

## **EU Focus: Brussels Orders Romania to Clean Up its Act**

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Polluted drinking water remains a pressing environmental issue, which Bucharest must tackle if it is to join the EU.

Since the fall of the communist regime, Garla Mare, a village of 3,500 inhabitants on the bank of the Danube and once a major grain producer for the country, has slid into poverty.

The only legacy of that earlier era is a high level of pesticides in the ground water, which is the only source of drinking water in the area.

More and more people have fallen ill in recent years. When the drinking water was finally tested, the results were devastating: the level of microbiological pollution was so high that according to EU legislation the water should not even have been used for bathing.

“The main drinking well, which according to the villagers was ‘clean’, had extremely high levels of pollution with nitrate and atrazin, a persistent pesticide,” said Mihaela Vasilescu, of the Bucharest based Medium & Sanitas (Environment and Health) Association, who coordinated the project that ran the tests in Garla Mare.

High concentrations of nitrates in drinking water are a major cause for concern, because nitrate can be reduced to nitrite, causing a condition that reduces the ability of the blood cell to carry oxygen.

The doctors in the village have warned local health inspectorates about the alarming health effects of the environmental pollution but until recently nothing was done.

“Under the project we managed to organise the installation of a water filter in the village school to provide drinking water for vulnerable groups, such as young children and pregnant women,” Vasilescu said. The project has also built ecological sanitary toilets and organised meetings between farmers and experts, so the inhabitants be informed of the dangers they face.

“We have been drinking water from the well near my house for years,” Maria Gheorghe, a villager of Garla Mare, told IWPR. “Although my kids often fell ill with intestinal diseases, especially when they were very young, and I had a miscarriage, it never crossed my mind it had anything to do with the water.”

Gheorghe said she had heard of the water tests but did not have the money to pay for a safe supply to her house. “Buying food is more important than water,” she said.

“We own a well but the water is muddy so I don’t use it, I fear kidney problems,” said Vasile Ion, another villager. “I use water from a neighbour’s well for drinking.”

The European Commission has criticised Romania repeatedly for its record on protecting the environment. Progress must be made if the country is to join the EU by 2007.

The latest report by the EC on the country's progress towards accession repeats the complaint that the environment remains an outstanding problem. "Financial resources dedicated to the sector remain inadequate, resulting in poor implementation of EC environmental policies," it said.

The legacy of environmental degradation dates from the communist period. Large industrial plants, most of which are still state-run, leaked insufficiently-treated toxic pollutants into ground for more than 50 years.

Intensive agricultural practices contributed to this environmental degradation, as synthetic fertilisers contaminated the ground water, the only source of drinking water in most rural areas.

The Romanian parliament adopted an environmental protection law, providing a framework for the conservation of the country's natural resources, in December 1995.

But the cost of bringing Romania into line with EU standards remains high. A report last year by the US Department of Commerce's Central and Eastern Europe Business Information Centre estimated the cost of Romania's compliance with EU standards at 20 billion US dollars over 20 years.

As a first step, the authorities have tried to harmonise environmental legislation in line with that of the EU.

"We have the right legislation but we do not have the capacity to put the law into practice," said Professor Petruta Moisi, president of the environmental NGO, Eco Counselling Centre Galati, ECCG. "We do not have enough resources to control and monitor polluted water sources."

Moisi believes publicity is another problem. "The authorities have not financed any campaigns to inform the population. Only the NGOs have tried to solve this, but the results have not been satisfactory, as the NGOs have to depend on foreign aid to inform communities about environmental hazards."

The government's latest measure has been to adopt a World Health Organisation action plan to reduce the impact of environmental hazards on health. Bucharest signed up to the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in Budapest last month. One of the goals set there was access to clean water and sanitation by 2015.

"We are confident that by 2015 we will reduce the number of population who do not have access to safe drinking water in Romania by half," Alexandra Cucu, deputy director of the public health department, in the ministry of health and family, told IWPR.

"Romania is going to put in place a national strategy to increase the proportion of households with access to safe and affordable water and sanitation facilities, especially in the rural areas, where the problem is most acute," Cucu added.

The first step, she told IWPR, would be to change the law on monitoring drinking water. Until recently, the ministry of health and family did not monitor water from private and public wells, which is what most villages use, because the law did not include it.

"We changed the legislation at the beginning of July. From now on we will be able to get exact information concerning pollution levels in all affected areas and, consequently, proper measures are going to be taken," Cucu concluded.

At the moment, only 18 per cent of the rural population has access to improved drinking water sources, according to a WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation.

Romanians remain worried about their water quality. Some 62 per cent consider water pollution the country's worst environmental problem, according to the latest report of the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe, REC, a non-profit organisation based in Szentendre, Hungary.

More than half said they did not believe the government cared about the environment. Over 90 per cent said neither national nor local government spent enough money on environmental protection, the same report said.

Bucharest says these worries are overplayed. Cucu insists a maximum of 3 per cent of the country's total drinking water is polluted. "It is true we have not monitored the water in public and private wells, which is used in most rural areas, but overall the situation is not dramatic," she said. "I believe we do better than many other European countries when it comes to water pollution."

It is not only small villages like Garla Mare that have faced water pollution problems in recent years.

The most serious case occurred in 2000 when the river Tisza became seriously contaminated with cyanide and heavy metal wastes from the Aurul gold mine in Baia. The contamination spread into the Hungarian stretch of the Danube. The environmental impact was so devastating that European environmentalists called it an "aquatic Chernobyl".

The eastern city of Galati, with a population of around 324,000, is another problem area.

One of the main inland Danube ports, with heavy commercial traffic along the river, its serious environmental problems stem from the steel, iron and chemical plants dotting the surroundings.

Local NGOs representatives have reported insufficient water treatment facilities in Galati, with acid rain and high-nitrate content in the ground water. "The Danube is highly polluted around the Galati area," said Petruta Moisi of the Eco Counselling Centre. "Fortunately we have managed to get foreign financial aid to construct a purifying plant in the region, but it will be ready only in 2006."

Intensive farming is blamed for the high levels of nitrate found in the ground water in Calarasi, a predominately agricultural county in south-eastern Romania. In 1997, every case of acute nitrate poisoning in the country occurred in Calarasi. Many children aged up to 15 were hospitalised that year for the condition. According to government sources, of 59 samples from the area's public wells and other water supply sources between 1996 and 1999, nearly 80 per cent exceeded the drinking water nitrate standard.

Several projects are in train, tackling the worst black spots. Since 1999, the World Bank has been funding one aimed at improving drinking water in Calarasi county, including promoting "environmentally friendly agricultural practices".

Another project to assist Romania in complying with EU standards is going to be developed in the eastern Siret River Basin region.

The US Trade and Development Agency, meanwhile, awarded almost 600,000 dollars to the Romanian ministry of environment and water management this June. The plan is for the ministry to select four municipalities in the Siret River Basin area. In each, ways will be examined to improve drinking water and waste water treatment facilities by the end of this year.

But not all communities can hope to get hold of expensive foreign aid grants to improve their water. Chris Church, of the Amsterdam-based Northern Alliance for Sustainability, a network of 100 international NGOs and environment groups, told IWPR that the foreign grants tend to go to the better-placed communities.

“Only the rich apply for the money,” Church said. “The poor usually have never heard of such opportunities and even if they have, they do not know what to do, or how to apply for financial aid.”

The inhabitants of Garla Mare have been lucky to benefit from the work of Medium et Sanitas, which has resulted in a marked improvement in their water and sanitation infrastructure.

Mihaela Vasilecsu, coordinator of the project, told IWPR the challenge is to ensure that “the project results can be replicated ... not only in this village but in other rural areas of Romania”.

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