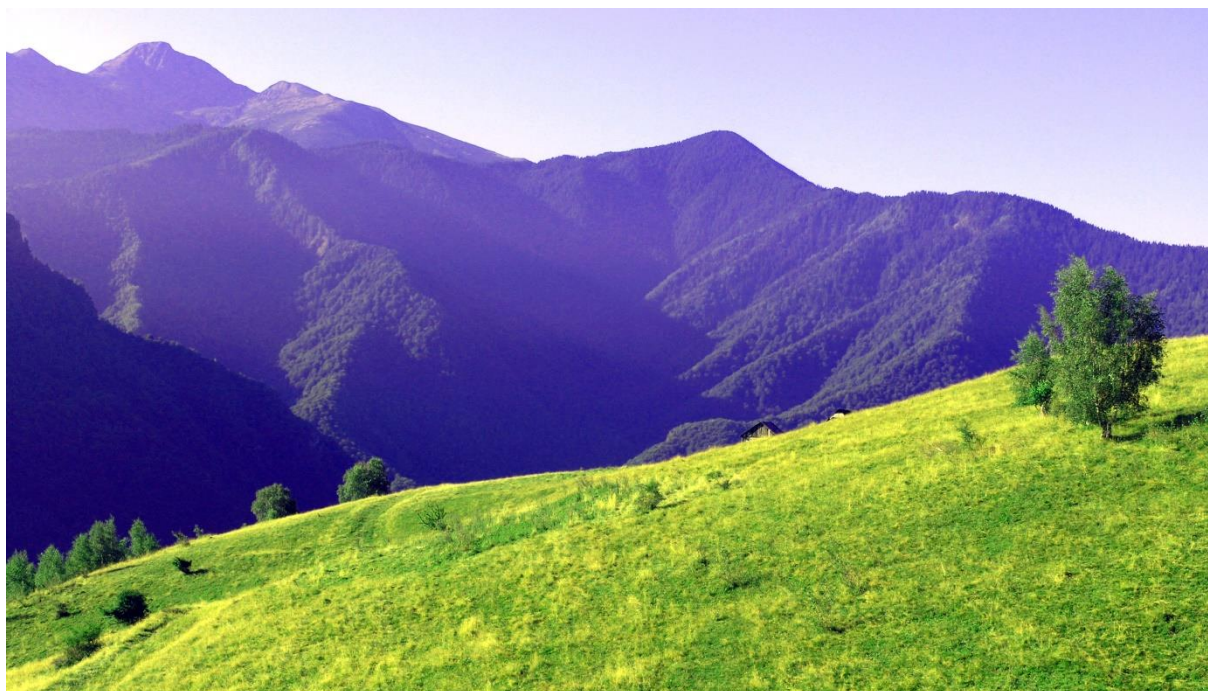


2050 Carpathian Vision: back from the future



Welcome to the 16th Conference of the Parties of the Framework Convention for the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians!

Dear Presidents and Prime Ministers;

Dear Secretary General of the United Nations;

Dear Ministers for Circular Economy;

Dear Ministers of Lifelong learning, Social Cohesion and Wellbeing;

Dear Ministers of Green Infrastructure and Ecosystem Services;

Esteemed visitors from other mountain regions, from the Alps, the Himalayas and the Andes;

Dear observers, dear stakeholders –

As we look back at the nearly five decades of the Carpathian Convention, we can be rightfully proud of the instrumental role that the convention has

played in both preserving and transforming this special region in the heart of Europe.

What has remained constant over the years is the uniqueness of this special region as one of Europe's greatest troves of natural and cultural heritage.

Our region remains Europe's green heart. It remains the home of Europe's greatest remaining areas of virgin and old growth forests, its wilderness areas, its populations of bears, wolves and other animals.

It remains the home of rich cultures and traditions.

In a full, busy and ever-faster world, the Carpathian Mountains remain a special place of peace, solitude and dark skies.

This has stayed, thankfully, the same. What has changed, in many ways, is the society and economy of our unique mountain region.

For long a relative backwater of Europe, today the Carpathians are one of the most dynamic regions in Europe, a favoured place to live and a magnet for tourists and visitors.

Young people still leave the region – for education, to gather experience and to travel Europe and the world. But in contrast to former times, most come back to the Carpathians to settle down and forge their futures. At the same time the region is also attracting new residents, especially from the cities, attracted not only by the jobs but also the services and high quality of life.

The Carpathians are known across Europe and indeed the world for their natural and cultural treasures. Visitors are drawn by the region's exceptional protected areas, its rich culture and traditions and opportunities for active recreation.

Certainly also a draw in the age of climate change has been respite from higher temperatures elsewhere.

Facilitated by direct marketing platforms like AirBnB, locals have been able to market their homes, their hospitality, culture and services directly to visitors from across the globe. As a result, tourism has become an important source of income -- and pride -- for local people.

Many of the same qualities that have attracted tourists are also attracting new jobs. The extension of high-speed internet to the smallest hamlet has opened the Carpathians to new industries as well as tele-commuting. Quality of life, including possibilities for recreation, has become a key draw especially for small and medium-sized enterprises involved in creativity and knowledge. Artists, writers and composers, long drawn by the region's beauty and free to take their work where they liked, have been joined by designers, engineers, project managers, lawyers, entrepreneurs and even doctors and educators now freed by the internet and technology to shape their work to their lifestyles.

You could say that the internet and communications technology put the Carpathians in touch with the world – and brought the world to the Carpathians.

Services – long a problem in a region bedevilled by its relative poverty and sparse population – have vastly improved as the internet and technology have brought high-quality services to the farthest reaches of the region. Most medical care is accessible from the nearest town and even from private homes. Mobile apps have put much of the medical care directly in the hands of patients themselves, while holograms and remote-controlled robots have made even examinations by specialists in distant cities possible.

Thanks to e-government, most governmental services, from filing taxes to getting a driver's license, no longer require lengthy trips to county, provincial or even national capitals.

Education has been transformed, tailored to individual pupils and students of all ages and available largely online, with local teachers serving as learning coaches rather than specialists. An electronic tablet and internet gives every pupil a direct line to all of the world's knowledge.

Learning is not something just done in schools and in childhood, but lifelong and everywhere. And perhaps most critically, our children learn how to learn, how to solve problems and work and live together, and how to see themselves within the broader systems in which they exist.

Thanks to ICT and 3-D printing, the Carpathians have also become a centre for high-quality, small-scale, demand-driven manufacturing – a development few expected, and part of a notable trend away from mass-manufacturing of uniform products in far off locations.

Not long ago, we relied on distant lands for our energy. No small part of our income went to Russia and the Middle East to purchase fuels that changed our climate and poisoned our air and water.

Today, our energy and investment is clean and local, creating jobs and livelihoods for many of our neighbours. Thanks to technology and investment, we have slashed our demand for energy and developed a broad mixture of local, clean and renewable energy sources.

Our buildings now generate more energy than they consume. Insulating homes, installing and maintaining solar panels, windmills, and biofuel plants run on agricultural waste has created jobs, livelihoods and pride among local people.

Extraction and processing of natural resources continues to be a mainstay of the Carpathian economy, but in much different form. The value of the region's forest, agricultural and other products has increased significantly as worldwide resources have become scarce while the number of people on the planet has grown. Much more of the economic value of our resources now stays in our region thanks to the dense network of firms, mostly small- and medium sized, that are specialised in processing raw materials into high-quality products.

We have successfully positioned the Carpathian region as the key link in a Circular Economy around wood as a renewable resource. In the past, we felled trees for single purposes – from building houses to creating pulp for packaging or pellets for energy, and sent the waste to landfill. Today, we give full value to those resources, cascading the use of wood from buildings to furniture to paper and packaging and finally to energy or nutrients for the soil.

"Waste" no longer exists. Instead, inspired by nature, we have resource streams, with the output of one process simply the input for another. We

have created entire new ecosystems of economic activity, like biofuels based on agricultural waste.

Changes in taxation and increased awareness have led to new industries around ecosystem stewardship – helping nature to provide vital services, from clean water to soil management and carbon sequestration.

Foresters – once vilified for clearcutting – are now respected as caretakers for our forests and the complex and vital goods and services that they provide.

Rangers and other protected area managers – once lambasted for restricting development – are now feted as guardians of our natural wealth and agents for local development.

Farmers – once criticised for poisoning the land – are now appreciated as landscape stewards.

Thirty years ago, the sharing economy also came to the Carpathians – starting with cars and homes, with Uber and Car2Go as well as AirBnB. But sharing quickly extended to machinery, tools and even recreational equipment as well as services.

A few quick clicks on a mobile app and we have traded child care for help in repairing a drone or solar panel.

All of this is new – but also old, a natural return to the roots, as for centuries what marked the Carpathians were the strong and tight-knit communities in which people helped each other. They worked together, building barns, carding wool and bringing in the harvest, creating a rich fabric of life that gave the region much of its special culture. Technology has simply facilitated a return to the roots.

All of these developments were not inevitable. Indeed, thirty years ago the future looked far bleaker. The world was coming up hard, and in too many cases exceeding, the planet's boundaries.

On climate change, we were pushing up close to 2 degrees Celsius. Just as alarming, within the 50 years between 1970 and 2020, we wiped out two-

thirds of global populations of fish, birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles – destroying the very web of life on which we ourselves depended.

The consequences became all too evident, also in our region. As our life support systems frayed, drought, flooding, wind and snowstorms increased in intensity and frequency, causing great damage and loss of life to societies that had forgotten how to live with nature.

The world was confronted by the hard reality of a fundamentally unsustainable civilisation – a linear, take-make-and-discard economy fueled by fossil fuels confronted by the increasing scarcity of resources as well as the growing problems of dealing with waste and emissions. It was clear that that model held no future – and could no longer give hope for delivering livelihoods, good jobs and rich lives.

It is always hard to fix the exact starting point for any revolution. But most historians generally agree that, more than any other event, the 2017 Conference of the Parties of the Carpathian Convention lit the spark that led to the Carpathians' transformation. It was that meeting that created a mind shift, where leaders of the region from government and other sectors collectively resolved not only to confront the challenges, but to turn them as much as possible into opportunities.

It was that mind shift – supported by developments in technology, new approaches as well as the increasing scarcity of resources – that was key.

Looking back, it is hard to believe that we used to plan our infrastructure, our motorways, powerlines and other development without taking into account green infrastructure, biodiversity, let alone the potential impacts on our local communities. We developed a much smarter, more inclusive approach to planning, one that took longer at first to involve and mediate different needs and perspectives, but that then allowed faster implementation and far better and more sustainable results.

Not everything we have done has been crowned with success. Our determined efforts to stop emissions of greenhouse gases may have avoided the most catastrophic impacts of Climate Change, but the emissions already made have nevertheless left deep marks on this part of Europe. Increased

average temperatures have changed the composition of tree species and agricultural crops and further intensified weather patterns. Flooding and droughts have increased in both intensity and frequency, affecting lives and livelihoods.

Under the circumstances, we have adapted as much as possible to the new realities. We have changed our designs and standards to make our buildings cooler in the summer and to better withstand extreme weather. We have improved our emergency services. We have sought to work with nature rather than against it, and to increase the flexibility and resilience of our economy and civilisation.

Thankfully, we have managed to halt biodiversity loss. We stopped the felling of virgin and old growth forests – thanks not only to our determined efforts to protect these treasures and address illegal logging, but also because we gave value to the complex functions, goods and services that these forests provide. Thanks to changes in the tax regime and other incentives, we have changed the economic calculus so that these standing forests are more valuable than simply the total cubic meters of their timber.

In the same way, we invest in wetlands as critical elements of green infrastructure yielding goods and services from flood management to water purification. And bears, wolves and other large carnivores -- once seen as threats at worst or trophies at best -- are now appreciated as essential linchpins in a complex and interrelated system maintaining the healthy habitats on which we all depend.

The Conference of the Parties in 2017 was the first spark. At the meeting, the parties could appreciate the work that had already been done – particularly to protect biodiversity and integrate it into sectoral decision-making on transportation, forestry, agriculture and tourism.

But they decided to take a bold step beyond these successes toward the future. The representatives of the Carpathian countries resolved to make the region a global pioneer – the first mountain area to introduce a circular economy.

As always, there were many sceptics. But there was also plenty of inspiration and lessons to learn from others – like the Alps or Finland, a country with similar conditions to the Carpathians, that in the 20th century managed to turn itself into a global player in technology and resource extraction and processing, and in the 21st century positioned itself to pioneer a Circular Economy.

Not only was there the encouragement of others to follow. The leap into the unknown was also made relatively easier by the fact that in many ways the transformation was a leap forward to the past, a return to centuries-old traditions – traditions based on community, on cooperation, on the careful and prudent use of resources.

In this sense, change, however great, was nevertheless familiar.

The delegates to the Conference of the Parties sketched out a bold vision, and developed a plan for making it reality. And the rest, as they say, was history.

From our vantage point today in 2050, it is hard to believe all that has happened and all that has been achieved. We can be rightfully proud. In a region famous for scepticism, we showed that forward thinking can indeed turn visions into reality.

Thank you for your visions, your initiative, engagement and attention.

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