

Montanaro European Smaller Companies Fund
Quarterly Commentary – Q2 2022**Market review**

This has been the worst first half of a year for developed market equities in over 50 years. To make matters worse, there has been no hiding place: government bonds and cash, usually safe havens, have been hit by higher interest rates and rising inflation. Central banks have struggled to deal with an inflationary environment, even as they have brought to an end the long era of “easy money” that has been in place since the Global Financial Crisis. It seems the adage rings true: one crisis leads to another.

For Quality Growth investors, this has resulted in an extremely tricky period, to say the least. The threat of higher interest rates has stalked markets, leading to a significant de-rating of growth stocks – businesses for whom future earnings are vulnerable to higher interest rates. Consumers have faced a significant increase to the cost of living and recessionary fears have heightened.

Although some may have anticipated a marked underperformance of SmallCap versus LargeCap (as is historically typical during periods of market stress), on a global basis, SmallCap has held up relatively well. On a more localised basis, however, the underperformance of the asset class has been far more pronounced: in the UK, SmallCap has underperformed LargeCap by 19% so far this year, while on the Continent it has underperformed by 11%. This, however, is explained not so much by investors’ aversion to smaller companies, but by the make-up of index constituents. In both the UK and Europe, the best performing sector has been Energy, an area of the market dominated by LargeCap names.

Portfolio

The NAV of the share class declined by 20% in Euro terms during the quarter, an underperformance of 4% versus the MSCI Europe Small Cap benchmark index. As recessionary fears increased in June, there were signs that Quality was returning to favour, with the Fund outperforming marginally on a relative basis.

The strongest contribution during the quarter came from **Ideagen**, the supplier of Governance, Risk and Compliance software for highly regulated industries, which rose after agreeing to a takeover approach by HgCapital. **Chr Hansen**, the Danish supplier of cultures, enzymes and probiotics, gained after reporting strong volume growth across segments. **SimCorp**, the system provider for asset managers, traded up following solid quarterly results and some contract win announcements.

The weakest contribution came from **MIPS**, the Swedish manufacturer of a brain protecting helmet insert, which declined on continuing concerns on consumer spending in an inflationary environment, despite increased 2027 sales guidance. **Qt Group**, the leading provider of tools to help developers design and build software applications, weakened after sluggish Q1 growth, although guidance for the full year remains unchanged. **Marshalls**, the UK's leading hard landscaping manufacturer, came under pressure due to worries about slowing demand across the construction sector. Management reiterated their 2022 expectations and their ability to pass on higher input cost through the supply chain.

Outlook

While the outlook remains uncertain, the significant decline in equity prices has shifted the risk / reward balance. Equities have significantly de-rated, particularly those in the Quality Growth part of the market. Even if, as seems likely, developed markets enter recessionary territory, selling stocks now and buying them back cheaper at a later date is a game fraught with risk. It is also worth noting that while Value has significantly outperformed Growth so far this year, Value based indices have still posted negative returns.

We believe that the strong outperformance of Value versus Growth may now be behind us. In an uncertain economic environment, the Quality companies that we favour – those that are highly profitable, with sound fundamentals, plenty of cash on their balance sheets and good management teams – remain attractive for long-term investors. We thank you all for your continued support during this difficult six months and look forward to meeting with you again in the coming weeks and months.

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