

The landfill, located near Cluj-Napoca concerns the life of the 1500 people living and working in the toxic environment of Pata Rât. Their survival depends on selecting the garbage, a work they do on the premises of the landfill. It is very painful to see that people living here have no other choice and lack any knowledge regarding the health threats of living in such an environment – said István Szakáts, activist, and president of AltArt Foundation managing cultural activities of the Pata-Cluj project.

The collapsing landfill situated at a distance of 12 km from the outskirts of Cluj-Napoca, branded as the “treasure city”, speaks of the indifference of the decision makers and shows the political, economic, environmental and social neglect with its severe health implications. The Pata Rât landfill has a loaded history: it was closed because it didn’t meet the necessary requirements to continue to operate, the integrated waste treatment plant despite the promises, hasn’t been built yet and the landfill, operated only on a temporary basis, couldn’t take in any more load. On the 4th of October a fire broke out, putting it down took 24 hours. The landfill was in focus again due to the fire.

„They want burn the trash like villagers, but in a city of half a million” – said Szakáts, who for a long while now is following the events at the landfill. On the 4th of October he got to the premises half an hour after it had caught fire. By that time he got there, the mountain of trash was engulfed by the fire, the flames had reached the top, and this, in his opinion, proves that the landfill was intentionally set on fire. „The temporary landfill is constantly on the verge of its maximum load limit. This is why from time to time it has to be set on fire: the fire eliminates of the volume and trash can be deposited here again.” – he explains.

In an interview given to the Adevărul journal, the Disaster Relief Inspectorate stated that up until the 4th of October 2017, the fire department had to intervene 27 times. Data show that 4 interventions took place in April, 15 in July, 7 in August, two in October. These fires eliminated 20 tons of trash. For the 4th of October fire, the competent authorities were issued a fine of 6000 RON (1300 EUR) by the Environmental Protection Guard. The amount represents a fraction of what the transport of the trash would have costed. Ioan Borș, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency of Cluj said they had issued a fine because the operators of the temporary landfill did not respect the provisions of the operating license. The landfill was not fireproof and the level of toxic gases was over the limit. The Environmental Protection Agency concluded that the landfill had to be fenced, and the smaller piles of trash have to be eliminated from the vicinity of the landfill. There was only one police investigation conducted for the 27 fires. The investigation identified a 15 year old boy as the perpetrator. But given the size of the landfill and the speed with which the fire had spread and engulfed it all, reaching the top within half an hour, shows that it couldn’t

have been caused by a single cigarette butt.

„Those who live there, know who did it, but they won't say names. Their lives depend on keeping their mouths shut. If the companies operating here were banned from the landfill, the people living there would starve to death within three days, as their only income is the 30-40 lei daily charge they get for collecting the garbage” - Szakáts explains.

The mountain of trash at Pata Rât is an urgent social issue

There are no words to describe the circumstances people live in at Pata Rât. Unless we want to use words like the incompetence of decision makers, measurements, statistics, pollution, we have none to describe the circumstances people live in at Pata Rât. The photos and videos fail to show the real size of the landfill and fail to transmit the unbearable stench spreading in the area. While we were filming I suddenly realized that the many debates, articles and studies talking about this place I found myself at examined it in the context of social justice and institutional abuse.

„We are not allowed to work during the weekend” - says one of the workers, accompanied by a twelve year old boy. They have no idea what company they are working for. On Sundays there is not much happening here, he says and urges me to go and see the upper landfill, too.

For children below sixteen entrance is forbidden - says the message at the entrance.

„Despite the fact that the companies agreed on not allowing children to the landfill, they are not keeping their promises. The families living in the vicinity of the landfill need to send their children to work, they need their help in the everyday struggle for survival. The authorities meanwhile, are looking for solutions that would provide humane housing and working conditions for the people living here which would also help with integrating them into the city life” - said Alex Boguş, the social worker working for several years at the landfill in the framework of the Pata-Cluj project, answering the questions of Átlátszó Erdély.

According to Boguş housing conditions are catastrophic. The bigger problem are not the shacks, but the terrible smell. The problem of the lack of drinking water and the health care problems could only be addressed by introducing comprehensive measures. There are brief studies and articles about the level of pollution and contamination, and the people living at the landfill said that many newborn babies suffer symptoms of respiratory illnesses.

Neglected by the law

The poorest and most isolated groups live on the top of Pata Rât landfill: the children are most affected. They did not attend school until the social workers of the Pata-Cluj project

started enrolling them and taking them to Cojocna and Cluj, to those schools which agreed to accept them.

„Officially, employees without working permit are no longer allowed to work in the landfill. But the reality is different. The recycling companies processing the selected garbage have a lot to gain from the work done here almost illegally. The situation is worrying not only from a legal, but from a moral standpoint too: workers are paid an insignificant amount of money, they work under inadequate circumstances, without social security or health insurance while the work they are doing is extremely important and creates huge revenues for the city. Their work should be valued more.” – the social worker explained.

In the recent past, the vice mayor, Emese Oláh announced the formation of a working group where several actors would participate in order to manage both on short and long term the social issues at Pata Rât. According to Alex Boguş it is still too early to comment on the undertaking, as the work has not started yet. A significant change though, – he stressed – is that the local government, even if it is just a small step, started acknowledging and taking responsibility for the situation in Pata Rât.

There is no doubt that the landfill is polluting, the question is: do we want to acknowledge it?

In November, 2009 the city council of Cluj commissioned the Center for Environment and Health to complete a study about water, air and soil pollution for the planned integrated waste management plant. No waste management plant was built in the past eight years, and since then, the level of pollutants indicated in the study has probably risen. The research showed that in the vicinity of the landfill several pollutants were above the limit or beyond the intervention threshold.

„It is crucial to pay attention to air pollution” – Szakáts repeated the conclusions of the study. It is difficult to prove the kind of long term effects the chemicals might have, but the high incidence of respiratory illnesses occurring right after the fires indicate and could easily prove that they are toxic. Despite being aware of the results the authorities did not step in, did not request further measurements to find out what kind of effect the pollutants and toxic gases have on the health of the people living and working at the landfill.

In October, 2017 Szakats commissioned measurement from researchers working at Sapientia University. Results showed that the leachate and the stream in its vicinity contain pollutants at levels that are several times higher than the limit set for rivers and drinking water. The measurement fails to prove the connection between the toxic air and the high incidence of pulmonary diseases and cancer affecting people living in the vicinity of the

landfill, but the high levels of pollutants are in and of themselves reason for concern. Polluting the Someş or the Tisa river is not an immediate cause for concern. No draining permit will be issued without having the sludge and leachate filtered first.

Protecting the bypass road by building a half kilometer long wall

The research group evaluating the visible collapse of the closed landfill identified the necessary measures that should be taken in order to prevent the fall on the eastern bypass road. It is still unclear though how these measures will be implemented. The conclusion of the study is that the collapsing mountain of garbage should be stabilized, and a half kilometer long wall should be erected to protect the bypass road. How would all this be carried out is uncertain, as relocating the garbage would exert pressure on another landfill. How can the measures preventing the collapse be implemented? How can the protective wall be built without filtering and draining first the leachate in the vicinity of landfill? The leachate filter is not even ready yet. And where will the 4 hectares of extra garbage exerting pressure be transported to? Where will the trash we throw out daily be taken if Pata Rât cannot take it in anymore?

Political garbage

The question is, why has the October fire alarmed local authorities and the Environmental Protection Agency, whereas the leachate, leaking for years has not. And why hasn't the April fire caused similar distress?

Based on the statements and public debates it is obvious that this highly popular topic is just a tool in the hands of politicians. Openly the political farce involves the former PDL (Liberal Democratic Party), currently PNL (National Liberal Party), represented by Alin Tişeu, the president of the City Council and the PSD, represented by the Prefect, Aurel Cherecheş. „The landfill can be used to pressure PNL, and the PSD (Social Democratic Party) realized that they themselves can benefit from this situation.”- says Szakáts.

Informal connections secure the political alliance between the local decision makers: Tişeu's best man was the Emil Boc, the Mayor from PNL. The Minister of Environment, Graţiela Gavrilescu is the aid of the Prefect when it comes to exerting pressure.

The debate consists mostly of insinuations, but certain statements are quite clear. Both Aurel Cherecheş and the Vice Commissioner of the Environmental Protection Agency, Róbert Szép agree that the fire was not caused accidentally. „Taking into account the weather conditions and based on what we saw on site, I do not think the fire occurred by accident”- Said Szép at the location of the fire. The state of emergency would have permitted Tişeu to start the interventions on private property in order to prevent the further collapse of the

landfill. He said that declaring state of emergency was the last chance, but did not present any documents that would support his claims, thus, his request could not be accepted by the competent authority.

„Those responsible will be held accountable”- at the press conference on November 8th, when Tişeu presented the necessary intervention measures that needed to be taken based on the expert examination, and said that those who were hindering the process will be held accountable. This was a hint at the Prefect who refrained from declaring state of emergency and slowed down the expropriation of the affected land causing extra costs to the county. It is still unknown where the waste generated in Cluj county will be deposited. According to the optimistic politician, in March 2018 all works will be finalized and the landfill will be closed down.

Waste is an issue which concerns us all, but DAHR (Democratic Alliance of the Hungarians in Romania) is keeping silent

The Hungarian community living in Cluj is as affected by the landfill as are the Romanian inhabitants, still, the Hungarian representatives shy away from taking a stand. According to Szakáts, the reason behind DAHR's silence is that it wouldn't bring them any political gains, given that in the city council DAHR forms a coalition with PNL. The wet autumn and winter months are aggravating the condition of the landfill, already at the brink of collapse and are also contributing to the increased leachate level. Local authorities have not taken any measures to protect the health of the people living or working in the close vicinity of the landfill. The communities living in Pata Rât will spend another winter working under inhuman conditions that render them more vulnerable. Nor the protection of the detour, nor the redistribution of the landfill, nor closing it down would provide a solution to their problem.

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