



EEA Speech

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Europe's environment: The fourth assessment

Speech to the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the Environment for Europe process
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Dear Mr President, Mr Chairman, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Participants,

Four years ago, in Kiev, you called upon the European Environment Agency to provide you with a new assessment of Europe's environment.

In other words, you asked us: "Is our environment healthy?"

Before trying to answer that question and addressing the environmental challenges of today, let us remind ourselves just how beautiful, rich and diverse our common pan-European environment is.

It is home to an enormous variety of natural and semi-natural habitats and ecosystems – ranging from wetlands to deserts, from coastal lowlands to alpine mountains, from dense forests to treeless steppes, from sub-tropical seas to arctic ice-shelves.

The pan-European region covers a vast area – spanning across ten time zones an area that is nearly a fifth of the planet's land surface.

More than half of this total is made up by the 12 countries in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. The other half is shared by 41 Western and Central Europe and South Eastern Europe countries.

Today, I am proud to present you the main findings of the fourth assessment covering the pan-European region – an assessment which I hope will guide you in designing better policies for our environment.

Let me summarise some of the key findings of the report – findings relevant to environment-related health concerns, to climate change, to biodiversity loss, to our marine environment and to consumption and production patterns.

Pollution of air, water and soils continues to pose major health concerns.

Yes, there have been considerable reductions in both air and water pollution in much of the pan-European region over the past few years. But air pollution remains a significant threat – in particular from fine particles and ground-level ozone in urban areas. In Western and Central Europe, these are estimated to shorten life expectancy by almost one year, and affect the healthy development of our children.

And, worryingly, we estimate that most air pollutants in EECCA countries have

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increased by more than 10 per cent since our previous assessment. These increases are largely due to increases in transport and the lack of proper implementation of air pollution policies.

Similarly, water quality is still a major issue across the region.

We estimate that more than 100 million people across the region – that is more than one in nine persons – still do not have access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation.

And in many countries in South Eastern Europe and EECCA regions, the quality of the water supply and sanitation services appears to have deteriorated over the past 15 years – especially in rural areas.

It is promising that the data available to us shows a general improvement of water quality for many rivers in recent years. Nevertheless, several large rivers – as well as many smaller ones – remain heavily polluted.

Biodiversity decline and loss of ecosystem services are becoming a serious concern.

An estimated 16.000 plant and animal species are indigenous to the pan-European region, and more than 700 – almost 5 % - are under threat. In addition, the number of invasive species is increasing across the region.

There is no doubt, that without considerable additional effort and resources, we will not be able to halt biodiversity loss in the pan-European region by 2010 – one of the few targets that we all agreed to just four years ago in the Kiev Resolution.

European seas are generally in a poor ecological state and our marine and coastal ecosystems are under increasing pressure.

Over-fishing and destructive fishing practices are still widespread, impacting fish stocks and marine ecosystems.

And, eutrophication – commonly a result of agricultural practices – remains a severe problem in all enclosed seas and sheltered marine waters across the region.

To counter these – and other – concerns about the state of our marine environment, a stricter implementation of existing measures is urgently needed.

Meanwhile, the number of major accidental oil spills in European seas has generally decreased. But oil discharges as a result of maritime transport and refineries are still significant, and continue to pose a problem, which may worsen with increasing movement of oil across the region's seas.

Climate change threatens to exacerbate all the environmental concerns.

Global warming has become an unequivocal reality – across the pan-European region data show that annual average temperatures in 2005 were 1.4 degree Celsius higher than pre-industrial levels. As a result, the Arctic ice cover is shrinking rapidly, permafrost is melting and glaciers across Europe are retreating.

And future climatic changes are projected, for example, to add to water stress, to significantly alter ecosystems – both terrestrial and marine – and to increase the vulnerability to extreme events.



Thus we will need to cut global greenhouse gas emissions by at least half by 2050, if we want to minimise climate change impacts and limit temperature increases to no more than 2 degrees Celsius (above pre-industrial levels).

Nonetheless, even if we do implement stronger reduction schemes today, some climate change impacts seem unavoidable and we urgently need to start adaptation measures – including changes in lifestyles.

Indeed, many of our current consumption and production patterns are not sustainable.

Here, there remains considerable scope for improvement. Our report highlights, for example, that the efficiency in the use of natural resources use varies by a factor of 20 between countries.

Household consumption, including water and energy use, and the use of transport continue to rise. Recent improvements in energy efficiency and other encouraging developments – such as the increased use of renewable energy sources – are simply offset by growing consumption. And this trend seems set to continue unless additional measures are implemented.

The pan-European region is also generating ever more waste; and dumping our waste in landfills is still the most common method of waste management across the region.

So, coming back to our initial question: “Is our environment healthy?”

Well, yes and no!

Yes, there are those issues - such as air and water pollution - where we have seen important successes in the recent past. Nevertheless, some related concerns persist, although, by and large, we know how to deal with them and what implementation action is needed.

But then there are also a number of more complex issues unfolding today - such as climate change, biodiversity decline and the loss of ecosystem services. Progress in addressing these issues is slow, partly because they require substantial action to be taken, the full benefit of which will only show in the long run.

And, glimpsing into the future, it becomes obvious that all these challenges – if not tackled decisively today – have the potential to seriously undermine the very security on which our economies and societies are built, to pose significant threats to our livelihoods and those of coming generations.

We increasingly recognise, that most - if not all - of these environmental challenges cannot - and should not - be tackled, without considering the bigger picture.

Therefore allow me to highlight some of the key socio-economic and political dynamics that are shaping our pan-European region:

Today, more than 870 million people live in the region – but population density and age structure vary considerably.

More than half of this population lives in Western and Central Europe, making it one of the most densely populated areas of the world. This is in stark contrast to the relatively low population density in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.



The economic disparities across the region are even more striking. Gross domestic product per person varies by a factor of ten within the Western and Central Europe region alone.

Meanwhile, across the region, greenhouse gas emissions per person have stayed more or less stable at relatively high levels since 2000. In both Western and Central Europe and EECCA countries, per person emissions are just above 10 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents per year.

It is worth noting, that trade flows between EECCA and the rest of Europe have more than doubled between 2000 and 2005 - making us increasingly inter-dependant. Nevertheless, here too a remarkable asymmetry is apparent: The main export from Western and Central Europe is manufactured goods, while raw materials - mainly fuels and mining products - make up more than 80% of the exported value from EECCA countries to the rest of Europe.

Over the past twenty years, the political map of the pan-European region has been altered several times. While the number of independent states within the region has nearly doubled over the past decade, the European Union grew from 15 to 27 members.

As a result, the region has - at the same time - become more diverse and has grown closer together than ever before.

This brings us to the core of today's debate: What can we do together to better address the environmental challenges of our time?

First, we still need to fill a prevalent 'Information Gap' with regard to environmental data covering the whole region.

The European Environment Agency has published four pan-European assessments. However, we are still not able to fully assess the state of our environment or the progress that has been made, as – in some cases – basic information, data or environmental indicators are lacking. Drinking water statistics across the region, for example, are incomplete and incomparable at best.

Future assessments would greatly benefit from a shared environmental information system covering all the countries and regions of the pan-European area– a system committed to and fed by national as well as international bodies. Progress is being made, but much still needs to be done to improve our capabilities to monitor, measure and assess environmental change adequately.

Also, we need to overcome a persistent 'Implementation Gap' in environmental policy.

A growing number of international documents have been negotiated and agreed upon on environment and related topics – including joint declarations and regional strategies, as well as bi- and multilateral agreements. Environmental issues are increasingly becoming a platform for dialogue and cooperation across the region.

However, implementing the commitments made in various international fora has proved to be slow and uneven across the region – it is worth noting that none (!) of the three protocols signed in Kiev four years ago are in force as of today. Implementation often requires additional investment and capacity building at national level, presenting many countries with difficulties or forcing delays in their response to the commitments made.



And, unfortunately, many of the policies that are agreed upon and subject to implementation, lack clear targets and adequate monitoring mechanisms – making it difficult to evaluate progress in achieving environmental goals.

However, comprehensive environmental information and implementation of existing policies are not enough. Because in the end, change depends on our individual behaviour, the consumption patterns we adopt, and the way our societies function.

Thus, to initiate change, all groups in society, individual consumers as well as public institutions and private enterprises need to be encouraged and empowered to act for a better, healthy environment. Public awareness and education for sustainable development need to play a long-term role in reshaping the way we respond to environmental concerns.

In this light it is particularly encouraging to also see ministers of education here today, joining forces to improve Europe's environment.

The 'Environment for Europe' process has been an important pillar in building partnerships towards a healthier environment – and could continue to be a way forward.

Building bridges to the future - to help us to deal with the challenges ahead - will, without doubt, be a long and difficult task. A task that requires, above all, dedicated cooperation.

Since we started down this road a good decade and a half ago, we have significantly increased our understanding of Europe's environment. At the same time, this has deepened the realisation that new ways of thinking are needed if we are to act on the ever more complex and uncertain environmental challenges we are facing today.

We need to evaluate and preserve the services that ecosystems provide in a more comprehensive manner - and to assess to what degree such services may be at risk as a result of our past, current and future actions. We need to make use of the understanding we have gained over the years, and embrace an ecosystems approach to deal with environmental concerns in a more integrated manner.

Indeed, complex issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and developing sustainable consumption patterns can only be properly addressed, if environmental considerations are seen as integral and beneficial to other fields of policies – all other fields of policies.

In this spirit, I hope our report – the evidence and insight it offers – can help inspire and guide environmental policies across the pan-European region.

We should not forget, that in the end, whether we can achieve a healthy environment or not, will depend on all of us taking action to make it happen.

Thank you very much for your attention.