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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EU STRATEGIC APPROACH FOR PROGRESS TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Abstract

Sustainable development is a process with continuous changes in the relationships between social, economic, and natural systems and processes. This is a long-term process and requires carefully guided and gradual development policies, as the complex challenges faced by humanity on a global level. Some of the contemporary challenges of sustainable development include: raising the level of ecological awareness of people, increasing responsibility, applying economic instruments and innovative solutions to environmental protection issues, etc. Therefore, a strategic approach to sustainable development and environmental protection is necessary. By studying initiatives and achieved results that the EU has aimed in the previous period, viewed through the prism of sustainability, climate action, and the fight against poverty, this paper highlights significant steps that the EU has taken in these key areas, but also key challenges in the future. The paper employs statistical data analysis from the Sustainable Development Goals Report to assess the ten-year progress of EU countries. The obtained results indicate that all EU-27 have shown an increase in the Sustainable Development Index in the period 2012/2022. Based on the analysis of achieved results, the aim of the paper is to highlight significant successes, but also to identify areas where additional efforts should be invested and attention should be directed in future EU sustainable initiatives.

Keywords: *sustainable development, environmental protection, EU-27, Agenda 2030, European Green Deal.*

JEL classification: *Q58, C10*

ЗНАЧАЈ СТРАТЕШКОГ ПРИСТУПА ЕВРОПСКЕ УНИЈЕ ЗА НАПРЕДАК У ОСТВАРИВАЊУ ЦИЉЕВА ОДРЖИВОГ РАЗВОЈА

Апстракт

Одрживи развој је процес сталних промена у односима између друштвених, економских и природних система и процеса. Овај процес је дугорочан и

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захтева пажљиво вођену и постепену политику развоја, пошто су и изазови на глобалном нивоу са којима се човечанство суочава комплексни. Неки од савремених изазова одрживог развоја су: подизање нивоа еколошке свести људи, повећање одговорности, примена економских инструмената и иновативних решења проблема заштите животне средине итд. Због тога је неопходан стратешки приступ одрживом развоју и заштити животне средине. Проучавање иницијатива и постигнутих резултата којима је ЕУ тежила у претходном периоду, посматрано кроз призму одрживости, климатских акција и борбе против сиромаштва, овај рад истиче значајне кораке које је ЕУ предузела у овим кључним областима, али и кључне изазове у будућности. У раду је примењена статистичка анализа података из Извештаја о остваривању циљева одрживог развоја како би се оценио десетогодишњи напредак земаља ЕУ. Добијени резултати указују на то да су све земље чланице ЕУ-27 показале раст индекса одрживог развоја у периоду 2012/2022. На основу анализе постигнутих резултата, циљ рада је да истакне значајне успехе, али и да идентификује области у којима треба уложити додатне напоре и усмерити пажњу у будућим одрживим иницијативама ЕУ.

***Кључне речи**: одрживи развој, заштита животне средине, ЕУ-27, Агенда 2030*, *Европски зелени договор.*

Introduction

Discussions, conferences and debates on solving ecological issues and reaching sustainable development have been held in the past fifty years. The idea of sustainability originated from a necessity to protect the endangered environment, but that idea of resources and the environment could not have been reached without concrete economic measures.

The concept of sustainable development developed together with the understanding that ecological management and irrational use of natural resources were preconditions for the achievement of development without ecological degradation. The base of sustainable development is a strong bond between economic development and environmental protection. Environmental pollution has been considered one of the most serious limitations of industrial progress in developed countries, in which the growth of the material output is considered a quality of life. However, a rise in the popularity of environmental protection is a product of greater consciousness of the connection between the economy and the environment (Radukić, Petrović-Ranđelović, 2019, p. 53).

The sustainable development concept focuses on a better quality of life has been adopted by governments, companies and various organisations. Based on this definition, achieving sustainable development is the only way to reach a better quality of life.

Focus on the goals of sustainable development (SDGs) is a key step towards the progress of economic sustainability. It offers instructions for the optimal development and the establishment of long-term sustainable economies. Integration of the SDGs in the political strategies secures reliability towards the environment and welfare of the society, besides inclusivity. Initiatives of the European Union (EU) show commitment

to the integration of the SDGs in various fields. In this context, the European Green Deal is particularly important. It highlights the transformation to the green economy by focusing on the importance of ecological practices and renewable energy sources. This comprehensive approach leads countries towards sustainable development but also supports global efforts towards a resilient and prospective future. Also, this transforming venture of the EU "has a goal of making Europe the first climate-neutral continent in the world by 2050"(European Commission, 2023). "As an integral part of sustainable development, it promotes energy efficiency as a target, in order to give a range of economic, environmental and energy benefits. Along with energy intensity decline, there is a GDP rise and greenhouse gases (GHG) emission decrease both in EU27 and Serbia." (Jednak et al., 2020, p. 473). It comprises a wide spectre of policies, strategies and investments, with an intention to encourage the growth of sustainable development, reduce the emissions of oxygen and promote an ecologically resilient planet.

This article offers a review of the key initiatives and relevant documents related to the sustainable development goals and transition toward a green and sustainable economy in the EU. Also, it shows new and various ways for achieving the SDGs. In the second part, the key results in the context of sustainable development in the EU-27 will be presented. The importance of the progress made by the EU in achieving the SDGs suggests its seriousness and commitment. Indicators show remarkable progression, but reports also show that additional efforts are still to be conducted in all the fields.

1. Agenda 2030

United Nations Agenda 2030 is a global framework for the achieving of goals, including the eradication of poverty, reducing inequality and taking action in the fight against climate change and its consequences. The SDGs of the Agenda 2030 are applied from the 1st January 2016, after the adoption of the resolution at the UN Summit in September 2015, which is about the global development agenda for the period after 2015. It is expected that countries which signed the resolution to mobilise their resources and reduce poverty, fight against inequalities and find the answers to climate change in the next 15 years. The SDGs, known also as global goals, originated from the Millennium Development Goals. The SDGs recognise that fight against the poverty aligns with economic growth and industrialisation and they include health, education, social protection, environment and resilience to climate change as objectives. The SDGs are universal.

Agenda 2030 captures 17 SDGs and 169 subgoals as a result of more than two years of global public consultations. They cover all three key dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental dimension. The basic motto of Agenda 2030 is that none shall be forgotten and left aside (Center for Democracy Foundation, Center for High Economy Studies, Belgrade Open School, 2020, p. 9). Analysis of Kuc-Czarnecka et al. (2023) about the implementation degree of SDGs in EU countries "reveals a certain regularity; the leaders are usually from countries with stronger economies (Scandinavian countries, Germany, France, Netherlands, Ireland, Belgium and Austria). Therefore, even if they rank lower in some SDGs, their socio-economic potential will be conducive to catching up quickly".

Since the sustainable development concept has four dimensions, all the goals of the Agenda 2030 could be divided into four groups: economic growth, human resources development, environment and climate, and institutions, finances and cooperation (Radukić, Kostić, 2019, p. 432). For the implementation of SDGs in every country, strategic documents, action plans and other public policies are essential. Although EU has incorporated SDGs into its strategic priorities, there are still possibilities to improve it. Further integration of SDGs and the European Green Deal should be conducted according to recommendations specific to every country given by the European Commission (Koundouri et al., 2021).

1.1. Best-ranked EU countries according to the Sustainable Development Index

Achievements in SDGs could be compared between the countries using the Sustainable Development Report (formerly the SDG Index & Dashboards), which has been published since 2015 on the initiative of the United Nations members. The competencies of some countries to achieve SDGs have been followed through the Sustainable Development Report, based on which advantages and shortcomings could be identified. Also, based on the Index value (ranges from 0 to 100), countries could be compared to each other. This is important for the definition and implementation of sustainable policies on a national level.

Table 1. Best-ranked countries according to the Sustainable Development Report in 2022 and 2023

Rank	Country	Index value	
		2022	2023
	Finland	86.5	86.8
	Denmark	85.7	86.0
	Sweden	86.0	85.7
	Norway	82.3	83.4
	Austria	82.3	82.3
	Germany	83.4	82.0
	France	82.0	82.0
	Switzerland	80.8	81.9
	Ireland	80.1	81.8
	Estonia	81.7	81.7
	United Kingdom	80.6	81.7
	Poland	81.8	81.5
	Czechia	80.5	81.0
	Latvia	80.7	80.7
	Slovenia	81.0	80.5

Source: Sachs, J., Lafortune, G., Kroll, C., Fuller, G., Woelm, F. (2022) Sustainable Development Report 2022. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., Drumm, E. (2023). Implementing the SDG Stimulus. Sustainable Development Report 2023. Paris: SDSN, Dublin: Dublin University Press, 2023. 10.25546/102924

Table 1 shows that the greatest conditions to achieve SDGs have Scandinavian countries and other most developed countries, while the poorest countries of the world are at the very end of the list. Based on the level of achieving individual goals, specific problems for each country could be determined.

1.2. Progress in the achievement of SDGs in EU-27

Analysing the Sustainable Development Report, we classified 27 EU countries into three groups by the level of the achievement of SDGs: countries with the highest level of sustainable development (HSD), countries with the middle level of sustainable development (MSD) and countries with the lowest level of sustainable development (LSD). The HSD has been reached by: Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria, France, Czechia, Poland and Estonia. The MSD have Croatia, Slovenia, Latvia, Spain, Ireland, Portugal, Belgium, Netherlands, and Hungary. The LSD countries are Slovakia, Italy, Greece, Luxemburg, Romania, Lithuania, Malta, Bulgaria, and Cyprus.

This classification is based on their indices from the Sustainable Development Report for 2022. All three groups have the same number of states (9 countries each). The analysis of the EU-27 sustainable development indices points out that all countries achieved a higher index of sustainability from 2012 to 2022, regardless of their starting point. This collective success comes from the general commitment to the progress of SDGs across the EU. It is important to stress that the LSD group of countries (Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Malta, etc.) is a group with the highest growth rates at the same time. Also, basic segmentation shows that Western European and Scandinavian countries are in the HSD group, while Central and Eastern Europe countries are in the LSD group (Table 2).

Table 2 shows the Sustainable Development Index for 27 European Union countries in 2012 and 2022, divided into three groups: HSD, MSD and LSD countries.

Table 2. Indices of sustainable development for the EU-27 in 2012 and 2022

	Country	Index of Sustainable Development 2012	Index of Sustainable Development 2022	Average yearly growth rate 2022/2012
Countries with the highest level of sustainable development	Finland	85.45	86.76	1,53%
	Sweden	85.48	85.98	0,58%
	Denmark	83.97	85.68	2,04%
	Germany	80.10	83.35	4,07%
	Austria	80.84	82.28	1,77%
	France	78.71	82.04	4,23%
	Czechia	78.12	81.87	4,80%
	Poland	77.42	81.80	5,65%
	Estonia	76.78	81,68	6,38%
Countries with a middle level of sustainable development	Croatia	76,59	81,49	6,40%
	Slovenia	79,68	81.01	1,65%
	Latvia	77,75	80.68	3,77%
	Spain	77.04	80.42	4,39%
	Ireland	78.94	80.14	1,52%
	Portugal	76.10	80.01	5,15%
	Belgium	76.73	79.45	3,54%
	Netherlands	77.58	79.42	2,36%
	Hungary	77.19	79.39	2,85%

Countries with the lowest level of sustainable development	Slovakia	76.69	79.12	3,16%
	Italy	76.47	78.78	3,02%
	Greece	73.87	78.36	6,08%
	Luxemburg	74.46	77.64	4,27%
	Romania	74.28	77.46	4,28%
	Lithuania	73.71	76.80	4,20%
	Malta	72.54	75.52	4,11%
	Bulgaria	74.57	74.62	0,06%
	Cyprus	69.68	72.49	4,03%

Source: Authors view on the basis of Eurostat (2012) SDGs database; Sachs, J., Lafortune, G., Kroll, C., Fuller, G., Woelm, F. (2022) Sustainable Development Report 2022. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Table 3 displays basic indicators (minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation), descriptive statistical analyses is conducted based on the sustainable development index database.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for 3 groups of EU-27 countries

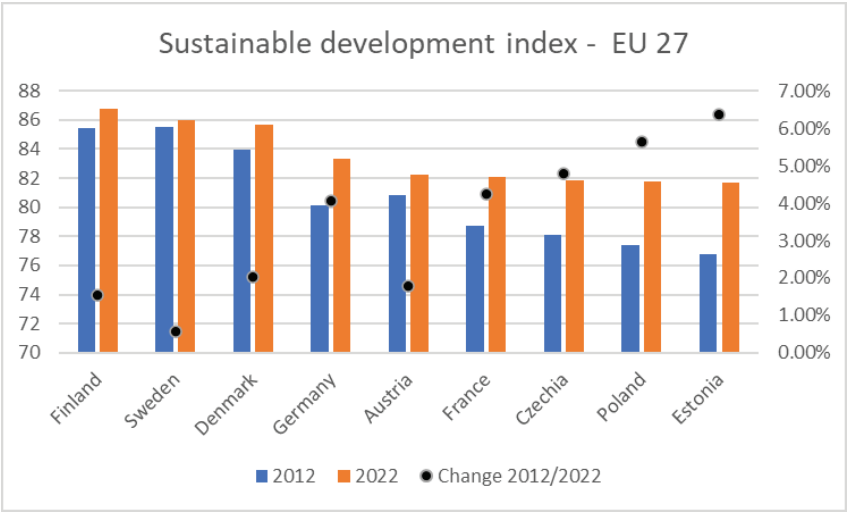
Descriptive statistics values	Groups of EU-27 countries		
	HSD countries	MSD countries	LSD countries
MINIMUM VALUE			
2012	76.7	76.1	69.6
2022	81.6	79.3	72.4
Average yearly growth rate 2022/2012	0,69%	0,47%	0,44%
MAXIMUM VALUE			
2012	85.4	79.6	76.0
2022	86.7	81.4	79.1
Average yearly growth rate 2022/2012	0,16%	0,25%	0,35%
AVERAGE VALUE			
2012	80.7	77.5	74.0
2022	83.4	80.2	76,7
Average yearly growth rate 2022/2012	0,37%	0,38%	0,40%
STANDARD DEVIATION			
2012	3.2	1.0	1.9
2022	1.9	0.7	2.0
Average yearly growth rate 2022/2012	-39.57%	-35,27%	4,25%

Source: Authors' analysis

The first group captures HSD countries. Here, Finland scores the impressive 86.7 index of sustainable development. On the other hand, Estonia in this group scores 81.6. Although it is currently in last place, Estonia is a country that has achieved the greatest improvement over the study period, with a 6.4% increase (from 76.8 to 81.7). This result is a great success, considering that Estonia has been among the countries with the lowest scores in 2012. This group of countries made it to increase their average index by 0.4%

per year in the period from 2012 to 2022. The average index for this group of countries has been increased from 80.8 to 83.5. Besides Estonia, in this group are also countries like Poland, with a growth of 5.7% (from 77.4 to 81.8), Czech Republic with 4.8% (from 71.1 to 91.9), France with 4.2% (from 78.7 to 82.0) and Germany with 4.1% of an increase (from 80.1 to 83.5). Sweden had the highest score in 2012 (85.4), but its growth has been the lowest, which allowed Finland to take the leading position.

Graph 1. *HSD countries in EU-27 for 2012/2022*



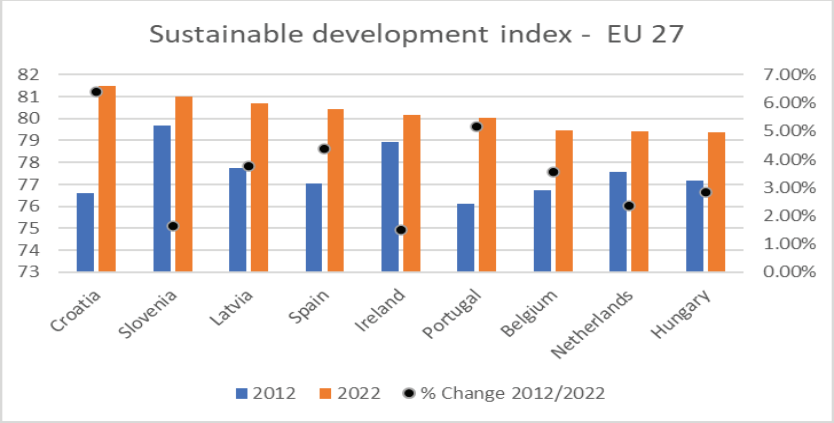
Source: Authors' analysis

On graph 1, HSD countries are depicted along with the growth rate of the index for 2012 and 2022. The sustainable development index is presented for both 2012 and 2022.

The standard deviation in the HSD group dropped by almost 40% in the study period, from 3.2 to 1.9. This drop indicates greater homogeneity in achieving sustainable development among countries from this group in the study period.

Croatia, with an index of sustainable development at 81.5, leads the MSD group. Hungary is in the last place with an index of 79.4 in 2022. Croatia achieved significant growth, a 6.4% increase from 2012 to 2022, which enabled it to move from the bottom of the list to the leading position. The average score of the index for this group is continually growing with an average yearly rate of 0.38%. This resulted in a growth of the average index for this group of countries from 77.5 to 80.2. Besides Croatia, significant growth has been achieved by Portugal and Spain with a rate of 5.15% (from 77.7 to 80.6) and 4.39% (from 77.04 to 80.6), respectively. In addition, significant progress has been made by Latvia, which increased its index by 3.7% (from 77.7 to 80.6). With a growth of 1.65%, Slovenia dropped to the second position. Noticeable are results made by Hungary and the Netherlands which have also increased their indices of sustainable development for 2.85% and 2.36%, respectively. The standard deviation in this group of countries fell by 35.27%, from 1.08 to 0.7.

Graph 2. MSD countries in EU-27 for 2012/2022

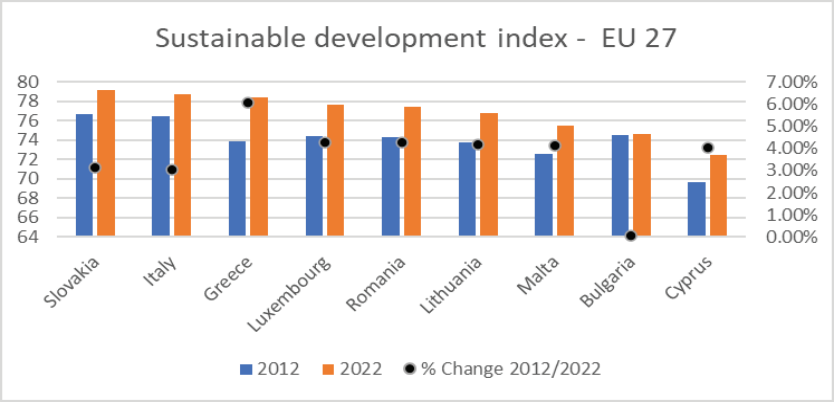


Source: Authors' analysis

On Graph 2, the MSD countries are depicted along with the growth rate of the index for 2012 and 2022. The sustainable development index is presented for both 2012 and 2022.

In the LSD group, Slovakia has the highest index of sustainable development (79). Cyprus is at the bottom of all 27 EU members with an index of 72 in 2022. This group of countries has, however, achieved higher growth rates faster than those in the rest two groups. The average yearly growth rate is 0.40%, and thereby average index of the group increased from 74 to 76.5. A unique characteristic of this group of countries is the growth of the standard deviation in the study period, from 1.9 to 2.05 (4% increase). 8 out of 9 countries in this group achieved a growth rate of 3%. For example, Italy achieved growth of 3% (from 76.4 to 78.78), Greece 6% (from 73.7 to 77.7), Luxembourg 4% (74.4 to 77.76), Romania 4.2% (from 74.3 to 77.4), Lithuania 4.2% and Malta 4.1%. Noticeable is that Bulgaria has achieved the smallest growth, not only in this group but considering all the countries. Bulgaria increased its index by only 0.06% in the study period. The data implies that these countries have achieved significant growth in sustainable development.

Graph 3. LSD countries in EU-27 for 2012/2022



Source: Authors' analysis

On graph 3, the LSD countries are depicted along with the growth rate of the index for 2012 and 2022. The sustainable development index is presented for both 2012 and 2022.

Analysis of the Sustainable Development Index for EU-27 from 2012 to 2022 shows that all three groups of countries and all individual members achieved growth, independently of their starting position. The HSD and MSD groups have achieved significant progress, while the LSD group, which is led by Slovakia, achieved the fastest growth in their rates. It is also significant that the difference between indexes of all 27 countries decreased by 9.5% (from 3.55 to 3.20). This has additional value in the results since it increases homogeneity in the achievement of sustainable development goals among those countries.

2. European Green Deal

European Union showed commitment to protecting the environment and to climate actions recently through several key initiatives, strategies and action plans.

At the centre of these efforts stands the European Green Deal (EGD), established by the end of 2019, which represents a new strategy for economic development EU. EGD is a key strategy that navigates developmental policies towards the models which encourage innovations and investments into sustainable technologies and services. It recognises significant possibilities for economic growth through the protection of the environment. This strategy obligates "the EU to become a carbon-neutral economy by 2050, in more than several sectors such as energy and agriculture" (Mert Mentes, Sustainability and Society, 2023, p. 7).

As a part of the EGD Strategic Framework about 20 strategic documents have been adopted recently (the Circular Economy Action Plan (2020), the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (2020), the Farm to Fork Strategy (2020), the Action on Critical Raw Materials Supply (2020) and the European Climate Law (2021). "Along with this, the EGD will require significant investments, with an estimated 260 billion euros a year (about 1.5% of EU, 2018 GDP) to achieve the 2030 climate and energy targets" (Almeida et al., 2023).

Key initiatives include *Fit for 55 (*cutting emissions by at least 55% by 2030), with an aim to prepare laws based on the climate ambitions of the EGD by changing the climate, energy and transport legislations (European Council, European Green Deal, 2019).

The part of the EGD is also the "EU's strategy on adaptation to climate change", which was adopted in June 2021 and aims towards the EU society that will be adapted to the inevitable influences of climate change by 2050. This should also directly contribute to sustainable development (Climate Action).

The biodiversity strategy for 2030, as a part of EGD, aims to recover the biodiversity of Europe, while the "Farm to Fork" strategy aims to make food systems competitive, healthy and environmentally friendly as a path to sustainability. These two strategies should contribute directly to Goal 15 (Life on land), and Goal 2 (Zero hunger) of sustainable development. European industrial strategy (European Council, European Green Deal, 2019) is also important since it supports the role of the industry in

the shift towards climate neutrality by contributing to Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure).

The Circular Economy Action Plan is also an important part of the EGD that aims to promote sustainable economies through waste reduction and the encouragement of re-usage, repair and recycling of products and resources. The mechanism for just transition is another key part of the EGD that secures financial and technical support to the regions affected by the transition to the low-carbon economy (LCE). This mechanism helps in the mobilisation of at least 55 billion euros in the period 2021-2027 (European Council, European Green Deal, 2019).

European Green Deal can contribute to the carbon-neutral Europe by 2050 while strengthening European cohesion. "A co-evolutionary development of policies, technologies, cultural values and economic institutions seems to offer the best chance of successfully designing and implementing the European Green Deal" (Wolf et al., 2021, p. 105).

3. Other EU sustainable development initiatives

At the UN meeting in New York in July 2023, the EU presented their first Voluntary Review on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, which highlighted its commitment to the SDGs. Review is presented as part of the regular reviews of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development under the UN Economic and Social Council (European Commission, The EU's Voluntary Review reaffirms commitment to delivering the Sustainable Development Goals at home and around the world, 2023).

The meeting's objectives were to deliver successful stories, best practices and discussions on challenges and knowledge to enhance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. European Commission conducts the 2030 Agenda through the "whole-of-government" approach, by integrating SDGs into all proposals, policies and strategies.

From 2020, yearly working programs of the EC place goals of sustainable development into the centre of EU policies, which is seen in the leading initiatives like, for example, European Green Deal, NexGenerationEU and REPowerEU.

NextGenerationEU, as a plan for economic recovery, is aiming towards achieving a green, digital and resilient Europe as a response to the crisis caused by COVID-19. The plan includes a financial package of 800 billion euros which supplements the EU budget for the period 2021-2027, to support the recovery of member countries (European Commission, NextGeneration EU, 2020). An important part of the funds is intended for projects that support the European Green Deal.

Strategic plan REPowerEU was brought in May 2022 as a response to the disruption of the energy supply caused by the Russian invasion in Ukraine. The objective of this plan is to amplify the energetic resilience and independence of the EU, by enhancing a transition to clean energy which directly supports Goal 13 (Climate action). This initiative is key to protecting the EU's citizens and enterprises from energy deficiency. According to the REPowerEU, energy saving is the most efficient way to reduce dependence on fossil fuels. Therefore, ambitious goals for the reduction of gas consumption have been established across the EU, which directly supports Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production). The plan highlights a significant increase in

the production of reusable energies, including wind and sun, to reduce the dependence upon fossil fuels. Diversification of energy sources is a key element of REPowerEU with a focus on the reduction of dependence upon Russian fossil fuels and finding alternative ways for energy supply. Since it came into force, REPowerEu successfully reduced the EU's dependence on Russian gas from 41% in August 2021 to 8% in September 2022. This has been achieved by agreements with third countries on the import of gas through pipelines, investments into liquefied natural gas (LNG) and strategic partnerships for green oxygen. REPowerEU plan demanded big investments and reforms. It mobilised "almost 300 billion euros – approximately 72 billion euros through grants, while around 225 billion euros in loans" (European Commission, REPowerEU, 2022).

European Union has also conducted several measures to reduce carbon emissions from fossil fuels and to promote the transition to clean energy sources. EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) is a key element in the EU policy against climate change and a basic tool for the profitable reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. In line with Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 13, EU ETS aims towards a sustainable and low-carbon European future. In addition, the EU is planning to introduce a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (Filipović et al., 2022). This mechanism is designed to stop the leakage of carbon when companies move production into countries with weaker limitations of emissions. The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism will ensure that the price of carbon when importing goods is according to the levels of carbon itself, aligning with Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production) and promoting ecological sustainability in global trade transactions.

Between 2014 and 2019, the EU had significant economic growth which contributed to the 14.5 billion new workplaces and the achievement of a high employment rate of 74.6% by 2021-2022, although there were obstacles such as COVID-19 pandemics. In 2022, the EU and its members achieved 92.8 billion euros of Official Development Aid (ODA), which is 43% of global ODA (European Commission, The EU's Voluntary Review reaffirms commitment to delivering the Sustainable Development Goals at home and around the world, 2023).

4. The eight Environment Action Programme of the European Union for Environmental Protection

The impact of the EU on the planet's resources is unequal. EU uses almost 20% of Earth's biocapacities although it makes up only 7% of the world's population. It would take 2.8 planets if everyone would spend like an average EU citizen. This is far above the world average of 1.7 planets. In addition, contemporary trends of transforming fertile land into infrastructure, industrial and commercial capacities endanger fertile soil, one of the most valuable natural resources. "Soil erosion costs European farmers 1.25 billion euros per year" (WWF European Policy Office, 8th Environment action programme: The EU to-do list for immediate action, 2023).

The newest 8th Environmental Action Programme (EAP), which came into force on the 2nd May 2022, is another step that shows the commitment of the European Union towards a sustainable future. This programme, which will lead the European policy of environmental protection until 2030, is a continuation of the fundamentals of the EGD

and it has an aim to speed up the transition to climate neutrality and a resource-efficient economy. Programme amplifies the significance of healthy ecosystems for human wealth and prosperity. It tends towards a vision for Europeans to live in 2050 following the limits of our planet and that the economy uses resources according to the possibilities of their recycling. Implementation of environmental protection queries into the economic decision-making process begins at the international level, where key decision makers are supranational institutions (like the EU) or countries, followed by sectoral level (Radukić and Petrović-Ranđelović, 2019, p. 60). 8th EAP calls on active participation of interested parties on all levels of governance, to ensure efficient implementation of EU laws on climate and environment.

To follow and report on the progress of these ambitious goals, the EU adopted a set of indicators on the 26 of July 2022. These indicators will help to inform citizens about the influence of EU policies on climate and the environment and to make easier discussions between politicians on the parts that need additional efforts to be addressed adequately. European Environment Agency (EEA) and European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) play key parts in this process by securing yearly reports since December 2023. These reports will assess a progress to the goals of the 8th EAP. Middle-term revision is scheduled for the 31st of March 2024, while complete evaluation should be done by 31st of March 2029.

5. Monitoring the achievement of SDGs in the EU for 2023

Key steps in following the progress have been also taken by Eurostat. In published the newest report "Sustainable Development in the European Union" – a report on the progress towards of SDGs in the context of the EU for 2023, where Eurostat offers detailed statistical analysis. The results of the Report are encouraging and show that the EU has reached significant progress in most of the SDGs in the last five years. This progress is following the focus of the Commission on the key political fields, including the EGD, the 8th Environment Action Plan and the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (Eurostat, Sustainable development in the European Union - Monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context, 2023).

A new aspect of this Report is its analysis of factors of recent crises on sustainable development. That includes the consequences of the energetic crisis caused by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, as well as that caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Key findings from the Report reveal significant progress in several fields including dignified work and economic growth (SDG 8), reducing poverty (SDG 1) and gender equality (SDG 5). Progress is also visible in the reduction of inequalities (SDG 10), promoting quality education (SDG 4) and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16). Although there were challenges caused by the pandemic, progress in the field of good health and well-being (SDG 3) was significant. The report also finds moderate progress in Responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), Sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), Life below water (SDG 14), Zero hunger (SDG 2), Clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and Affordable and clean energy (SDG 7) (European Commission). Furthermore, there is a need for the EU to put additional efforts into Climate action (SDG 13), Life on land (SDG 15) and Partnership for the goals (SDG 17) (Eurostat, Sustainable development in

the European Union - Monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context, 2023, p. 10).

The report also highlights that emissions have fallen due to energy consumption reduction and increased usage of renewable sources. Sectoral analysis for the period from 1990 to 2021 shows that all the economic sectors reduced the emission of gases with the green garden effect in this period, except for the traffic sector. Fuel combustion in energy industries, which captures electricity production and central heating, has shown the most significant reduction. That is a result of the general reduction and an increase of participation of renewable energy sources, by achieving 37.5% in consumption of electricity by 2021. Also, electricity consumers' fuel combustion (excluding transport) changed energy industries as the biggest source of emissions in 2020 and stayed as the biggest sector with 27.4% of summed emissions with the effect of the green garden in 2021 (Eurostat, Sustainable development in the European Union - Monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context, 2023, p. 235).

Summed funds invested by the EU into the green transformation (including EU-27, as well as EU institutions) "grew from approximately 12,9 billion euros in 2014 to 23,4 billion euros in 2020" (Eurostat, Sustainable development in the European Union - Monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context, 2023). "Germany and France were countries that invested the greatest budgets for green incentives among member states" (Mentes, 2023). On the other hand, the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Commission were the third and fourth biggest donors of public funds to fight against climate change in developing countries.

Conclusion

Every branch of the economy, as well as the economy in general, are, to some extent, "guilty" for the pollution in their environment and above. Therefore, every country leads active policy in environmental protection and financing projects. EU has developed its economic and law system in this field. EU has brought guidelines to help environmental protection and sustainable development. These guidelines become obligations for candidates for EU membership. The most significant is the Agenda 2030. Its goals are an ambitious and complex project in general. To be implemented by 2030, active commitment of governments and institutions is needed, but also partnership with organizations of civil society, citizens and the private sector. Criteria and standards in the field of the EU environmental protection are at a high level.

The analysis of the Index of Sustainable Development for EU-27 from 2012 to 2022 points to the growth of the sustainable development level. The HSD and MSD groups of countries scored more significant growth, while LSD countries achieved certain growth rates faster than others. Furthermore, the difference between indices of all 27 countries fell by 9.5% (from 3.55 to 3.20), which additionally highlights progress and increased homogeneity in the achievement of SDGs among members.

European Union showed a strong commitment to sustainable development and green transition by policy harmonization with the global SDGs. This harmonization is seen through efforts of the EU to harmonize national laws on environmental protection with the EU's legislation of environmental protection. Key initiatives like the EGD, 8th

Action Environment Programme, NextGenerationEU, REPowerEU, and the Emission Trading System are central to the EU's strategies. These programs are designed to transform the EU into a resource-efficient economy that aims towards zero emissions by 2050 and promotes sustainable development.

Through various programs, the EU provides the necessary financial support to smaller and candidate countries to the EU which face challenges in achieving these ambitious goals. The support is crucial for the transition of these countries to green economies and alignment with EU environmental standards. This partnership highlights the EU's role not only in advancing its green agenda, but also in supporting its neighbours and partners in achieving common sustainability goals. On this road to sustainable development, the EU has also taken important steps in the systematic monitoring of progress.

Last year EU presented its Voluntary Review on the Implementation of the Agenda 2030 at the UN meeting, together with the Eurostat Report on the reduction of energy consumption. They represent the concretization of these goals and send the message that even significant progress has been achieved in the past, due to the rise of global geopolitical problems and ambitious goals set, more intense efforts should be undertaken in the upcoming period.

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