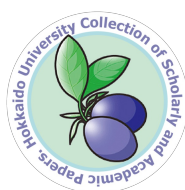




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**Red Sludge Spill in Ajka, Hungary in 2010:
Disputes on the Dual Criteria of Waste Management
between the EU and Hungary**

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The oil spill accident in the Gulf of Mexico might be remembered worldwide as the most serious environmental accident of 2010. In contrast, the red sludge spill in Ajka, a small town in western Hungary, almost went unnoticed in the international mass media. The physical magnitude was, however, similar in both catastrophes: 800,000 m³ of oil mud spewed out for three months, and eleven people were killed in the Gulf of Mexico; in Ajka, at least, 700,000 m³ of red sludge,

hazardous waste from the alumina industry, ran over the wall of the waste reservoir, and ten people were killed. Locally the red sludge spill caused long term damages on the environment and the society, as well. Beyond its long-lasting recovery and compensation process, the accident in Ajka became a hot international issue in the European arena beyond the Hungarian borders, when the CEO of the Hungarian alumina company, which was responsible for the spill accident, said that the red sludge was not hazardous according to the EU criteria in spite of the huge damages already caused by the red sludge flood.

A majority of the former socialist countries in Eastern Europe became member states of the EU in 2004 and 2007, accepting the *Akquis Communautaire*, the European standards and conditions in almost all fields of life, according to which member states and its peoples have to follow. The *Akquis* include many legal norms relating to environmental policy, though the East European countries required a moratorium on the implementation of some *Akquis* concerning environmental policy, when they gained full-membership in 2004 and 2007. Thus we may expect that the EU should have much more severe criteria in the field of environment than the East European countries. The Ajka accident, however, shows that in reality this is not always the case, and the above mentioned CEO's comment provides good evidence for this case. Eventually, in 2000, Hungary had already established an act on waste management, which was very comprehensive and strict enough to qualify the red sludge as hazardous. What made the situation complicated is the Hungary's EU membership in 2004, when Hungary accepted the EU norms of waste management, as well as other norms.

Hungarian specialists, including academics, at last after heated discussions, concluded that the red sludge was indeed hazardous in spite of EU norms, based on the Hungarian act of 2000. The Hungarian government, the Orbán's Fidesz cabinet, accepted this conclusion, and Fidesz representatives raised the issue with the EU Parliament.

The Ajka accident thus developed from a local issue to a European one, and potentially suggests the issue will become a global one, because the red sludge has been one of the most serious issues in the ratification process for the new London Convention on the dumping of waste at sea. Japan is one of the parties insisting that red sludge is not hazardous. The red sludge issue is all the more pertinent for Japan, because the Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Energy and Environment, which counts Japan as a member, has so far qualified red sludge as dangerous.

The paper examines these topics, and proposes some further issues concerning the future management of red sludge.