

EU consumers 'export' environment damage to Eastern neighbors

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European Union (EU) consumers are "exporting" negative environmental impacts to their Eastern European neighbors, while keeping the bulk of economic benefits linked to consuming goods and

services, a new study reveals.

Although the environmental impacts of EU consumption are felt around the world, countries in Eastern Europe have experienced the highest environmental pressures and impacts associated with EU citizens' consumption.

Large shares of 10 major environmental pressures and impacts are "outsourced" to countries and regions outside the EU while more than 85% of the [economic benefits](#) remain within member countries—albeit with uneven distribution of costs and benefits within the EU.

Publishing their findings today in *Nature Sustainability*, an international group of researchers studied the environmental indicators between 1995 and 2019.

These indicators included greenhouse gas emissions, material consumption, land use, consumption of surface and [ground water](#), particulate matter formation, photochemical oxidation and biodiversity loss due to land coverage, as well as freshwater, marine and terrestrial ecotoxicity.

Researchers found that seven analyzed pressures and impacts—ecotoxicity indicators, [greenhouse gas emissions](#), particulate matter formation, photochemical oxidation and material consumption—increased notably outside the EU, while decreasing within the bloc.

Researchers at the Universities of Birmingham (U.K.), Groningen (NL) and Maryland (U.S.), as well as Chinese Academy of Sciences, also analyzed value added by consumption of goods and services within the current 27 EU member countries to economies between 1995 and 2019..

Corresponding author Yuli Shan, associate professor in sustainable transitions at the University of Birmingham, commented, "For the sake of our planet, environmental pressures and impacts from EU consumption need to decrease substantially—reducing the export of environmental damage beyond the borders of the wealthy EU states to poorer regions.

"The benefits of EU consumption are greater for most [member countries](#) than those outside the Union, whilst inducing higher environmental pressures and impacts for the EU's eastern neighbors such as Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Ukraine and Moldova."

Eastern Europe consistently ranked as the region receiving the lowest share of economic value added compared to environmental pressures and impacts associated with EU consumption.

Pressures and impacts induced by EU consumption dropped in most of its member states—for the Netherlands and Sweden, indicators in all ten categories dropped from 1995 to 2019. Austria, Czechia, Italy, Poland, Romania and Slovenia all saw decreases in nine of ten analyzed environmental pressures and impacts.

In contrast, all analyzed impacts and pressures associated with EU consumption increased in Brazil, China, India, Japan, as well as in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

First author Benedikt Bruckner, from the University of Groningen, commented, "As many super-affluent consumers contributing disproportionately to global environmental damage and resource use live in the EU, we must focus mitigation efforts on overconsumption."

The other corresponding author Klaus Hubacek, professor at the University of Groningen, said, "We can reduce environmental pressures

and impacts associated with EU over-[consumption](#) in a number of ways, including changing how people travel or their dietary choices, and creating new EU trade policies that lower environmental pressures and impacts associated with goods and services."

More information: Yuli Shan, Ecologically unequal exchanges driven by EU consumption, *Nature Sustainability* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41893-022-01055-8](#).
www.nature.com/articles/s41893-022-01055-8

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