

Collecting Bottles as a Profession

Alban Knecht, April 2024

A deposit system for disposable bottles and cans will be introduced in Austria in 2025. Collecting bottles will then become a topic of interest in this country. In Germany, where such a system has been in place for some time, a new profession has emerged: deposit collectors.

Uwe from Hamburg is a man of the first hour. Back in the summer of 2007, after the deposit system in Germany was changed in a way that deposit bottles and cans could be handed in at any supermarket, he walked along the Landungsbrücken and the Elbe beach on warm days, where locals and tourists drank their beer in the fresh air and were relaxed enough to leave their empty bottles and cans behind. He proudly recounts that on good days, he was able to take home up to 50 euros after his 30-kilometre walk.

But competition soon increased. The introduction of Hartz IV and the federal government's low-wage policy drove up the poverty figures. Especially in the big cities, bottle collectors – more men than women – soon became part of everyday life. As a result, most of them now only earn a few euros a day. Surveys show that most of them earn a maximum of 50 euros per month, which they use to supplement their existing income from work or social benefits, such as early retirement pensions or the new German “Bürgergeld”, the citizen's basic income. Although there are many homeless people amongst those who collect bottles, most of them do not live on the streets. By collecting bottles, they try to stay connected to the labour market.

Support and expulsion

As the number of collectors increased, the activity became increasingly controversial and eventually became a political issue. Some municipalities installed so-called deposit rings around their rubbish bins, in which empty deposit bottles could be placed; one initiative launched the slogan: “Put the empties next to the rubbish bin” (“Pfand gehört daneben”) – and a project by students launched an internet platform where you can have your bottles collected at home by deposit collectors. At the same time, the collectors, who

do their utmost to earn money and pursue a meaningful activity, were met with more and more reservations. In addition to the positive encounters and encouragement, they increasingly heard derogatory comments on the street. Supermarket staff were also unenthusiastic when large quantities of empties arrived. Despite the general obligation to return empties, some supermarkets put up signs stating that only “normal household quantities” could be returned. A regular eviction policy was established at some railway stations and airports. When Hamburg Airport filed a series of criminal charges against the collectors in 2014, Uwe had long since decided to sell the Hamburg street newspaper Hinz&Kunzt instead, but friends of his were affected.

Social insurance for bottle collectors

It was Hinz&Kunzt that launched an initiative with an online petition to make Hamburg Airport rethink their strategy. The team at the street newspaper, who were well aware of the plight of homeless people and those on low incomes, knew that additional income had become important to many. After more than 50,000 signatures were collected, a joint project between the airport and Hinz&Kunzt set up collection containers in the departure area, into which deposits could be thrown as donations - and which were then emptied and disposed of by former bottle collectors.

At that time, Uwe switched from selling street newspapers back to collecting bottles – in one of the newly created, regular and socially insured jobs. Since then, he and two colleagues have been taking care of the average of 1,000 bottles that are collected there every day – in 2019, there were almost 500,000 disposable bottles. In other areas of the airport, there are different collectors. The permanent job, which has fed

Uwe for nine years, is financed almost entirely by the collected deposit, even if the development of wages and prices is causing difficulties, as the deposit has never been adjusted. With a wink, he says: “So far, everything is going quite well. My biggest problem at the moment is that I've accumulated so many deposit bottles at home that I can't get rid of them all at once.”



The headquarter of Hinz&Kunzt in Hamburg

Who owns the rubbish?

Many deposit return collectors emphasise that they also collect for ecological reasons. This is part of the professional ethos that unites deposit return collectors who otherwise tend to be lone wolves. And indeed, the considerable numbers of collectors and bottles collected indicate that they are effectively helping to reduce the amount of unsorted rubbish and channel the deposit items

Annotations

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Now that all countries in Europe are to introduce recycling systems, bottle collection is becoming a topic of interest everywhere – for those affected, the municipalities, the trade unions and the states. I am currently looking for stakeholders from all European countries and look forward to hearing from you via my website www.albanknecht.de/albanknecht.html.

About the Author



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into the right channels. Officially, however, the extent of their activity is barely recognised. They do not appear in recycling or environmental reports and no one has yet established that they could be supported with simple administrative measures.

Deposit collection made easy

As in many other EU countries, a deposit system for single-use packaging will be introduced in Austria in 2025. A 25-cent deposit is to be charged on every plastic bottle and every can. However, the right to collect a deposit should also be granted by law. In Austria, unlike in Germany, waste is regarded as a so-called “ownerless good” that can in principle be legally appropriated, but the legal situation is not always entirely clear. (<https://augustin.or.at/das-schmeissen-wir-alles-weg>). An established law would reflect the ecological significance of the deposit and – more generally – of its reuse and would make collection easier. In addition, there will be a problem with the return of larger quantities. In Austria, retailers are actually remunerated for their efforts by a so-called “handling fee” for accepting empties. Even if one can hope that there will then be less hassle when returning the bottles, there should be places where larger quantities can easily be returned. If these were available in Germany at some point, Uwe could quickly solve his current problem.