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ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE ERA OF CLIMATE TRANSITION

ABSTRACT

The subject of this study is the relationship between environmental protection and the principle of human dignity in the context of the contemporary climate policy of the European Union. The aim of the article is to assess whether the mechanisms of climate transition remain consistent with the principle of the protection of human dignity and social justice. The research hypothesis assumes that climate protection cannot constitute an autonomous objective but should serve to ensure dignified living conditions for present and future generations. The study employs the dogmatic-legal method, institutional analysis, and elements of axiological and comparative analysis. The findings lead to the conclusion that the future of European climate policy should be based on the Human-Centric Climate Policy model, combining environmental protection with the protection of human dignity and social security.

KEYWORDS: *human dignity, environmental justice, climate policy, climate change, human rights, anthropocentrism, European Green Deal*

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary policy of the European Union, as well as the activities of many international organisations, focuses on creating normative systems for environmental protection that often appear to operate independently of the direct existence of the human person. These strategies, exemplified by ambitious carbon dioxide emission reduction programmes aimed at curbing global warming, are in their essence desirable and indeed existentially necessary. Their fundamental weakness, however, lies in the fact that they are often developed without sufficiently broad public consultations, without due consideration of the differing levels of prosperity among the Member States, and without adequate regard for the economic and social consequences of the reforms being implemented.

These measures are often undertaken by the European Union in relative isolation from global economic and political trends. Europe is no longer the sole technological, economic, and decision-making centre of the contemporary world. Even assuming the most optimistic scenario, namely that the European Union succeeds in completely eliminating CO₂ emissions in the coming decades, the problem will remain unresolved on a global scale.

CO₂ emissions will continue to be generated by countries outside the European Union, including the world's largest economies, such as China, the United States, and India. Under such a scenario, the unilateral and far-reaching costs of the transition may not only fail to produce the intended climate outcomes but may also hinder technological and economic development, while contributing to a decline in the standard of living and the level of health protection enjoyed by EU citizens^[1].

In this context, the present study examines the concept of environmental justice, analysing how the disproportionate effects of climate change lead to social exclusion and undermine the fundamental security of both individuals and entire social groups^[2].

Adopting an anthropocentric perspective, this article advances the hypothesis that environmental protection must remain inseparably linked to the protection of the ontological status of the human person. The central postulate is that climate policy should not exacerbate existing social inequalities but should instead pursue the paradigm of protecting human dignity as the foundation of all remedial measures^[3].

2. THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF THE HUMAN PERSON AS THE FOUNDATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Human dignity constitutes an inherent, inalienable, and universal value, and its protection is the foundation of contemporary human rights systems and the democratic rule of law. Consequently, all actions undertaken by public authorities or social organisations must be grounded in this dignity. Human dignity thus becomes the standard by which such actions are assessed. When referring to human dignity, it should be noted that it concerns not only those living today but also future generations.

In the context of this ontological dignity of the human person, the natural environment is of fundamental importance, as human beings cannot exist without it. For this reason, beginning in the 1980s, first the United Nations and subsequently the European Economic Community undertook efforts to

develop an environmental protection policy for the sake of the human person^[4]. Environmental degradation has a direct impact on the fulfilment of fundamental human needs, such as health, security, housing, and access to food and water. Consequently, environmental protection does not constitute an autonomous objective but should be regarded as an instrument serving the protection of the human person and human dignity.

The natural environment therefore constitutes a fundamental condition for human existence, as the possibility of satisfying the most basic human needs, such as access to water, food, clean air, and a safe place to live, depends on its quality. Despite technological progress and civilisational development, the human person remains an integral part of the ecosystem and is entirely dependent on the stability of natural processes. For this reason, for several decades the United Nations and the European Union have promoted a sustainable policy of economic and technological development that makes it possible to reconcile the pace of development with the well-being of the human person^[5].

Environmental degradation leads not only to health and economic threats but also to violations of fundamental human rights, including the right to life, health, and dignified living conditions. In this sense, environmental protection cannot be perceived solely as a technical or economic issue but as an obligation arising from the need to protect human dignity itself. The natural environment thus serves as a common good, the preservation of which is a prerequisite for the existence of both present and future generations. Contemporary public policies should be based on the assumption that care for nature is at the same time care for the human person and for the sustainability of the social order^[6].

The disruption of ecological balance is increasingly regarded as one of the most serious threats to human rights in the twenty-first century. This phenomenon results not only from climate change, ecosystem degradation, air pollution, and the depletion of natural resources, but also from pursuing environmental protection policies in isolation from the real needs of the human person and the protection of human dignity. An excessively radical or exclusively technocratic approach to environmental issues may lead to restrictions on social and economic rights, the deepening of social inequalities, and the marginalisation of groups particularly vulnerable to the effects of the climate transition. Consequently, environmental protection cannot

be separated from the anthropological and axiological foundations of law, the pivotal point of which remains the human person as the holder of rights and freedoms^[7].

Contemporary legal scholarship therefore emphasises that environmental protection policy should not constitute an end in itself, pursued independently of the well-being of the human person, but must be an integral element of the protection of human dignity and of ensuring the effective protection of fundamental rights. From this perspective, ecological balance becomes not only a natural category but also a constitutional and civilisational one, determining the sustainability of the democratic rule of law and the existential security of present and future generations^[8].

The above discussion demonstrates that, both in practice and in theory, there are currently two distinct approaches to environmental protection policy, namely the anthropocentric and the biocentric approach. The anthropocentric approach assumes that the human person remains the central subject of law and the primary point of reference for public policies, including environmental protection policy. From this perspective, the protection of nature is not an autonomous objective but serves to safeguard the conditions necessary for human life, health, and development. This concept is rooted both in the tradition of natural law and in contemporary constitutionalism, in which the dignity of the human person constitutes the highest value of the legal system^[9]. In contrast, the biocentric approach attributes intrinsic value to all forms of life and advocates abandoning the privileged position of the human person in relation to nature. Although biocentrism has played a significant role in the development of contemporary environmental awareness, its more radical forms may lead to the relativisation of human rights and the weakening of the axiological foundations of the democratic rule of law^[10].

Departing from the anthropocentric foundation of environmental protection policy may lead to a situation in which the interests of the environment are placed in opposition to the fundamental social, economic, and, above all, developmental needs of the human person. Contemporary legal scholarship therefore increasingly points to the need for so-called *moderate anthropocentrism*, which recognises the necessity of protecting nature while at the same time preserving the primacy of human dignity as the highest value of the legal order^[11].

3. A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION'S CLIMATE TRANSITION MECHANISMS

The climate transition pursued by the European Union constitutes one of the most ambitious regulatory projects in the contemporary world; however, its effectiveness and social legitimacy are becoming increasingly controversial. A critical analysis of the European Union's climate protection mechanisms therefore requires consideration of both their environmental objectives and their economic, social, and political consequences for the Member States and their citizens^[12].

3.1. THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL AND THE ECONOMIC REALITIES OF STATES WITH DIFFERENT LEVELS OF PROSPERITY

The European Green Deal constitutes one of the most ambitious economic transformation projects in the contemporary history of the European Union. Its primary objective is to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 through a profound transformation of the energy, industrial, transport, and agricultural sectors. The problem, however, arises in the context of Member States with differing levels of economic development and different energy structures. Central and Eastern European countries, whose economies continue to rely to a significant extent on fossil fuels, bear relatively higher transition costs than the countries of Western Europe, which possess more advanced energy infrastructure^[13]. As noted by the European Court of Auditors, the transition to climate neutrality carries the risk of widening economic disparities among the Member States unless appropriate compensatory mechanisms are implemented. This means that the absence of adequate solidarity mechanisms may lead to growing economic inequalities within the European Union^[14].

Contemporary legal scholarship also emphasises that the climate transition cannot be pursued in isolation from the issues of energy security, labour market stability, and the standard of living of citizens. An excessively rapid departure from traditional energy sources may lead to rising energy prices, reduced competitiveness of European industry, and social tensions. This became particularly evident during the energy crisis following 2022, when

many Member States, including Germany, were compelled to temporarily return to conventional energy sources^[15]. Consequently, it is increasingly argued that the European Green Deal should be implemented in accordance with the principle of a just transition, considering the actual economic capacities of individual states and societies^[16].

3.2. THE PROBLEM OF THE LACK OF BROAD PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS (THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT IN ENVIRONMENTAL RULE-MAKING)

One of the most frequently raised criticisms of the European Union's contemporary climate policy is the existence of the so-called democratic deficit in the process of developing environmental legislation. Although the objectives of the climate transition are formulated at the level of the EU institutions as a response to global environmental threats, the legislative process is often perceived as overly technocratic and insufficiently subject to public consultation. Particularly controversial are the regulations concerning the energy, agricultural, and transport sectors, which directly affect the economic situation of citizens and businesses^[17].

This problem became particularly evident during public protests against certain regulations of the European Green Deal, especially in the agricultural and transport sectors, particularly in France, Germany, Belgium, and Poland^[18]. Critics argue that climate policy cannot be imposed solely from the top down without taking into account local economic conditions and the social costs of the transition. Consequently, there is an increasing emphasis on the need for broader use of participatory democracy mechanisms, public consultations, and civic dialogue in the process of developing environmental legislation. Indeed, for environmental protection to be effective and sustainable, it requires not only expert legitimacy but also social legitimacy^[19].

3.3. ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE EU'S LOCAL MEASURES IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL EMISSIONS (CARBON LEAKAGE)

One of the most serious challenges facing contemporary climate policy remains the limited effectiveness of regional emission reduction measures in addressing the global nature of greenhouse gas emissions. As already noted in the introduction, the European Union is currently responsible for a relatively small share of global CO₂ emissions. Owing to rising production costs, there is a genuine risk of so-called *carbon leakage*, consisting in the relocation of industrial production to countries with less stringent environmental regulations, particularly in Asia and Africa^[20].

In response to this problem, the European Union is developing mechanisms such as CBAM (Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism), intended to counter unfair competition and reduce the phenomenon of relocating production outside the European Union. However, these instruments give rise to numerous economic and geopolitical controversies, particularly in relations with developing countries^[21]. Critics argue that unilateral climate measures weaken the competitiveness of European industry without achieving any genuine effect in terms of global emission reductions. Higher energy prices in Europe compared with those in the United States and China may lead to the deindustrialisation of Europe^[22].

Consequently, it is increasingly emphasised that an effective climate policy requires not only regional regulations but, above all, broad international cooperation between the European Union and its Member States, other international organisations, and the countries with the largest share of CO₂ emissions. From this perspective, it is important to pursue a more balanced distribution of the costs of the climate transition between wealthier and less affluent countries, including within the European Union.

4. POSTULATES TOWARDS A "HUMAN-CENTRIC CLIMATE POLICY"

Contemporary climate policy increasingly requires a shift away from an exclusively technocratic model of environmental transition governance towards a human-centred approach (human-centric climate policy). Although climate protection remains one of the greatest civilisational challenges of the twenty-first century, it must not lead to the marginalisation of social needs, the deepening of economic inequalities, or the weakening of citizens' social security. Consequently, climate policy should take into account not only emission reduction objectives but also the protection of human dignity, social justice, and the actual adaptive capacities of individual states and societies^[23].

It is also increasingly emphasised that the effectiveness of the climate transition depends on the level of public acceptance of the proposed changes. Climate mechanisms lacking appropriate safeguard instruments and democratic participation may lead to social conflicts, declining trust in public institutions, and growing anti-integration sentiments. Therefore, contemporary legal scholarship points to the need to develop a model of transition based on social solidarity, civic dialogue, and the gradual adaptation of the economy to the requirements of climate neutrality^[24].

An important contribution to the development of the concept of environmental protection based on human dignity is also made by the social teaching of the Catholic Church. Beginning with the pontificate of John Paul II, it has been emphasised that the ecological crisis is not merely technical or economic in nature but is, above all, a moral and anthropological crisis. In the 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, paragraph 37, John Paul II stated that *man, who is more concerned with having and enjoying than with being and growing*, disrupts the harmony of nature, that is, the environment essential to his life. This concept was subsequently developed by Benedict XVI in the 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, paragraph 48, where environmental protection was linked to intergenerational responsibility and integral human development. Of particular importance to the contemporary climate debate is also Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'*, paragraph 43, which emphasises the need for *integral ecology*, combining concern for the natural environment

with the protection of human dignity, social justice, and responsibility for the common good. This teaching is consistent with the model of moderate anthropocentrism, according to which nature requires protection precisely because it constitutes a condition for the dignified life of the human person and future generations.

4.1. THE NEED TO INCORPORATE PROTECTIVE (SAFEGUARD) MECHANISMS INTO EVERY CLIMATE INITIATIVE

The climate transition involves significant social and economic costs, which affect low-income groups and regions dependent on high-emission industries to the greatest extent. The introduction of new environmental regulations, rising energy prices, and restrictions affecting traditional sectors of the economy may lead to a deterioration in the living conditions of part of society. Consequently, the European Union and its Member States, including Poland, are increasingly introducing safeguard mechanisms, such as compensation schemes or financial subsidies for replacing heating systems with environmentally friendly alternatives, as well as other forms of support for households. Equally important are programmes for vocational retraining and for transforming the coal and steel industries into less emission-intensive sectors in former industrial regions, such as Silesia in Poland^[25].

The absence of appropriate safeguard instruments may undermine the social legitimacy of climate policy and lead to growing social tensions. A good example was the public protests against rising fuel and energy prices in many European countries, which demonstrated that the climate transition cannot take place at the expense of the social security of citizens.

4.2. STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

Effective climate policy requires the active involvement of local governments and local communities, which are best acquainted with the specific regional environmental and social challenges. The centralisation of decision-making

at the level of the European Union or national institutions may result in local economic, cultural, and infrastructural conditions being overlooked. Therefore, contemporary legal scholarship increasingly points to the need to develop a model of multi-level climate governance^[26].

The involvement of local communities in the decision-making process also increases public acceptance of climate measures and strengthens the democratic legitimacy of the ecological transition. Public consultations, participatory budgeting, and local adaptation strategies are of particular importance. Environmental protection becomes more effective when citizens perceive it as a common good and actively participate in its implementation, rather than viewing it merely as the result of top-down administrative decisions^[27].

4.3. ALIGNING THE PACE OF THE TRANSITION WITH THE TECHNOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC CAPACITIES OF SOCIETIES

The pace of the climate transition should consider the actual technological and economic capacities of individual states and societies. An excessively rapid implementation of restrictive environmental regulations may lead to labour market instability, rising energy costs, and reduced economic competitiveness. Such climate policy also undoubtedly undermines the well-being and dignity of the human person, who requires time to accept the changes taking place.

The phenomenon of society's inability to adapt to rapidly occurring changes is particularly evident in countries whose energy systems continue to rely on fossil fuels, and which do not have sufficient financial resources to implement modern low-emission technologies rapidly^[28].

Contemporary climate economics indicates that the effectiveness of the transition depends not only on ambitious political objectives but also on maintaining an appropriate balance between the pace of change and society's capacity to absorb it. A transition lacking an adequate technological and social foundation may lead to economic crises and increased public resistance to climate policy. Consequently, there is growing emphasis on the need for a gradual, realistic, and sustainable transition that takes into account not only environmental objectives and the economic stability of the state but, above all, the needs of the human person^[29].

5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis conducted leads to the conclusion that contemporary climate policy requires a shift away from a purely technocratic model towards an approach cantered on the protection of the human person and human dignity. The climate crisis undoubtedly constitutes one of the greatest civilizational challenges of the twenty-first century; however, measures undertaken to counteract environmental degradation cannot disregard the social, economic, and axiological consequences of the climate transition. Climate protection should not be regarded as an autonomous and absolute value pursued independently of its consequences for society, but rather as a means of ensuring the conditions necessary for a dignified human life. In this sense, the natural environment remains a common good, the protection of which should enable the enjoyment of fundamental human rights and freedoms rather than lead to their restriction.

The analysis of the contemporary mechanisms of the European Union's climate transition also demonstrates that the effectiveness of environmental policy depends not only on ambitious emission reduction targets but also on the level of public acceptance of the proposed changes. The absence of adequate safeguard mechanisms, the insufficient consideration of economic disparities among the Member States, and the limited participation of citizens and local communities in the law-making process may undermine the legitimacy of European climate policy. Consequently, the future of the European normative framework should be based on a model of just and sustainable transition that considers both the need to protect the environment and the need to safeguard the economic and social security of citizens.

Looking ahead, the European legal system is likely to continue strengthening environmental standards and further integrating climate policy with the human rights protection framework. However, this process requires maintaining a balance between ambitious climate objectives and the principles of the democratic rule of law, social solidarity, and the proportionality of public action. The concept of *Human-Centric Climate Policy* assumes particular importance, according to which the human person should remain the crucial point of reference for all legislative and regulatory measures relating to environmental protection. Only a climate policy that combines the protection of nature with

the protection of human dignity can achieve lasting public legitimacy and ensure the stability of the European legal order in the decades to come.

In this context, the concept of *human ecology*, as developed in the social teaching of the Catholic Church, also assumes particular importance, according to which environmental protection remains inextricably linked to the protection of human dignity and responsibility for the common good of present and future generations.

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