Tackling Fast Fashion in the EU: The Sustainable Textiles Strategy, Waste Crisis, and Unfair Competition

Summary

KEY POINTS

1. Millions of tonnes of textile waste are generated annually in the EU, yet only 1% is recycled into new clothing.

2. Ultra-fast fashion imports bypass EU environmental rules via customs loopholes, pressuring domestic textile SMEs.

3. Ecodesign mandates and Extended Producer Responsibility must be backed by strict customs enforcement and recycling funds.

European textile SMEs are struggling to compete with non-EU e-commerce platforms that specialise in selling non-compliant "ultra-fast fashion" products to EU consumers. The Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles will fall short of addressing textile overconsumption and tackling its negative environmental impacts unless the EU pairs binding ecodesign requirements with stricter controls at its external borders to stop non-compliant imports.

Textiles and clothing are the fifth largest consumers of primary raw materials, as well as GHG emissions and the third-largest consumer of water and land use in the EU (European Environment Agency, 2024). To address this, in 2022 the European Commission adopted the Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles, which aims to ensure that all textiles placed on the market in the EU should be durable, repairable and recyclable by 2030 (European Commission, 2022).

Textile waste and recycling challenges

On average, EU citizens discard between 12 to 15 kilograms of textiles each year, totalling approximately 5.8 million tonnes annually across the EU (European Parliament, 2023). Yet, due to limited recycling technologies and the use of mixed synthetic fibres, less than 1% of textile waste is recycled into new garments (fiber-to-fiber recycling). Instead, most is incinerated or shipped to developing countries, where it has significant negative environmental and socioeconomic impacts (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

Textile imports and competitive concerns for EU manufacturers

The recently agreed Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) introduces important measures to tackle these issues, such as the Digital Product Passport, which will contain information about the composition of a garment, as well as a ban on the destruction of unsold textiles (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024). However, stringent rules aimed at improving the circularity of textile products risk exposing EU manufacturers to unfair competition from imports of cheap non-compliant textiles. Millions of low-value textile parcels, often containing non-compliant synthetic garments, currently enter the EU every day to be sold directly to consumers through e-commerce platforms, without any customs duties thanks to the de minimis customs exemption for packages with a value of less than 150 euros. These textiles enter the EU without controls to check compliance with EU rules on durability or the use of certain chemicals. As a result, EU manufacturers that comply with EU sustainability rules face an unfair competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis non-compliant imports of “ultra-fast fashion” products (Changing Markets Foundation, 2023; EURATEX, 2023).



Financing textile collection and recycling: EPR schemes

EU textile producers should also be made financially responsible for the collection, sorting and recycling of end-of-life textiles. Such Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes will become mandatory in all EU countries thanks to an ongoing revision of the Waste Framework Directive (European Commission, 2023). EPR fees can be eco-modulated, meaning that producers of less circular and durable garments, as well as of garments made of synthetic fibres, would pay higher fees. Ideally, revenues raised from such EPR fees should be ring-fenced and earmarked for investment in textile collection, sorting and recycling systems.

Given major disparities in collection, sorting and recycling capacities, especially between Western and Eastern European countries, earmarking part of EPR fees could help prevent separate collection systems from failing in some Member States. Textile EPR fees could also finance investment in innovative recycling technologies and the green transition of EU textile producers. EU cohesion policies should play an important role in co-financing the build-out of sorting and recycling infrastructure, especially in Eastern European countries that currently lack the financial means to set up efficient waste sorting and recycling systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Abolish the De Minimis Customs Loophole

Abolish the 150-euro de minimis customs exemption for packages ordered through e-commerce and make the Digital Product Passport mandatory for imported textiles.

2. Eco-Modulate EPR Fees

Introduce mandatory EPR fees that are eco-modulated, in order to penalise producers of non-durable and non-repairable “disposable” garments.



FOOTNOTES

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This Policy Brief has been prepared as part of the participants / students' assessment in the framework of the EU Politics lecture.
The content of this policy brief lies entirely with the author. It does not reflect the official opinion of Çağ University.