

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2010

Focus on ICTs and environmental sustainability



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Building advocacy networks

Pavel P. Antonov
www.georeporter.info

Could a lack of sensitivity spoil the love affair between the Pirates and the Greens?

What activists in Central and Eastern Europe have to say...

His long, brown hair, tiny glasses loosely fixed on the characteristic nose, and spicy jokes are well familiar to Sofia's environmental protection activists. They call him Cluster, but no one surely remembers whether this nickname originates from his fixation with ecosystems, or from his passion for computer equipment. As a matter of fact, for over two decades now he has been a true geek of both environmental protection and information and communications technologies (ICTs). But recently Cluster's two passions have become harder to combine. "I like computers less and less," he admits with a sigh, "for they now don't last long and are impossible to upgrade or repair."

In South Eastern Europe, as in most parts of the world, environmental activists and experts like Cluster have been among the first to take advantage of the internet and ICT resources.¹ More recently a new generation of green citizen movements and political parties in countries like Bulgaria and Hungary have used web-based social networks as their primary communication media.² Understanding the power brought to them by ICTs, many such groups have embraced internet rights and privacy issues as part of their campaigns and political platforms.

But the sky is not cloudless above the love affair between environmental and ICT activism. The realisation that keeping up with the newest software and user features requires constant upgrades and replacement of hardware – and therefore generates more and more waste – leaves a bitter taste in the mouth for environmentalists. More alarmingly, otherwise grateful for any support, ICT activists and newly evolving social movements around the internet and communication rights do not seem to be that willing to engage with environmental protection causes. Could a lack of sensitivity spoil yet another love affair – that between environmental and internet activists?

In an attempt to answer this question I approached representatives of both communities: ICT and environmental activists. Respondents were professionals employed by environmental protection and ICT organisations and think tanks; ICT specialists volunteering for environmental causes; citizen campaigners with greater understanding of ICT issues; as well as active members of their respective new political movements, the Pirates and the Greens.

Among major environmental issues two came clearly into focus, as they are most obviously connected to ICTs: climate change³ and waste processing.⁴ The computer industry seems to make a notable contribution to these two issues, although opinions on the scale of their contribution differ.

The proximity between active environmental and internet rights causes has been reflected in the processes of new political parties and movements emerging in Bulgaria and Hungary since 2008. The appearance of new activist-based Green Parties in both countries more or less coincided with the wave of political activity around piracy and the internet. The two types of movements seemed to share a common vision on many problems, and a common membership base. The Greens were the only party which sent representatives and congratulations to the launch of the Pirate Party in Bulgaria, remembers Boris Loukanov, one of Bulgaria's Pirate Party's board members. Another founder of the party, Veselin Petkov, wrote: "I am a 'pirate', but one interested in and trying to keep an eye on whatever happens in the world of 'green' causes." However, Petkov may be the exception. The similarities between Green and Pirate causes are that both are extraordinarily important for the common person – but the latter seldom realises it, he explained.

Viktor Bjelic, a web specialist based in Bosnia's Banja Luka, suggested that a certain group of ICT activists is more interested in the environment than others: the open source community. "They are much more aware of social and environmental issues," Bjelic concluded, based on his experience with e-networking for environmental activists since 2001. Elitsa Stoyanova, who works for a Bulgarian IT company, has noticed a higher level of fascination with environmental protection among programmers, database managers and system administrators. "I would not say they are too active, but are certainly moved by [environmental]

1 REC (2002) *Networks at Work: Status and Needs Assessment of Electronic Networking and Cooperation Among Environmental NGOs in South Eastern Europe*, Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe, Budapest. archive.rec.org/REC/Programs/SEE_networking/NetworksAtWork.html

2 Antonov, P. (2009) Grassroot(er)s: Green activists of Eastern Europe enter politics, *APCNews*, 30 July. www.apc.org/en/news/grass-root-er-s-green-e-activists-eastern-europe-e

3 Leake, J. and Woods, R. (2009) Revealed: the environmental impact of Google searches, *The Times Online*, 11 January. technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/article5489134.ece

4 Walraven, K. (2007) E-waste: Impacts, challenges and the role of civil society, *APCNews*, 28 February. www.apc.org/en/news/e-waste-impacts-challenges-and-role-civil-society

problems,” Stoyanova wrote. Stoyanova herself has been a voluntary web editor for Bulgaria’s coalition of environmentally concerned citizens and NGOs for more than two years. “Most programmers in my experience are good people, highly concerned about things that surround them, including nature and society,” she said.

But according to Todor Yalamov, a coordinator for the ARC Fund – an ICT think tank in Sofia – the environment is just one of many social causes that ICT specialists care about. “The IT community in Bulgaria struggles for principled causes like law enforcement and eradication of corruption, among which nature protection seems like just a tiny bit,” Yalamov said. He then pointed at another reason: doubt. Climate change is a complex issue and its effects seem to be proved, but then the evidence is questioned again and the total ecological effect appears to be negated, Yalamov explained. “Environmentalism seems too ideological for the IT community,” he finally added.

Thomas, an owner of an advertising agency in Sofia, is an active blogger and activist on citizen causes like smoking and urban environment. But he denied the existence of any connection between ICTs and the environment, particularly when it comes to climate change. Electronic waste (e-waste) seems like a small portion of all garbage, and contributes to general pollution, if anything, but certainly not to climate change, he stated. “Someone is trying to impose on us [the guilt for] greenhouse emissions from the power we use, but this is not very true, as no such problem exists with nuclear [energy]; it exists with coal or petrol, but seems negligible to me in comparison to what is burned as fuel in transport,” Thomas wrote.

Zoltan Varady, a Budapest-based programmer, attributed the low level of engagement of ICT specialists with environmental issues to the generally low level of environmental awareness in society. Veny Markovski, the founder and president of Bulgaria’s Internet Society, shared a similar opinion: “People have different interests; being active on internet rights does not mean you need to care about the environment as well.” In the case of Bulgaria, Markovski spoke of a generally low level of civil society development in general, which results in the weaknesses of both the environmental and ICT movements.

In fact, both the environmental and internet rights movements in Bulgaria, Hungary, and elsewhere in the region have lived through significant victories over the past years,⁵ sometimes effectively joining forces.⁶ Varady, who

has been a collaborator of Hungary’s green NGO e-network Zöld Pók (Green Spider)⁷ for over a decade, spelled out a deeper reason for the lack of environmental awareness among ICT specialists and activists: environmental thinking stands in the way of the philosophy of constant upgrade. As the ICT industry in principle is unwilling to “upgrade” their materials to be less toxic, more recyclable and less power hungry, ICT professionals employed by it feel that environmental protection “isn’t worth the bother,” Varady wrote. “Tech companies, computer factories, etc. are so involved in the race to be better, faster, and have more features, that they can only show a token effort for the environment,” he explained. As examples of such “token” efforts, Varady listed www.apple.com/environment and lastyearsmodel.org.

Certain business decisions within the ICT industry seem to cause more and more frustration to environmental minds. Cluster’s complaints – which referred to the Apple iPhone’s maintenance policy – seemed to summarise the opinion of his green-minded fellows on the new proprietary trends with ICT equipment. Ivaylo Hlebarov from CEE Bankwatch, a prominent network of environmental pressure groups, suggested that there would be fewer problems should ICT companies respect some basic principles with regard to equipment: it should be modular, durable, possible to repair, and recyclable. Hlebarov, who has spent most of the past decade campaigning around waste, criticised the European Union for not applying strictly the proximity principle which requires all waste to be treated close to the place where it was generated. “Transportation, processing and disposal of waste – including e-waste – in distant areas is immoral and unethical,” he said.

In conclusion, natural bonds seem to exist in the post-socialist societies of Central and Eastern Europe between environmentally minded people and those who care about internet freedom and other ICT-related issues. These bonds already have a solid record in the relations between the respective communities of campaigners, NGOs and their newly emerged political movements. However, for different reasons, ICT professionals seem less likely to embrace environmental protection causes: some find them too ideological, others simply question the reasoning behind issues like climate change. At the same time, the ICT industry is perceived to be committed to maximising profits through increasing equipment sales and limiting modularity and the possibilities of self-repair. These trends are watched by the environmental community with growing dissatisfaction.

5 Antonov (2009) op. cit.

6 BlueLink (2010) Bulgaria is not Big Brother, 2010 is not 1984, *BlueLink News*, 10 June. www.bluelink.net/en/index.shtml?x=42264

7 www.zpok.hu

While the environmental community seems well aware and supportive of internet rights issues and causes like open source, additional efforts are needed to raise the environmental awareness within the ICT community. Efforts are needed, and timely ones, to prevent further discord between the civil society voices on critical ICT and environment issues. Such efforts could possibly include detailed comparative analyses and mapping of the underlying principles and goals of the two communities, with special analytical attention on the areas where they match or differ substantially.

Further, it would be useful to promote the findings from such an analytical study in both communities, while emphasising the potential opportunities that could arise as a result of a “common voice” between them on crucial issues, and raising awareness of the threats posed by any eventual split or disharmony between the two. Selected goals and priorities of each community will need to be systematically integrated – including in their strategic and policy documents, projects, and real life activities. ■

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2010 investigates the impact that information and communications technologies (ICTs) have on the environment – both good and bad.

Written from a civil society perspective, **GISWatch 2010** covers some 50 countries and six regions, with the key issues of ICTs and environmental sustainability, including climate change response and electronic waste (e-waste), explored in seven expert thematic reports. It also contains an institutional overview and a consideration of green indicators, as well as a mapping section offering a comparative analysis of “green” media spheres on the web.

While supporting the positive role that technology can play in sustaining the environment, many of these reports challenge the perception that ICTs will automatically be a panacea for critical issues such as climate change – and argue that for technology to really benefit everyone, consumption and production patterns have to change. In order to build a sustainable future, it cannot be “business as usual”.

GISWatch 2010 is a rallying cry to electronics producers and consumers, policy makers and development organisations to pay urgent attention to the sustainability of the environment. It spells out the impact that the production, consumption and disposal of computers, mobile phones and other technology are having on the earth’s natural resources, on political conflict and social rights, and the massive global carbon footprint produced.

GISWatch 2010 is the fourth in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GISWatch is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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