



# MAGAZINE



# ReArm Europe

## **EZA BRUSSELS CONFERENCE 2026**

Social justice in a rearming Europe

## **EUROPE AND THE WAR**

The new European reality in times of global uncertainty

## **MENTAL HEALTH IN WAR ZONES**

Interview with psychologist Eleanor Hitchman of ICRC

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Defining Future Priorities for Workers' Organisations in Candidate Countries

## **EZA NEWS**

Two new members from North Macedonia



**ISSUE 01/2026**



## Dear Friends, Dear Reader,

At the beginning of March, EZA sent a strong signal with its Brussels' Conference under the theme: 'Social justice in a rearming Europe'. Although it is not self-evident for a network of workers' organisations to get involved in this debate, we consider it our responsibility to reflect on this.

Safety in a very unstable world concerns everyone. Armaments cannot be seen in isolation from the broader context in which dialogue, agreements and diplomacy must continue to play their role. Especially since Europe remains a peace project. Moreover, the strengthening of the EU's defence capacity must not lead to less social protection. Military capacity is necessary but not sufficient for a lasting peace to which social peace also contributes.

At a time when a new world order is emerging, solidarity is giving way to the self-interest of dictators and on the other side of the ocean, of autocrats, kleptocrats and technocrats who want to take over democracy, ignore international rules and moreover come to say that Europe is in decline.

There is no reason to go along with it unnoticed and unconsciously, to let ourselves be fitted with complexes and to call it the new normal. Without defeatism, we must continue to follow our own European path, based on our values. Convinced that our prosperity and well-being and social protection is much greater than elsewhere. We feel strongly involved in this unpredictable and confusing world with the feeling that we have no influence on it.

I would like to remind you of the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt: „We must not be afraid of anything except fear itself.“ An American president who still embraced democracy.

We must therefore not hesitate to act.

For example, monitoring purchasing power is important, especially with the current reappearance of a new energy crisis, based on the observation that globalisation does not provide the same benefits for everyone.

The same applies to how we deal with the dramatic changes in the world of work, among others caused by AI. Will we still be able to talk about classic jobs or will it be about fulfilling tasks, assignments or processes? When a large entrepreneur was asked about the number of employees in his company, he answered: one quarter people and three quarters robots.

For older workers who were trained in a different time and will have to work longer to keep pensions affordable, appropriate forms of transition, of up- and re-skilling will be needed. For the younger generation the question arises as to how they will still gain access to the labour market despite good skills and what impact this will have on their mental well-being. Moreover, we know that AI is already widely used in their recruitment, uncontrolled. Intergenerational cooperation between these different groups in the workplace is certainly necessary. And in general, legal embedding of AI will be imperative to keep work human in the future.

The Easter period brings me to the thought that despite all the worries and problems, the perspective of resurrection and hope must continue to guide us.

Luc Van den Brande – EZA-President



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# SOCIAL JUSTICE IN A REARMING EUROPE

Against the backdrop of the EU rearming at rapid pace, the 2026 EZA Conference in Brussels brought together participants from 21 countries to reflect on the social implications of this turnaround in security policy.



**FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: JOVITA PRETZSCH, DEPUTY CHAIR OF LITHUANIA'S SOLIDARUMAS TRADE UNION; LUCIE STUDNIČNÁ, CHAIR OF GROUP II (EMPLOYEES), EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE (EESC); ROLF BRO WEBER, POLICY ADVISOR AT WOW; AND BJØRN VAN HEUSDEN, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE WOW EUROPE (WORLD ORGANISATION OF WORKERS).**

**TEXT:** Sergio de la Parra, Sigrid Schraml  
**PHOTOS:** Katrin Brügggen

It may be tempting to attribute the current disorder on the international stage to the personality of one or another political leader. Without denying their influence, the French journalist and deputy editor-in-chief of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Anne-Cécile Robert, argued in her keynote speech that the current situation – marked by

renewed geopolitical confrontation and multiple armed conflicts – is rather the result of a series of historical cycles that now appear to be drawing to a close. As a result, the European Union feels increasingly threatened and, in the last few years, defence policy has moved to the top of the EU's policy priorities.

## Security beyond the military dimension

Deterioration of the international environment has brought the question of security back to the forefront of the European agenda, including the need for the Union to rely on credible and effective military deterrence. "It's a tough world out there", recalled French General Christophe Gomar, who is currently Vice-Chair of the European Parliament's Defence Committee. In his view, strengthening Europe's defence capability is the EU's guarantee for peace and a necessary condition for advancing its broader goals and values. At the same time, discussions throughout the conference highlighted the importance of placing these developments within the EU's longstanding commitment to peace and the values upheld by Christian workers' movements, such as social justice. Several speakers pointed to the continued relevance of international law and multilateral frameworks, first and foremost the United Nations, as central reference points for European action. This was accompanied by recognition of the limitations to the current international system and the need to align it with a changing geopolitical landscape. Participants also recalled that processes of rearmament tend to generate reciprocal reactions, as measures taken by one player are often perceived as threats by others – a dynamic commonly described as the security dilemma.

In a context of fiscal constraints across many Member States, concerns were raised about the potential impact of rising military expenditure on other areas of public spending, particularly those linked to conflict prevention, such as development cooperation and diplomacy. At the same time, it was emphasised that these policy areas play an important part in fostering stability and peace. In this regard, reference to the ILO motto – *si vis pacem, cole justitiam* (If you desire peace, cultivate justice.) – illustrated a broader understanding of security that underpinned the

discussion. Overall, the debate reflected a shared awareness that military capabilities alone cannot fully address today's security challenges, and that they are part of a wider set of instruments that also includes diplomacy, multilateralism and international cooperation.

## Consequences of higher military spending

One of the most visible aspects of the EU's rearmament policy is the hike in military expenditure. At a time when global military spending has reached an all-time high, Europe is at the forefront of this trend, with significant increases since 2014, the year when Russia occupied and then annexed Crimea. The legitimacy of this increase is not debated – although it could be argued that the challenge of European defence is not primarily a matter of financial resources. The issue here is to ensure transparency on the consequences and the choices that such a policy entails. "If Europe chooses to rearm, we must be honest about the implications", as EZA President Luc Van den Brande put it. An initial concern is financing. Within the EU, Member States with fiscal room for manoeuvring – Germany in particular – tend to rely on debt. For others, a rapid increase in military expenditure, like the current one, is hardly possible without putting pressure on other major areas of public spending, including social protection, healthcare and education. In practice, this rarely translates into immediate cuts to welfare systems, but rather into a progressive constraint on their development as resources are increasingly redirected towards defence priorities.

A second issue relates to the positive impact of defence spending on growth and employment. The existence of such effects is not denied (except where increases are largely driven by imports of military equipment).



**AROUND 100 PARTICIPANTS FROM 21 COUNTRIES ATTENTIVELY LISTENING TO THE TALK GIVEN BY ANNE-CÉCILE ROBERT, DEPUTY EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF LE MONDE DIPLOMATIQUE**

THIS MEANS THAT STRENGTHENING INDUSTRIAL SOVEREIGNTY IN THE DEFENCE SECTOR REQUIRES LONG-TERM COORDINATION, SUSTAINED POLITICAL WILL AND, ABOVE ALL, GREATER TRUST BETWEEN MEMBER STATES.

Yet, as Dr Nan Tian, Senior Researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, pointed out – it is important to recognise that defence spending tends to have a much lower impact on economic growth – the so-called fiscal multiplier – as compared to other types of public investment, like infrastructure, education or social services. While most existing studies focus on the United States, the European case has been less extensively analysed. However, some recent estimates suggest that, for countries like Germany, every additional euro spent on military spending generates, at best, 50 cents in additional economic output, possibly none whatsoever. According to Dennis Radtke, EPP coordinator in the European Parliaments' Employment Committee, this cannot be denied. Given the current geopolitical situation, however, the EU has no choice but at last to give priority to European defence.

Finally, it is important to underline that significant inefficiencies continue to affect the allocation of defence resources. In the German case, for instance, the limited effectiveness of military spending is largely linked to the defence sector's current structure: production capacities are already operating at near-full capacity, while competition is restricted by a lack of transparency in procurement procedures. Conditions like these make additional public spending more likely to translate into rising prices and increased profits for companies than into any sizeable expansion of production.

### The Defence Readiness Omnibus and Europe's industrial base

Apart from EU initiatives aimed at encouraging or facilitating higher national defence spending, industrial policy is another key area the Union is using to advance its defence agenda. Measures, such as funding research and development, accelerating permit procedures, encouraging joint procurement and facilitating the intra-EU circulation of defence-related goods,

are among the core elements of the "Defence Readiness Omnibus" package currently under discussion between the European Parliament and the Council.

The discussion with Paraskevi Papantoniou, head of unit at DG Defence Industry and Space (DEFIS) of the European Commission, and Isabelle Barthès, Deputy General Secretary of IndustriAll Europe, highlighted the need to rebalance the current mismatch between the growing availability of public funding for the defence industry and the benefits generated for society and for workers in the sector. This, for instance, raises questions about the possible taxation of excess profits in the industry, as well as the introduction of stronger social conditionality attached to public funding for defence companies.

Moreover, it became clear that simplifying procedures and removing regulatory obstacles for companies will not, on their own, address the structural challenges facing the EU's industrial base. These include fragmentation between national markets, underinvestment, duplication of capacities and the lack of fully integrated European supply chains. This means that strengthening industrial sovereignty in the defence sector requires long-term coordination, sustained political will and, above all, greater trust between Member States.

### A continuing debate

The conference made clear that the EU's security turn raises complex and far-reaching questions. For trade unions and Christian workers' organisations, it is not about denying the new geopolitical reality, which, as EZA Co-President Piergiorgio Sciacqua noted, has changed "whether we like it or not". Rather, it is to engage with it critically and constructively – encouraging political leaders to ensure that, however paradoxical it may seem, the EU's security policy remains anchored in a broader strategy where peace and respect for international law are guiding principles. Such an approach calls for a genuinely human-centred security policy, one that, both internally and externally, remains firmly committed to solidarity and human dignity.

# EUROPE AND THE WAR

The new European reality in times of global uncertainty

€ 800 billion for weapons and equipment, financed by additional debt – in a nutshell, this is the EU Commission's "Readiness 2030" plan, because war is raging at the EU's external borders. The EU needs money, not least to support Ukraine. But is this mounting arms build-up proportionate? And what consequences does the growing need for security have on the social fabric within the EU? We take a look at the defence industry, trade union work in the war zone and an initiative for peace.



**TEXT:** Ralph Würschinger  
**PHOTOS:** Ralph Würschinger, freepik

**B**russels. Yuriy Kurylo looks tired. Heavy eyelids cover part of his green eyes, dark circles visible beneath. In contrast, his suit is freshly ironed, his polo shirt shines out in rich violet. The president of VOST “VOLYA”, a Christian trade union and EZA (European Centre for Workers’ Questions) member from Ukraine, is taking part in this year’s EZA Brussels conference. He is warmly welcomed, returns the greeting with a smile, and speaks candidly about the current situation his country is facing. From the news, many are aware of the military developments taking place there. But Yuriy Kurylo provides an insight into the conditions under which the trade union has been operating since the war began. He explains that the war has prompted parliament to pass a law which has since restricted workers’ rights and freedoms, such as the right to strike and the right to work. Among other aspects, specific changes include the weekly working time, that may go up to 60 hours, redundancies no longer requiring trade union approval, partially suspending collective bargaining, and abolishing public holidays. The trade unionist, of course, is not happy about all this, but he accepts the need for such measures and hopes for a swift end to the war so life can return to normal. However, there’s no sign of this happening yet.

**R**ussia’s attacks not only pose a risk to life in the east of the country; they have destroyed infrastructure and energy supplies throughout Ukraine and severely restricted communication channels. Yuriy Kurylo and his colleagues are doing their best to support members despite the circumstances: “Where possible, we engage in collective bargaining with employers and conclude collective agreements. Where it’s not possible to reach such an agreement, we try to negotiate with the employer to get reasonably adequate working conditions. In the occupied territories or in areas where active hostilities are taking place, for example, this is impossible.”

### Constant stress

**I**n Lviv, western Ukraine, VOST has provided concrete assistance in building a shelter. Lyudmyla Vysotska and her nursery-school children head there whenever there’s an alarm. “Only yesterday, a drone flew over the city”, the

VOST union member says. Whereas to begin with it often used to happen twice a week, there’s an alarm now (as of March 2026) every couple of weeks. She then takes the children into the garden, where there’s an entrance to an underground bunker. “It causes a lot of stress for the children and puts their health at risk because power cuts mean the heating doesn’t always work and it can get cold”, the 57-year-old says.

**S**he distracts herself from the horrors by sketching with others at weekends or making little woollen toys. Two cousins have been at the front since the war broke out, and her niece, a doctor, is caring for the soldiers. It would have been easy for Lyudmyla to leave Ukraine. She owns land in Poland. Instead, she puts up with the fear and stress in an effort to help. In her spare time, she makes things that benefit soldiers – such as candles and bags – and finds her work as a nursery-school teacher particularly meaningful in times of war: “When dads are at the front, it’s harder for mums to bring up their children. We try to take some of the burden off them and be there for the children in every possible way.” VOST has also helped to raise the wages of nursery teachers like Lyudmyla. Wages that can go on being paid, partly as a result of EU aid.

**B**esides financial support, Ukraine needs military aid to win the war. Yuriy Kurylo of VOST “VOLYA” believes in victory. To achieve this, he argues, it is imperative for Europe to continue arming itself. After all, he says, it’s a matter of “upholding the civilisational values of freedom, democracy and respect for human rights.”

### The narrative of economic boom

**T**he fact is: defence spending is rising rapidly. According to estimates by the European Council, investment by EU member states since 2020 has risen from € 234 billion to € 381 billion in 2025 (an increase of 62.8%). Germany and France spend as much as the remaining member states combined. Defence contractors like Rheinmetall in Germany and Leonardo in Italy are even said to be driving the crisis-stricken European economy on the back of their well-filled order books. According to industry representatives, armaments not only guarantee strength

through deterrence but are also a guarantee of growth. Investment banks like Goldman Sachs expect GDP in the eurozone to rise by 1.3% in the wake of increased arms production. The investment bank attributes high profits to Germany in particular, while seeing an opportunity to offset the decline in car exports. Experts at the Banque Nationale de Paris (BNP) consider Spain and Italy to be the countries with the greatest macroeconomic potential from increased armament.

**S**cientific studies show a more varied picture. “Arms build-up will create jobs, albeit not as many as claimed”, says Nan Tian, programme director for military expenditure and arms production at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). In a paper published at the end of 2025, the economist, who holds a PhD, examined how defence investment affects a wide range of factors, including security, decent work, education and economic growth. Nan Tian’s paper is a meta-study incorporating findings from 50 years of research. His conclusion: “More jobs would be created were the money to be channelled into sectors other than defence.” To back this up, he cites the fiscal multiplier. This correlates government spending with GDP growth. While

rising defence spending does lead to higher wages in the defence industry, having a positive impact on GDP, spending in other sectors – such as education, infrastructure or healthcare – results in a significantly greater increase in GDP. “When you build a tank, it sits in a warehouse until there’s a war. If, say, you produce ammunition, then of course its purpose is to be destroyed”, the economist explains. “If you invest the same amount in healthcare and education, the return is far higher because healthier people can work longer and, in this way, generate more revenue for the economy.”

**F**or example, measured by the fiscal multiplier, anti-poverty programmes generate two to four times the return on investment. Such programmes do not, of course, protect Europe from external belligerent aggressors. However, the multiplier makes it clear that economic reasons do not speak in favour of any arms built-up at least. The argument that the defence industry creates additional jobs or – as in the case of Germany – cushions job losses in the automotive sector is untenable for Nan Tian. This is because producing arms is highly automated, and getting skilled workers into this sector is not easily done on account of the high level of specialisation involved.

Find out what pressure this puts on workers in an interview with psychologist Eleanor Hitchman from the International Red Cross in Ukraine. Among other aspects, she talks about how she supports workers whose family members have been reported missing.



ECONOMIST NAN TIAN EXAMINES THE LINK BETWEEN DEFENCE AND SOCIAL SPENDING

The peace researcher altogether acknowledges that a military is needed to ensure security for Europe. However, he argues that the concept of security should be understood in a much broader sense than just a number-based military or technological defence capability. Since this alone does not create security but even jeopardises it.

### Concerns about the welfare state

The 'human-centred approach' is about putting people at the heart of considerations. This also applies to the issue of security, says Tian: "People not only need the feeling of being safe from an invasion – whether from outside or, let's say, by rebel groups or insurgents within their own country. They need food, education, healthcare, housing and jobs. And of course, this applies not only to the current generation, but also to future ones." The UN established this approach back in 1994. It was incorporated by member states into the 2015 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of these goals is peace, others focus on good health, zero hunger as well as infrastructure. In his study, Nan Tian found that military build-up runs counter to these goals. For whilst military spending increases, investment benefiting the SDGs decreases. In the SDG Report presented at the end of 2025, the figures speak for themselves: only 35% of the goals are on track, half are progressing too slowly, and 18% are actually falling short. The Sustainable Development Goals set for 2030 will not be met.

One reason for this is that "countries are starting to look more inward, at themselves and what they can do for their own country, and less at how they can show solidarity with other countries", Nan Tian says. He considers this move to be short-sighted. "If you can help countries with their development, this can lead to greater security because then, the willingness to start an uprising, to fight or even to consider illegal migration decreases which would also benefit the donor countries."

Amid all the discussion about rearmament, he would like to see scientifically underpinned arguments from politicians and calls on trade unions in particular to take a closer look: "Trade unions and their members can say: we demand these scientific facts. We demand investigations, and we demand a decision-making process based on sound information."



**MATTEO BRACCIALI OF ACLI FEARS A SHIFT IN THE EU'S VALUES**

### A new Europe

The Christian Workers' Association and EZA member ACLI from Italy takes a clear stand against the arms built-up currently taking place in the EU. However, it has a more differentiated explanation: "The problem is not investment in the military per se. The problem is the amount invested and how we spend it", says Matteo Bracciali, Vice-President of ACLI. He feels the amount spent is far too high in direct comparison to Russian investment, which stood at € 240 billion in 2025. This means that Russia, which is waging wars on several fronts and conducting a war of invasion against a large country, spends around € 100 billion less on its military than the EU.

Bracciali fears that the national rearmament of EU member states in particular is jeopardising the EU's social pillar. Individual countries would consequently spend less on social services, whereas a pan-European army would relieve the burden on member states, be more cost-effective in absolute terms and could free up funds for such social services.

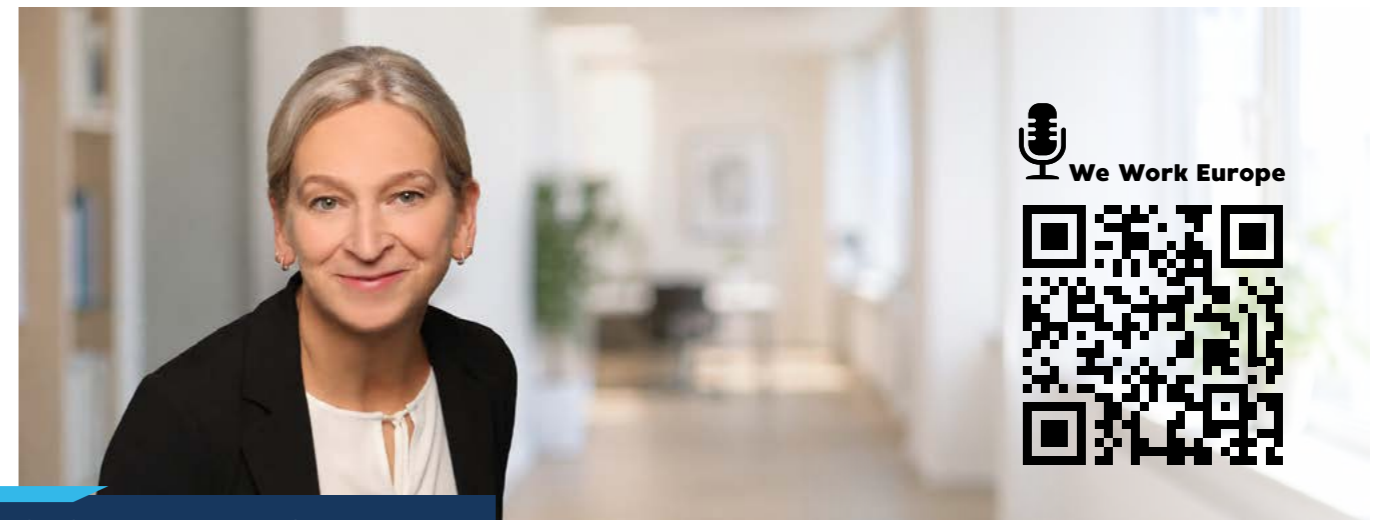
"WE VISITED PEOPLE IN THEIR EVERYDAY LIVES AND FOUND THAT THEY NEED SUPPORT IN ADOPTING PEACEFUL BEHAVIOUR. I BELIEVE THAT IN THIS WAY WE CAN CONTRIBUTE TO POLITICS OF A MORE PEACEFUL KIND"

Some politicians, such as Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Spain's President Pedro Sánchez, are among the proponents of this idea. However, it is not a new idea. As early as the 1950s, countries were working on such a solution. Under the "European Defence Community" banner (EDC for short), France, Italy, Germany and the Benelux countries were to provide contingents for armed forces under the joint command of a common defence ministry. As is well known, this never came about. This was partly because France – which had initially launched the idea – ultimately had too many reservations about limiting its own military sovereignty in favour of a supranational organisation. To this day, defence cooperation has gone no further than producing the Eurofighter.

However, it is not only the financial aspect that concerns Matteo Bracciali in the debate on European rearmament: "I believe we are currently creating a new Europe with values different from those we have stood for over the past 80 years." He argues that excessive armament runs counter to the EU as a union of peace. In line with Pope Leo XIV's quote, "If you want peace, prepare institutions of peace", ACLI has made it

its mission to promote precisely that peace. In 2025, the organisation launched the Caravan of Peace. A mobile information station that travelled through Italy for almost six months, making a total of 78 stops: at schools, prisons, farms and many other locations. "We visited people in their everyday lives and found that they need support in adopting peaceful behaviour. I believe that in this way we can contribute to politics of a more peaceful kind", Matteo Bracciali is convinced. He believes this conveys a more varied picture of peace, security and armament to people, which could be reflected in policymaking.

Members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg too have come into contact with the Caravan of Peace. They have received a manifesto from ACLI. It contains seven proposals designed to contribute to greater peace. Only time will tell whether points from the manifesto will be implemented. Matteo Bracciali, however, doesn't wish to wait that long. ACLI will continue its projects into 2026, in the hope that the EU will reflect on its role as a peace union and pursue more diplomatic avenues. In relation to its own diplomacy, as well as to potential negotiations between Ukraine and Russia.



**POLICY EXPERT ANNEGRET BENDIEK**

You can find out more on ACLI's manifesto, the geopolitical situation in Europe and a deep dive into Nan Tian's study in the "We Work Europe" podcast. Annegret Bendiek from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs discusses, among other things, the EU's strengths and weaknesses in the area of decision-making. To listen to the episodes, simply scan the QR code or visit the following website: [we-work-europe.podigee.io](https://we-work-europe.podigee.io).

# MENTAL HEALTH IN WAR ZONES

Interview with psychologist Eleanor Hitchman of ICRC



A SESSION ON MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT GIVEN BY THE ICRC. 2023/ICRC.

**INTERVIEW:** Ralph Würschinger  
**PHOTOS:** ICRC

In recent years, terms such as work-life balance, sabbatical and burnout have become part of our working lives. We are talking more and more openly about mental health. These debates are taking place from a position of privilege. After all, not everywhere is peace. Armed conflicts are not confined to countries in the Global South; they also exist on Europe's border. The issue of mental health is perhaps even more pressing there than it is here. So, how do workers manage their daily lives? Is it even possible to work properly under these conditions, and how does this affect one's mental well-being?

We spoke to Eleanor Hitchman. She is a psychologist and works for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as a mental health programme manager in Kyiv, Ukraine.

**EZA: Ms. Hitchman, martial law has been in force in Ukraine for several years. This has had serious consequences for working conditions in many sectors: overtime, no public holidays, no pay rises, etc. What effect does this have on workers' mental health?**

**Eleanor Hitchman:** If you are working in any frontline response, particularly in an armed conflict, then your conditions, of course, are very stressful. If you are not having time for rest and recuperation, then we see people becoming quite burnt out. There are problems with sleeping for everybody because of the air alerts. And so, this can impact your ability to do your job, and how you live your life.

**EZA: Are you in contact with employers in the Ukraine? Do you try to raise awareness of these risks and are you trying to improve the working conditions?**

**Eleanor Hitchman:** We often get requests for mental health or psychosocial support for utility workers or for healthcare providers – the ones who are regularly responding to needs, whether they be medical or repairing critical infrastructure. These requests are received via our colleagues who are providing technical or material assistance to these specific services, for example, medical donations to a hospital. For the cases of these workers, we work with the Ukrainian Red Cross Society (URCS), to increase their capacity, as they are the ones that may provide psychoeducation through their staff and volunteers.

It is not our role to improve working conditions as such, but mental health affecting first responders is a huge challenge. One of the reasons for this is that there are not enough people to respond to the drastically increased mental health needs since 2022. Sometimes organizations send personnel to attend some interventions that we offer.

Does this mean mental health challenges are magically fixed? To be honest, I don't think so and it's not necessarily because employers don't want to support their workers, but that maybe they can't because of a range of factors, including

the lack of workers, or simply what the job entails. If there are too many shifts and not enough workers, there may be less ability to have regular days off, people may then get fatigued yet have increased pressure to perform at the same time. The emotional toll of conducting this type of work in a conflict zone can also be immense, as people are exposed to much more trauma than they may otherwise be.

**EZA: How do you perceive the public's need for mental health services?**

**Eleanor Hitchman:** Ukraine still has a fairly traditional approach to mental health, with remnants of a more Soviet system. This means it has been stigmatized. Previously, there was very little access due to a lack of funding of services. Psychological treatment was very psychiatry-led. Before the escalation of the conflict, Ukraine was in the middle of health reforms to introduce an integrated stepped care model for mental health services, but since 2022, of course there have been such increased needs, it has been difficult to continue the reforms.

The awareness around mental health since the escalation of the armed conflict has gone up. This has been very much something that Olena Zelenska (Ukraine's First Lady) has focused on, enabling access to mental health services, making them more community-based and accessible. If mental health services are available in more local areas, as opposed to mainly in hospitals, and still run by mental health professionals, it means more people may have access to the programmes.

**EZA: Have the reforms you mentioned ensured that there are enough psychologists to adequately address mental health issues?**

**Eleanor Hitchman:** Psychology as a profession is relatively new in Ukraine. Therefore, there are not many qualified psychologists. In order to meet the gap, the Ministry of Health has implemented some trainings for psychologists.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been providing support in Ukraine since 2014. It supplies the population with relief goods, provides hospitals with equipment, and assists with reconstruction. Following the escalation of the armed conflict in 2022, the organisation scaled up its operations. It currently has more than 750 staff members in the country, spread across several cities.

As you can imagine, the mental health needs of people differ between peacetime and times of armed conflict, which requires different skills. And of course, some psychologists will then be mobilized to support the military. This means there are less available to work with the general population.

**EZA: Is there something people affected by mental health issues can do on their own? How can they become more resilient?**

**Eleanor Hitchman:** I don't really like this word resilient when it comes to people living in these situations, to be honest. If you are not coping, is it because you're not resilient enough?

Is it about resilience or is it about survival? I mean, you don't have a choice. People have to manage the best they can with difficult situations. I think it is more a question of how do you make things a bit less bad. We can support expansion of skills for psychosocial work in armed conflict, we can try to provide psychoeducation and offer people strategies or techniques that can help them cope but it differs in each person.

**EZA: How does this work?**

**Eleanor Hitchman:** The thing with coping strategies is, it's easy to be prescriptive and say, do some yoga and walk the dog and call your friends, but actually everybody is a bit different. Because if you are calling your friends and then will end up spending your whole time talking about the situation or if you spend time with your family and then they always want to talk about the conflict, then this may not be working for you. So, many of the things that people may have done

to cope with life and stress in a normal situation may not be possible anymore because they are experiencing life in an armed conflict. There is curfew, some cannot leave the country, communities may have broken down or people displaced or family members may be overseas.

Unfortunately, there's not one simple thing or a few simple things you are going to do that makes it all better because the reality that you're living in is really difficult. Workers need to find the strategies that work for them, in their specific situations. Might make a small difference to how they get through each day, how they cope, but it doesn't mean it will ever be a full proof solution.

**EZA: Even though there is no one-size-fits-all solution, is there a programme you offer that works particularly well?**

**Eleanor Hitchman:** I would say I was proud of all our programmes because they work very well, but the programme that we are running for the families of the missing in action has very good responses from the participants (editor's note: Currently, more than 70,000 people in the Ukraine are listed as missing, according to the Ukrainian authorities). These people are workers and so being able to support them to manage the challenges and distress that's caused by not knowing what is happening with their loved ones allows them to continue with their daily lives, work and family.

We see people from these groups who maintain contact beyond the group and become a strong support network. And we know that social support is a really good factor for the prevention of developing mental health issues.

If you want to know how the Ukrainian trade union VOST "VOLYA" is supporting their members, have a look at our article on p. 7.

More information on the ICRC programme for families living with uncertainty follow this link: <https://www.icrc.org/en/article/ukraine-supporting-families-living-uncertainty>



## FROM CHALLENGES TO ACTION: DEFINING FUTURE PRIORITIES FOR WORKERS' ORGANISATIONS IN CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

**TEXT:** Ljuban Bulić

How can workers' organisations in EU candidate countries strengthen their role in times of rapid economic and social change? This question was at the centre of the Concluding Perspective Seminar, organised by EZA in cooperation with the Confederation of Labour POD-KREPA. The seminar took place from 2–4 February 2026 in Königswinter, Germany, within the framework of EZA's Special Project for workers' organisations in EU candidate countries. It was held at the Arbeitnehmer-Zentrum Königswinter (AZK) – an EZA member organisation and the birthplace of EZA – giving participants, including new partners from the Western Balkans, the opportunity to connect with the roots of EZA and visit its Secretariat.

The seminar placed a clear emphasis on practical exchange. Its core was the first day, which was fully dedicated to interactive workshops designed to capture the real needs of workers' organisations across the region. Facilitated by Lucy Chambers, an experienced facilitator, the workshops created an open and inclusive space for discussion among participants from different countries and linguistic backgrounds. Through a structured process, participants first mapped the key challenges they face, then translated these into concrete capacity-building needs, and finally developed proposals for future action. This process resulted in six priority areas that reflect common concerns across candidate countries: navigating digital technologies and AI, addressing mobbing and strengthening integrity, increasing trade union membership, improving public image and communication, engaging young people, and strengthening negotiation capacities. Beyond identifying challenges, the workshops also generated practical ideas, including the need for regional training programmes, stronger use of digital tools, targeted approaches to youth engagement, and more interactive learning formats such as simulations and study visits. These results will directly inform the future direction of EZA's Special Project and its capacity-building activities.

While the first day focused on practice, the second day placed these issues in a broader European context. Nermin Oruč, Director of Research at the Centre for Development Evaluation and Social Science Research (Bosnia and Herzegovina) opened the discussions with an overview of the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in the Western Balkans. His analysis pointed to gradual progress in employment and education, but also to persistent structural challenges, including informality, skills mismatches and weak institutional capacity. Christophe Galand, Head of the Western Balkans Unit at the European Commission (DG ENEST) complemented this perspective by presenting the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans from the viewpoint of the European Commission, highlighting its strategic importance for the enlargement process and its role in accelerating reforms and economic convergence.

Building on this, Stefan Ristovski, Researcher at the European Policy Institute (North Macedonia) provided a more critical perspective through the presentation of the Reform and Growth Monitor. He highlighted uneven implementation across countries and pointed to a key gap: workers' organisations are still not sufficiently involved in shaping reform processes. This observation strongly resonated with participants and led to a broader discussion on the role of workers in ongoing reforms.

A central message of the seminar was that workers are too often treated as passive recipients of reforms, rather than as active partners in shaping them. Strengthening social dialogue is therefore essential, particularly in the context of digital and green transitions, which have a direct impact on jobs and working conditions. The seminar concluded with a clear message: economic convergence must go hand in hand with social progress, and empowering workers' organisations will be key to achieving fair and sustainable outcomes.

## EZA NEWS

# TWO NEW MEMBERS FROM NORTH MACEDONIA

We are delighted to welcome not just one, but two new members to our network. Both new organisations are based in North Macedonia, thereby strengthening EZA's regional diversity and European cooperation.



The **Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Macedonia (KSS)** is an independent and democratically organised trade union confederation that defends the rights and interests of workers. It is an umbrella organisation, bringing together several sectoral trade unions and representing its members vis-à-vis state institutions and employers. KSS is a representative trade union at national level and in the public sector of North Macedonia. As such, it is involved in the work of the Economic and Social Council and is a signatory to the general collective agreement for the public sector. Its activities primarily focus on promoting social dialogue, improving

working conditions and strengthening labour rights. Furthermore, the KSS actively contributes to the development of labour market measures and lobbies for fair wages and social security. Its remit also includes training and awareness-raising initiatives for workers. The work of KSS makes an important contribution to the advancement of a social and just working society.



The **Union of Financial Institution Workers of Macedonia (SFOM)** specifically represents the interests of workers in the financial sector in North Macedonia. As a sectoral trade union, it campaigns for fair working conditions, decent pay and the protection of labour rights in banks and financial institutions. The organisation particularly focuses on promoting social dialogue in the sector and supporting its members in labour law matters. Furthermore, SFOM provides training and information for workers to promote their professional development. It helps to give workers in the financial sector a voice and effectively represent their concerns. Its speciali-

sed expertise will add an important perspective from a key economic sector to the EZA network. We look forward to starting our exchange and future cooperation.

*A warm welcome to the EZA network!*



# MAGAZINE



## WE WORK EUROPE

### The EZA magazine for your ears

From now on, you can listen to EZA's new **We Work Europe** podcast on your smartphone or PC free of charge. In the comfort of your own home or while you are on the move. In the future, three episodes will be published for each EZA magazine and will appear on all podcast platforms.

For **We Work Europe**, we travel throughout Europe and meet member centers as well as experts in the field of labor issues, discuss current events and look at developments in social dialogue and European social policy.

**We Work Europe** is a production of Escucha - Culture for the Ear on behalf of EZA. You can find the podcast on all popular platforms: Apple Podcasts, Audible, Google Podcasts, Spotify and on many other pod-catchers. Feel free to leave us a review and recommend the podcast to others! Scan the code with your smartphone and go directly to the platform of your choice!



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