that periodic state-financed, anti-avalanche bombardments will continue to guarantee his and the hotel’s safety. “Indeed, these avalanches normally pass aside, but only when they’re small,” said Volodycheva.

The glaciologist warned that the new buildings under Cheget lie in a potentially catastrophic danger zone, and that current protection measures are wholly inadequate. The only hotel at the moment with effective anti-avalanche protection was built in 1968, and is protected by the new buildings around it, Volodycheva added.

Hussein, like most hotel owners in the republic, has no property insurance. “If something happens, I’ll rely on my neighbours. They’re my best insurance,” he said, and not without good reason. Neighbours helped out when Hussein’s café was destroyed by fire in 2005. Hussein’s, but it is difficult to imagine what help would be available if everyone were struck at once.
Central and Eastern Europe’s climate change opportunity

By Tom Burke, Chris Littlecott & Nick Mabey

We are living at a pivotal time in terms of Europe’s future, and taking the right decisions now could enable decades of investment in clean technologies and smart infrastructure. This would ensure the creation of millions of good jobs across Europe and underpin the creation of a new, inclusive social contract. This is a one-off opportunity for the direct development of a new ‘green industrial revolution.’

The citizens of CEE member states definitely want to part of this opportunity, but can they ensure that their leaders will look to the future rather than the past? The efforts of environmental organisations and civil society groups will be central to making sure that they do, and they could start by focusing attention on opportunities contained in the EU Budget Review.

The political context for action on climate change has improved over the past three years, while an upturn in economic growth has restored some much needed confidence. The European Commission (EC) in particular has recognised the importance of an outward-looking and future-focused European project. It has rightly identified the environment as a core issue that binds Europeans together. Strong leadership from former UK Prime Minister Blair, German Chancellor Merkel and EC President Barroso has helped to secure agreement on ambitious climate and energy aims.

But, of course, it is one thing for politicians to set a policy agenda, and a distinctly different challenge to actually follow through with action to reach those goals. Europe is now in a different phase. Its ability to rise to the climate change challenge is the litmus test of its legitimacy and practical value. The decisions taken now will shape the future of all of Europe and determine its place in the world.

The challenge for CEE member states

In January 2008, Bulgaria and Romania will celebrate their firstanniversary as EU members. Their regional neighbours will then have been members for four years, and could quite rightly expect to lose the ‘new member state’ tag. Indeed, Slovenia will take over the reins of the EU presidency.

In the broad view, the enlargement of the EU to 25, and then 27, members has been a great success. As prosperity has improved steadily, too, it has economic confidence—even if social confidence sometimes wanes as a consequence of changing patterns of family life.

Similarly, CEE member states have added a new dimension to EU politics. Their geographical position and historical experience has made them quick to grasp that the projection of Europe’s role in the world and the maintenance of security and prosperity at home are two sides of the same coin. They also know that, in an unstable world, they will be the border regions receiving environmental refugees and economic migrants. They have similarly felt their hard-won experience of liberty—on issues ranging from securing energy supplies to support for democracy worldwide.

Now these countries are facing, perhaps, their biggest test yet: namely, a transition of status within the EU. For the next two years should see not just an end to the EU’s internal institutional disputes that have plagued the recent past, but also the achievement of a global deal on climate change and the foundations for a radical new EU budget.

In all of these processes, the attitude and political leadership of CEE member states will be crucial for delivering an EU that can project its value into the future. The key question is whether CEE leaders will push forward as a motor for EU action with a politics of opportunity; or will they retreat into a politics of poverty? The former alternative would seek to maximise today’s catalytic opportunities for economic modernisation and environmental sustainability, while the latter risks seeing the region leapfrogged by China and India in the deployment of new technologies. At present, the signs are mixed.

The politics of poverty

The recently launched EU Budget Review aims to identify how the EU should spend its money from 2013 onwards. Given the tortuous nature of budget politics, it may well be that any new approach might not be fully implemented until 2020.

The review aims to ensure that EU spending adds value, rather than simply redistributing money that could be best spent directly by member states. It wants to make sure that EU spending is effective in achieving economic and social goals. Recent decisions to increase transparency over the receipt of EU funds from the Common Agricultural Policy and Structural Funds are clear attempts to apply more pressure for their revision, which has caused a certain amount of unease that the review will look to cut funding to CEE countries.

At the same time, the EU is developing policy pathways to deliver up to 30% reductions in carbon emissions by 2020, with 20% targets for energy efficiency and renewables. It also plans to roll out a series of demonstration plants for carbon capture and storage technology (CCS). Yet CEE countries, instead of driving these debates forward, have responded to the National Allocation Plans for carbon emissions from the European Commission with legal challenges and protests that they are too severe and too expensive.

Driving this current defensive approach is the plea of ‘poverty.’ This is a tactic that has been used in the past by other new member states, but the subsequent rapid success of Ireland, Spain and others means that it has now lost much of its rhetorical power as a long-term justification for funding. And this is certainly the case for most (although not all) CEE member states as they attempt to project this plea forward 13 years into the future.

Given recent rates of growth and the general economic benefits of EU membership, the time is right for the region to pursue a more positive approach.

We must be very clear on this point: CEE member states rightly deserve significant financial support from the EU as...
they continue to modernise. That is not in doubt. What is in doubt, however, is what should be the focus of the funding. For the region has far more to gain by pushing for a radical new budget focused on the EU’s core added-value activities, thereby placing major investments in energy and climate at the heart of the EU. Such a budget would give CEE leaders the opportunity to channel investment into the creation of a new clean-energy economy, which would simply not be possible under the continuance of the old EU budget framework, designed as it was for the challenges of the 1980s.

The politics of opportunity

The transition to a low carbon economy is the best opportunity to modernise infrastructure, industry, housing stock and energy production that we will ever see. It could possibly create and guarantee millions of new European jobs, improve energy security, and spur the renewal of low-carbon, people-friendly cities. It is vital that these changes are made now, as current fossil-fuelled investments are continuing to tack on expensive liabilities for today’s younger generations, rather than creating new low-carbon assets.

CEE countries are positioned to receive the greatest gains from this transformation. Major improvements in energy efficiency will increase energy security and improve trade balances, in addition to generating financial benefits through carbon trading. And the region’s population has strong technical, scientific and industrial skills that are all crucial for the successful development, manufacture and deployment of new low-carbon goods and services throughout Europe and beyond.

The key to securing all of these objectives will be effective investment, which will come from both public and private sources. By taking a positive stance on the EU Budget Reform, CEE leaders could leverage funding that will provide their economies with the low carbon foundations that will be needed in an era of increasingly severe energy and climate constraints. Used this way, EU money would pave the way for a major deployment of climate compatible electricity generation, low carbon transport systems, domestic and commercial energy efficiency improvements and widespread deployment of renewable energy technologies.

Such an approach would solve many political problems. It would demonstrate the EU’s relevance and added value, and would reduce the vulnerability of economies to energy price shocks and the political influence of energy exporters. It would also be a major step towards meeting climate targets and jobs and competitiveness goals, and would also strengthen the EU’s leadership capacity on climate change. Finally, it would be a major driver for greater prosperity and improved quality of life throughout the EU and beyond.

This article draws on E3G’s pamphlet titled: Europe in the World: Political choices for security and prosperity.
THERE’S GOTTA BE A BETTER WAY: A snowstorm brings traffic to a standstill at a central square in the Armenian capital of Yerevan.
The world’s scientists urge immediate action toward building a sustainable future

The runaway success of US former vice president Albert Gore’s film and book, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and his subsequent winning of the Nobel Prize have certainly made a huge impact in terms of bringing some hard science into living rooms and auditoriums worldwide; but the scientific community—itself responsible for discovering such facts and often ‘inconvenient’ truths—is no longer engaged in a debate about whether the planet faces new and profound dangers, but is focused now instead of what must be done right now to avert the worst imaginable outcomes in terms of life on planet Earth.

Several of the world’s top scientists gathered in Budapest on November 8-9 for the third World Science Forum to discuss these very issues, and a main thread to emerge during the event was that world leaders and policymakers need to make a significant shift away from short-term gains (whether as individual consumers or single nation states) in order to promote long-term environmental stability and economic justice worldwide.

Timo Makela, a consumption and waste specialist and the European Commission’s DG Environment director, warns that population growth, coupled with more consumptive lifestyles outside of the US and the EU, could lead to a six-fold increase in consumption worldwide by 2050. One particularly urgent problem is worldwide disposal of electronic waste. Makela points out that 15 million cars are sent each year to the scrap heap, as are 100 million mobile telephones. The world’s annual electronic waste would, in fact, cover an area the size of Budapest in a layer of debris one metre thick, according to the specialist.

Makela is encouraged, however, that eco-industries now account for 2.1 percent of the EU’s total GNP, and that recycling efforts are playing an important role in this expanding economic sector. He adds, however, that research needs to be “robust and bold” if we are to meet today’s and tomorrow’s environmental challenges.

Taking risks

Speaking of robust and bold proposals, Ecuador’s ambassador to Hungary, Juan Salazar Sancisi, wants people to take seriously his country’s truly unique and potentially trendsetting proposal—namely, that his country be paid to *not* exploit some of its natural resources.

By presidential decree, Ecuador declared in January 2007 that a 1.87 hectare ‘intangible zone’ in the heart of the Ecuadorian Amazon be off limits to both logging and oil extraction. The intangible zone overlaps the country’s Yasuni National Park, but oil extraction has been allowed in the past despite declared national park status. Aside from drilling and logging resulting in environmental damage to the delicate ecosystem, these industries have come into frequent contact, often violently, with members of two indigenous tribes (the Tageri and Taromenane) who choose to live in voluntary isolation from modern society. Thus the creation of an intangible zone is an effort to protect not only Ecuador’s environment, but also to maintain a rich ethnic diversity.

Sancisi explained that oil accounted for an average of 40 percent of Ecuador’s total exports from 1972 to 2006. This figure, however, rose in 2006 to 60 percent. Increased dependency on oil exports for national income will undoubtedly jeopardise the 18 percent of Ecuador’s land that currently enjoys protected status, the ambassador claims, which is why he hopes that an international mechanism will be put in place to provide a proposed 50 percent in compensation to Ecuador for not tapping its oil reserves. As things stand now, Ecuadorians have the option of donating money of their own toward the fulfilment of this goal, but the real challenge will be to convince foreign governments that agreeing to such a proposal is the right thing to do.
Religious leaders embrace doctrine of nature protection

Seeing is believing!

By Pavel Antonov, off the coast of Greenland

A classic anecdote tells of a Shoppian’s first visit to the zoo. A Shoppian is an ethnic and cultural representative from the border region of today’s Bulgaria, FYR Macedonia and Serbia—exactly where a Shopska salad comes from, in fact. So, the anecdote continues, after standing for an hour totally perplexed in front of the giraffe’s cage, staring in disbelief at the weird, long-necked creature, the man finally concludes: “There is no such animal!”

Unlike Shoppians, most people do trust their eyes, and thus have a preponderant tendency to believe that what they have witnessed is real and happening. Moreover, people have proved throughout history their ability to believe in things that other people have seen with their eyes—provided that the evidence is sufficiently credible and convincing. Today’s mission to convince more and more people worldwide that climate change is really happening, and that immediate action is needed to protect nature’s balance, includes efforts to reach the eyes and ears—and, yes, the consciences—of religious leaders. And for good reason: religious leaders have historically been most effective in persuading millions to believe in those things that very few have—or have not—actually witnessed. And these leaders have, ultimately, been successful in calling converts into action in accordance with the tenets of their particular faith.

In order to witness first-hand the effects of climate change—to be certain that it really exists—a group of religious leaders from around the world sailed around Greenland last September, accompanied by scientists, politicians and journalists. The cruise was the seventh in a series of water-borne symposia on religion, science and environment, which the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has both organised and guided since 1995. The latest symposium, entitled “The Arctic Mirror of Life,” was conceptualised in direct reference to the polar ice cap’s vital function in reflecting solar radiation and keeping the water underneath from warming up. This particular symposium was the most diverse yet in terms of number of schools of religious thought being represented. In addition to religious leaders from Christian, Muslim and Hebrew traditions, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain and Sikh clergy took part, and were joined by an Inuit and Saami representative from north of the Arctic Circle.

Polar prayers

On board the Fram, a sleek Norwegian polar cruiser that had been booked straight from the shipyard for the Arctic journey, delegates spent six days giving presentations and engaging in debate over a broad variety of issues, from nuclear proliferation to population overgrowth. But the religious and emotional culmination of the symposium was, arguably, a ‘Silent Prayer for the Planet.’ Assembled in prayer on the Fram’s foredeck on the chilly morning of September 7, the religious leaders beheld the Sermeq Kujalleq Glacier. This magnificent ice field is suspected of being the most likely origin of the fatal iceberg that sank the Titanic on her maiden voyage back in 1912. But today the glacier is losing 35 cubic kilometres of ice to the sea each year—a worrying indicator of global warming. “Few people now doubt the science of climate change, but this prayer from the top of the world will offer a different message: that the polar pilgrimage should be joined in spirit by all those who care about the future of mankind and its relationship with the planet, be they in Manka or Moscow, Borneo or Beijing, Innsbruck or Ottawa,” the symposium website explained.

Principles and paradox

The silent prayer and the Icefjord Commitment that followed (see sidebar), which was widely reported by the international media, could easily serve as fodder for the type of polemic championed by bestselling American science fiction author Michael Crichton (Jurassic Park), who once charged that environmentalism is the new “religion of choice for urban atheists.” Taking, arguably, an aggressively anti-environmental stance, Crichton argued in 2003 that environmentalism is detached from facts and scientific knowledge, and is actually more of a ‘faith’ in which no discussion about the truth is possible.

While Crichton was not on board the Fram, it should be noted that many of the symposium participants come from the hard-core environmental protection movement, as well as from firmly established scientific institutions—backgrounds in which the symbiosis of religion, science and...
nature protection might seem paradoxical. Within the field of environmental science there are notions of ecology, biodiversity conservation and other disciplines that are deeply rooted in evolution theory and Darwinism—as opposed to staunchly unscientific and creationist versions of the world’s origins and development. Even Patriarch Bartholomew acknowledged in his opening statement that many people were puzzled during the early days of his endeavour about the kind of links his symposium was trying to establish. “Religious people were relatively indifferent, or even hostile, to science, and many scientists and ecologists could see little relationship between their world and the world of faith.”

Yet, the idea of bringing religion into the cause of protecting the environment eventually garnered political support, as EU Commission President José-Manuel Barroso and former UN secretary general Kofi Annan were enlisted as co-patrons of the symposium. For one thing, no one would seriously deny the power of religions to mobilise people for action. “As more and more people now realise, religion and environmental science are both concerned with ultimate matters, with the final destiny of mankind, the earth and the whole of creation,” Bartholomew explained on board the arctic cruiser.

A most exciting outcome of the symposium is a sort of informal competition that seems to have emerged in terms of establishing which religion is the ‘green-est.’ A special address from the Vatican, for example, affirmed that preservation of the environment, promotion of sustainable development—and, most importantly, addressing climate change—are matters of grave concern for the entire human family. “The consequences of disregard for the environment cannot be limited to [a single] immediate area or population because they always harm human coexistence and thus betray human dignity and violate the rights of citizens who desire to live in a safe environment,” Pope Benedict XVI wrote. Cardinal McCarrick, archbishop emeritus of Washington DC and the pope’s special envoy to the arctic, added: “The human family has been commanded by the Lord to use the Earth, but to be a good steward to the Earth—to use it, but not to abuse it.”

Higher ground

Musharraf Husein al-Azhari, a director of the Karinia Institute and a practicing imam in London, said that climate change and the degradation of spoliation of “our beautiful Earth” are issues of deep concern for Muslims, as they involve the very survival of humanity. Ven Jinwoi, a Buddhist monk and president of Korea’s ‘United Religions’ initiative, explained the connection between his faith and nature protection: “We believe that nature and [humankind] are in reality one and the same. The human being is part of nature, so without the environment we cannot survive”, Jinwoi—playing a high hand, as it were—added that Christianity argues justification for the exploitation of nature by human beings, which Buddhism deems unacceptable.
Acquired habits

Dennis Meadows, a US-based emeritus director for policy and social science research, has been posing the same thought-provoking question to audiences for years: “In the next few decades, human population is likely to do one of three things—one, it will continue to rise to a point of near zero-growth/zero-decline; or, three, it will at some point begin to drop precipitously. What do you think will happen?” Two or three decades earlier Meadows believed that population would continue to grow. Why, then, does he now believe that population will at some point relatively soon begin to decline precipitously? “We simply are not in a sustainable situation,” he says.

The professor shares three key “insights” crucial to the understanding of building a sustainable future. The first is that the knowledge needed for sustainable development is in the social sphere, and not in new technologies. “Cultural change is what’s needed,” says Meadows. “We already have the knowledge.” The second insight is that change needs to happen soon. “We don’t have 30–40 years,” he warns. The third insight is that no tools—no matter how innovative or potentially effective—will work if governments and economic schemes continue to be programmed for short-term growth.

Meadows also points to a difference between ‘easy’ and ‘hard’ problems. Hard problems, for example, demand solutions that, despite being fundamentally correct, prove detrimental in the short-term; thus it is easy to understand why politicians catch up in election cycles seldom take this kind of approach.

A deeply influential figure in Europe’s green and ecological movements, Wuppertal Institute senior scientist Wolfgang Sachs believes that science badly needs the humanities in order to affect the great conceptual changes that will be necessary for a sustainable future. He points out that the words ‘ownership,’ ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ stress the meeting of individual needs, while ‘access,’ ‘provision’ and ‘use’ are terms with far greater social resonance. He also urges a need to reconsider our notions of speed, slowness and space if we are to grow toward ‘cosmopolitanism’ and begin to see the world as a community of people—not as a battleground for competing interests and rival nation states.

Descriptive-quantitative sciences are valuable, Sachs argues, but they tend to have too pervasive an influence because “people tend to see numbers as an indicator of truth.” Cost-benefit analysis, Sachs claims, has had particularly harmful consequences, as the goal of a given formula is to come up with a purely numerical outcome, while other intangibles (e.g. human and animal life) tend to be inadequately considered or overlooked completely, he says. “What really counts in life can’t be counted.” Sachs quotes from another German scientist of some renown, Albert Einstein.

Running on fumes

Also from the Wuppertal Institute, Stefan Bringezu is an expert in material flows and waste management. Bringezu says that one of the EU’s main long-term (over 25 years) resource strategy objectives is to decouple GDP from resource use, and then to decouple resource use from environmental impacts. He states that raw consumption numbers are significantly lower than numbers reflecting the actual extraction of resources related to consumption. For example, per capita European consumption is 20 tonnes per year, while per capita resource extraction for what is consumed amounts to 50 tonnes per year.

Bringezu also argues that biomass and agrofuels are not ideal alternatives. “Growing global demand cannot be countered by merely shifting from minerals to biomass without reducing levels of consumption,” he says. Some factors to consider, according to Bringezu, are: switching land use from food crop production to fuel crop production (even in countries where large swathes of the population lack enough to eat); loss of species diversity (due largely to monoculture farming); and actually increasing greenhouse gas emissions (due to clearing of forests, savannahs, etc.). The Wuppertal scientist points out that the amount of grain needed to produce 60 litres of fuel could feed one individual for an entire year.

Ashok Koshla is the founder and president of New Delhi-based Development Alternatives, an enterprise that has moved beyond rhetoric and is actually producing materials for sustainable living. Koshla, appalled by the world’s economic disparities, points out the roughly 60 percent of the world’s people “lead pretty miserable lives.” He adds that the people “don’t get water, without clean drinking water, and that this figure is likely an underestimate. He juxtaposes this sad fact with the claim that, on average, 20 tonnes of earth is removed to produce a 20-ounce gold ring.

Koshla stresses that social justice, livelihoods, basic needs and environmental safety are of equal importance in any sustainable development strategy. He posits three fundamental choices facing humanity. The first is a business-as-usual/copycat approach, which involves no real change of approach and has disastrous consequences but is nonetheless favoured by global corporations. Second is a factoring/piggyback approach, which involves improving the efficiency of certain products and is the wealth-growing strategy of choice for individual nations. While a significant improvement over the former, it still falls well short of the third and optimum alternative—the systemic change/leapfrog approach, which could actually reverse man’s impact on an already overburdened planet.
same living standard for everyone, or if you want to have a few rich people and a lot of poor. That [choice] has a big influence on how many people can live on this planet. Population is going to come down—absolutely! It can come down in two ways. Either we reduce the birth rate, or nature increases the death rate.

But how soon? How do complex systems change over time? That’s my specialty. I don’t see any basis for hoping that humanity is going to look ahead and make the changes by free will. I think the changes will come because they are forced on us. It doesn’t mean a catastrophe. It doesn’t mean that species are going to disappear off the face of the earth. It means we’re facing a period of intensive change, which will give us two generic options. The rich and the powerful can try to keep their standard of living in the short term and screw everybody else. Or we can say: ‘Listen. We’re all in this together, and we need to cut back and share and try to get through this period.’ [The latter] would be a more attractive outcome.

How will policymakers cope with this?

I recently bet 1,000 euros that there will be rationing of automobile gas in Germany before 2020. Because gas is going to become very expensive. And in a political system like Germany it’s not accepted for the rich to get everything they want and the poor to get nothing. Germany or France won’t permit that. But in Kenya or Somalia, or maybe in Russia—I don’t know. When I made that bet, gas was about 50 dollars a barrel, and now it’s 100 dollars a barrel. In three years it will be 200 dollars a barrel. It’s just going up.

Have politicians reacted too late?

Yes, it is too late. I was in this very same room [of the Hungarian Science Academy] in the 1970s, talking about the big problems we were going to face by the end of the century. I have spoken at many such conferences. Nothing happened! This is the discussion we were having 30 years ago. [Politicians] are living in a fantasy. Humanity is now far above the long-term carrying capacity of this planet. Certainly physical growth is going to stop sometime in the coming years. You hear now about water scarcity and are starting to hear about food scarcity. But the big challenges are climate and energy.

The IPCC and the Kyoto accord are based on the idea that we need to stabilise at 450 particles per metre of CO2 to keep temperature from rising more than two degrees [Celsius]. It’s a fantasy. We already have 0.7 of a degree of global warming and ecosystems are running far out of control. Sea levels are coming up, Arctic ice has lost 80% of its mass and droughts are becoming more of a problem. Forest fires.

Could new technologies offer the solution?

No. I’m a scientist, a professor of engineering for many years. I have a degree in chemistry, and worked for the Atomic Energy Commission. I’ve done scientific research and am personally very enthusiastic about science. But it is a question of timing. We need to cope with declining energy over the next 10 years. We’re not going to get radically new kinds of cars or radically new kinds of anything in a decade. It takes between 30 and 40 years for a laboratory discovery to become embedded as a useful tool. And we don’t have that time. However, there’s a lot of knowledge out there, and if we could pull it together and use what we already know—that would give us some interesting tools. I’m not so enthusiastic about hybrid cars. But I’m enthusiastic about bicycles. They are definitely putting out less CO2 than cars, trains, planes, stuff like that.

Is there any reason for optimism?

There is. We’ve been using energy so ineffectively that there are amazing ways to save without making big sacrifices of our standard of living. The technology is there for doing it. We don’t need drastically new technology; we only need to use the best of what’s currently available.
The Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) has been involved in the Environment for Europe process since its beginning, providing increased assistance with each consecutive ministerial conference, from Sofia (1995) to Aarhus (1998) to Kiev (2003).

The documents, reports and publications on this CD present facts, experiences and lessons about the problems and possibilities of environmental improvement in Central and Eastern Europe. Prepared in cooperation with South Eastern European governments, international organisations, institutions and many other partners, they should enrich your understanding of the debates at the Sixth Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference in Belgrade, October 10-12, 2007.

The REC wishes to express its gratitude to the Ministry of Environment, Land and Sea of Italy for making the production of this CD-ROM possible.

**CATEGORY I DOCUMENTS**

- Mobilizing Finance for Environmental Priorities: Recommendations for the Future (ECE/BELGRADE.CONF/2007/22)
- Public-Private Partnership for Reduced Air Pollution from Vehicles Through Lead-Free and Low-Sulphur Fuels (ECE/BELGRADE.CONF/2007/24)

**CATEGORY II DOCUMENTS**

- Acceptance and Implementation of UNECE Multilateral Environmental Agreements in South-Eastern Europe (ECE/BELGRADE.CONF/2007/INF/19)
**REC experience, expertise on display in Belgrade**

**Up to the task**

By Pavel Antonov

In opening a ministerial plenary session on environmental finance, Brigita Schmognerova of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) stated that governments do not bear sole responsibility for carrying out such activity. Schmognerova called instead for public-private partnerships and structured funding. In response, Gunner Oleson of the European ECO-Forum coalition of NGOs cautioned that, while private investment is important, it can shift the focus toward optimising profits—particularly in the monopoly industries of heat, gas and water supply.

As of January 1, 2008, one less country will be using leaded petrol. FYR Macedonia’s decision to phase out leaded petrol was the first good news to emerge from Partnerships for Better Air Quality through Clean Fuels and Vehicles, a conference side event held on October 10. However, three other Balkan nations (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia) will remain on the ‘black list’ of leaded petrol users.

Two more countries in the pan-European region still need to phaze out leaded petrol (Tajikistan and Turkmenistan), and unless political action is taken immediately, there is a danger that these countries will not meet the end-2008 deadline set by the global Partnership for Clean Fuels and Vehicles, which hosted the Belgrade event. The REC is offering high-level commitment and support for ensuring cleaner fuels and vehicles in all UNECE member countries, said the REC’s clean fuels project manager, Ruslan Jetchkov.

The governments of Armenia, Belarus and Moldova proposed a voluntary initiative on strategic environmental assessment (SEA) for East Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA). The initiative, aimed at promoting sustainable development in the region, was announced at another conference side event: Review of Implementation of the UNECE Protocol on SEA—from Kiev to Belgrade and beyond. The event was co-organised by the REC, UNECE and UNDP.

EECCA countries should take advantage of CEE knowledge drawn both from the 1995 Sofia Initiative on SEA and during the EU integration process, said REC Executive Director Marta Szigeti Bonifert. Initiating countries expect that this initiative will enhance SEA procedural integration into existing environmental assessment structures and planning processes throughout the EECCA region, added REC project manager Aurora Jurjeviciute.

The REC’s climate change programme teamed with REC Country Office Serbia, Serbia’s Ministry of Science and Environmental Protection, and the Serbian Hydro-meteorological Service in preparing a background document on the so-called Belgrade Initiative to enhance regional SEE cooperation in the field of climate change. The initiative is to be implemented through a mechanism of coordinated SEE regional action planning.

During a side event on October 10, a climate change framework action plan for the SEE region was adopted. Also established was a sub-regional, virtual climate change-related centre for research and systematic observation education, training, public awareness and capacity building. All activities received financial support from the Italian Ministry of Environment, Land and Sea and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

**Local support:** The REC presented support programmes for local communities during Roadmap for Local Sustainability–Local Initiatives in South Eastern Europe, a side event held on October 10.

**Green Pack Junior:** The REC’s latest multimedia education kit, produced with support from Toyota Motors Co., was launched in Belgrade. The new tool is geared for primary school teachers and younger children.

**The Adriatic Sea Partnership:** launched on October 11, aims at enhanced international legal cooperation concerning the Adriatic Sea.

**SEARCH: Preventing and Reducing Respiratory Diseases** was the title of a REC-hosted side event that examined, among other things, the implementation of European Environment and Health Policy Action Plans.

**Assessing civil society:** Outcomes from the civil society assessment conducted by the REC in 2006 were presented by the REC (together with the Swedish International Cooperation and Development Agency and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) at a side event entitled Civil Society Organisations in Central and Eastern Europe: Trends, Challenges and Barriers in Leadership towards Sustainability.

**Aarhus chronicles:** "Lessons, Experiences and Remaining Challenges in Implementing the Aarhus Convention: Common Approaches and Best Practices" was an October 11 side event during which practitioners and analysts shared recent Aarhus Convention-related efforts and experiences.

**The SEE Joint Statement on Education for Sustainable Development**, coordinat ed by the REC, was read by the Montenegrin Minister of Environment. The statement contained requests and needs of a various and serious nature, remarked REC civil initiatives director Robert Atkinson.
Hungary joins international renewables partnership

By joining forces with REEEP, Hungary has become the 36th formal partner and second Eastern European government to join the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP) during a September 24, 2007 signing ceremony hosted by the UK Embassy in Budapest.

The partnership agreement was signed by Ministry of Economy and Transport deputy state secretary Abel Garamhegyi (as the official representative of the Hungarian government), UK ambassador to Hungary John Nichols, and director of the REEEP International Secretariat, Marianne Osterkorn. The signing ceremony was attended by representatives from ministries, embassies, energy agencies, regulators, businesses, NGOs, academia and the media.

By joining forces with REEEP, Hungary intends to contribute to the development of regional policies. The Central European nation is particularly interested in cooperating with governments from neighbouring countries in the development of renewable energy and efficiency programmes.

"The Hungarian government has drafted a renewable energy strategy, and an energy efficiency strategy and action plan. Both of these areas are covered by REEEP activity," said Garamhegyi.

The government representative explained that in 2020 the renewable energy contribution to Hungary’s total primary energy supply will be about 14-16 percent, adding that the country has already met its green electricity target of 3.6 percent (the original deadline was 2010). Hungary, however, desires to provide support for continued development of clean energy.

REEEP membership is yet another example of Hungary’s plans for improved energy security and reduced dependence on fossil fuels. Establishing international cooperation links with REEEP will allow increased development of renewable energy resources, and also the ability to share experiences with neighbouring countries. Action has already been taken through enactment of the National Strategy on the Promotion of Renewable Energy sources, and also through several existing legislative initiatives.

These policy changes are creating a more favourable investment environment for the country. "The REEEP is extremely pleased that Hungary has joined. The country has the most successful energy service companies (ESCOs) in the region and, as a large agricultural producer, Hungary has enormous potential for bioenergy," stated Osterkorn, REEEP’s international director. The Hungarian Ministry of Economy and Transport will act as the government’s representative to REEEP.

REEEP is active globally, with over 80 on-the-ground projects targeting the development of innovative policy or financial models that can be replicated by governments and project developers worldwide. In Eastern Europe the partnership provides cooperation, networking and training for various stakeholders (e.g., local governments, regulators, policy makers and experts), and also transfers best practices throughout the region and works with municipalities to remove barriers to energy efficiency.

The REEEP partnership has more than 220 members, including all G8 countries, minus Russia. Argentina, Romania, Singapore, Switzerland and Tunisia all climbed on board in 2006 to support domestic renewable energy and energy efficiency programmes.

For more information, contact either Robert Hodosi from the Ministry of Economy and Transport at <robert.hodosi@gkm.gov.hu> or Judit Balint from the REEEP Regional Secretariat for CEE and Turkey at <judit.balint@reeep.org>.

Winners of the first ‘REEEP Media Awards for Excellence in Sustainable Energy Reporting in Central and Eastern Europe’ have been announced. The aim of the award is to boost mass media coverage of sustainable energy alternatives in Central and Eastern Europe, and the competition drew several applications from throughout the region. The top prize went to Vajda Pilhibalyte from Latvian National Radio for her report entitled ‘A New Nuclear Power Plant for Lithuania: Would it Really Pay for Itself’ Second prize was awarded to Atanas Georgiev from Bulgarian Utilities Magazine for a series of articles about sustainable energy, while Mladen Ilickovic took third for ‘Small Hydro Plants in Juditiva and Croatia’—a report produced for Croatian Television.

The awards ceremony will be held in early 2008 during an event organised by the REC/REEEP Regional Secretariat for CEE and Turkey and United Kingdom Energy Research Centre. For further details, please contact REEEP project manager Judit Balint at <jbalint@rec.org>.
LEAPS

Sida and REC partner up to reduce poverty in SEE communities

The Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the Regional Environmental Center (REC) have signed an agreement to implement a project supporting the development of local environmental action plans (LEAPs) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo as defined by UNSCR 1244. This project, which aims to improve local environment and planning practices, will help 19 municipalities to develop their own LEAPs.

Increasing the number of municipalities with developed LEAPs is important because some countries have formal requirements for their development (Bosnia and Herzegovina and FYR Macedonia, for example), while others have local planning-related recommendations outlined in their national strategic environmental documents. Developing LEAPs also sets examples of good practices and exhibits how internal capacities of municipalities can be mobilised for improving inhabitants’ quality of life and, eventually, be drawn closer to the EU.

After the LEAPs are finalised, Sida and the REC, together with partner municipalities, will provide financial support of EUR 1.45 million for local environmental projects. Implementation of this project will start in November 2007 and is expected to wrap up in October 2010.

For more information about this project and the REC’s other local initiatives, contact Srdjan Susic at <ssusic@rec.org>.

The Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) is a non-partisan, non-advocacy, not-for-profit international organisation with a mission to assist in solving environmental problems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The center fulfils this mission by promoting cooperation among non-governmental organisations, governments, businesses and other environmental stakeholders, and by supporting the free exchange of information and public participation in environmental decision making.

The REC was established in 1990 by the United States, as well as other inter-governmental and private institutions.
A five-day programme of capacity building is being offered in each country/territory of the Western Balkans from Feb. 2008 – Nov. 2008. Targeting CSOs active in the field of urban sustainability, it will look to address two key questions: “What’s my role in effecting change and environmental action?” and “How can I make a difference?”

Within each national programme, five training modules – tailored to the country conditions and hosted in the local language – will build knowledge and skills on “how to” successfully accomplish:

- Legal Recourse/Advocacy
- Lobbying
- Watchdogging
- Public Participation
- Effective Communication and Public Outreach

Each module will span 1½ days. Participants will be expected to share their experiences and will receive a certificate of completion.

More details are available online: www.rec.org/sector/assistance/Masterclass.

Because the programme places emphasis on both theoretical and practical learning, it includes two parallel programmes. Places are therefore offered to up to two individuals per organisation. To register your interest, download an application form today and submit by one of the following deadlines:

**Locations, Dates and Deadlines for Submitting Applications**

- Serbia: Feb. 4–9, 2008 (Dec. 3, 2007)
- Bosnia-Herzegovina: March 31–April 5, 2008 (Feb. 4, 2008)
- Macedonia: May 19–24, 2008 (March 17, 2008)
- Montenegro: June 23–28, 2008 (April 21, 2008)
- Croatia: September 15–19, 2008 (July 21, 2008)
- Kosovo: Nov. 3–8, 2008 (Sept. 8, 2008)
Warming to new ideas

Behavioural change is necessary to reduce transport’s harmful environmental effects

I felt a strangely awkward sensation last spring when I was removing the winter tyres from my car. I realised for the first time in my decade as a driver that my winter tyres hadn’t touched any snow from November to April. And I couldn’t merely attribute this to good luck of not needing to drive when it snowed in Budapest; it was simply because the 2006/07 winter was warm, brief and utterly without snowfall. It was almost as if winter didn’t happen at all. ‘Welcome to the subtropics,’ I thought, speculating meanwhile that I could even take the chance of no longer buying winter tyres if this sort of weather pattern continues.

The link between transport and climate change has been suggested over the years on numerous occasions. The business community is keen to tout new technologies as the most likely remedy to the problem, while activists are recommending behavioural change at all levels—from individuals to international corporations.

But radical technological changes are not on the immediate horizon, argues Jack Short, secretary general of the International Transport Forum (ITF). The organisation headed by Short emerged as a result of the European Conference of the Ministers of Transport, founded in 1953, and has chosen climate change as the topic of focus for its 2008 summit, the first to be held under its new name.

There are many long-term possibilities, including electric power trains, fuel cells and hydrogen, but only battery-powered cars appear among these options as likely to be commercially viable before 2030, Short explains. Nevertheless, the potential from improving existing technologies can deliver up to a 30% reduction in CO₂ emissions, he adds.

Short also expresses doubts as to how much transport users will change their behaviour. This, as he says, is “the most difficult challenge.” Whether it’s changing to more fuel-efficient modes, travelling less or using more efficient vehicles, experience and success are limited, he asserts.

So what’s the best approach to take in solving transport-related climate problems? After all, policies change, says Short. A survey of existing transport-sector greenhouse gas reduction policies identified over 400 abatement policies introduced or under development in the ITF’s 51 member countries. According to Short, the measures analysed might cut 700 million tonnes from annual CO₂ emissions by 201—just over half the projected increase in emissions between 1990 and 2010. These measures include a CO₂-related fuel tax, CO₂-based vehicle taxes, incentives for alternative fuel vehicles, urban transport initiatives, biofuels promotion, and traditional transport policies like modal shift policies, investment, better traffic management and speed-reducing safety measures.

This promising-looking package might, however, be difficult to run, particularly in CEE countries hoping catch up economically with the West. It’s natural early on in the economic growth cycle to be deeply concerned about the economy, and less concerned about the environment. But Short also points to CEE’s advantages, beginning with the opportunity to address the environment at earlier stages of development than in the West. “In many ways, CEE countries are accepting the best technology because [today’s] vehicle standards are perfect. They’re also accepting high standards of appraisal for investment. There are directives on investment that require environmental appraisals,” Short says.

Regardless of changing policies, investment strategies and technologies, climate change has immediate impacts that could soon lead—voluntarily or involuntarily—to behavioural changes. Put into perspective, a useless pair of winter tyres would be the least of my worries.
On December 17, political infighting resulted in failure to confirm Hungarian President Laszlo Solyom’s nomination of international lawyer and ELTE Law Faculty member Boldizsar Nagy for the position of ‘green’ ombudsman, a post established recently with the support of all five sitting political parties.

Responding to outside initiative from an NGO called Vedegylet (Protect the Future), Parliament adopted a bill in November to amend 1993’s Act on Parliamentary Commissioners (Ombudsmen) to create a new position of green ombudsman, thereby replacing the existing human rights deputy.

Solyom, a former member of Vedegylet, lobbied for such a bill in 2000, but was unable at the time to muster the political support necessary to adopt the proposal. Nonetheless, Vedegylet has continued to press the issue, and was ultimately instrumental in securing unanimous agreement on the bill.

The impact of establishing the green ombudsman post (the official title of which is Ombudsman of Future Generations) is that it could provide unprecedented assistance in working toward sustainable development and environment protection over the coming years. The ombudsman mandate is based on guaranteeing the right of citizens to live in a healthy environment, and is a unique office in Europe and the world. Only Finland and Israel have similar institutions.

The new ombudsman, compared to the existing one, will have expanded jurisdiction. The most significant added power is that he or she will be entitled to suspend environmental permits and operating licenses (mostly local government licenses) by calling in the appropriate authorities.

The new official will also be able to gain access to private property when necessary, and has the right to access private documents during an investigation.

It is currently the case that an ombudsman has the right to give opinions on matters which are not legally binding; the ombudsman’s expanded power, however, now means that he or she may, apart from issuing recommendations, seek remedies at higher administrative levels and also initiate court litigation where environmental violations are concerned. The ombudsman will also be entitled to intervene in ongoing judicial proceedings and reveal details of infringements to the broader public.

The existing ombudsmen in Hungary do not have the powers to sue legal persons such as companies, organisations or associations who are suspected of being in non-compliance with the laws. The ombudsman for human rights, however, recently applied to Parliament to be granted expanded powers regarding redress to courts and litigation proceedings.

The last major difference is that the green ombudsman will focus primarily on private companies and not the public sector, as the former is responsible for the most environmental damage.

Boldizsar Nagy, the rejected nominee, was an early supporter of establishing the green ombudsman in Hungary, and is a key figure in popularising the idea in the country. He also represented Hungary in the International Court of Justice during a 1993–97 lawsuit over the Bos-Nagyamaros Dam, a trial that led to the abandonment of plans to build a second hydroelectric dam on the Danube River. It remains possible that he will be renominated for ombudsman in February.
SatNavs are those nifty little map-based toolkits that have become quite the rage recently. Based on satellite-derived global positioning system (GPS) coordinates, the technology helps you navigate from point A to point B by identifying (generally) the shortest route. Once uploaded with auxiliary data—e.g. speed limits, camera locations—the device uses real-time info that can also help you avoid the worst traffic jams. And with less distance covered at more constant speeds, it sounds great for the environment, too. But is it?

A quick poll of colleagues revealed some interesting viewpoints. “GPS may mean more efficient route management, especially in urban areas, but this will eventually see haulage companies making three drops a day, instead of two—the so-called bounce-back effect,” notes REC project manager Gabor Heves.

On top of this, “the shortest possible route may not always be the most navigable,” says Chris Douglas, senior associate with UK consultancy firm Transport & Travel Research Ltd. “Consider a scenario where long-distance truckers take a 16.5-metre, 44-tonne articulated vehicle down an impassable winding rural road because they’ve trusted the GPS over their common sense,” Douglas adds. Hmmm.

According to European Commission (EC) estimates from September 2007, EU freight transport will double in just the next decade, while levels of car ownership will likely have grown by 50 percent from 2000 to 2010. After digesting those numbers, try considering this: “Satellite navigation boxes…are no longer the preserve of luxury car owners in Europe. You now see them in the humblest vehicles,” Paul Meller of the IDG News Service wrote this autumn. Just imagine the consequences of every driver heeding the advice of electronic real-time traffic updates. The sights I saw across the Benelux this summer—driving bumper to bumper at 90 km/h—will be replicated all over Europe!

Nonetheless, where SatNavs are concerned, the EC seems focused primarily on the bottom line. On September 19 the commission proposed to foot the entire EUR 3.4 billion cost of ‘Galileo’ (Europe’s answer to the US-led GPS). “Galileo is extremely important for the strategic autonomy of Europe,” transport commissioner Jacques Barrot explained. “We can’t let the opportunity to manage…this advanced technology pass. Consumers are answering the question by buying more and more GPSs. Galileo will make money, and with the EU as its owner, it will generate income for the EU budget.” Again, hmmm. I’m inclined to think that EC money would be better spent on public rail infrastructure or expanded city planning budgets.

To be fair, my colleagues have also expressed their share of praise for SatNavs. “If you have to negotiate your way into city centres during rush hour, they help you arrive relaxed at your destination, on time and without daredevil feats,” says one. “They can lead you better than a map in areas you don’t know at all,” adds another. Yet another colleague makes the fantastic claim: “GPS saved my marriage.”

But, still, I have to ask: What is happening to our spatial awareness? What about our ability to read maps, or to interact with passengers and townsfolk? My belief is that SatNavs will simply increase our dependence on technology and external stimuli—further turning us into automatons and dummies. And, of course, anything oriented toward making driving easier just means we’re going to be driving more, not less.
To buy or not to buy
Consumers need detailed and reliable information to make ethical purchases

The Ethical Consumer Research Association (ECRA), a not-for-profit organisation run as a worker cooperative, has been churning out green buyers’ guides and reports for more than 20 years. Many of these reports, published in the concern’s Ethical Consumer Magazine, are available online, with roughly six new ones added each month. ECRA’s website has recently been divided into two portals: <www.ethiscore.org> (which contains the buyers’ guides) and <www.ethical-consumer.co.uk> (where Boycott News and other sustainable production and consumption-related information can be found).

Of course, several other NGOs and watchdog organisations compile information on companies and their environmental records (such as Corporate Watch and Multinational Monitor), but Ethical Consumer is likely the only group to have systematically researched more than 10,000 companies and created product-issue matrices to rate such a wide range of product groups. Ethical Consumer Magazine “looks at the companies behind the brands.” For example, does a company manufacturing recycled paper also clear-cut virgin forests?

Utilising newspapers, public records, health and safety-related court proceedings, and reports from such NGOs as Friends of the Earth, Oxfam, and War on Want, Ethical Consumer examines 19 criteria before giving a company and/or product a rating of anywhere between 1 and 20, with 20 being the most environment friendly. Some of the criteria include: environmental reporting, nuclear power, workers’ rights, human rights, armaments, irresponsible marketing, animal testing, energy-efficiency rating, political activity, and whether or not products are organic or Fair Trade. So it’s really a good idea to consult these reports before buying anything, whether it’s an MP3-player, toothpaste, baked beans, mobile phone, vodka, fridge, toilet paper, baby carriage, bread, make-up, tent, or even internet banking services.

Many of the reports are available for free, but the entire range is available for a small yearly subscription fee. Also, with Boycott News you can discover why companies like Shell (destruction of Nigeria’s environment), Tesco (use of chips embedded in products that collect personal data), Nouvelle (use of virgin forests to make toilet paper), Caterpillar (bulldozers to the Israeli army), Nestle (irresponsible marketing of baby milk formula) and Starbucks’s (Ethiopian farmers earn only about 2p/cup) are the targets of consumer boycotts.

Embracing change
Another multi-format resource offering a wide range of interesting environmental information is <www.treehugger.com>. The resource is available as treehugger tv, treehugger radio, and a set of 32 “How to Green Your …” guides. Some examples of the latter include How to Green Your: Book (for both authors and publishers), Public Transport, Baby, Wedding, Meals, Heating, Summer, Car, Gardening, Clothing, Coffee and Tea, Work, Furniture—and, yes—even Sex. Did you know, for example, that 60–100 million condoms are improperly disposed of in the U.K. alone? This creates problems for rivers, plumbing and sewerage treatment plants.

Some of treehugger’s tamer recommendations include: buying undergarments made from organic and Fair Trade sources, purchasing organic Fair Trade chocolate and organic massage oils, showering together to save water (though I suspect this might actually increase the length of time in the shower!), and using silky smooth bamboo sheets (which are manufactured using a rapidly renewable resource, naturally contain anti-microbial properties, and draw away moisture).

GEO-4: Humanity at risk!
The latest in UNEP’s flagship report series, Global Environment Outlook 4 (GEO-4): environment for development offers a harrowing assessment of the “current state of the global atmosphere, land, water and biodiversity.” Prepared by nearly 400 experts and published in October 2007, GEO-4 details environmental and socio-economic changes since 1987, demonstrates how essential the environment is for improving and sustaining human well-being. The report uses four scenarios to explore plausible futures and identifies options for action, making it indispensible for policy-makers, business and industry, teachers and researchers. It is a call for action.

“I sincerely hope GEO-4 is the final wake-up call.”
– Achim Steiner, UN Undersecretary General and UNEP Executive Director

Take action now by ordering online at: www.earthprint.com
Price: USD 80
E3G and its network of change agents call upon European leaders to extend democracy to every citizen. With a firm mandate in hand, Europe can make political choices that ensure its security and prosperity in an interdependent world, and spread the call for global sustainability. Europe in the World is based on a series of "thinking events" held over the spring and summer with the support of various partners such as the REC. A passionate debate hosted by the REC in 2006 in Szentendre, Hungary, which featured various stakeholders, contributed heavily to the content of the publication.

THE ITALIAN TRUST FUND

The Italian Trust Fund ITF – a targeted contribution to the Regional Environmental Center (REC) by the Italian Ministry for the Environment, Land and Sea – and the REC assisted the development of the Europe in the World pamphlet. ITF is committed to a sound environment in the region both at the local level and on a global scale. From concept to strategy, from hot spots to sustainable development, the ITF is a step ahead in supporting all-in sustainability solutions for Central and Eastern Europe. For more information on ITF’s activities visit www.rec.org/rec/programs/itf.
Our aim: to accelerate and expand the global market for renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies.

We are an active global partnership that formulates policy initiatives for clean energy markets and facilitates financing for sustainable energy projects.

The REC serves as the regional REEEP secretariat for 15 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Turkey.

The benefits of sustainable energy are clear: energy security, economic development, social equity and environmental protection.

Join the drive for sustainable energy!

www.rec.org/reeep

REEEP a sustainable energy future