

Chapter 1 Sustainable Consumption in Central and Eastern Europe – a Survey

Gyula Zilahy and Ágnes Zsóka

Corvinus University of Budapest

1 Introduction

Countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been in the lime-light with regard to their political, social and economic transformation process during the past 20 years. Massive legislative work and a gross restructuring of the economies of the region, however, followed the patterns of developed Western countries closely with only very faint criticism along the way. The lack of democratic traditions and the general situation of the economies of these countries mean that the transition process is a long one and CEE countries could hardly catch up with the rest of Europe.

The process of their accession to the European Union is continuous, resulting in similar challenges, requirements and problems for them by now and in the future. As CEE countries want to belong to the affluent Western societies, they strive for growth and wealth, while they have been hardly hit by the economic crises of recent times. The possible ways out of the resulting poor economic situation are often discussed. Most importantly, traditional values and the aspects of genuine social welfare have often been neglected or sacrificed for material well-being.

On the political level, CEE countries also try to address sustainability issues, but obviously they are doing it in quite different ways and with different success. This is also true for addressing sustainable consumption, so – as part of Europe – the experience of CEE countries also provides valuable insights and relevant input for the debate on the future of sustainable consumption.

In our paper we aim to survey the most important aspects of social and economic development in the CEE region from the point of view of (sustainable) consumption. To this end we will:

1. Uncover economic and social trends characterising the CEE region, focusing on recent times
2. Analyse consumption patterns such as the consumption of different goods and services, their tendencies over time and their distribution across the different groups within society
3. Reveal general attitudes of the population towards sustainability and Sustainable Consumption specifically, based on existing studies describing the region

Such an overview of the situation will enable us 1) to assess the situation in the region from the point of view of Sustainable Consumption 2) draw up future scenarios regarding consumption patterns within the region and 3) propose policy options specifically suitable for the CEE region and possibly to other transformation countries across the world and thus contribute to the overall debate over Sustainable Consumption.

2 Economic and social trends in the CEE region

Economic trends are usually illustrated GDP levels. The following chart demonstrates the trends of GDP during the last ten years in selected CEE countries and their more developed counterparts on the continent. The chart does show the GDP/capita values in absolute terms, thus the gap between CEE and Western Europe is well demonstrated: the GDP/capita of the most developed countries is more than twice as much as of some lesser developed CEE countries.

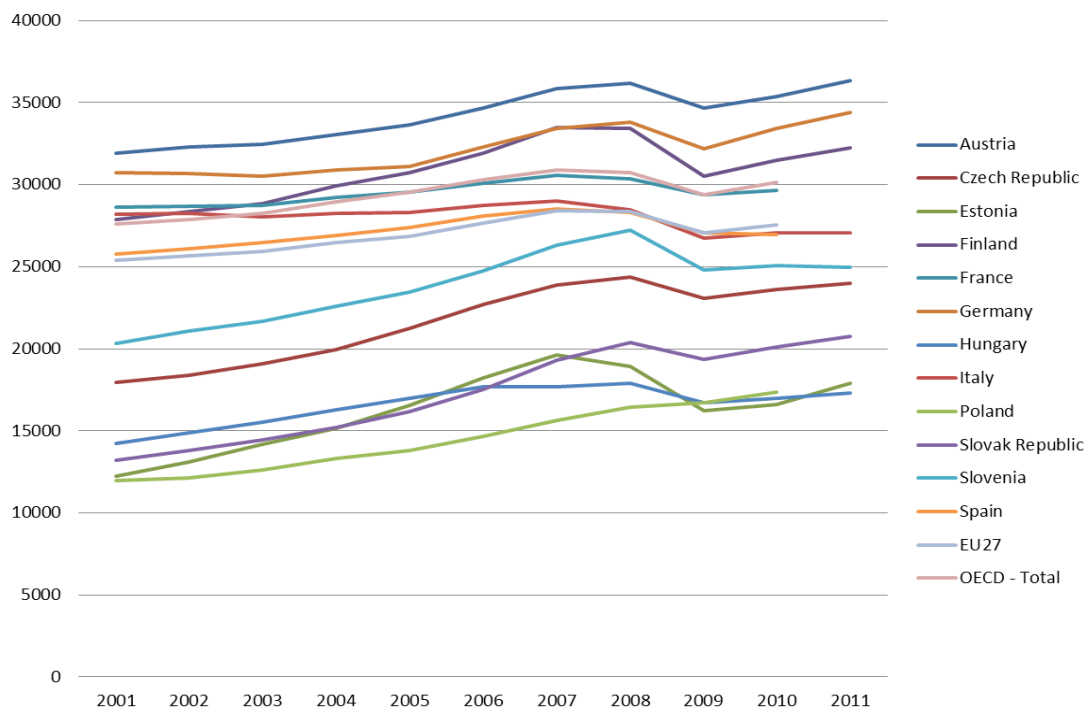


Figure 1: Gross domestic product per capita (expenditure approach)
Source: OECD Factbook 2011-2012

The following two charts show the growth rate of GDP in the two groups of countries separately. It is obvious that all countries have been hit by the recession in year 2009, and – apart from the one and only Poland – produced a negative growth. A few other implications:

1. Some countries of CEE experienced a growth rate of 5-10% before the crisis, which is significantly higher than that of more developed EU countries (1-5%);
2. These exceptionally high growth rates have not returned to the region yet (with the exception of Estonia, which experienced the worst decline just two years before);

3. The variation in growth rates between the two country groups is different: while growth rates of developed countries tend to move together and are close in value, there are bigger differences between the growth rates of CEE countries;
4. While in developed Europe GDP growth in 2007 tended to be rather high, some CEE countries experienced difficulties already early in the crises;
5. The rather high variation of growth rates between CEE countries seems to be continuing after the crisis as well – although this is hard to judge because of the lack of data after 2009.

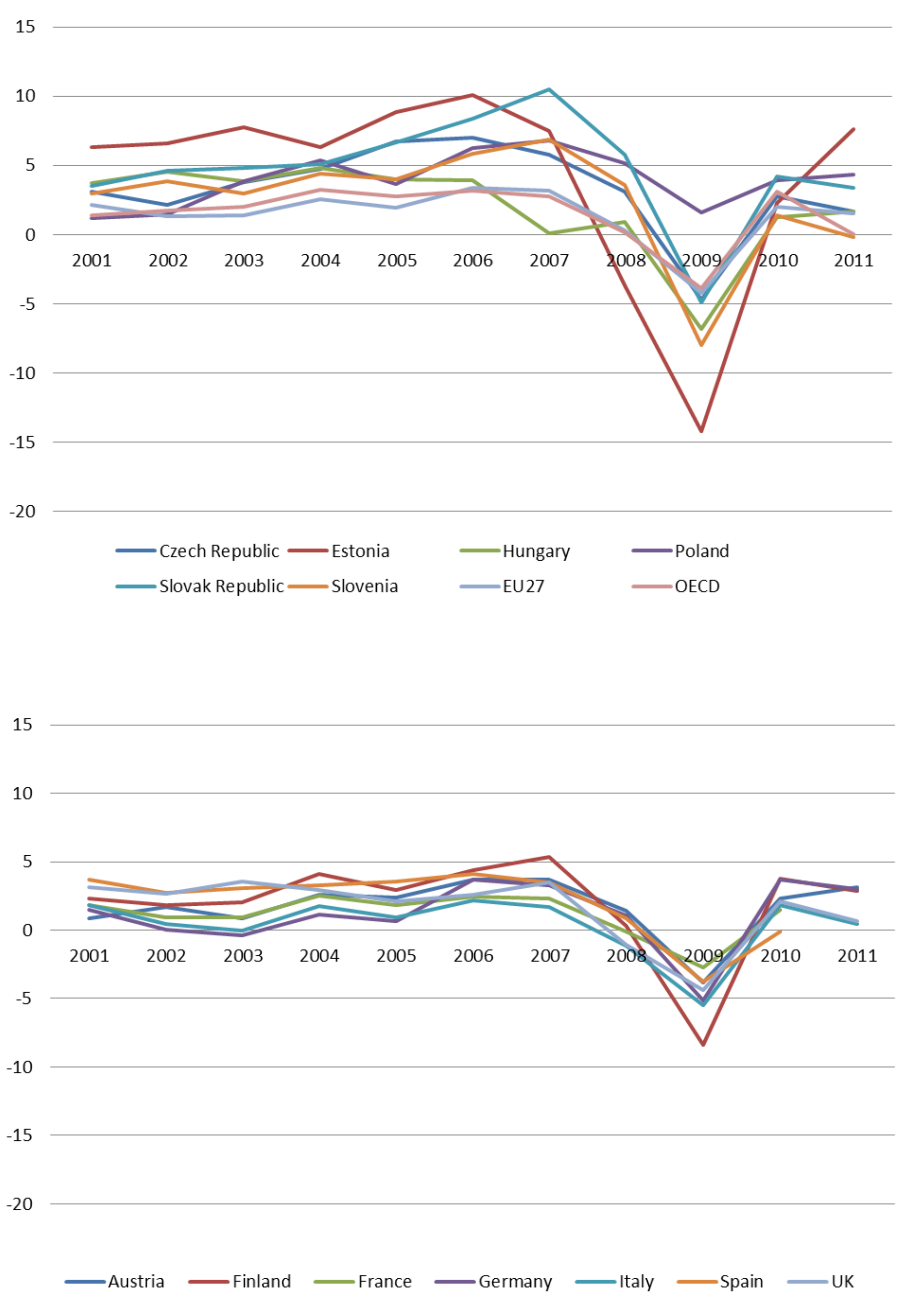


Figure 2: Gross domestic product (expenditure approach) – annual growth rate
 Source: OECD Factbook 2011-2012

Taking these developments into account, even if CEE countries return to their higher growth patterns compared to more developed EU member states, it will definitely take several decades before GDP/capita figures come close to the Western half of Europe (somewhat faster for Slovenia and the Czech Republic, although Slovenia faces problems with emerging from the crisis as flat GDP figures show).

Employment rates also show interesting patterns in the CEE countries. For most countries numbers peaked in year 2008 and have decreased in the two years after. Overall, when compared to the selected countries of more developed Europe, it can be concluded that employment rates are somewhat lower in the CEE countries. As for Hungary, demonstrating the lowest number since the middle of 2000's, recently some policy measures have been implemented to increase the number employed in the different sectors of the economy. However, results will be seen only in a couple of years.

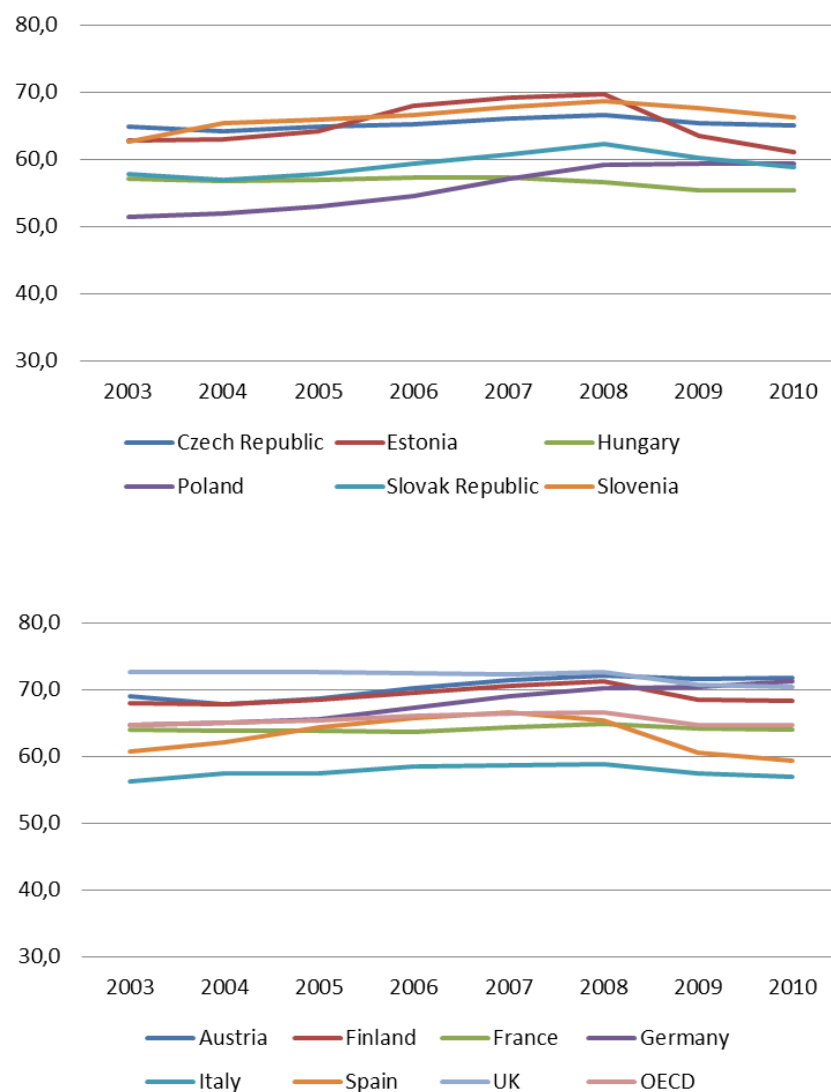


Figure 3: Employment rates - % of working age population
Source: OECD Factbook 2011-2012

Table 1: Trends in different income inequality measures
 Source: OECD (2011): Divided We Stand – Why Inequality Keeps Rising

Looking at the Gini coefficient, it is hard to make out any obvious trends in the selected countries. The value of the coefficient for CEE countries is often lower compared to those of more developed countries (e.g. Italy and the U.K.) although some of the best values also belong to developed countries (Denmark and Finland). Also, changes over the last two decades show high variation. The Czech Republic and Hungary with available data show that there was an increase in income inequality in the first decade around the transition followed by a decrease during the decade after. This seems to be a more favourable tendency compared to that of the more developed countries most of which show an increase in inequality between the middle of the 1990's and the late 2000's.

The following two figures also indicate that societies of the CEE countries still face serious issues regarding the poverty of their populations.

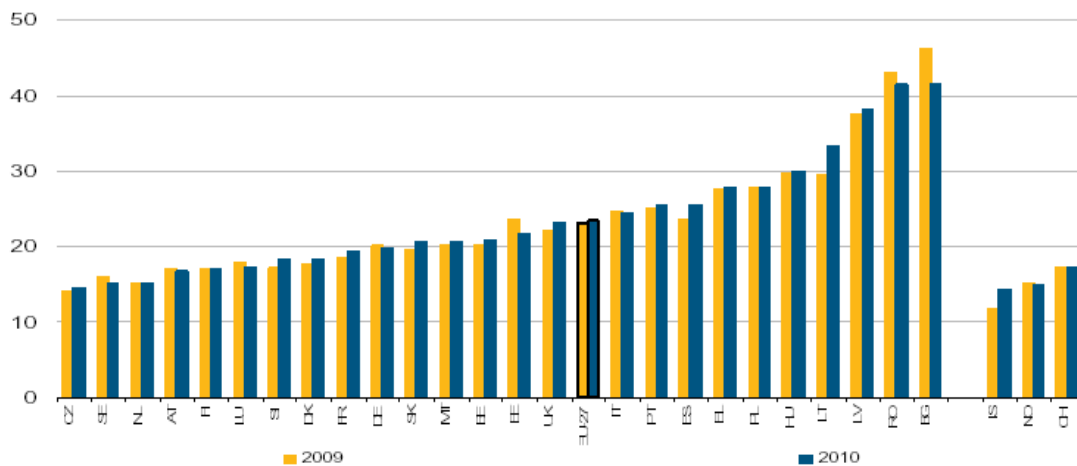


Figure 5: People at risk of poverty or social exclusion
 Source: Antuofermo and Di Meglio (2012)

Member States with the highest rates of people being at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPA rates) in 2010 were Bulgaria (42%), Romania (41%), Latvia (38%), Lithuania (33%) and Hungary (30%), while countries with the lowest rates were Sweden (15%), the Netherlands (15%) and the Czech Republic (14%).

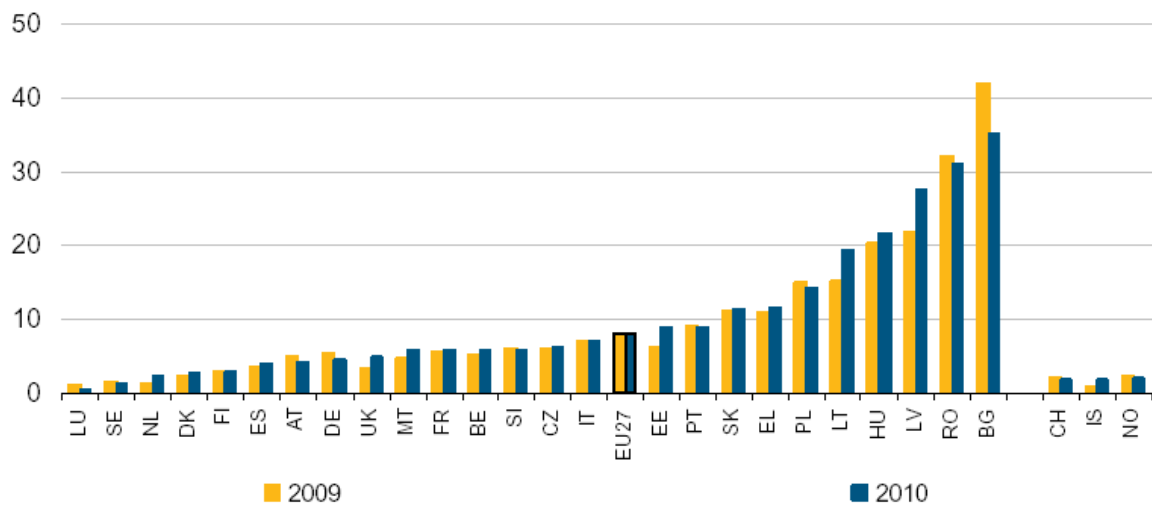


Figure 6: Severe material deprivation rate
 Source: Antuofermo and Di Meglio (2012), p.5

The rates of people who are severely deprived materially in Europe show a similar picture to the AROPA rates. These rates have increased as a result of the economic crisis in the most hit countries.

One of the most important indicators of the environmental component of Sustainable Development, the emission of Greenhouse Gases (GHGs) is shown in the next figure in absolute terms (thousand tonnes of CO2 equivalent).

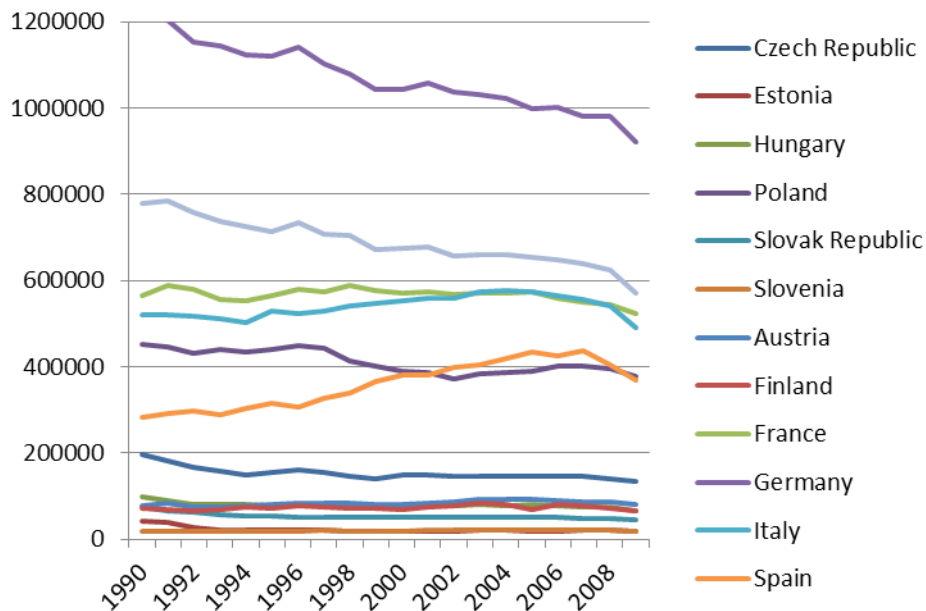


Figure 7: Greenhouse gas emissions (thousand tonnes CO2 equivalent)
 Source: OECD statistics

Obviously, more industrialized, bigger countries produce higher amounts of GHGs (Germany and the U.K. topping the list followed by Italy and France) while smaller CEE countries have much lower emissions (here Poland being the major emitter). However, tendencies are also interesting and show that large polluters like Germany and the U.K. take the issue most seriously and have reduced their emission noticeably over the last ten years. Other countries like France, Italy and Spain have only acted in the first half of the last decade and all countries show a marked decrease as a result of the crises. CEE country emissions seem to be rather constant with only a decline as a result of the recession of 2008-09.

3 Consumption patterns in CEE countries

Consumption patterns within the CEE region also show marked differences compared to other, more developed countries of the European Union.

Real household income has grown continuously during the last two decades in most European countries, just as in the CEE region.

	Average annual change mid-1980s to mid-1990s					Average annual change mid-1990s to mid-2000s				
	Bottom quintile	Middle three quintiles	Top quintile	Median	Mean	Bottom quintile	Middle three quintiles	Top quintile	Median	Mean
Austria ¹	2,5	2,7	2,8	2,8	2,7	-2,1	-0,5	-0,4	-0,6	-0,6
Czech Republic	..	..	..	..	..	0,4	0,6	0,7	0,5	0,6
Finland	0,9	0,9	1,0	0,8	1,2	1,6	2,5	4,6	2,5	2,9
France	1,0	0,5	-0,1	0,5	0,3	0,9	0,7	1,0	0,8	0,8
Germany	0,4	1,4	1,6	1,2	1,4	-0,3	0,5	1,3	0,6	0,7
Hungary	..	..	..	..	..	0,9	1,2	1,0	1,1	1,1
Italy	-1,3	0,5	1,5	0,6	0,8	2,2	1,0	1,6	1,0	1,3
Spain ¹	4,4	3,2	2,4	3,2	3,0	5,2	5,1	5,0	5,5	5,1
Sweden	0,5	0,9	1,2	0,9	0,9	1,4	2,2	2,8	2,2	2,3
United Kingdom	0,7	2,0	4,3	1,9	2,8	2,4	2,1	1,5	2,1	1,9

Table 2: Trends in real household income by quintiles
Source: OECD (2008): Growing Unequal? Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries¹

However, the two countries illustrated in the above table show a more moderate increase (0,6 and 1,1 respectively regarding mean annual change between the mid 1990's and mid 2000's) than most of the developed member states. In fact, highest rates are produced by Spain, Finland and Sweden.

Resulting household demand has grown slower since the crisis than before as shown in the following figure. Most of the CEE countries returned to the 0-5% range, while demand in more developed countries grows at a more moderate 0-3%. This shows some catching-up of CEE countries to Western consumption habits at least as far as consumption of goods and services is concerned.

¹ Changes over the period mid-1990s to around 2000 for Austria, the Czech Republic and Spain (where 2005 data, based on EU-SILC, are not deemed to be comparable with those for earlier years)

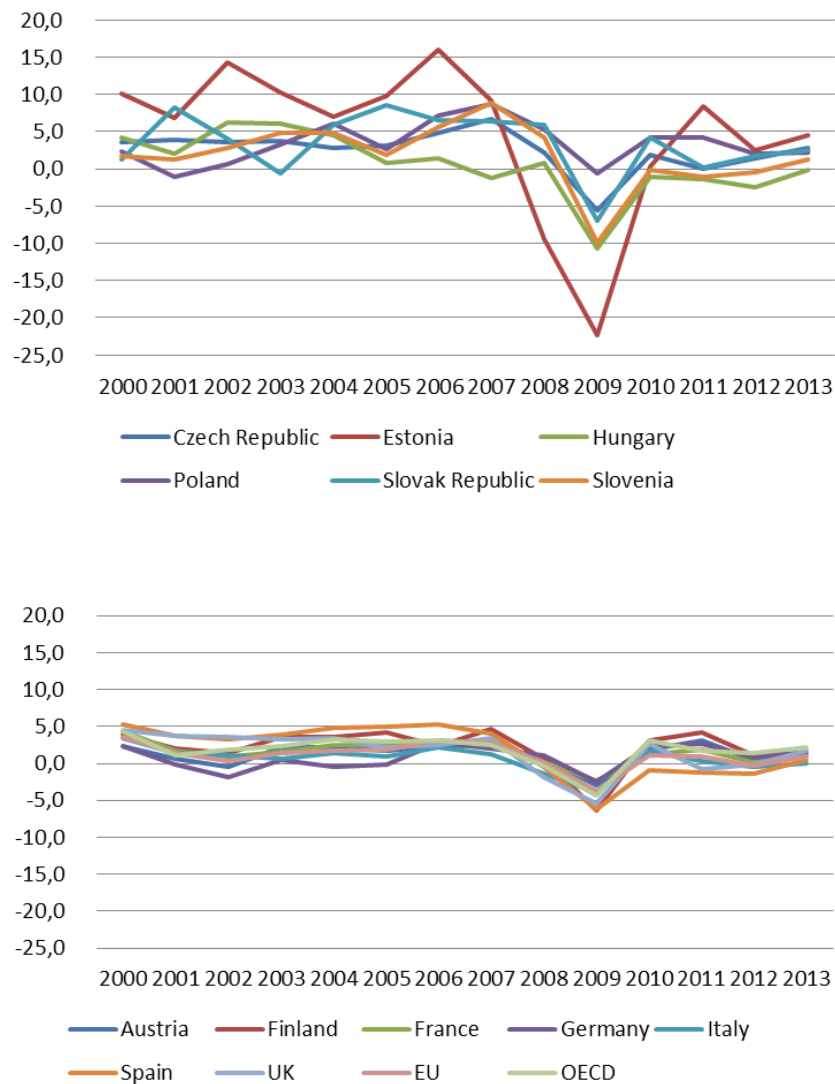


Figure 8: Real total domestic demand – percentage change from previous year
Source: OECD (2011): OECD Economic Outlook

Again, it is evident that from many aspects CEE countries show bigger heterogeneity compared to the older members of the European Union. Another example of this phenomenon is shown below illustrating the final consumption expenditure in selected countries.

All countries (but Poland) have seen a negative growth in final consumption in the year 2009, but while all more developed countries have stayed within the 0-5% range before and after this year, final consumption has often increased with more than 5% in CEE countries. Also, Estonia and Hungary have experienced decreases of more than 5% in year 2009.

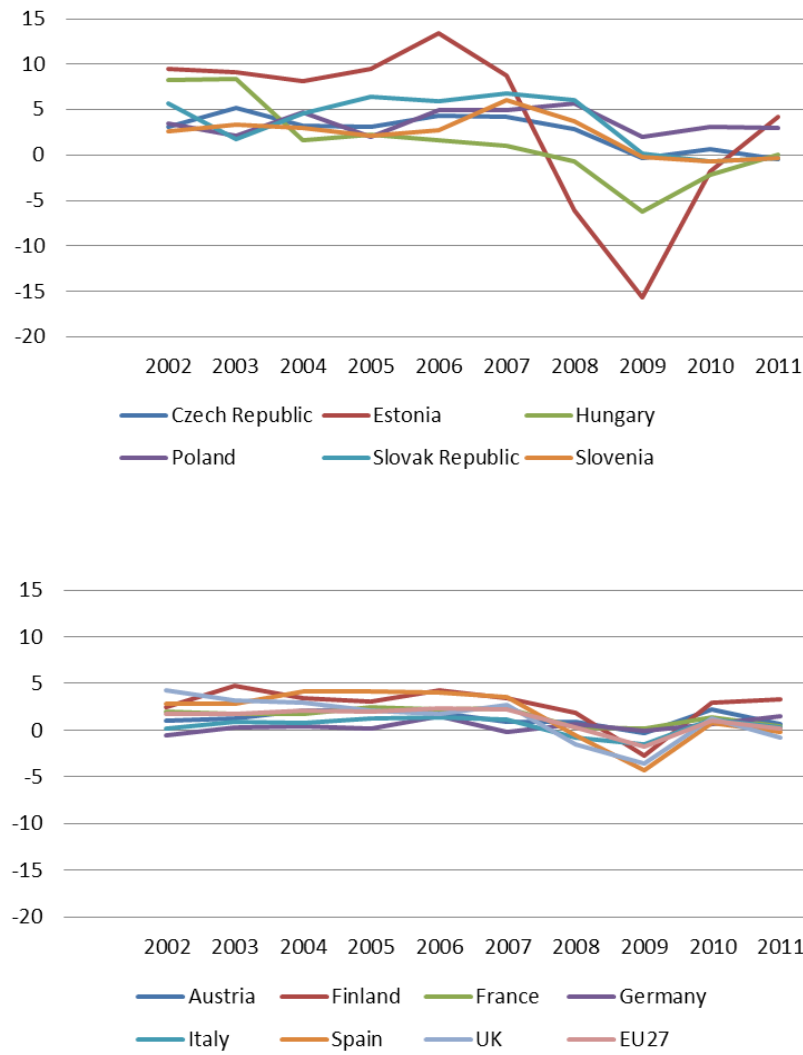


Figure 9: Change in private final consumption expenditure at constant prices
Source: OECD Factbook 2011

The actual volume of final consumption is shown in the following chart demonstrating the low share of CEE countries compared to other EU member states.

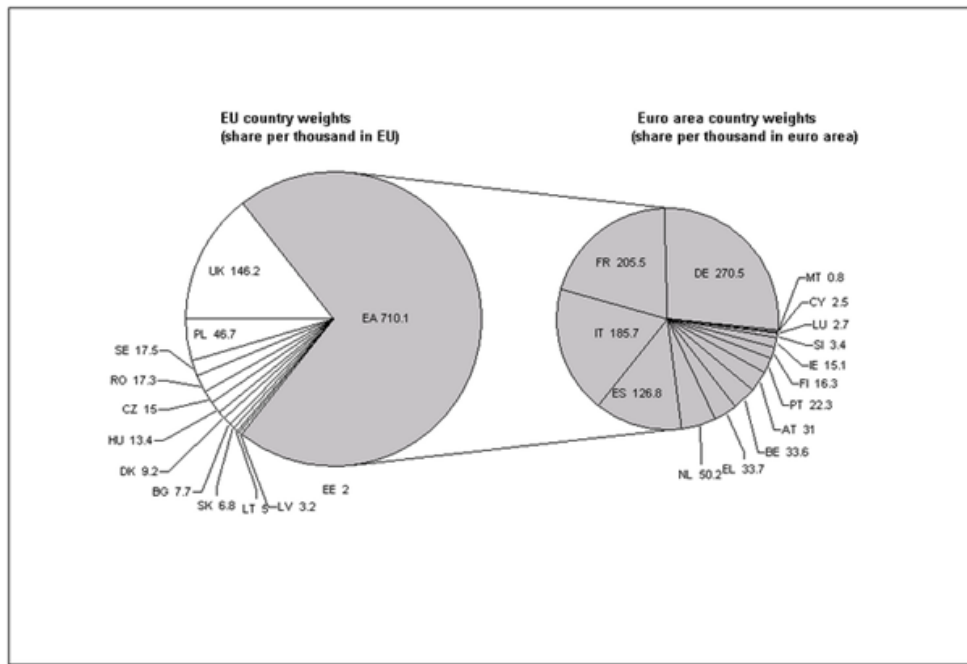


Figure 10: Consumption levels in the European Union, EU and euro area - country weights, Source: HICP – Household Consumption Patterns (2008)

These high levels of consumption, however, are not sustainable, as shown by the consumption-to-GDP ratios of selected European countries in the following figure. The chart does not only demonstrate the unsustainable lifestyle of European citizens from a long term, environmental point of view, but also the recent developments of European economic development.

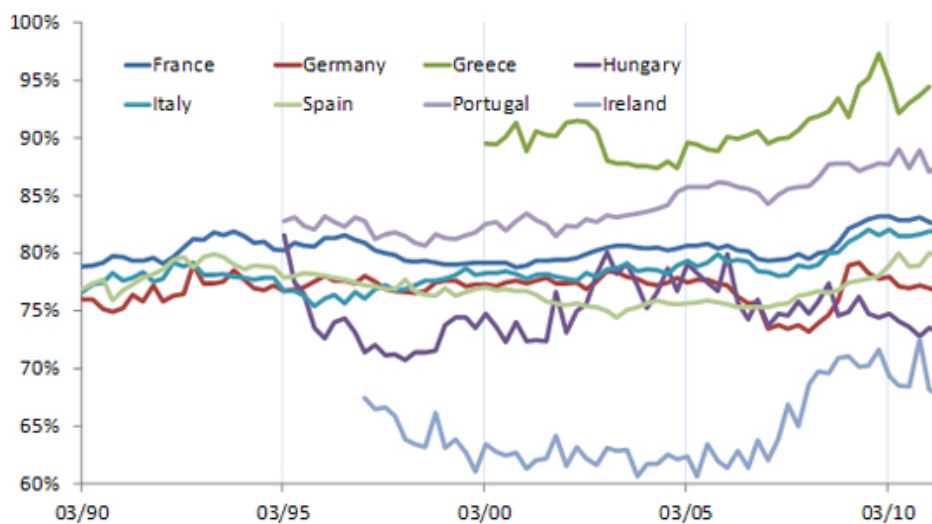


Figure 11: Consumption-to-GDP Ratio for Selected EU Countries Source: CEIC Data, cited by: Ernst (2011)

Based on the Sustainable Consumption and Production Indicators of Eurostat (Eurostat, 2012), the monitoring process in 2011 resulted in an evaluation regarding the changes since

2000 for the European Union. The evaluation highlights that there is “only a relative decoupling of resource use from economic growth, consumption of materials continues to rise, more and more cars are on the roads, more but smaller households are relevant with increasing expenditures” (Eurostat, 2012). On the other hand, “final energy consumption decreased in 2009, waste management is improving, although there is more hazardous waste, there is a decrease in atmospheric emissions, an increase in eco-label licenses and organisations certified with an environmental management system, and there are signs of agricultural de-intensification” (Eurostat, 2012).

Differences between CEE countries and other EU member states can also be seen regarding the structure of consumption. Before the economic crisis in 2008-09, the highest weights were attached to food, transport and housing, each being responsible for around 15% of consumption expenditure, both in the EU and the euro area. Around 10% was devoted to recreation and culture, and a bit lower weight to restaurants and hotels.

However, as the next figure and additional statistics of Eurostat show, the consumption basket is fairly different for the various Member States (Eurostat, 2011).

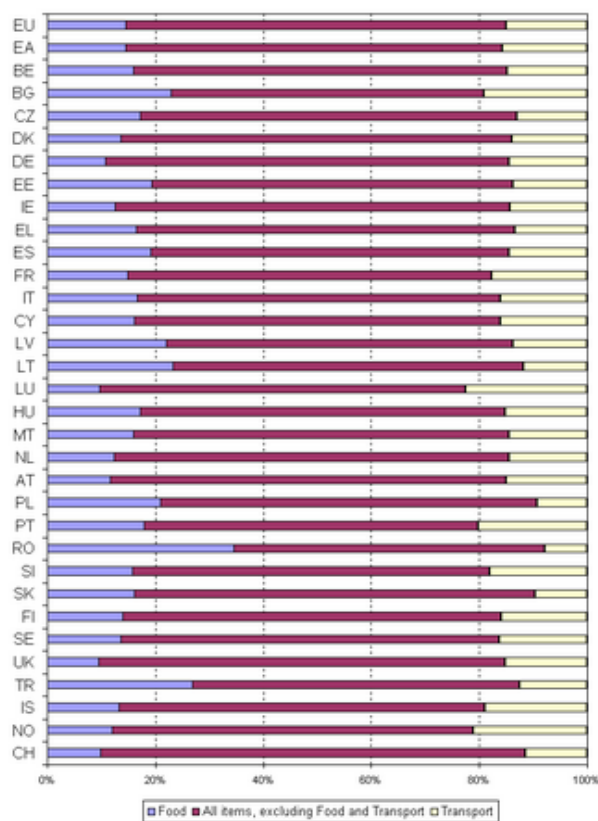


Figure 12: Consumption structure in the EU member states, 2008
Source: Eurostat (2011): HICP – Household Consumption Patterns

In 2008, the weighting for food varied between 11 and 12% for the United Kingdom, Luxembourg, and Germany, but was very high for Romania: 37%. “The share for transport in household final monetary consumption expenditure ranged from 8-10% for Romania, Poland, and Slovakia, to 19-23% in Bulgaria, Portugal and Luxembourg. Consumption expenditure on recreation and culture ranged from 5% in Bulgaria, Portugal, Romania, and Greece to 15%

in the United Kingdom. The weight for housing² ranged from 8-9% in Malta, Cyprus, Greece and Luxembourg, to 22-23% in Slovakia and Germany.” (Eurostat, 2011)

Expenditures on health services also demonstrate the large difference between the various countries of the EU.

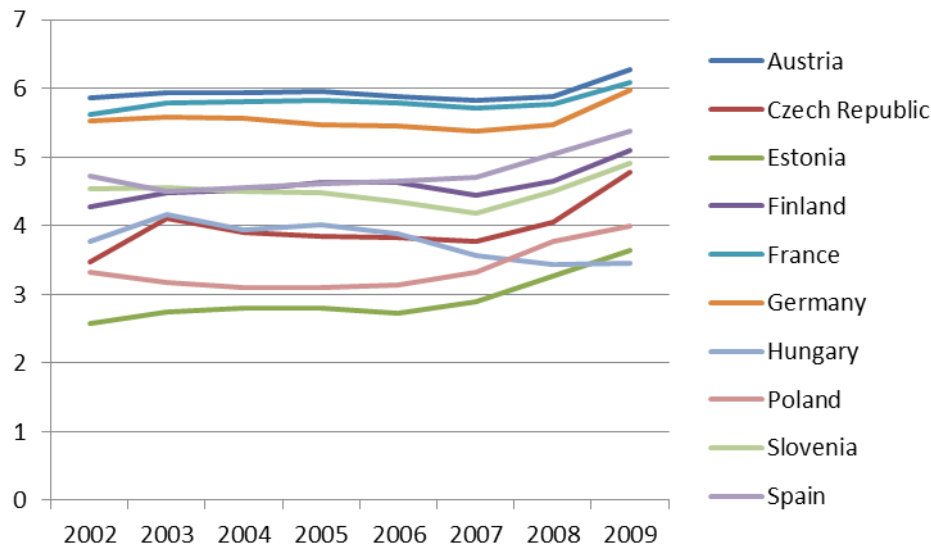


Figure 13: Total health expenditure - Services of curative and rehabilitative care (% of GDP)
Source: OECD statistics

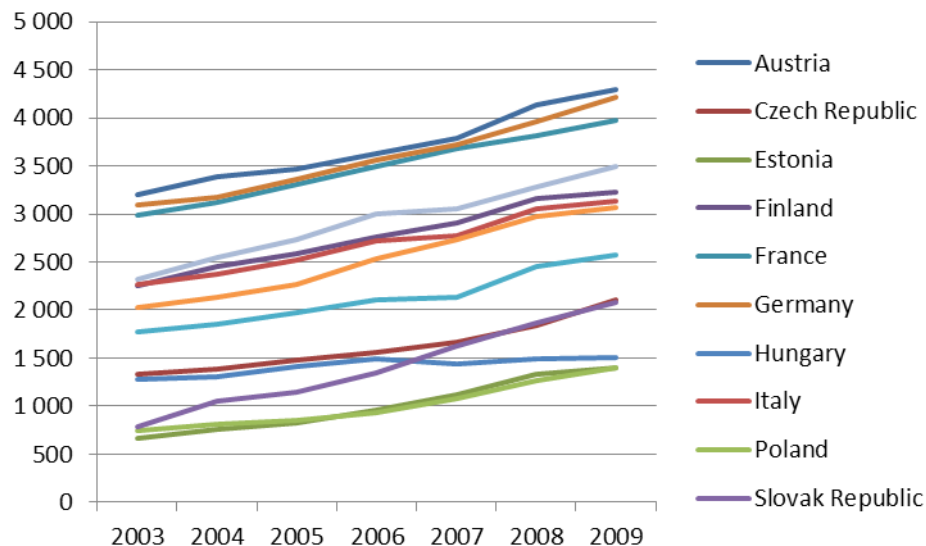


Figure 14: Total expenditure on health per capita – at current prices and PPP (U.S. dollars)
Source: Key tables from OECD, OECD 2011

² As the housing category does not include services provided by owner-occupied dwellings, countries with a larger proportion of the population living in rented dwellings tend to have a larger weight for housing.

Both the share of health expenditures within the countries' GDP and their total value show significant discrepancy between the countries with developed countries spending more both compared to their GDP (a two time difference between the extremes) and in absolute terms (a three time difference) as well. It is interesting to note that health expenditures have not decreased as a result of the crises, but rather increased similarly to the previous years.

Another interesting indicator of consumption, the purchasing and registration of private cars is shown in the next figure. Here, the recession had split both CEE and other, more developed countries: Hungary, Estonia and Slovenia (CEE) as well as Spain, Finland and the U.K. (developed) showing a marked decrease in registration, while other countries (e.g. Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Austria and France) being able to grow in this respect.

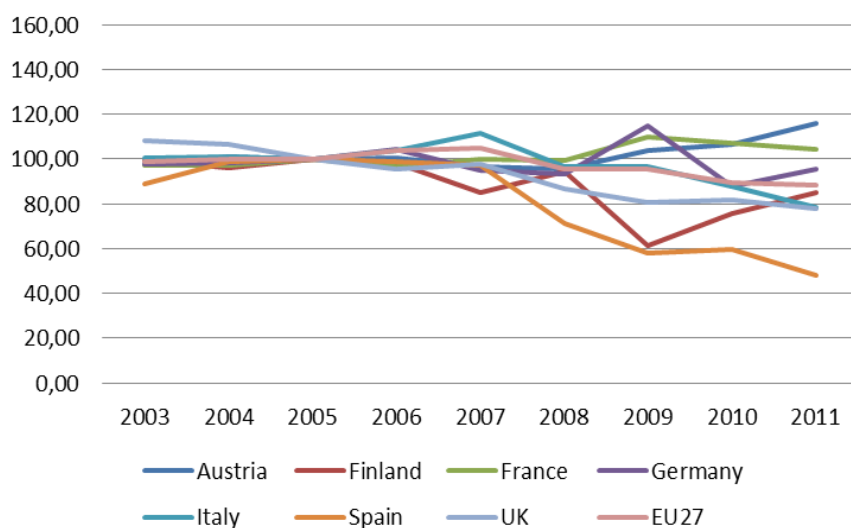
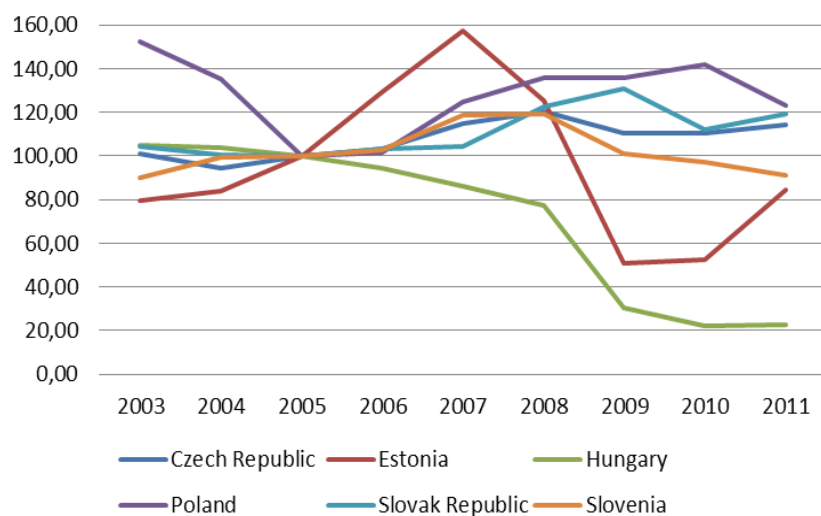


Figure 15: Passenger car registrations, 2005=100%
Source: OECD statistics

A more detailed picture of consumption patterns can be gained by looking at countries individually. The consumption patterns of households of different income levels can be illustrated by the relative importance (weight) of household monetary expenditure attached to different categories of goods and services. The situation after the economic crisis is reflected in the following figure for the case of Hungary.

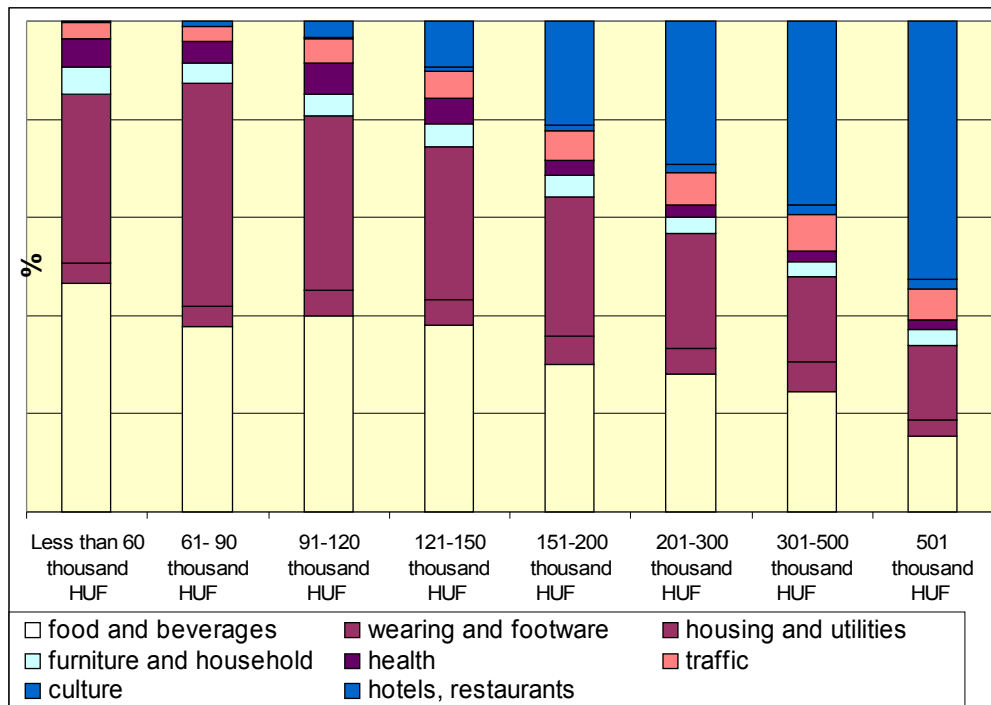


Figure 16: The structure of expenditure in Hungary,
Source: Vetóné Móznér (2012): Measuring the Ecological Footprint of food consumption

While in higher income households the relative weight of food and housing is definitely lower in the expenditure structure, leisure-related spending is proportionately higher. This picture alone would definitely lead to false conclusions about the sustainable feature of consumption in different income categories, so it should be supplemented by an indicator of the environmental impact caused by consumption.

The environmental burden caused by consumption is often measured by the ecological footprint. As seen from the next figure, 40% of the society consume within the ecological boundaries calculated for the country while consumers in higher income deciles are over the per capita bio-capacity level. This result shows that the seemingly favourable consumption structure of higher income families – where service-related elements dominate – are over-compensated by the generally high level of consumption in those households.

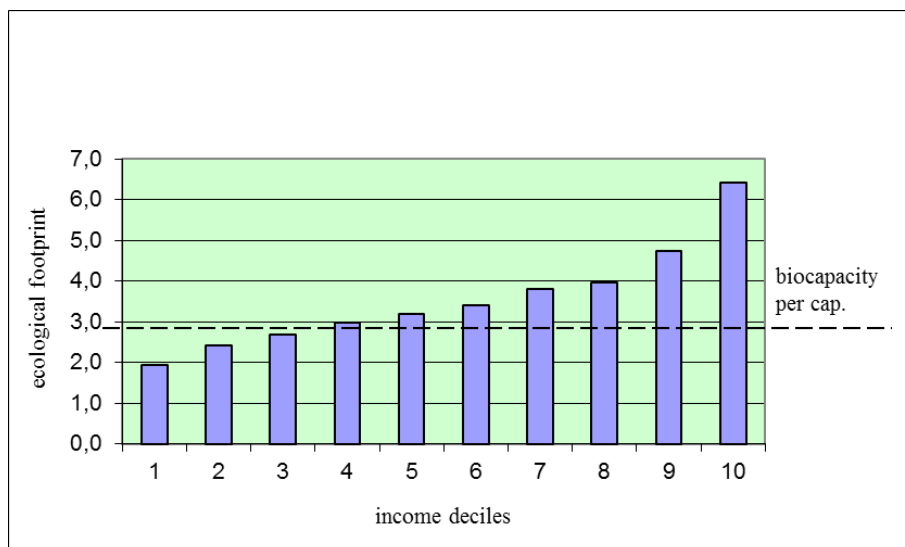


Figure 17: Ecological footprint per capita by income deciles in Hungary
Source: Csutora et al. (2009)

4 Attitudes towards sustainability and sustainable consumption

Globally, a recent study states that consumers became more conscious about sustainability issues worldwide (WBCSD, 2008). Consumer awareness is reflected in both consumption related choices and lifestyle patterns as well as reported future behaviour. However, despite of a significant increase in *reported* behaviour change, the shift towards *real* lifestyle change is much less obvious (see also Partidario et al. 2010 and Young et al. 2009).

On the European level, two Eurobarometer surveys can serve as background for analysing the attitudes of citizens to the environment (European Commission, 2008) and sustainable consumption (European Commission, 2009) in a comparative way. In line with the above quoted global survey (WBCSD, 2008), the awareness of environmental and sustainability issues was found to be generally high. Citizens of new member states appear to be significantly more worried about environmental problems than in 2004.

However, the importance attached to different environmental problems clearly shows that the relevance of directly behaviour-related issues – like consumption habits, impact of current modes of transport and urban problems – is well underestimated among European citizens (European Commission, 2008, p.8). Individual responsibility and role versus the responsibility of the big polluters are perceived quite differently in member states indicating a tendency that the citizens of Western countries consider their individual role in environment protection to a significantly higher extent than their Central and Eastern European counterparts (op.cit., p.17). Regarding actions taken for environmental reasons, country-specific features are much less region-specific than responsibility considerations. Not surprisingly, most popular actions like waste separation as well as reducing energy and water consumption were at the top of the list (op.cit., p.20).

The gap between attitudes and action can be well observed in the reported willingness to buy environmentally friendly products (even if more expensive) as opposed to the actual purchase (75% versus 17%, op.cit., p.27). Another gap in attitudes and behaviour can be noticed in the difference between reported importance of environmental impact in product

purchasing decisions (compared to the importance of the product's brand) and the ranking of environmental impact, quality and price considerations when it comes to purchasing a specific product (European Commission, 2009, p.5).

For Hungary specifically, the contemporary and future attitudes of the Hungarian society towards sustainability and sustainable consumption can also be evaluated based on a representative survey of 1013 respondents, implemented in 2010 (Csutora ed., 2010). The reported present elements of an eco-friendly lifestyle are illustrated in the following figure. There are more popular lifestyle patterns like separating waste, using environmentally friendly modes of transport or reducing energy and water consumption (see European Commission 2008 for comparison), while product-related activities are much less frequent. This means that the awareness of the environmental impacts caused by consumer goods is still low in the Hungarian society. 21,5% of the respondents even did not indicate one single activity.

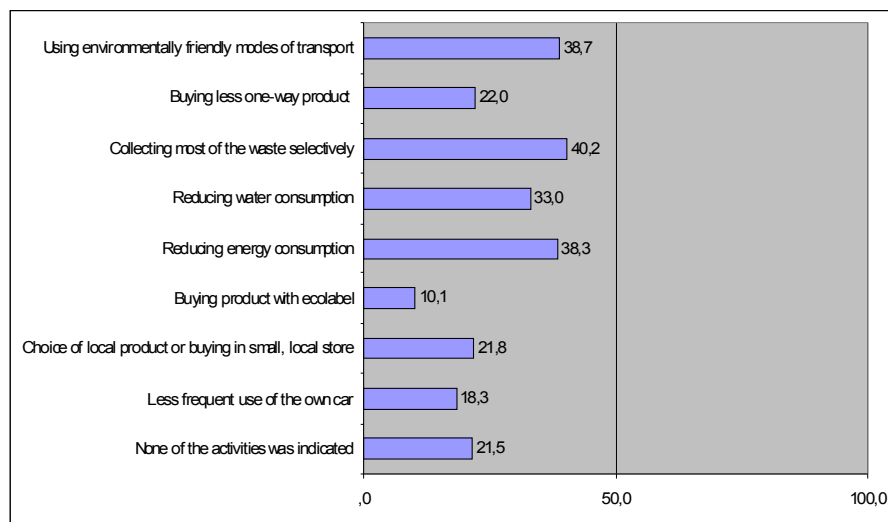


Figure 18: Pro-environmental activities at the time of asking (more answers were possible)
Source: Zsóka 2011, p. 54

Generally low frequencies show that the unutilised potential in changing consumer behaviour and lifestyle of the Hungarian society is quite high. The question is whether society is open for such behavioural change or not. The following two figures indicate future attitudes of the Hungarian adult citizens, regarding sustainable activities. Figure 19 shows a detailed view of the answers, while Figure 20 contains the average values comprehensively.

Obviously, the Hungarian society is not willing to change meat consumption habits at the time, even if this would be a crucial factor in improving our ecological footprint. The same is true for energy use, as the majority of respondents rejected to use solar energy or other renewable resources at home – mainly for financial reasons. On the other hand, domestic or local products become more and more popular as well as buying energy-efficient devices, better insulating walls and changing heating habits.

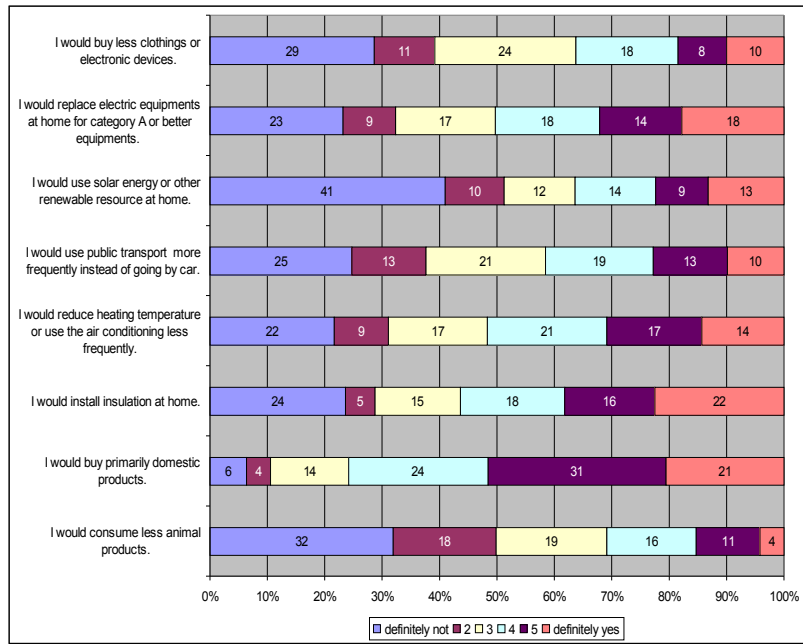


Figure 19: Willingness to act pro-environmentally in the future
Source: Zsóka 2011, p. 56

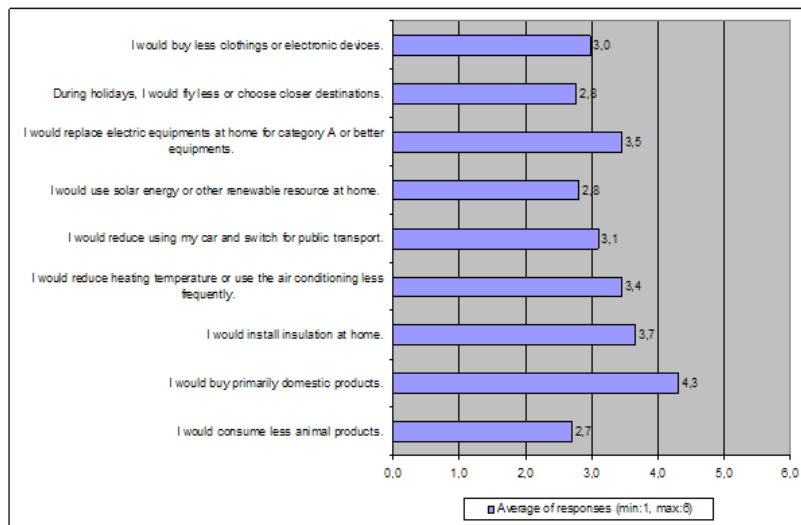


Figure 20: Average values for willingness to act pro-environmentally in the future
Source: Zsóka 2011, p. 57

As a result of the comparison between contemporary and intended future behaviour, the tendency is clear in Hungary: those who are generally more active in sustainable activities are significantly more willing to further change their behaviour towards sustainable lifestyles.

5 Conclusions

We have provided a snapshot of the economic and social trends prevailing in the countries of the Central and Eastern European region, putting a special emphasis on consumption patterns and their potential influence on the realisation of a more sustainable future. We have also attempted to shed some light on how the recent financial and economic crisis influences such a pathway.

Taking into account the short time span since the crisis hit Europe in 2008, it is hard to come to definite conclusions. However, data show that most of the major indicators explored have returned to their pre-crisis levels or are at least approaching these. While the European Union faces serious economic problems at the moment, it is hard to see any major structural changes which could redirect the continent onto a more sustainable path. This may seem contrary to some tendencies identified earlier (e.g. the volume of GHG emissions has been decreasing in some countries for several years now), but consumption patterns did not change significantly over the last two decades and without such a development we cannot expect major positive changes.

CEE countries have tried hard to catch up with their more developed counterparts in Western Europe since around 1990, but most will need another few decades to achieve their ultimate goal. This is shown most unambiguously by looking at the volume and structure of household spending (see e.g. the large variances in health expenditures). When finally implemented, however, such a development path would lead to unsustainable social and economic structures. Meanwhile, some CEE countries are hardly hit by unfavourable social changes shown by the rate of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion as well as the rate of severe material deprivation, causing social tension in the society and a more severe perceived level of the crisis. Those tendencies do not make it easier for the citizens to notice the positive potential in reducing consumption from a sustainability point of view. The “gift impact” of the crisis causing lower consumption levels is considered to be a burden for people, which makes attitude shaping more difficult.

Are countries of the CEE region learning from the mistakes of developed countries? Are they pursuing a different, sustainable pathway? Unfortunately, we could not find any data pointing in this direction and thus we have to assume that if there will be no serious intervention (e.g. by governments, more active civil society or the European Union which itself is looking for new ways of development), CEE countries can only add to the problem and not to its solution. However, there are some weak but promising features in contemporary pro-environmental activities and future attitudes of people as those who show higher environmental awareness in their everyday life at the moment, do not seem to have changed their mind as a result of the crisis, regarding their willingness to follow a more sustainable lifestyle in the future as well (see Hungarian results as example). The less or not at all committed part of the society should definitely be addressed by different consumer policy tools, as in their minds sustainable consumption is not associated with positive attributes.

Acknowledgement

The publication of this research has been supported by the EU funded project: TÁMOP-4.2.1.B-09/1/KMR-2010-0005.

References

- Antuofermo, M., Di Meglio E. (2012): *Population and social conditions*, Eurostat: Statistics in Focus, 9/2012, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-12-009/EN/KS-SF-12-009-EN.PDF
- Csutora M. ed. (2011): Economics of ecological footprint (in Hungarian), summary of studies for the project “Sustainable Consumption, Production and Communication”, supported by the Norwegian Fund, Budapest, ISBN: 978-963-503-466-9
- Csutora M., Móznér Zs., Tabi A. (2009): *Sustainable Consumption: From escape strategies towards real alternatives*, Sustainable Consumption 2009 Conference Proceedings (Eds. Csutora M., Kerekes S., Székely M.), ISBN: 978-963-503-399-7, 63-74
- Ernst, J. (2011): *Consumption Patterns Across European Union*, <http://blog.securities.com/2011/11/consumption-patterns-across-european-union/>
- European Commission (2008): *Attitudes of European citizens towards the environment, Report*, Special Eurobarometer, ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_295_en.pdf
- European Commission (2009): *Europeans’ attitudes towards the issue of sustainable consumption and production, Analytical Report*, Flash Eurobarometer, ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_256_en.pdf
- Eurostat (2011): *HICP – Household Consumption Patterns* (2008), http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/HICP_-_Household_consumption_patterns
- Eurostat (2012): *Sustainable Development Indicators, Theme 2: Sustainable Consumption and Production* <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/sdi/indicators/theme2>
- OECD (2008): *Growing Unequal? Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries*, http://www.oecd.org/document/53/0,3746,en_2649_33933_41460917_1_1_1_1,00.html
- OECD (2011): *Divided We Stand – Why Inequality Keeps Rising*, OECD Publishing, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264119536-en>
- OECD (2012): *OECD Factbook 2011-2012: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics*, http://www.oecd.org/site/0,3407,en_21571361_34374092_1_1_1_1,00.html
- OECD (2011): *OECD Economic Outlook, Volume 2011 Issue 2 - No. 90*, http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3746,en_2649_37443_20347538_1_1_1_37443,00.html
- Partidario M. R., Vicente G., Belchior C. (2010): *Can New Perspectives on Sustainability Drive Lifestyles?* Sustainability, 2, 2849-2872; doi:10.3390/su2092849
- Vetőné Móznér Zs., Csutora M. (2012): *Designing lifestyle-specific food policies based on nutritional requirements and ecological footprints*. Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy- Special Issue: Sustainable Food Consumption: Current Trends, Policy Approaches and Future Scenarios. Under review, forthcoming in 2012 Dec
- WBCSD (2008): *Sustainable Consumption Facts and Trends: From a Business Perspective*. The Business Role, Focus Area, Washington, DC, USA, <http://www.wbcd.org/pages/edocument/>
- Young, W.; Hwang, K.; McDonald, S.; Oates, C. (2009): *Sustainable consumption: Green consumer behaviour when purchasing products*, Sustainable Development, 18, 20–31
- Zsóka Á. (2011): *Environmental awareness now and willingness to act pro-environmentally in the future*, in: Csutora M. ed. (2011): Economics of ecological footprint (in Hungarian), summary of studies for the project “Sustainable Consumption, Production and Communication”, supported by the Norwegian Fund, Budapest, ISBN: 978-963-503-466-9, 54-74

