Romania – work still bad for health

The country’s work accident figures may be falling and working conditions improving, especially since joining the EU and coming into line with its laws in 2006, but work is still not a safe nor yet healthy place to be for Romania’s five million employees.

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Coal miners prepare to head into the mine, Petrița, Romania (7 December 2006). Since Romania joined the EU, dozens of unprofitable mines have closed. In the south-western Jiu Valley, coal mining was the only stable form of employment. Twelve of the mine’s workers were killed in a firedamp explosion in November 2008.

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38-year-old Bogdan is a casual construction worker. He doesn’t see himself as working in particularly dangerous conditions, and freely admits to not always wearing a hardhat and climbing scaffolding with no fall-preventing screens or guardrails. "It all depends on the building site, but safety and risks aren’t a common topic of conversation with the boss or even your workmates", he says.

Romania, a country of 22 million people, joined the EU in 2007. Working conditions, social protection, risk assessment and prevention, access to care, indeed anything to do with health and safety at work are often nowhere near up to European standards.

But the official figures offer hopeful signs. Statistics compiled by the Labour Inspectorate since 2000 point to a decline in accidents at work: the number of recorded work accidents fell from 6,653 in 2000 to 2,457 in 2009, while fatal accidents were down from 490 to 157.

This striking drop in the accident figures "reflects improved efficiency in the labour inspectorate’s health and safety at work activities to make employers and employees aware of workplace hazards", says the National Labour Inspectorate’s man in charge of this, Ionut Barbu. He is particularly pleased to see it happening even though productivity has doubled, when the reverse can usually be expected.

But if the downturn in accidents is due to a stepping-up of inspections, more stringent laws with stiffer penalties and tighter risk assessment procedures, it is also partly due to changes in the Romanian labour market from closures or decline in very high risk industries like mining. Between 2000 and 2004, there were more than 4,000 accidents (two-thirds of the total) in coal mining. By 2009, that was down to 185 accidents (8% of the total). The construction (306 accidents, 13% of the total), woodworking and transport industries are now the most hazardous.

### Figures that don’t say it all

The number of new cases of occupational diseases recorded each year is also down: 1,766 in 2009 – chiefly in the mining, metallurgical and car-making industries – from 2,750 in 1980. The main diseases identified by the National Institute of Public Health are bronchial asthma, silicosis and musculoskeletal disorders - the latter being on the rise. The Institute puts the slight decline down to improved working conditions, particularly with regard to exposure to toxic chemicals for example, and improvements in the surveillance network.

But Corneliu Constantinoia, the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Romania’s general secretary for social issues, caveats these figures.

While good on the face of it, the results have to be qualified by the possibility that some labour inspectors may be open to corruption – endemic in government agencies – and that the potential dangers of certain risks, particularly in commerce, may be ignored.

The same lack of certainty surrounds the occupational disease figures. The National Institute of Public Health, which manages the 600 occupational doctors, says that many former industrial workers now work in agriculture and may be ill but not included in the official figures. Occupational medicine also offers a good illustration of the broader processes at work on these health and safety issues. First, the reshaping of the labour market is leading to the emergence of new risks and new diseases that occupational doctors have to learn to detect. Also, the legislation is not yet being fully implemented: annual employee health checks and pre-employment medical examinations are still a rarity, especially in small businesses.

On paper, Romania has the rules and tools to establish an effective health and safety policy. The realities are under-resourcing, a poor understanding of the situation, and little interest in these matters.

Ionel Iorga, Director of the National Institute for Research and Development for Safety at Work, believes that the main problem is "lack of funding for carrying out preventive and protective activities and developing an infrastructure for vocational training of health and safety at work specialists". He also points to the lack of a system for disseminating information on these things and a work equipment certification system. Funding for studies and research on these topics is also lacking. Basically, what has to be developed in Romania is an entire network of surveillance, skills and tools to establish healthy and safe working conditions.

### Health and safety, "the bottom priority"

Enforcement of the Health and Safety at Work Act 2006 is also hobbled by a poor health and safety culture in firms.

"In the communist era, social protection was a state responsibility. After 1989, market liberalization and the proliferation of private firms, especially SMIs, have made dramatic changes and the situation now varies across firms. Some of them provide very good social protection", explains Corneliu Constantinoia. "The main problem is that for most employers, safety is always the bottom priority, even though they have a duty to provide their employees with a safe and healthy environment."

He also blames the low pay and development that "forces trade-off", meaning "cheap and easy" are often preferred to "safe". As a result, many workers are still exposed to risks at their workplace from solvents, pollutants, noise, inadequate safety measures, etc. One recent example is the two workers who fell down the shaft of a lift they were repairing in February 2010.

### Over a million "rightless" workers

One key factor in play here is the weak position of Romanian workers, who are hard-put to stand up for themselves. The switch to a market economy coupled to a deep economic crisis has led to high unemployment, insecure attachment to the labour market made worse by off-the-books work, and an undermining of workers’ rights.

Despite the strong growth that pumped up the economy in the 2000s up to the crisis in 2009, employees still stand in a weak position, made worse by the lack of clout wielded by trade unions with dwindling memberships. Employees, even though aware of the potential risks, will often not stand on their rights, therefore, for fear of being sacked. And with the crisis pushing unemployment up from 4 to 7.3%, employees are more than ever making “compromises”.

More importantly, the Romanian economy is affected by widespread cash-in-hand work. A recent report estimated the number of rightless workers at between 1.4 and 1.7 million, mainly in agriculture and...
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Stress and burnout

Not just building sites and production lines, but offices can be dangerous, too. Stress, free overtime, the build-up of fatigue, aggression towards public-facing workers all take their toll.

The death in 2007 of Raluca Stroescu, a young staffer with the Ernst & Young consultancy group, awoke public opinion to the situation of employees in these big firms. Working sometimes up to 14 hours at a stretch including on weekends, these young professionals are subject to sustained stress and work phases. In March 2010, Ramona Ciciu, a young mother who worked for the international market research firm Ipsos, collapsed at her desk and died after four days in a coma. Her family blamed an excessive workload and overtime working. There is no proof that stress in 2007. Run first of all in the northern Satu Mare department on two target groups – civil servants and clothing industry workers – the study has been extended to other departments and the issue has since 2009 been in the labour inspectorate's action programmes. Psychosocial problems are likely to be classified as occupational risk factors before long. A large-scale inspection and prevention campaign on overtime working was set to be run in late March in big audit, consulting and computing firms.

Informing employees

Preventive and information measures are desperately needed in Romania. Smoking, pollution, alcohol, diseases and the rest – Romanian workers generally know little of the risks they run. "This is especially true in things like commerce which is thought to be harmless but is not without hazards", says Corneliu Constantinoaia. He and his union (among others) are working on a project to develop health and safety committees. All companies with more than 50 employees are meant to have these, but many either do not or have one in name only.

Some sectors like construction also have set-ups to promote awareness and prevention of occupational risks: since 2007, the construction workplace safety fund set up by two industry unions has been running "no penalty" checks on worksites, providing firms with consultancy services on workplace safety, and chiefly informing employers and workers about safety.

The Romtens Foundation set up by doctors has become a European contact point for promoting health in the workplace. It has, for example, run campaigns on smoking, assessing firms’ situations and looking with them at what measures to take to educate employees in the risks of smoking. "These are risks they often do not know about", says Eugenia Barbuc, Project Manager at Romtens. Because while EU directives and recommendations have been taken over into law, it takes much longer to change behaviours. "The level of information – be it about smoking, drinking, diet, or whatever – is very limited. The occupational doctors we work with are more treatment- than prevention-oriented. We're getting good reactions from the workers, and while there's still a long way to go, it is an improving trend", she says. The foundation's campaign particularly plays up the commitment of some businessmen – those that use the foundation's services – to give a proper place to these issues in the business world. Perhaps a sign of an awakening to the importance of providing a healthy and safe working environment.

Very unequal access to care

There is a huge gap between workers in health monitoring and access to care. All workers are covered by the public health system and must also undergo regular health checks by the occupational health service. "In reality, though, the situation varies with the firm", says Corneliu Constantinoaia. The case of two young women illustrate this: one is a civil servant with entitlement to a family doctor and free treatment in public hospitals; the other works in advertising and has the same entitlements plus access to employer-funded private hospital treatment, annual health check and reimbursement of a list of treatments.

The problem is that Romania's health system is in a very poor state. In particular, it is riddled by corruption and care is never actually free if you factor in the "backhanders" paid to healthcare staff to ensure proper treatment. This makes it harder for the lowest paid to access care.

The case of Viorel, a Bucharest junior executive who had several weeks' sick leave last year clearly illustrates the problems of accessing care and the resulting inequalities. He had to make the cash-in-hand payments to public sector doctors he consulted out of his own pocket; was able to have some tests done and see doctors in a private hospital under his employer's health care plan; but for want of the right equipment, had to have extra investigations done in another private hospital where he had to pay the full cost. This makes it hard for most employees in a country where the average wage is between 250 and 300 euros to get proper treatment. The planned reform of the health system signalled at the end of 2009 but repeatedly put back aims to introduce the co-payment system, leaving patients to foot the bill for the cost of their care over a certain amount (yet to be defined). Although this measure aims to cure the chronic failing of the health system, it could further worsen the two-tier health situation.

Despite new laws in line with European standards and a relative improvement in the situation, the Romanian working environment is still not by any stretch healthy or safe. The rules are there on paper, and some of the tools; what is needed now is funding and to make this issue a real priority. The economic crisis hitting the state as much as business means this could well not happen for some time to come.