Proposition: ‘It is time for a Schengen Zone for waste’

Like people, secondary raw materials could be permitted to cross national borders unhindered within a Schengen Zone. The idea of a Schengen Zone for materials has met with a mixed response. Stientje van Veldhoven MP (Democrats 66) supports the idea; Judith Merkies MEP (Labour) sees no merit in it at all.

By Joop Hazenberg

Whereas goods are traded and shipped freely across Europe, the internal borders often present insurmountable barriers to the transport of wastes. At the beginning of this year, Gerben-Jan Gerbrandy, MEP for the Democrats 66 party, launched the idea of a Schengen Zone for waste transport. He believes waste should be able to cross the EU internal borders without hindrance to optimise its recycling and reuse. Current regulations often make it difficult to transport waste within Europe, says Gerbrandy, despite the fact that increasing recycling rates is a European priority. The European target is to recycle at least half of all household waste by 2020. But is a Schengen Zone for waste transport a feasible proposition? Or even desirable? In this article Dutch MP Stientje van Veldhoven (Democrats 66) and Judith Merkies MEP (Labour) debate the issue.

Would a Schengen Zone for waste contribute to a better European recycling society?

Van Veldhoven: ‘Definitely. The increasing scarcity of raw materials is driving up demand for recycled materials. We believe there is no such thing as waste, and that raw materials should have a third and a fourth life. At the moment, member states are mostly developing their own initiatives for recycling wastes, but it is much more efficient and cheaper to organise this together. For certain materials a border-free zone is needed because to recycle them you need economies of scale.’

Merkies: ‘The argument against hauling wastes back and forth across Europe is to “go local!” We must make sure that as much waste as possible is treated in the region it is produced. That way you avoid situations in which waste is shipped to countries where it is not treated properly or processed to a lower quality. The EU has excellent waste legislation. I would much rather work for proper implementation and enforcement of the current legislation than a new set of rules and agreements for a Schengen Zone for waste, which could have all sorts of undesirable side-effects. The last thing
we need now is a new set of structures and institutions. Let’s first apply the existing rules properly.’

**IS IT VERY DIFFICULT TO TRANSPORT WASTE ACROSS THE BORDERS?**

Merkies: ‘It is claimed that transporting wastes across borders is beset by difficulties, particularly problems with bureaucracy. But the OECD and the EU have put numerous measures in place to facilitate cross-border waste shipments and remove unnecessary obstacles. EU regulations already permit the treatment of wastes in other member states. Certain waste streams require specialist treatment and are best processed at facilities elsewhere – as long as you can demonstrate that the waste treatment company concerned has the necessary facilities and expertise.’

Van Veldhoven: ‘The transport of rare earth elements is subject to numerous strict rules. You’d think it should be much easier. For example, the transport of energy saving light bulbs has been taken care of, but not fluorescent tubes. You have to know all the details of what is permitted and what isn’t. This does not make it any easier to achieve the European target of fifty per cent recycling. A good example is Desso, which collects its old carpet tiles from across the whole of Europe and recycles them at a plant in Slovenia. Each country should be able to develop its own niche recycling markets. It seems a great pity to put up barriers within a company’s internal market.’

**DOESN’T A SCHENGEN ZONE REQUIRE A LEVEL EUROPEAN PLAYING FIELD?**

Merkies: ‘Some EU member states have considerable problems managing and treating their waste. For example, in Naples I saw that household and hazardous wastes are simply dumped on the street and in the countryside because there is no adequate waste treatment infrastructure. If we can do anything to improve waste policy, we should do more to improve implementation and enforcement and ensure the same standards are applied everywhere in Europe. The biggest problem is a failure to implement the legislation, and that is an understatement.’

Van Veldhoven: ‘Compliance and enforcement can always be better, but what we have now is a mix of European and national legislation. And these national regulations, such as landfill taxes, are often different. A Schengen Zone would allow us to even out the disparities between regulations. We want to make it easier to transport waste between countries that have demonstrated that they operate an effective inspection and enforcement regime, such as the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium. I have asked the caretaker Dutch foreign minister, Uri Rosenthal, to set up a pilot project for these three countries. Having to apply for a permit for every shipment is not good for business.’

Merkies: ‘I don’t want to see any special areas within the EU. This would give other countries an excuse to let their waste policies slide. I would much rather see all of us complying with the existing regulations – the ones that set high standards. Otherwise the Schengen Zone would become a sort of orderly American compound surrounded by anarchy. With a Schengen Zone Dutch companies could in fact lose waste imports from countries like Italy, because they would not comply with the regulations.’

**WHAT DO D66 AND LABOUR AGREE ON?**

Van Veldhoven: ‘There should be a European landfill ban. Far too much valuable material is being buried in the ground. For example, a tonne of mobile phones contains more gold than a tonne of ore. Over the past decades we have made huge strides in efficiency and labour productivity, which has made us more competitive. The challenge now is to bring down the cost of materials, which still account for forty per cent of product costs.’

Merkies: ‘Putting an end to landfill is a priority for me too. All efforts should be directed at developing technologies for giving the materials in waste a new life. An essential requirement for this is greater cooperation between countries and companies, for example on implementing new techniques. But we need to take this step by step, because there is always a risk that waste will be dumped.’