

# AUTONOMOUS ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY FOR THE CARPATHIAN BASIN: A THEORETICAL APPROACH

[Professor Gyula Bora](#)

The Budapest University of Economics  
Hungary

Following the declaration of the Stockholm UN Conference on the Environment, numerous documents of both the United Nations and other international organisations are calling more and more attention to the importance of international co-operation in environmental protection. The Rio de Janeiro documents emphasise even more forcefully the strong grounds for international co-operation in this area, including the various types of regional co-operation. In the European region it is the UN Economic Commission for Europe, amongst others, and in a more limited area, the European Union, that are working to solve the common environmental problems of the European countries.

The achievement of the environmental goals drawn up for the whole of Europe, and the high level of international co-operation which that entails, in no way clash with the harmonisation of the environmental policies of the countries of the various parts of Europe and with their co-operation to promote greater effectiveness in environmental protection. A special case in this endeavour could be the creation of an autonomous environmental policy for the Carpathian Basin.

It is customary to speak of autonomy in policy when that policy relates exclusively to territory within a country's international borders. The concept of autonomy in the case of environmental protection, at least theoretically, and allowing for certain limitations and margins of error, can be extended to those geographical regions or units in which the natural endowments constitute a complex geographical order, and in which the interrelationships of the elements of that order act to promote the spread of environmental pollution. The Carpathian, or Pannonian, Basin may be regarded as one such geographical order.

Despite the political structure of the region, the conditions would appear ripe for the formulation of the main lines of an autonomous environmental policy for the Carpathian Basin. Because interference's in environmental processes cross international frontiers and affect, or damage, the interests of other countries, the geographical situation can influence, indeed, determine the stance of countries called upon to formulate international law. The geographical situation of a country is not to be considered in isolation. It is important to consider to what extent pollutants originating from it affect the territories of other countries, and to what extent it is endangered by contaminants originating outside its borders.

The Carpathian Basin is a well-defined geographical unit consisting of an equally well-definable system of regions. Two of its most important characteristic features are its central situation and the fact that it is a closed geographical system. Its central situation renders it the centrepiece of Europe's main geographical regions, while the surrounding compact mountain ranges close it off from other regions. This makes it a distinct and unique geographical unit. Despite the fact that the Basin is closed off, however, the geographical link with the surrounding regions is maintained.

The geographical harmony of the Carpathian Basin is afforded by the complex interrelationships and synthesis of its relief, climate, river systems, and vegetation cover. Being a closed system tight, inward-looking connections and relationships dominate among the various regions of the Basin via the elements of the geographical environment. Owing to its central situation, it is not only the activities of the neighbouring regions that influence environmental processes within the Basin, but the fact that it is a closed system ensures that environmental elements act as conductors, directing pollutants from different parts of the Basin to areas mostly inside the Basin itself. This holds generally true even though it may not apply to every pollutant source and direction of flow.

An excellent example of this is the Danube, collecting the waters of the rivers of the Carpathian Basin either inside the Basin or outside it - with the exception the Poprad and Dunajec Rivers which belong to the Vistula's river system. Consequently, all the Basin countries are responsible for Danube water quality.

It is important to add, however, that the Carpathian Basin cannot be considered a perfectly closed system, because its atmosphere is under the influence of air currents from Europe and, occasionally, from further afield, and its main river, the Danube, receives its water from catchments outside the Basin and delivers it to the Black Sea.

An investigation of the Carpathian Basin's environmental state and the means of its protection requires an analysis of the prevailing political conditions and the geography of its political structure. The Basin's political geography evolved over a number of historical stages and episodes. Radical changes took place with the termination of the Yalta agreements and the establishment of the new states. The first process saw the establishment of market economies throughout the region - with the exception of Austria which was already a market economy - while the second process consisted of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and the assumption of independence by Slovakia.

Today, the territory of the Carpathian Basin is shared among eight states falling into three groups. The first group consists of Hungary and Slovakia, whose territories lie entirely within the Basin. A significant proportion of the territories of the second group of countries - Croatia, Romania, and Yugoslavia - lie inside the Basin, while only peripheral areas of the third group, consisting of Austria, Slovenia, and Ukraine lie inside the Basin. One important difference between the three groups of countries could be that they are not concerned to the same extent with the environmental condition of the whole of the Basin.

The states of the Carpathian Basin are sovereign; their national frontiers are guaranteed by international law. They are free to shape their domestic, foreign, and economic policies, and not least their environmental policies in line with their own interests. One consequence of this, and of the fact that a large number of countries are involved, is that their interests differ, which means that potential clashes of interests have also to be accounted for. International experience demonstrates that the number of the participating countries and their differing interests can extend the work of reaching agreement, or that settlements may often be reached only at the price of extensive compromises which eat into the essence of the agreements.

The proposal for an autonomous environmental policy for the Carpathian Basin naturally should not affect the basic principles which stipulate every country's obligation to ensure that installations on its territory do not cause contamination or damage to another country, nor should it violate any country's sovereignty to determine the kind of environmental policy it is to pursue and the kinds of instruments it is to employ to achieve it. Co-operation, first and foremost, has to find those points of contact and areas of mutual interest in the Basin which genuinely promote the protection of the environment and, through that, of humanity.

The above gives rise to a relationship which can most simply be expressed as follows: the countries of the Carpathian Basin have expectations of neighbouring countries in the interests of environmental protection, but they also have a responsibility to protect their own respective environments in a way that ensures that waste products crossing the international boundaries do not cause damage to neighbouring countries.

It is important to point out, however, that, owing to the physical geography and particularly to the political structure of the Basin, the probability and frequency of contaminants spreading across international boundaries are potentially high. These two factors on their own would seem sufficient to justify the countries of the region not restricting themselves to mere close co-operation in the area of environmental protection but, on account of the strong community of interests and prevailing conditions, recognising the need for an autonomous environmental policy exclusively for the region. The continued deterioration of the Basin's environment cannot be allowed to continue.

Over the past decade, advances have been made in international co-operation by the activities of the UN World Committee on Environment and Development. The Committee's report, *Our Common Future*, makes, amongst others, the following recommendations for future action, concerning the development and environmental policies of countries:

- Policies ought to be critically reviewed, more environmentally-friendly and reformulated in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.
- International co-operation should promote creativity and flexibility in policy formulation.
- In the interests of environmental protection it is important for individuals, environmental organisations, economic organisations, and governments to continually raise the level of mutual understanding and commitment.

Even though the Rio documents were the product of a global approach, they contain elements which can promote co-operation among Carpathian Basin countries. Examples of these documents include the Declaration on the Forests, the UN Framework Convention on Climatic Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, Agenda 21 and the Convention on Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents (Helsinki, 1992).

If a common interest relevant in every respect to all the countries of the region is difficult to draft, it is possible to find numerous interests of a bilateral nature, or those which relate to a number of countries. For example, in the area of water conservation flood prevention is a common interest among countries bordered by rivers. Common interests are to be found as well in the area of air conservation. Further, there is a common interest in reducing pollution from transit commercial transport, as well as in the handling of industrial and household waste.

The issue of responsibility may also be raised amongst the arguments for a more intensive common environmental policy. Being aware of the future dangers confronting humanity, the concept of responsibility emerges much more forcefully today than in the past. What sort of responsibilities are we talking about? Is it a question of global responsibility? Is it a question of regional responsibility of a group of countries in the same region, or in close geographical proximity, or are we talking about the local responsibility within a particular country? What, then, could constitute the main elements of an autonomous environmental policy? A few suggestions are listed below:

- establishing a uniform monitoring system and an efficient, high-speed information system which would provide information not only on the regular instances of pollution, but would also report on exceptional events in the shortest possible time
- extending environmental impact assessment to cover more countries when planning new investments and installations in order to avoid, amongst other things, future disagreements and tensions
- establishing and running, in border areas, installations and facilities for the protection of the environment

- joint supervision of the implementation of tasks, which affect the whole of the Carpathian Basin, stemming from various international agreements
- reducing differences in emission standards, and perhaps formulating a set of standards custom-prepared expressly for the Basin
- technical assistance and the exchange of research results and experience in the interests of more effective environmental protection

The above list shows that there is wide scope indeed for the development of an autonomous environmental policy for the Carpathian Basin. The most important condition for the realisation of this policy is the recognition on the part of the countries concerned of the need for this kind of protection for the Basin. For the time being, a number of barriers to closer co-operation remain; amongst these are conflicting interests and inertia, born of historical grievances.

In discussions on international co-operation voice is often given to the issue of violation and protection of sovereignty. Today, in the age of economic integration, joint security and political arrangements such as NATO and the European Union, surrendering a part of one's sovereignty is not an isolated phenomenon. In a community surrendering one part or another of one's sovereignty strengthens that community, which could also have positive backlash effects on the countries concerned.

Co-operation in environmental protection may be achieved in a number of stages, beginning with the most easily acceptable arrangements, basing successive steps on the results achieved in the previous one - using this as evidence of viability - and advancing to the forging of more complex co-operation. Over and above its effect of advancing environmental protection, a successful autonomous environmental policy for the Carpathian Basin would also promote general trust and good-will among the peoples of this region.

Naturally, this study contains the outlines of one possible approach only, in which it was not possible to address numerous important questions. One of these, for example, is the main dangers associated with the types of environmental degradation that are commonplace, and which today pose a very real threat to the environment of the countries of the Carpathian Basin.

---

Professor **Gyula Bora** graduated from the Budapest University of Economics. He was a Candidate for Science in Geography, and was sponsored by the Ford Foundation for his postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Chicago. He also studied US environmental policy on a WHO fellowship. Professor Bora works in the Department of Economic Geography at the Budapest University of Economics where he has also held the position of Vice Dean of the Faculty of Commerce and Vice Rector for Scientific and International affairs. His scientific activities include regional studies, industrial plant location, consulting for regional organisation and research on environmental protection model building. He has been involved in several national and international research projects, and has been Acting President of the Hungarian UN Association and President of the Hungarian Geographic Society.