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THE NEW EUROPEAN AIR QUALITY STANDARDS: LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR ROMANIA

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Abstract
Air quality protection has become one of the main priorities of European environmental policy, given the significant impact of air pollution on human health and ecosystems. The adoption of Directive (EU) 2024/2881 on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe establishes more stringent protection standards, bringing European requirements into closer alignment with the levels recommended by the World Health Organization and imposing additional obligations on Member States regarding the monitoring and reduction of atmospheric pollutant emissions. This article examines the evolution of the European regulatory framework governing air quality, the main innovations introduced by the new directive, and its legal and institutional implications for Romania. The study highlights the need to adapt the national legislative framework and strengthen administrative implementation mechanisms in order to achieve the European air quality objectives by 2030 and to ensure the effective protection of the fundamental right to a healthy environment.
Keywords: air quality; Directive (EU) 2024/2881; air pollution; environmental protection; public health protection; right to a healthy environment; sustainable development.

Introduction

Air quality protection has become one of the major priorities of the European Union's environmental policy, given the significant effects of air pollution on human health, ecosystems, and socio-economic development. Despite the considerable progress achieved over the last two decades in reducing atmospheric pollutant emissions, air pollution remains the most significant environmental health risk facing the European population. According to the European Environment Agency, a large proportion of the urban population in the European Union continues to be exposed to pollutant concentrations exceeding the levels recommended by the World Health Organization, resulting in adverse health effects and substantial economic and social costs [6].

In this context, the European Union has strengthened its regulatory framework on ambient air quality through the adoption of Directive (EU) 2024/2881 on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe. The new Directive establishes more stringent air quality standards that are more closely aligned with the levels recommended by the World Health

Organization and imposes additional obligations on Member States regarding the monitoring, prevention, and reduction of air pollution, as well as the development of roadmaps aimed at achieving compliance with the new standards by 2030 [3].

For Romania, the new European requirements entail a reassessment of the national legislative and institutional framework governing air quality protection and require the adoption of legislative and administrative measures capable of ensuring compliance with the new European standards. Reducing the concentrations of particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, and other atmospheric pollutants necessitates the development of effective monitoring and control mechanisms, as well as strengthening public policies in the fields of environmental protection and public health.

The objective of this study is to analyse the legal and institutional implications of Directive (EU) 2024/2881 for Romania by examining the evolution of the European regulatory framework on ambient air quality, the obligations incumbent upon Member States, and the main challenges arising from the implementation of the new European air quality standards. The research is based on legal analysis and documentary research methods and draws upon European Union legislation, national legal instruments, public policy documents, and reports issued by European institutions and international organisations.

1. Air Quality Protection within the European Union's Environmental Policy

1.1. Evolution of European Regulations on Air Protection

Air quality protection constitutes one of the fundamental components of the European Union's environmental policy and is the result of a gradual and complex regulatory and institutional process developed in response to the increasing effects of air pollution on human health and the environment. The evolution of European regulations in this field reflects the transition from an approach primarily focused on economic integration to a comprehensive policy framework in which environmental protection and sustainable development have become core objectives of the European Union.

The original Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, signed in 1957, did not contain explicit provisions on environmental protection. However,

accelerated industrial development and urbanisation within the Member States led to the emergence of environmental problems of a transboundary nature, of which air pollution was a prominent example. In the absence of specific environmental competences, the first European environmental measures were adopted through legal provisions aimed at achieving the common market and approximating national legislation.

A significant milestone in the development of European environmental policy was the adoption of the First Environmental Action Programme in 1973. This programme recognised that economic development and environmental protection are complementary objectives and highlighted the need to prevent and reduce air pollution through coordinated action at the European level.

The formal recognition of environmental protection as a European competence was achieved through the Single European Act of 1986, which introduced a distinct title on environmental policy and established several fundamental principles of environmental law, including the precautionary principle, the preventive action principle, the principle that environmental damage should be rectified at source, and the polluter pays principle. These principles subsequently became the cornerstone of the European legal framework governing air quality protection. Their legal significance has been extensively examined in the literature on European environmental law, which regards these principles as the normative foundation of contemporary European environmental policy [13]. The gradual strengthening of European environmental legislation further demonstrates the increasing importance attributed to preventive and precautionary approaches in European Union environmental law [14].

Subsequently, the Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty) and the Treaty of Amsterdam reinforced the environmental dimension of European integration by recognising sustainable development as a fundamental objective of the European Union and requiring environmental protection requirements to be integrated into the definition and implementation of all Union policies and activities [1] [15]. Consequently, air quality protection ceased to be merely a sectoral environmental concern and evolved into a cross-cutting policy closely connected to public health, energy, transport, industrial activities, and territorial development.

Over time, the European Union has developed an extensive regulatory framework aimed both at reducing atmospheric emissions and at establishing common standards for ambient air quality. This framework has progressively strengthened the obligations imposed upon Member States regarding air quality monitoring, the assessment of pollution levels, and the adoption of measures necessary to limit public exposure to harmful concentrations of atmospheric pollutants.

The need for the continuous strengthening of air quality protection is justified by the persistence of elevated pollution levels in several regions of Europe. According to the European Environment Agency, despite significant progress achieved during the last two decades in reducing emissions and improving air quality, air pollution remains the most significant environmental risk to human health in Europe. More than 90% of the urban population in the European Union continues to be exposed to concentrations of pollutants exceeding the levels recommended by the World Health Organization, resulting in adverse health effects and considerable economic and social costs [6].

Against this background, the evolution of European regulations on air quality protection demonstrates a consistent trend towards increasingly stringent standards and stronger obligations for Member States regarding the prevention and reduction of air pollution. This process has culminated in the adoption of Directive (EU) 2024/2881 on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe, which inaugurates a new stage in European air quality policy characterised by higher protection standards and a stronger focus on safeguarding human health and promoting sustainable development [3].

1.2. Air Quality as an Objective of the European Union's Environmental Policy

Air quality protection has become one of the priority objectives of the European Union's environmental policy due to the significant consequences of air pollution for human health, biodiversity, ecosystems, and socio-economic development. In the current context, characterised by increasing environmental challenges and the need to achieve sustainable development, ensuring a high level of air quality protection has acquired strategic importance within the European Union's policy framework.

The legal basis of the European Union's environmental policy is established by Articles 191 to 193 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Pursuant to Article 191(1) TFEU, Union policy on the environment shall contribute to preserving, protecting, and improving the quality of the environment, protecting human health, and promoting measures at the international level to address regional and global environmental problems [1]. Within this framework, air quality protection serves the dual purpose of environmental improvement and the protection of public health, which confers a complex and multidimensional character upon this policy area.

European air quality policy is founded on several fundamental principles of environmental law enshrined in Article 191(2) TFEU, namely the precautionary principle, the preventive action principle, the principle that environmental damage should, as a priority, be rectified at source, and the polluter pays principle [1]. The application of these principles requires the adoption of proactive measures aimed at preventing and reducing atmospheric emissions, as well as the establishment of effective mechanisms for monitoring and controlling air quality. Romanian environmental law doctrine has consistently emphasised that the precautionary and preventive principles impose positive obligations upon public authorities to adopt effective measures aimed at preventing environmental degradation and mitigating pollution risks [11].

The strategic importance of air quality protection has been further reinforced through its inclusion in the European Union's principal policy documents concerning sustainable development and ecological transition. In this regard, the European Green Deal seeks to transform the European Union into a modern, competitive, and resource-efficient economy while pursuing, among its main objectives, a substantial reduction in pollution and the creation of a healthier environment for European citizens [4]. Likewise, the European Union's Zero Pollution Action Plan for Air, Water and Soil establishes the objective of significantly reducing the impact of pollution on human health and ecosystems by 2050 [5].

The need to strengthen air quality protection measures is also supported by scientific evidence concerning the adverse effects of air pollution on public health. According to the European Environment Agency, air pollution remains the most significant environmental health risk in Europe and is associated with respiratory and cardiovascular

diseases, as well as a considerable number of premature deaths [6]. Although air quality has progressively improved across Europe over the last two decades, pollutant concentrations continue to exceed the levels recommended by the World Health Organization for most pollutants. Furthermore, more than 90% of the urban population in the European Union remains exposed to pollution levels exceeding those recommendations [6].

Beyond its effects on public health, deteriorating air quality also generates substantial economic consequences. The costs associated with healthcare expenditure, reduced labour productivity, and absenteeism attributable to pollution-related illnesses constitute a significant burden on Member States. The European Environment Agency estimates that the economic impact of air pollution amounts to approximately EUR 600 billion annually, representing nearly 4% of the combined gross domestic product of the Member States [6].

Under these circumstances, air quality protection has evolved beyond the scope of a merely sectoral environmental policy and has become a cross-cutting objective of European Union action, situated at the intersection of public health, energy, transport, industrial, and sustainable development policies. This evolution is also reflected in the broader assessments of European environmental policy undertaken by the European Environment Agency, which emphasise the increasing interdependence between environmental protection, public health, climate action, and sustainable development objectives [7]. This integrated approach explains the continuous strengthening of European air quality standards and justifies the adoption of increasingly stringent legislative measures aimed at reducing public exposure to air pollution and ensuring a high level of protection of both the environment and human health.

2. The Relationship between Air Quality Protection and the Right to a Healthy Environment

Air quality protection is not merely an objective of environmental policy but also constitutes an essential condition for the effective enjoyment of the fundamental right to a healthy environment. The deterioration of air quality directly affects human health, quality of life, and the exercise of other fundamental rights, including the right to life, the

right to physical and mental integrity, and the right to health protection. Consequently, air quality protection has acquired a significant legal dimension and has gradually become embedded in international, European, and domestic legal frameworks. International environmental law scholarship has increasingly recognised the close relationship between environmental protection and the effective enjoyment of fundamental human rights, particularly the rights to health and to a healthy environment [12].

At the European Union level, environmental protection is recognised under Article 37 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which provides that a high level of environmental protection and the improvement of the quality of the environment must be integrated into the policies of the Union and ensured in accordance with the principle of sustainable development [2]. Although the Charter does not expressly recognise an individual right to a healthy environment, it imposes an obligation upon the European institutions and the Member States to incorporate environmental protection requirements into all Union policies and activities.

At the national level, the Romanian Constitution explicitly recognises the right to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment. Article 35 provides that the State shall recognise the right of every person to a healthy environment, ensure the legislative framework necessary for the exercise of this right, and require natural and legal persons to protect and improve the environment [9]. Consequently, the right to a healthy environment is not merely declaratory in nature but gives rise to positive obligations for public authorities, requiring them to adopt appropriate legislative, administrative, and institutional measures aimed at preventing and reducing environmental risks.

In the field of air quality protection, these positive obligations assume particular importance. Air pollution is associated with numerous adverse health effects and has been identified as the most significant environmental risk to human health in Europe. According to the European Environment Agency, despite the progress achieved in recent decades, a large proportion of the European population continues to be exposed to levels of air pollution exceeding those recommended by the World Health Organization, thereby contributing to an increased incidence of respiratory and cardiovascular diseases and to a considerable number of premature deaths [6].

The relationship between environmental protection and fundamental rights has also been reinforced through the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. Although the European Convention on Human Rights does not explicitly recognise a right to a healthy environment, the Court has consistently held that severe environmental pollution may interfere with the effective enjoyment of rights guaranteed by the Convention, particularly the right to life and the right to respect for private and family life. The Court has repeatedly emphasised that States are under a positive obligation to adopt adequate and effective measures aimed at preventing and reducing environmental risks that can affect the population.

Similarly, the Court of Justice of the European Union has consistently underlined the binding nature of European environmental legislation and the necessity of ensuring a high level of protection of human health through the effective implementation of European air quality legislation. The Court's case law demonstrates that obligations concerning the monitoring and reduction of air pollution are not merely formal requirements but require the adoption of concrete and effective measures designed to achieve compliance with the air quality standards established by European Union law.

Accordingly, air quality protection should be regarded not only as an objective of environmental policy but also as an expression of the State's obligation to ensure the effective enjoyment of the right to a healthy environment and to guarantee a high level of human health protection. In this context, the strengthening of European air quality standards and the adoption of more stringent measures for preventing and reducing air pollution constitute not merely matters of public policy but also legal requirements derived from the obligation to safeguard fundamental rights and promote sustainable development.

3. Directive (EU) 2024/2881 and the New European Air Quality Standards

3.1. The Context of the Adoption of the New Directive

The adoption of Directive (EU) 2024/2881 on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe is the result of a comprehensive reassessment of the effectiveness of the European regulatory framework governing air quality protection. This reassessment was

prompted by the persistence of elevated levels of air pollution across Europe and by the need to strengthen the protection of human health and the environment. Despite significant progress achieved over the last two decades in reducing atmospheric pollutant emissions, scientific evidence and institutional assessments continue to demonstrate that air pollution remains the most significant environmental threat to public health in Europe [6].

According to the European Environment Agency, concentrations of several major pollutants have shown a downward trend in most European countries. Nevertheless, a significant number of monitoring stations continue to record exceedances of air quality standards, particularly in relation to particulate matter (PM10), ground-level ozone (O3), and benzo(a)pyrene [6]. Furthermore, when assessed against the recommendations issued by the World Health Organization, the situation appears even more concerning. The European Environment Agency has reported that more than 90% of the urban population in the European Union remains exposed to pollutant concentrations exceeding the levels recommended by the World Health Organization, highlighting a considerable gap between the legal standards in force and the level of protection required to prevent adverse health effects [6].

The consequences of air pollution are not limited to public health concerns but also encompass significant economic and social impacts. The costs associated with pollution-related diseases, reduced labour productivity, and increased expenditure on healthcare constitute a substantial burden for Member States. According to estimates provided by the European Environment Agency, the economic costs of air pollution amount to approximately EUR 600 billion annually, corresponding to nearly 4% of the gross domestic product of the Member States of the European Union [6].

The adoption of a new European legislative framework on ambient air quality was also driven by the commitments assumed by the European Union under the European Green Deal and the European Zero Pollution Action Plan for Air, Water and Soil. These policy documents establish the objective of achieving pollution levels that are no longer considered harmful to human health and ecosystems and promote the gradual alignment of European standards with the levels recommended by the World Health Organization [4], [5].

Against this background, Directive (EU) 2024/2881, which entered into force on 10 December 2024, establishes a new legal framework for air quality protection and introduces more stringent standards that will become applicable from 2030 [3]. The Directive requires Member States to assess, during the period 2026-2029, the likelihood of achieving the new standards and, where there is a risk of non-compliance, to prepare and implement air quality roadmaps aimed at ensuring compliance by 2030 [3].

The adoption of Directive (EU) 2024/2881 therefore reflects a significant shift in the European Union's approach to air quality protection. Whereas previous regulatory instruments were primarily oriented towards the progressive reduction of pollutant emissions and the establishment of minimum protection standards, the new directive adopts a more ambitious approach centred on closer alignment with scientific evidence and on strengthening the responsibility of Member States to guarantee a high level of protection of human health and the environment.

3.2. Main Legislative Changes Introduced by Directive (EU) 2024/2881

Directive (EU) 2024/2881 on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe represents one of the most significant reforms of the European legal framework governing air quality protection. The new legislative instrument responds to the need to strengthen the protection of human health and the environment and seeks to bring European standards closer to the levels recommended by the World Health Organization. To this end, the directive introduces substantial changes concerning air quality standards, monitoring obligations, planning mechanisms, and compliance requirements applicable to Member States [3].

One of the most significant innovations introduced by the directive is the revision and tightening of the limit values applicable to major atmospheric pollutants. The new standards establish more stringent requirements for particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide, and other pollutants recognised as posing significant risks to human health and the environment. This legislative approach reflects scientific findings and institutional assessments indicating that adverse health effects continue to occur even at pollution levels below those permitted under the previous regulatory framework [3], [6].

Another important development concerns the progressive alignment of European air quality standards with the levels recommended by the World Health Organization. Although the new limit values do not fully coincide with the WHO Air Quality Guidelines, they constitute a significant step towards strengthening public health protection and demonstrate the European Union's commitment to reducing the risks associated with exposure to air pollution [8]. According to the European Environment Agency, concentrations of several pollutants in Europe continue to exceed the levels recommended by the World Health Organization, thereby justifying the adoption of more ambitious standards and additional measures aimed at further reducing air pollution [6].

Directive (EU) 2024/2881 also introduces a strengthened planning and compliance mechanism. Where there is a risk that the new standards applicable from 2030 will not be achieved, Member States are required to assess, during the period from 2026 to 2029, the likelihood of attaining the prescribed standards and, where necessary, to prepare air quality roadmaps [3]. These roadmaps must identify specific legislative, administrative, and technical measures, establish implementation timelines, and provide mechanisms for monitoring progress towards compliance.

The directive further reinforces obligations concerning air quality monitoring and assessment. Member States are required to improve monitoring systems, strengthen their networks of monitoring stations, and ensure a more accurate assessment of pollution levels. The European Environment Agency has emphasised that existing monitoring networks will need to be adapted in order to comply with the new requirements and to enable a more precise evaluation of compliance with the standards that will become applicable in 2030 [6].

Particular emphasis is also placed on the preventive dimension of environmental protection. The new legislative framework expressly recognises that reducing air pollution constitutes not only an environmental obligation but also an essential instrument for preventing disease, reducing premature mortality, and limiting the economic costs associated with pollution-related health effects. In this respect, the European Environment Agency has underlined that reducing air pollution may generate substantial public health benefits while simultaneously reducing healthcare expenditure and productivity losses attributable to pollution-related illnesses [6].

Accordingly, Directive (EU) 2024/2881 goes beyond a mere revision of technical air quality standards and establishes a new regulatory model characterised by higher protection standards, strengthened monitoring mechanisms, and enhanced responsibilities for Member States concerning the prevention and reduction of air pollution. From this perspective, the Directive constitutes one of the most important legal instruments adopted by the European Union for the achievement of sustainable development objectives and the effective protection of human health and the environment.

3.3. The New Limit Values for Major Atmospheric Pollutants

One of the most significant changes introduced by Directive (EU) 2024/2881 concerns the revision of the limit values applicable to major atmospheric pollutants in order to ensure a higher level of protection of human health and the environment. The new regulatory framework seeks to progressively align European standards with the levels recommended by the World Health Organization, taking into account the scientific evidence demonstrating that prolonged exposure to atmospheric pollutants continues to have significant adverse effects on public health [3], [8].

According to the European Environment Agency, in 2024 a considerable number of monitoring stations across Europe recorded concentrations of major pollutants exceeding the standards applicable at the time, particularly in relation to particulate matter (PM10), ground-level ozone (O3), and benzo(a)pyrene. Moreover, for most pollutants, concentration levels remain above those recommended by the World Health Organization, thereby justifying the adoption of more stringent standards and the implementation of additional measures aimed at reducing air pollution [6].

Against this background, Directive (EU) 2024/2881 lowers the limit values applicable to several pollutants that are considered particularly harmful to human health, especially particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide. These pollutants are associated with the development and aggravation of respiratory and cardiovascular diseases and contribute to increased premature mortality and significant social and economic costs resulting from air pollution [6], [8].

The reduction of the limit values for $PM_{2.5}$ and PM_{10} is of particular importance because these pollutants are among the most hazardous components of air pollution. Due to their small size, particulate matter can penetrate deep into the respiratory system and enter the bloodstream, thereby increasing the risk of cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory conditions, and certain forms of cancer [8]. According to the European Environment Agency, concentrations of $PM_{2.5}$ and ground-level ozone continue to exceed the levels recommended by the World Health Organization in most European regions, highlighting the need for additional measures aimed at reducing public exposure to these pollutants [6].

Regarding nitrogen dioxide (NO_2), the reduction of the annual limit value reflects the European legislator's concern with mitigating the impact of emissions originating primarily from road transport and industrial activities. At the same time, the new requirements concerning ground-level ozone and sulphur dioxide underline the necessity of adopting an integrated approach to air quality management based on continuous monitoring of pollution sources and the implementation of appropriate prevention and control measures.

The new limit values established by Directive (EU) 2024/2881 therefore represent a paradigm shift in European air quality policy. Whereas previous standards were primarily intended to promote the gradual reduction of emissions and establish minimum protection requirements, the new regulatory framework is expressly aimed at effectively reducing risks to public health and progressively aligning European standards with the scientific recommendations of the World Health Organization. Consequently, Member States are required to adopt more ambitious public policies and legislative measures capable of ensuring compliance with the new European requirements by 2030 and contributing to the achievement of a cleaner and healthier environment for present and future generations [3], [6], [8].

3.4. Obligations of Member States for the Period 2026-2030

The entry into force of Directive (EU) 2024/2881 marks the beginning of a transitional period during which the Member States of the European Union are required to adopt the measures necessary to achieve the new air quality standards by 1 January

2030. During this period, the obligations imposed upon Member States extend beyond the mere formal transposition of the directive into national law and require the development of legal and administrative mechanisms capable of ensuring the effective reduction of air pollution and the protection of public health [3].

One of the principal obligations introduced by the new directive concerns the periodic assessment of air quality conditions and the likelihood of achieving the standards applicable from 2030. During the period 2026-2029, Member States are required to assess whether existing pollution levels permit the attainment of the prescribed standards and to identify sectors and geographical areas where there is a risk of exceeding the applicable limit values. Where such assessments indicate that compliance may not be achieved by 2030, Member States are under an obligation to adopt additional measures and to develop specific planning instruments [3].

For this purpose, Directive (EU) 2024/2881 introduces the obligation to prepare air quality roadmaps. These documents are intended to identify the legislative, administrative, and technical measures necessary to reduce pollutant concentrations and ensure compliance with the new European standards. The roadmaps must establish clear objectives, implementation timelines, and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating progress, thereby constituting an important planning and accountability instrument for national authorities [3].

Member States are also required to strengthen their air quality monitoring systems. According to the European Environment Agency, existing monitoring networks will need to be adapted to meet the new legislative requirements, including by increasing the number of monitoring stations and improving mechanisms for collecting and analysing data on air pollution. Accurate and continuous assessment of air quality constitutes an essential precondition for identifying high-risk areas and adopting appropriate intervention measures [6].

Another important obligation concerns the adoption of effective measures aimed at preventing and reducing emissions originating from the principal sources of pollution. In this respect, Member States are required to integrate air quality objectives into policies relating to transport, energy, industry, urban development, and spatial planning. The cross-sectoral nature of air quality protection requires coordinated action across different

economic sectors, given that air pollution results from multiple sources and the interaction of numerous economic and social factors.

The Directive also highlights the need for a preventive approach focused on reducing public exposure to atmospheric pollutants and mitigating their adverse effects on human health. The European Environment Agency has emphasised that reducing air pollution generates significant benefits both from the perspective of public health and in economic terms, by decreasing healthcare expenditure and limiting productivity losses associated with pollution-related diseases [6].

From the perspective of European Union law, the obligations established by Directive (EU) 2024/2881 are mandatory in nature and require the adoption of concrete and effective measures by Member States. The mere formal transposition of the Directive into national legislation is insufficient to fulfil the European requirements. Rather, effective implementation necessitates the development of public policies capable of reducing pollution levels and ensuring compliance with the new air quality standards by 2030.

Accordingly, the period from 2026 to 2030 assumes particular importance for the Member States of the European Union, as it represents the timeframe within which the transition towards a new model of air quality protection must be achieved. This model is characterised by higher standards of health protection and enhanced obligations concerning monitoring, planning, and intervention in the field of ambient air quality [3], [6].

Conclusions

Air quality protection has become one of the principal priorities of the European Union's environmental policy in light of the significant impact of air pollution on human health, ecosystems, and socio-economic development. The evolution of the European regulatory framework in this field demonstrates a consistent trend towards strengthening environmental protection standards and integrating environmental requirements into all Union policies, in accordance with the principles of sustainable development and the objective of ensuring a high level of human health protection.

The adoption of Directive (EU) 2024/2881 on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe marks a new stage in the development of European air quality policy. By revising and tightening air quality standards, bringing them closer to the levels

recommended by the World Health Organization, and introducing additional monitoring and planning obligations, the new directive seeks to reduce public exposure to atmospheric pollutants and mitigate the adverse consequences of air pollution for human health.

The analysis undertaken in this study demonstrates that the obligations imposed upon Member States extend beyond the mere transposition of European legislation and require the adoption of concrete and effective measures aimed at preventing and reducing air pollution. During the period from 2026 to 2030, Member States are expected to develop more efficient monitoring systems, prepare air quality roadmaps for areas exposed to the risk of non-compliance, and integrate air quality objectives into policies relating to transport, energy, industry, and urban development.

For Romania, the new European air quality standards pose significant challenges from both legal and institutional perspectives. Achieving the objectives established for 2030 requires the adaptation of the national legislative framework, the strengthening of air quality monitoring and control mechanisms, and the development of public policies capable of effectively responding to the new European requirements. In the Romanian legal system, the general legal framework governing environmental protection and the obligations of public authorities in this field is established by Emergency Government Ordinance No. 195/2005 on Environmental Protection [10]. Equally important is the need to intensify measures aimed at preventing air pollution and to develop administrative and technical instruments capable of reducing emissions originating from the principal sources of pollution.

Furthermore, air quality protection must be considered in light of the fundamental right to a healthy environment. In this respect, the obligation of the State to ensure a high level of environmental protection requires the adoption of effective legislative and administrative measures aimed at reducing risks to public health and guaranteeing the effective enjoyment of fundamental rights. Contemporary international environmental law increasingly recognises environmental protection and the safeguarding of human health as mutually reinforcing objectives that require integrated and preventive legal responses [16].

In conclusion, Directive (EU) 2024/2881 constitutes a particularly important legal instrument for strengthening air quality protection within the European Union and for promoting the objectives of sustainable development. However, the effectiveness of the new European standards will ultimately depend upon the capacity of Member States to transform their legal obligations into coherent and effective measures capable of reducing air pollution and improving public health outcomes. For Romania, the coming years represent an important opportunity to modernise its legislative and institutional framework governing air quality protection and to consolidate public policies aimed at ensuring a cleaner and healthier environment for both present and future generations.

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