

We import banned asbestos from the EU

Croatia has imported thousands and thousands of tons of the deadly poison that it banned in 2006 – at Brussels' urging, to fulfill the membership requirements

Reporter: Sergej Župančić

The astonishment felt at the editorial offices of Forum after a document from the Customs Authority was delivered to us was total and utter. Upon our inquiry into the quantities of asbestos products imported into Croatia, the Customs Authority sent us a table of data from their records, according to which, after the absolute ban of January 1st 2006, asbestos products were imported into our country in 275 instances, to the total amount of 11 677 tons.

The same document shows that 87 % of those imports are imports from the EU, the same union whose juristic legacy Croatia copied word-for-word stating in Croatian laws and regulations that "usage, commercial transactions and manufacturing" anything containing asbestos is "banned". When asbestos is mentioned, we are speaking of "the silent killer", a dangerous poison that causes such diseases and death in agony to which few ways to die can be compared. Between 2005 and 2009 alone, asbestos has killed a total of 345 persons by mesotheliemias, and the final number of victims after several decades of production and usage will likely be in the thousands. That is why the EU has banned it definitely from January 1st 2005, and Croatia followed suit a year later – it was one of the preconditions for the process of joining the EU. You'd think that importing it would be the furthest thing from any sane person's mind; if nothing else, then because the strict legal ban would make it impossible. However, upon some indications that the ban is not as strictly enforced as Croatian laws demand, Forum asked the Customs Authority for a list of imported asbestos products. After a lot of correspondence and weighing of arguments "regarding the delivery of statistical data tied to the asbestos import" we were sent three tables thoroughly filled with data on the country of origin of each amount, its mass, and even the customs tariff numbers.

The clerks of the Customs principal Zlatko Grabar have made the effort to provide us with a document containing as much information as possible, and the data delivered to us made it clear that each asbestos import was registered, so it must have been clear to persons responsible what was going on. The Customs Authority tables bear witness to a total horror. It turns out that the "total ban" resulted in the imports of nine and a half thousand tons from 2005 getting reduced by just a third – to 6357 tons in 2006. Even for Croatian circumstances, such disregard for law is unheard of. In 2006, 3785 tons of asbestos boards, the same kind that gave the Salonit company from Solin their notorious reputation, were imported from Hungary, 1522 tons from Slovenia, 298 tons from Ukraine... From Germany, a most orderly country where laws and regulations are concerned, various building materials containing asbestos were imported to the amount of 103 tons, from Slovenia 107 tons, 53 tons of brake linings containing asbestos from India, 52 tons from Germany... and so on. During the following year, 2007, imports

dropped to 3246 tons, of which more than four fifths was building materials containing asbestos from Hungary. Incidentally, in September of the same year, all those carcinogenic shards from the Salonit factory in Vranjic, very similar to the just-imported goods from Hungary, were dropped into the nearby Mravinačka kava cave. That was the beginning of a 111-million-kuna cleanout of the polluted area, which was the reason for Uskok (anti-corruption squad) to declare open season on Vinko Mladineo, director of the Environment Protection Fund.

While the minister Marina Matulović-Dropulić claimed that the Vranjic cleanout was "flawlessly executed", in 2008, another shipment came from Hungary: 1552 tons of building materials containing asbestos. It was not until 2009 that the quantity of asbestos imports dropped significantly, to barely 16 tons. Most of it was building materials from Ukraine, while the rest were various asbestos clothing, packing material, brake linings and such. The trend of drop in the imports continued until today, but with almost 100 % coming from the EU, and the last registered shipment that we have managed to track was some 10 kilograms of "other things containing asbestos" from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Of course, Forum also asked for the list of companies that have, for more than six years, imported one of the worst materials from the dangerous chemicals list unimpeded, but the Customs Authority invoked the obligation to guard business secrets from the Customs Law.

How about enriched uranium?

We met with the same refusal upon contacting directly the office of the Finance Minister Slavko Linić, although we used the argument that in this case the public interest trumps business confidentiality of whichever kind, since business confidentiality would not be kept if someone was discovered to, for instance, illegally import enriched uranium. The next wall of silence was met while we were trying to ascertain who was, in fact, the person most responsible for the scandalous approval of asbestos imports and how that was technically feasible at all. From director Grabar's office we got the answer that checking whether the goods to be imported match the trade, sanitary and health regulations is exclusively the domain of the Border Sanitation Inspection Service.

- Customs officials upon approval by the inspection services just allow the entrance of goods into the customs area – we were told.

Just to be on the safe side, we checked the laws and regulations and found out it was true, however much logic states that it would be hard to overlook thousands of tons of asbestos-cement materials in, for instance, a train, and not even remember that it was an illegal activity. Our next port of call was the Ministry of Health as an indirect factor. That is where things turned completely mysterious. Minister Ranko Ostojić answered that the Sanitation Inspection Authority has no idea (!) about the imports of asbestos fibers or goods containing asbestos. But one thing was clear:

- Regarding the ban on imports of asbestos fibers and products from 2006, any border crossing and import into Croatia of such goods would entail illegal importing – answered Minister Ostojić.

He did not mention by a single word the fact that a few days previously, the Ministry of Environment had raised the same question with him, after we have tried their address in our search for answers, and got the reply that, according to the division of departments in

Mirela Holy's province, asbestos was only their concern after it becomes waste, but that the Ostojić ministry would be informed of the fact.

The first person that threw some light on how it was possible to import banned substances that will, in the following years, claim the lives of who knows how many Croatian citizens, was Franjo Plavšić, director of the Croatian Toxicology Institute. His claim is shocking in both being scandalous regarding the state services and being completely logical.

- Simply, no-one reported that to the border sanitation inspection. The transporters are those who must declare the goods to the border inspection, the customs officer just watches the customs serial numbers, and the border inspection will not notice anything unless it was warned beforehand– said Plavšić.

The top Croatian toxicologist has encountered such practices before with numerous banned substances.

- I remember that once a company imported the toxic gas phosphene, which in application kills anything, from rats to mites. And that man was once caught. So he went ballistic: "For ten years I have been importing that and nothing ever happened!" He simply did not know he needed a license, and never reported anything, and the border sanitary inspection cannot go from truck to truck and check each of them. It is a fact that various things trickle over the border. There is something wrong with that system. If the transporters and importers were heavily penalized, they would not dare to do those things – described Plavšić a blatant example of the non-functioning of the state in Croatia.

Dossier on the "Vranjic disease"

With asbestos it is obviously a matter of fraud, says Plavšić, adding that the various services are insufficiently interconnected. Now we are coming to the matter of the EU, which is also heavily at fault in this tale. Forum has actually obtained a list of asbestos imports from 2000 until today. If only the import from EU member states is regarded, we come to the fact that in 2000 some 38% of all imported asbestos was delivered from EU; in 2001 it was 48 %, the following year 66 %; and more and more each year that Croatia passed on its road to full membership. An exception was 2009 with just 2 %, but in 2010 and 2011 the percentage of imports from EU leaped to 90 and 99 %. One could maliciously draw the conclusion that EU is using us as a warehouse for the poison that cannot kill in Europe's front yard but can kill in Croatian front yard, despite the fact that Croatia has by then adopted that part of the European law legacy.

- As far as Europe is concerned, it is a matter of the free flow of goods and capital. If you don't break EU regulations, and want to export to Croatia, it's OK as far as EU is concerned. They don't care about the fact that we ourselves, according to our regulations, should not import anything containing asbestos – explains Plavšić, being spot-on there.

Upon Forum's enquiry how the European Commission explains that something that would be a deadly sin is exported into a country that is soon to be a member, we got this answer from the office of the EC commissioner Janez Potočnik:

- The rule on Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH) obliges the EU members to apply the ban on exporting asbestos and

asbestos products. But the REACH regulation is concerned exclusively with the EU market and is not applied to exporting asbestos into non-member states. In other words, if someone in the EU has a customer in Croatia which, as it seems, is not controlling its borders, Brussels is quite fine with not allowing just the export to Croatia but also the production in the EU for the purpose of exporting into "Our Beautiful Homeland". Our discussion with Plavšić highlighted the fact that EU is damaging itself by that, since by exporting asbestos into Croatia it magnifies the asbestos problem in our country, which will soon become Brussels' problem too once Croatia is accepted into the EU – soon.

- That is completely true! That is an economic calculation. We are close to entering the EU, we have undertaken all the directives, so our regulations are European ones. And they know it, which makes that also immoral – concludes Plavšić.

It certainly is immoral, but even if Croatian political elite have not realized how immoral the EU position was, and instead grew rich on corruption in the alleged cleansing of asbestos, those who certainly have realized are the families of 519 persons who have died from mesothelioma, asbestosis and pleural cancer between 2002 and 2010. It is not an accident that mortality in the Istria County is twice the national average, and in Splitsko-dalmatinska County three times higher. Those are the data of the Croatian Institute of Public Health, but Lovre Grgić, president of the ecological association Barbarinac from Vranjic does not put much trust in them. Mostly because of the data he obtained unofficially.

- In 2005 I went to the parish priest in Vranjic. He showed me the parish death records, having officiated at funerals for the last 30 years. By each name he had written a note on the cause of death – old age, heart disease, traffic accident, whatever, and there was a note "the Vranjic disease", which was asbestosis or other diseases caused by asbestos. There were about 110 dead noted, and that just from Vranjic – said Grgić about the data on dead workers in the Salonit factory and other people from Vranjic. The factory used to employ 1400 workers, much more than the population of Vranjic which stands at 1100, so that means a lot of workers from other villages near Split.
- You can tell who's going to be the next to go in Vranjic. The symptoms are easily recognized: you go to the hospital, they get the water out from your lungs, you go back home, but you know that in half a year or a year you'll be gone. It's not a pretty death, it's dying in such pain I would not wish it on anybody – says Grgić calmly, estimating that this will go on for the next 20 years.
- In EU they estimate the peak of the sickness will be in 2018, and we have banned asbestos as late as 2006, and we are not even respecting that ban.

Grgić remembers that bankruptcy manager of Salonit, 10 days before the ban, ordered 900 tons of asbestos, getting a wink from the Health Minister at the time, Neven Ljubičić, that production will be allowed, and soon after the Minister called two environmental associations - Barbarinac and Eko Kvarner – for a meeting.

- The Minister claimed that it was not his decision, that the signature was his, but there was pressure from higher up – says Grgić, and Piršić adds that he tried to explain his actions by mentioning the pressure from ministers Božo Vukelić and Ivan Šuker. At the meeting, the Minister claimed it was better to incorporate asbestos into a finished product, since then it would be tied up with cement and

- thus less harmful. About the risks of production and the work with the dust, he did not utter a single word.
- - At that moment we took out a bag of asbestos we stole from the factory the night before. I held the bag above his head and told him: "Do you really think that it would be better if I opened this bag, instead of leaving it tightly packed?" He went pale as a ghost, the meeting was over, and we left the bag of asbestos as a present for him – describes Grgić that meeting.

Attorneys cried over children

Despite the arguments that management of the finished product is ten times more expensive, production was continued in 2006. Piršić remembers that there was mention of exporting those pipes into the countries where there wasn't a ban on asbestos products – Serbia, Nigeria, and Iran – and that building a sewage system in Teheran was mentioned.

- I don't know what became of that, but then Vinko Mladineo came into the picture with the cleansing and his robberies that are still talked about – says Piršić about what went on afterwards.
- After the process of cleanout got underway, they realized that a lot of money can be lifted from that. Actually they did not do any cleanouts, they just drew the money from the Environmental Protection Fund. It's not that easy to do from the state budget, but it's easier from the fund with a yearly budget of 1.2 billion kuna. Some hundred millions were spent on a "cleanout" that just additionally jeopardized the population – says Grgić, who had followed the trucks that unloaded the waste by night into the Mravinačka kava with his Barbarinac colleagues in a car.

They recorded all that on video, including the fact that tarpaulins on the trucks were so badly tied that the area surrounding the kava was enveloped in asbestos dust, as if it were snowing. Piršić adds that the most shameful role was played, together with Mladineo, by APO, the company that oversaw the management of the asbestos waste.

- APO covered an important part of the participants in those hideous activities, and there was also the parliamentary Commission for environmental Protection, chaired at the time by Marijana Petir who, together with Mladineo, opened soccer fields on asbestos deposits. But the job of overseeing the cleanup, i.e. the mechanism for the state to do some good, was always awarded to APO. In a normal country the license of such a company to do jobs concerning environmental protection would be revoked a long time ago. In the cases of Gorjak and Pliva, APO has made the cleanup methods a business secret.

As far as Forum's discovery on asbestos imports is concerned, Piršić thinks that the state's complete disregard for any such problems is at work here.

- Croatia takes the EU laws by the copy/paste principle; to paraphrase a lyric by a popular band, "With one click in Photoshop they'll be ready for Europe." Here it isn't clear yet that asbestos is one of the greatest killers known to mankind – says Piršić and adds that a consequence of some French scientists saying, after being intensively beset by lobbyists, that "white asbestos" is harmless, was the loss of life of some 50.000 French citizens. EU has a different face, too, so Grgić and Piršić have last year taken a walk through Salonit and its surroundings with a

German Bundestag representative Manuel Sarrazin from the Green Party. Sarrazin was horrified by what he saw.

- He said that he could expect to see something like that in Siberia, but not in Croatia – says Grgić, and Piršić remembers also the reaction by Italian lawyers who recently in Turin court demolished the Swiss-Belgian pair of billionaires who were involved in asbestos production. It was in 1999, and in Italy the victims from the ranks of workers were numbered in thousands. When those lawyers saw at the salonit factory that children are playing on heaps of asbestos waste, those grown men, steeled in brutal legal battles, looked at the kids and started crying like babies.

AND ON ITS OWN TERRITORY, EU SHOWS NO MERCY TO THE POISONERS

While EU for short-term profit allows export of asbestos into "third countries", at the same time in its own backyard, in Turin, the court had mercilessly punished Swiss billionaire Stephan Schmidheiny and Belgian baron Louis de Cartier with 16 years in prison for consciously causing with their company Eternit the death of more than 2000 people. Together with the prison sentences, they were punished by 300 million euros retribution to the sick, the families of those deceased and to local authorities, because it was proven that they knew what they were doing to the workers and surrounding population. To prove that was no problem, since the awareness about dangers of asbestos dates from late 19th century, when those were discovered in Great Britain.

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