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introducing staff member Ljuban Bulić

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Dear colleagues, dear readers,

We live in exciting and unusual times. Where challenges used to come one at a time, we now have to find answers to many of them at the same time.

Climate change targets, the need to green the economy for the sake of caring for the environment, a different approach to using resources in a circular economy, careful energy consumption, global changes that have an influence on new investments: all these topics are interconnected. All this has a direct impact on the world of work, where a just and fair transition must be ensured. All this presents itself in a digital environment, which moreover is increasingly driven by AI and robotics, and against the backdrop of a multipolar world, with wars in Ukraine and the Middle East on your doorstep.

A few weeks before the European elections, we are aware that their outcome will determine which solutions will be put forward, and thus determine the future for all Europeans. Of course, the way the European Union functions is not perfect. The decision-making process is sometimes too slow; the need for compromise in an EU of 27 member states can give the impression that too little attention is paid to what really matters. What's more, not enough information on what the EU is doing reaches the citizen. The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, budget cuts, overly market-oriented policies and insufficient social support are causing a deep-felt sense of insecurity among many sections of the population. Populist and extreme parties eagerly capitalize on this. They take advantage of people's gullibility. They undermine democracy, erode trust and ignore the fundamental values that must continue to underpin our society. All of this was extensively documented during our recent two-day EZA Brussels Conference. It was particularly interesting to note that there is a big difference between the discourse of these parties and their voting behaviour in the European Parliament. Every time, they voted against the most important social proposals on the agenda: against the initiative for a strong social Europe for a just transition, against the proposal for decent minimum wages, against the need for collective bargaining, against equal pay for equal work, against the revision of the European Works Council directive, to name but a few examples. Even though there is still room for improvement, we must use the coming weeks to highlight the progress and successes that have been achieved in many areas, including social Europe.

But now is also the time to ask ourselves how we can contribute to a social Europe. To do this, we need to expand and broaden our day-to-day workplace to make it a 'European workplace'. By talking to people, including those outside our workplace, providing them with information, debating the importance of a Europe based on values such as the rule of law, solidarity and responsibility, participation, togetherness, being open-minded about coexisting with everybody else – including refugees – away from polarisation, learning to live in the large and unique space that is Europe.

All of this is part of the DNA of EZA, its views and actions, and its members' work. When we know that 70 percent of European legislation affects even the smallest village in Europe, we must help to ensure that tomorrow's Europe is in good hands and offers the prospect and security of a humane and social Europe.

The conviction, the commitment, the concrete attitude and the results achieved in recent years are sufficient indication that it is representatives who are inspired by Christian social doctrine who will be able to give us this guidance.

Luc Van den Brande, President

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REPORT: THE 2024 EZA BRUSSELS CONFERENCE

Populism and social policy: With less than three months until the European elections, recent surveys indicate a decline in the so-called “constitutional arch” parties and a rise in populist far-right factions. It was against this backdrop that EZA held its annual Brussels Conference on 19 and 20 March 2024, with a focus on exploring the intricate link between populism and social policy.

TEXT: Sergio De la Parra
PHOTOS: Katrin Brüggen

For years now, election after election, we have been witnessing the slow but inexorable rise of far-right parties across the EU. Rather than a “wave”, it’s more like a “progressive rise of the sea level”, as one of the conference’s speakers put it. In fact, today’s situation is the culmination of a phenomenon that has been unfolding for decades, explains ADAPT President Francesco Seghezzi, the lead author of a study entitled “Industrial democracy today: what it means, what it means today and how it can help democracy in itself”, commissioned by EZA.

In his view, the resurgence of populism can be seen as a direct consequence of a broader crisis in democracy, marked by declining trust in political institutions and the erosion of traditional trade union participation in economic decision-making processes. The study analyses the mechanisms through which “industrial democracy” has historically bolstered democratic systems, thus providing a critical framework for understanding the current political landscape. It also offers insights into the potential for revitalizing democratic engagement through enhanced worker participation. Grasping the historical conditions that fuelled the rise of today’s populist movements is crucial. However, the structural changes that will be needed to stop or even curb this trend can be discouraging. On the other hand, more directly actionable strategies can be revealed by concentrating on the concerns driving voters of right-wing populist parties. Daphne Halikiopoulou, Chair in Comparative Politics at the University of York, highlights a crucial point. Core, ideological right-wing voters are only a minority. All the

other “peripheral” far-right voters have more materialistic concerns, she recalls. If policymakers and trade unions want to effectively counter the rise of far-right parties, they must therefore focus on these economic grievances by reducing labour market insecurity, promoting economic growth and ensuring effective social protection. Rather than copying the populist agenda, they should reclaim and emphasise their commitment to equality and address the economic concerns that drive voters towards populist choices.

By concentrating on these areas, they can re-engage with their core supporter base while also reaching out to those who might otherwise be swayed by the far-right’s exclusionary agenda, Halikiopoulou argues. The correlation between populism and social policy operates in both directions. While a country’s economic and social models can drive voters toward populist factions, these movements can similarly shape a country’s welfare state once they gain power in parliament or government. At first glance, the position of far-right parties on social issues may seem straightforward. Focusing on the European Parliament, for instance, several studies of the voting behaviour of far-right parties within the ECR and ID groups show their nearly systematic rejection of all social, economic or tax policy measures that would benefit their voters. A close look at the situation on the national level, where right-wing extremist parties have come to power, shows that these parties don’t just systematically support a minimal welfare state only. In European countries where populist right-wing parties have participated in government, they have developed

and implemented a “dualistic” welfare state model, explains Juliana Chueri, Assistant Professor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

This model offers protection and enhanced social spending for “deserving” citizens – typically long-standing, hard-working nationals – while endorsing neoliberal austerity for the “undeserving”, often immigrants and those outside the labour market. This approach shifts from minimal welfare to selective expansion based on perceived societal contribution, intertwining nativist and authoritarian values to prioritise benefits for established citizens over others. Needless to say that for trade unions, such a model is anathema as it violates the fundamental principle of solidarity by creating divisions and fostering competition among workers, as well as challenging the commitment to universal fairness by favouring certain groups over others.

And if the distinction between the values of trade unions and populist parties wasn’t stark enough, the ETUC manifesto drives the point home with unyielding clarity. Drafted with the 2024 European elections in view, this manifesto is a firm stance against the spread of populism, calling for enhanced social dialogue and equitable policies and outlining a bold strategy to combat economic disparities and social unrest. The manifesto also explicitly calls on European parties to

reject any collaboration with far-right parties in the European Parliament.

The EZA conference put forward a number of actionable solutions against populism. Patrick Develtere, Professor of International Cooperation at Catholic University Leuven, called for self-criticism and change, stating, “For years, we have been saying that globalisation would be good for people. We told them that the market would solve all their social problems. We promised that there would be a trickle-down effect.” But in the end, we have failed in our promises, again and again. A poignant reminder: we’ve missed the mark, dramatically. Former MEP and unionist Claude Rolin from Belgium called for consistency: “You can’t keep talking about social policy on the one hand, and at the same time adopt economic and budgetary policies like the EU’s new fiscal rules that preclude it on the other.” The spotlight turned to trade unions and workers’ associations, championed as defenders of democracy and advocates of social equity. Their role? More crucial than ever. And as for political parties, the message was clear: it’s time to step up, match policies with people’s needs, foster inclusivity and sideline populism. With the June elections looming, these insights aren’t just words; they’re a roadmap. It’s probably not too late yet, but it’s more urgent than ever to put them into practice.



PIERGIORGIO SCIACQUA (CO-PRESIDENT OF EZA), SIGRID SCHRAML (SECRETARY GENERAL OF EZA), CESAR RODRIGUEZ PÉREZ (PRESIDENT OF CEAT), LUC VAN DEN BRANDE (PRESIDENT OF EZA), ANTONIO LÓPEZ-ISTÚRIZ WHITE (MEP), RAINER WIELAND (MEP), CARMEN QUINTANILLA BARBA (NATIONAL PRESIDENT OF AFAMMER), ROSA ESTARÁS FERRAGUT (MEP), DENNIS RADTKE (MEP), YURIY KURYLO (VICE-PRESIDENT OF ALL-UKRAINIAN UNION OF WORKERS SOLIDARITY)

DECIPHERING EUROPEAN VOTER TRENDS

Brussels Conference speaker Daphne Halikiopoulou gives insights about her research into electoral trends across the EU and talks about the big unknown: non-voters.



TEXT: Ralph Würschinger
PHOTOS: Adobe Stock

Together with her colleague Tim Vlandas from the University of Oxford, the political scientist Daphne Halikiopoulou published a report in 2023 analysing the election results of centre-left, centre-right and far-right parties in 17 EU member states over several years. It is based on the European Social Surveys from 2002 to 2018, i.e. cross-national surveys of European countries conducted every two years. These surveys contain socio-demographic characteristics of individual respondents and their attitudes towards a wide range of topics such

as immigration or democracy, etc. Since the 2000s, far-right parties have been steadily gaining ground. Support for both the mainstream left and mainstream right has declined. Following a number of national elections across Europe, many of these far-right parties are now in government, coalition governments or are even the largest party, as in Italy, the Netherlands and Hungary. All this leads to an increased presence of the far right, says the scientist. For her, this indicates a further breakdown of the so-called cordon sanitaire.

Strategy of normalisation

She continues by saying that far-right parties have found a clever yet disturbing way to appeal to a broader electorate by using a strategy of normalisation. „They try to distance themselves from fascism by claiming that they do not exclude people based on their ethnicity but if they reject liberal democratic ideas“, says Daphne Halikiopoulou. This normalisation is also fuelled by mainstream parties when they adopt populist arguments. According to the political scientist, this tactic for scoring points with voters does not work: „What all these parties would be doing is to give prominence to the issues the far right owns, and what happens is people vote for the far right. This ultimately inflates the far-right vote because voters are going to vote for the original and not for the copycats.“ When parties move from the centre to the right, they risk losing their core electoral base.

The Danish paradox

For many, Denmark is an example. In the 2015 elections, the far-right Danish People's Party reached more than 20 percent of the vote. Its success benefited from the increasing prominence of the immigration issue and a strong correlation between immigration scepticism and the economic dimension of the party's political agenda. However, in the following elections the party lost the majority of their votes, shrinking to 2.6 percent in 2022. At the same time, the ruling Social Democrats made a decisive shift to the right in terms of migration policy and stayed the strongest party in government. One might think that this change came about by adapting to populist issues. However, according to Daphne Halikiopoulou and her research, this change in policy did not result in the Social Democrats taking votes away from right-wing populists. Official numbers show that the Social Democrats in Denmark received similar shares of the vote in recent elections (2015: 26.2 percent; 2019: 25.9 percent; 2022: 27.5 percent). According to the

report, the losses suffered by the Danish People's Party are due to a combination of factors, including accommodative mainstream strategies and competition from new radical competitors, like the New Right. There has also been a shift of votes to the centre-right. So, shifting to the right did not enable the Social Democrats to win over the supporters of the Danish People's Party, but the numbers show that they did not lose their voters either.

The power of non-voters

Although forecasts indicate that a shift to the right is to be expected in the EU elections, there is still one big unknown: non-voters. According to research by Daphne Halikiopoulou, there are two main types of non-voters: those who are angry at the establishment and those who don't care about politics at all. The European Data Journalism Network (EDJNET) has collected information about votes and abstention on a national level. They conclude that better educated and richer countries have lower abstention rates. But there are also individual factors such as in Bulgaria, where there were five elections in just two years, which could have created a kind of voter's fatigue. On the other hand, there are countries like Luxembourg and Belgium, where voting is mandatory with the risk of being eliminated from the electoral roll for years. Turnout for the European elections has declined constantly since 1979. In 2014 it was at its lowest at 42.6 percent, rising to 50.2 percent in 2019. This increase is mainly due to a high turnout of young voters, according to the European Parliament. It is difficult to predict whether this year's turnout will continue to rise, stay the same or fall, and how this will affect the results. Even if the statistics tend to favour a lot of votes for populist parties, Daphne Halikiopoulou wants to make it clear that "political outcomes are volatile. Very often things will change drastically from one election to the next. So what the current predictions of a far-right victory in June could easily be reversed."

Engaging with our audience: the "We Work Europe" podcast

If you would like to know more about the findings of Daphne Halikiopoulou's report and hear from our members, our "We Work Europe" podcast explores these issues in more detail. To listen to this episode, simply scan the QR-code or visit we-work-europe.podigee.io.



HOPES, CONCERNS, AND EXPECTATIONS

Thoughts of our members about the European elections 2024

Wir haben EZA-Mitglieder aus verschiedenen Teilen der EU nach We asked EZA members from different parts of the EU about the impact of populism in their country and their hopes and expectations for the upcoming elections in June.

TEXT: Ralph Würschinger
PHOTOS: Lukas Fleischmann, Ralph Würschinger



CARMEN QUINTANILLA BARBA, PRESIDENT OF AFAMER (ASSOCIATION OF RURAL FAMILIES AND WOMEN), SPAIN

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From the perspective of equal rights for rural women, there are two forms of populism in Spain. There's a left-of-centre grouping that has sown hatred between men and women. And there is also the populism of the extreme right, which denies that violence against women exists, for example.

I am afraid that to a certain extent, we are losing access to young people. We have problems in communicating just how hugely successful this European community really is.

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BJØRN ANDERS VAN HEUSDEN, WOW (WORLD ORGANIZATION OF WORKERS), NETHERLANDS

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Traditionally, populism used to be associated with the right-wing, but now there is also a lot of left-winged populism related to the environment, for instance Extinction Rebellion. Even so, the right wing still accounts for the largest share. In the last national election, 40 percent voted for the extreme right in the Netherlands.

I hope that things will become more harmonised in the not-so-distant future. The EU isn't a real union yet. Every country still focuses on its own issues.

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CAROLIN MOCH, YCW (YOUNG CHRISTIAN WORKERS' MOVEMENT), EUROPE

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I'm scared of the right-wing populist party AfD in Germany, which is turning into an actual movement rather than just a party. Many young people are scared of it, especially when it comes to the European elections.

I expect that the populist parties will see huge gains. That's all. Then we'll see whether the parliament can still work or if it will be blocked.

In recent weeks, there have been a lot of protest marches in Germany. It seems that people have started to think and are not falling into the trap of populism. I hope that we start to think on a European level in order to prevent the right-wing populists from gaining too many votes.

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ROLF WEBER, KRIFA (CHRISTIAN TRADE UNION), DENMARK

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We don't have so much populism in Denmark because we have this tradition that policymaking always consists of a compromise between all the democratic fractions, from the Liberals to the Social Democrats. This means the far right and the far left don't have any influence. I don't really expect too many changes.

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For me there are two forms. One is political populism, from both the right and the left wing. The other is religious-ideological populism, especially from the Islamic world.

This will be a very tight affair with right-wing populist parties gaining momentum in particular. I hope that the right-wing populists won't see too many gains. But I am realistic enough to accept that they will definitely see an increase in support. But that doesn't worry me because I see it as a task for us as trade unions to counteract this trend.

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MICHAEL SCHEDIWY-KLUSEK, FCG (FREE CHRISTIAN TRADE UNION), AUSTRIA

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Until 35 years ago, we were still part of the Eastern communist bloc. Consequently, we continue to have political factions with pro-Moscow sentiments, primarily stemming from the far left. Furthermore, we also have far-right parties. Collectively, they want us to withdraw from the European Union and NATO, striving for independence. Conflict persists at Europe's borders with an escalation in military spending, while funding for social programmes declines. Protests are spreading across Europe amid a precarious economic climate, with many countries on the brink of recession. These conditions benefit nationalist and populist parties that aim to undermine the European project.

I sincerely hope that the European People's Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (S&D) and other parties that have demonstrated their commitment to advancing the European social model will be able to maintain their majority in the European Parliament. I hope they continue to enhance legislation concerning social issues.

“

VESELIN MITOV, PODKREPA, BULGARIA



INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY: WHAT IT MEANS, WHAT IT MEANS TODAY AND HOW IT CAN HELP DEMOCRACY IN ITSELF



FRANCESCO SEGHEZZI - PRESIDENT OF FONDAZIONE ADAPT

TEXT: Francesco Seghezzi, President of Fondazione ADAPT (Fondazione Associazione per gli studi internazionali e comparati sul diritto del lavoro e sulle relazioni industriali - Associati)

PHOTOS: Lukas Fleischmann

This article outlines the key findings of research that has been dedicated to unravelling the dynamics surrounding the connections between populist movements, crises in workplace democracy and the broader democratic landscape. In specific terms, the research seeks to address the question of whether trade unions can serve as a deterrent to populism, adopting a multifaceted approach. Firstly, a theoretical investigation was carried out with an extensive review of existing literature, as well as an appraisal of statements made by trade unions together with documentary analysis. Secondly, an empirical inquiry was conducted, comprising

semi-structured interviews with trade unionists across various European countries, including, Austria, France, Italy, Poland and Spain. First and foremost, in order to further substantiate the deep connection between political, economic and industrial democracy, it is crucial to note that each of the countries featured in the research have seen the emergence of populist actors leveraging on key socio-economic themes traditionally aligned with industrial democracy stakeholders, especially the trade unions (pensions, minimum wage, minimum income schemes, social benefits, precarious work, workers' purchasing power).

“ANOTHER NOTICEABLE TREND CONCERNS THE PRESSURES EXERTED BY THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT IN MODERATING THE DEMANDS AND OBJECTIVES OF POPULIST ACTORS, PARTICULARLY REGARDING THEIR ONTOLOGICALLY ANTAGONISTIC STANCE TOWARDS TRADE UNIONS.”

These issues are indiscriminately present in both right-wing and left-wing populist movements, serving as an indication of the crisis of legitimacy and representativeness that is currently being experienced by trade unions. The convergence of ideas between populist actors and trade unions has not automatically been beneficial to workplace democracy. Similarly, it is also important to highlight the manner in which these pro-labour measures have been enacted in the respective countries, particularly examining the extent of trade union involvement and their role in the decision-making process.

In Poland, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) has formed a symbiotic relationship with *Solidarność*, with positive perception of measures proposed by *Solidarność* and implemented by PiS. However, in spite of this alignment on labour issues, in the end the position of the trade union was weakened, primarily because the government began addressing labour-related matters without the social partners being appropriately involved in the process. The situation has been exacerbated by the lack of trade union involvement in labour policy during the pandemic. In contrast to Poland, Spain's coalition government, including Podemos, ensured that the social partners were actively involved in decision-making processes and welcomed their policy proposals. This had the effect of enhancing industrial democracy, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, case studies reveal that despite attaining power (with the exception of France), democratic safeguards within the respective systems have compelled populist actors to compromise in terms of their political agendas and operational methods. This often results in varying degrees of trade union involvement, depending on the specific country and the degree to which social dialogue has been institutionalised.

Setting France to one side as the only country featured in the research where multiple populist parties have surfaced in the political sphere without attaining governmental power, in Italy, Spain, Poland

and Austria the presence of populist movements in one or more governments has had no relevant impact on the level of workplace democracy. At least there is no direct correlation between the two. This is further substantiated by the significant role that trade unions have played in not only shaping but also, in certain instances, implementing essential measures aimed at mitigating the spread of Covid-19 in companies. Another noticeable trend concerns the pressures exerted by the political environment in moderating the demands and objectives of populist actors, particularly regarding their ontologically antagonistic stance towards trade unions. When populist movements become part of government, they are institutionalised in a way that compels them to adapt their policy agendas and their approach to the trade unions. In line with the inclusion-moderation hypothesis already used in the Austrian context by König & Swalve, populist parties tend to become more moderate when they come to power. This also seems to be the case with regard to the need to interact and cooperate with trade union representatives, albeit to varying degrees. Podemos in Spain, as well as Lega, Movimento 5 Stelle and Fratelli d'Italia in Italy, initially opposed the role and activities of trade unions, capitalising on their legitimacy crisis following the economic and financial crisis of 2008. However, on taking up positions in government, these parties were obliged to involve trade unions in decision-making processes, although often to a limited or ineffective extent.

As mentioned previously, the research also elucidates pivotal strategies that were adopted by trade unions in order to bolster their influence in society and mitigate the erosion of industrial democracy. These strategies entail various initiatives, which include integrating territorial dynamics into industrial democracy, streamlining communication strategies and tackling a range of issues such as equal opportunities and environmental sustainability in order to foster broader worker engagement.



Proposals also emphasise reinforcing social dialogue on the industrial level, adopting standardised participation procedures on both national and territorial levels to facilitate dialogue and empower stakeholders, and strengthening fragmented collective bargaining systems, which are particularly evident in contexts such as Poland.

In conclusion, the research findings suggest that the rise of populist movements and their participation in government in numerous European countries has not necessarily caused a wholesale decline in workplace democracy. Notably, there have been no overt attempts at complete disintermediation. This holds true even in nations with fragile and uncoordinated systems of industrial relations. One surprising result indicated by the research is that the specific industrial relations model of a country does not seem to have any significant impact on the relationship between populist movements and industrial democracy. Instead, it appears that each country featured in the research

tends to adhere to its own particular form of industrial democracy and its own path dependence, largely unaffected even by external threats such as populist governments.

This emphasises the enduring legacy of established industrial democracy frameworks, whether they are more robust or more vulnerable, which continue to shape the dynamics of labour relations across Europe. These findings offer valuable insights, although due caution should be applied when generalising them, and warrant further investigation to delve deeper into the intricate relationship between populism and workplace democracy. Notably, this research stands out for its original contribution, as it not only evaluates the state of industrial democracy in the countries under review but also tracks its evolution to the present day, particularly in response to the emergence of populist movements.

The full study will be published shortly by EZA.

A HUMAN-CENTRED APPROACH

key findings from EU-OSHA's campaign for safe and healthy work in the digital age.



TEXT: Lukas Fleischmann
PHOTOS: EU-OSHA

One in three workers feels controlled and supervised by technology – just one of the many facts discovered by researchers at EU-OSHA during their four-year preparation period for the current campaign “2023–2025: Safe and Healthy Work in the Digital Age”. However, beyond the hazards, the use of modern technology such as artificial intelligence (AI) offers significant opportunities for improving working conditions together with occupational safety and health. EU-OSHA aims to raise awareness for occupational safety and health in the digital age, and EZA is proud to be an official EU-OSHA campaign partner once more.

“Above all, it is important to underline that technology is neither inherently bad nor good. It’s all about its application – which means its design for the workplace, its implementation, and its day-to-day usage”, states William Cockburn Salazar, Executive Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). The Agency was established in 1994 and began its operations in Bilbao in 1996. Since its inception, it has launched campaigns every two and now three years focusing on occupational safety and health (OSH), in collaboration with employers, trade unions and other organizations. “Our campaigns are the largest in the world when it comes to OSH. For the current one, we’ve conducted four years of extensive data collection and various inquiries to provide three key points: we raise awareness, we provide access to guidance, and we prevent risks.” To gather data, EU-OSHA conducted numerous surveys. In 2019, for instance, they analysed over 45,000 workplaces with a special focus on digital technology, discovering that nine out of ten workplaces utilise digital technologies such as laptops or mobile devices. “More recently, in 2022, we asked workers about their experiences with digital technology. We were quite impressed to find that one in three workers reported that digital technologies were used to allocate their working time, shifts, and tasks. And almost the same proportion experienced technology being used to rate their performance by third parties”, Cockburn remarks. “The increase is substantial and more prevalent than we had anticipated.”

Big Brother in the workplace

Over 37 percent of workers feel excessively monitored by their employers in their workplace, which leads to a perceived loss of autonomy. In addition, more than half of the workers report that digital technology has intensified their work, leading to

a loss of control and independence. Almost the same proportion feel that they are isolated by digital technologies, creating a sense of distance from decisions that may then be perceived as unfair. Cockburn emphasises: “Controlling this is crucial because these psychosocial factors are the most prevalent risks at present and the leading causes of absenteeism from work due to stress and depression.” Cockburn advocates a human-centred approach when it comes to risk management of digital technology.

The opportunities: protection and creativity rather than a threat

Maurizio Curtarelli, a senior research manager for EU-OSHA, played a key role in the numerous studies, inquiries and analyses that informed the recommendations of the current campaign. He advocates demystifying digitalisation as a general threat to occupational safety and health: “One digitalisation narrative suggests that robots or digital technologies will replace workers.



WILLIAM COCKBURN SALAZAR – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF EU-OSHA



MAURIZIO CURTARELLI – SENIOR RESEARCH MANAGER FOR EU-OSHA

However, we've found that this is not always the case, and sometimes it can be beneficial to take workers out of dangerous environments." According to Curtarelli, digital technology can have a significant impact in terms of safety: "Consider a mine or a construction site. Digital technologies can monitor the environment for toxic substances, gases or excessive noise. Sensors or wearables can track vital signs such as heart rate and blood pressure, helping to identify stress or burnout risks." Curtarelli notes: "Automating repetitive tasks can free workers from monotonous duties, allowing more time for creative tasks, training or preparation for new roles within the company."

Humanity first

All the data collected by EU-OSHA over recent years indicates that technology is a double-edged sword when it comes to occupational safety and health. Minimising the negative effects as much

as possible remains a challenge. Curtarelli suggests a human-centred focus, thoroughly incorporating workers' experiences: "Human-centred discussions with workers or their representatives about implementing and using technology help prevent negative repercussions of these technologies on OSH and promote their positive use for OSH purposes."

The issue with platforms

However, not every workplace can adopt this approach, as it requires a deep level of workplace democratisation, with entities such as works councils. Addressing occupational health and safety seems to be easier for bigger companies. In contrast, platform workers, for example, often lack this form of organisational representation, as they may not have a conventional working relationship with the platform or they find it challenging to connect with colleagues due to physical separation. Despite new legislation in

"DESPITE NEW LEGISLATION IN MANY COUNTRIES AND ON A EUROPEAN LEVEL TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION OF PLATFORM WORKERS SUCH AS DELIVERY DRIVERS, CONNECTING WITH THESE WORKERS REMAINS A CHALLENGE."

many countries and on a European level to improve the situation of platform workers such as delivery drivers, connecting with these workers remains a challenge. Yet not everything is black or white: "The pandemic has been a significant catalyst. It's unclear whether it was to protect the workers or for commercial reasons, but platforms began providing workers with masks, hand sanitisation instructions and guidance on how to prevent the disease from spreading. This marked an important step towards protecting their workers", says Curtarelli. Furthermore, some platforms analysed by EU-OSHA offer strategies for physical and mental well-being. "Aside from that, we've observed a significant sharing of work-related experiences among platform workers through informal means such as messaging apps or blogs."

Reaching out to platform workers: a challenge

Despite all efforts, connecting with platform workers remains a challenge, also for the campaign, according to Heike Klempa, the campaign manager responsible for its operational execution. "It's a bit complicated. On the national level, our partners sometimes include them, but so far, there is no representation on the European level."

Theoretical findings with practical impact

The data collected underscores a pressing need for action in the realm of occupational safety and health concerning digital technologies. The thoughts on practical outcomes have already been integrated in preparing the campaign. "From the outset, a tripartite body involving representatives from governments, employers' organizations and workers' organisations has been involved in constructing the campaign", Klempa notes: "There's substantial political support for what we're doing. Some of our focal contacts on the national level have told us that legislation has been adopted because of the discussions and exchanges we facilitated."

As with previous campaigns, the current campaign relies on its partners on national and European levels, such as EZA, which organises seminars for representatives of trade unions and other social organisations to share ideas and best practices. EU-OSHA has instituted awards for best practices to promote their application in companies, for instance. As far as Klempa is concerned, garnering sufficient attention is the most significant challenge for this kind of campaign: "Occupational safety and health is sometimes seen as bureaucratic red tape. Many people are not aware of its importance in their lives and the significant contribution it can make to their working lives."

Engaging with our audience: the "We Work Europe" podcast

To delve deeper into the findings and objectives of the current campaign, our podcast "We Work Europe" will explore these topics in greater detail. We will also hear from the employers' perspective as we talk to representatives from the German software company SAP. To listen to this episode, simply scan the QR-code or visit we-work-europe.podigee.io.



NEW IN OUR HEAD OFFICE

Introducing Ljuban Bulić: new member of the EZA Secretariat staff



LJUBAN BULIĆ

Joining the EZA team marks an exciting new chapter in my career, where I can apply my knowledge of European relations and my first-hand experience with European integration in the Western Balkans. With a background that includes working at the Office of the EU Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina and contributing to several EU-funded projects, I've gained valuable insights into the crucial role of social dialogue in the integration process. Fluent in the languages of the Western Balkans and deeply committed to the mission of European unity, I am eager to support EZA's efforts in the EU candidate countries. I look forward to using my knowledge and experience to advance our common goal of promoting inclusive and effective social dialogue across Europe.



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