

POLICY PAPER ON PLASTIC WASTE MANAGEMENT IN ALBANIA

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Plastic production¹, consumption, and waste is expanding exponentially, affecting marine, freshwater, and terrestrial ecosystems and contributing to greenhouse gas (GHG) and hazardous chemical emissions with consequent implications for human health, economies, and social well-being around the world. Plastic pollution is a global challenge that demands comprehensive policy solutions. This paper outlines strategic recommendations to address plastic waste across its life cycle. By emphasizing the recycling of materials that can be efficiently recycled, reuse and responsible design, we can move towards a more circular economy with the least plastic as possible.

In its efforts to acquire EU membership, Albania is negotiating the extensive and demanding chapter 27 of the EU acquis on Environment and Climate Change. Waste Management is a large subchapter of chapter 27, including a series of requirements for developing and/or improving legal framework and establishing effective institutions to support implementation and enforcement of these requirements. Furthermore, waste management issues are intertwined with the transition to Circular Economy, particularly regarding production, distribution, sale and consumption of plastic products. The Waste Directive and CE Directive provides dispositions aiming to completely stop the production of waste or transform waste into a valuable resource.

Albania's waste sector is facing several challenges. That can be summarised as following:

- Growing amounts of municipal waste and improper waste management lead to environmental pollution. Most municipal waste is still sent to landfills.
- Waste legislation, including targets, is increasingly being adapted to or inspired by EU directives.
- Data on waste generation and management are largely insufficient, although many initiatives are in place to improve data quality.
- There is an urgent need to set up and invest in separate collection systems and recycling infrastructure and seize the opportunity to recover valuable resources.
- Targets for municipal waste, mainly for recycling but also for collection and reducing landfilling, are set in waste legislation, strategies, and programmes, approximating those set by the EU. In some cases, this results in targets that appear ambitious compared with the current situation and the capacity for change. The measures implemented with the aim of reaching the targets are generally weak, especially for recycling targets.
- Key challenges include a lack of financial resources and staff, insufficient cross-institutional cooperation, and poor enforcement of waste legislation. Illegal, substandard, and informal activities hinder the proper funding and functioning of the legal infrastructure and its gradual improvement. The region would benefit from fees that are better structured to cover the full waste collection and management costs and more effective enforcement.

Albania has adopted legal frameworks for waste management by approximating or being inspired by EU waste legislation, particularly the EU Waste Framework Directive. However, further alignment and harmonisation with this directive is needed. Despite the adoption of comprehensive strategic documents and action plans by the Albanian government, their effective implementation remains a remarkable challenge in the years ahead. Lack of staff, budget deficiencies and poor enforcement mechanisms, lack of cooperation and/or overlapping powers of central and local institutions hinder effective implementation. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive strategies that bridge legal, societal and economic disparities.

Plastics in Albania are assessed as a priority area with high policy relevance. The most important applications of plastics in Albania are packaging, textile, construction and fishing. Plastics' usage, in particular single-use

¹ Circular Solutions to Plastic Pollution Integrated Program, 2022, www.thegef.org

plastic products, is also exacerbated by the growing tourism sector. Albania is also one of the economies with large proportions of mismanaged waste, contributing to a high leakage of (often untreated) plastic waste into the Adriatic-Ionian basin, amounting to 20 kg per person per year (World Bank, 2020), with litter from fishing and shipping in the Adriatic Sea further compounding the problem. This results in plastic pollution and leakage from mismanaged plastic waste, which have important negative environmental implications and may harm nature and ecosystems, including marine ecosystems and human health.

Albania will need to implement national obligations and targets related to plastics. Namely, its National Plan for Integrated Waste Management (2020-2035) foresees specific targets for the recovery of plastic packaging waste generated (10% by 2025, 12% by 2030 and 22.5% by 2035). Albania will also need to align its regulatory framework with the European Union’s (EU) plastics legislation, in line with its EU accession negotiations.

However, considering the situation with plastic waste as well as requirements and dispositions of either EU or national level, an improved and complete legal framework and stronger and effective institutional setting are necessary. In this regard we recommend:

1. Closing the Plastics Loop:

☞ Improved Waste Management:

- ✓ Strengthen municipal waste management systems to enhance plastic waste collection, sorting, and treatment.
- ✓ Define legal obligations for private actors and municipalities, backed by monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.
- ✓ Educate households on proper waste separation and disposal practices.

☞ Separate Collection:

- ✓ Prioritize separate collection of plastic and packaging waste.
- ✓ Develop infrastructure for efficient collection and transportation.
- ✓ Pilot projects in Albanian cities can serve as models for successful implementation.

☞ Citizen Engagement:

- ✓ Encourage citizen cooperation in waste separation.
- ✓ Integrate waste reduction efforts with separate collection initiatives.

☞ Shift from Single-Use Plastics:

- ✓ Promote reusable alternatives to single-use plastics.
- ✓ Encourage businesses and consumers to adopt durable, long-lasting plastic products.
- ✓ Support repair and refurbishment services to extend product lifetimes.

2. Design and Production Measures:

☞ Curbing Virgin Plastics Use:

- ✓ Implement regulations to reduce reliance on virgin plastics.
- ✓ Encourage eco-design principles that prioritize long life of the products, repairs practices and last but not least the recyclability and material efficiency.
- ✓ Foster collaboration between designers, manufacturers, and recyclers.

☞ Facilitating Recycling:

- ✓ Develop guidelines for plastic product design to enhance recyclability.
- ✓ Promote closed-loop supply chains.

3. Cross-Cutting Measures for Circular Plastics:

☞ Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR):

- ✓ Establish an EPR take-back scheme for plastic producers.
- ✓ Hold manufacturers accountable for the end-of-life management of their products.

☞ Collaboration and Research:

- ✓ Engage stakeholders across sectors (industry, academia, NGOs) to drive circular solutions.
- ✓ Invest in research on biodegradable plastics or natural materials for plastic alternatives.

Albania’s commitment to sustainable plastic management can lead the way toward a circular plastics economy. Let us work together to reduce plastic waste and protect our environment for generations to come.