

FORSCEE - The future of a forest-based bioeconomy in Central-Eastern and South-Eastern Europe

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FORSCEE strives to activate the potential of the Central-Eastern and South-Eastern European region to develop towards a forest-based bioeconomy. There is a central notion that this region is lagging behind in the development of bioeconomy strategies, and there is still a deficit in the connectivity of the research community. FORSCEE wants to overcome both aspects: stipulate a high-level policy support activity for forest-based bioeconomy, and engaging the research network in the region to work in a proven EFI context. The goals of the project are to (i) initiate a discourse on a forest-based bioeconomy in the CEE and SEE regions, (ii) to connect science and policy in a tailor-made form for the region, (iii) to mobilise the EFI network to provide sound policy support for bioeconomy development in the region, (iv) to encourage exchange on experiences and obstacles for further pursuing bioeconomy strategies from science to policy.

Bioeconomy in Eastern- and South Eastern Europe:

Bioeconomy has been one of the lead principles in Europe in the past decade. The idea is to move from a fossil-based economy to a sustainable economy based on renewable resources. While this was taken up explicitly e.g. by the EU Bioeconomy Strategy in 2013, we experience a European Bioeconomy of different emphases and different paces.

First, there are inherently different conceptions on what bioeconomy is. There is a bandwidth from 'bio-technology', i.e. technological approaches on how to use natural resources in different sectors, to 'bio-resources', i.e. how to better process and handle raw materials, to 'bio-ecology' relating to ecological processes and ecosystem services (Pülzl et al., 2017). The forest-based sector perceives itself as a major player in the bioeconomy, and *de facto* connoted to bio-resources and bio-ecology approaches that should retain equal importance as compared to the initially predominant technological approaches. In the meantime, the concept of a circular bioeconomy gained increasing attention and also appeal for the forest-based sector as a means to foster sustainability and material efficiency of forest resource use (Hetemäki et al., 2017).

Second, there is a difference of pace how the bioeconomy concept has been taken up in implementation. We see vivid take-up in Northern Europe with strongly recognized (forest) bioeconomy strategies that are particularly addressing the forest-based industries, we see bioeconomy strategies for Southern-Europe that stronger pick up the need for forest ecosystem services and maintenance of forests under increasing pressure, and a diversity of strategies in Central Europe that reflect the heterogeneity of forest ownership and industries.

Evidently, countries in Eastern and South-Eastern European countries are mostly still in the process, if ever, to get their grips on how to interpret the concept of a bioeconomy for their countries and regions.

FORSCEE prepared a report to scrutinize some of the ingredients that are necessary for the development of forest bioeconomies and bioeconomy strategies in this region. The project conducts a screening of the status quo in forest resources and the forest-based sector, as well as the assets and obstacles for a viable forest bioeconomy for selected countries.

This exercise is not meant to be comprehensive, but to provide solid input to ongoing developments. There are lot of initiatives and projects materializing, many of them at a very initial phase, such as e.g. the [BIOEAST](#) initiative.

On the other hand, the new European Green Deal of the European Commission launched in December 2019 might be something of a game changer since bioeconomy is not very prominently placed in the strategic direction of the EU. It will be important to see how the leading concepts of climate change mitigation and biodiversity protection might complement with resource demands of a bioeconomy. This will most likely require a re-shaping of the bioeconomy, and a strong focus on circular, resource-efficient approaches.

Finally, in time of the Covid crisis, many paradigms might falter or shift in prevalence. It might be a fallback in terms that investments in a bioeconomy are stalled, but also an opportunity for shifting into a new era all at once.

Report can be requested from Bernhard Wolfslehner.