

Regional environmental initiative:
**South-Eastern Europe (Balkan) Regional Environmental
Cohesion Initiative**

Prof dr **Andjelka Mihajlov**

“ENVIROMENTAL AMBASSADORS”
Jovana Rajica 5 D, 11000 Beograd, Serbia

Email: anmi@eunet.rs

Abstract

Regional Environmental Cohesion Initiative itself, as the strategic and visionary concept*, promoting “environment as the no-borders concept” and “environmental soft diplomacy” tool for regional cooperation. The platform is *SEE Regional Declaration on Environmental Cohesion as the tool to EU integration and Sustainable Development*, approved in 2006. In 2007 commitment is confirmed to move from Initiative to Regional Networking and Action through regional project/s.

The effectiveness of initiative is having constrains: recognition by decision makers, and need the strong support to CSOs from the region, in promoting this environmental language as the important tool to common future. Citizens and NGOs of Western Balkan and South Eastern Europe are looking for further opportunities to building up partnership, and to move from “acknowledgement” of Initiative to “recognition”. In year 2008+ this approach is giving potentials to be used as one of the instruments for regional security, peace and (sustainable) development.

Environment as the no-borders concept

The pollution of environment which is caused by destruction (conflict/bombing/military actions in Balkan region, i.e. on territory of former Yugoslavia) of industrial installations and urban infrastructure as well as military and other waste, including mines and unexploded ordinances, has impacted soils, watercourses and has rendered difficult or impossible the use of large areas of arable land. Post-conflict environmental restoration was / is limited.

Environmental degradation is keeping potential of conflict and competition over natural resources and energy security, aggravating social tensions, and in certain volatile situations, with potential of provoking or escalating violence and conflict. There is a mounting concern over the extent to which environmental degradation is threatening livelihoods, health and the fulfillment of basic needs, and harming the sustainability and stability of political, social and economic systems.

* Introduced by Andjelka Mihajlov in 2003 at that time Serbian Minister for the Protection of Natural Resources and Environment, and further accepted as the Mission of “Environmental Ambassadors”.

Author: Andjelka MIHAJLOV, a chemical engineer, is a Professor at the University of Novi Sad and Dean of the Faculty of Environmental Governance, EDUCONS University, Serbia. She is a member of the EBRD Environmental Advisory Council and President of the NGO, Environmental Ambassadors. In 2006 she was recognized by UNEP as a Woman Environmental Leader of the Western Balkans. She served as Serbian Minister for the Protection of Natural Resources and the Environment from June 2002 to March 2004.

Although there are the new administrative borders within former Yugoslavia, and new countries exists, the environment is sharing area, and substantial borders in building environmental protections systems is limited, if regional perspective and conditions are not taking in account.

Environmental problems in one country often spill way beyond its border. Thus, in already fragile social and political circumstances, *environmental insecurity* could serve as a catalyst for resorting to violence and becoming a risk for state (and regional) security and stability (there are obvious links between poverty, environmental safety and the level of human security).

SEE Regional Declaration on Environmental Cohesion as the tool to EU integration and Sustainable Development

NGOs from South East Europe (Serbia and UNMIK/Kosovo, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania), by signing the *Declaration for regional environmental cohesion, as an instrument to achieve sustainable development and accelerated association with the EU*, on 5 June 2006 in Belgrade, actively put forward an initiative for *environmental regional cohesion*¹. The process was promoted by the UNEP accredited NGO "Environmental Ambassadors"² from Belgrade in 2004.

The declaration *affirms* the shared goal of peace, stability, security, prosperity for citizens in the region and contributes to the EU cohesion policy 2007-2013. The *Declaration for regional environmental cohesion, as an instrument to achieve sustainable development and accelerated association with the EU*, starts from the fact that regional environmental cohesion is important in achieving sustainable development and security, that the environment is an important segment of foreign policy, that the environment and sustainable development have no price tags and no borders, that the region is facing numerous problems including, without being limited to, poverty, unemployment, lack of planning approach in development, pollution, regional energy deficit, excessive exploitation of natural resources, extensive fishing and hunting, neglect of animal welfare.

Environmental (soft) diplomacy

It is agreement that it is growing linkage between environment and conflict.

This paper is pointing out promotion of environmental language (used with knowledge and understanding of substance) as the important tool to common future.

Environmental issues can often offer a "soft" entry point for regional co-operation when other topics and issues are too politically sensitive for collaborative efforts.

Potentials for regional security, peace and (sustainable) development.

*EnvSec Initiative*³ is having respective results achieved in Western Balkan region, by addressing issues of environmental degradation which contribute to human vulnerability, and by promotion regional co-operation through cross-border management of natural resources. The *EnvSec Initiative* intends to assess environment and security challenges in a participatory way involving governments, academia and civil society.

The environmental sector has a great potential to enhance regional cohesion and the establishment of efficient regional cooperation.

¹ The initiative was presented in 2007 at the event accompanying the Sixth Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe" and specific activities have been undertaken.

² (www.ambassadors-env.org)

³ The Environment and Security Initiative (UNEP/UNDP/OSCE/REC/UNECE and NATO as associate partner) |

The advantage of regional initiatives is that they have the potential to attract more investments compared to individual country initiatives (for example ensuring a bigger recycling market).

“Our survival depends not only on military balance, but on global cooperation to ensure a sustainable environment”[⊗].

Concluded remarks

Proposal to EU policy and decision makers

For sustainable development of Western Balkan region, the best prescription is peace and security. To come closer to fulfilling this task, EU should (re)formulate policy for enlargements, taking in account possible instruments and tools (this paper is strongly recommended soft environmental diplomacy as one of the main instruments with great potential for success).

The policy should include instruments to succeed in:

- Effecting a transition to understand sustainable use of natural resources and integral environmental protection
- To assist to citizens to be motivated and able to pay for transition to sustainable economic management
- To assure inclusion of environment in other sectoral policies, including to education (by supporting programs), straightening institutions and implementation of relevant environmental agreements (the implementation of ratified international agreements is weak, and as certain international agreements are not yet ratified by all countries of the region, the potentials for such cooperation have not yet been fully utilized; moreover, strengthening regional and national institutions for environmental protection is a pre-requisite to ensure sustainable development).

Way could be development of ENVIRONMENTAL DIPLOMACY tools, already noted by NGOs of region, including, but not limited to ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY actions (global, regional and local) as one of important tool (and respective activities through *EnVSec Initiative*).

Well informed, mature citizens have to be prepared for implementing sustainable development. It is therefore necessary to support relevant governmental and non-governmental institutions and organizations in order to develop their understanding of the complexity of the concepts and the inter-linkages of environmental protection, human security and sustainable development. They also need to have sufficiently developed skills to define and carry out actions.

Proposal to national policy decision makers

For the significant potential of regional cooperation to be utilized in the area of the environment in all countries, a set of minimum requirements on national level needs to be fulfilled, specifically:

- To include the environmental sector among the priorities for sustainable development, including to aware the elected representatives, public officials, civil society, media and the general public on environmental problems and the concept of sustainable development
- To harmonize environment protection mechanisms with those operating in the EU, including the consistent integration of environmental considerations and requirements in the process of adoption of local development plans and municipal regulations/decisions, proper environmental monitoring and research mechanisms on local and central level , and adequate mechanisms for ensuring public participation in

⊗ Brundland Commission Report, 1987

policy- and decision-making processes in the field of environmental protection, both on local and national level.

And to recall, The *SEE Regional Declaration on Environmental Cohesion as the tool to EU integration and Sustainable Development* (mentioned above) appeals on governments of the region to build partnerships with the NGOs to:

- overcome the differences in the region in partnership with NGOs;
- contribute to human and environmental security by reducing cross-border risks and increased regional and cross-border cooperation, with EU integrations as a shared interest;
- ensure sustainable development through strategies and actions;
- monitor the implementation of the Declaration and to ensure that the EU and the international community and institutions provide financial support to the achievement of the above goals.

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