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# NEGLECTED AND FORGOTTEN WORKERS

## THE WASTE SECTOR IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Executive summary  
of the comparative report

INSTITUTE OF  
PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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## Executive summary

The waste management sector plays a fundamental role in achieving the European Union's ambitions for a circular economy, sustainability, and environmental resilience. Yet the sector's workforce—those who collect, sort, and process waste—remains underrepresented in social, economic, and political discussions. This contradiction highlights a critical blind spot in the EU's green transition strategy: while attention is paid to environmental outcomes, the human labour that makes these outcomes possible is systematically overlooked.

This executive summary focuses on twelve countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE): Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia. These countries are undergoing both a post-socialist transformation and integration into the broader EU framework. While their waste sectors vary in structure—some are more privatised or technologically advanced than others—they share key characteristics: labour shortages, poor working conditions, fragmented trade union organisation, and limited social dialogue mechanisms.

The study, conducted as part of the CEECAW project, brings together country reports based on desk research, interviews, and comparative analysis. It aims to determine the degree to which workers in the waste sector are organised, protected, and represented in national collective bargaining structures. It also examines whether and how the implementation of Art. 4 of the EU's Adequate Minimum Wages Directive might influence sectoral improvements.

A striking finding is the persistence of informal and precarious employment, especially in physically demanding and socially undervalued jobs. Waste workers frequently work in hazardous conditions, often with inadequate safety equipment and limited opportunities for skills development. In many cases, they come from socially marginalised groups, such as Roma communities or people with low levels of education, which further complicates their access to formal labour rights.

Most of the country report authors indicated that waste workers were poorly organised (with the exception of Croatia and Serbia). The low visibility of their representation within the national trade union movement was evident in all reports. There are no cross-industry structures dedicated exclusively to this group.

The report offers a critical reflection on the systemic structures that reproduce these deficiencies. It draws attention to the urgent need for improved trade union strategies, sectoral bargaining, employer engagement, and government-led training programmes. These are not just issues of labour justice, but strategic imperatives if Europe is to build a resilient, socially inclusive circular economy.

The study is part of the CEECAW project—Challenges for Organising and Collective Bargaining in Care, Administration and Waste Collection Sectors in Central and Eastern Europe—coordinated by the Institute of Public Affairs (Poland) and conducted with the following partners: the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences, the Central European Labour Studies Institute, the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, the Center for Democracy Foundation, and supported by the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU).

## Key findings

### 1. The invisibility of waste workers in the policy framework

The waste sector is essential for achieving the EU's environmental objectives, yet workers remain invisible in policy dialogues. Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, waste workers face physically demanding work, low pay, and job insecurity. Policymakers tend to focus on technical targets, ignoring the human labour that underpins them.

### 2. Weak social dialogue and trade union representation

Trade unions' organisation in the waste sector is low. In most countries, unions are either non-existent or part of wider public utility structures with no specific focus. Sectoral bargaining is virtually non-existent.

### 3. Lack of employers' organisations and structured dialogue

The absence of sector-specific employers' organisations hampers collective bargaining, with tripartite forums being limited. Tripartite

dialogue on workforce challenges does not produce concrete results. There is little structured engagement between trade unions and employers' organisations.

#### 4. Automation, an ageing workforce, and the green transition

Automation is progressing slowly, but it is increasing skill requirements without adequate training systems. The sector's ageing workforce and lack of attractiveness to younger workers are exacerbating labour shortages.

#### 5. Marginalisation of vulnerable workers

Low-skilled and ethnic minority workers are over-represented in the sector. They face poorer working conditions, lower levels of unionisation, and greater exposure to informal employment.

#### 6. EU-level organisations have not prioritised labour issues in the waste sector.

Social dialogue mechanisms do not satisfactorily address waste management issues.

### Strategic gaps

- No national organising strategy for waste management workers.
- Trade unions lack structure and presence in the sector.
- Lack of collective bargaining and structured employer engagement.
- Lack of policies on occupational safety and health, training, and digital transformation.
- Vulnerable groups left behind.

## Recommendations

### For national trade unions

- Develop sectoral organising strategies.
- Establish dialogues on occupational safety and health, training, and digitalisation.

### For European industry federations

- Advocate for sectoral social dialogue at the EU level.
- Push for common positions on automation and working conditions.
- Support national unions with resources and training.

### For national authorities

- Invest in vocational training and the recruitment of young people.
- Develop plans to make work in the sector more attractive. For EU institutions, integrate social priorities into green policies.
- Pilot job quality programmes in green sectors.

## Conclusions

The findings of this report expose a striking paradox at the heart of the EU's sustainability agenda. The waste management sector is undeniably critical to the environmental transformation envisaged by the European Green Deal, yet the very workers who make this transformation possible remain excluded from the benefits and protections that should accompany such a strategic shift. The absence of a worker-centred policy framework, the institutional neglect of trade union structures, and fragmented employer representation have left waste workers in CEE countries in a state of systemic vulnerability.

As Europe moves towards a circular economy, the success of this transition depends not only on technological innovation or regulatory enforcement, but also on the active involvement of the workers who perform the frontline

tasks. A socially just transition must ensure that waste workers, many of whom are underpaid, socially marginalised, and poorly protected, are empowered, organised, and formally recognised within national and European industrial relations systems.

This report is a call to action. First, it calls for trade unions to rethink their organising strategies to include under-represented sectors such as waste management. Building sector-specific union structures and fostering alliances with civil society and international bodies can increase their legitimacy and influence. Second, governments are urged to integrate human resource planning and training into waste policies, creating clear pathways for skills development, mobility, and generational renewal within the sector.

At the EU level, institutional support is essential. European social dialogue needs to be broadened to include waste management more substantively, while collective bargaining mechanisms need to be revitalised and adapted to green sectors. The lack of engagement with large multinational waste management companies at a European level is a missed opportunity that needs to be rectified.

Ultimately, recognising waste workers not as marginal workers but as essential contributors to the sustainability transition is not just a moral imperative—it is an economic and political necessity. As climate change, digitalisation, and demographic shifts continue to reshape Europe's socio-economic fabric, only those transitions that are inclusive and equitable will be sustainable in the long term.

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