



Weekly Briefing

Romania social briefing:

The European Commission warns Romania on dealing with air pollution

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The European Commission warns Romania on dealing with air pollution

At the beginning of this month, the European Commission launched the first step in the infringement procedure against Romania for not adopting national control programmes for atmospheric pollution. The notification is seen as an increased pressure for the Government to act for increasing the air quality, as awareness on reducing pollution in major cities already drew warnings from NGOs, international institutions and private air pollution measurement organizations. There is a lot of work to be done, as cities are hardly dealing with the problem of pollution. Up until now, there is only one programme for the renewal of the car park at national level which also stimulates the acquisition of electrical or hybrid cars, a recent measure for restricting the use of highly polluting vehicles in the centre of Bucharest and several attempts for greening the fleet of public transportation in several cities.

The European Commission urged Romania to adopt national control programmes for atmospheric pollution in accordance with the EU Directive 2016/2284 on the reduction of national emissions of certain atmospheric pollutants. The information request enclosed in the letter of formal notice addressed to Romania, Greece and Malta is the first step in the launch of the infringement procedure. Romania has two months for adopting and communicating these new programmes to the Commission, otherwise it risks a reasoned opinion which is equivalent with an official request asking the state to comply with EU law. The three member states should have submitted to the Commission their first national air pollution control programs by 1 April 2019. Directive 2016/2284 aims to support the achievement air quality levels that do not generate significant negative effects or risks to human health and the environment. Under its provisions, Member States are obliged to draw up, adopt and implement programs in order to limit their annual emissions.

If a Member State does not restore compliance with the EU law, the Commission may decide to refer the matter to the Court of Justice and the Member State could be financially sanctioned. In Romania, the notification is seen as an increased pressure for the Government to act for reducing pollution. The dimension of air pollution drew the attention of the population following the discussions at international level, the reports of private institutions about the level of pollution in major cities and the several warnings regarding the exceeding of accepted levels of pollution in different cities in Romania since the beginning of the year.

At the beginning of February, the European Commission also requested Romania and seven other Member States to submit the energy and climate plan for implementing the greenhouse gas reduction targets by 2030 in the EU. The plans are meant to facilitate the implementation of EU commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement. The EU's target is the reduction of the greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% until 2030, compared to 1990 levels. However, the plans of the von der Leyen Commission are more ambitious, hoping to increase the levels up to 50-55%. The revised commitment of the EU is intended to be presented at Cop26 climate change conference in Glasgow, at the end of 2020. The first deadline for the submission of this plan was the end of 2019.

Romanians seem to be interested in the topics related to the protection of environment according to a study carried out by World Economic Forum, as half of those in the survey's sample mentioned that they are pursuing the public agenda, while 42% of them consider that the environment should become a priority despite potential worsening of the economic growth. In addition, 58% trust the scientists' opinion on the environment. Romania is the second European country in the ranking with such a high percentage, after Italy (61%). Such behaviour could further add pressure for adopting the needed measures for increasing the health of the environment.

In addition, several NGOs are calling on authorities to take action to reduce air pollution in Bucharest and in major cities following frequent overshoots of legal air pollution limits, given that the independent measurements pointed to higher values of the pollution than the official data since the beginning of the year. In fact, the European Commission has already started an infringement process against Romania caused by the lack of solution for pollution problems in Bucharest, Iasi and Brasov. For this situation, Romania is waiting for the verdict of the European Court of Justice regarding the pollution in Bucharest, which can bring a fine between EUR 100,000 and 400,000.

In Bucharest, several environmental organizations organized a march against pollution, urging the City Hall and the Ministry of the Environment to take action and provide for sustainable transport, green spaces and adequate air quality monitoring, in the context of the alarming increase of pollution in the big cities. In a recent Greenpeace report, Bucharest is ranked the 13th out of 14 cities on sustainable mobility and air quality. Bucharest received the second lowest score for air quality and active mobility and was the last in the management of mobility. The explanations for this situation reside in a very high level of congestion, increased preference for daily commute with private vehicles and less green space per capita (only 10 square meters in Bucharest as compared with the EU norm of 26 square meters/capita),

according to specialists. Solutions would involve the development of infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists and the prioritization of environmentally-friendly means of public transport in order to reduce travel time and thus increase their attractiveness for locals and travellers. Greenpeace Romania claims that the measures taken by the City Hall, through the Integrated Air Quality Plan, are inefficient and do not bring a concrete improvement of the air quality.

The Minister of Environment stated that Romania should implement measures to reduce pollution as soon as possible, applying the promises announced since 2009. He considers that one of the causes of pollution is the lack of important infrastructure works.

Up until now, there is one national programme for the renewal of the car park, while recently a tax for reducing the use of highly polluting cars in the centre of Bucharest was recently adopted. Other measures, such as tackling sustainable transport by purchasing electric or hybrid busses for public transportation, are at the decision of local public authorities.

The City Hall in Bucharest recently implemented a system for reducing the number of highly polluting cars in the centre of the city. The “Oxygen tax” imposes a tax according to the Euro norm of vehicles, for restricting the access of vehicles with non-Euro, Euro 1 and Euro 2 engines. These are usually cars of 20 years or older, produced until 2000 inclusively. Euro 3 vehicles are allowed to enter this area if the “Oxygen tax” is payed, while Euro 4 cars will have to pay the tax starting with next year. The measure has been in effect since the beginning of the year, but the sanctions for not paying the tax will be applied starting with March. Similar measures are applied in several cities in the EU, such as London or Milan. In the future, even more drastic restrictions are planned. Non-Euro, Euro 1 and Euro 2 vehicles would be banned in Bucharest from 2022 and Euro 3 from 2024. One of the main shortcomings of the regulation is the fact that the regulation does not take into account the engine capacity of the car, nor the fuel used, but future regulations may appear. For example, there are plans for restricting the use of cars older than five years in the case of taxi drivers in Bucharest.

Several attempts for dealing with pollution at local level were taken into consideration. The enrichment of the public transportation with hybrid buses is a target for the City Hall in Bucharest this year. Still, the acquisition of electrical busses was put on delay following several bureaucratic procedures. Other cities took similar initiative. Cluj-Napoca has the largest fleet of electric buses in Romania and is in the top 10 cities in the EU, based on the number of inhabitants. However, the measures are not considered to be enough.

The car park in Romania contains over 8.2 million vehicles on petrol or diesel, with high negative impact for health. Moreover, the elimination of pollution tax in 2017 led to the import of over 500,000 second hand vehicles, 70% of them older than 11 years. Now, the greening of the car park resides in the acquisition of electrical cars. The market for electrical cars is increasing and the demand is relatively high, although the infrastructure for such vehicles should be better developed, especially on the part of charging stations.

At national level, the programme for stimulating the renewal of the car park is coordinated by the Ministry of Environment since 2005. The program functions on the principle that the state grants a premium for the purchase of a new car in exchange for an old car. A new component was added to the older version of this programme, which stimulates the purchase of new electric vehicles or new hybrid electric cars, without having to dispose an old car. The difference between the price of the new car and the state premium is paid from the buyer's own sources. This year, the Ministry intends to grant 60,000 vouchers for the acquisition of new cars and to fund at least 3,000 electric cars. According to the statement of the Minister, the premium for the buying of an electrical car is the highest in the EU, running from EUR 10,000 to EUR 11,350.