



Weekly Briefing

**Romania social briefing:
Focus on the environmental issues
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Focus on the environmental issues

Romania hosted the informal meeting of the EU ministers of the environment, which addressed the topics of climate change, biodiversity and water resource management. One of the main conclusion is the need for increasing awareness related to environmental issues, as the lack of information makes the topics of climate change and pollution to be perceived as abstract notions. Romania has several vulnerabilities in the area of environment, envisaged in the European Commission's Environmental Implementation Review 2019, risking not to achieve its target for 2020 related to recycling. However, the Government support several programs that aim to solve the existent problems.

The informal reunion of the ministers of the environment in the EU member states took place in Bucharest in the last week. The event reunited, among the EU countries, the environment representatives in the AELS countries and the EU candidate countries. The working sessions addressed the topics of climate change, biodiversity and water resource management through the control of water pollution with plastics and microplastics from rivers to seas, issues of great importance for the Romanian citizens but which are less made known to the large public. This is why, in practice, the topics of climate change and pollution tend to be perceived sometimes as abstract notions. The conference led to the adoption of a list with methods of action for water pollution. The following steps are to determine how these changes will be made, as there are divergent views on which legislation should be addressed, as the products have to be designed from the very beginning for not generating pollution at the end of their life cycle.

The intentions of the authorities are to provide adequate conditions for supporting the transition to a low-carbon society, thus using a wide range of instruments, starting with those providing the incentives to promote investment in the needed technological innovations, as well as increased funding for research and development.

The involvement of citizens in actions for long-term decarbonisation, which will affect their lifestyle or spatial planning (such as their options regarding mobility, housing and food consumption, which reduce energy consumption or the use of certain high carbon products and services) becomes vital. This involves better informing citizens about the impact of their

actions, leading to more conscious climate behaviour and a greater sense of individual responsibility.

In this direction, another event which took place recently was the 7th ASEM Education Ministers' Meeting. ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) is a platform for cooperation between Europe and Asia, launched in 1996, to strengthen the dialogue between the two regions. The theme of the ministerial meeting was "Education that connects: inclusion, mobility and excellence in support of sustainable development goals". Even if it was the reunion of the ministers of education, their works were related to that of education for population in the perspective of sustainable development and, therefore, of the environment. The Bucharest Declaration was adopted, a document which states the role of the ASEM Education Process in achieving the Global Sustainable Development Objectives set out in Agenda 2030. Sustainable Development and Digitalization have been introduced as cross-cutting themes within the four priority areas of the ASEM Educational Process (ensuring and recognizing the quality of education, involving business and industry in education, balanced mobility and lifelong learning – including vocational and technical education).

Greater awareness of environmental issues is needed, as Romania is the fifth most polluted country in the EU, after Bulgaria, Poland, Croatia and the Czech Republic, according to an investigation carried out in 2018 by AirVisual, related to the quality of the atmosphere. In addition, the European Commission publication on the second Environmental Implementation Review (EIR) as part of the initiative launched in 2016 to improve the implementation of European environmental policy and agreed rules in all EU member states, published in April this year, points towards several vulnerabilities of Romania:

- The poor air quality, as a result of the use of solid fuels in households and the pollution in the energy and transportation sectors. The recommendations target the restructuring of the energy and the heating system of households, by favouring the integration of renewable sources and the switch to natural gas, centralized heating and pollution control, traffic measures and other measures to control and prevent pollution.
- The waste management continue to be a challenge, although there is a national waste management plan adopted in 2017. The recycling rate and the efficient use of resources are still low and Romania could be at risk of not achieving its 50% recycling target for municipal waste set for 2020. Romania has the highest waste disposal rate in the EU, of 72%, well above the EU average of 25.6%, while the recycling rates have been stagnating since 2013, the incineration rate has slightly increased to 4% and the municipal

waste recycling rate is only 14%. Still, the generation of municipal waste per capita is well below the EU average (272 kg in Romania in 2017 as compared to the EU average of about 487 kg). One of the EU directives to which Romania records delays in implementation is related to the greening of waste. Romania has already been condemned by the EU Court of Justice because 68 landfills that do not comply with EU standards were not closed in time. In addition, another environmental problem is the electrical and electronic equipment waste. At beginning of this year, Romania was notified on the delay in the transposition of EU rules on electrical and electronic equipment waste, which could further trigger an infringement procedure. The main problems were the inaccurate and incomplete provisions for transposing the EU legislation, the inconsistencies with regard to collection centres and the absence of a specific provision requiring that all electrical and electronic equipment waste which are separately collected to be treated appropriately. The awareness of the circular economy is reduced, although there is large potential for implementing measures in this direction.

- The water quality should be enhanced and efforts are still needed for the implementation of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive and the improvement of the quantity and quality of drinking water.
- The measures related to the conservation of nature are affected by the lack of adequate administrative capacity, of knowledge and up-to-date statistical data. As a consequence, the projects for attracting funds lack appropriate prioritization based on different environmental aspects and are insufficiently prepared.

The Government support several programs for the protection of the environment. Generally, these answer to the problems signalled by the European Commission:

- The Photovoltaic cell installation program for citizens was launched this month, after the approval of the Romanian Parliament last year that every citizen can become an energy supplier because the surplus electricity enters the national network. The total budget reaches EUR 130 million and each applicant could receive RON 20,000 for the installation of the photovoltaic cells in order to cover the power consumption of equipment in a household. In addition, for the first time, there is another program reaching RON 230 million in which the municipalities may request non-refundable grants for the installation of photovoltaic systems in isolated households not connected to the distribution network. These programs contribute to the increase of the energy efficiency, improve the air quality and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by generating electricity from renewable sources.

- Municipalities may also submit projects under the Non-compliant municipal landfill closure program during April-June, as according to EIR 2019, the transition period granted to Romania through the Accession Treaty for the implementation of the Landfill Directive was completed and Romania will have to shut down and also rehabilitate 101 non-compliant landfills. The total budget for the programme reaches RON 100 million.

- The Program for the stimulation of the car fleet renewal (or the “Scrappage program”) provides the car owners a “scrappage premium” for the purchase of a new car in exchange for an old vehicle or for the acquisition of a new electric or hybrid vehicle. The budget of RON 320 million will allow the grant of about 35,000 scrappage premiums. The program, launched in 2010, has been a great success and contributes to the reducing pollution due to the acquisition of new, less polluting vehicles.

- The Scrappage program for appliances was launched in 2018, with the aim of replacing the intensive energy equipment in the area of air conditioners, washing machines and refrigerators with high-saving energy equipment. It was estimated that over 60,000 used household electrical and electronic equipment could be replaced by low energy consumption ones. This year, the budget was doubled, reaching RON 40 million, and was extended for including televisions and other household appliances. Under this program, individuals benefit from vouchers with different amounts depending on the type of appliance for the purchase of energy-efficient household equipment.

- Discussions for the potential continuation of the LIFE Program 2019, a financing instrument provided by the EU for environmentally-friendly measures and actions that address climate change. The LIFE Project “Connect Carpathians” for the improvement of the landscape connectivity through an ecological corridor used by wild animals was appreciated in EIR 2019 and such projects should continue.

- Punctual initiatives for reducing pollution are taken at local level. In 2019, important cities, among which the Bucharest, already acquired or launched auctions for the acquisition of hybrid or electrical buses as means of public transport.