



# MAGAZINE

**GLEB (10) IS THE SON OF IGOR, WHO DRIVES TRUCKS FOR MONTHS ON EUROPE'S ROADS.**



## **THREE MONTHS IN A CABIN – ONE WEEK OF FAMILY**

precarious working conditions on Europe's roads

## **THE BULGARIAN BRAIN DRAIN**

a country losing its young workers

## **INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT OF THE EESC, CHRISTA SCHWENG**

"We are convinced that this can only be achieved together with people and businesses"

## **REALISING THE RIGHT TO EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES**

Erasmus+ project "Work at any price?"

**ISSUE 02/2022**

## Dear Readers and Colleagues,

Since the spring of 2020, eurofound has been researching the impact of the pandemic with its Living, Working and Covid-19 e-survey. The fifth round held in the spring of 2022 also reflects the consequences of the war in Ukraine with the highest inflation and cost of living increase in the EU since the 1970s. Two findings are particularly worrying:

First, although almost all pandemic restrictions have now been lifted, mental health levels are lower than before the pandemic. Many people were, therefore, unable to fully recover from the mental consequences of the pandemic.

Second, during the pandemic, trust in institutions has consistently fallen. The war and inflation seem to be exacerbating this trend. Unemployed people, and people who have difficulties making a living, show less confidence than people who are financially better off. Whereas even among the latter, trust in the EU and national governments has declined, even more than among other groups. It is of little consolation that the EU is performing better on average than national governments. It is also striking that citizens who use social media channels as their preferred source of information distrust state institutions more than citizens who rely on traditional media. What conclusions should we draw from this?

State institutions – and also labour organisations – need to be much more present in social media. The funds from EU and national aid packages must be used in such a targeted way that those really in need benefit from them. The stronger members of our society are especially called upon to show solidarity. Only if we succeed in restoring trust will we be able to protect our democracies. The results of the last parliamentary elections in France and the forecasts for the upcoming parliamentary elections in Italy are another alarm sign of how politically questionable movements are instrumentalising the current uncertain times for their own purposes.

The EZA kick-off seminar at the end of September will seek a European exchange under the title “Solidarity and Social Peace in Troubled Times”. We have also sought initial questions and answers in this EZA-Magazine in an interview with the President of the EESC, Christa Schweng.

We hope you enjoy reading!

Sigrid Schraml  
Secretary-General



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# THREE MONTHS IN A CABIN - ONE WEEK OF FAMILY

On precarious working conditions on Europe's roads

**TEXT:** Lukas Fleischmann  
**PHOTOS:** Lukas Fleischmann





**THE FAMILY WITH JOVITA PRETZSCH FROM SOLIDARUMAS**

(Kanus/Lithuania) Gleb sits on the sofa and stares at the app Viber. This app is not a game or a social network, it is a communication service that keeps the ten-year-old in touch with his father. Igor is roughly 1,600 kilometres away from him on a southern German motorway, somewhere near Karlsruhe, while Gleb lives in a suburb of Kaunas with his mother and sister. The family comes from Ukraine and had to flee to Lithuania before the war of aggression. Currently, the family lives in a house provided by Lithuanians who have emigrated to the USA for a year. The only thing asked for in return: dog-sitting.

Igor has known Lithuania for quite a while, because he has been driving goods by truck through Europe for Lithuanian companies for years. As a long-distance driver, up to three months at a time. "If I could earn even half that in Ukraine, I wouldn't do it," says Igor, while taking a break at a rest stop and communicating via the app with his son and wife on the sofa. "In Ukraine, I earn a few hundred euros a month; in Lithuania, it's more than four times that." Igor's income is not only necessary for his family to survive, it is also important for numerous relatives who have stayed in Ukraine, despite the war. Many have to live on his salary, Natalya says. She is Igor's wife. "Another nephew or niece will be born in September. Igor is helping his brother because there is no work in Ukraine now. But prices are now higher than here, even though wages were lower," she says. Normally, Igor stays at home with his family for at least a

month after a three-month trip. Since the war, the month has turned into a week, and Natalya handles all the daycare work at home almost exclusively. In addition to looking after the children and the family, she works a few hours a week as a hairdresser in Kaunas to earn a little extra income for the family.

### **A trade union provides security**

Compared to other drivers, Igor enjoys some advantages and runs less risk of being exploited by his employer. This is mainly due to his membership in the "Solidarumas" trade union. This is because this trade union, which is also an EZA member centre, represents the rights of its members when they are on the road in Europe. Gintaras Čiužas is the chair of the transport branch of Solidarumas and represents over 2,000 members. He himself drove a truck for ten years and knows the needs of drivers. "People experience stressful situations when they are separated from their families. Especially when you are in an unknown country with unfamiliar laws, different people and a new language. People find themselves at an impasse when they have problems. They don't know what to do next. And then they call us and we try to help," says Gintaras. One example from his work: A driver was sleeping in his cabin at a rest stop in France while the diesel of his vehicle was stolen during the night.

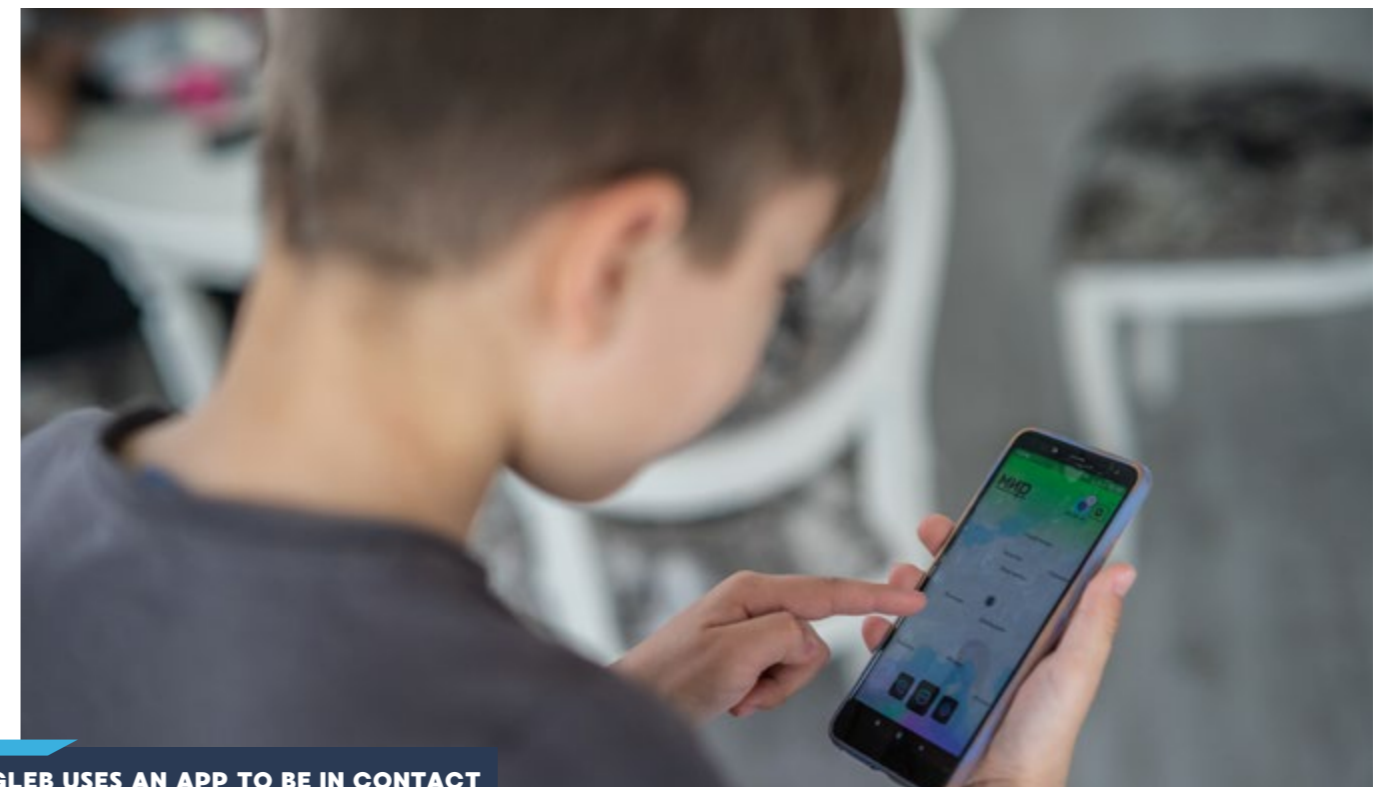
One example from his work: A driver was sleeping in his cabin at a rest stop in France while the diesel of his vehicle was stolen during the night. Given the current prices for fuel, this is not uncommon. Even communicating with the police was almost impossible because of the language barrier. Then the employer demanded that the driver pay for the damage from his own salary. A typical case where Gintaras becomes active. "Normally, people only turn to our union when problems arise. The consciousness of our people has not yet grown to the point where they join the union out of solidarity. Their attitude is this: It wouldn't happen to me, I don't need it, I know everything myself. And then it happens," says Gintaras. For example, around 70,000 of the 80,000 drivers registered through Lithuanian companies are not in any union, despite the obvious benefits.

This is also due to the salary paid in Lithuania. At up to € 2,400 net, the salary of a long-distance driver is twice as high as the national Lithuanian average wage and more than four times higher than those in Ukraine or Belarus. And so, there is little reason to unionise for better wages. For Ukrainian drivers like Igor, this amount means being able to provide for several families. Therefore, he accepts the hardships that the job entails. More than 80 per cent of all drivers in Lithuanian haulage companies are Ukrainian or Belarusian. Furthermore, in many countries east of the EU borders, there tends to be even less awareness of organised workers' interests than is already the case in the Eastern European EU member states. After all, haulage companies are not really enthusiastic about drivers seeking union membership as soon as they are employed.

### **An inhumane system**

For Norbert Jungkunz, this system is inhumane. For more than 20 years, he has been active as a pastor for long-distance drivers, especially in Bavaria, and travels to motorway service stations to offer support and lend an ear. His clientele is huge: Germany is the busiest trucking country in the EU. Around 1.5 million trucks drive on German motorways every day, and with them, more than 1.5 million drivers. "Imagine if you had to look for a toilet every day at your workplace? Does that sound like humane conditions? Or just imagine the catering. The food at motorway service stations is far too expensive. So, the drivers usually have a mini-fridge with them, which has been filled up by the wives. Or they cook in the cabin on a gas cooker and do so for months on six square metres. That sounds inhumane to me," says Norbert Jungkunz. He has not seen an improvement in working conditions in the past two decades. This is also reflected in the fact that this work is attractive to fewer and fewer people within the EU, and the workforce is increasingly coming from the East and even Asia. "I am aware of cases of Vietnamese coming here through the most questionable conditions. This is human trafficking," says the pastor.

Since 2020, regulations have become much stricter on paper, although the EU has been working on the issue for years. The EU's mobility package aims to strike a balance between the social protection of drivers and the freedom of operators to provide cross-border transport services.



**GLEB USES AN APP TO BE IN CONTACT WITH HIS FATHER**

**GINTARAS ČIUŽAS – CHAIRMAN OF THE TRANSPORT BRANCH OF SOLIDARUMAS**



In addition, a new EU institution has been in place since 2019 to monitor compliance with these regulations across borders: the European Labour Authority (ELA), based in Bratislava. Pia Fallström Mujkic is their spokeswoman. She describes the cooperation between national authorities and the ELA when it comes to keeping tabs on the road. “A practical example of this form of cooperation is an action week we held in June 2022. ELA, together with Roadpol, coordinated a joint inspection in Croatia, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Spain at the same time. We also had support from national inspectors from 13 other member states. Numerous violations were found. From speedometer manipulation to non-compliance with resting periods, to human trafficking.”

Since its inception, ELA has significantly increased the number of inspections and also expanded its cooperation with national authorities. But the struggle remains difficult. This is also due to the fact that, sometimes, it is not at all clear in which country violations have just occurred. “People are employed by a company that is registered in country A.” But actually they come from another country, A third country, and very often a country outside the EU. Then their employer, who is registered in said country a, sends them to country B, for example, which may be a more expensive country with a higher income level. Nevertheless, the employer only pays the salary of the country that is cheaper, although most of the time is spent living and working in the more expensive country.”

## The necessary access to information

For Pia Fallström Mujkic, too, it is clear that the real problem of “social dumping” lies not so much with the drivers who are informed about their rights, but with those who do not have access to information. “This is why social dialogue with trade unions and employers’ associations is so important for our work. As it is precisely the social partners who help to establish not only the regulations but also the awareness of them.” Norbert Jungkuz is sceptical as to whether increased control and membership in a trade union will have positive effects for the broad mass of drivers. His demands go further: “I demand a fixed price per kilo or

tonne for commercial freight transport. This is because that is the only way to break this downward price spiral.” On average, the truck driver driving in the EU is over 50 years old. The trend is on the up. And so, the question for the future of freight transport is whether more young people can be inspired to take up this difficult job again through better, fairer working conditions.

The alternative for drivers, who have little access to information and workers’ organisations, is a system of exploitation that does not shy away from human trafficking and modern slavery. The trucks are not dispensable. After all, four out of five things that Europeans use have been transported across the continent by one of the millions of trucks on the roads.

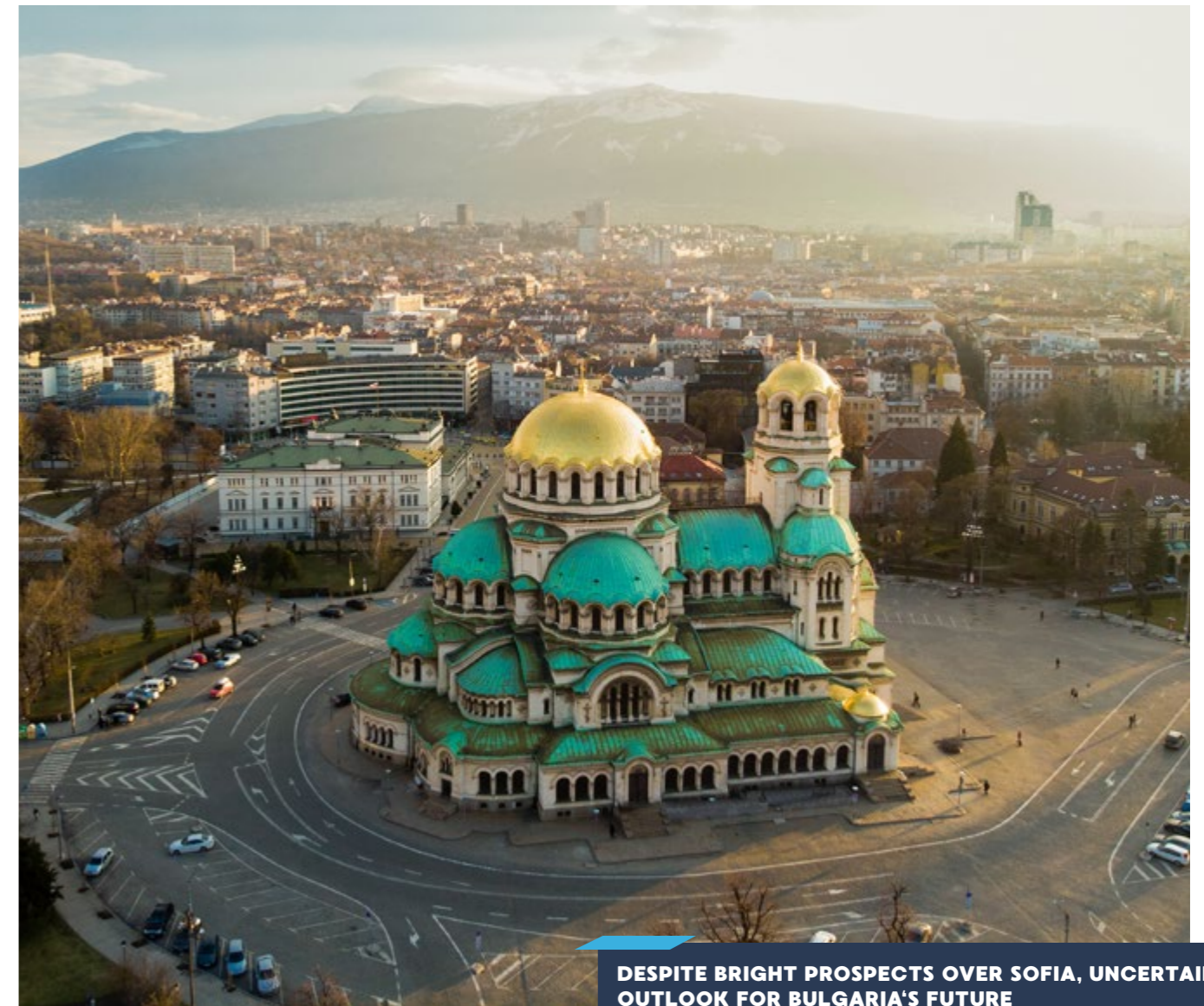
**We Work Europe**



There is also an episode of the EZA podcast **“We Work Europe”** on Igor’s work situation as a truck driver and on the trade union work of Solidarumas, which can be accessed at [www.eza.org](http://www.eza.org) or via this code.

# PROSPECTS IN BULGARIA

Between emigration and protest



**DESPITE BRIGHT PROSPECTS OVER SOFIA, UNCERTAIN OUTLOOK FOR BULGARIA'S FUTURE**

**TEXT:** Ralph Würschinger  
**PHOTOS:** Ralph Würschinger, Adobe Stock

(Sofia/Bulgaria) The winters of 2020 and 2021 were very hard for Bulgaria. The Balkan country did not have to deal with extreme cold, but rather with the pandemic, which was met with an almost collapsing health system. Staff shortages, which have become apparent in almost all areas of Bulgaria’s economic life due to the large number of young workers emigrating, have exposed this in a dramatic way. “Many anaesthetists were employed to help Covid patients. We treated Covid-Patients Day and night. Unfortunately, many of them have passed away. My job was particularly

focused on Covid patients with my specialisation.”, Genoveva Bellchova tells us during an interview for EZA-Magazine in the summer of 2022. She works as an anaesthetist at the Shumen Hospital in Sofia, and did many extra shifts during the past winter. “We received bonus payments for a short period of time, but that is now over.” What remains are the overtime hours. This is because Bulgaria’s clinics lack staff. Not only in the medical sector, but also in the nursing sector. The causes of these conditions started well before the pandemic.



ALEKSANDER ZAGOROV –  
FEDERAL SECRETARY PODKREPA



PODKREPA MEMBERS DOCTOR GENOVEVA BELLCHOVA  
(LEFT) & NURSE KRASMIRA DIMITROVA (RIGHT; SHE  
DESCRIBES HER SITUATION IN THE EZA PODCAST)

## Population loss

For decades, Bulgaria has been characterised by emigration. The collapse of the Soviet Union contributed massively to this. Conversely, relatively few people have immigrated to Bulgaria. Only the admission to the EU in 2007 dampened the exodus. Bulgarians have enjoyed the free movement of workers since 2014, and migration has since become more seasonal. According to a study by Caritas Bulgaria (from 2019), around 1.3 million Bulgarians were living in another country in 2017. At the same time, immigrants in Bulgaria accounted for 150,000 people. The number of emigrants is thus almost nine times higher than that of immigrants. The result: the population is shrinking. Over the past forty years, the total population has dropped from 8.8 million inhabitants to the current 6.8 million.

The majority of Bulgarians living abroad are aged between 25 and 54 years (source: Eurostat population statistics 2019), i.e. of working age. As a result, the population in the country is getting older, and the labour market is increasingly lacking workers. In the context of Covid and the health system, this had serious consequences for a large part of the population. In November 2020, the country had the highest per capita mortality rate in the EU. This was (and still is) mainly due to the lack of nurses and doctors who take care of the patients. 60 per cent of physicians are older than 51 years and, therefore, at a higher risk themselves of suffering severely if infected with Covid. With the increase in the elderly population, there would be a heightened need for more medical staff. But the opposite is the case. According to the Bulgarian Association of Health Care Professionals, 1,000 nurses and other health professionals leave Bulgaria every year. Fewer immigrate

by comparison. “Better working conditions, more advanced technical equipment and opportunities to train, and, of course, higher salaries. That’s why some colleagues went to Germany,” says Dr Genoveva Bellchova. She can understand these decisions and even admires them a little. That is because it takes courage to leave home. The 47-year-old medical specialist complains about drawbacks in her field, but emigration is still not an option for her – not any more. She had tried it before the European Union existed, but that did not work for various reasons. In the meantime, she has built a family and a career here. “I feel committed to society. I am also committed to young people, as I teach young students. I will do everything I can to make sure the pay here gets better, that we have better conditions and to train our doctors to stay here.” For about 25 years, she has been involved in the Podkrepa trade union confederation, one of two large trade unions in Bulgaria with 150,000 members and an EZA member.

## Challenge for trade unions

Aleksander Zagorov is Podkrepa’s federal secretary. He negotiates at a national level with the government and state institutions, and presents the demands of the workers to them. “There are a number of protests in different sectors. Sometimes, it is about more security at work, sometimes about higher wages. Especially when there is inflation, when the future looks uncertain, it’s about higher wages.” Recently, it was the cultural sector that attracted media attention. In June, museum and library workers protested for better pay. At first, the minister in charge of education ignored the protests and did not seek talks with the unions, says the Podkrepa worker.

“In the end, we managed to get the minister’s attention through parliament. He admitted that his behaviour was unacceptable, met with the unions and representatives of the protesters to sign a collective agreement.” Despite this success, Aleksander Zagorov looks to the future with mixed feelings. “2023 will be a crucial year for us as many national plans and strategies will change.

For example, the climate and energy plan, territorial development plans are being drawn up, many strategies are being forged in one area or another, but with EU help, and in 2024 we will introduce the euro. Social tensions will arise – there will be large groups of people who need more justice.”

## IT-Boom

Aleksander Zagorov sees it as Podkrepa’s task to respond to the changing labour market and ageing workforce; with training or by having the union help people find jobs. The ageing is also reflected in the union’s membership figures. A problem, as Zagorov has found. Podkrepa’s influence on politics could dwindle in the long term if absolute membership numbers decline due to a lack of young people. Perhaps some of the young people in the labour market would not see the need to join a union, even though workers in medicine, culture and teachers, in particular, complain about unfair wages. After all, it is not in every sector that workers complain about poor working conditions or too low wages.

“I don’t think anyone from the IT sector would say they are underpaid. Okay, maybe there is someone, but that is ridiculous when you consider what is paid in other sectors,” says Nikolay Tanchev. Originally, the 26-year-old studied fashion design and is now doing further training as a programmer. He also works as a Software Support Specialist for an American company that has a head office in Sofia. A win-win situation for both parties: the wages paid by international companies in the IT sector are high by Bulgarian standards. According to Tanchev, they exceed the salaries of teachers and, in some cases, also those of doctors. He does not want to give a concrete figure. At the same time, it is cheaper for Western companies to employ workers in Bulgaria than elsewhere in the EU.

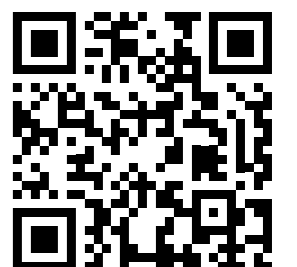
NIKOLAY TANCHEV –PROGRAMMER



The IT sector has created around 100,000 jobs in the Balkan country in the recent past. Alongside the outsourcing companies, a young start-up scene is developing in Bulgaria. For Tanchev, there is, therefore, no reason to complain. Becoming a trade union member is, therefore, not on his agenda. Nevertheless, he is also gaining insight into other sectors through friends who have already left the country. It is important to him that medical staff are better paid: “Their work is very hard, the training takes years and we really need doctors here. That’s where we need a higher salary, not only so that people who studied abroad will return, but also so that more people will choose to study medicine and work here.” Just like Dr Bellchova’s son. He is currently working at the university hospital in Varna, she says. He is happy there, but she does not rule out the possibility of him going abroad one day. She’s fine with this. The doctor has a good feeling about the future of Bulgaria: “If we are being honest, it is difficult right now. But we must remain optimistic and proactive, step by step. Better working conditions, higher skills opportunities, better pay – we need to finish what we started.”

More information and insights into Podkrepa’s work can be found in an episode of the EZA podcast “We Work Europe”, which can be accessed at [www.eza.org](http://www.eza.org) or via this code.

We Work Europe



# “WE ARE CONVINCED THAT THIS CAN ONLY BE ACHIEVED TOGETHER WITH PEOPLE AND BUSINESSES”



CHRISTA SCHWENG, PRESIDENT OF THE EESC (EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE)

Christa Schweng, president of the EESC (European Economic and Social Committee), on the work of her committee and the multitude of economic and social transitions Europe is facing.

**INTERVIEW:** Ralph Würschinger

**PHOTOS:** EESC

**EZA: When you started your work as president of the EESC in 2020, the pandemic had already affected the whole world. Now there is war in Europe. How has that multitude of challenges and transitions affected the work of the EESC and your presidency?**

**Christa Schweng:** From the very beginning, it was quite clear that we needed to work on the recovery from the pandemic. We needed something like this recovery and resilience capability which emerged afterwards. As regards the war in Ukraine, we had already held an initial discussion on the 24th February about Ukraine and the possible outcome of the impact this might have, not just on the European Union, but also particularly on the people in the European Union. As a specific result, we adopted two resolutions; the first one dealt with the real consequences of the war in Ukraine, and the second one called for Ukraine's membership of the European Union. Furthermore, we issued and adopted this resolution one week before the Council agreed to grant candidate status to Ukraine. I think we were quite up-to-date and we are really quite proud of this.

**EZA: The war on the borders of the EU fills people with uncertainty and fear. It also leads to consequences at an economic level. Which are the most pressing ones?**

**Christa Schweng:** Inflation is increasing, and the economic outlook is deteriorating. Moreover, because of the energy crisis, many people fear not being able to heat their homes. So, even before the war started, we argued that the energy transition needed to be dealt with. However, the question was always how can this 'Fit for 55' be realised? We are convinced that this can only be achieved together with people and businesses. You need to have everybody on

**“YOU NEED TO HAVE EVERYBODY ON BOARD – NOT ONLY BUSINESSES, BUT ALSO, OF COURSE, WORKERS AND CONSUMERS.”**

board – not only businesses, but also, of course, workers and consumers. After all, if society in general is not in agreement, it becomes difficult to achieve these kinds of objectives. We therefore think it is necessary to invest everything we have and can do in renewables, and to try to work towards that transition as soon as possible.

**EZA: Apart from the repercussions of the war in Ukraine and the pandemic, what are the most urgent issues with which the EESC is currently occupied?**

**Christa Schweng:** We know that around 90% of all jobs in the future will require digital knowledge or, at least, basic digital knowledge. So, having some sort of digital competence is no longer an option, it is an absolute must. The older the workers are, the more difficult it is for them to cope with these changes. Leaving nobody behind is one of the goals, and one of the messages, that we always put forward. We must also not forget to mention the green transition, as this is equally important to us. It requires a different mindset, a different way of thinking. Let me just give you the example of our circular economy stakeholder platform that we have, which is a collection of best practice examples. We have, in the meantime, sent out over seven hundred and they show just how industry, how certain professions need to change to work towards a circular model – this is something which attracts significant attention from all over the world.



**In the recent past, the EESC has been criticised. Some people argue that this advisory body is over-financed and does not have sufficient impact on real policy-making. How do you respond to this critique?**

**Christa Schweng:** The EESC consists of employers, workers, consumer organisations, agriculture, and sectoral organi-

sations, etc. Our work is based on consensus and, when these groups do agree on something, I can assure you that it is a safe pillar for politicians to lean on, as they then know that this is something upon which they can build. This is my response to the criticism. Don't you believe that people, such as workers and consumers, deserve a voice, or to be heard, at the European level?

The EESC (European Economic and Social Committee) is a consultative body of the European Union (EU) established in 1958. Its purpose is to represent civil society at a European level. Members are representatives of employers' organisations, and trade unions, as well as social, occupational, economic and cultural organisations. The EESC currently consists of 329 members.

This interview is a short summary of the **"We Work Europe"** podcast. If you would like to listen to the whole episode with **Christa Schweng**, please just scan this barcode or visit: <https://www.eza.org/en/eza-podcast>

**We Work Europe**



# REALISING THE RIGHT TO EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

## Erasmus+ project "Work at any price?" for women in precarious employment



**EZA MEMBERS IN DEFINING THE EZA CHARTER**

**TEXT:** Karin Reisige  
**PHOTOS:** EZA

The European Union affords women rights, prohibits unequal opportunities for advancement and unequal pay, guarantees them the right to personal integrity in the workplace, and the right to be treated with dignity. Women in precarious employment – as is often the case in catering, cleaning or private security services – are often far from realising their rights. "The main thing is that there's work there!" is all too often their mantra. Harassment and other violations of the law should simply be "waved away" – especially in professions where customers often leave public reviews on the internet. In short, economic constraints lead to unequal rights, which is unacceptable.

EZA members Nell-Breuning-Haus (Germany), SOLIDARUMAS (Lithuania), PODKREPA (Bulgaria), Arbeiter-, Freizeit- und Bildungsverein (Italy) and EDS Fundacja Nowy Staw (Poland) have, therefore, launched the Erasmus+ project entitled "Work at any price? A project against exploitation, discrimination and sexual harassment of women in precarious employment". As a project network of trade unions and educational institutions, we are developing standards for gender-responsive education for female workers, which

will be set out in an EZA charter. The charter's content is devoted to the advocacy for equal access to our educational work, and the consideration of the specific life situations of these women. In this way, we can increase the quality and relevance of our work and fulfil our genuine mission with even greater efficacy: supporting female workers through education.

We will capture the life situations of many women in precarious employment in a film and in a campaign, in order to raise awareness of the issue in our European societies. A special training programme, which will also be available as a webinar in German, English, Lithuanian, Polish and Bulgarian, will provide the women with the knowledge they need to assert their rights. At the same time, we train "key multipliers" in a certification course, who go on to carry out the training programme and act as Equal Opportunity Officers within organisations.

The project is being implemented via the EZA platform IPEO – International Platform for Equal Opportunities. The project's duration is from February 2022 to July 2024.

Do you have any questions about (or interest in) completing the certification course? Feel free to contact the project's management function: **Karin Reisige**, Nell-Breuning-Haus in Herzogenrath, Tel.: **+49 2406/9558 12**, E-mail: [karin.reisige@nbh.de](mailto:karin.reisige@nbh.de)





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