

Bulgaria: Impoverished Graduates Find Salvation in Rubbish

Author: [Boryana Dzhambazova](#)

Jobless, well-educated people scrape a living sorting through capital's litter - at same time performing a valuable service.

At lunchtime, a middle-aged woman reaches the refuse reprocessing point at 35, Simeon Street, dragging her rusty pram behind her.

It contains nothing but a broken metal chair - all she could find from a long morning's work trawling the rubbish bins of Sofia.

She aims to exchange her prize at the collection point for money. But she is unlikely to get more than 1 lev, worth 50 US cents, for this find.

The woman is not alone. About 70 similar types gather several times daily at the reprocessing point, exchanging salvaged items of metal, paper and glass for small sums of cash.

"Many of us earn their a living this way," said the woman, "even though I have a university degree."

The 55-year-old rubbish sifter, who will not reveal her name, says she used to work in the government sector.

She lives with her husband in a normal house in the centre of Sofia. But when he gets up and goes to work, she starts her secret life, exploring the garbage bins.

Her husband and children are unaware of her daily occupation, she says.

Although the idea of a university educated, middle-aged housewife poring through rubbish bins in search of the odd recyclable item may sound peculiar, her case is far from unusual.

There are hundreds of well-educated people who have failed to find their feet as the country undergoes economic transition - and are so marginalised that they have effectively become beggars.

Some scrape a living by sifting through piles of litter in the city and finding metal, glass and other reusable items.

The city's rubbish reprocessing points buy them up, as they have not developed their own system for sorting litter into disposable and recyclable categories.

"At least a third of the people coming here have university degrees," said a worker at the garbage reprocessing collection point.

One is Maya Anmahyan, a former chemical engineer. She says she has to collect garbage to support herself as her sick son, aged 25, cannot work.

She likens herself to a character out of Victor Hugo's classic novel about the Parisian underclass, "Les Miserables".

Sorting through people's litter is the only lifeline for many homeless and jobless people in Sofia who can expect little in the way of support from the post-socialist state.

Some are people who for one reason or another do not possess identity cards – an obligatory requirement for those seeking social security or healthcare.

The authorities are ambivalent about the plight of these unofficial rubbish sorters and sifters.

Stoyan Chakurov, chair of Sofia city council's health and social policy committee, says their existence is a symptom of a poorly organised society.

But he also says the phenomenon is inevitable. "There will always be some people who want to lead a Bohemian life and wander the streets," he said.

Chakurov adds that some are reluctant to integrate and seek help from the authorities.

Kolyo Kolev, a sociologist, agrees. "The socialist state took care of each citizen but now people have to carry the burden of their lives on their own," he said.

Many are well-educated people who have simply failed to adapt to changing circumstances, he adds.

Describing the refuse collectors as "Bohemians of misery", he says the authorities cannot be held responsible for them, as they frequently do not wish to have jobs or even wash or dress properly.

While some officials say their existence is a symptom of social breakdown, the litter-collecting fraternity is better organised than it appears from the outside.

They have strict rules about pecking order and precedence. For instance, whoever gets to a bin first can claim it as his or hers. No one else can muscle in.

There is no racial discrimination among them, either. "It makes no difference if you are Bulgarian, Armenian, or a Gypsy," said the 55-year-old woman. "We are all equal and get along well."

Her Armenian friend, Maya Anmahyan, nods. But they also agree that the existing concord between them is facilitated by the sheer abundance of rubbish in Sofia.

There is enough litter for everyone, they say, adding that the quantity lures many other would-be rubbish

sorters from the countryside.

The country's old-fashioned rubbish-collecting system, which does not sort litter by category, perpetuates the community's survival.

The rubbish sifters, in fact, perform the local council a big service by sorting and processing huge quantities of litter.

Recently, the city council launched a new initiative that threatened to cut them out.

They placed different containers for different kinds of junk garbage in five areas of the capital. But the new containers have yet to make an impact, for few people are willing to sort through their litter before hurling it into the bins.

Although disapproving of reprocessing points working with the rubbish sifters, Neli Manova, chair of the city council's ecology committee, admits the ad hoc system is quite effective at separating out paper, glass and metal for recycling.

For the time being, it seems, rubbish sifters will continue to serve the city with their cheap and ecologically friendly services, and in doing so, make a bare living for themselves.

Boryana Dzhambazova is a freelance journalist, based in Sofia.

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/bulgaria-impovertised-graduates-find-salvation>