

RESEARCH

**REPORTS**

RECOMMENDATIONS

ANAMARIA NĂSTASĂ

# THE WASTE SECTOR IN ROMANIA

## CHALLENGES OF ORGANISING AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

INSTITUTE OF  
PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
Social Policy Programme

This report is one in a series presenting the findings of research carried out in Bulgaria, Czechia, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia as part of the project CEE CAW ‘Challenges for Organising and Collective Bargaining in Care, Administration and Waste collection sectors in Central and Eastern European Countries’, which was led by the Institute of Public Affairs (Warsaw). The other partners were the: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Sofia), Central European Labour Studies Institute (Bratislava), Lithuanian Centre of Social Sciences (Vilnius), and Centre for Democracy Foundation (Belgrade).



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00-031 Warszawa, ul. Szpitalna 5 lok. 22  
tel.: +48 22 55 64 260, fax: +48 22 55 64 262  
e-mail: [isp@isp.org.pl](mailto:isp@isp.org.pl), [www.isp.org.pl](http://www.isp.org.pl)



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## 1. Methodological preface

As research methods, the current study involved conducting in-depth interviews with stakeholders from trade unions and desk research. The in-depth interviews included two with trade union federations on public services and one with a stakeholder from a local trade union in waste management. The interviews were taken between 27 and 29 April 2024 with each interview lasting at least 40 minutes. The desk research included data analysis from administrative sources, website content analysis, and reviewing available collective agreements.

## 2. General characteristics of the sector

The number of employers in waste collection, treatment, disposal, and materials recovery has increased in the last ten years. According to Eurostat (2024a), the number of workers increased from 47,300 in 2014 to 66,100 in 2023. Romania is among the countries with the highest number of workers in this economic activity, just behind Turkey, Italy, Germany, France, Poland, and Spain.

When looking at recycling rates, Romania has one of the lowest recycling rates (11.3% in 2021) in Europe, along with Montenegro (4.7%), Turkey (12.3%), Cyprus (14%), and Serbia (16.8%) (Eurostat, 2024b, 2024c). Moreover, Romania uses a low quantity of biogas and biomass waste to produce energy. However, the use has increased in the last few years from 16 to 22 MW in biogas facilities and from 89 to 107 MW in biomass facilities from 2015 to 2022 (ANRE, 2024). Data indicates that in 2021, there were approximately 20 mechanical-biological treatment plants (13 with a capacity of 950,000 tonnes/year and 7 with a capacity of 740,000 tonnes/year) (European Environment Agency, 2022). Some examples of biogas facilities in the country include Genesis Biopartner, TEB Project One, and First Biogas Ardud (Cebucean & Ionel, 2019). While most of the facilities are private organisations, the first municipal initiative based on biogas and biomass energy was developed in Arad County (Boițiu, 2023).

Solid waste management is carried out by municipalities, public entities, private operators or public-private partnerships (Bunding-Venter et al., 2022). Examples of municipal companies include Salubrizare Sector 5 SA, RADP Cluj-Napoca, and Administrația Serviciului Public de Salubrizare Sector 6. Private companies include ROSAL Group, and Romprest Service SA. Examples

of public-private collaborations include Sibiu, Timisoara, and Arad counties' waste management systems. Multinational companies such as Veolia, Suez and FCC Environment also provide services in some urban areas.

The regulatory framework in Romania includes several laws on waste management. One important law is Law no. 211 on waste regime which was repealed by Government Emergency Ordinance no. 92 from 2021 (LEGE nr. 211, 2011; ORDONANȚĂ DE URGENȚĂ nr. 92, 2021), which aligned and transposed the European Union's Directive 2018/85 on waste (Directive 2018/851, 2018; European Environment Agency, 2022). Other important frameworks include Emergency Ordinance No. 195/2005 on environmental protection (ORDONANȚĂ DE URGENȚĂ nr. 195, 2005), Law No 101/2006 on local sanitation services (LEGEA nr. 101, 2006), Law 196/2005 on the Environmental Fund (LEGE nr. 105, 2006), Law No. 249/2015 on Packaging and Packaging Waste (LEGE nr. 249, 2015), Government resolution 1132/2008 on batteries (HOTĂRÂRE nr. 1.132, 2008) and Government resolution 170/2008 on the management of used tyres (HOTĂRÂRE nr. 170, 2004). Romania's struggle to meet the EU's waste recycling targets is a topic of public debate, as well as scientific debate (Deutsche Welle, 2023; Leoveanu-Soare & Nimerenco, 2023; DIGI24; 2023). Recent legislative measures aimed at improving waste management and meeting the targets imposed by the European Union were Ordinance 6/2021 on single-use plastic (ORDONANȚĂ nr. 6, 2021), Law No. 127/2024 on Waste from Electrical and Electronic Equipment (LEGE nr. 127, 2024) and a government resolution 1074/2021 on the return guarantee system for non-refillable primary packaging (HOTĂRÂRE nr. 1074, 2021) launched at the end of November 2023 with Romania's Deposit Return System. Another measure directed at meeting the European Directive's target is the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) which has allocated around 1.2 billion Euro for modernising waste management systems by 2026 (Ecotecca, 2023). A further initiative is Romania's Circular Economy Action Plan, which aims to drive the transition to a circular economy across various sectors, including waste management (PLANUL DE ACȚIUNE din 5 octombrie 2023, 2023).

### 3. Major problems and challenges in the sector

As brought up by the stakeholders who were interviewed, one of the sector's main problems is the labour shortage of skilled and unskilled workers. Firstly, these shortages are influenced by unpredictable work conditions as well as

risks and violations in the workplace. According to one stakeholder, general conditions have been improved, but workers are still at risk of being infected with many diseases due to insufficient measures of protection for the employees. Besides the usual unpredictable and dangerous conditions during the pandemic, workers also faced the risk of infection with COVID-19 (Stoica & Vincze, 2020). Additionally, these labour shortages are influenced by low wages in the waste sector. All these circumstances have led to labour force migration to other countries.

The lack of opportunities for training and updating workers' skills is an issue raised by two stakeholders. Besides the green skills required for different types of waste, these jobs require training in using different types of machinery or vehicles. Hence, the digitalisation of work impacts the waste sector in Romania. In this context, one stakeholder emphasises the lack of a labour force with the necessary skills for operating these tools and the lack of educational and training opportunities for specialising in this line of work because of the reduction of educational institutions offering vocational training or dual education.

Other problems discussed by stakeholders concern the sector's low level of financing, which may influence dangerous working conditions and low wages.

#### 4. Characteristics of social dialogue organisations in the sector

The most representative trade union in the waste sector in 2023 was the Federation of Trade Unions in Community Services (Federația Sindicatelor din Servicii Comunitare – FSSCUP), comprising of employees from the sector “Community services and public utilities. Waste management, decontamination and environmental protection activities” (Sector 23) and employees from other sectors that carry out a similar/associated activity with those in this sector (covering in total 7% of the total workforce from these sectors). Over the years, there have been several trade union federations that included workers from the waste sector, public transportation, and water services. According to the stakeholders, this sector's coverage of employees in trade unions is currently relatively low.

#### 4.1. Challenges of organising employees

There are several barriers to organising employees in trade unions. One of the main challenges is the hostility of employers, combined with the fact that there are just a few trade unions in this sector. According to stakeholders, most employers are private organisations that do not support the unionisation of workers. Some stakeholders also believe that sector policies and social dialogue (or the lack thereof) contribute to a more substantial trend of deunionisation and worker division.

Another issue when organising employees is the lack of information regarding trade unions' activities, goals and the benefits of participating in these activities. One stakeholder notes that this issue is influenced by managerial bodies, a lack of measures and practices for attracting or keeping employees in trade unions, and hostility between trade unions from this sector.

Another problematic aspect when unionising the employees is the workers' education level. According to the stakeholders, employees with low levels of basic skills (writing, reading and numeracy) are more difficult to unionise. Education and wage aspects are often intermingled and amplified by other forms of social exclusions along intersectional lines among these workers. The literature showed that inequalities and marginalisation, including ethnical divisions/segregation, especially for Romani people, are linked with exploitation and participation in the informal economy (Vincze, 2012).

#### 4.2. Good practices for organising employees

Good practice in organising employees, as emphasised by one of the stakeholders, is the power of setting an example through changes that improve working conditions from union activities. According to this stakeholder, workers are motivated to participate in trade unions when there are positive outcomes from the trade union movement and their activities.

#### 4.3. Characteristics of employer representation

One of the major issues pointed out by stakeholders regarding the participation of employer organisations is that there aren't any employer organisations at the sector level with which the social dialogue might take place. This aspect also causes the absence of a sectorial collective agreement for the waste sector.

## 5. Collective bargaining and other forms of social dialogue in the sector - characteristics

As mentioned above, at present (2024), there is no collective agreement within the waste sector or among a group of units. The last collective contract was 2013–2014 and comprised 207 organisational units with activities related to public services, such as transportation, waste management and water services. Although collective agreements have covered public services over the years, these have only covered the water, sewerage, and public transport sectors. Henceforth, there are collective agreements at only the level of organisational units in the waste sector and the stakeholders did not acknowledge any major collective agreements or conventions at a sectorial level.

### 5.1. Content analysis of collective agreements

The collective bargaining agreement signed for the years 2013 and 2014 in the waste sector, as required by law in a typical collective bargaining agreement, included the following aspects: (1) negotiation, conclusion, execution, modification, suspension, termination and interpretation of the collective bargaining agreement; (2) execution, modification, suspension, termination and interpretation of individual labour contracts; (3) working conditions, health and safety at work; (4) wages and other wage rights; (5) working time and rest time; (6) other protective measures and facilities granted to employees; (7) vocational and continual training; and (8) other provisions relating to the rights and obligations of the parties.

The collective contract mostly covered the aspects stipulated by general legislation. However, in addition to the general legislation, the collective contract included information regarding wages and other bonuses such as fidelity bonuses (for workers who keep their jobs for an extended period), 13th salaries, prizes, and supplementary paid leave benefits. One stakeholder also added that, in addition to general legislation, the changes brought by the collective agreement at the level of the organisational unit are usually related to paid leave, salary benefits, and other bonuses.

### 5.2. Other forms of social dialogue

A Health and Safety Committee is mandatory at the public/private organisation level for organisations with more than 50 employees (and optional for organisations with less than 50 employees). Such a committee aims to ensure



the involvement of employees in developing and implementing decisions in occupational health and safety. In theory, the law requires organisations in the waste sector to establish such committees due to the potentially dangerous nature of the work carried out by waste management workers, but in practice, these committees are rarely established.

Another structure that, in theory, must play an important role in social dialogue at the national level is the National Tripartite Council for Social Dialogue. Other forms of social dialogue include tripartite social dialogue at the sectorial (at the level of Ministries/Central Public Administration) and local (at the level of each county prefecture) levels. Another form of tripartite social dialogue is the Economic and Social Council (ESC) (LEGE nr. 248, 2013). According to stakeholders, in the waste sector, these forms of social dialogue play a formal and passive role rather than an active role in changing the work conditions.

### 5.3. Impact of European sectoral social dialogue

Trade Unions and Federations in the waste sector are not currently affiliated with or aware of the European (or Global) social dialogue structures.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

The social dialogue at the level of waste management in Romania is relatively scarce and primarily formal. The working conditions and wages are unpredictable and rather unattractive, leaving the sector with a large labour shortage of low skilled and highly skilled workers. The research also revealed that the waste sector faces issues regarding the education and training of workers on digital, technical, and green skills, as well as a low level of financing for public services.

General recommendations for improving the social dialogue in the sector include (1) the creation of more unions, including workers from private organisations, workers with low levels of education and workers from local organisations; (2) national/local information campaigns on social dialogue to inform workers about the role and benefits of union membership for all types of employees; (3) separation of the waste sector from other public services to address the specific interests and problems in this sector, while still trying to form strategic partnerships in trade union actions on public services; (4) increase the involvement of non-governmental organisations/associations/civil society on ecology and social issues in trade union actions.

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## About the Author

Anamaria Năstasă, PhD, is a sociology researcher in the Department of Education, Vocational Training and Labour Market at the National Scientific Research Institute for Labour and Social Protection. She completed her PhD in Sociology in 2024 at the University of Bucharest with a thesis on reflexive modernity and artificial intelligence focusing on the discourses around risks and opportunities. Her current research interests and expertise cover topics related to science, technology and society studies (STS), computational sociology, social inequalities, school-to-work transition, digital skills, environmental sociology and labour relations. Her methodological expertise lies in both quantitative and qualitative methods.