



*Understanding the EU's Association Agreements
and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas
with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia*

3DCFTAs Youth Essay Competition – Prize winner

Tracking the EU-Georgia Association Agreement Harmonization Progress in the Waste Management Sector

Natalia Davlianidze



My name is Natalia Davlianidze and I am 27-year-old geographer. I obtained my BA and MSc degrees in Human Geography at Tbilisi State University. I spent part of my academic life as a visiting scholar at the University of Tartu in Estonia and Sapienza University of Rome. Currently, alongside my career in the environmental sector, I continue studies at a PhD programme in Human Geography. My areas of interest include sustainable development, natural resource management, and climate change adaptation and mitigation in the context of a rapidly changing world and urbanization. Besides my scientific interests, in my free time, I enjoy extreme sports and love everything connected to winter and snowboarding. I often travel both for studies and adventures.



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Abstract

The following essay examines the progress of the Republic of Georgia in the application of the EU Directives on Waste Management under the EU-Georgia Association Agreement. The essay seeks to track the country's efforts of tackling waste management-related challenges, emphasizing the EU Association Agreement Directive on the provision of waste management plans in line with the five-step waste hierarchy and waste prevention programmes. The article begins with analysing the importance of environmentally-sound waste management practices in the country and its corresponding challenges, and continues by describing Georgia's current waste management system and the anticipated processes on the community, governmental and private sector levels.

"Human behaviour is incredibly pliable plastic."

Philip G. Zimbardo

Early hunter-gatherers created no waste because all of their discarded materials were natural, but afterwards, societies developed, materials evolved, design skills became more sophisticated, and the products people used on a daily basis became more advanced.¹ With the growth of the world population, material production has far outstripped the ability of the current waste management system to keep up, assailing the environment with a seemingly infinite amount of waste. It is noteworthy that one of the most commonly used materials – plastic – is not even a century old, but its extensive and careless use has already adversely affected the natural lifecycle of our planet. One sophisticated solution humankind came up with in order to manage its waste in a sustainable way is recycling. However, recycling is far from perfect, and most of the world's waste still remains unseparated and ends up in landfills, or in the environment. In addition, an effective waste management system still remains a luxury for many developing countries. With this in mind, the exchange of vision, innovative ideas, technology, and knowledge is essential to allow developing countries to advance their waste management systems.

As a still transitioning country, development in Georgia is rapid, but the country still faces some major challenges in the waste management sector. Currently, there are 63 official landfills in Georgia² and only four of these landfills meet international standards. The first landfill designated for municipal waste in

Georgia developed according to EU standards³ was established in Rustavi in 2011. In general, almost every rural settlement has one or even more illegal dumpsites. Several of these dumpsites seriously impact the environment and surrounding communities. With a rapidly

¹ Susan Freinkel, "A Brief History of Plastic's Conquest of the World," in *Scientific American* (5/29/2011).

² Of these landfills, 52 are under the control of the Solid Waste Management Company of Georgia (SWMCG). The remaining 11 are under the control of municipal and private companies.

³ The landfill provides a disposal capacity for 80,000 m³ and it currently receives 30,000 tons of municipal waste annually from the town of Rustavi and the village of Gardabani, serving 150,000 people in total. The project was implemented with financial support provided by the EBRD, SIDA and BP.

growing urban population, and increased consumption and waste generation, Georgia will have to effectively prepare for and address these impending challenges.

Developments that have taken place in the country in the past decade have already kick-started changes in the waste management sector. Georgia is a member of two main conventions in the field of waste management, which have special requirements. These conventions are the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal and the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants. It is worth to note that the aforementioned conventions are not fully trans-posed into national legislation. Another essential document for the country, which also covers the waste management sector, is the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (AA). The Agreement requires Georgia to promote sustainable waste management practices through the progressive harmonization and gradual approximation of the country's relevant policies and legislation to those of the EU that are related to the sector in a specified timeframe. Incorporating the EU requirements outlined in the AA into Georgia's national legislation will be a challenge that must be addressed accordingly.

The waste management objectives listed in the EU-Georgia Association Agreement obligates the country to ***adopt national legislation and designate competent local authorities for the implementation***. In this regard, the national authority, the Ministry of Environment Protection and Agriculture of Georgia,⁴ has adopted waste management sector-related legislation and the National Waste Management Strategy (2016- 2030). The country's acquired Waste Management Code now provides legal conditions for implementing measures aiming to prevent excessive generation of waste and to increase the environmentally-sound treatment of waste, emphasizing the importance of recycling and the extraction of secondary raw materials, energy recovery from waste, as well as the safe and proper disposal of waste. The aforementioned National Waste Management Strategy (NWMS) of Georgia has been prepared in accordance with the Waste Management Code and the EU-Georgia Association Agreement. The Strategy aims to develop the Georgian waste management sector and to replicate European waste management policies and approaches.

An essential part of the Waste Management Directives in the AA concerns the ***provision of the Waste Management Plans in line with the five-step waste hierarchy and of waste prevention programmes***. This requires a more decentralized vision from the Government of Georgia and enforcing the Waste Management Code of Georgia that requires local authorities (self-governing municipalities) to adopt Municipal Waste Management Plans (MWMPs). In addition, the introduction of an effective waste separation system in the country is required by the Waste Management Code, and the National Waste Management Strategy and Action Plan.

⁴ Note: In 2014, the designated local authority was the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection of Georgia. After the 2017 merge, the ministry was combined with the Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia and the responsibilities were distributed among several ministries.

Municipal waste, including household waste collection and transportation, is the responsibility of the municipalities according to the Code. It must be noted that, currently, the country is comprised of nine regions, two Autonomous Republics, and the capital of Tbilisi — a total of 76 municipalities, and all of them are at different stages in terms of adopting Municipal Waste Management Plans. Initially, the deadline to adopt

MWMPs was set to December 31, 2017. However, the requirement was not fulfilled by some municipalities, resulting in an administrative charge. It is worth it to note that the country's capital and largest city, Tbilisi, failed to provide a Municipal Waste Management Plan in the designated timeframe, and other much smaller municipalities have also failed or are making little progress in this regard. Following is mostly

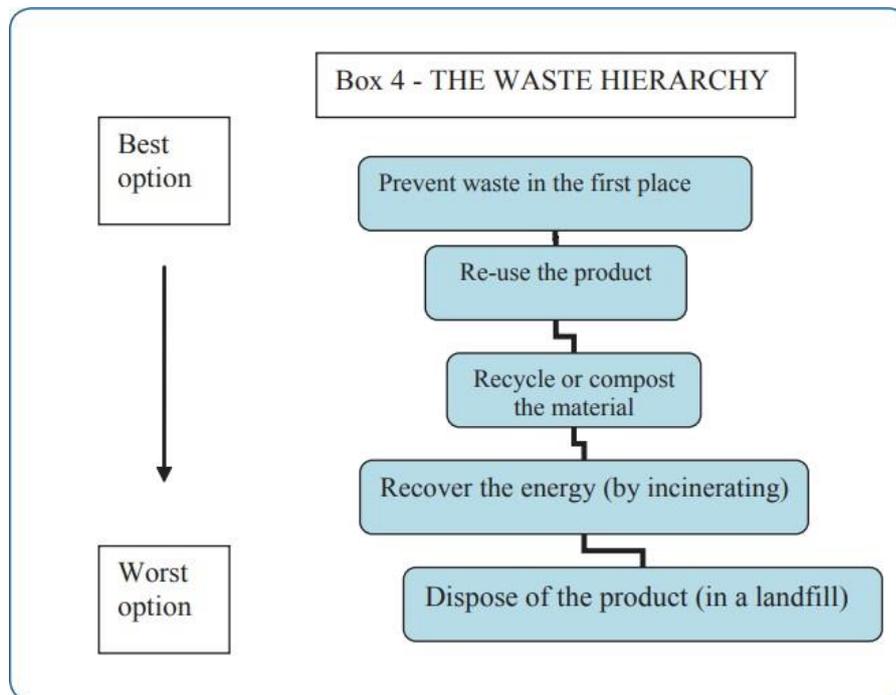
occurring due to limited resources and capacities, but the process of MWMP adoption still continues, and municipalities are expressing their willingness to cooperate and receive potential support in order to meet the EU directives. However, the challenge for the next decade, related to the aforementioned directives, will be the implementation of the Municipal Waste Management Plans. Hopefully, the national vision presented⁵ by the Parliament and Government of Georgia concerning decentralized and local self-governance will increase the capacity, decision-making, and financial resources of regional and local authorities, and will also empower them to better address the AA directives and the needs of citizens overall.

In its National Waste Management Strategy, the country identified one of its targets as the introduction of waste separation practices and commitment to the waste management hierarchy (Figure 1), by including waste prevention, reusing, recycling, and/or recovery in its vision. Under the following goal, the country sets specific deadlines and the strategy aims to have source separation for paper, glass, metal and plastic, established by 2025. At this turning point, it is essential to realize that the vision introduced by the Strategy needs a gradual implementation and preparation on multiple levels, including communities, local government authorities, centralized government, and private sector. Introducing separation at the source is some- how anticipated among a limited number of citizens, and extensive awareness raising is still necessary to reach out to all communities.

In order to better analyse the situation in the waste management sector in Georgia, the understanding of the above-proposed hierarchy and the gaps the country is facing at different levels is critical. To start with, the hierarchy proposes the most preferred options of the waste management sector (that have a minimal impact on the environment) and continues down to the least preferred options (maximum impact on the environment).

⁵ The presentation of the national vision for decentralization and local self-governance, 5 March 2018.

Figure 1. Waste Management Hierarchy



Source: The story behind the strategy. EU Waste Policy. European Commission.

At the bottom of the Pyramid (Figure 1), the most common approach for disposing of waste both in Georgia and worldwide is disposal in landfills. According to Georgia's Third Environmental Performance Review (EPR), developed by the UNECE in 2016, the average municipal waste composition⁶ in the country mainly consists of 42% food (organic) waste, organic waste (14%), inert waste (12%), plastic (12%), and cardboard and paper (8%). It is noteworthy that all of the mentioned types of waste are either compostable, recyclable or easy to maintain, but still, end up in landfills. This can be explained by the limited knowledge about waste management at a household level, and/or limited opportunities for sorting waste because so far, waste is recovered for recycling mainly through small-scale activities.⁷

With this in mind, and knowing that the country's strategy is aiming to introduce source separation, now it is time to understand what the opportunities for recycling in Georgia are. First, a notable fact for the country is that waste is not considered a resource, therefore it does not have much economic value. With a low level of comprehension about the importance of environmentally sound waste management, starting source separation of waste and its further recycling is a challenge. Currently, there are a few operational recycling plants, in and

⁶ Composition of municipal waste was analysed in the regions of Tbilisi, Kvemo Kartli and Kutaisi, which is accepted as representative of the whole of Georgia by the EPR.

⁷ The WMTR program is supported by the USAID in Georgia and implemented by CENN, and provides separation corners in two of its target municipalities - Tbilisi and Batumi. The locations of the waste separation points in Tbilisi are available here - <http://environment.cenn.org/waste-management/waste-maps/waste-separation-corners-tbilisi/>.

around Tbilisi and Batumi, focusing on paper, PET (polyethene terephthalate) and glass. The secondary aluminium and plastic raw materials are being exported. Although, the potential for the recycling does exist and the evidence is the above-analysed composition of waste in landfills. If we look closer at some of the most economically valued waste, it becomes clear that the country indeed does have a substantial unexplored potential for recycling solid waste — the potential annual amount of plastic waste in Georgia is around 26,000-33,000 tones, for paper it is 68,000-75,000 tones, and for glass it is 90,000-100,000 tones.⁸ But, currently, waste separation does not occur in Georgia, separated waste streams are hard to receive, limiting the supply of secondary raw materials for recycling companies. In addition, the low capacity of existing recycling companies, their insufficient understanding of the market, and poor business linkages lower both the quality and amount of production. Therefore, there is limited demand for domestically produced packaging, and the industry is not appealing for the private sector to enter into the recycling business.

Lastly, the key to achieving progress in transitioning out of the current poor waste management system towards the vision recommended by the EU-Georgia Association Agreement is preventing waste generation in the first place. Worldwide practice shows (including in many EU countries) that even with the most advanced approaches towards waste management, littering still remains a global threat to humans. The solution is a sustainable change in consumption routine. It is hard to refuse particular comforts in life, but we need to keep in mind that waste production is directly linked to poor manufacturing design choices. If we start thinking, planning and acting in a viable and more environmentally conscious manner, our choices in buying things, producing goods, or operating businesses will be more sustainable. In order to achieve this, education and awareness raising are essential. Individuals and communities need to be prepared to address global challenges at a local level, the government needs to support knowledge-sharing and expansion, the private sector needs to have more responsible operations schemes, and everyone needs to realize that their actions are interconnected and together those actions can positively or adversely affect the environment.

Conclusions

- Abuse of the environment by littering is a visible problem in Georgia, caused by an inefficient waste management system. However, the movement towards change has kick-started and it requires commitment on all levels, in order to create necessary positive change.
- The EU-Georgia Association Agreement has been a major leap forward for the country. Influencing all major areas of countries development, the AA also gives an extensive and comprehensive list of directives related to the establishment of environmentally-sound waste management practices in Georgia.

⁸ Waste Management Sector: Plastic, glass, paper and aluminum market research, prepared by ICMA and CENN, Georgia, 2016.

- The Government of Georgia expresses its willingness and devotion to commit to ensuring harmonization procedures, but the process still continues, and the further transposition of EU requirements of the AA and international conventions into national legislation related to waste management is necessary.
- The process of establishing proper waste management practices at a decentralized (municipal) level in a designated timeframe by the AA is hindered due to centralized leadership, lack of capacity at regional levels, poor understanding of the problem at all levels, recent changes in the distribution of functions, and bureaucratic issues.
- Municipal Waste Management Plans are required and will contribute to the improvement of the sectoral situation both in regions and in the country in overall. Local authorities are cooperating in order to meet the centralized requirements presented in line with the AA.
- Introducing source separation and supporting the recycling sector are included in the national vision, but limited resources mean that both may struggle to progress.
- The country has an untapped potential for a recycling business and is offering a good business ecosystem for successful recycling business operations, but proper market analysis is still not available, causing an informative vacuum about current opportunities.
- The understanding of the recycling potential in the country is still mediocre at best. The private sector lacks capacity, and the government is not able to provide the necessary framework for further development.
- In line with recycling, an equally important step for the country is in the prevention of waste generation in general. Following this is hard to achieve unless extensive educational and awareness-raising campaigns are implemented, ensuring information access to all communities in the country.