



Financial crisis divides EU on greenhouse gas cuts

By GEORGE JAHN – 3 hours ago

VIENNA, Austria (AP) — What price clean air, sparkling streams, stately chestnut trees along busy avenues? In some ways it depends on whether you are a citizen of Old or New Europe.

A debate on whether to stick to an ambitious European Union timetable meant to slash greenhouse gas emissions at a time of economic turmoil is dividing the continent.

Most governments within the 27-nation bloc insist on going ahead with a December timetable for legislation requiring a 20 percent cut in EU emissions by 2020. They say that will send a strong signal to the U.S., China and other big industrial states to embrace a new global deal on reducing emissions after the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012.

"The European Union must keep its leadership role" on the environment, French Environment Minister Jean-Louis Borloo told his EU counterparts this week.

But eight former Soviet bloc countries argue the EU's envisioned pace could hurt them more than the prosperous members of "Old Europe" — the 15 west European nations that have not had to play catch-up to compensate for decades of ruinous communist economic policies.

Voicing the easterners' concerns last week, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk told an EU summit that the bloc's environmental and energy initiatives must also "be tolerable for the poorer member states."

Poland, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia all called for special consideration on the emissions cut timetable. Italy also complained about the plan.

The European Parliament endorsed the emission plan with a 499-130 vote Wednesday, but the opposition in the east raises doubts since major EU decisions require agreement by all the member governments.

The disagreement predates the global financial turmoil that threatens to cause a prolonged economic downturn. But as Hungary's currency crumbles, stocks hover at alarming lows in Poland and real estate prices plummet in Slovenia, the depth of malaise in the east has given greater urgency to New Europe's calls for scaling back planned emission curbs.

Their push worries environmental activists. They question whether eastern Europe's post-communist commitment to the environment is shallow, with leaders happy for the opportunity to rechannel resources into bolstering pensions, boosting employment and lowering inflation.

"They're using the financial crisis as an excuse," said Tomas Wyns at Climate Action Network Europe, a Brussels, Belgium-based umbrella organization of more than 100 environmentalist groups.

Eastern Europe has erased most — but not all — of communism's environmental sins since the Iron Curtain came down nearly two decades ago.

The worst cases are sites like Copsa Mica, the Romanian town where communist-era rubber-dye factories and a lead smelter spewed out pollutants that colored snowflakes black, left high levels of carcinogens in the air and reduced life expectancy in the surrounding region to 41.

The smelter is still operating. And the New York-based Blacksmith Institute environmental watchdog says newborns in the area have twice the safe levels of lead in their bodies; 96 percent of children ages 2-14 have chronic bronchitis and other respiratory problems; and life expectancy is still nine years below the national average of 63.

In a 2006 report that mirrored the situation in many East European countries, the Czech government documented that worsening air quality affects 60 percent of its population — the price of developing rapidly after decades of economic stagnation under communism.

While environmental consciousness is growing among the well-heeled in the more prosperous parts of eastern Europe, the poorest had more immediate concerns even before the financial maelstrom hit.

In Serbia's capital, Belgrade, where the average monthly wage is little more than \$500, the needy have little time to discuss the perils of climate change.

"Global warming? Who cares if we all starve to death," said retiree Mirjana Budimirovic.

Serbia has one of the largest carbon footprints of any country in Europe. Its creaky, inefficient power sector uses twice as much energy per person than western Europe's average.

Still, charges of environmental foot-dragging rankle government officials who point to progress made cleaning up the environmental catastrophes of the communist era.

"Thanks to structural reforms from 1995 to 2005, greenhouse gas effects were reduced by 40 percent in Romania," said that nation's environment minister, Attila Korodi.

Eastern officials argue their countries merit special consideration because communist policies left their economies more vulnerable to the cost of making deep, rapid cuts in greenhouse emissions.

Poland, for instance, still depends on plentiful coal reserves to meet most of its heating needs, while coal use has lessened in recent decades in western Europe because of pollution concerns that were not an issue during the communist era in the east.

Now, the EU's emission plans has Poland facing the expense of equipping its coal industry with costly filtering equipment — or the deeply unpopular option of turning to historic nemesis Russia to buy cleaner burning oil and natural gas.

The Polish Environment Ministry's spokeswoman, Elzbieta Strucka, said Warsaw's opposition to the EU climate package has nothing to do with the financial crisis but stems from existing economic considerations for a poor country.

The plan will result "in a shocking rise in energy prices," she said. "Poland and other nations that use coal energy cannot agree to this."

She said Poland agrees to the principle of cutting emissions but wants to implement it more gradually than EU administrators envision.

Tusk, the Polish prime minister, said that if the EU truly wants to set an example to the rest of the world, it must first persuade its poorer members to sign on to a deal acceptable to all.

"If we are not able to accept it, what will a hundred countries much poorer than Poland say?"

Associated Press writers Veronika Oleksyn, Jari Tanner, Monika Scislowska, Pablo Gorondi, Dusan Stojanovic, Karel Janicek and Alison Mutler contributed to this report.