

Panel discussion “20 Years of the Carpathian Convention: Assessing Progress, Inspiring Action, and Shaping the Future in times of triple planetary crisis”

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Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

The Carpathians are a mountainous area of great natural, tourist and cultural importance. Adopted 20 years ago by seven countries, the Carpathian Convention is an instrument to protect the great values of this region, while providing an opportunity to develop and improve the living conditions of its inhabitants. The rapid ratification of the Convention by all Parties highlighted the urgency of the need for a cross-border cooperation instrument for countries sharing the same problems.

Many benefits of implementing the Convention can be listed. These include the strengthening of ties between our nations, the possibility to exchange experiences and, for countries outside the European Union, to learn about and apply the most effective solutions in the field of environmental protection, proven in the Community.

In all the Carpathian countries, the lead ministry for the Carpathian Convention is the ministry of environment. From this ministry came the negotiators of the draft text of the convention, and this is where most of the action was taken. However, from the very beginning, economic sectors that use environmental resources were involved in the implementation of the Convention. Of several such important areas, I would like to focus on two in which Poland took on the role of chairing the working groups. I am referring to the areas of sustainable transport and sustainable tourism.

Sustainable transport is an essential condition for the development of the region, affecting other sectors. The pursuit of policies for and cooperation on sustainable transport is mentioned in Article 8 of the Convention. The Working Group on Sustainable Industry, Energy, Transport and Infrastructure, established under the Convention, focused primarily on sustainable transport, which allowed the development and adoption in 2014. Protocol on Sustainable Transport. The Protocol provides for cooperation on, among other things: policies for the development of sustainable transport and related infrastructure, with the reduction of negative environmental and socioeconomic impacts, the improvement of transportation safety, and the development and promotion of environmentally friendly transport models and systems.

A Joint Strategic Action Plan for the implementation of the Protocol was developed, with the support of the TRANSGREEN project. The Action Plan implements those provisions of the Protocol to the Convention that focus specifically on ecological connectivity and biodiversity conservation in relation to land transportation.

As for the second area, tourism plays an extremely important role in the development of the region and provides a significant part of the local community's income. The Protocol on Sustainable Tourism, adopted in 2011, includes provisions on, among other things, the need to harmonize the Carpathian countries' policies on tourism, the promotion of the Carpathian region as an important tourist destination, as well as the development and promotion of Carpathian tourism products. Work in this area was carried out by the Working Group on Sustainable Tourism, implementing the adopted provisions and supporting innovative activities, related to ongoing projects and initiatives.

Poland has actively cooperated with the Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention in the development of the Sustainable Tourism Strategy, developed and adopted the Plan for Voluntary Action by Administration and Tourism Sector Entities to Implement the Strategy, and established the Carpathian Convention Sustainable Tourism Task Force. The ministry responsible for tourism has subsidized projects from the budget on such issues as the restoration and maintenance of tourist trails, upgrading the skills of tourism personnel, developing tourism brands, implementing smartphone tourism apps, developing rural tourism, and improving tourist safety.

As the only area of activity of the Convention, tourism has developed the concept of a platform for joint action, called the Carpathian Platform for Sustainable Tourism. In a situation where three countries came forward to run such a platform and it was not possible to reach a consensus on selecting one country to run it, Poland proposed the creation of three centers: in Poland, Romania and Ukraine, which would coordinate the platform's activities in turn. As a result, a four-party agreement on the matter was signed with the Convention Secretariat, providing a good basis for further cooperation.

When the coordination of the platform's work was taken over by the Poland Center, established at the Association of the Carpathian Euroregion Poland, the "Carpathian Tourism Observatory" and "Ethno-Carpathia" projects were implemented, product offerings and inbound tourism packages were created within the framework of the Carpathian Brand, and the Micro-Project Fund for tourism and cultural heritage was launched. A center in another Carpathian country, the Slovakia Center, was also established during the period.

The achievements of the past two decades in both of the aforementioned areas are significant, given the relatively small institutional, human and financial resources available. Implementation has not been made easier by the recent tragic years, which began in 2019 with the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, and since February 2022 have been marked by Russia's beastly aggression against one of the Carpathian countries, and the complexity of the political situation in the entire region.

However, we are not settling on our laurels. These successes are a stimulus for further intensive work. We believe that the Convention will continue to play an important role in the protection and sustainable development of the Carpathian region, a region free of political tensions, developing in peace and increasing the prosperity of its people. A more active involvement of the European Commission in the work of the Convention can be of great support. We should continue our efforts to make the European Union a Party to the

Convention, just as it is in the Alpine Convention. We must encourage the European Commission, by showing our commitment, our achievements and the cooperation of member countries with accession countries.

Further implementation should be based on close cooperation with regional and local authorities, who are much more familiar with local conditions, challenges and the needs of residents. A good example of this is the long-standing cooperation with the local government of the Podkarpackie region, which resulted in the joint organization of a ministerial conference in Rzeszow last year. Also worth emphasizing is the activity of the Carpathian Euroregion, also actively involved in the implementation of the Convention for many years. There should be more and more such entities every year, as it is possible to see emerging problems and opportunities for their solution sooner from the local level than from the perspective of the usually distant national capital.

The Convention should serve as a model and inspiration for other mountain regions of the world to create analogous international agreements. We welcome the participation of Andean representatives in the recent meeting of the Carpathian Convention Implementation Committee (CCIC) in Mszana Dolna and look forward to further developing cooperation with this region, as well as other mountain regions of the world. Mountain areas, especially due to their unique vulnerability from climate change, should receive special attention in international forums. Efforts should be made to further strengthen mountain issues in international conventions and agreements, including the Convention on Biological Diversity through efforts to establish a group of "like minded mountain countries," where the Carpathian Convention, building on its 20 years of experience, could provide advice and assistance to other areas, especially in developing countries.