

## Explanatory Comments on the Polish Incinerator Project Awarded with the RegioScars Award 2009

CEE Bankwatch Network

### Background

**Twelve waste incinerators** are planned to be constructed during the coming 6 years – all of them co-financed under European Union's cohesion policy. In 2007, Poland drafted lists of individual projects under the Operational Programme Infrastructure & Environment – projects from this list don't go through a regular competition procedure, but **the funding is reserved** and once the necessary documentation is ready, the project can be implemented. However, as all the incinerators are 'large projects' in view of EU regulations, they also need approval the European Commission first.

Originally, in late 2007, nine incinerators were proposed. In November 2008 further three installations of this type appeared on the government's list. At this point, if implemented, the **12 incinerators will consume over 1,1 billion euro, which is ca. 66% of the entire allocation for waste management projects** to be co-financed by the EU in the 2007-2013 budget period (Measure 2.1 of the Infrastructure & Environment Operational Programme).

### Arguments

- The 9 becoming **12 incinerators deserve a Regio Scars award** because they are expensive, complicated and take a lot of time to develop the necessary documents, resource intensive, face civic opposition and are nowhere close to being ready to apply for EU financing.
- Out of the 12 planned incinerators maybe only half will be ready to apply for EU funding within the financial period 2007-2013. During these 7 years, they are **blocking ca. 75% of the available waste funding** instead of developing alternatives. EU funds are unique financial opportunity for countries like Poland which should not be lost.

- The EC should negotiate with Poland a realistic revision of the List of waste projects so that all incineration projects that are nowhere close to applying for EU funds are removed and the **EU funds for waste are immediately made available for alternative solutions** which are cheaper, resource efficient, socially acceptable and will help Poland to comply with the EU packaging directive and the revised Waste Framework Directive requiring 50% recycling of plastics, metal, paper and glass until 2020.
- In times of economic crisis, **sustained employment effects of structural funding must be central to public investments**. Alternatives such as prevention, recycling and waste separation create more sustainable jobs, business niches and local development. Such an example is **city of Wroclaw where there are no plans to build an incinerator – the city chose to invest in a large scale sorting facility able to cope with the city's and its vicinity's production of waste (210 thousand tonnes per year)**. The sorting facility cost ca. 4 million EUR and was opened in December 2007.

### More explanatory notes

Obviously, the majority of Polish large cities (including Warsaw, Krakow, Poznan, Gdansk) have come to believe that incineration is the best way to cope with the growing amount of waste on one hand and lack of space in landfills on the other hand, keeping in mind **obligations of EU's Landfill Directive (by 2020, only 35% biodegradable municipal waste can end up in landfills**, in relation to figures from 1995). If the targets are not met, the country will face fines from the European Commission. The Polish government has been active in promoting incineration even for relatively smaller cities such as Olsztyn (175.000 inhabitants), encouraging cooperation between local governments (counties) in the entire region to justify and push the incineration project forward.

Unfortunately, authorities on both central and local level have been neglecting the most economical, environmentally friendly and socially acceptable ways to deal with the waste problem – selective collection, recycling and composting. **The level of recycling household waste in Poland is among the lowest in the EU – in 2004, only 2,5% of household waste was collected selectively..** To change the situation, local organizational efforts are needed as well as legal changes and financial incentives should be introduced on national level. Unfortunately, plans to incinerate waste have dominated the agenda, with no visible progress in separate waste collection or recycling. **This brings Poland in danger of not complying with EU's packaging waste directive as well as with the revised Waste Framework Directive with a target of 50% recycling for plastics, metals, paper and glass in 2020.**

Waste incinerators are one of the worst possible ways to invest the funding from the EU cohesion policy, which never has been and probably never again will be available in such large

amounts for Poland in a short period of time. Waste incinerators are expensive to build and operate; their operation implies more costs for households. For economical reasons, these are all large-scale installations, which require a steady supply of mixed waste of certain 'quality'. **This means that once the incinerators are built, there will be little incentive to reduce, re-use or recycle household waste.** Recycling will be even more in danger due to the fact that for smooth operation, incinerators need waste which contains a certain proportion of waste which burns easily – such as plastics. This is especially unfortunate in the times of the financial crisis, which is already causing rising unemployment – **recycling, if developed on a larger scale, could help develop a new industrial branch, with many times more jobs than in the waste incineration scenario.** Providing incentives for companies to specialize in recycling could make the separate collection system less prone to the global economic crisis (currently, the prices of recyclables have dropped dramatically, as Poland exports e.g. China, due to the lack of domestic processing facilities).

**Alternatives to waste incineration have not been properly assessed on national, regional or local level.** Waste management plans, such as Warsaw's waste management plan published for public consultation in October 2008, are clearly written in order to justify the pre-chosen option – waste incineration. Measures to reduce the amount of waste in the first place, and then to collect it separately and recycle, are not given much attention. The growing amount of waste – mixed household waste – is deemed as inevitable and there is not much discussion whether this could be changed; no targets are set in this field. With such assumptions it is easier to prove that incineration is a must (though even for the mixed waste alternative technologies exist, such as different types of mechanical-biological treatment – MBT). Concepts for new incinerators develop ad-hoc and are results of political ambitions rather than analyses, as in the case of Koszalin, where the incinerator had not been foreseen, neither in the region's nor the city's valid waste management plans. The city, however, happens to enjoy special ties with the Vice-Minister of Environment, who has publicly stated that the project has been foreseen for EU co-financing only as a result of his personal intervention. **A positive exception among Polish large cities is Wroclaw where there are no plans to build an incinerator – the city chose to invest in a large scale sorting facility able to cope with the city's and its vicinity's production of waste (210 thousand tonnes per year).** The sorting facility cost ca. 4 million EUR and was opened in December 2007.

Ensuring supply of waste to the incinerators would require a major change in Poland's **waste management system** – currently, waste is collected by private operators and is their property; the companies are allowed to choose a disposal facility which competes with others on the market. Aware that the incinerators will be one of the most expensive options, the government is attempting to change the system in order to be able to force the operators to bring the waste to a certain destination – this process, however, is slow and will face a lot of opposition.

Reserving money for incinerators could prove wasteful for another reason: the projects are complicated and take long to develop, while time to apply for EU funding is running out. Informally, **staff from the Ministries, as well as from the European Union and EIB admit**

**that in the best case, only a few waste incinerators will actually be built with EU support in this budget period.**

Incineration projects are also prone to **social protests** – which can be another factor making it simply impossible to implement the projects, leaving Polish cities with no waste management solutions at all. Protests are actually the first sign that a city is starting to progress with a waste incineration project – they appear immediately. Now matter how one judges the motivation of local groups and citizens, the outcome can be blocking the investment and not using the EU funding at all for waste management. **Recently such protests started intensifying in Gdansk and Szczecin.**

However, the best known and most outstanding case of social conflicts around a planned incinerator is taking place in Poland's second largest city – **Krakow**. Finding the site for the investment was accompanied by fierce demonstrations, protests, failed negotiations and a petition filed in the European. The environmental impact assessment process has not even started – and it may take long, taking into account possible appeals. City authorities have demonstrated the lack of willingness to hold a true dialogue, organizing a round table on waste management in autumn 2008, but not inviting the most active and concerned local protest committees. Time is running, the city's landfill is almost full, but only a miracle could help finalize project documentation by late 2009, when according to the government all applications for EU money should be ready for the large waste management projects. At the same time, the city's separate waste collection schemes are still in the experimental phase. The amount of household waste collected separately today in Krakow is estimated at 7%.

### For more information

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