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# **Waste Management: Where Does Greece (Want to) Belong?**

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## **Key points**

The European Commission has adopted an ambitious Circular Economy Package that has a major effect on the way every member state approaches waste management. This means that the countries' policies must adapt to the new directives issued by the Commission, so that the EU can achieve the set targets. In order to conform with these new directives, Greece has still a long way to go, as it is lagging behind most EU countries when it comes to recycling-reusing and landfilling reduction.

## **Key Recommendations:**

- Motivation of the public for recycling.
- PAYT System
- At-home composting
- “Green Points”
- Reinforcement of the Blue Bell campaign
- Landfill Fee

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## Introduction

The transition to a circular economy, and by extension, waste management, are issues that are at the forefront of EU policy making. New legislation and directives are constantly issued, with the latest regarding waste management, issued in May of 2018. This waste package sets new targets which member states have to meet: according to the directive “reuse and recycling of municipal waste must be boosted to 55% by 2025, 60% by 2030 and 65% by 2035. By 1 January 2025, member states must set up, separate collections of textiles and hazardous waste from households. In addition, they must ensure that by 31 December 2023, bio-waste is either collected separately or recycled at source (e.g. home composting). This is in addition to the separate collection which already exists for paper and cardboard, glass, metals and plastic” (European Council 2018).

Regarding the targets for package recycling, 65% of all packaging must be recycled by 2025 (70% by 2030), with other goals set for certain materials. These new directives put Greece in a very difficult position, as it not only is one of the 14 EU countries at risk of missing the 2020 target of 50% for municipal waste recycling, but also sits at the third worst position out of the 28 member-states in the field of reusing-recycling, above only Malta and Romania. The directive also sets a landfill reduction target, raising another issue for Greek authorities, and especially the Ministry of Environment and Energy.

## Current Situation

### Landfill

Waste management has been a thorny issue for Greek governments throughout the years. The policies that have been followed, have not had the desired effects, leaving the country at a very low position in the European scene. According to the latest available statistics, 82% of total municipal waste is being landfilled in Greece, while in countries such as Denmark (9,7%), Germany (10%), Sweden (0,6%), Bulgaria (64%), the percentage shows a steep drop (Eurostat, 2016). This situation has been very costly for Greece for many years now. Since June 2015, when a fine was imposed to Greece by the EU because of active landfill sites, the Greek state has paid 15 million euros in biannual fines, for landfill sites in the region of Peloponnese only. The last installment of the fine alone was 2,84 million euros. The use of landfill sites is the main reason for the fines that Greece has to pay, as 57 are still active or in restoration process, for which the state has



to pay 40.000 euros in fines. However, when the use of landfill site was abolished in the EU, there were 1000 landfill sites in Greece, which effectively had dropped to 300 by 2014. This shows that the efforts to shut down landfill sites have been fruitful, but there is still a lot of ground to be covered.

### **Recycle-Reuse (Municipal Waste)**

Such high rates of landfilling obviously mean very low rates of recycling and reusing of municipal waste: 13% of the total waste generated is recycled and just 0,5% reused (Table 1\*). The table illustrates the situation very clearly and shows how far behind Greece is in comparison to other member states. These rates make it clear that Greece will miss the targets set for 2020 (50% recycling) and raise serious questions about whether the Greek state will be able to reach the new targets set for 2025 and 2030 by the new directive issued by the Commission. This comes as a result of the ineffective actions taken (or not taken in most cases) by Greek authorities to increase the recycling and reusing of municipal waste. A telling example of this is the terrible delay in the implementation of the targets set by the National Plan for Waste Management (NPWM, published 2015). To cite some examples, according to the NPWM: a) a goal was set to create “green spots” for separate collection at municipalities across Greece by the end of 2015 (until now only one has been provided to the public in Pyrgos), b) elimination of uncontrollable waste disposal (waste disposal sites are still in use), c) a plan was put in place for the creation of a network for the management of bio-waste / composting (no further action has been taken, and a plan for the separate collection of bio-waste in distinctive, “brown” bins has been pushed back), d) a landfill fee was supposed to have been implemented by 2015 (the implementation was postponed every year). These examples make it clear that the right planning and legislation have already been made, but they have yet to be put to practice.



Municipal Waste (2016)	Produced (Tonnes)	Landfilled (% of total)	Recycled	Reused
<b>European Union</b>	52.133	60.246 (24%)	71.963 (29%)	62.288 (25%)
<b>Greece</b>	5.362	4.415 (82%)	738 (13%)	27 (0.5%)
<b>Germany</b>	52.133	522 (10%)	25.435 (48%)	14.260 (26%)
<b>Denmark</b>	4.484	44 (9.7%)	1255 (28%)	2.338 (52%)
<b>Spain</b>	21.542	11.658 (54%)	3.945 (18%)	2.589 (12%)
<b>Sweden</b>	4.393	28 (0.6%)	1435 (32%)	2.263 (31%)
<b>Bulgaria</b>	2.881	1.851 (64%)	654 (22.5%)	109 (3.8%)

(Eurostat, 2016, Hellenic Recovery Recycling Corporation, 2017)

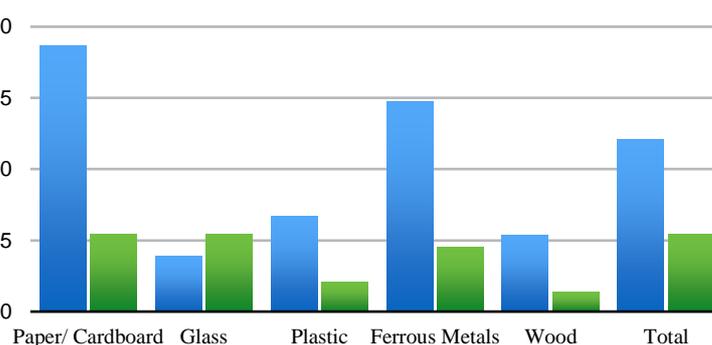
## Package Recycling

The only field in recycling where Greek rates not only meet the goals set by the EU but also surpass them, is package recycling. Recycling rates in packaging are very high, with only glass lagging behind (chart 1). This is a result of the

national strategy of the blue recycling bins and the “blue bells”, as well as the motivation of the public for active participation through awareness campaigns. This stream of public action didn’t happen overnight, but it took almost 10 years to reach this level. This came as a result of the policy followed by Hellenic Recovery Recycling Corporation (HRRC):

The amount of money collected through a special fee included in the price of every packaged product, is channelled to awareness campaigns, advertisements and also new plastic bins, collection vehicles and recycling plants. Subsequently, this equipment is distributed to municipalities according to their population, and municipal authorities are responsible for the collection and transportation of rejects to the plants.

■ Rates in Greece (%) ■ EU Goals (%)  
[Chart 1, Eurostat (2016), HRRC (2017)]





## Recommendations

What Greece is dealing with is not the lack of appropriate legislation but of its correct application. Having said that, some actions that can be taken include:

### Recycling-Reusing:

- a) Better information and motivation of the public through awareness campaigns, along with recycling campaigns at schools with reward systems.
- b) Immediate implementation of the separate collection method and the Pay As You Throw system (PAYT), by providing each household with bins. This system can work through the distribution of differently coloured bins for each waste stream (plastic, glass, paper, etc.) along with the use of specialized collection vehicles that are using automated weighing systems. This way each households' waste production can be monitored, and so the more a family is recycling, the smaller the municipal fee they will be required to pay, according to the total weight of the generated waste.
- c) At the same time, at-home composting must be promoted, starting at houses with gardens, especially in suburban and rural areas. Furthermore, composting should be set up at local markets, hotels, and restaurants with direct help from the municipalities, along with a rewarding system. This measure of course needs the collaboration by specialized compost processing plants.
- d) It is very important that the “green point” measure is implemented. These focal points could play a major part in the motivation of the public and can become places where people can be informed about recycling. They can even have an aesthetic impact on the urban environment by providing colorful spots around the city.

### Package Recycling

The high rates of package recycling must not be taken for granted. The blue bin and “blue bell” campaign must be reinforced and spread to even more areas around the country. Furthermore, the rates of glass recycling can be boosted by providing separate collection points for this particular material.



## **Landfilling**

As mentioned before, landfilling is a result of the very low rates of recycling. An increase in recycling will automatically result in less waste ending up at landfill sites. Anyhow, efforts to shut down uncontrolled waste disposal sites must be intensified, along with the implementation of the landfilling fee. This way Greece will be relieved from the heavy fining, that is costing millions of euros every year. After all, a peoples' cultural footprint, is the waste that it generates.



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