Journal of Materials Science and Engineering A 16 (1-3) (2026) 26-33
doi: 10.17265/2161-6213/2026.1-3.003

Predictive Models for Recycling Rate, Contamination Risk and Waste Collection in Europe

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Abstract: Waste management in Europe faces mounting challenges from rising consumption, climate pressures, and uneven infrastructure. Collection schedules—the frequency and design of waste pickup—are central to recycling performance, influencing contamination rates, material recovery, and citizen participation. This study examines how geographic zones (Nordic, Western, Southern, Eastern, and UK/Ireland) differ in waste generation, organics share, seasonal drivers, and policy frameworks, and how these factors shape collection schedules and recycling outcomes. Using predictive modelling and scenario analysis, the research highlights the role of adaptive scheduling in managing seasonal surges from tourism and heatwaves, the importance of separate organics collection, and the divergence between EU harmonization efforts and local implementation. Results show that high-performing regions combine frequent, differentiated collection with advanced infrastructure and strong policy support, while lower-performing zones face constraints from climate stressors and infrastructural gaps. The study concludes that resilient waste systems require hybrid strategies—integrating technology, policy, and community engagement—to meet circular economy targets. Future work will focus on empirical validation, climate stress-testing, and international collaboration and policy development.

Key words: Waste management, recycling, schedules, regional differences, circular economy.

1. Introduction

Waste management has become one of the most pressing environmental and policy challenges in Europe, where rising consumption, urban density, and climate pressures converge to strain collection systems and recycling performance. Municipal solid waste alone accounts for hundreds of kilograms per capita annually, with significant variation across regions. While Nordic and Western countries often achieve high recycling rates through advanced infrastructure and strict policy frameworks, Southern and Eastern Europe face persistent difficulties linked to seasonal tourism peaks, heatwaves, and infrastructural gaps. The United Kingdom and Ireland, meanwhile, navigate divergent trajectories following Brexit, complicating alignment with EU directives. Collection schedules—the frequency and design of waste pickup—play a pivotal role in determining recycling outcomes. Frequent and well-structured collection of organics reduces contamination and improves composting, while differentiated schedules for packaging and electronic waste enhance material recovery. Conversely, irregular or insufficient collection exacerbates overflow, contamination, and reliance on landfill or incineration. Climate change intensifies these challenges: heatwaves accelerate organic waste spoilage, while tourism surges create unpredictable spikes in waste generation, demanding adaptive scheduling. European policy frameworks, particularly the EU Circular Economy Action Plan and directives on packaging, WEEE (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment), and bio-waste, set ambitious recycling targets and mandate harmonized collection practices. Yet implementation remains uneven, reflecting diverse socioeconomic conditions, governance structures, and citizen engagement. Understanding how collection schedules interact with recycling performance across geographic zones is therefore essential for designing resilient, efficient, and equitable waste systems. This article

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contributes to that understanding by combining predictive modelling, scenario analysis, and regional comparison. It examines how waste generation, composition, and climate drivers shape collection schedules, and how these in turn influence recycling outcomes.

This literature review synthesizes recent European research on municipal waste collection, recycling performance, policy instruments, and innovation, highlighting determinants, cross-country patterns, and methodological advances.

2. European Policy Frameworks and Harmonization

The EU has intensified efforts to harmonize separate collection systems, aiming to reduce contamination and boost recycling performance. A Joint Research Centre (JRC) review proposes an EU-harmonized model for separate municipal waste collection, cataloguing best practices, data definitions, and policy support tools that enable comparable monitoring across member states [1]. These frameworks intersect with circular economy targets [2, 3] and producer responsibility, requiring standardized reporting and operational guidance to make cross-country benchmarking feasible [1]. Public service analyses situate waste management within broader structural trends—ownership models, labour conditions, and treatment pathways—linking policy shifts to operational realities (e.g., privatization in incineration, insourcing in municipal services). This lens emphasizes how governance choices shape collection schedules, investment, and service quality alongside recycling outcomes [4].

3. Determinants of Recycling Performance

Multi-method EU analyses (2005-2023) identify key drivers of municipal recycling: separate collection coverage, economic development, urban density, and policy instruments such as landfill taxes and PAYT (pay-as-you-throw). Country profiles reveal persistent heterogeneity, with higher recycling rates in states with mature infrastructure and stringent policies, versus lower performance where collection systems and sorting capacity lag [5-7]. Systematic reviews of waste recycling within the circular economy corroborate these determinants, adding supply chain integration, consumer behaviour, and market demand for secondary materials as critical mediators of performance [8]. Innovation-oriented studies highlight digitalization (sensor-enabled bins, route optimization), advanced sorting (robotics, machine vision), and data platforms as enablers that reduce contamination and increase material recovery but note the dependency on capital investment and institutional readiness [9]. These findings connect technological adoption directly to operational scheduling and quality of recyclate, reinforcing the role of adaptive collection in meeting recycling targets [9].

4. Collection Models, Contamination, and Separate Streams

The JRC literature review emphasizes the operational logic of separate collection systems—organics, packaging, glass, paper, and WEEE—showing that stream-specific scheduling improves capture rates and reduces contamination when supported by clear communication and consistent service frequency [1]. Evidence across EU case studies points to contamination as a pivotal barrier; rigorous source separation, bin standardization, and service regularity are associated with higher-quality inputs to MRFs (Materials Recovery Facilities) and composting plants [1]. Sectoral reports underline the interplay between collection design and treatment choices (recycling, incineration, landfill). Regions with heavier reliance on incineration often maintain high service reliability but may under-incentivize upstream separation; conversely, areas prioritizing recycling invest more in frequent, differentiated collection schedules and citizen engagement. These structural trade-offs shape both operational costs and environmental outcomes across European zones [4].

5. Cross-regional Patterns and Country Profiles

Comparative analyses position Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland among Europe's high performers, reflecting stringent policy frameworks, extensive separate collection, and robust markets for recyclate. Southern and parts of Eastern Europe show lower average recycling rates, with seasonality (tourism, heatwaves), infrastructure gaps, and variable enforcement contributing to performance constraints [5-7]. Reviews of circular economy research add that national strategies, innovation ecosystems, and public procurement for recycled content correlate with sustained improvements, highlighting policy-market alignment as a distinguishing factor among higher-performing countries [8]. Public-service-focused studies also map ownership structures and market concentration (e.g., major firms in collection and treatment), noting impacts on service integration, economies of scale, and investment capacity—variables that translate into scheduling reliability and modernization pace across regions [4].

6. Methods and Analytical Advances

Recent literature deploys multi-method designs: panel econometrics, comparative case studies, and bibliometric analyses to trace determinants of recycling and assess policy efficacy [10]. The JRC work contributes methodological standardization for data definitions and collection typologies, enabling better cross-country inference [1]. Frontiers research applies country profiling and determinant analysis over long panels, providing granularity on temporal dynamics and policy impacts [5-7]. Bibliometric and text-mining reviews synthesize two decades of waste recycling scholarship, surfacing emergent themes in Central Europe integration, innovation, and behavioural drivers that influence operational decisions like schedule frequency and stream separation. Innovation studies document pilot deployments and performance metrics for digital tools, informing scalable pathways and cost-benefit considerations [9].

In recent literature sources there aren't predictive models to strengthen circular economy pathways. The article is intended for policymakers, municipalities, researchers, and students.

7. Methodology

Methodology includes computational plan for predicting recycling rates, contamination risk and collection schedules in Europe. This plan is designed to illustrate the model with clear variables, methods, and reproducibility.

- Input variables are:
  - Organics share
  - Collection Frequency
  - Waste generation per capita
  - Heatwave days
  - Tourism index
- Outcome variables:
  - Recycling performance: % recycling of municipal waste
  - Contamination risk: qualitative assessment: low or high
  - Collection schedule: pickups per week
- Panel regressions: Fixed-effects models to estimate the effect of input variables on outcome variables. The simulation uses a simple linear model to predict the outcome.

$$\begin{aligned} Outcome\_variable &= \beta_1 Input\_variable1 \\ &+ \beta_2 Input\_variable2 \\ &+ \beta_3 Input\_variable3 \\ &+ \beta_4 Input\_variable4 \\ &+ \beta_5 Input\_variable5 + \beta_0 \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

The coefficients are chosen so that: Each variable contributes a few percentage points, not extreme swings. No single variable dominates the prediction. The sign of the coefficients is determined by the direction of their effect on the outcome variable.

In real research, coefficients are not chosen manually. They are estimated using: Multiple linear regression, Regularized regression (LASSO, Ridge), Random Forest feature importance, SHAP values, Bayesian modelling. Then the model is trained on: Eurostat municipal waste data, National recycling statistics, Climate data (heatwaves, temperature anomalies), Tourism intensity, Collection system characteristics. The algorithm then learns the coefficients that best fit the data. In this model are shown illustrative, not empirical values of coefficients β_i. The goal is to minimize the outcome variable.

8. Results

8.1 Simulation of Recycling Rates across European Zones

Simulated machine learning model predicts recycling rates based on input variables.

Input variables are:

• Organics Share: positive. Higher organics share usually improves recycling when separate collection exists.

• Collection Frequency: positive. More frequent collection reduces contamination and increases capture rates.

• Waste Generation per capita: negative. High waste generation per capita often correlates with lower recycling efficiency.

• Heatwave days: positive. Heatwaves increase organics spoilage. → Municipalities often increase collection. → Slightly better recycling performance.

• Constant term: Ensures the model produces realistic baseline recycling rates (20-60%).

The coefficients were not taken from empirical data; they were constructed to illustrate model logic in a simple, transparent way. The model is:

$$\text{Recycling Rate} = 0.05 \cdot \text{Organics\_share} + 0.03 \cdot \text{Collection\_freq} - 0.02 \cdot \frac{\text{WasteGen\_pc}}{100} + 0.01 \cdot \text{Heatwave\_days} + 20 \tag{2}$$

Table 1 shows the input variables and their values for recycling rate assessment with following agenda: Data 1: Eastern Europe; Data 2: Nordic Europe; Data 3: UK/Irland; Data 4: Western Europe; Data 5: Southern Europe.

Fig. 1 shows a simulated Machine Learning (ML) Prediction of Recycling Rate. The bar chart illustrates how these inputs influence the predicted recycling performance.

Fig. 2 shows a simulated classification model that predicts contamination risk (High vs. Low) using the same values of input variables (Contamination Risk regarding Recycling). The chart shows predicted scores and classifications for each data point (zones in Europe).

8.2 Simulation of Risk score across European zones

This simulation helps illustrate how ML models can support waste management decisions—like identifying when contamination risk is high and adjusting collection strategies accordingly. This model uses a logistic function to calculate a risk score based on input variables. If the score is above 0.5, the risk is classified as High; otherwise, Low.

The coefficients in model (1) are selected to satisfy the following considerations:

• Organics Share: negative. Higher organics share reduces risk (better separation).

• Waste Generation per capita: positive. Higher waste generation increases contamination risk.

• Collection Frequency: positive. More frequent collection reduces risk slightly.

• Heatwave Days: negative: Heatwave days increase risk (organic waste strain).

• Constant term: Ensures the model produces realistic baseline contamination risk (1, There is always a risk.).

Model Formula is (Contamination risk without recycling):

$$\text{Score} = \text{sigmoid}(0.04 \cdot \frac{\text{WasteGen\_pc}}{100} - 0.05 \cdot \text{Organics\_share} + 0.03 \cdot \text{Collection\_freq} - 0.02 \cdot \text{Heatwave\_days} + 1) \tag{3}$$

Table 1 Input variables (Synthetic Data)

Data Point	WasteGen_pc	Organics_share	Collection_freq	Heatwave_days
1	450	25%	1	5
2	500	30%	2	10
3	550	35%	2	15
4	600	40%	3	20
5	650	45%	3	25

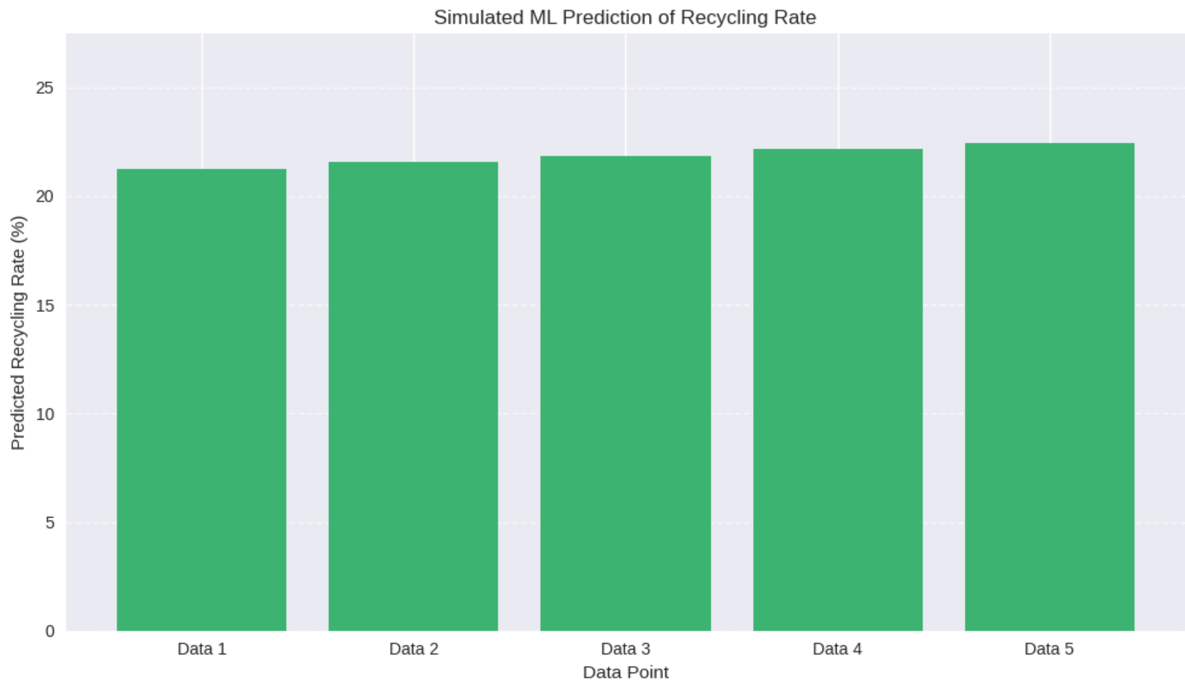

Fig. 1 Simulated ML prediction of recycling rate.

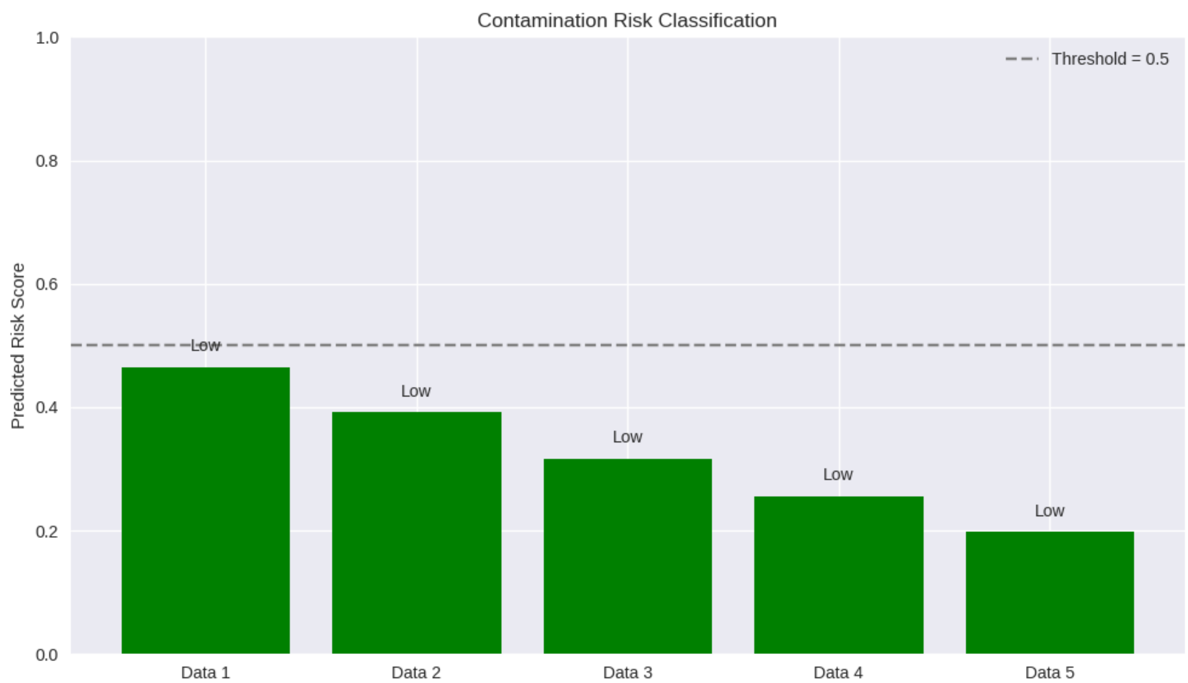

Fig. 2 Contamination risk classification.

or

$$\text{Score} = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(0.04 \cdot \frac{WasteGen}{100} - 0.05 \cdot Organics\_share + 0.03 \cdot Collection\_freq - 0.02 \cdot Heatwave\_days + 1)}} \quad (4)$$

Table 2 Synthetic example data.

Case	WasteGen_pc	Organics_share	Collection_freq	Heatwave_days	Predicted risk
1	450	25%	1	5	Low
2	500	30%	2	10	Low
3	550	35%	2	15	High
4	600	40%	3	20	High
5	650	45%	3	25	High

Table 3 Predicted collection frequency in Europe

Zone	WasteGen_pc	Organics_share (%)	Tourism_index	Heatwave_days	Predicted pickups/week
Eastern	480	25	30	8	4.58
Nordic	500	30	40	10	5.10
UK/Ireland	520	32	45	12	5.38
Western	550	35	50	15	5.80
Southern	600	40	80	25	6.95

Table 2 shows the input data and the predicted Contamination risk.

This simulation demonstrates how ML can classify risk levels and guide municipalities to adjust collection schedules.

3. Predictive modelling of collection schedules across European zones

Below is an interpretable predictive model estimating weekly collection frequency from waste and seasonal drivers.

The coefficients in model (1) are selected to satisfy the following considerations:

- Organics Share: positive. Consistently increases required frequency, aligning with faster spoilage and odor control needs.
- Tourism index: positive. Substantially raise schedule needs, indicating strong seasonal pressure on operations.
- Heatwave Days: positive. Substantially raise schedule needs, indicating strong seasonal pressure on operations, but not so much as Tourism index.
- Waste Generation per capita: positive. Waste generation increases collection frequence but not so much as Organics share, Tourism index and Heatwave days.
- Constant term: Ensures the model produces realistic baseline collection frequency (0.5: There is or there isn’t collection).

Model Formula is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Collection\_freq} &= 0.005 \cdot \text{WasteGen\_pc} + 0.04 \\ &\cdot \text{Organics\_share} + 0.02 \\ &\cdot \text{Tourism\_index} + 0.01 \\ &\cdot \text{Heatwave\_days} + 0.5 \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

Table 3 shows the predicted pickups per week by European zones.

Key takeaways are: Eastern Europe has the lowest frequency, reflecting lower inputs across most drivers. Southern Europe shows the highest predicted frequency, driven by higher waste per capita, organics share, tourism intensity, and heatwave days.

9. Discussion

For discussion we offer future scenarios for waste collection and recycling in Europe.

The Future Scenarios are represented as a strategic 2 × 2 matrix. It maps the four future scenarios for waste collection and recycling across Europe: Fig. 3.

Top-left (Tech + Local): *Smart Adaptive Scheduling* → AI sensors, bin-level optimization.

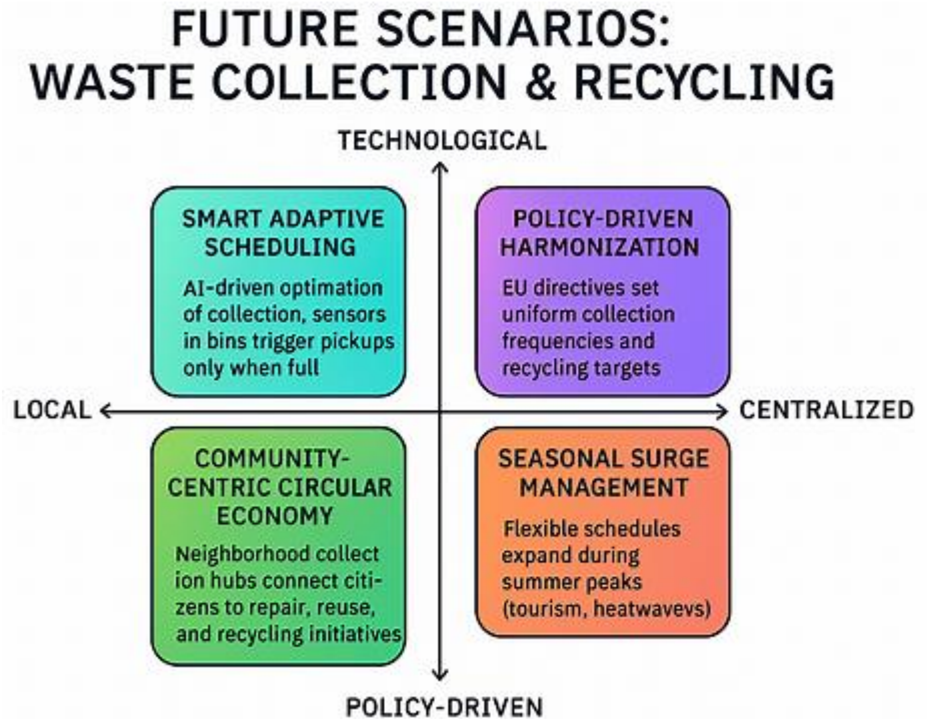

Fig. 3 Four future scenarios for waste collection and recycling across Europe.

Top-right (Policy + Centralized): *Policy-Driven Harmonization* → EU directives, uniform schedules.

Bottom-left (Policy + Local): *Community-Centric Circular Economy* → neighborhood hubs, citizen-led recycling.

Bottom-right (Tech + Centralized): *Seasonal Surge Management* → flexible schedules for tourism and climate peaks.

10. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that waste collection schedules and recycling performance in Europe are shaped by a complex interplay of geographic, climatic, and policy factors. By modelling regional waste generation, organics share, seasonal pressures, and collection frequency, authors reveal how operational efficiency and recycling outcomes vary across Nordic, Western, Southern, Eastern, and UK/Ireland zones. Southern Europe faces pronounced seasonal strain due to tourism and heatwaves, while Western and Nordic regions benefit from advanced infrastructure and policy alignment. Eastern Europe shows potential for rapid improvement through targeted investment and harmonization. The predictive models and scenario frameworks developed here offer actionable insights for municipalities, policymakers, and researchers. They highlight the need for adaptive scheduling, separate organics collection, and climate-resilient waste systems. To deepen and extend this research, future work should focus on: Empirical validation: Integrate Eurostat, municipal, and satellite data to refine model coefficients and test predictive accuracy across seasons and regions, Create a table of expected coefficient ranges. SHAP-based interpretability: Apply machine learning explainability tools to quantify the influence of each variable on recycling outcomes. Scenario stress-testing: Simulate operational risks under extreme climate events (e.g., prolonged heatwaves, floods) and tourism surges. Equity analysis: Examine disparities in service access and recycling performance across income, density, and urban/rural divides. Policy modelling: Evaluate the impact of EU mandates (e.g., separate bio-waste collection, EPR (Extended Producer Responsibility) expansion) using difference-in-differences and event-study designs.

Authors used Artificial Intellect.

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