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## The souvenirs of communism: missed opportunities for sustainable development innovations in the enlarged European Union?

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# **Chapter 5 The souvenirs of communism: missed opportunities for sustainable development innovations in the enlarged European Union?**

***Petr Jehlička***

## **Introduction**

One autumn morning in the early 1990s a group of professionals from Slovakia and the Czech Republic arrived at the vast Open University (OU) campus in Milton Keynes, UK to be trained to teach the OU's environmental courses in their countries. As the bus drew up to the campus, their jaws dropped at the sight of car parks surrounding university buildings filled with some 2,000 cars. 'So we came *here* to learn how to protect the environment?' sighed one of the Slovak visitors.

This brief anecdote from an OU colleague provides several points I wish to draw on in developing the argument of this chapter, which concerns the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). First, right from the start of the process of democratisation of these countries in 1990, the assumption both in the West and CEE was that former socialist societies needed to adopt western know-how, policy approaches and models if they were to lift themselves out of misery inflicted on them by the previous regime.

The phrase ‘transition to democracy and market economy’ used both in academic writing and in assistance programmes was a strong evocation of the linearity of this process. In the context of eastern enlargement of the European Union (EU), ‘catching up with the more advanced practices of their west European neighbours’ (Baker, 2006: 207) was the dominant perspective.

This applied to all policy spheres but first and foremost to the environment. Both Western media and CEE environmental activists used powerful images of smokestacks churning out dark clouds of smoke with ensuing adverse effects on human health and on ecosystems, such as tracts of dead forests killed by acid rain, as the ultimate evidence of the communist regime’s failure to deliver on its promises for harmonious social development. As Zsuzsa Gille, a Hungarian-born US sociologist observed, ‘the textual, visual and statistical representations all suggested, therefore, that state socialism was wasteful, both in the sense of squandering resources and in the sense of being full of wastes: producing too many rejects, too much waste and garbage, and too many outdated and superfluous goods’ (Gille, 2007: 2–3). Thus, explicitly or implicitly, in these representations, much of environmental damage was attributed to the production side of the economy.

It is beyond question that some structural features of socialist states economies such as reliance on low-grade coal as a source of energy generation affected the quality of the air, water, and soil. However, some observers with first hand experience became critical of these media representations and their political implications. Manser (1993: 18) referred to them as

‘one of the last propaganda coups of the cold war’ and Pavlínek and Pickles (2004: 242) described them as western myths of ecocide, toxic nightmare and ecological disaster in CEE. As Gille (2007: 3) pointed out, while dirt, toxic waste, wastefulness and degraded nature in the East was contrasted with cleanliness, efficiency and thriftiness of the West, some 400,000 tonnes of detritus and 40,000 tonnes of toxic waste per year were exported from West Germany to East Germany alone.

Thus, the somewhat simplistic binary relationship between dirty and wasteful East and clean and efficient West begins to look less convincing. It will be my goal in this chapter to unsettle these conventional representations and offer an alternative and more complex view of the relationship between the West and CEE in this area.

### ***The demise of CEE preventative approach to waste management***

As the introductory anecdote suggests, there were some social practices in CEE countries that, although not necessarily motivated by environmental concerns, were quite advanced from the sustainability point of view, but these rarely received attention in scholarly works or in policy exchanges and strategies. As Gille (2007: 3) pointed out, the recollections of her youth in socialist-times Hungary, such as waste collection campaigns in school, returning empty bottles to grocery shops and taking one’s own bags when doing shopping, did not square with the images of socialist societies as hopelessly wasteful which she encountered after her emigration to the United States in 1988.

In fact, these practices, as well as the general approach to waste management in socialist Hungary, were strikingly similar to the declared waste management policies of the EU, which Hungary was supposed to adopt as part of its accession to the Union in 2004. EU environmental management policies are officially guided by the ‘waste management hierarchy’ with environmental risks associated with these methods increasing from 1 to 5 (see Chapter 14):

- 1 Reduce – don’t generate waste in the first place
- 2 Reuse – use products for their original design purpose more than once
- 3 Recycle – reprocess waste materials to manufacture new products
- 4 Recover – burn wastes to recover energy for heat and power generation
- 5 Dispose – landfill wastes that are not suitable for recovery, recycling or reuse

The state socialist approach to waste management could be described as preventative as it was based on waste minimisation, reuse and recycling. In terms of EU waste management hierarchy, this was a highly progressive approach. Land filling, while widely used, was being discouraged by the state more than in the post-socialist period and incineration was virtually non-existent as socialist Hungary had only one purpose-built waste incinerator. The recycling rate for hazardous waste in the 1980s Hungary was 20% while in the then EU-12-countries it was 8%. The environmentally most risky method of management of hazardous waste – incineration – accounted only for about 3% of its volume (Gille, 2007: 186). In keeping with

thriftiness practices in people's daily life mentioned above, the volume of municipal waste per capita in Hungary was lower than in most EU member states at the time.

At this point you might feel compelled to ask to what extent were these environmentally favourable features of waste management, which were compatible with the approach promoted by the EU, considered and further developed during the process of Hungary's accession to the EU. The frustrating answer is: Not at all. In fact, they were scrapped and replaced by a new approach based on the least environmentally-friendly methods of waste management – incineration and land filling. In reality, rather than seizing eastern enlargement as an opportunity to strengthen EU environmental strategies advocating prevention, reduction and recycling, it was seen primarily as an opportunity for the expansion of the market for EU end-of-pipe technologies (i.e. treating pollutants at the end of the production process after they have been formed). There were two crucial prerequisites for achieving this conceptual U-turn. First, the branding of preventative socialist waste management policies domestically as backward and incompatible with European-ness and European consumerism (Gille, 2007: 201). Second, the projection of the image of post-socialist Hungary within the EU as a country lacking any meaningful waste legislation, lacking technical infrastructure to implement modern waste management methods and being incapable of implementing any progressive change (Gille, 2007: 188).

## ***Sustainable consumption practices in CEE and EU sustainable consumption policy***

The opportunity to use the CEE approach to waste management as a source of policy innovation in the whole EU, however theoretical this opportunity was, was lost long before the accession of CEE countries to the Union in 2004. Let me now consider another and more recent example of the interaction between the EU and CEE in the area of sustainability-compatible practices – sustainable consumption.

Since the establishment of sustainable consumption as part of the global environmental governance agenda at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (**UNCED**), it has been increasingly viewed as a prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005). The solutions proposed by UNCED included promoting eco-efficiency and using economic instruments to shift consumption patterns, but it also called on governments to develop ‘new concepts of wealth and prosperity which allow higher standards of living through changed lifestyles and are less dependent on the Earth’s finite resources and more in harmony with the Earth’s carrying capacity’ (UNCED, 1992, chapter 4, paragraph 4.1)).

Thus, sustainable consumption was initially a concept that embraced two competing perspectives – one reformist, and one more radical implying realignment of social and economic institutions (Seyfang, 2005). The former perspective, often referred to as green

consumerism, is based on the premise that individual consumers' choices drive market transformation towards the provision of greener goods and services and thus greater resource efficiency. The problem with the reformist approach is that efficiency gains alone can be overcompensated by a growth in consumption volumes. This problem is addressed by the latter perspective which implies reduced consumption levels with attendant lifestyle changes. A simple illustration of the two perspectives is driving a car further with lower fuel consumption per 100 km versus travelling by train or not at all.

EU environmental policy of the 1970s and 1980s focused primarily on the regulation of production via emissions-limit values and on technology standards. Following the realisation that this left a number of environmental problems unresolved (such as those arising from the growing use of private transport), the EU began to develop legislation addressing environmental problems from the perspective of consumption. The EU took part in wider international efforts which culminated in the World Summit on Sustainable Development (**WSSD**) in 2002. The Plan of Implementation, the most important outcome of the WSSD called on governments to 'encourage and promote the development of a 10-year framework of programmes in support of regional and national initiatives to accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production....' (UN/WSSD, 2002, chapter III, clause 14). The March 2003 European Council identified the development of the 10-year Framework Programme as one of the key priorities of the EU and described it as a primarily internal



challenge: ‘putting our own house in order by delivering at home what we would like others to do too’ (European Commission, 2004, p. 5).

### *Sustainable consumption-compliant food practices in the Czech Republic*

Focusing on another post-socialist CEE country – the Czech Republic – I will briefly introduce two types of social practice compatible with sustainable consumption. Voluntary simplicity and food self-provisioning, while not universally practised, are familiar to large sections of the Czech society. The term ‘voluntary simplicity’ refers to the choice out of free will, rather than by being coerced by poverty, to limit expenditure on consumer goods and services, and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning (Etzioni, 1998: 638). Etzioni was unequivocal about voluntary simplicity’s environmental benefits: ‘There can be little doubt that voluntary simplicity, if constituted on a large scale, would significantly enhance society’s ability to protect the environment.’

Voluntary simplicity in the Czech Republic was a subject of long-term research by the sociology professor Hana Librová. In 1992, she carried out in-depth interviews with people in 49 households whom she described as ‘people who resist the general idea of a society oriented towards attaining high levels of consumption’ (Librová, 1994, p. 207). A decade later she interviewed 15 households selected from the original sample (Librová, 2003). Most of the respondents were people who had moved, in some cases several years before the 1992 research commenced, from comfortable conditions in towns to live in the country and settled individually in villages or rural towns. The furnishing of their flats was markedly modest,

even poor, and they chose not to have televisions. The respondents used bicycles rather than a car. The great majority of them had a secondary or university education but this was not used professionally. Many of them were vegetarians and relied on self-provisioning for their fruit and vegetables.

In comparison with voluntary simplicity, food self-provisioning is a more widespread social practice in the Czech Republic. While the exact scope of environmental benefits of food self-provisioning is difficult to establish, they certainly include a shorter distance from the garden to the table than for food acquired in a conventional way in shops, and often a virtually organic standard of cultivation (Jehlička and Smith, 2007).

Self-provisioning on allotments or smallholdings outside the cities originated in earlier times, but expanded considerably in the socialist period after World War 2. Fresh fruit and vegetables were expensive, quality was poor and supply patchy. But self-provisioning in this period also worked at a political-cultural level to make space for an element of independence from state organisation and provision of both food and work (Haukanes and Pine 2004, p.108).

However, food self-provisioning did not disappear with the arrival of western consumerism in the 1990s. Evidence from a national survey of 1,100 respondents conducted in February 2005 showed that this style of provisioning is still widely practised. 41.5 % of the population use a garden or allotment to produce vegetables and fruit for their own consumption (Smith

and Jehlička, 2007). In his study of productive gardening in Slovakia, Smith (2002) demonstrated that hardship was not the only motivation for self-provisioning. He showed that, both during state socialism, and in the years since, the non-economic reasons for these practices have been at least as prominent as the economic: 'household food production can only be understood in relation to the constellation of household, cultural/historical and economic (not only capitalist) forces' (Smith 2002: 244). Indeed the evidence from Smith and Jehlička's (2007) Czech household interviews and quantitative survey work confirm these Slovakian findings. Far from being directly related to austerity in the economy, the Czech evidence suggests that there are higher rates of self-provisioning in more financially secure households than not. The proportion of people with high living standards that grow their own food is higher (43.6 %) than the proportion of people doing so with the lowest living standard (35 %).

In Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, 21% of people grow their own fruit and vegetables. In mid-size towns this proportion is 41 % and in villages with less than 2,000 inhabitants, 65% of people are involved in this kind of gardening. People's main motivation for self-provisioning is stated as being about having access to their own healthy food. The second motive is financial and the third is that it is a hobby. As a result, self-provisioning of many commodities is very high. For example, the 2005 national survey showed that, among people involved in self-provisioning, two thirds of the consumption of blackcurrants,

strawberries and apples is accounted for by people's own production (Smith and Jehlička, 2007).

### *The transfer of EU sustainable consumption policy to the Czech Republic*

Sustainable consumption as a policy concept arrived in the Czech Republic via two interrelated initiatives in 2003, just a year before the country's accession to the EU – one promoted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the other driven by the EU. Following the publication of the 2001 UNEP strategic policy report 'Consumption Opportunities' and the emphasis placed by the 2002 World Summit on consumption, UNEP ran a series of seminars under the title SCOPE (Sustainable Consumption Opportunities for Europe) in selected European countries including, in May 2003, the Czech Republic.

UNEP's one-off initiative in the Czech Republic soon transformed into part of the EU 10-year Framework Programme. In anticipation of the country's upcoming EU membership, the Czech government set out to develop the *10-year Action Plan for Sustainable Consumption*. After several years, this resulted in the *Framework Programme of sustainable consumption and production of the Czech Republic*, which was conceptually based on EU documents on sustainable consumption.

In contrast, a range of more hands-on activities followed more immediately after the 2003 seminar. Two pilot projects, small in scope but nonetheless logistically complex, were implemented in parallel. At the Ministry of the Environment in Prague and at the

Ombudsman Office in Brno (second largest city in the Czech Republic), some aspects of the operation were 'ecologised'. This included switching to recycled copy paper and fitting the buildings with energy saving light bulbs. In the area of food, the internal directive stipulated that only drinks in returnable bottles and only organic food would be used at official functions organised by the Ministry (Vondrouš, 2004; Kašpar, 2004).

The greatest challenge proved to be the plan to introduce an organic meal option to the menu of the Ombudsman Office's canteen. Developing the supply network of organic ingredients for the organic lunch option in a country with most of its 800 organic farms specialising in meat production for export turned out to be a difficult task. Subsequently, the organic meal option was also introduced in a Brno kindergarten. Nevertheless, despite this huge effort, after about six months both organic food schemes were dropped due to low demand for the organic meal option, mainly due to its substantially higher price (Kanichová, 2004).

Thus, in terms of the two perspectives introduced earlier in this chapter, the projects and activities on sustainable consumption promoted in the country by UNEP and the EU were firmly of the first – reformist – conceptualisation. Indeed, leading figures of the Czech sustainable consumption initiative appeared sceptical about reduced levels of consumption as a basis for policy (Smith and Jehlička, 2007). Instead, when voicing their ideas on policy proposals for sustainable consumption, they invoked a vocabulary of neoliberalism, a vocabulary which includes promoting market competition, choice, citizen-consumerism and individual responsibility of citizens for the implications of their consumption. For example:

“... a group of people is emerging in the Czech Republic to whom status is not demonstrated simply by a new house, but by a house built according to ecological principles. These are the people who are sufficiently well off to afford it, rather than the category of people with an alternative lifestyle who leave the city for the countryside seeking to be self-sufficient and live independently from the external world” (Kanichová 2004).

## **Conclusion**

I hope that I managed to show you in these two brief case studies that a more in-depth approach to investigating environmental policies and practices in former socialist countries of CEE reveals a much more complex situation than that depicted by western media and consultants. As the case of Europeanisation of waste management in Hungary demonstrates, this depiction conveyed a ‘tabula rasa’ (clean slate) approach (Gille 2007: 196) that assumed environmental policy was virtually non-existent in CEE countries. It nurtured the general approach of western aid agencies and of the EU towards the environmental reform of CEE namely, the wholesale adoption of western solutions. The striking element of the waste management story is that there was a policy in CEE and it was highly compatible with the approach promoted by the EU in its programmatic documents. But rather than seeing the CEE approach to waste management as supporting EU declarations, economic rationality that

saw the CEE as a market opportunity for EU countries' industries – incineration and landfilling technology – prevailed.

As the Czech case of food self-provisioning shows, widespread CEE practices which correspond with strategic goals of the EU in the area of sustainable consumption are neglected both by EU institutions and CEE domestic policy actors. Instead, policy innovations of western provenance with marginal sustainability potential are prioritised. The common practice of virtually organic food self-provisioning is disregarded by the policy community which focuses, instead, on market-based green consumerism. The fact that the preventative approach to waste management and food self-provisioning both defy the underlying principles of the prevailing market-driven economic paradigm, perhaps offers a clue for their neglect as a source of policy inspiration.

## **Summary**

- In contradiction to the views widely held by the EU and other western promoters of sustainable development, in some areas state socialist societies of CEE developed innovative policies and harboured social practices that were compatible with principles of sustainable development.
- In the area of waste, with respect to both production and consumption, the approach of CEE societies was based on the notions of prevention and thrift.

- In the area of food consumption, virtually organic self-provisioning is still widely practised.
- Rather than developing these domestic sustainability-compatible approaches and practices, CEE societies are expected to adopt western sustainable development know-how, knowledge and policy approaches in the name of Europeanisation and modernisation.

## **Acknowledgement**

I borrowed the phrase in the title from the book by Dubravka Ugrešić (2007) who, however, uses it in a different context and meaning.

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