



## SUSTAINING CONTAINABILITY: Zero Waste and White Space

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Color-coded plastic recycling bins began appearing regularly on the streets of Sofia, Bulgaria, in 2006. The country was set to join the European Union the following year, and the authorities installed the bins in efforts to meet EU recycling quotas. Yellow was for plastic and metal, green for glass, and blue for cardboard and paper. Each bin sported a small hole in the front, as well as a label indicating which category of packaging waste should go inside. Yet the holes proved too small for almost any packaging to fit through, leading people to pile up all sorts of trash around the recycling containers.

When I asked urban residents, waste workers, and recycling firm executives about the purpose of the design, they all said more or less the same thing: it was to “keep garbage in and G\*psies [*ts\*gani*] out.”<sup>1</sup> The bins were designed to prevent people—in Bulgaria, people assumed to be Roma—from “stealing” and subsequently selling recyclable waste.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that many Romani people across Sofia, due to long histories of workplace discrimination and land dispossession, collect recyclables from a variety of sources, including trash and recycling bins, city sidewalks, and, by request, from people looking to discard bulky materials.<sup>3</sup> Known as *kloshari* (waste collectors or “scavengers”), they transport recyclables to semilegal local collection points called



Figure 1. Plastic bins for EU-mandated separate collection of packaging waste in Sofia, Bulgaria. This photo has been edited to preserve anonymity. Photo by Elana Resnick.

*punkts*, which buy and then sell them to official Producer Responsibility Organizations (also referred to as Packaging Recycling Organizations) (PROs).<sup>4</sup> PROs then report these items in their accounting records of recovered packaging waste, as mandated by the European Union.<sup>5</sup> The EU requires that each member country recycle an increasing amount of packaging waste every year, a number based on the amount of packaged goods put on the market in that country.<sup>6</sup> The PRO officials I spoke with were quick to criminalize Romani collectors, but they also admitted that without the work of *kloshari* and *punkts*, they could not meet EU targets—and thus would risk significant sanctions—because the general public does not sort enough of their garbage or make sufficient use of the color-coded plastic bins. This is not to suggest that people ignore these bins altogether: they do use them, but mostly as mixed-waste receptacles, like the metal bins they sit beside.

Multiple reasons might drive this behavior. First, my friends and neighbors in Sofia explained, the socialist state had made recycling compulsory, so the transition to capitalist democracy entailed the “freedom” to discard instead (cf. Gille 2007). Second, people saw recycling as a “facade”; in the end, they asserted, it all went to the landfill. They knew this, they told me, because they routinely watched waste from the colored-coded and mixed-waste bins dumped into the same garbage truck. I cannot confirm if this is true, but I noted that waste company

officials knew well and forcefully denied the facade argument. They explained that although many city residents saw the differently colored bins emptied into the same truck (which is common practice), *inside the vehicle* recyclable waste was not mixed with waste from other containers. The most important thing, they emphasized, was to keep recyclable waste from contamination by wet household waste, because once that has occurred, recyclables can no longer be decontaminated enough for processing. So, the practice of dumping different color-coded plastic bins into one truck was useful in that it separated recyclables from the wet waste in the mixed-waste bins.

When I visited one of Sofia's main waste-installation (sorting) sites, it did seem as if many kinds of waste were being dumped in one place—only to then be separated on a conveyer belt, by predominantly Romani women, for recycling.<sup>7</sup> This part of the picture was not obvious to most Sofia residents, because, in line with EU policy, the recycling companies were invested in making the streetside bins for separate collection appear as the last front for recyclable waste disposal.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 2. Women working at a waste sorting facility in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Photo by Elana Resnick.

While conducting research in Bulgaria in 2019, a recycling company executive, Marko, described the recycling bins as a ruse to make Bulgaria appear clean

and “European.”<sup>9</sup> He also reiterated a common trope about Roma hindering Europeanization: “So, yes, all the waste might go to the same place, with one truck, but we at least try to keep the streets clean, as opposed to the G\*psies [*ts\*gani*] who just make every bin a mess.” He mentioned times when the municipal inspector’s office had called on him to collect trash amassed around recycling bins, which he and they presumed to be the leftovers from *kloshari* going through the bins to extract anything of value. “With them around, how can we call this Europe?”

Other waste company representatives and urban residents made the same points: they complained that Roma “steal” waste from recycling bins, blaming them for then “polluting” the surrounding environments.<sup>10</sup> People commonly framed Roma, whose labor proves critical to meeting EU mandates, as both anti-European and disposable, tending to equate Roma with the trash they collected. Such associations form part and parcel of contemporary Bulgarian racism.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars of global environmental justice and discard studies have focused on waste—as well as other environmental harms—as it accumulates in “sinks” near systemically marginalized communities (Bullard 1990; Gabrys 2009; Hage 2017; Harper, Steger, and Filčák 2009; Pellow 2017; Pulido 2017; Sze 2006). This certainly makes for a problem in Bulgaria, where trash is dumped by Western European countries, like Italy, that cannot process it.<sup>12</sup> However, this dumping is also recursive; within Bulgaria, waste is disproportionately accumulated—and disposed of—in Romani neighborhoods, rather than being recycled or reused as EU policy mandates.<sup>13</sup> Yet efforts to alleviate such environmental degradation can also burden marginalized groups—in this case, Roma criminalized for work essential to meeting EU-driven environmentalist goals.

The absurdist materiality of Sofia’s recycling bins can reveal a great deal about how marginalized groups engage with progressivist environmental regimes and the larger political systems and racial orders that embed them. I explore this engagement by foregrounding what I call *containability*. Bridging analyses of “progressive” environmentalism and theories of enclosure, containability offers a way to understand the relationship between waste and race. I theorize containability as a realm of human-waste relations predicated on the aspirational goal of boundedness and its everyday disruptions. In other words, containability describes the capacities of various political material enclosures to actually enclose, as well as the ways in which their boundaries prove nearly impossible to sustain. Instead, these supposed enclosures generate spaces for disruption—opportunities for waste collectors to play by containability’s rules yet reveal it as ultimately unattainable.

I investigate the racial politics of keeping waste contained from people deemed disposable and how these efforts fail. Specifically, I trace containability in Sofia through two interlinked processes: 1) official efforts to implement recycling-based international environmental sustainability initiatives and 2) Romani laborers' necessary disruption of institutionalized attempts at containment, which uncovers containment as always aspirational. As my Romani interlocutors involved in Bulgaria's recycling sector made clear, authorities tacitly allow for a certain amount of escape, of diversion from enclosure, for the system to sustain itself. Containability, with its paradoxical core, allows us to better understand the ways in which international sustainability programs can be flawed from the start, a problem particularly relevant in an aspirationally European—and continually Europeanizing—context.<sup>14</sup>

I bring together theories of waste treatment's modernization (Zhang 2020) with analyses of liberal state governance (Sojoyner 2017) as an invitation to think through anthropologies of enclosure that span the city and different forms of racial and environmental harm, but which also serve as spaces for disruption—for taking containability up on its offer to disturb it. As Damien Sojoyner (2017, 516) argues, "enclosed places" are rooted in "brutal systems of punitive containment." Amy Zhang (2020, 92) explores a different kind of urban enclosure, in the form of waste-management infrastructure, one nonetheless related in its liberal logics: enclosures as "aesthetic, spatial, and environmental ideals of an ecological modern method of urban waste treatment." Zhang documents how, in the city of Guangzhou, scientists require an "enclosed system" to transform fly larvae into workers. In this modernization initiative, enclosure also entails hiding trash and its human-animal labor from view and keeping it out of olfactory perception (cf. Nagle 2013; Reno 2015). By putting into dialogue Sojoyner's findings on the "false promises of state governance" and Zhang's analysis of the determined invisibility of nonhuman waste laborers, we can think through other kinds of "enclosed places"—and containability projects—rooted in similar racial capitalist logics, like those that undergird environmental sustainability in Bulgaria.

The material containability of waste bins, I suggest, parallels the containability of the European nation-state as white. Roma, metonymically associated with trash, disrupt the way the EU intended color-coded recycling containers to function, while also still enabling the meeting of EU goals. At the same time, Roma knowingly destabilize the naturalized association between recycling and "Europeanness," or whiteness (Imre 2015; Kalmar 2022; Rucker-Chang and West Ouh-eri 2021; Wekker 2016; van Baar 2019). The agenda of Europeanization and its

environmental policies serves to uphold “Europe” as a fundamentally white space. Specifically, EU-wide environmental sustainability programs like Zero Waste institutionally rely on local racial hierarchies in the name of “greening” the system. Zero Waste marks what I elsewhere call a “racial sustainability” regime in which certain things and categories of people—including whiteness—can be sustained through the discardability of others (Resnick 2025; also Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022; Pellow and Park 2011; Solomon 2019; Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019).

Whiteness in Bulgaria constitutes a fraught category. It is salient for most of my Romani interlocutors as a designation for what they are not (the majority, locally termed “ethnic Bulgarians”)—they also just use the term *Bulgarian* to connote unmarked whiteness.<sup>15</sup> In other words, an implicit understanding equates Bulgarianness with whiteness, at least within the country. The contours of racialization in Bulgaria—in which whiteness may be diagnosed or erased—in large part result from Bulgaria’s long history of racial disavowal, or “politics of racelessness,” structuring its racial landscape (Rexhepi 2022, 9; also El-Tayeb 2011; Imre 2005; Resnick 2024). It also reflects the understandings of non-Romani Bulgarians when they travel or move to Western Europe, where they themselves experience racialization as not fully white.<sup>16</sup> I choose to follow my Romani interlocutors’ understandings and discourses of whiteness to fully address their perspectives as key theorists in the piece.

Theorizing containability through the lens of sustainability—a perpetually aspirational project—provides insights about broader phenomena of containment and related constellations of power. Urban recycling in Bulgaria, within an expanding European Union, marks a technology of sustaining racial hierarchies, or what Barnor Hesse (2007, 646) deems “designations of Europeanness and non-Europeanness.” An ongoing tension exists between ideals of capitalist, late liberal Europeanization and the intertwined vestiges of both socialism’s compulsory recycling programs and legacies of Bulgaria’s severe economic crises of the 1990s. This tension springs into action within an urban landscape that relies on the waste labor of a population viewed as quintessentially “non-European” to meet very European Zero Waste quotas. Attaining the ideals of European sustainability also entails repurposing socialist waste institutions, like the *punkt*, to comply with new international environmental standards.

As Savannah Shange (2019, 4) shows, adopting a critical analytical approach to progressive environmentalism requires addressing “progressivism [as a] fundamentally reconstructionist politic embedded *within* liberal logics.” I draw on this analysis by focusing on relations between the liberal logics of Europeanization and

ongoing projects of sustainability.<sup>17</sup> In conditions of progressivist environmentalism, as in a Europeanizing Bulgaria, the value of waste emerges through the labor of those who collect it, as it is also leveraged against those who survive on its collection, accumulation, and sale.

While this article analytically contends with the always present possibilities of waste's movement and attempts to contain it, I also consider this tension between flow and stasis methodologically. My research extends from Romani neighborhoods and Sofia's urban center to landfills throughout the countryside, waste-management corporate offices, and EU headquarters. My research began in 2003 and concluded in 2024, including three consecutive years (2010–2014) during which I worked as a street sweeper, shadowed international waste and recycling firm CEOs, worked with environmental consultants, interned at the Bulgarian Ministry of the Environment and Water, and spent time in Fakulteta and Filipovtsi, two of Sofia's large Romani neighborhoods. Bulgaria had joined the EU in 2007, and by the time I conducted most of my fieldwork, recycling had emerged as a commonplace topic of conversation. However, most of these discussions did not focus on recycling itself, but on the failures of both recycling containers and containability. As of 2024, Bulgaria continues to near its EU packaging recovery targets despite the ongoing resistance of most Bulgarians to recycle.<sup>18</sup> As the next section shows, this success hailed from the same waste collectors that the street bins were designed to keep out.

### THE LABOR OF SUSTAINABILITY

Environmental sustainability has become the quintessential umbrella framework for environmental reform in the European Union. Officially, Bulgaria has pursued sustainability through multiple avenues since EU accession, including efforts to reduce air pollution, preserve special land areas (“safeguarding nature”), and increase recycling rates while lowering landfilled waste amounts. Functionally, however, *sustainability* in Bulgaria has become synonymous with recycling. This partly results from most components of sustainability projects not being as visible to the general public as waste management; they are often written into conservation laws and other behind-the-scenes mandates. In contrast, EU waste directives take shape through domestic waste recycling, which happens visibly on city streets through racialized practices that help make it a “sustainability” flash point for society. Bulgaria's colored bins are critical, visible infrastructures where recycling can happen, because even if people separate items in their homes, that separation must

then be transferred to the streetside bins where they dispose of their accumulated domestic items.

Separate collection recycling in Bulgaria has a long history (Hlebarov 2013; cf. Gille 2007). Under socialism, Bulgaria had compulsory recycling for different kinds—or streams—of domestic waste. For example, state socialism focused on metal recycling as the foundation of industrialized state-building (Gille 2007). Yet a reaction to the collective memory of forced recycling, alongside current-day cynicism about recycling, has left many urban Bulgarians to reject color-coded separate collection, instead throwing everything into mixed-waste bins. Capitalist-era recycling has thus become a matter of individual decisions about post-consumption discard, and most Bulgarians consider this ability to discard as they please a new-found freedom that rejects EU-sponsored Zero Waste initiatives.<sup>19</sup>

Programs promoting Zero Waste have long encouraged post-discard recycling, especially in newly accessed EU countries.<sup>20</sup> However, their aims differ from the original meaning of this phrase, which, practically, more resembled socialist Bulgaria's approach to material recovery for state industrialization, which baked future recycling into production itself. In the 1970s, Paul Palmer, a chemist living near Silicon Valley in California, coined the term *Zero Waste* to describe a way of recovering still valuable tech business chemicals that their producers were discarding (Mauch 2016). Yet at their inception, Zero Waste programs in newly accessed EU countries like Bulgaria focused neither on waste elimination at the site of production nor on chemicals. Instead, Zero Waste had become a global buzz word to decrease the amount of waste landfilled around the world. In line with European policy, it has been implemented in Bulgaria as an always-changing project of moving, transferring, and transforming waste, so that it no longer “counts” toward EU-regulated landfilled waste amounts. Zero Waste, as implemented in Bulgaria, also attempts to ensure that waste remains outside of (white) Bulgarian view. Landfill reduction targets form part of a broader set of EU-era liberal reforms establishing quantifiable markers, which wealthier European Union countries determined long ago, to limit how much landfilled waste should be accumulated from packaged goods put on the market—and how much waste should be diverted from landfills altogether.<sup>21</sup>

Since most Bulgarians refuse to recycle their household garbage via color-coded streetside containers, EU recycling directives are fulfilled through other avenues. For example, a friend's cousin, Petko, worked as a waste collector (*kloshar*), performing the labor necessary to have such directives appear effective. One day in 2011, he invited me to take a day off from the NGO where I was working to



meet him inside Filipovtsi, the Romani neighborhood where he lived, and accompany him on his work rounds. I called him Uncle Petko (*Bai Petko*) as a sign of respect and an acknowledgment of our wide age gap.

Soon after we began walking together, he told me that through the 1970s and 1980s, he had worked in the much more regulated state socialist transport sector, first as a bus mechanic and later as a bus driver. Yet in the wake of state socialism's collapse in 1989, he found himself quickly unemployed. Nobody in charge of municipal transportation services would hire him because, he explained, he was seen as just another "unemployed dirty G\*psy [*ts\*gan*]." He received a disability pension because years of hard and repetitive labor had taken a toll on his body. But he also gained critical knowledge by working in the automotive repair sector, which included using discarded materials as mandated by the state's thriving secondary reuse program. Now, he used that knowledge to stay busy and eke out some extra money. He saw no shame in working with waste; he rejected terms like *trash* (*bokluk*) and *garbage* (*opadaci*) altogether. When I asked him when he started collecting trash, he joked, "Trash?! . . . Where is the trash? Here, it's just pure money."

While Petko's claim of "pure money" was certainly sarcastic—the objects he amassed required a great deal of work to collect and exchange for money, and not much money at that—his resistance to the term *trash* was serious. In his mind, the collection of recyclables was too important for Bulgaria's economic and social functioning to be "criminal" or "dirty"—two rampant stereotypes of labor like his. "This isn't dirty; it is critical. This place needs us." He was correct, as the country could not afford sanctions if it failed to meet EU sustainability targets, but his collecting was nonetheless both criminalized as theft by recycling company owners and degraded as "backward" and anti-European by local officials and white residents of Sofia.

Petko traveled with his pushcart to collect recyclables early each morning. He devised a handmade cart divided into two sections, one for paper and one for aluminum cans—the two waste streams he deemed most lucrative and easiest to haul. When he collected enough from the colored and mixed bins to fill his cart, he would go to the same one of Sofia's many *punkts*, where he would weigh items after waiting in a line of other collectors. Each day's rounds typically took five to six hours. Then he would return home to eat the lunch his wife had prepared for them.



Figure 3. Uncle Petko's cart, divided into sections for aluminum and paper.  
Photo by Elana Resnick.



Figure 4. Another waste collector weighing collected paper at the local collection point (*punkt*) in downtown Sofia, Bulgaria. Photo by Elana Resnick.

Since the socialist era, *punkts* have been located on the side streets of Bulgarian cities and towns, usually crammed between apartment buildings and thus not readily visible to passersby. Their compensation rates fluctuate daily based on the

international market for raw materials. Every morning, the *punkt* manager posts a handwritten sign indicating the day's price for each raw material (per kilo).

As Petko traversed his route with me, he told me about his life “before.” We stopped outside the apartment building where he and his wife raised their children decades ago, near the high school where his two sons graduated with, as he announced proudly, straight As. We also stopped at places that have more recently become regular parts of his life—the bench where he took his daily cigarette break, the park where he fed the pigeons. When we finally stopped at the local *punkt*, he weighed and sold the items he had collected to a middle-aged white Bulgarian woman. Five hours after we had set out in the morning, Uncle Petko had collected nine kilograms of paper, three kilograms of aluminium, and a broken copper-plated kitchen pot. He sold all of this for 2.80 leva (about \$1.50). I asked him what he was going to do with the money, wondering if it was a good or bad day for him, trying to assess the economics of the job. “I’m going to buy us some coffees, maybe a beer for later, take a lev [about 50 cents] home. That’s a day.” The collectors who used horse carts that I saw hitched to posts outside the *punkts* and the women I sometimes accompanied who sold items as secondhand goods made more money than Petko. But, he explained, the money he made accumulated, little by little, and he was happy to just be out of the house and working.

### STEWARDS AND CRIMINALS

Petko’s labor took shape within broader structures of international environmental governance and Europeanization projects (Andreev 2009; Bechev 2013). Ryan, a Swedish waste-management consultant working on a short-term contract for the Bulgarian Ministry of the Environment and Water, told me about these structures during an interview I initiated over dinner at one of Sofia’s well-known vegetarian restaurants. He revealed that, over the past decade, European statistical indexes have used waste as a marker for capitalist—and, by proxy, democratic—development. In the 1990s, when Bulgaria was unequivocally focused on economic privatization, policymakers were particularly sensitive to such indexes. In this early postsocialist period, Bulgaria had to comply with a set of regulations to fulfill pre-accession requirements necessary to join the EU. These extensive mandates required not only economic privatization and “minority protection” but also environmental sustainability measures designed to reduce waste accumulation.<sup>22</sup> Yet the valorization of waste *production*, understood as a material index of Bulgaria’s economic growth, continued for decades. Marginalia in an unpublished waste strategy planning document from 2011, which I obtained from a former

government employee, still linked waste generation with economic growth. Yet by this time, waste reduction had been established as an official and crucial environmental sustainability goal.

Recycling programs mandated by the EU and their reliance on socialist-era *punkts* prove critical to how waste-management policies reinscribe Europe—and Europeanness—as a perpetually white space (Böröcz 2021; Brodtkin, Morgen, and Hutchinson 2011; Goldberg 2006; Hesse 2007; Kalmar 2022; Lentin 2008; Wecker 2016). Western Europe broadly portrays Bulgaria as needing environmentalist reform because of its socialist past—a not-quite-European space in need of development. But, when pressed, most Western European officials also acknowledge that, since 1990, other European Union countries have been dumping their waste in Bulgaria to reduce their own accumulations.<sup>23</sup> Never mind that recycling was crucial to socialist development for decades: now, as the EU sees it, Bulgaria is a landscape that needs remediation. It thus exemplifies the possibilities for transforming what was a degraded space into a consummate site of Europeanization. For the EU, it is an opportunity to model how to repair and steward a historically polluted landscape. Yet in local plans to realize environmentalist mandates, only some people are understood as potential stewards, while others are deemed hindrances to the system.

Within Bulgaria, EU environmental programs both rely on and criminalize Romani waste workers. As Bulgaria developed its path toward EU accession, Romani communities found themselves poorer and in more precarious positions than they had faced during socialism, when many held relatively lucrative jobs. Heavy industry, including Sofia's Kremikovtsi metallurgy plant and the Balkancar forklift factory, which had employed many of the city's Romani men, downsized or shut down after the 1989 regime change, and Romani women's jobs as seamstresses, office cleaners, and garment workers disappeared as Bulgaria began to outsource and offshore its formerly thriving textile industry. At the same time, costs for housing, food, and health care rose rapidly. Moreover, Roma faced new, increasingly explicit forms of racism in hiring practices and systemically lacked the educational opportunities needed for newly emerging job sectors. Since EU accession, Romani unemployment rates have continued to climb, and waste work—because of its racialization and stigma—notably remains one of the only spheres in which Roma can make an income.<sup>24</sup>

Like Petko, many unemployed workers retooled expertise gained in the socialist-era primary market for the production of heavy industry and applied it to the EU-era secondary market for discarded materials. This labor tends to be

divided along gendered lines: Romani women, on foot with bags, gather items for reuse and resale from garbage and recycling bins, while Romani men use carts to collect raw materials to resell. Horse carts prove especially useful for those collecting lucrative heavy metal waste, otherwise impossible to gather and haul to a *punkt*. When white Bulgarians want to get rid of an old car or construction waste without paying to do so through official channels, they often summon Romani men with horse carts—who advertise with small slips of paper in mailboxes—to make it “disappear.”

These workers disrupt the supposed containability for which the color-coded bins are designed. Their labor confirms that the bins are open enough if there are people who need to go through them. Waste cannot be contained from those who need it; receptacles with small holes cannot perfectly exclude those people who are enabling Bulgaria to meet EU mandates while also, purportedly, preventing the country from attaining “Europeanness.” And many of my waste-collecting interlocutors, including Petko, knew of these and related efforts to contain Roma, including multifarious types of surveillance such as the monitoring of bank accounts, video-recording sellers at *punkts*, workplace policing, and a long history of ethnographers embedded into Romani communities to generate information for authorities (van Baar and Kóczé 2020). These attempts at containment have also manifested in the segregation of Romani neighborhoods, heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Sofia city officials mandated that all Romani residents of certain neighborhoods stay within the bounds of “contained” areas, making them subject to police checkpoints if they tried to leave (Matache and Bhabha 2020; Resnick 2020; Salvatore 2023; Trupia 2021). Liberal ideas of sustainability are often advanced with programs for “stewardship” and “responsibility.” Yet as recycling infrastructures in Bulgaria make clear, EU sustainability implementation is bound up with the same power logics that continue to exclude Roma from categories of personhood (Plájás, M’charek, and van Baar 2019; Weheliye 2014; Vincze 2014).<sup>25</sup>

The “greening” of an expanding Europe thus includes dividing environmental labor between those who can serve as stewards and others who are racialized as criminals. Local politicians and wealthy Bulgarians often make public shows of cleaning up city spaces, for instance, at the corporate-sponsored, annual “Clean Bulgaria in One Day” campaign.<sup>26</sup> Many people I spoke to in Sofia considered this a capitalist reinvention of the Soviet-era cleaning holiday, *subbotnik*. Teams of businesspeople, public figures, and wealthy Sofia residents would clean together in matching T-shirts in events featured on television news and Instagram streams.

While their labor was valorized, the city's uniformed, predominantly Romani waste laborers were denigrated as “lazy,” or said to perform “superfluous” work. Similarly, public authorities espoused that Roma walking the streets with various kinds of carts undermined the city's aspirational European aesthetic.

Yet almost everyone I knew in the waste sector—CEOs, consultants, inspectors, and manual laborers—saw individual waste collecting as an important part of waste management, albeit in different ways. Those employed by waste-management companies criminalized individual collectors for forcing the companies to buy from the *punkts* what they felt they should have received for free, even as they acknowledged that the work of *kloshari* was essential for Bulgaria's ongoing adherence to the EU environmental framework. On the other hand, waste collectors, mostly Romani men and women, saw collecting as vital to their own survival (cf. Millar 2018). They told me they were reclaiming trash from a failing system predicated on waste's non-containability—recovering what the white ruling class didn't want—but also providing a public service by sorting trash that otherwise, as they explained, “would go directly to the landfill.” They knew all too well that the PROs needed just what they collected for Bulgaria to remain—as they put it—“European.”

### CONTAINABILITY

During a public Q&A session after a panel at Sofia's annual Waste Expo conference in 2011, I heard Ivan, the CEO of one of the largest Bulgarian recycling firms, bemoan the company's trouble recovering enough recyclable packaging waste from its color-coded bins. Afterward, I requested his business card and asked him, quickly, why *kloshari* in Sofia outraged him so. He had to run to another conference panel, but I insisted I would call to continue the conversation. He may have been put off by my question, because he did not answer the first several phone calls I made to him. Eventually, he agreed to meet me in his office.

I arrived at his brightly lit office reception area, where an administrative assistant offered me a coffee and handed me a stack of promotional materials, including a miniature plastic recycling bin on wheels. Then I waited until Ivan invited me into his large, windowed office. The interview was awkward at first. I began with some questions about recycling and the nature of his work before finally getting to the issue of the bins: “So why do the different colored bins have those holes in them?” He sat up and leaned forward, visibly excited to talk about the holes, which, he said, were on most of the recycling bins that his firm owned. It was a design effort, he explained, to help the recycling companies from “going under.”

I followed up with statistical questions about how much recyclable waste his organization recovered and about the history of his specific PRO. I wondered aloud what the largest hindrance was to meeting their EU packaging-recovery quotas. At first, he seemed to enjoy the question. The most difficult part of the EU-wide program for separate collection, he announced, was convincing the Bulgarian public to throw the correct kind of packaging into the appropriately colored bin. They had a great deal of funding for public outreach programs (I had witnessed this firsthand in elementary school visits composed of recycling games and educational videos), but it all seemed to fail when it came to adults using the streetside color-coded bins as intended, to sort their household waste.

The second major hindrance, he said, were *kloshari*: “I mean, we have no way to stop them for now from stealing waste from the sorting containers and selling it for money . . . at *punkts* where they buy the waste. I consider this the most difficult. Everything else can be done according to plan, but not this.” The *kloshari* could not be contained by the system intended to prevent them from intercepting waste that would otherwise go to a landfill and, subsequently, making money from that waste.<sup>27</sup> Despite the inefficiency of recycling bins and the reluctance of most Sofia residents to use them, Ivan saw *kloshari* as the main problem. “It means we are paying double. It is how things work now, but this is not the way the system should be. The waste that is in our containers becomes our property.” “Paying double,” I learned over time, was a common refrain from waste-company executives to refer to the money they paid to maintain colored recycling bins on city streets and the money they paid to *punkts* for recyclables they obtained from *kloshari* who scavenged those same bins.

“So,” I interjected, “I want to ask about these *kloshari*, who collect waste on their own,” but he interrupted me: “They are not *collecting* it,” he emphasized; “they are stealing it.” I had noticed Ivan’s awareness of language during the Q&A session at the conference. When speaking to the panelists (via an English-Bulgarian simultaneous interpreter), he used the term *kloshari* to refer to waste collectors, but when directly addressing Bulgarian-speaking audience members, he spoke plainly of *G\*psies (ts\*gani)*. *Kloshari*, in other words, was coded language for Roma, intended for an international audience before which he knew he could not use explicitly racial terminologies without reprimand. With me, he said *kloshari*, but he insisted that what “they” did must be categorized as theft:

The municipalities are responsible for this in the first place, because there are no punishments for the scavengers [*kloshari*], and no one is stopping them.

And, secondly, those who buy it [waste] at the collection points [*punkts*] are also to be blamed, because they are buying waste illegally and paying people to bring it to them. The scavengers [*kloshari*] obviously can't generate so much waste on their own; they are stealing it. That's all.

When I pointed out that *punkts*, according to my research, were legal and registered within the national business registry, Ivan responded gruffly. "They have registration for their activities, and that is good. But tell me, how can they buy from *kloshari* without any invoices or without using the machine that gives you a receipt for buying something?" He continued, "They don't even ask *kloshari* where they got all that waste from." I asked him whether it would be illegal for me to take my own garbage to one of these *punkts* to sell. He answered, "That depends on how many kilograms [of recyclable waste] you can gather. How much can you really gather, one kilogram, maybe?" I nodded. "Well, that's it. Now imagine how those *kloshari* are selling a hundred kilograms every day. Every day!" Knowing this was impossible, I asked him directly if he was claiming that every individual was selling a hundred kilograms daily. "Yes," Ivan replied firmly. "That's what *kloshari* do. They steal and they sell it."

I tried to conceal my rage, asking, "In your view, what's the best avenue for handling this?" Ivan replied, "Of course there must be a clear law. And there must be those who respect the law . . . We have already spoken with the Ministry [of the Environment and Water], of course, so they can make some laws for those people, so they won't be able to sell waste anymore. The law should be organized, so that all waste can be turned in for free . . . and yet, between all the laws, there are still illegal collection points where you get paid when you turn in plastics, paper, and such. And the Ministry is not doing anything about it."

Hristo, the CEO of a smaller waste-management company, was similarly quick to criminalize *kloshari* for their work. He allowed me to shadow him as he organized recycling bin pickups, coordinated with local bureaucrats, and wrote emails to municipalities abroad, including in postwar Libya, to sell plastic bins to those furnishing new waste-collection systems. He also received calls each week from the municipal inspector bemoaning the condition of the recycling bins for which his firm was legally responsible. When doing a recycling bin pickup, workers on the truck would have to sweep the area around the containers if messy so as not to incur fines from the municipality. One day, when Hristo received a phone call about an overturned bin, he rolled his eyes at me, and referenced my work in the Roma NGO sector I had told him about: "Your friends created an issue that



we now need to clean. Soon, you'll see the whole society from this perspective." Hristo was suggesting that the mess his company was mandated to clean had resulted from people collecting recyclables from his company's bins, a process that involves dumping the bins on their sides to bypass the small hand-sized holes at the top. In general, while the domestic waste-management industry actively ignores the fact that *kloshari* waste labor allows Bulgaria to fulfill EU requirements for recycling, it also argues that "G\*psies" make the streets messy, thus making it impossible for Bulgaria to *look* aesthetically "European."

Ivan told me that waste collected by *kloshari* accounted for more than 70 percent of all recovered recyclables in Bulgaria, but he cited this as evidence of their stealing. Many other people gave me the same number at different times, but there are no official statistics to support it, due to market privacy restrictions on public accounting of packaging put on the market (and also the means of its recovery).<sup>28</sup> Most official documents about recycling in Bulgaria likewise do not acknowledge the role of *kloshari* labor. One notable exception is a 2006 report entitled "Zero Waste as Best Environmental Practice for Waste Management in CEE Countries,"<sup>29</sup> which includes a section, "Waste Crisis in Sofia and Roma Community Recycling Activities," with detailed information. Iskra Stoyanova, a co-author of the report who worked for years at the Romani Baht Foundation, focuses on Bulgaria's shift in waste policy from the perspective of Fakulteta, the largest Romani neighborhood in Sofia. In the report (2006, 10), she states that the Ministry of Environment and Water "estimates that roughly 10,000 people are scavenging rubbish bins and landfills to collect and sell recyclable materials in the territory of Bulgaria."<sup>30</sup> On the involvement of Roma, she notes:

The carters usually have two horses each but some of them have 4-5 horses, two of which they rent out to other Roma. Some of the carters have apprentices who are young boys between the age of 10 – 15 year-old [sic] who do not receive any wage or money for the materials they have collected during the day but only food and cigarettes. Normally one cart will collect about 100 kg of metal or 2 m<sup>3</sup> of wood and will make on average 1 trip per day each day (12).

Over the course of my research (2003–2024), the demographics of collectors remained the same, but the landscape of recycling transformed in accordance with changing EU regulations. Since state socialism focused on the nation-building capacity of industrialization, it equipped people like Petko with strategic knowledge

about the production, processing, and repurposing of materials like metal. For waste collectors and companies, metal recycling remains the most lucrative, and thus metal has stayed front and center for decades. From 2010 to 2014, specifically, PROs lobbied to prevent scrap metal theft (ostensibly to increase their profits), with the regulations changed as a result. For example, in 2012, the government required anyone who sold metal at a *punkt* to present ID with their government-issued personal identification number. This has constituted a problem for many Roma who do not have an officially registered address, which can be difficult to obtain. At best, most Romani neighborhoods are tenuously “legal,” and even within “legal” neighborhoods, tens of households are often registered at one address, all of which makes getting mail or an individual ID nearly impossible. The ID requirement in the 2012 Waste Management Act thus effectively rendered many scrap collectors unable to work.<sup>31</sup> It also required sellers to be willing to have themselves recorded on video, which served as an even more frightening deterrent for collectors who rightfully had deep-rooted fears of the police and its long-standing racialized surveillance policies (Yıldız and De Genova 2019; Ivasiuc 2015; Plájás, M’charek, and van Baar 2019).

In 2014, Producer Responsibility Organizations (PROs) took financial ownership of many of Sofia’s *punkts*, a testament to how these critical waste infrastructures work in practice (Doherty 2021; Nucho 2019). After EU accession, the *punkts* of socialist-era recycling continued operations to fulfill EU Zero Waste targets, now as sites where recycling waste was both bought and accounted for in official documents. Since recycling organizations now owned many of the *punkts*, people like Petko could continue to sell collected waste there as before, but instead of selling it to an intermediary, they were selling it to the PROs directly. Practices stayed similar, but collectors started to worry that they would face surveillance in the *punkts*, having quickly noticed the newly installed cameras. In effect, waste infrastructures mandatory in the socialist era continued to function in a space of legal ambiguity after 1990 that has, since 2014, become institutionalized as an economically necessary—although not fully “formalized”—part of the EU-mandated waste-management sector.

Waste containers serve as material manifestations of containability, designed to isolate and control (cf. Markkula 2021; Shryock and Smail 2018). Bulgarian officials, corporate executives, and environmentalist bureaucrats attempt to contain waste, in part by criminalizing the laborers who access it. While they value waste as something worthy of theft, they devalue the labor of *kloshari* who ensure that the waste—from streetside bins and elsewhere—is recycled. By preventing

unwanted people from accessing waste containers, but also, as I show in the next section, by preventing Romani neighborhood waste from comingling with “better” Sofia waste, they negotiate the politics of containability and value within a racialized regime of criminality (Sojoyner 2017). In criminalizing the labor that compensates for Sofia residents rejecting recycling mandates, Bulgarian waste recovery organizations affirm the value of waste as worthy of being stolen.

### CONCLUSION: Containable Futures

Waste collectors in Bulgaria—often working in the only job sector accessible to them—are interpolated in the design of recycling bins; the deposit holes in the containers mark their presence by attempting to keep “them” out. To maintain this kind of containment, strict measures of surveillance are enforced, ones rooted in ongoing aspirations of Europeanization. These measures are highly racialized; waste-management bureaucrats took pride in preventing “criminals”—naturalized as Roma—from accessing these “European” infrastructures. My ethnography suggests that containability, as experienced in the daily lives of waste collectors in Sofia, inevitably and always remains incomplete. The bin design includes the possibility for its own disruption and, in fact, *depends on that* for the system to work. For example, as Petko acknowledges institutional attempts to keep him from accessing waste, he also bypasses such attempts at containability, which functionally enables Bulgaria to comply with its EU mandates.<sup>32</sup>

More than mere objects or nodes within wider international waste networks, recycling bins represent both the attempts at and impossibilities of containment. By starting with the bin itself, I have theorized containability as the force that keeps a color-coded, streetside recycling system in operation despite failures of Sofia residents to use the bins as intended. Then, by documenting how collectors—*kloshari*—like Petko live within dehumanizing conditions not of their own making, including within projects of “European” containability, I show how they underscore the impossibility of containment by working hard, each day, to upend it—while also maintaining its place in the broader waste-management system.

Containability shifts scale from city streets to regional landfills; it also emerges via EU-sponsored “modern” waste depots, which replace socialist-era landfills. Old-fashioned and still functioning landfills are fully open to the elements, the senses (i.e., they stink), and whoever can approach them. During my visits to aging landfills across Bulgaria in 2013, I saw entire families living, working, and sleeping at transitioning landfill depots. I also witnessed that, in contrast to the older landfills, newer EU-funded depots, despite being open at the top,

were designed to be secure, contained, and “clean.”<sup>33</sup> This entailed segregating waste coming from Romani neighborhoods, as one of my interlocutors, Valentina, informed me.

Valentina, a waste executive working at a new EU-approved waste-installation site, told me in late 2019 that the waste from Sofia’s big Romani neighborhoods is “so contaminated” that it is not worth sorting to recycle. This is because trash generated by Roma is considered, in Valentina’s terms, “unrecoverable.” When I pressed her on what she meant, she explained that there was nothing of value to reclaim in Romani waste. Her statement implied both that their waste had already been sorted through, “scavenged” and sold, but also, like the stereotype of Romani people, that it was too “dirty” to be worthwhile. As a result, it appeared more efficient to not sort it in the first place.

Instead, the new waste-installation site treats waste from Romani neighborhoods as the old, Soviet-style landfill would: dumping it wholesale without any processing. Just as Romani people are often seen to need “containment”—for example, their urban segregation throughout Bulgarian history or the policy in effect during the COVID-19 pandemic that I discussed earlier—waste from Romani neighborhoods, picked up intermittently at best, also becomes the object of containability at Sofia’s modern waste-installation site.

Valentina adds a new dimension to waste’s containability: she focuses on containing some waste from other waste, based on where it came from. Like the types of containment used by governments across the global north “to interrupt and refuse the mobility of people from the global south,” environmentalist attempts at waste’s containment in Bulgaria has similarly taken shape through racialized criminalization (Besteman 2020, 61). In conditions of rampant inequality and rapid environmental “progress,” it is not unusual for waste labor to be alternatively unrecognized and criminalized but also used in projects of resistant life-making, which include the practices of disruption on which both waste workers—and EU policies—depend, albeit to different ends (Ahmann 2019; Butt 2023; Doherty 2021; Fredericks 2018; Millar 2018; Resnick 2021; Solomon 2019, 2022; Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019).

As my Romani interlocutors working in Bulgaria’s recycling sector made clear, authorities tacitly allow for a certain amount of diversion from enclosure for the system to sustain itself. This means that waste officials turn a blind eye when *kloshari* go through waste, as long as it ends up at their *punkts* and helps them meet their EU targets. They bemoan this countersystem even as they rely on it. They know that designing recycling containers with small holes does not

stop people from going through them—an entire parallel waste-collection system depends on this labor. But Sofia’s recycling bins also make the surveilling of racialized *kloshari*—often Romani—labor that much easier. For example, I often saw Romani women casually reach inside open metal mixed-waste trash bins as they passed by, cigarette in hand. Yet because the recycling bins’ small openings make the act of collecting waste harder, multiple adults might need to tip over entire bins to sift their contents—rendering them hypervisible on city streets. Moreover, recycling firm executives, like Ivan, project state failings onto Roma in ways that showcase how Bulgaria’s compliance with EU environmental governance is predicated on the dual project of valuing waste and criminalizing the labor of its recovery.<sup>34</sup>

The kind of racial exclusions that containability makes apparent reveals a conjunction of multiple, structural forces.<sup>35</sup> These forces include Europeanization as an ongoing racial project, one that encompasses the continuing transition from state socialism to capitalist democracy and the racist, liberal projects of EU policy harmonization on which this transition currently depends. At their root, EU recycling initiatives recycle the enduring racial hierarchies that have undergirded Europeanization for centuries, while at the same time promoting them as new, future-oriented, and progressively “green.”

Sustainability projects in Bulgaria reinforce hierarchies of racialization through the country’s aspirations of attaining not only an official but also a lived, aesthetic kind of European status that is, by definition, white (Hesse 2007; Kalmar 2022; Wekker 2016). Many sustainable development initiatives worldwide result in finding a “sink” (or dump, or unregulated Romani neighborhood) where waste can go, exacerbating racialized geographic inequalities (Gabrys 2009; Liboiron 2021). But in Sofia, sustainability also concerns keeping those same people living among waste at home (because their neighborhoods lack municipal waste removal) *from* accessing waste’s value on the city’s streets, all while relying on their labor.

Contemporary environmental policies, including EU-wide programs like Zero Waste, uphold the daily practices of “Europe” as a fundamentally white space. These programs reinvigorate long-standing racial politics in new “environmentally friendly” ways and with changing material technologies. Zero Waste, as a future-oriented initiative deeply reliant on local histories of racialization, is a project of an imagined future and constant erasure. It marks a “racial sustainability regime” in which certain things and categories of people can be sustained through the discardability of others (Resnick 2025).

As waste regimes morph into racialized sustainability regimes—in the name of progressivist Europeanization—people find gaps in institutionalized attempts to contain them from the city and its waste. Bulgaria’s most visible sustainability project, Zero Waste, entails imagining what life could be. It is the forward-thinking promise of a future in which there is no trash on city streets—but also a future in which Bulgaria is white, and, paradoxically, would lack the racialized labor to keep its aspirational goals of Europeanization alive.

## ABSTRACT

*Environmental sustainability initiatives in Bulgaria generate new forms of racialization. Although institutionally framed as progressive in the name of “green” Europeanization, in practice these initiatives rely on undervalued and unrecognized racialized labor. By attending to the materiality of recycling bins in downtown Sofia and their physical openings—designed to keep hands out—I show how people engage with recycling-based sustainability regimes and the environmental systems in which they are embedded. Bridging analyses of progressivist environmentalism and anthropologies of enclosure, this article introduces the idea of containability to understand the relationship between waste and race. Containability marks a realm of human-waste relations predicated on the aspirational goal of boundedness and the everyday disruptions of it. I examine these relations from the perspectives of waste collectors, recycling executives, Romani neighborhood residents, and international environmental consultants. These insights invite us to rethink the racial and material politics of environmentalism that constitute contemporary urban life. [sustainability; environmentalism; race; labor; recycling; Europe; waste]*

## РЕЗЮМЕ

*Инициативите за екологична устойчивост в България създават нови форми на расово разделение. Тези инициативи, въпреки че са институционално формулирани като прогресивни в името на „зелената“ европеизация, разчитат на подценен и незачитан расово маркиран труд. Обръщайки внимание на веществеността на контейнерите за рециклиране в центъра на София и на техните физически отвори, проектирани да държат ръцете вън от тях, показвам какво е отношението на хората към устойчивите режими за рециклиране, както и към екологичните системи, в които са вградени. Включвайки анализи от прогресивната екология и от антропологията на ограждането, тази статия въвежда идеята за съдържаемост, за да обясни връзката между отпадъците и расата. Съдържаемостта е област, принадлежаща на връзката хора—отпадъци, която е основана на стремежа към ограничаване и на всекидневните ѝ прекъсвания. Изследвам тази връзка от*

*перспективата на сметосъбирачи, ръководители по рециклирането, жители на Ромски квартали и международни консултанти по екология. Този поглед ни подканва да преосмислим расовата и материалната екологична политика, върху които е изграден съвременният градски живот. [устойчивост; екология; раса; труд; рециклиране; Европа; отпадъци]*

## NOTES

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1. In line with Romani activists and scholars including Ioanida Costache (<https://www.dor.ro/racism-and-the-road-to-healing/>), I spell *Gypsy* in the remainder of this essay as *G\*psy*, because it is a racial slur. The Bulgarian word, *tsigan* (singular)/*tsigani* (plural), is also considered derogatory by many Bulgarian Roma and so I have denoted it as *ts\*gan/ts\*gani* throughout.
2. Roma in Bulgaria comprise approximately 10.33 percent of the total population, according to the Council of Europe, although statistics are skewed since census-takers miss many Romani communities and/or Roma don't identify as Roma for myriad reasons, including fear of surveillance ([https://commission.europa.eu/content/roma-equality-inclusion-and-participation-eu-country/bulgaria\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/content/roma-equality-inclusion-and-participation-eu-country/bulgaria_en)). Also consult Surdu 2016; Plájás, M'charek, and van Baar 2019.
3. Many of my white Bulgarian interlocutors wanted to make sure my research acknowledged that even non-Romani Bulgarians, mostly the poor and elderly, had turned to dumpsters for income and food. While they saw these white Bulgarians as victims of a corrupt, incompetent state that cannot provide adequate pensions, they generally saw Roma as criminals stealing waste.

4. *Punkts* have been part of Sofia life for decades and are not outlawed, but they are also not fully regulated.
5. The tax on packaged products in Bulgaria was introduced in March 2004 and is designated per kilogram of packaging material. To avoid paying this tax directly, producers sign a contract with a Producer Responsibility Organization (PRO) that they pay to be responsible for the recycling and recovery of the packaging to meet EU targets (<https://d-nb.info/1097448436/34>).
6. The steadily increasing recycling targets are bolstered by a growing, EU-mandated tax on landfilled waste; together they function to incentivize recycling at the national level.
7. I thank an anonymous reviewer who asked if Roma serve as the scapegoats for a failing recycling system and if non-Roma would admit this. Many non-Roma would admit to the system's failure but do not see Roma as scapegoats; my white Bulgarian interlocutors typically believed that *both* the official recycling system and Roma collectors were to blame. Those within and with extensive knowledge of the sector claimed that bins are "useless" except for two elements: 1) recycling bins can separate recyclables from "wet waste" and 2) color-coded bins could enculturate the population to recycle (even if not immediately successful).
8. <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/economic-instruments-and-separate-collection>
9. All names have been anonymized.
10. Accounts of Roma "stealing" recyclables form part of ubiquitous tropes of anti-Roma racism in Bulgaria, which position Roma not as contributing workers but as inveterate criminals.
11. My non-Romani interlocutors often equated Roma with trash, while Romani interlocutors would tell me, "You study trash, that's why you're talking to us."
12. Western European countries have exported waste to Bulgaria for years. It has become mainstream news since EU accession in 2007 and became a major issue particularly after China, the largest recipient of EU trash, banned waste imports in 2018 (<https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-recycling-china-trash-ban-forces-europe-to-confront-its-waste-problem/>).
13. The Waste Framework Directive 2008/98/EC (as amended by Directive [EU] 2018/851) includes a target to recycle and prepare for reuse 55 percent of all municipal waste generated by 2025. The Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive (94/62/EC as amended by Directive [EU] 2018/852) includes targets for the recycling of packaging waste, both in total and by material, to be achieved by 2025. Bulgaria's 2025 target is that 65 percent of total packaging waste must be recycled. Importantly, waste incineration (in Bulgaria, in three cement plants and one thermal plant) does not technically count as recycling, but it does effectively count toward reducing landfilled waste, per EU policy (see <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/many-eu-member-states/bulgaria>).
14. My analysis bridges critical studies of liberalism (Povinelli 2011; Shange 2019) and fugitivity (McKittrick 2021; Moten 2017; Sojoyner 2017) with scholarship about social and material enclosures (Besteman 2020; Byler 2022; Chua 2018; Markkula 2021; O'Hare 2017; Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019; Zhang 2020) to posit a new approach to environmental relations, something we might consider a multiscalar ecopolitics (Morimoto 2022).
15. Although racialization need not be articulated through terms of colorization, many of my Romani interlocutors used terms ranging from *black (cherni)* to *swarthy (murgavi)* and *dark (tumni)* to describe their racialized positionality.
16. The racialization of non-Romani Bulgarians abroad as not quite "white" or "European" still drew on local tropes of Romani racialization. Many discussions I had with non-Romani Bulgarians who had traveled abroad involved their analogizing themselves to G\*psies when juxtaposed to Western Europeans.
17. Checker (2011, 2020), Isenhour (2015), McDonogh, Isenhour, and Checker (2011), and Swyngedouw (2007) present critical analyses of urban "sustainability" programs, rhetoric, and justice-centered alternatives.



18. It is important to note that this rate differs from Bulgaria's overall municipal solid waste recycling rate, which was 31.5 percent in 2018, 23.5 percentage points below its 2025 target. [https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/many-eu-member-states/bulgaria/at\\_download/file](https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/many-eu-member-states/bulgaria/at_download/file)
19. These "sanitary regimes," in which "clean up becomes a civilizing project to ensure a better, whiter, gentrified future," forms part of global flows of capital and related projects of urban "cleansing" (Solomon 2019, 77; also see Doherty 2021).
20. Zero Waste policy implementation in Bulgaria has focused on post-consumption recycling, even though Zero Waste Europe has long espoused ideologies of a "circular economy," or a "model of production and consumption which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing, and recycling existing materials and products as long as possible" (<https://zerowasteurope.eu/about/about-zero-waste/>).
21. European "green dot" recycling programs, in the name of Zero Waste and codified into EU regulation, make for another measure shaping disposal that focuses on reconfiguring or disappearing waste (O'Hare 2022). The green dot indicates that the company putting that packaging on the market has paid funds to a registered PRO "set up in accordance with the principles defined in European Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive 94/62 and the respective national law."
22. For EU accession criteria, see [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession\\_criteria\\_copenhagen.html](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession_criteria_copenhagen.html)
23. <https://www.dw.com/en/my-europe-illegal-garbage-dumps-reflect-eus-east-west-divide/a-52480168>
24. The 2021 census showed that Roma employment stood at 21.6 percent, compared to 66.8 percent of "ethnic Bulgarians." According to census data, more than half (51.2 percent) of Bulgarian Roma of working age were unemployed. <https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2021-ethnos.pdf>
25. Roma, especially when working with waste, are treated like the materials they touch. This includes having lit cigarettes thrown at them, not receiving pay for weeks at a time, and being likened (by their bosses and passersby) to animals and machinery.
26. See the Let's Clean Bulgaria Together website, <https://www.btv.bg/english/news/the-11th-edition-of-let-s-clean-bulgaria-together-started-with-an-official-national-meeting-of-the-partners.html>
27. Importantly, the work of *kloshari* also helps Bulgaria reduce its landfilled waste amount and associated (rising) landfill tax.
28. This was explained to me in person while interning at the Bulgarian Ministry of the Environment and Water in 2013. However, more recent accounts reveal specific amounts of packaging put on the market (e.g., Dolchinkov and Ozerova 2019).
29. [https://ipen.org/sites/default/files/documents/19ceh\\_zero\\_waste\\_as\\_bep\\_in\\_cee\\_countries-en.pdf](https://ipen.org/sites/default/files/documents/19ceh_zero_waste_as_bep_in_cee_countries-en.pdf)
30. This 2006 report cites "MEW (2003a)" as its source. I have not been able to identify this source, nor locate statistics on those who work as "scavengers" (*kloshari*) in Bulgaria. I asked the author for this documentation, but she could not access it. Nonetheless, I trust these details, as they align with my own interview data.
31. [https://www.moew.government.bg/static/media/ups/tiny/Waste\\_Management\\_Act.pdf](https://www.moew.government.bg/static/media/ups/tiny/Waste_Management_Act.pdf)
32. Damien Sojoyner (2017, 2022) and others (McKittrick 2021; Moten 2017; Shange 2019) argue that a politics of fugitivity can emerge in hyper-regulated spaces of oppression. Following this perspective, the forms of containability I address are persistently present but never fully realized.
33. Amid the gates and locks and cameras of the landfills and waste depots roamed birds, either crows or seagulls, depending on proximity to the sea (Doherty 2021; O'Hare 2022; Sosna, Henig, and Figura 2022). Newer waste depots included special liners at the bottom, gates with locks to monitor all who enter, and video-surveilled weigh stations to measure waste and prevent waste categorized as construction, hazardous, or green from being illegally dumped there. Despite attempts to contain waste from the sides

- and the bottom, the tops of even the most modernized landfills remain open as trucks dump waste and birds fly in. These scenarios provide another example of how attempts at containability are constantly subject to disruption.
34. Ivan's simultaneous blaming of Roma and the Bulgarian government is not new—Roma have received the blame for failures of governance for centuries (Lemon 2000; cf. Harney and Moten 2013).
  35. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this phrasing.

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