

THE WASTE MARKET IN ALBANIA

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The waste produced by modern industrial development constitutes a major problem for countries today, complicating the management of both the environment and the citizens. The European Union has placed the question of waste management among its priorities, from an environmental and public health perspective as well as an economic point of view. The cost of disposal of various waste materials is extremely high and has negative impacts on local communities, which are often reluctant to allow the construction of landfills and incinerators in their area.

In the search for ways out of this rapidly deteriorating situation, the EU has promoted diverse initiatives by means of various directives and legislative measures, but has struggled to produce the desired effects. This is due to the fundamental contradiction extant between an economy based on quantitative production, keeping pace with the ever-increasing consumption of goods and services and the necessity to ensure the protection of human health and the environment.

Facing these difficulties, many European countries have attempted to find shortcuts, settling for getting rid of their waste products without significantly reevaluating their own development models.

One of the shortcuts adopted by individuals and governments alike is the exportation of waste products to countries with less strict waste legislation. In this way, it is possible to solve the problem of waste management temporarily while leaving the production chain of the waste-exporting country intact. This delays the resolution of a problem that has proved difficult for both individual governments and the European Commission itself.

Albania is among the countries that accept foreign waste at a relatively low price. Long suspected to be a center for the illegal importation of waste products, Tirana has in recent years attempted to establish a legal process facilitating the importation of various waste products from abroad.

While this does not mean that illegal waste importation has stopped entirely, it certainly indicates that what was once an unregulated and controversial process is now officially becoming a legal source of revenue for Albania as well as for its individual citizens. Although a definitive list of waste materials allowed in the country by Albanian law has been created, both politicians and members of the public remain wary of the possibility of permanently becoming the destination for their European neighbors' waste.

The disagreement surrounding the emerging waste market in Albania led the Constitutional Court of Albania to approve the call for a referendum on the topic, after which environmental organizations and community groups gathered tens of thousands of signatures in support of a vote. The referendum will be held in December of 2013 and will be a deciding factor for the future development or extinction of the imported waste market. Environmental concerns as well as economic considerations intensify the debate. Waste is seen as an urgent concern in many countries (in Italy, for example); these countries would potentially be willing to spend significant sums to unload the burden of disposal on individuals and

communities beyond their borders. This confers a financial potential upon this economic sector that cannot easily be ignored in the name of defense of the environment, especially in a historical moment characterized by international economic and financial difficulties.

However, other significant economic sectors such as tourism and agriculture would feel a considerable negative impact as a result of a large-scale, well-established official pathway for the importation of waste into Albania.

It seems that Albania is attempting to specialize in a sector with high margins for growth and earnings while also attempting to play on a comparative advantage incommensurate with the competitive challenges that other European nations must confront. Albania's use of its national legislation and open land for waste disposal that would require extensive legislative procedure and high costs elsewhere in Europe is a far cry from EU states' challenging obligation to find and develop innovative and sustainable economic sectors capable of carrying European economies towards a sustainable economic future.

Furthermore, the community politics of the European Commission promotes are in direct opposition with the avenue that Albania seems likely to follow with respect to waste management and importation.

There are two points in particular to underline regarding the topic. Firstly, Albania aspires to become a candidate for EU membership and wishes to do so soon. To do this, Albania must begin to progressively assimilate elements of current European legislation and consequently adapt to the environmental standards held by most European nations. If it decides to import various types of waste, it will be difficult for Tirana to demonstrate its adherence to European standards, which call for a gradual reduction of the amount of waste within the borders of every member state or EU candidate.

Second, it is important to consider the obligations of the countries from which the waste originates; the European Commission expects a decrease not only in the quantity of waste but also a reduction in the production of waste, regardless of whether it is managed within the country or exported.

The case of Italy, often reprimanded by Brussels for its unsatisfactory waste management, is representative of the problem discussed above. The potential to export waste to Albania would be an alternative to the reduction of the quantity of waste products that would not contribute to the formation of a strategy intended to reduce waste at its source. Italy is not the only country to consider a solution such a temporary solution; however, the implementation of a plan reliant on the mere exportation of the waste problem would constitute a step backward with regard to the environmental goals set by the European Commission.

Of these goals, one of the most pressing is the prevention of the production of large quantities of waste. For potential waste-exporting countries as well as for Albania as an importer, the European Commission's official prioritization of waste reduction renders the development of a waste market of any significant dimensions rather infeasible.

The debate regarding the possibility of developing a market for the importation of foreign waste into Albania continues while waste management within the country itself is actually rather lacking. This raises serious doubts regarding the country's ability to dispose correctly of the possible influx of waste from abroad. The situation within Albania poses two main problems that could compromise the feasibility of the trash importation project.

The first problem concerns the disposal of products consumed domestically. There are still significant structural flaws in the Albanian waste management system. Both waste collection and disposal are in need

of considerable improvement, as evidenced by recent protests in various local communities facing environmental degradation and health risks caused by often-inadequate waste management. Illegal landfills and trash in the streets are common in both rural and urban settings in Albania. The dangers to public health and the environment are considerable in the cities as well as in the sites intended for the storage of the refuse. The contradiction between the inadequacy of the internal waste management and the potential for further waste influx from abroad would therefore suggest that Albania should not follow the path towards the waste importation that recent legislation has promoted.

The second problem involves concerns regarding the rule of law both within Albania and along its borders. The possible importation of foreign waste products raises concerns about the potential increase in the illegal trafficking of waste. This prospect seems more probable with the increase of both the amount of trash entering the country and the number of trash collection sites. Organized crime, present in Albania as in Italy and many other southern European countries, could benefit from this process, coordinating illegal trafficking and other forms of importation of unregistered waste products. This possibility raises a particular concern when we realize that illegal waste disposal is already a sector in which organized crime in both Albania and Italy has turned large profits. Corruption within local governments is largely responsible for facilitating illicit imports and thus distancing the country from EU standards regarding the environment, the law, and public health.

Although newly elected officials do not support the actions taken by the previous government with regard to waste, there are other possibilities that could be capable of transforming the risks of the waste market enterprise into opportunities without abandoning the legislation on waste management.

As we have discussed, Albania's current internal waste management has far to go in order to approach Western European standards. To reach this goal, the country must solve complex problems and overcome great resistance. A possible solution, undervalued for far too long, would be for Albania to frame its difficulties with waste management as a part of the greater European attempt to solve the waste problem, joining the ranks of neighboring European states working towards innovative solutions for environmental sustainability.

Indeed, other countries near Albania share some of its difficulties with waste management, and Italy is no exception. More and more often, southern regions must cope with illegal landfills while northern regions feel the effects of air pollution caused by trash incinerators. Progress in recent years cannot compensate for the vast areas of the Italian peninsula that suffer from the same difficulties experienced in Albania.

Common experiences and similar needs can therefore form the basis for collaboration among businesses and institutions on both sides of the Adriatic. Unlike many economic sectors, waste production is consistently high regardless of falls in consumption. In spite of the continental economic crisis, the amount of waste produced every year in Europe is on the rise overall. There was a notable increase in electronic waste (televisions, cell phones, and other devices), which contains many metals that are harmful to human health and the environment.

These considerations make the waste market a promising future prospect; even today, it garners much interest at academic institutions, due to its relevance to social, environmental, and public health concerns. However, the value of this sector is not only notable for its importance to the infrastructure for waste disposal. In fact, the various materials that make up the total waste have a significant monetary value that is often buried or incinerated. It has been calculated that the value of the waste buried in landfills or burned in incinerators across Europe amounts to a sum between €10 and €20 million a year.

Furthermore, the environmental damages caused by the materials in many products (such as electronics) are considerable, and they do not become less severe with the passage of time. That which currently represents a grave threat to the environment and a source of revenue for organized crime could in the future become an economic sector of value to society and the environment.

Recycling, the extraction of useful and functional parts from undifferentiated waste, and especially the proper treatment of dangerous or toxic waste represent a burgeoning market; specializing in this branch of waste management provides a consistent return, in both economic and environmental terms.

The law approved by the former Albanian government should be used to engage these opportunities and to promote the collaborations that they could generate.

The Italian businesses that operate in this field could be able to offer useful and innovative solutions, but the possibility to collaborate in a foreign context (which is geographically close and relatively well-known thanks to pre-existent commercial and cultural ties) would also increase the possibilities for investment and development. In the eyes of the European community, uniting the efforts and capabilities of Italian entrepreneurs with those of Albanian institutions seems to be a possible way for Tirana to avoid a very risky situation.

In this way, it would be possible to avoid a grave environmental and health issue in Albania while at the same time demonstrating its commitment to future membership in the EU. Additionally, the benefit to Italian business would be significant, as this collaboration would open up a foreign market in a relatively untouched sector that would be expandable to other Balkan nations. At the same time, the experience and the investments needed to carry out this initiative would be useful for the domestic Italian waste market as well, providing it tools with which to address its many notable difficulties.