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Single-use Plastic: The Greek Case

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Key points

Everyday life has been greatly facilitated by the introduction of plastic, but it has also been compromised by the overuse thereof. Over the past years, the competent EU institutions have taken action towards identifying and taking steps for the legislative and regulatory framework to tackle the problem of both the extensive use of plastic in products and packaging materials and their disposal. The relevant proposed solutions consist,

- in the extension of the existing environmental laws on the production and use of plastic,
- in raising consumer awareness and
- in stricter monitoring of the implementation of EU regulation in Greece.

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Introduction

Plastic can be found in every aspect of our daily life. It constitutes a major economic factor, and a huge profit generator. Its aim is to simplify everyday difficulties, to improve our living standard and to create new dynamics to human activities. Nevertheless, plastic has actually managed to dominate our lives and we have become plastic-dependent. Its omnipresence is undeniable, as long as we think of all the things that surrounds us. From toothbrushes to contact lenses, we use products made of plastic all the time. Almost everything we use is made of or contains some form of plastic. It is true, plastic has indeed made our lives easier. But until recently, people weren't concerned about its repercussions. Today the issue raises global concern as many problems are associated with plastic (in the form of microplastics, mainly found in the seas and the beaches). Greece could not be unaffected, because of its connection with the fisheries, its coastline and as a major tourist destination.

“Single-use” in particular was the word of the year for 2018, according to Collins Dictionary (Newsbeast.gr, 2018), and it has since become an everyday term commonly known and used in newspaper articles, school papers and also many editorials, as public awareness on environmental concerns constantly rises.

With its own Environment policy, the EU is “competent to act in all areas of environment policy, such as air and water pollution, waste management and climate change” (European Parliament, 2018). The legal basis of this policy is located at the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), Articles 11 and 191 to 193, and the EU's jurisdiction is restricted by the principle of subsidiarity. Since the 1970s, the EU has implemented a significant environmental regulatory framework with directives, regulations and decisions, as well as Environment Action Programmes and Horizontal strategies such as the Europe 2020 strategy. The Union's role consists in the monitoring of environmental laws' application, for the implementation of which only the member states are competent.

Analysis

Since its early introduction, plastic has become a significant part of our life. Usually derived from petroleum, it is virtually everywhere and very durable. Unfortunately, it is this very property that makes it difficult to dispose properly and to re-use or recycle, as it is well known that single-use plastic, such as plates, straws, cups and cotton buds is dangerous for the ecosystem: once it enters the environment, it can remain there for centuries due to its extreme durability and because conventional plastic is not biodegradable.

Not only in the EU but all around the globe, when plastic is disposed of, it often ends up on beaches, washing into the oceans and being consumed by marine life.



Specifically, more than 80% of marine litter is plastics (European Commission, 2018). This waste is harmful on many levels and endangers millions of living things on land and in the water - and ultimately also ourselves. Marine animals in particular are much more endangered by foamed plastic items or so-called "Oxoplastics", which are marketed as biodegradable but when decompose, they leave behind tiny plastic particles.

In other words, while decomposing, due to physical and natural processes like sunlight and wind, plastic breaks down into debris, that is, smaller particles that accumulate in seas and on beaches. These particles are called microplastics and are smaller than 5 millimeters. According to the Institute of Marine Conservation "Archipelagos" studies, microplastics have been found in all marine livings, including commercial species of fish, mussels and crabs on the eastern Aegean area. As microplastics are easily absorbed by fish, shellfood and other marine life, this is extremely alarming as the plastic particles, after being ingested by seafood in general, find their way through the food chain onto our plates and into the human body.

The source of this huge problem is easy to be discovered. It's the human activity. Although plastic is produced to facilitate our everyday life, it has actually managed to rule our lives. We are so "addicted" to plastic, that we produce more than we'll ever need. We buy our groceries, which are already packed in plastic packages, and put them in plastic bags to carry them. We buy bottled water in the plastic bottle. We often buy individually wrapped products that are part of a larger package because its more convenient or so we claim; for instance, buying a precut, prewashed and packaged lettuce from the supermarket shelf seems to have more appeal, i.e. to be more time-efficient, than purchasing it from the local farmer's market and carrying it home in a re-usable and ultimately more cost efficient bag made of cloth. We generally prefer all single-use products, because it's easier to just throw them away after use. For example, we drink our coffee-to-go in plastic cups. According to Greenpeace, only in Greece 1.000.000 plastic cups are consumed daily. And most importantly, we don't recycle. In 2018, Greece has been identified as "at risk of missing the 2020 target of 50% preparation for re-use / recycling" and therefore received an early warning (European Commission, 2018), when plastic waste on the Greek beaches reaches 95% of total waste. This is the result of the citizen's irresponsibility, as well as the state's negligence and indifference.

Recommendations

In order to overcome the problem with the plastic in Greece once and for all, it is essential to take action immediately. Firstly, it's important encourage no-plastic initiatives, with funding, tax exemptions or other means of financial relief in order to motivate industries and businesses to opt for more eco-friendly practices and use of less plastic and packaging materials. At the same time, polluting behaviors need to be suspended (or at least



discouraged). Besides the EU principle that “the polluter pays” manufacturers will be made to use less plastic if the financial burden is heavier than if they were using alternative materials throughout the production process. Also, financial incentives for re-use of package or waste materials should be given, but that would further require the regional and sub-regional cooperation between the state, the industry and local manufacturers.

Furthermore, there is a need to enforce the Circular Economy Action Plan involving more economic contributors, i.e. industrial producers, consumers, local authorities to support it and embrace its common goals. This strategy, adopted by the European Commission, includes among others, revised legislative proposals on recycling and waste management. It sets common targets and proposes concrete measures on waste. Naturally, reduction in consumption, proper waste management and more recycling are integral parts of today's society's production process. For instance, it is indispensable to spread the ban to single-use plastic products beyond the current ones. In order to do so, corresponding investment is necessary. Sufficient investment in Research and Development will allow the emergence of alternative products, which can substitute the plastic ones. Only then can the ban apply on them too. Exactly like in the case of drinking straws, ban is only applicable on products which can be replaced. First the substitutes are developed, and then the single-use plastic product is banned.

Of course, raising consumer awareness by educating people to prefer sustainable and/ or renewable or reusable products, to refrain from single-use-plastic items, especially individually packaged ones, to systematically choose less packaged goods wrapped in recyclable/ renewable or at least biodegradable materials should be a main target for our governments. Only recently, public opinion has shifted from viewing ecofriendly consumer behavior as ludicrous to this being a responsible, assertive choice and mindset. People should be encouraged to avoid multiple packaging and single portions but rather buy in bulk or unpackaged goods. The concept of plastic-free stores is as simple as it is forward-looking: It saves tons of plastic packaging, which is produced with high energy. Already, several European countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) introduce the concept of non-packaging supermarkets, where many of the products are stored in large, wall-mounted dispensers known as "bulk bins," so you can bottle the product yourself. Spices and herbs may be spooned from large glasses into small ones, vinegar and oil are filled from large canisters or bottles into small bottles, eggs are packed in cardboard boxes, cheese in paper, storage jars or oilcloths. Even shower gel or detergents may be self-filled in containers brought along, bought or rented in-shop.

Last, but most importantly, a stricter monitoring is necessary, as Greece is often failing to comply with EU legislation. The country's implementation at national level is weak and the application of the Community *acquis* is deficient. It is clear that the country needs guidance rather than simple sanctions. Just as in the case of the Early warning for Member States at risk of missing the 2020 target of 50% preparation for re-use / recycling for



municipal waste (European Commission, 2018), notes, reviews and guidelines should be more frequent and more precise.



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