

# Intercultural Communication in Municipal Waste Management in Romania

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The article analyzes the role of intercultural communication in promoting environmentally responsible behavior, highlighting the importance of adapting messages to the cultural, social, and educational diversity of the population. It analyzes national examples of environmental campaigns and projects to demonstrate the effectiveness of using communication channels specific to the target audience. National statistics on waste recycling and disposal highlight the gaps compared to the European average and highlight differences in perception and behavior between different groups. Finally, the article proposes concrete recommendations for intercultural communication in waste management, emphasizing the need to personalize messages, involve the community, and continuously test campaigns with constructive feedback to stimulate active participation and empower citizens.

**Intercultural communication; waste management; environmental education; environmental protection.**

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## 1. Introduction

Romania faces multiple challenges in waste management, which have significant consequences for the environment and public health. Uncontrolled dumping and illegal landfills continue to be a major problem, affecting soil, groundwater, and air, especially in rural areas and small towns, where selective collection infrastructure is underdeveloped. The recycling rate remains low, well below the European average, while existing awareness campaigns have failed to have a significant impact on the national level.

Intercultural communication plays a key role in how environmental messages are perceived and adopted by different social groups in Romania. Differences in education, socio-economic status, cultural traditions, and geographic region influence communities' response to waste management initiatives. Zhu (2019) and Baker (2022) show that cultural and linguistic differences are essential in intercultural communication. This perspective is also relevant to the field of waste management, where policies and strategies for waste

collection, recycling, and reduction must be communicated and negotiated between communities with different values, customs, and levels of environmental awareness.

Baker's (2024) perspective on intercultural communication can also be applied to the field of waste management. Just as learning foreign languages involves negotiation between diverse cultural and linguistic resources, waste management strategies require communication between actors from different cultural backgrounds.

The young urban population may be more receptive to digital campaigns and visual messages, while rural communities respond better to the involvement of local leaders and practical activities. Cultural differences also influence values and attitudes towards individual responsibility in waste management, requiring messages to be adapted in order to be effective.

Local public administration authorities are required to ensure that residents are adequately informed about the waste management system in their localities. Although local authorities are often perceived by the population as solely responsible for the success or failure of waste management systems, the hygiene of an area is only possible by encouraging collaboration and intensifying communication between citizens and public authorities. As a result, the population must change its perception of sanitation services and become an active partner in them by keeping public spaces clean, minimizing the amount of household waste, and supporting the recovery and recycling process through selective waste collection.

The objective of this article is to analyze the communication strategies used in Romania to promote sustainable behavior in waste management. By combining intercultural communication perspectives with real environmental issues, the article aims to identify effective practices and suggest recommendations for adapting messages to the cultural and social diversity of the Romanian population.

## **2. Conceptual framework**

According to Gherase R., the level of intercultural communication represents the level at which communication between members of two or more different cultures takes place. Intercultural communication refers to the process by which individuals or groups from different cultures convey and interpret messages, considering the values, norms, traditions, and social codes specific to each community. This is not limited to linguistic differences, but also includes non-verbal aspects, cultural perceptions, and social contexts that influence how messages are received.

In the context of waste management, adapting messages to different cultural and social groups is essential to increase the effectiveness of campaigns and the level of public engagement in the long term. For example, some communities may perceive recycling as an imposed administrative task, while others see it as a moral or community gesture. Messages must be adapted to be inclusive and sensitive to these values.

To achieve its goal, communication must be tailored to the community. In cities, apps, social media, and information boards can be used. In rural areas, community meetings, the involvement of local opinion leaders, and practical activities (such as cleaning up certain areas) are more effective.

Communication plays a fundamental role in the social process of environmental education. Without this indispensable tool, citizens do not have access to information that can stimulate changes in attitude and the full exercise of citizen participation in waste management activities. In waste management, there are many concepts that help us to correctly understand efficient waste management, protect the environment, and promote a sustainable system.

According to current European legislation, defined by Directive 2008/98/EC, the term "**waste**" means any substance or object that the holder discards, intends to discard, or is required to discard. This definition highlights the three essential circumstances in which a material is considered waste and provides a legal basis for its classification and management, ensuring uniform application in all Member States of the European Union. Through this approach, the legislation reflects an integrated view of resource management and responsibility in the process of waste generation and disposal.

**Integrated waste management.** This concept refers to the use of a comprehensive set of strategies and techniques for waste management, considering collection, transport, and disposal, as well as prevention, recycling, and reuse of waste. This system encourages long-term solutions.

**Waste prevention.** This concept refers to taking measures to prevent waste generation before it is produced. The main goal is to reduce the amount of waste generated by changing consumption and production behaviors, such as:

- choosing products with minimal or reusable packaging
- designing durable products that do not need to be replaced frequently
- optimizing production processes to minimize losses

**Reuse.** This concept refers to the process of repeatedly using a product or material for the same purpose or for a different use. Reuse helps reduce the amount of waste and extend the useful life of products.

**Waste collection.** Waste collection involves a series of operations consisting of collecting waste and sending it to a transfer station, a sorting center, a treatment center, or a landfill. Selective collection is a municipal waste management process whereby household materials with high recycling potential (such as paper, cardboard, glass, plastic, and metal) are recovered and sent for recycling. To be effective, this process requires sorting "at source," separate collection of secondary materials, and treatment at a recovery center.

**Waste recycling.** This is the operation of reprocessing waste in a production process to be used for its original purpose or for other purposes. The term includes organic recycling (composting) but excludes energy recovery.

The concept of the *circular economy* promotes an economic model in which resources are used as much as possible through reuse, repair, recycling, and reuse. In this system, waste is considered a resource, and the flow of materials is continuous, minimizing losses and pollution.

**Waste disposal** is the method by which waste that cannot be recycled, reused, or recovered for energy is stored in specially designed facilities - landfills. This is considered the last step in the waste management hierarchy and is used to prevent environmental pollution and risks to public health.

**Environmental education** integrated with intercultural communication not only conveys information about environmental protection, but also increases the chances that this information will be understood, accepted, and applied by all communities.

Environmental education has a number of informative and formative functions, such as those related to the transmission of scientific knowledge aimed at encouraging individual and collective attitudes based on motivations and theories. The opinions formed aim to change poor and deficient environmental behavior and lead to actions that involve responsible environmental conduct.

The educational goal of the environmental education is to prepare citizens to be able to make the right behavioral decisions, to make informed and independent decisions regarding environmental protection.

Environmental education programs are diverse, ranging from environmental education classes in compulsory education to the transfer of information through the media, training, artistic activities, ecotourism, etc. Therefore, in order to make rapid progress in understanding nature and rethinking our approach to nature and society, there must be an intertwining of theoretical and practical activities that support each other.

## **2. Effective national practices**

At the national level, campaigns have been carried out that are not just technical actions, but communication processes that must be adapted to the social, cultural, and educational diversity of the population served.

The *Ecotic Caravan*, considered a mobile educational project for the collection and recycling of electrical and electronic waste, shows the importance of adapting the message to different urban and rural communities. Through practical demonstrations and collection points, citizens learn to recognize the value of recyclable materials. Intercultural communication is evident here in the different ways messages are conveyed: technical explanations for urban audiences and practical activities for communities with lower levels of environmental literacy.

*Green Group*, the leader of the recycling industry in Romania, conveys messages of responsibility and transparency through its modern facilities. In an intercultural context,

the company must communicate with both international partners and local communities. Educational visits and media campaigns help build public confidence that the waste collected is recycled, not disposed of through incineration or landfilling. This transparency is essential for gaining the support of communities.

The most complex environmental education campaign in Romania aimed at schoolchildren (*Baterel and Lumea Non-E*) uses customized educational tools, digital platforms, and even "green currency" - points earned for collection that are converted into resources for purchasing school supplies, accessories, or games. This campaign is a relevant example of adapting messages to a specific audience with norms and values different from those of adults. Students respond better to visual language, interactivity, and symbolic rewards than to moralizing or directive speeches. At the same time, by involving teachers and parents, the environmental message crosses barriers between generations and social contexts, demonstrating that the success of environmental education depends on how messages are adapted to the cultural diversity of the audience.

The large-scale civic movement *Let's Do It, Romania!* mobilizes volunteers from all regions of the country, with very diverse cultural and social experiences. So far, the campaign has mobilized over 2,600,000 volunteers in various national clean-up actions. The simplicity of the message – "Let's clean up Romania in a single day!" – and its visual and participatory nature explain the campaign's success. Intercultural communication is present through the initiative's ability to create a common message that is understood and accepted by both students and adults, urban dwellers and rural communities.

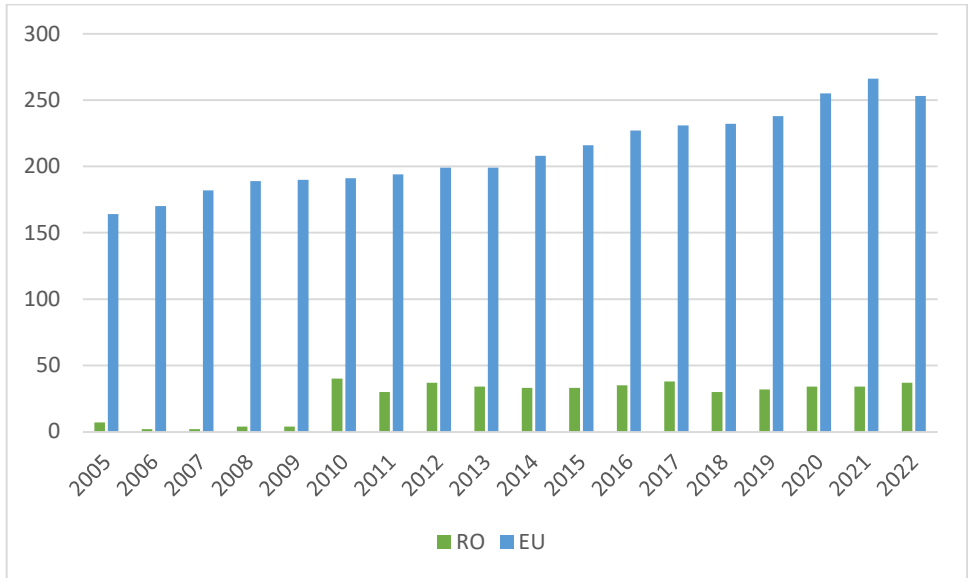
Therefore, environmental programs and campaigns in Romania demonstrate that the success of municipal waste management depends not only on infrastructure, but also on how messages are communicated to the public.

### **3. Data and context for waste management**

To understand the challenges and opportunities of municipal waste management in Romania, it is essential to analyze statistical data and the current context. Low recycling rates, predominantly landfill disposal, and uneven distribution of collection infrastructure show that the problems are not only technical, but also social and cultural.

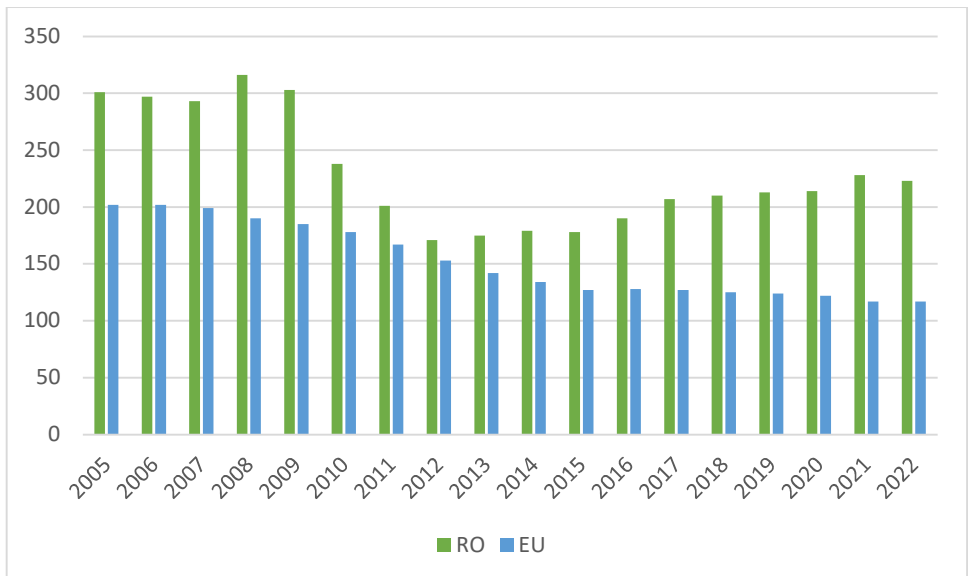
From the analysis of statistical data reported by EUROSTAT, we can clearly see the large gap between Romania and the European Union average in terms of the quantities of municipal waste recycled (kg/capita). This numerical gap reflects not only differences in infrastructure and digitization, but also cultural and communication differences. In Romania, environmental education messages have failed to bring about significant changes in the behavior of the population to become more involved in recycling. In contrast, at the EU level, intercultural campaigns and community engagement mechanisms have supported an almost constant increase in recycling. This comparison between Romania and the EU

shows that adapting messages to cultural and social specifics is essential to stimulate citizens' active participation in recycling and turn involvement into a daily habit.



**Figure 1: Recycling of municipal waste (kg/capita)**

Source: Own processing based on Eurostat data (Accessed in August 2025)



**Figure 2: Municipal waste disposal (kg/capita)**

Source: Own processing based on Eurostat data (Accessed in August 2025)

Statistical data reported for Romania show that municipal waste disposal remains the main method of waste management, despite European initiatives to reduce this practice and encourage recycling. In 2005, Romania landfilled 301 kg/capita, a figure that rose to 316 kg/capita in 2008. After this period, there was a significant decline, reaching a low of 171 kg/capita in 2012, because of pressure to comply with European policies. However, after 2013, the trend became upward, and between 2016 and 2022, levels stabilized at around 200–228 kg/capita. This stagnation suggests that measures to reduce landfilling have not been sufficiently consolidated, and alternatives such as recycling, composting, or energy recovery from waste have not developed to the necessary level.

Romania's dependence on landfilling reflects gaps in public communication and environmental education of citizens, noting that messages encouraging selective collection for recycling have not produced sufficiently strong cultural changes. Therefore, communication strategies should be adapted to the specificities of local communities to reduce resistance to change and stimulate sustainable behavior.

In contrast, the downward trend recorded at EU level reflects the success of European strategies to reduce landfill by encouraging recycling, composting, and energy recovery to extract value from waste.

#### **4. Recommendations for intercultural communication in waste management**

To achieve the goal of each communication campaign in the field of waste management, we considered useful several recommendations aimed at adapting messages to the cultural and social diversity of the Romanian population:

1. Identifying target groups based on cultural, social, geographical, and educational criteria (urban vs. rural, ethnic groups).
2. Adjusting the language, tone, and complexity of the message according to the level of literacy and familiarity with the subject of waste management.
3. Messages formulated in the native language of minority communities when relevant.
4. Using clear pictograms and images to overcome language barriers and facilitate understanding of the message.
5. Use communication channels appropriate to urban and rural environments. In urban areas, social media, websites, and mobile applications would be more effective for informing the public, while in rural areas, posters, direct education campaigns, and local opinion leaders would be more effective.
6. Messages promoting responsibility and awareness should consider local cultural values and norms related to the environment, family, and community.
7. Encourage collective actions that increase trust in local leaders or community initiatives.

8. Conduct pilot tests of communication campaigns to observe how messages are received and collect feedback to improve communication with citizens.
- Applying these recommendations facilitates the understanding and adoption of environmentally friendly behaviors, contributing to the creation of a respectful and sustainable dialogue between authorities and communities.

## 5. Conclusions

Waste management in Romania is an area facing major technical, social, and cultural challenges. Underdeveloped infrastructure (insufficient selective collection points in some areas), low recycling rates, and high landfill rates highlight the need for an integrated effort between authorities and citizens.

Intercultural communication plays a crucial role in promoting environmentally responsible behavior. Adapting messages to the cultural, social, and educational diversity of the population - through the choice of language, visual symbols, communication channels, and the involvement of local leaders - increases the effectiveness of environmental campaigns. National examples, such as Caravana Ecotic, the Baterel and Lumea Non-E campaigns, and Let's Do It, Romania! show that messages tailored to the target audience and tested through feedback have a significant impact on changing behavior.

Ultimately, an intercultural approach to communication in waste management is not just an information strategy, but an indispensable tool for building a sustainable partnership between authorities and communities that leads to the stimulation of collective responsibility for protecting the environment.

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