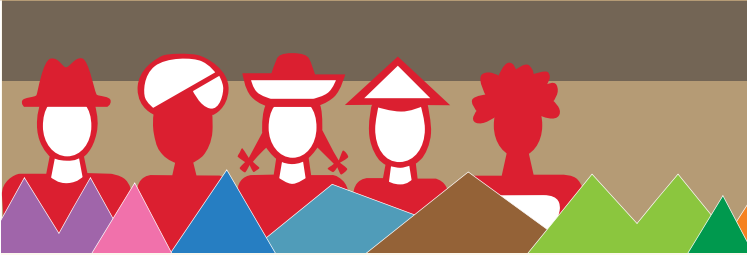


Why mountains matter for Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe



The mountains of Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe have played a key social, economic and environmental role in the development of the nations and peoples that have resided there since time immemorial. Being both natural barriers and safe havens not only for people, but also for flora and fauna, the mountains have been instrumental in shaping the Europe of today. Europe harbours large transboundary mountain groups that are located in dynamic geopolitical regions: the Balkan and Dinaric Arc, the Carpathians and the Caucasus. These mountain regions have global significance as they provide goods and ecosystems services essential for sustainable development, in particular to the lowlands and the communities living in these areas. Nonetheless, mountains are highly vulnerable to global change. Given the tight highland-lowland linkage, these changes may have serious impacts far beyond the mountain boundaries.

The mountains of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe and their contribution to sustainable development

Europe's mountainous macro-regions are partly developing dynamically while also experiencing political and economic marginalization, and in some cases still terri-

torial disputes and conflict resulting from the past. They are a living environment inhabited by millions of people, but are subject to a variety of heavy pressures ranging from migration and unemployment, land use change, habitat conversion and fragmentation, deforestation, the impacts of climate change, to industrialization and mining pressure, pollution, and exploitation of natural resources, environmental degradation, energy needs and water scarcity.

An important asset of Europe's mountain region is their uniquely diverse natural and cultural heritage which provides a cultural and ecological link within Europe. They are rich in landscape, bio- and agro-diversity, and are centres of the world's biodiversity. Their significance as crossroads and transit regions cannot be overlooked in today's global economy. Forest resources in countries with economies in transition play a significant role for national income. The diverse functions of forests (recreation, tourism, water, wood and non-wood products, etc.) are creating sustainable benefits. Europe's mountain regions are usually heavily dependent on agriculture, but offer unique opportunities for production of organic and high-quality products. The picturesque mountain regions of Europe offer potential for developing environment-friendly sustainable tourism as a source of livelihood for local people. In Europe's mountains, architecture, rural arts and crafts, as well as indigenous knowledge have been best preserved. Europe's mountains create potential for sustainable supply of renewable energy.

Both the challenges and opportunities for substantial improvement in all aspects of transboundary and national sustainable mountain development are enormous, with success stories leading to increased regional collaboration and stability. As the European and global experience show, the challenges of sustainable mountain development cannot be effectively solved without intergovernmental cooperation. As an example, in the Carpathian region, international cooperation within the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians provides a solid base for measures to balance environmental protection and sustainable regional development, and to improve the living conditions of the local population.



Sar mountains, South East Europe (© Ljupco Melovski)

Policy action for the mountains of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe – and the future we want



From Tarnica Z Tarnicy in Bieszczady National Park, Poland (J. Stola)

- The need to create global, regional, national and local mechanisms that justly support mountain communities in providing essential resources and services for human well-being has to be recognized.
- It is imperative to support green and low-carbon economic activities in mountain regions through capacity building and development of suitable technologies, as well as innovative means of financing for sustainable development and conservation of mountain regions.
- The pivotal role of regional centres of competence in research and development to achieve solutions which take into account the specificities of mountain areas has to be stressed. The creation or strengthening of regional centres is also needed to enhance inter-regional cooperation and partnership between the mountain macro-regions of Europe as well as other mountain regions of the world.
- Integrated ecosystem based management approaches have to be adopted taking into account highland-lowland linkages, transboundary cooperation and resource efficiency. Innovative institutional arrangements for regional and transboundary cooperation aiming at a multi-sectoral approach are urgently required to trigger governance models and decision support systems, as well as the actual mainstreaming of mountains into overall national development and conservation processes. The Carpathian Convention – the only mountain convention adopted since 1992 – is a regional governance mechanism and a best-practice example of an institutional framework for promoting sustainable development and green economy in mountain regions.
- New opportunities for public-private partnerships and investments in mountain ecosystem goods and services have to be defined, especially in the fields of conservation, renewable energy, sustainable forest management, sustainable tourism, responsible industrial development and climate-smart agriculture, including promotion of natural products. Actions in support of sustainable mountain development are a key to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

The map below shows the mountains of Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe from the Western Balkans to the Caucasus (Courtesy EURAC)

