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Environment

So Trashy! A Review of EU Waste Management and Inequality Modeling

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The policy of the European Union (EU) in the field of environmental protection and natural resources has, since the 1980s, continued to grow in importance. But some topics are of particular concern to European citizens. This is the case, in particular, with the production of waste, which is increasingly alarming, with the EU generating some 2 billion tons of waste every year.

More than 40 million tons of this waste are classified as “hazardous waste.” Nearly 60% of the waste produced consists of mineral waste and soil, most often from construction and demolition as well as mining activities. Approximately 30% is produced by manufacturing, trade, energy, services and agriculture, meaning that waste production generally increases at rates comparable to those of growth.

About 10% is “municipal waste” – in other words, waste generated mainly by households and to a lesser extent by small businesses and public institutions such as schools and hospitals.

If we convert these numbers into kilos, in the year 2015 each European produced 477 kg of municipal waste, taking into account the garbage as well as the waste of the communes (including the sewage sludge). According to the 2017 figures of Eurostat, the statistics office of the EU, these numbers are “down by 9% compared with its peak of 527 kg per person in 2002, but slightly up, for the first time since 2007, from the 474 kg recorded in 2014.” On the other hand, this data hides gaping disparities, since a Dane produces about 790 kg of waste, against a Romanian's 250 kg, with the UK being close to the average of about 490 kg.

Although this downward trend may be linked to EU waste management policy measures, experts argue that it is still largely a result of the global economic crisis that the EU countries have experienced in recent years. Looking at the total number of members, 18 countries reduced the amount of waste, 9 increased it, while Malta remained at the same level. Evidently, we must encourage this downtrend if we want to avoid being swamped by rubbish, as there is no doubt that the method of waste management currently applied is unsustainable, harmful, expensive and ecologically disastrous. Besides simply producing less trash, the EU has drawn up a strategy to incentivize sorting out our waste, recycling, composting, raw materials, etc., in the form of waste legislation. By 2020, each member state will be required to recycle 50% of its municipal waste.

Throughout the EU, an increasing amount of waste is already being recycled, and less and less sent to landfills. More specifically, over the past decade, recycling and composting have almost tripled, incineration doubled, and the amount of waste that ends up at landfills has decreased by 59%. However, revealing disparities still exist.

The total amount of communal waste per capita varies considerably from country to country, depending on patterns of consumption, economic wealth, demographic trends, but also ways of collecting and managing waste. In fact, while Bulgaria is dumping all of it into landfills, Denmark is the front-runner in terms of incineration, with 54% of its waste ending up in smoke. Germany is at the forefront of recycling (48% of municipal garbage), and Austria is the champion of composting (40% of its waste). Austria's records are unrivaled, with 70% of its municipal waste being recycled or composted. At the end of the ranking are Croatia, Lithuania, Malta, Bulgaria and, bringing up the rear in terms of sustainability, Greece, far from the average. Also ranking among the states with the worst record in the implementation of waste legislation: Cyprus, Romania, Latvia, Italy, Estonia, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland. The reason: identified shortcomings include the absence or inadequacy of waste prevention, lack of incentives to prevent waste landfills, and inadequate waste management infrastructure.

Almost all Eastern EU members are therefore tormented by waste. Croatia, for instance, has long been waiting for a national strategy, and only two of the 13 announced waste management centers have been built. In the meantime, we are required to sort out half of our waste by 2020. During a lecture on waste management organized by the Croatian progressive party Radnička Fronta (*Workers' Front*), the influential environmental activist Vjeran Piranić warned that the European Court of Justice will impose penalties if Croatia doesn't meet its commitments:

"Hungary pays €27,316 per day; Bulgaria €15,220 per day; Poland €67,314 per day! Greece has already paid €10 million, and will need to keep paying €14.52 million every 6 months until they meet the new requirements. Italy paid €40 million and will keep paying €42.8 million every 6 months until it fulfills those demands. If we do not adopt a plan, Croatia will pay fines as well. But what is worse is that we will not have a waste management system."

An economy of circular exploitation

In December 2015 the European Commission adopted an ambitious circular economy package, including a EU Action Plan with measures covering the entire life cycle of products, from the design stage to supply, production and consumption up to waste management and the secondary raw materials market.

But what happens when member states do not comply with these measures?

While recycling is a priority for the EU, not all of its member states accord it such importance. In Croatia for example, 77% of waste ends up in landfills, which is the most expensive and the most ecologically harmful solution. On top of these costs, however, the Court of Justice of the EU intends to impose fines of tens of millions of euros on the Union's laggards for failing to meet their waste management obligations, forcing these countries to good standing.

The Commission registered 45 infringements in 2010, coinciding with the entry into force of EU legislation. Italy has committed thirteen, Greece seven and Ireland six. An appeal against Slovakia and a fine for non-compliance with the Court's judgment of April 2013 require it to ensure that decisions concerning the operation of the Žilina-Považská Chlmec waste disposal site are taken in accordance with Union rules so as to avoid any serious risk to human health and the environment. In 2014, the Court again imposed on Greece a lump sum fine of €10 million for its failure to close the illegal dumps enaming its territory.

To make up for the millions in EU fines, bills for communal waste management services (delivered by local governing units and paid by their citizens) will double at best, but possibly quadruple. Still, if they do not sort out their waste properly, "careless" citizens will end up being fined again themselves by the communal guards of their towns and cities – an absurdity given that these fines are issued by the same governing bodies that the EU has earlier disciplined for ecological misconduct.

The EU's refusal to develop genuinely common policies to help new, peripheral members reduce their economic drawbacks in comparison with the core countries, is largely responsible for structural discrepancies that work against the process of European integration. It also justifies protests from the European periphery against its constant subjugation to the decisions made by the hegemonic core.

If you still think of EU funds as help, think again. First, the EU fund system *factually* serves to leverage the capital of the developed core of Western Europe (in countries such as Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, etc.). Croatia for instance is still paying more to the EU than it withdraws from EU funds and is by no means the only peripheral country thus affected. The money that Croatia gets as "aid" is actually its own money; only now, Brussels is

controlling into whose hands the money goes and how it will be spent.

Second, money from EU funds destined for better waste management is likely to come through pre-financing – meaning that the city will first have to raise the loan, and the funds will only be returned subsequently. The catch, of course, is that the loan can in principle only be granted from private foreign banks. And, with 95% of the “peripheral” banks actually owned by Western European banks, this policy, of course, favors capital in the developed Western European core.

What about the tendering of projects of waste management infrastructure? The periphery will surely profit from this in terms of economic growth, one would think.

Not quite. In the Croatian capital, in the current context of the EU-promoted restructuring of waste management, the reforms will be enormous given that Zagreb is a big market. Accordingly, there is potential for huge profit from the purchase of waste containers, trucks, sorting lines, etc. However, given that the western, core countries are much more developed, their economies stronger, and so their incentives are bigger – and in the free market, the stronger candidate always comes out ahead – it will likely be western companies that benefit from these reforms.

In this light, it seems peripheral European countries, such as Croatia, always turn out to be the financial losers even when they are entitled to EU funds for beneficial projects such as sustainable waste management. In the meantime, while the same pockets will be getting filled, the quality of our air, water and food is at its lowest wherever we might live, core or periphery. Because if our economy might not be circular, the biosystem very much is.

How green is the green core, really?

Given the right education and sufficient infrastructure, most citizens will sort their waste – the issue is that cities have nowhere to dispose of it afterwards. As standards for waste treatment or disposal are less stringent in a number of countries from the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Africa or Asia, where treatment or disposal is less expensive, it is there that the life cycle of unwanted waste from the European center usually comes to a halt. However, the transfer of waste from a country with high environmental standards (and expensive treatment) to a country where standards and costs are lower is obviously not a viable long-term option globally.

The almost entirely unregulated ship-breaking industry is exemplary of the ways in which a national economic power can result in a global ecological null set. The rich North regularly brings unknown quantities of toxic waste aboard end-of-life vessels sent to India to be dismantled and to get rid of its ships full of asbestos, PCBs, lead, mercury, and other toxic chemicals no other European country was willing or able to securely dismantle. Instead, they have it broken up by hand in a scrapyard where impoverished workers are injured and die every day. Hazardous products including dead batteries, arms waste like empty shells and cartridges, toxic substances, waste oil and carcinogens like asbestos are making their way to the 7,600-km-long Indian coastline, posing a serious threat to hundreds of fragile ecosystems along the shores. Large quantities of this poisonous jetsam from various European countries have been discovered in shipping containers across eight major ports in the country. Most of these highly dangerous goods, many highly inflammable, were part of consignments declared as plastic or newsprint. Moreover, millions of tons of old electronic goods are illegally exported to developing countries, as people dump luxury items.

The North unilaterally strengthens its environmental policy by requiring firms located in its territory to reduce their level of pollutant emissions. For its part, the South does not change its environmental regulations: we are thus in a typical configuration where the South practices passive ecological dumping. Within the EU, waste gets dumped to Europe’s trash cans, from the UK, France or Italy to Albania, Romania and Poland. “Dirty business”, a recent

documentary produced by SkyNews exposes how the export of plastic recycling toward *pollution havens*, where both land and labor are cheaper, is much more lucrative than processing it locally in the North. But in reality, no one really checks whether plastic is really recycled once it leaves European shores. Although it is often consigned to landfill, the shipment of plastic is often registered as recycled by the exporter and therefore counts towards EU recycling targets.

The process of globalization has the effect of reducing the transaction costs of trade in industrial goods. And while waste generation is one of the best indicators of our progress towards sustainable development, market capitalism makes it incredibly difficult to make truly helpful sustainable choices. Firms located in the North are then confronted with a binary choice: either to meet these new standards by undergoing an increase in their fixed environmental cost, or to circumvent the new legislation by relocating their activity to the South. In other words, the process of globalization sensitizes firms in environmental dumping and thereby affects the effectiveness of unilateralism in environmental policy. Globalization, by accentuating the intensity of the offshoring effect increases the likelihood that Northern environmental policy will paradoxically be accompanied by a worsening of global pollution.

Conclusion

Waste has a direct impact on the quality of life, public health and the environment. It also represents a huge loss of valuable natural resources, materials and energy. Although the reduction or prevention of waste is actually the first and most important step in responsible waste management, a major emphasis is put on the other phases of its processing. Given the priorities, in relation to the costs and risks of harmful effects on the environment, by order of importance after prevention comes recycling, then processing and the least desirable – disposal. When looking at Eurostat data on trends in waste management in the EU from 2005 to 2015, great progress has been made – in numbers, with the EU's directives having the main merit. But despite the good averages in the Union, dumpster countries will continue to be underdeveloped peripheral land – only perhaps slightly more ecologically conscious.

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