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ENVIRONMENT-EUROPE: On Your Green Bike

By **Claudia Ciobanu**

Sofia, Jul 11 (IPS) - A group of young people from several European countries are taking a cycling tour from Bulgaria to Turkey to show the world that travelling and a good life are possible without much energy consumption.

Fifteen people - from Bulgaria, Croatia, Bosnia, Spain, Portugal and a few other countries - started the 2008 Ecotopia Biketour Jul. 4 in Bulgarian capital Sofia. After travelling for about 600 km in Bulgaria and another 1,000 km in Turkey, over more than one month, they will reach their final destination, the city of Sinop on the Black Sea Coast in northern Turkey. More people are expected to join on the way.

Ecotopia Biketour has been taking place yearly since 1990 on different routes around Europe. Participants are headed to the annual international youth gathering Ecotopia, a series of discussions and events on environmental and social justice issues. Topics addressed since the first Ecotopia that took place in 1989 in Cologne, Germany, include youth employment, art and political activism, migration, and alternative energy.

This year, Ecotopia is taking place in Sinop Aug. 9-23 and is focused on energy problems. Organisers chose Sinop because it is the planned location for a nuclear power plant to be built in Turkey. Ecotopia participants oppose using nuclear energy as a way to tackle the global energy crisis, and propose instead to decrease energy consumption, improve energy efficiency and promote low-impact energy production.

The Biketour itself is meant to show that it is possible to travel and live on little energy. Participants sleep in tents or in housing offered by people they meet on the way, they cook for themselves using products bought from local farmers, and generally promote a 'do it yourself' lifestyle.

The cyclists are also trying to build up a fair community amongst themselves while on the road. This translates into consensus-based decision-making on all issues and the use of a special currency, the 'eco-rate', which means that those from wealthier countries contribute more to the costs of the trip than those from poorer countries. For instance, the daily cost of a day in the Biketour is estimated at 15 eco, which equals eight euros for Westerners and only four euros for Eastern Europeans.

"We want to show that living like this, in equality, is not utopia," Ivan Gregov, one of the participants in the 2008 Biketour told IPS, during a break from cycling in Velingrad, in southwestern Bulgaria.

A core element of the Biketour is that participants organise or attend events and demonstrations addressing issues confronting the local communities they pass through.

In Bulgaria, they will protest against a planned nuclear plant at Belene in the north of the country. When cycling through the Rodope mountains, they will put together actions to draw attention to the construction of large-scale tourism infrastructure in protected natural sites. In the southern town Krumovgrad, they will organise an information day on the dangers of cyanide mining, a technique that is expected to be used in the gold mines in the region.

When they reach the Black Sea Coast, they are scheduled to participate in a demonstration against the Burgas-Alexandroupolis pipeline, a controversial project because of the high environmental risks entailed, which has been voted against in a local referendum.

In Turkey, the bikers plan to promote the use of bikes and renewable energy sources, and to participate in awareness actions on the negative impact of thermal plants such as the one planned in Ayancik, close to Sinop.

Most of the actions are meant to draw attention to the way in which development takes place in the region.

While participants say they are met with curiosity and friendliness everywhere, the message they are trying to promote is not always equally welcomed.

"It is very tough to discuss with people, for example, that oil consumption needs to be reduced," says Ivan Gregov from Croatia. "Eastern Europe is a very consumerist society, and few are really ready to give up energy-intensive habits."

As a participant in an earlier edition of Biketour wrote in a blog, "the culture of global progress has already occupied Eastern European countries, but people still cannot see the counter-effects and costs which they will have to pay. The mistakes Western Europe made because of its ruthless development are now being copied by Eastern countries. We want to raise public awareness to change this way of development."

Still, the Biketour seems to be more about setting an example rather than preaching about how people should live. "Biketour aims to be a sustainable community," says a participant. "Think about the environmental impact of your daily choices. And don't be too fascist about the issues you happen to be specialised in because different people will consider different issues important." (END/2008)



The cyclists on their way to Turkey.

Credit: Joao Lopez/ Ecotopia

  

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