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Garbage from Naples arriving in Hamburg. The waste piled up in southern Italy because there was no place to dispose of it. For the moment Hamburg is incinerating it. (Urs Kluyver for the International Herald Tribune)

All of Europe getting a whiff of Naples garbage problem

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Correction appended

HAMBURG: Naples's garbage - the plastic Ferrarelle water bottles, the soggy copies of Internazionale magazine, the decomposing kitchen compost - has ended up here, waiting to be dumped into an incinerator on the outskirts of this tidy German city.

For months, mountains of rotting trash have piled up in the streets of southern Italy because the region has run out of places to put it. So for the time being - for 11 weeks actually - a 56-car train will arrive in Hamburg every day after a 44-hour journey, each bearing 700 tons of Neapolitan refuse.

"We are doing this because we were asked to provide emergency aid, but we will do it only for a few months, not years," said Martin Mineur, technical director of two of Hamburg's incinerators, as a steady stream of trucks carrying garbage from the train station roared by. "This is not a long-term solution. Italy will have to solve Italy's problem."

But Italy's problem has echoes in all of Europe, where Naples looks increasingly like a foul-smelling version of an untenable past, and Hamburg its future. Despite population growth, Hamburg actually produces less garbage today than it did almost a decade ago. What it does generate is either recycled or removed to high-tech, low-polluting incinerators.

Outside Naples, Europe's trash may not yet be overflowing in the streets. But across the Continent, longstanding landfill sites are filling up quickly, and in Europe's small spaces there is little room for new ones. The problem has made it imperative for European nations to cut their waste.

By 2020, the European Union will require member nations to reduce the amount of trash sent to landfills to 35 percent of what it was in 1995, and it has already begun severely restricting and reducing the use of landfills, aka garbage dumps, because of the health and environmental problems they produce.

None of this will be easy. Italy, Spain, Greece and Britain all still send more than 60 percent of their garbage to landfills. A recent study found that they - and Ireland and France - are unlikely to meet the long-term landfill targets.

In 2006, the United States sent 55 percent of its waste to landfills, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

"Look, no one wants waste," said Barbara Helferrich, a spokeswoman for the European Commission Environment Directorate. "You want to ignore it, or throw it away, or have huge piles of it out of sight in landfill, as they do in Britain."

"It's a difficult problem," she said, "but some countries are definitely much better than others in waste management."

It is perhaps not surprising that Hamburg should take the lead. Its environmental waste policy is controlled by the German Green Party, which governs the city in a coalition with the conservative Christian Democratic Union. On the street, pedestrians are required to divide trash into four different bins, depending on its recycling potential.

Germany and a few other northern European countries have spent most of the past decade developing strategies to reduce and dispose of the waste generated by modern life - closing polluting landfills, and investing heavily in recycling and trash reduction programs.

For the trash that remains, they have developed state-of-the-art incinerators that minimize noxious emissions with a series of filters and have put the energy generated to good use - heating homes and water, for example.

But incinerators take at least four years to build, officials here say. Getting permits and planning permission to deal with a smelly, undesirable problem often takes longer. For example, although German officials agreed in February to take trash from Naples, it took months to get permission for trash trains from Naples to cross Austria.

On Thursday, the trash transfer program was briefly suspended after Hamburg officials found a small amount of radioactive medical waste in one of the railroad cars; Italian officials promised better monitoring.

But a number of countries have trash problems that will not wait.

"We have described the U.K. as the dustbin of Europe because we put more to landfill than any other country in the EU, and our landfill space is running out very quickly," said Nick Mann of the British Local Government Association. Waste in Britain is increasing 3 percent a year, and its dumps will be filled to capacity in nine years.

Mann said, "A large percentage of our calls are about trash. There's a front-page story on bins almost every day. Trash is a really hot issue."

Unfortunately, Helferrich said, public concern about trash does not translate into solutions. Those depend more on the structure of government, management expertise and national priorities.

Italy "has money from the EU," Helferrich said. "They have technical support. But they still don't have a plan. Naples has not applied EU legislation, and they have been dragging their feet to come up with a proper solution."

In fact, after years of warnings, the European Commission filed suit against Italy in early May, charging that it had failed to meet its obligation to collect and dispose of its garbage. Officials in Hamburg express a degree of sympathy, since until 2000 Hamburg also sent the vast majority of its trash to landfills - most of it to the former East Germany. It was cheap and easy to truck away prosperous Hamburg's trash to poorer towns looking for hard currency.

But a decade ago, the state environment minister decided to end the practice. "After a while, they didn't want to take it, and we didn't want to export it," said Reinhard Fiedler, who runs Hamburg's waste management program. "We had ambitious environmental politicians and also there was a lack of space for landfill. There's been a complete turnaround."

This city of about 1.8 million people produced 1.6 million tons of garbage a year in 1999, and only 50,000 went to recycling. Today, growing in size, it generates only 1.4 million tons; 600,000 tons is incinerated and 800,000 tons is recycled, said Volker Dumann, Hamburg's environment minister.

"The trend is to recycle more and incinerate less and to generate less waste altogether," he said. Indeed, Hamburg's incinerators have excess capacity to accommodate Italian trash because so much trash from the city is now recycled.

In addition to conventional recycling of things like bottles and cans, there are programs to reuse brick in construction and even to reuse X-ray materials, for example.

"It is very expensive to get rid of waste here, so there is a big incentive to generate less," Dumann said. Residents pay a heavily graduated garbage tax that depends on the size of their bins, for example.

Hamburg's incinerators not only dispose of trash, they also feed the heat generated into the heating grid. The plant here, run under contract by the Swedish energy giant Vattenfall, heats water for a large part of downtown Hamburg.

So it was not surprising that when Italy had a garbage problem, it turned to Germany for a solution: On Feb. 28 a delegation from the Italian region of Campania, which includes Naples, flew to Berlin to ask for help from Germany's Environment Ministry. Last year, one German city, Bremerhaven, quietly took a small amount of Naples's trash for incineration. This year, as the crisis deepened - it ultimately helped bring down the leftist government - a larger rescue was needed.

The German Environment Ministry agreed to take 200,000 tons, and asked Germany's states, which control the country's waste programs, to volunteer. Some states, like Hesse, which includes Frankfurt, refused to take Italian trash. But Hamburg said yes. Hamburg has three incinerators: one privately run by Vattenfall, one public, and one a public-private partnership. German incinerators normally receive more than €150 a ton for trash, although Hamburg officials would not say how much, if anything, they were paid by Naples.

But the agreement had its limits. "The German government and the states expect the Italian government to present a coherent program of measures to ensure a long-term solution for the waste disposal problems of the Campania region," the document said.

Indeed, citizens here offer only grudging approval of the plan to rescue Italy, which they tend to regard as a messy younger brother. "Of course no one wants trash," said Jochem Wutschke, a businessman having lunch in front Hamburg's majestic town hall. "But the facilities here are able to burn it - they have the capacity. And they're able to earn money."

Naples and a host of other countries and cities have long been ignoring growing trash problems that are hazardous and environmentally damaging. Landfills leach toxic chemicals into the ground and produce methane, a gas far more potent than the CO₂ from car or factory emissions in terms of its effect on global warming.

To reduce their use, governments are encouraged to reuse, recycle, and then incinerate if necessary.

While incineration does produce greenhouse gas in the form of CO₂, newer incinerators are relatively clean, using new technology to filter out heavy metals, nitrous oxides, particles, and sulfites. In addition, Hamburg has placed its incinerators within the city, both to minimize emissions from garbage truck transport and so that the heat from burning trash can be fed into the heating grid. The Vattenfall plant is just 15 minutes from the city center, on an industrial road lined with recycling facilities.

But that, in a way, makes the local politics of trash even more difficult. Politicians in Naples have said the region has been unable to build planned incinerators in Naples because of local opposition. But Guido Bertolaso, Italy's new trash chief, is not accepting that anymore.

"As you drive around Europe, you see incinerators in lots of neighborhoods," he said last week.

There are now 70 incinerators in Germany and each opening has been accompanied by protest, which quickly subsides, Mineur said. "Most of these projects are not welcome initially, but once the plants are working, nobody says anything."

<http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/06/08/europe/trash.php>