

THE EUROPEAN ECOLABEL – ADVANTAGES AND PERSPECTIVES FOR DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The ecological label has been implemented by the European Commission in 1992 in order to encourage the market of products and services with low negative impact on the environment. This paper presents the concept of European ecolabelling, the main types of ecolabels and the process of request and achievement of the European ecological label. In Romania, the European ecolabel helps companies consolidate their positions before customers, in accordance with the commitment for consumers and environment protection and sustainability.*

Key words: *European ecolabel, environmental protection, types of ecolabels, impact on environment, company image.*

1. Introduction

Ecolabels may be linked with various environment attributes, which may include health issues, impact on the atmosphere or different types of impact on the environment and industry issues. The labels allow consumers to comparatively analyze the products and services in order to choose the ones they prefer.

The Romanian law defines the ecolabel as "a graphic symbol or short textual product description applied on products or which is to be found in a brochure or other informative document which accompanies the product and which provides information on maximum three types of impact on the environment generated by the product or service in cause". (Government Resolution no. 189/2002).

Representing the result of a long expertise, the ecolabelling linked with the inspection and certification procedures

leads to an increase of requests for recyclable and sustainable products.

The ecological label or the "ecolabel certificate" became a symbol of environmentally friendly products and services.

The ecological label has been implemented by the European Commission in 1992 in order to encourage the green products market and it represents a unique scheme of certification that helps consumers distinguish the "eco", environmentally friendly products/services.

The number of ecolabeled products and services (with the European ecolabel) has significantly increased. In 2011, more than 1,300 licences were awarded. Today more than 17,000 products and services have EU Ecolabel (fig 1). A licence gives a company the right to use the EU Ecolabel logo for a specific product group [2].

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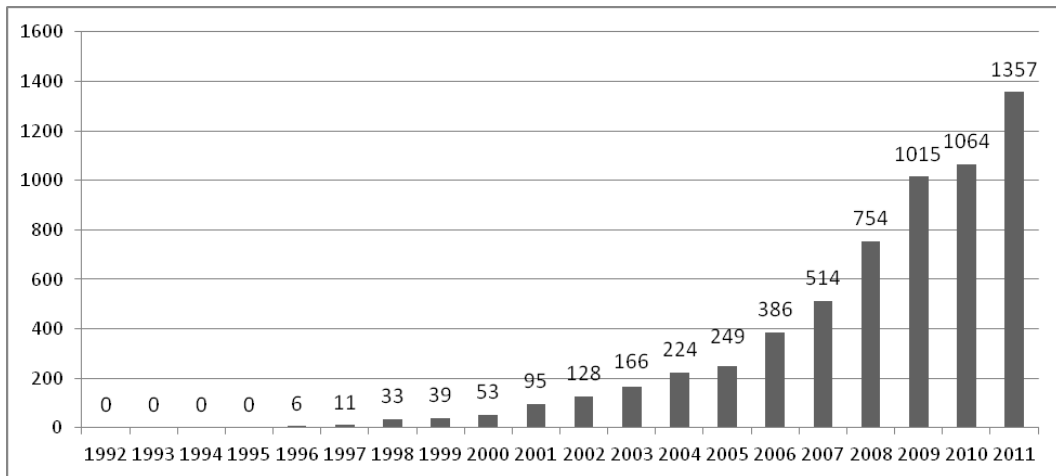


Fig. 1. Total number of licenses issued from 1992 to 2011

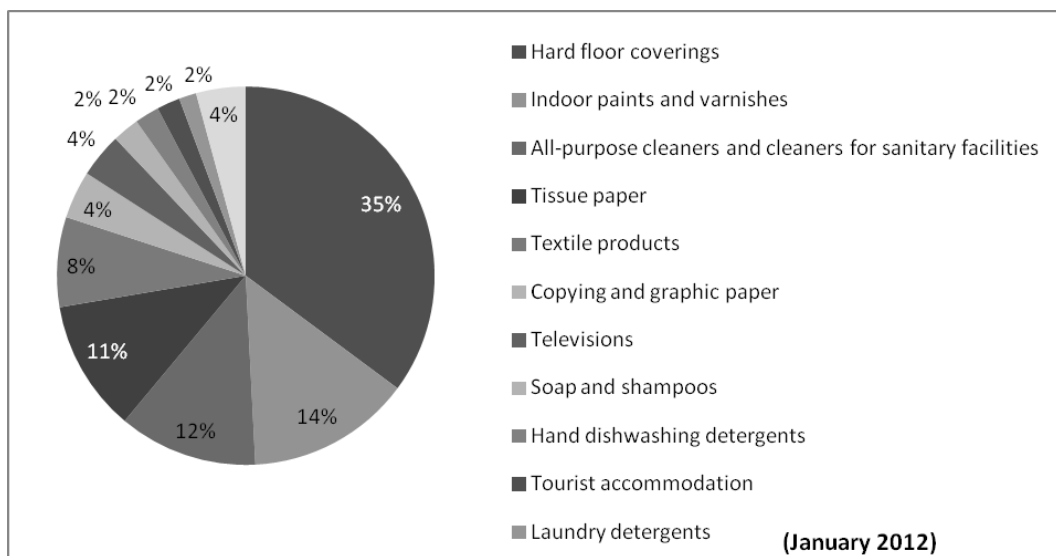


Fig. 2. Number of EU Ecolabelled Products per Product Group Category

The EU Ecolabel currently covers a huge range of products and services, all non-food and non-medical. Tissue paper and all-purpose cleaners each equate to around 10% of EU Ecolabel products, while indoor paints and varnishes make up nearly 14%. The largest product group is hard floor coverings, which total more than

33% of EU Ecolabel products [2].

The EU Ecolabel has been established to the largest number of products in Italy, France and the UK. Italy has issued more than 50% of the total number of Ecolabel awards, while France and UK total 22% and 9% respectively. These are followed by the Netherlands and Spain [2].

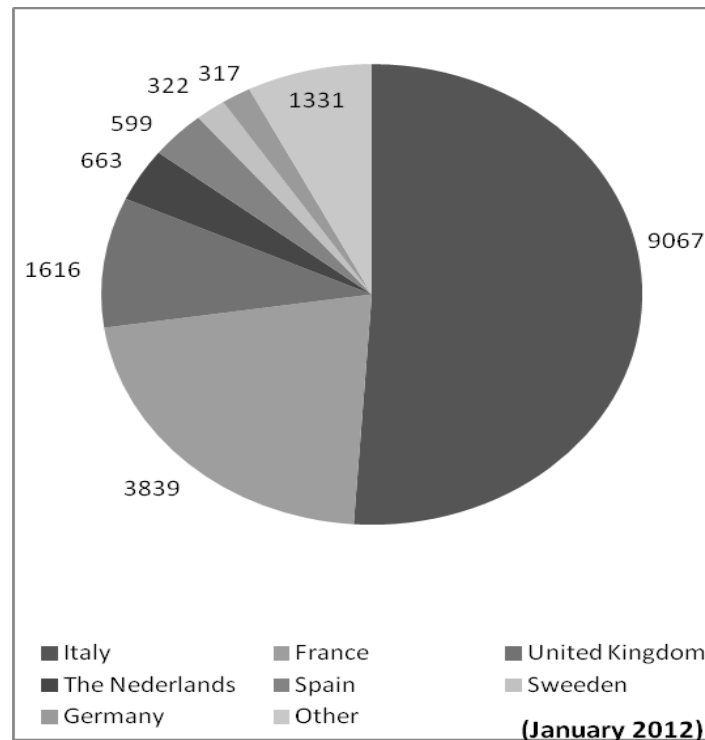


Fig. 3. Number of EU Ecolabel products issued per country

2. Types of ecolabels

Among the types of ecolabels there are ecolabels sponsored by the Government and those launched exclusively following the private entrepreneurs' initiative. So far, around 28 countries have initiated national programmes of ecolabelling, most of them being the result of voluntary actions.

The voluntary ecolabelling, which does not involve the Government, consists of two subcategories: one in which the criteria are imposed by a third party and one which is based on the producers' own statements.

The ecolabels may refer to different types of products (this being applicable for most of the ecolabelling schemes), to services or products.

The European ecolabel relates to 24 product groups (e.g.: cleaners, paper-based products, home and garden products, consumer electronics and domestic

appliances, footwear, textiles, services, heat pumps, lubricants).

Within the service category fall the tourism accommodation and camping services.

Revision of some ecolabelling criteria for certain products/services is currently pending, and the European ecolabel is not granted for food, beverages and medical products.

An essential condition for the accomplishment of the commitments assumed by our country in the environmental field is represented by the creation of a new type of economic growth – an innovative, regenerative and protective growth both for the environment and individuals, accompanied by the development of commercial exchange, economic cooperation and use of clean technologies.

The total estimated costs for the implementation of the community acquis

by the end of 2018 (the last year offered as a transition period for the implementation of all provisions of the community acquis on environment) represent around 29.3 billion Euros. One of the most important challenges in the field of environmental protection will be the provision of the financing resources necessary for covering such costs, and also making environmental friendly investments. At the same time, the public awareness campaigns will be continued and intensified, accompanied by pragmatic actions aimed to contribute to the understanding of each person's role and responsibilities, in order to achieve an effective participation in the process of ensuring environmental protection in Romania. [5]

3. The European and national legislation concerning the ecolabelling process

As of January 1st, 2007, when Romania became a Member State of the European Union, the ecolabelling process has taken place according to the provisions of the Regulation of the European Parliament and Council no. 66/2010/EC regarding the EU ecolabel.

The Regulation of the European Parliament and Council no. 66/2010/EC is directly applicable in all Member States, including Romania.

The Regulation of the European Parliament and Council no. 66/2010/EC includes decisions for each group of products/services. Those decisions define the criteria of the European ecolabelling process for each group of product and they are directly applicable in all Member States, including Romania [3].

At a national level, there were elaborated: measures for ensuring the national implementation of the (EC) Regulation no. 66/2010 of the European Parliament and Council related to the EU ecolabel (Government Resolution no. 661/2011) and measures regarding the

approval of the nominal component of the EU Ecolabelling Commission.[5]

4. The European ecolabel request

The European ecolabel is granted by the Ministry of Environment. The National Commission for awarding the ecolabel is a consultative body with a role in evaluating the file.

The European ecolabel covers a wide range of products, contributing to the customers' choice through the symbol applied on them.

The economic agents – producers, importers, service providers or traders – that are interested in obtaining the European ecolabel submit their requests to the Ministry of the Environment. They must submit a file proving that the product complies with the ecological standards settled by the European Commission. The testing and inspection procedures, as part of the process of product performance evaluation, are achieved by specialized accredited institutes. The tests may be performed also in other foreign institutes with accredited laboratories.

The Ministry of the Environment receives the requests and if the ecological and performance-related criteria are met, it informs the European Commission upon its decision of awarding the European ecolabel. The Commission publishes this decision on the European ecolabel website. The National Commission for awarding the ecolabel proposes the related changes concerning the information to be included for obtaining the ecolabel. After granting the right to use the European ecolabel, the competent authority concludes an agreement with the economic operator according the Government Resolution no. 236/2007, throughout which the conditions of use are settled. The competent authority must be informed in case of product features change, even though this does not affect the compliance with the criteria

based on which the ecolabel was granted. If such changes affect the compliance with the criteria based on which the ecolabel was granted, a new ecolabel award request is necessary. In order to warrant the duration of product compliance with the European ecolabel standards, the competent authority – the Ministry of the Environment, including its qualified representatives – is entitled to perform periodic field inspections. Thus, the beneficiary is checked to determine whether it observes the criteria related to the product category and the conditions of use, and also the provisions of the entered agreement. The ecological criteria revision for each product is performed at a period between 3 and 5 years. The ecolabel is granted only for a certain period of time equivalent to the criteria validity, its request being subsequently renewed [6].

Five Romanian economic operators have succeeded so far in obtaining the ecolabel licence. In Romania, there is only a single type of label, namely the one with the European Union logo inscription. So far, the companies that have obtained the ecolabel are Maguay for notebooks, Duraziv SRL for indoor varnishes and “Argeşana” Piteşti for textiles. The Saturn and Crowne Plaza Hotels are also ecolabeled for tourism accommodation services [4].

5. The European ecolabel in tourism

The ecolabelling criteria applicable for the tourism accommodation services aim to reduce the energy and water consumption, to reduce the amount of waste, to facilitate the use of renewable resources and of more environmental friendly substances, but also to promote the communication and education in the field of environmental protection.

An important advantage brought by the ecolabel to tourism operators is the decrease in costs. Practically, in order to

obtain the ecolabel, the operator must adopt measures that implicitly reduce costs. Romania is the only country in Europe that has tripled, over the last year, the number of operators registered in the ecological agriculture. However, the ecological tourism is a field almost unknown to the tourism agencies in Romania. According to a study carried out by the Association of Ecotourism (AER), there are 12 boarding houses certified in this respect, and 17 boarding houses bearing the “Eco-Romania” label, the certification process for other 9 being currently pending. Another ecolabelling system in Romania is “Eco Ghinda” (eco-acorn), implemented by the Green tourism Association.

Similarly to the AER certification, this is complementary to the current classification system, with stars or daisies, and provides up to five acorns to those tourist units which comply with the criteria settled by the ecolabelling system for the services provided to the customers [1].

The Saturn Hotel is the first accommodation unit ecologically certified in Romania. This is a five star unit with lightening and water supply systems registering minimum levels of consumption. The hotel’s maintenance services are carried out with ecological cleaning products, the pools are fitted with special filters, and the waste is selectively collected.

6. The advantages of the ecolabelling process

The European ecolabelling must provide consumers with trustful information related to the environmental impact of products/services during their entire lifecycle (production, package, distribution, use, disposal), warranting their quality.

The consumers must be informed about the importance of the ecologic criterion

which they should take into consideration when buying products or using services.

The ecolabelling process contributes to the effective use of resources and to a high level of environmental protection. The ecolabelling scheme is part of a European strategy that promotes sustainable production and consumption. This type of approach promotes the design, trade and use of products/services with a low environmental impact during their lifecycle.

The ecolabelling process has a selective character, it certifies the quality of using a product/service and its ecological feature, it warrants a selectivity of products/services through the exigency level of the criteria which its award is based on, it is granted for a certain period of time equivalent to the validity of the criteria (3-5 years), its request being subsequently renewed, and it has a voluntary character [5].

The ecolabel award presents numerous advantages for economic agents. The ecocertified products and services benefit from a high level of trust from customers.

If the company's aim is to increase the customers' loyalty and trust in the products and services provided on the market, the European ecolabel represents a real support. This is the best way to answer the consumers' questions, providing them with much more complete information about the

products and services offered, based on a scientific foundation.

The European ecolabel helps companies consolidate their positions as regards customers, with respect to the commitment for consumers and environment protection. The ecolabel represents an indicator of quality for products and services able to improve the company's brand image.

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