

Environmental Politics in Southeastern Europe

In Western Europe and North America today, environmental problems are among the most pressing items on the political and public agenda. Despite all the woeful tidings, much has been achieved over the past forty years in the effort to 'save the planet', make economic growth sustainable and halt the depletion of natural energy resources and the decline in biodiversity. Essential to these changes have been states with the resources and administrative capacity to design and implement the necessary policies, and an electorate ready to accept, if not quite demand, the prioritization of environmental issues. However, the former communist polities typically lacked both. An awareness of long-term environmental danger among citizens and policy-makers alike is a precondition for the necessary investment, always costly, in alternative sources of energy, environmentally friendly production and other measures, which are often seen as restrictive. Moreover, only an affluent nation could afford to aspire to be a 'green nation',¹ but while environmentalism has always been perceived in Western Europe as typically a concern of the left-leaning, the opposite might well be true for former Eastern Bloc countries. There, concern for the environment galvanized democratic and national opposition to communism. Thus, there seems to be a clear dividing line between East and West, at least as far as environmental politics are concerned.

The former communist states and Soviet republics of Eastern and Southeastern Europe had all been subjected to at least half a century of forced industrialisation, very heavy urbanisation and unrestrained consumption of land, leaving a threefold communist legacy. First, the extent of the environmental problems and the duration of unchecked modernisation; secondly, the limited options for citizens subject to communism to force state authorities to acknowledge the

GUEST EDITORS

Wim van Meurs

is associate professor for Political History at the History Department of the University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

Liesbeth van de Grift

is assistant professor for the History of International Relations at the Department of History and Art History of Utrecht University, The Netherlands.

Both co-initiated the research framework 'Voice of Nature', concerned with the political history of environmental governance in Europe.

¹ Frank Uekötter refers to Germany as 'the greenest nation'. Frank Uekötter, *The Greenest Nation?*, Cambridge/MA 2014.

consequences of all-out modernisation; and third has been the lack of resources to support the cost of environmental policies during post-communist transition.

This special issue of *Südosteuropa* addresses the development over the past quarter of a century of environmental politics in Southeastern Europe and adjacent regions, and specifically in Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Turkey, and Georgia. Environmental politics are viewed as an object of European Union environmentalist politics, and the contributions offered here cover a broad range of topics, from the role of environmental movements during the fall of communism, to the subsequent rise of green NGOs and political parties, as well as the nexus between EU integration and environmentalism. However, all the articles are strictly focused on environmental politics and policy-making, and quite deliberately omit both the realities of policy implementation and the difficult question of measurable trends in environmental pollution, nature conservation, sustainable economics, and biodiversity.

For North America and Northwestern Europe, similar thematic restrictions would still yield a vast literature dating back at least to the 1970s and growing exponentially to date.² For Eastern Europe and especially for Southeastern Europe, relevant publications and academic experts are few and far between, although important work has been done in recent years.³ This issue of *Südosteuropa* does not seek to offer a comprehensive analysis of environmental policies or citizens' preferences in one or two, or many countries—as some recent studies do.⁴ Nor would it provide the reader with a systematic comparison of several polities for one well-defined subject such as European environmental

² John R. McNeill, The State of the Field of Environmental History, *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 35 (2010), 345-374; Sverker Sörlin / Paul Warde, The Problem of the Problem of Environmental History. A Re-Reading of the Field, *Environmental History* 12 (2007), 107-130; Stéphane Frioux / Vincent Lemire, Pour une histoire politique de l'environnement au 20e siècle, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'Histoire* 113 (2012), 3-12.

³ Julia Obertreis, Von der Naturbeherrschung zum Ökozid? Aktuelle Fragen einer Umweltzeitgeschichte Ost- und Ostmitteleuropas, *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 9 (2012), 115-122; Julia Obertreis, Eine ‚ökologische Katastrophe‘ in historischer Perspektive. Die Verlandung des Aralsees und die russländische und sowjetische Bewässerungs- und Baumwollanbaupolitik in Usbekistan und Turkmenistan seit der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts, in: Thoralf Klein et al., eds, *Umweltgeschichte in globaler Perspektive*, Erfurt 2013, 1-26; Tobias Huff, *Natur und Industrie im Sozialismus*, Göttingen 2015; Stephen Brain, *Song of the Forest. Russian Forestry and Stalin's Environmentalism*, Pittsburgh/PA 2011; Klaus Gestwa, *Die Stalinschen Großbauten des Kommunismus. Sowjetische Technik- und Umweltgeschichte 1948-1964*, Munich 2010. See also the special issue of *Osteuropa* on environmental history, *Osteuropa* 58, Nos. 4-5 (2008), ‚Grünbuch. Politische Ökologie im Osten Europas‘.

⁴ William T. Markham / C. S. A. van Koppen, Nature Protection Organizations and Climate Change in the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States, *Nature and Culture* 9 (2014), 238-265; Vera Schwach, The Sea Around Norway. Science, Resource Management, and Environmental Concerns, 1860-1970, *Environmental History* 18 (2012), 101-110; Hein Anton Van der Heijden, Political Opportunity Structure and the Institutionalisation of the Environmental Movement, *Environmental Politics* 6 (1997), 25-50; Ronald Inglehart, Public

policy, say, or 'green parties'.⁵ Given the broadness of their scope, thematically and geographically, the six contributions here offer a number of insights that tend to challenge the obvious stereotypes of both environmentalism and the post-communist half of Europe.

The History of Environmentalism

A large part of the academic literature on the environment analyses trends in ecological processes and, equally importantly, assesses the impact of human-kind on landscape, biodiversity and their own immediate environment. These studies, by biologists, geographers and ecologists, are beyond the scope of the present special issue, for we wish to focus here on certain *political* aspects of the environment and of policymaking concerning it, rather than the actual implementation of ecological measures, or their results. This segment of the academic literature, which is dominated by political and social scientists, revolves around three main subjects:

1. Actors and processes of political decision-making in what is a highly complex policy field involving state institutions, experts, civil society, and business on regional, national and transnational levels.

2. The role of civil society, social movements and green parties in prioritising environmental matters on the political agenda, and their supervision of the implementation of policy measures and efforts to improve public awareness.

3. The impact of EU enlargement on the diffusion of environmental norms and policy-making in Europe.

The same subjects and analytical frameworks apply to studies focussed regionally and nationally on the EU-15 as well as on the new or future member states. There is a fourth point for studies on Western Europe, and it concerns the 'environmentalism' of the 1970s and 1980s as a then-new social movement. The historic dimension, pre-dating the environmentalism of the 1970s protest movements, is weakly developed for Western Europe, with the caesura of Greenpeace and the Club of Rome eclipsing continuities from preceding decades. Indeed, in studies on Eastern Europe, any historical dimension is virtually absent, with the ecological protests of the *glasnost*' appearing to come out of nowhere, and to be at best belated emulations of Western role models.⁶

Support for Environmental Protection. Objective Problems and Subjective Values in 43 Societies, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 28 (1995), 57-72.

⁵ Elizabeth Bomberg, *Green Parties and Politics in the European Union*, London 2005; Jon Burchell, *The Evolution of Green Politics. Development and Change Within European Green Parties*, London, Sterling/VA 2002.

⁶ Joan DeBardeleben, *To Breathe Free*, Washington/DC 1991; Christiane Busch-Luty, *Zum Verhältnis von Gesellschaft und Umwelt im realen Sozialismus*, Berlin 1986; Barbara Hicks,

By most accounts, the environmental history of the former communist countries amounts to a series of ecological disasters and a complete lack of political accountability. Typically, the stories begin with the intensification of agricultural production, the fields being frowned over by factory chimneys grimly belching ever more smoke as the signature image of industrial modernisation. 'Progress and prosperity' were the watchwords coming from the USSR in the 1930s and Eastern Europe in the 1950s, but that sort of propaganda sits uncomfortably with our twenty-first century perspective, imbued as it is by now with our acute concerns about sustainability and the irreversible degradation of nature. Yet as a matter of fact, the ideals, strategies and imagery of modernisation in the West in the 1950s (and the dire realities of pollution) were not so terribly different from those of their communist counterparts. All the same, communist regimes certainly were notorious for their reckless exploitation of nature and its resources, as well as for the hard-nosed pollution and despoliation of the landscape and the human environment alike. Bitterfeld, Chernobyl, or Baia Mare are just the better-known calamities punctuating a history of pervasive modernisation at all costs; but although outside the geographical scope of this particular issue, we should not forget events at Harrisburg, aboard the Exxon Valdez, in Bhopal, Seveso, and elsewhere.

According to this grand narrative, the weakening of communist rule and the parallel rise of citizens' protests against its various regimes and policies in Europe brought environmentalism to the fore in the 1980s. The combination of economic crisis and environmental degradation eventually turned 'green issues' into major mobilising factors for the civil protests of the late 1980s, and contributed strongly to the de-legitimisation of the communist regimes. The same narrative has it that the frenzy of communist industrial production came to a halt in the 1990s, when many of the notoriously polluting factories built in the 1960s failed to cope with the new rules of market economics. Socially, it is true, the consequences of de-industrialisation were disastrous, with mass unemployment, the erosion of the social infrastructure and poverty. In terms of pollution, however, the bankruptcy of former state enterprises and the closure of so many factories drastically reduced industrial emissions in absolute terms—although without the introduction of anti-pollution technologies.

Overall, the post-communist transition of the 1990s proved to be a Pyrrhic victory for the environmentalists. The green civil society initiatives of the late 1980s lost out to more immediate concerns about employment and fears of poverty during the economic transition to capitalism. In public debates about economic transition, environmental activists were marginalised and green parties in Eastern Europe never managed to achieve the standing of their Western

counterparts, neither in national parliaments nor governments.⁷ The reasoning seems to have been that, while entering a global competitive market, the former communist countries could ill afford to alienate international investors over environmental concerns. In fact, throughout the region and for most of the 1990s, low labour costs and minimal standards for pollution and waste management were considered indispensable competitive advantages.

Arguably, the downward trend was arrested by European environmental regulations and standards which, despite derogations for accession countries, are probably among the world's strictest. The European Commission and international NGOs and their national chapters could bring to bear enough leverage (and possessed the blueprints) to force national governments to pass substantial amounts of environmentally relevant legislation within a very few years. All the same, it takes time first to increase public awareness and then to change attitudes. Governance capacities were and are a recurring deficit identified in the annual EU progress reports for almost all candidate countries in East Central and Southeastern Europe. At the same time, the implementation of environmental legislation is one of the most demanding tasks in terms of administrative capacity. In sum, the past three decades have undoubtedly seen major achievements in all aspects of environmentalism, but for the former communist countries, catching up with the EU-15 and meeting the continuing challenges they face is by no means a foregone conclusion.

It must of course be admitted that the above account is in more than one respect somewhat clichéd and one-sided. First, it suggests that the environment had been a major political matter in the West ever since the Second World War, whilst regimes in the East were concerned only with production figures and output. Eastern and Southeastern Europe were not a blank slate in 1989/1991 as far as nature conservation and environmentalism were concerned. Relevant organisations, state institutions and legislation did exist, and some of them were in place even before the communists took over. Secondly, only in the 1970s did the 'green' activism that sought to protect individual species and landscapes give way to a 'grey' ideology that questioned the very legitimacy and rationality of human exploitation of nature beyond what was sustainable. Recently, both 'green' and 'grey' have been re-branded under an *economic* rationale of 'sustainability', instead of simply insisting on the sanctity of nature, its intrinsic value. The West's environmental movement of the 1970s was built partly on foundations that were at least a century older. Thus, the rethinking and prioritisation of ecological matters by citizens and governments alike in the 1970s and 1980s

⁷ Tanja Börzel / Aron Buzogány, Environmental Organisations and the Europeanisation of Public Policy in Central and Eastern Europe. The Case of Biodiversity Governance, *Environmental Politics* 19 (2010), 708-735; Peter Pavlínek / John Pickles, *Environmental Transitions*, London 2002.

contained more East-West parallels than is generally acknowledged.⁸ Third, the implied dichotomy of an ecology-minded civil society versus an economy-minded political establishment is a fallacy — as much in West as in East Europe. Legislation and taxation as incentives to make economic production more sustainable and awareness campaigns to change citizens' attitudes and behaviour all typically require state institutions that are both cooperative and competent.

Special Issue

It is the aim of this special issue to challenge the grand narrative we have outlined. By analysing a selected number of case studies, the contributors reveal the complexities and trajectories of environmental politics and policy-making in the region. They do so in a number of ways. The current politics of the environment in general and EU policies in particular are pivotal to three of the six contributions, although each of the case studies demonstrates that the adoption or emulation of EU norms and procedures for environmental protection is but a small part of the story. Local governance capacities, public support and vested economic interests are indispensable to a proper understanding not just of the dynamics of specific policies and their implementation, but of environmental politics in general. And it is clear that with the leverage of its integration process, the European Union takes a key effect. Susan Baker (Cardiff) offers a comparative overview of the results of EU conditionality in Southeast European environmental policies, while political scientist Ralf Nordbeck (Vienna) homes in on international policy transfers and the domestic adaptation of the legal and institutional framework. His target is the specific case of Romania. These studies of present-day politics not only analyse past deficiencies and misjudgements, but also set out to offer recommendations to national agencies, NGOs, and in particular to the European Union and other international drivers of environmental improvement. Conversely, in Georgia, as economist Manuela Troschke (Regensburg) explains, environmental policies remain the almost exclusive domain of national politics. To be heard at all, the voices of citizens and NGOs must be backed by international donors, and even if they do receive support, those voices do not seem to carry anything like far enough.

The three remaining contributions feature a prominently longitudinal perspective, covering environmentalism in a particular country from the 1980s to the present. Ümit Şahin, a scholar based in Istanbul with a decade-long experience as an activist in the Turkish environmentalist movement, focuses on the long struggle of environmentalists there to organize themselves into a political

⁸ For a focus on the East-West dichotomy rather than the parallels, see Fred Singleton, ed, *Environmental Problems in the Soviet Union & Eastern Europe*, London 1987; DeBardeleben, *To Breathe Free*.

party. Ethnographer Charlotte Johnson and sociologists Vanesa Castán Broto and Nela Milić (London, all) retrace the conflicts over an urban environment to the 1980s. New Belgrade as a planned city dates back to the early postwar years, but in recent decades state and municipal authorities on the one hand, and citizens' organisations and individual inhabitants on the other, have clashed over the reshaping of the city. Johnson, Castán Broto and Milić describe arguments—over liveability, tradition and ownership—similar to those used for the natural landscape. Political scientist Aron Buzogány (Berlin) focuses on Hungary's 'grey' civil environmentalist organisations and unpicks their evolving strategies from late communist times up to the transition to the market economy and membership of the EU.

What all the contributions have in common is that they reveal tensions among a large number of political and societal, national, and international players, who operate in changing coalitions which depend on the matter at hand and on prevailing views and ideas. Given the varied historical trajectories and political landscapes, it is no surprise that they have obtained varied results. Meanwhile, *all* actors, whether national governments, international bodies, or civil society organisations, are faced with a dilemma, between representative claims, citizens' participation and democratic legitimacy on the one hand,⁹ and adequate long-term environmental policies and their efficient implementation, on the other. That has always been the case in the past, and it will remain one of the main challenges.

CORRESPONDING AUTHORS

Wim van Meurs Radboud University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of History, Erasmusplein 1, 6525 HT Nijmegen. Email: w.v.meurs@let.ru.nl

Liesbeth van de Grift Utrecht University, Department of History and Art History, Drift 6, 3512 BS Utrecht. Email: l.vandegrift@uu.nl

⁹ Michael Saward, *The Representative Claim*, Oxford 2010; Neil Carter, *The Politics of the Environment*, Cambridge 2007; Brian Doherty / Marius de Geus, eds, *Democracy and Green Political Thought. Sustainability, Rights, and Citizenship*, Abingdon 1996.