



POLICY BRIEF No 2019/18, March 2019

Earth calling Greece

Meropi Kyriaki

Key points

Greece, after an early warning report from European Commission, is at the edge of not achieving its 2020 targets of 50% recycled waste and shows a holistic hindrance in implementing environmental laws. This policy brief outlines the reasons of delay, mainly due to insufficient facilities, lack of awareness and coordination deficit. If Greece does not adhere to EU's recommendations, soon its natural habitat will not differentiate from a landfill. Lastly, this analysis refers to measures of combatting the waste management problem, proposed from European Commission: landfill tax, information exchange on an administrative level, better allocation of EU funds, creation of a database awareness-raising. This policy brief suggests,

- The Ministry of Environment and Development enforces the landfill tax and ensures the closure of illegal landfills.
- The Ministry is also counseled to hold a conference among different administrative levels, NGOs, industries and the Hellenic Recovery Recycling Corporation.
- It is mentioned as a priority measure the consistency of the Greek database in respect to waste management.
- It is highly recommended to enhance the allocation of EU funds in order to ameliorate the quality of waste recycling infrastructure.
 - Awareness raising campaigns have great significance in terms of sensitizing the citizens.

Meropi Kyriaki is an undergraduate student at the Department of International and European Studies, University of Piraeus.



Introduction

Greece, a “seaside” country, depends highly on its magnificent natural habitat, that only last year (January 2018-November 2018) was visited by 33 million tourists, according to data of the Ministry of Tourism, indicating that tourism is one of the blooming sectors despite the financial crisis. It is considered that governments do not show as much interest as they should in the environment, maybe because politicians do not comprehend fully of its benefits. For this reason, Greece delays the enforcement of environmental laws, hinders the European project of circular economy and fails to comply with the EU recommendations. Consequently, the aim of this policy brief is to highlight why Greece should be the standard-bearer of environmental issues and not falling behind with the risk of paying fines for not compliance.

Early warning

A warning report has been sent to Greece last September, indicating that our country is far from reaching the “2020 target of 50% preparation for re-use/recycling of municipal waste”. Although a plethora of measures have been set, they are not currently in force due to hindrance of governance. Law 4042/2012 was created in accordance with the directive 2008/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council “on waste and repealing certain Directives” and introduced new national and regional waste management plans (WMP), in order to reach 50% of recycling and reduce landfilling to 30% of municipal waste. Even though the landfill tax of this law was due to be put in force in 2014, it was suspended for fourth time until 31/12/2018. Consequently the landfill tax is still not in force and this delay is hindering the waste hierarchy of the directive 2008/98/EC, according to which prevention of production is applied as a priority, followed by preparation for re-use, recycle, energy recovery and, the least management option, disposal (landfilling without energy recovery).

Whose fault is it?

Now the question is what the obstacle of implementing the law is. According to European Commission there are four problems that Greece is facing, apart from the financial debt which hindered the stable progress of the country. Firstly, the infrastructure of waste treatment is largely insufficient and clearly not compatible with the waste hierarchy, that was mentioned above. According to Eurostat, Greece is largely dependent on landfilling, the least preferred option of management waste, and only 17.2% of its municipal waste was recycled in 2016. Furthermore, economic preventive is still not implemented because the polluter-pays-principle depends on the number of inhabitants and the size of



households. Thus, there is no incentive of reducing waste or increasing recycling, while at the same time there are no binding targets of maximum landfilling or minimum recycle for municipalities.

Concerning the collection of packaging waste, a few steps have been made with the implementation of the law 4496/2017, which enforces the separate collection of packaging waste in public spaces. Nevertheless, people are hardly aware of the importance of separation and hence composting has still a low rate (3% in 2012). Biodegradable waste ends in landfills because of the lack of infrastructure for separate collection and mainly due to lack of information. Greek society is indifferent to the amount of packaging that is landfilled every year and the environmental cost of this option. This deficit is described in the unavailability of Greek statistics concerning waste management.

Last but not least, the society's indifference on the environmental "bomb" of the landfills has as a consequence to put waste management low on the political agenda. The responsible authorities delay the implementation of European directives, albeit warned by the European Commission, and it appears a difficulty in coordinating the multiple sectors of administration (Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Development, regional administration and municipalities). Finally, we could describe the situation as a holistic hindrance in the sector of waste management that is mainly created by lack of awareness concerning the severe consequences for the natural habitat.

Taking seriously into account the consequences

Most of waste from landfills ends up in seaside, in beaches and unfortunately is consumed by marine animals. According to European data, plastics are the main marine litter, occupying European beaches, that not only compose a threat to marine biodiversity, but they also cost €259 - €695 million per year. More specifically marine debris are unsighted, but they still put in danger marine life, indirectly harming tourism and economy, because they deteriorate the natural habitat and threaten on a long-term period human health. Enough incidents have proven that digestion of marine litter can be fatal for animals or can provoke sublethal consequences. A plastic straw inside the nostril of a sea turtle is one characteristic hideous incident.

European Union has introduced a new strategy for plastic ban in certain products (plastic cotton buds, cutlery, plates, straws, drink stirrers and sticks for balloons) and this promotion should finally alter Europeans' habits. Only in Greece, we consume 300 million plastic cups per year, according to a survey conducted by Greenpeace. It is important to mention that this strategy is fully complied with UN's Sustainable



Development Goal N° 13 for climate action, N° 14 for life below water and N° 15 for life on land.

Setting priority measures

Since a new year has just started, it is highly recommended setting priority measures for waste management in order to achieve the 2020 targets and adhere to the EU reports. The first measure that is compulsory to be taken is the implementation of the landfill tax, that has been suspended previously for four times since 2014. The revenues of the taxes will be invested to the infrastructure of separate collection and recycling, moving a step forward towards the 2020 targets. In the meantime, the Ministry of Environment and Development should enforce the closure of illegal landfills, provide certain criteria on landfilling for some types of waste and, thus, promote other waste management options for recyclable/biodegradable products. In addition, inspecting the adherence of Extended Producer Responsibility schemes and setting fines for non-complying with the obligations of Regional Waste Management Association are considered as high priorities.

As it was mentioned above, coordination of different administrative levels is one of the causes hindering the process and it could be outweighed by information exchange and technical support in form of a conference, including local, regional, national level administrations, NGOs, industries and Hellenic Recovery Recycling Corporation. Furthermore, the modernization of the database on waste is obligatory, since it will harmonize Greek statistics with EU's requirements and the consistency of data will develop a high-quality project.

In addition to the aforementioned measures, the enhancement of the allocation of EU funds, mainly from Cohesion Policy Fund, will increase the quality of recycling services, decrease residual waste by introducing kerbside – a door-to-door collection of household waste –, and home-composting. In order to fulfill the targets, the Ministry should support raising awareness and promote its project for communicational reasons. Once citizens are aware of the targets, the benefits of circular economy and the process for achieving it, there is a high possibility that they will adhere to the obligations and support the ministerial project.

Conclusion

In essence, before a cry for help of the earth, Greece must set as a priority the protection of its biodiversity, the preservation of the natural beauty, by raising awareness and communicating to citizens the aims of the strategy. To achieve this, government should



explain fully the “cost and balances” of landfill taxes, of fines for non-compliance with the waste management hierarchy. Besides people must comprehend the dimension of environmental damage that plastics could provoke to nature and human life, in order to comply with the rule of law. In brief, Jean-Claude Juncker’s quote, from the State of the Union Address in September 2017, sums up the mentality of this policy brief: “Europe must ensure we make our planet great again. It is the shared heritage of all of humanity.”



References

The records of Greek tourism in... London. (Τα ρεκόρ του ελληνικού τουρισμού στο... Λονδίνο). (2018, November 7). Retrieved December 7, 2018, from <https://m.naftemporiki.gr/story/1411044/ta-rekor-tou-ellinikou-tourismou-sto-londino>

The early warning report for Greece [PDF]. (n.d.). European Commission. Retrieved December 15, 2018, from http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/pdf/early_warning_report_EL.pdf

Ministry of Environment and Energy (n.d.). Waste Management. (ΔΙΑΧΕΙΡΙΣΗ ΑΠΟΒΛΗΤΩΝ). Retrieved December 15, 2018, from <http://www.ypeka.gr/Default.aspx?tabid=238>

Ministry of Environment: Suspension of implementation of landfill tax (amendment). [Υπ. Περιβάλλοντος: Αναστολή επιβολής τέλους ταφής απορριμμάτων (τροπολογία)]. (2017, December 23). Retrieved December 15, 2018, from <https://www.e-nomothesia.gr/law-news/yp-perivallontos-anastoli-epivolis-telous-tafis-aporrimmaton-tropologia.html>

Roadmap for Greece (GR) [PDF]. (n.d.). European Commission. Retrieved December 16, 2018, from http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/framework/pdf/GR_Roadmap_FINAL.pdf

Bourguignon, D. (n.d.). Single-use plastics and fishing gear [PDF]. European Parliament. Retrieved January 4, 2019, from [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625115/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)625115_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625115/EPRS_BRI(2018)625115_EN.pdf)

Thompson, R. (2013, August 22). Plastic Entanglements Increase 40% For Marine Animals. Retrieved January 4, 2019, from http://www.oceanhealthindex.org/news/Death_By_Plastic

Lee, J. (2018, June 05). How Did Sea Turtle Get a Straw Up Its Nose?. Retrieved January 4, 2019, from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com.au/animals/how-did-sea-turtle-get-a-straw-up-its-nose.aspx>



Single-use plastics: New measures to reduce marine litter [PDF]. (n.d.). European Commission. Retrieved January 4, 2019, from http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/pdf/single-use_plastics_factsheet.pdf

In Greece we consume 300 million of plastic cups per year for our coffee. (Στην Ελλάδα καταναλώνουμε 300 εκατ. πλαστικά ποτήρια το χρόνο μόνο για τον καφέ μας). (2018, June 02). Retrieved January 4, 2019, from <https://www.cnn.gr/news/perivallon/story/132565/stin-ellada-katanalonoyme-300-ekat-plastika-potiria-to-xrono-mono-gia-ton-kafe-mas>

Sustainable Development Goals. (n.d.). Retrieved January 4, 2019, from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>

The EU Environmental Implementation Review Country Report - GREECE [PDF]. (n.d.). Brussels: European Commission. Retrieved December 16, 2018, from http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eir/pdf/report_el_en.pdf