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SUMMARY

ECOLOGICAL (UN)SUSTAINABLE GROWTH OF EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

The economic growth of an increasing number of countries for a long period causes the ecological consequences in the so far unrecorded extent. This results in significant and largely irreversible ecological losses on a global scale. Although economic growth has in many aspects influenced rising of the general welfare of certain social groups, especially since the Industrial Revolution, this was done at the cost of environmental damage in an alarming extent.

The economic growth and prosperity of European countries are particularly critical in this regard. After North America, Europe has the most significant role in disrupting global environmental quality. Thus, only European Union countries, which have slightly less than 7 percent of the world's total population, use about one-fifth of the overall biosphere's regenerative capacity; and while its share in the global population is declining, the share of the use of biosphere refrigeration capacity is rising (WWF, 2005: 3). This indicates their ecologically unsustainable development.

As a result, throughout Europe (as well as the rest of the world) climate change takes place with very negative consequences. In one of the reports of the European Environment Agency (EEA, 2012: 16-17), there are many listed consequences of climate change. When it comes to the sea and coastal areas, these are the overall rise in sea levels globally and across most of Europe's coasts (with variations due to local land movement and other factors); increase in ocean acidification; increase in sea surface temperature and ocean heat content; earlier seasonal appearance of various marine species; northward expansion of some fish and plankton species. As regards freshwater, there are decrease in river flows in southern and eastern Europe (in particular in summer) and increase in other regions (in particular in winter); increases in flood events (mainly due to land-use changes); increase in the frequency and intensity of droughts (in particular in southern Europe); increase in water temperature in rivers and lakes; northwards movement of cold-water species; earlier seasonal appearance of phytoplankton and zooplankton blooms. When it comes to terrestrial biodiversity and ecosystems, there are earlier occurrence of spring seasonal events and later occurrence of autumn seasonal events in plants and animals; lengthening of breeding seasons; northwards and uphill movement of many plant and animal species, whereby the migration rate of many species is insufficient to keep pace

with the speed of climate change; establishment of warm-adapted alien plant species; many habitats of European interest are potentially threatened. As regards agriculture, there are northward expansion of areas suitable for several crops; earlier flowering and harvest dates in cereals; reduced yield of some crops due to heat waves and droughts (mostly in central and southern Europe); increased water demand for irrigation (in southern and south-western Europe). When it comes to forests and forestry, there are reduction in forest growth due to storms, pests and diseases in some central and western areas of Europe; increase in the number of forest fires in the Mediterranean region between 1980 and 2000 and a decrease thereafter. As regards energy, there is reduced demand for heating (particularly in northern and north-western Europe) but increased demand for cooling (particularly in southern Europe). Finally, as regards health: tens of thousands of premature deaths due to the extreme heat waves; thousands of premature deaths per year due to tropospheric ozone (however, particular contribution of climate change is difficult to quantify); increased number of people affected by river and coastal flooding; and increased risk of transmission of vector-borne diseases.

Data from the Global Footprint Network provide accurate data on biocapacity and so called ecological footprint of countries around the world. Biocapacity is defined as an ecosystem's ability to produce useful biological material and absorb carbon dioxide, and ecological footprint as a measure of "demand" for the Earth's ecosystem, which implies biologically productive land and water areas needed for crops, grazing, built-up lands, fishing and forest grounds, as well as the surface areas needed to absorb carbon dioxide unabsorbed by the ocean (CBD, 2010). Biocapacity and environmental footprint are measured by global hectares per capita. The global hectare contains the average productivity of all biologically productive areas in a given year. These data indicate that most European countries have been characterized by ecological deficit (negative difference between their biocapacity and ecological footprint) for many decades, or ecologically unsustainable growth.

When analyzing the latest available data from the Global Footprint Network, from 2013, on biocapacity and ecological footprint of 39 European countries, it is noticeable that only nine countries were characterized by an environmental surplus. The largest ecological footprint was noticeable by Luxembourg (13.1 global hectares per capita, of which 10.4 hectare of so-called carbon footprint, which is the second largest in the world), followed by Estonia (7.0) and Belgium (6.9), while the smallest ecological footprint had Moldova (1.7), followed by Albania (2.3) and Romania (2.6). On the other hand, the largest biocapacity had Finland (13.3), followed by Sweden (10.4) and Estonia (10.2), while the smallest biocapacity had Cyprus (0.3), Malta (0.6) and Moldova (1.0). In general, Europe's largest ecological deficit was the highest in Luxembourg (-11.5), followed by Belgium (-5.8), the Netherlands (-4.7), and Switzerland (-4.0), and lowest in Finland (6.6), followed by Sweden (3.9), Estonia (3.9), Latvia (3.0), and Norway (2.1). It is also important to note that the ecological footprint of the largest number of countries analyzed is mostly contributed by the carbon footprint (an average of about 50 percent).

When data on ecological footprint and biocapacity are combined with the World Bank's data on the economic development of countries (measured by GDP per capita in constant 2011 dollars), there is a notable tendency for more developed countries to cause greater environmental damage. More specifically, a statistically significant negative correlation between the ecological surplus and the level of economic development occurs (r = -0,391, p < 0,05). Many researchers have already pointed out this kind of findings (e.g. Vliert and Vlek, 2015). Of all the analyzed countries, 19 countries with the largest ecological deficit belong to the group of high-income countries (each of them being member of the European Union, and Switzerland). It is interesting to note that the countries of Europe outside the European Union are actually functioning ecologically sustainably (with an ecological surplus of 0.3 global hectares per capita), unlike the member countries of the EU (with an overall ecological deficit of 2.5 global hectares per capita).

In European countries, greenhouse gas emissions contribute most to the violation of the ecological balance. For this, energy production is especially responsible, where, as in other parts of the world, fossil fuels dominate, making more than three quarters of energy consumption within the EEA33 countries (EEA, 2013, according to: EEA, 2015: 96). Despite the improvements in recent years, industrial air pollution in Europe has significantly contributed to greenhouse gas emissions as well as to air pollution in general. Industrial pollutants include major air pollutants (which are ammonia, nitrogen oxides, non-methane volatile organic compounds, particulates and sulfur oxides), heavy metals (arsenic, cadmium, chromium, lead, mercury and nickel); organic compounds (benzene, dioxins and furans and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons); and carbon dioxide (EEA, 2014a: 7). Each of these pollutants can cause damage to the environment, the health of the organisms, or both. Each of these also contributes to the formation of ozone and particulates in the atmosphere. Based on the data available from 14 325 individual industrial facilities, the total cost of damage during the period from 2008 to 2012 caused by emissions from facilities were estimated at between 329 billion and 1 053 billion euros, with only 1 percent of the assets accounting for 50 percent of the total estimated damage.

Further, despite considerable progress in reducing the release of pollutants into Europe's waters in recent decades, nutrients, pesticides,

industrial chemicals and household chemicals continue to adversely affect the quality of surface, underground and marine waters. Water status throughout Europe is alarming due to overfishing, pollution and acidification. It is estimated that about 25% of underground waters and about 10% of the rivers and the lakes are of unfavorable chemical composition; however, even 40% of all European waters are of unknown chemical composition (EC, 2012: 7).

At the same time, water shortages are estimated to affect at least 11% of the population and 17% of European territory, and that droughts in the past thirty years had caused losses of 100 billion euros, and it is also predicted that climate change will increase water shortages, especially in the Mediterranean region (EEA, 2009: 9).

There is also a growing use of available land and a decline in its further availability, which has a negative impact on biodiversity, by reducing the number of habitats and living space of a large number of species. In the period from 2000 to 2006, these trends were intensified in relation to a decade ago (EEA, 2013).

In addition, it is important to point out that a large share of species (about 60 percent) and habitats (about 77 percent) monitored during the period from 2007 to 2012 were in unfavorable conditions, which is an increase of 52 percent and 65 percent respectively over the period from 2001 to 2006 (EEA, 2015: 57).

Probably the main problem in measuring ecological footprint and biocapacity of countries is the limitation on the territory of each country individually, although the ecological consequences of growth are hardly restricted to the national territories. It is crucial to emphasize that their ecological deficit European countries largely maintain on the import of raw materials and other goods and services and the export of waste. In other words, the degradation of the environment in relation to the economic activity of European countries is spreading far beyond the borders of Europe. Thus, as much as 24% and 56% of ecological footprint of the EU occur outside the EU. During the period from 1995 to 2008, this type of pressure had a tendency to grow (EEA, 2014b: 34).

All these trends indicate the global danger caused by European countries in an ecological sense. Economic growth is not necessarily bad, but if it is not in line with the principles of environmentally sustainable development, it is more harmful than useful in the long term. Although there have been some positive shifts over the past years, long-term forecasts regarding the ecologically sustainable development of European countries do not bring much good. Economic and political factors that are crucial for aligning the economic and ecological aspect of sustainable development also do not seem to have an interest in that direction in the foreseeable future.