

Three years after China blocked imports of garbage from developed countries, Romania is becoming a new dumping ground for illegally imported trash from mostly European countries.

Romanian Environment Minister Tanczos Barna told a local television show recently that the smuggling of waste into Romania “is a widespread phenomenon, a phenomenon based on the rule that allows the passing of raw materials from one EU member state to another”. “What is theoretically brought in with these containers is the raw material for recycling”, Barna said. “I say ‘theoretically’ because very often in these containers there is something other than what is declared”.

In countries like Germany, Belgium, and Greece, hazardous waste can cost up to 1,000 euros per ton to dispose of. Companies instead try to slash their costs by shipping the trash to Romania, where profitable black-market operations charge around 250 euros per ton to receive the waste. But instead of being disposed of according to regulations, the trash is simply dumped in landfills or burned.

Octavian Berceanu, the head of Romania’s environmental protection agency, says that around 3,700 tons of waste has been smuggled into Romania in 2021 alone.

That included:

May 7: 10 containers from Germany filled with mixed waste, including paper and plastic, discovered in the port of Constanta.

May 31: 10 tons of glass waste loaded in Greece and destined for a company located in Calarasi County.

June 10: 20 tons of plastic from Greece bound for a company in Giurgiu discovered at the border.

June 11: Over 16 tons of waste uncovered by the Bihor border police, mainly consisting of clothing and footwear. The truck driver failed to present papers authorizing the import.

August 3: The Constanta Coast Guard identified one barge within a convoy of six, supposedly carrying grain from Serbia and heading toward the port of Cernavoda. More than 1,000 tons of waste was discovered on board.

The port of Constanta has caught illegal imports of waste coming from as far afield as Japan, China, and Saudi Arabia. Berceanu says the influx has dramatically increased over the past couple of years as countries look for places to dump waste now that China and several other Asian countries have refused to accept more.

But spotting the illegal trash on the border is made more complicated by legal imports of materials such as waste plastic, which Romanian recycling plants purchase from abroad to keep their operations running at full capacity. In 2019, Romania recycled just 12 percent of

its waste - one of the lowest rates in Europe.

Environment Minister Barna says that “waste that arrives in Romania from other European countries is listed in official documents as raw material for recycling, but the company that imports the waste processes only 10 percent, while the rest goes to the landfill”.

Smugglers evade customs officials with other waste by describing it as second-hand products to be sold to Romanians.

“We want to strengthen our legislation to be able to impose prison sentences”, Berceanu says, adding, “From my point of view, it’s a matter of national security”.

Source: rferl.com