



BETWEEN DISAPPOINTMENT AND THE WAY AHEAD

Bulgaria's adoption of the euro and the state of EU Eastern integration

LESSONS LEARNED FROM 2004 AND 2007

Five insights into the future of the EU

INTERVIEW

Konstantin Trenchev – dissident, trade union founder and contemporary witness

COMMENT

The EU isn't a magic wand

Dear friends, dear readers,

On 26 November 1989, just shortly after the Iron Curtain came down, I arrived in a snowy Warsaw late at night. This was the beginning of an intensive phase of formal cooperation with several Eastern European countries for me in my role as Belgian Federal Minister of Employment and Labour, and as Minister-President of Flanders. My remit included organising exchanges and training, with support from governments, employers and trade unions, and initiating numerous projects through our Eastern Europe Fund. It was only because of the democratic changes in Poland and other countries, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union that the largest enlargement of the EU was at all possible in 2004.

This edition of the EZA Magazine looks back on that period of reunification – I prefer to say ‘reunification’ because it is about countries that have always belonged to Europe. The resulting evaluation is not unequivocally positive, though. What is the reason for this? It was thought that the standard of living would swiftly become the same everywhere. Although a ‘handbook’ was available for going from a free market to a totalitarian state economy, there was none for going in the opposite direction. Experimenting was therefore the order of the day. This also included restructuring companies, following the example set by the Treuhand, in order to make companies profitable and to strengthen the economy. The rise in unemployment was seen as a positive sign of growth in market forces, but the social breakdown was not adequately addressed. Like today, competitiveness was necessary, but not at the expense of social protection.

The EU did not always treat the new countries on an equal footing with the existing member states and they were underrepresented for a long time. People acted as new ‘missi dominici’, issuing unilateral instructions for how the new member states had to adapt. I remember the bitter observation of Polish ministers and trade unionists that the country was being treated as a ‘reserve’. But the acceding countries also struggled to change their habits. First, they felt that reforms were being carried out for the sake of the EU, although they were necessary for the country itself. They also tended to have a tough centralistic approach, not focusing enough on cooperation, not going for real dialogue with the social partners, leading also to insufficient use of cohesion funds – as I noted in my report to the then Commissioner for Enlargement, Johannes Hahn.

EZA, not coincidentally founded in 1985, has made great efforts to encourage social dialogue in candidate countries (and member states alike) and will continue to do so intensively. Training for dialogue remains of vital importance and is a joint learning process. Even though citizens are also disillusioned, there is a prevailing conviction that the larger European Union was needed and is an improving positive story. When asking my Eastern European friends what they think is the biggest change for them, they always said: the freedom to go and live where they want.

With a view to possible new accessions, decision-making in the EU has to be reformed. The way to full membership must consist of step-by-step cooperation. Moving on from past reluctance, it may well be that war and threats on our borders bring us back to the basis of the European Union as a peace project. Worried young people may find this relevant once more.

Freedom, peace and values still underpin our common European project.

Luc Van den Brande
EZA President



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BETWEEN DISAPPOINTMENT AND THE WAY AHEAD

What Bulgaria's Euro adoption reveals about the state of EU Eastern integration



**JOURNALISTS ON STRIKE IN BULGARIA
THEY WANT MORE PAY**

TEXT: Lukas Fleischmann
PHOTOS: Lukas Fleischmann/European Parliament

It was a project of historic significance: on 1 May 2004, a total of ten countries from Central and Eastern Europe as well as Malta and Cyprus joined the European Union. Bulgaria and Romania followed in 2007. Despite constantly increasing economic growth, the initial wave

of euphoria has today been replaced by disillusionment and mounting EU scepticism in many of these countries. The trade unions are also disappointed. Where does this bad mood come from, and is it justified? Searching for clues...

Sofia in May 2025: several hundred striking journalists and trade unionists have gathered at a crossroads in the city centre of Sofia. They are demanding a 15-percent pay increase. "At the moment, two thirds of my salary go on rent", explains an editor working for the Bulgarian news agency. "We do an important job for democracy and society, but it doesn't get enough recognition." The strike is just one of many at the moment. Public transport employees are also on strike, so half the city is paralysed.

In 2026, Bulgaria will be replacing its national currency, the lev, with the euro – taking European integration to an even deeper level. Many people in the country are afraid this will cause prices to rise and social benefits to fall because of the stricter austerity criteria that the Bulgarian state budget now has to meet. Hence the comprehensive strike is not a random thing. "Everyone's a bit afraid, also because there hasn't really been a proper information campaign", says Dimitar Manolov. He is the President of PODKREPA, the second largest trade union in Bulgaria and a member of the EZA. The union is also involved in the strikes. He adds: "Some politicians are playing with people's fears."

Returning to nationalism

Mountain guide Maria shares these fears. She works as a tourist guide in the Rila National Park, about a one-and-a-half-hour drive south of the capital. "We are Bulgarians and we should focus more on that.

I'm afraid that the euro is going to make my life here even more expensive. What do we gain from Europe?" Dimitar Manolov understands these fears, but even so, he says: "Joining the EU was a good thing for most Bulgarians. But the EU's decision to accept the country was based on politics, not economics."

At the same time, Manolov believes that joining the eurozone makes sense. "Of course, processes like these will push prices up in the short term, but wages will soon come into line. In terms of prices and wages, Bulgaria will become an average European country."

Communication and misconceptions

The example of joining the eurozone reveals several fundamental problems that have plagued the Central and Eastern accession countries for more than 20 years. "The European dream has failed to bring improvements for many", says Marta Kahancová. She is the co-founder and managing director of the Slovakian research centre Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI). Together with her colleagues, she analysed the last 20 years in the Central and Eastern European accession countries and has published her research results. She says: "As far as working conditions are concerned, there were great expectations in terms of convergence, particularly with regard to wages. We know that this simply hasn't happened."



DIMITAR MANOLOV – PRESIDENT OF PODKREPA



ELMAR BROK AT A SEMINAR WITH THE NEW ACCESSION COUNTRIES IN 2002

Bulgaria's GDP is well below the European average. The job market situation has caused many young people in particular to try their luck abroad. At the same time, Bulgaria receives above-average financial support from the EU. In 2024, this amounted to nearly 2 billion euros, or around 2.3 percent of the gross national income. Despite constantly growing GDPs, new value chains and increasing investment, most of the Central and Eastern European accession countries from 2004 and 2007 are lagging behind. This is accompanied by frequently weak state institutions and unstable governments, characterised by frequent snap elections. In Bulgaria alone, the parliament has been elected seven times in the last four years. For Marta Kahancová, this leads to a discrepancy: "A growing GDP does not automatically result in better working conditions or higher wages. That is a highly neo-liberal mindset."

A social dialogue with almost no-one to lead it

This imbalance is both cause and consequence of a European dilemma, with both the European social model and the social dialogue struggling to get established. "In Western countries, the social dialogue is merely facilitated by the state, whereas in Central and Eastern European countries the state plays an extremely important role. Both trade unions and employers' organisations see the state as their initial point of contact before they start talking to each other", says Marta Kahancová.

Interests are frequently enforced by law and not by the system of negotiation that is actually intended for that purpose. Marta Kahancová: "Instead of getting

invested in developing the social dialogue and collective bargaining, the social partners prefer to use their limited resources to influence the legislative process, where they feel they're on the safe side. Laws are binding." Above all, they serve particular interest groups. Research refers to this phenomenon as the "captured state".

Problems of access and history

The captured state is a consequence of post-communist tradition in Central and Eastern European countries. Corporatist traditions, such as have been customary in Western and Northern Europe for decades, simply do not exist. As a rule, trade unions were part of the communist party and thus part of the state. The change in regime during the 1990s turned the situation upside down, something which became obvious above all during the accession negotiations. Elmar Brok (Christian Democratic Union - CDU) was a rapporteur for the European Parliament during the accession process. Thanks to his Brok reports, he is seen as one of the architects of EU enlargement to the East. "The 1990s were an absolute disaster because people believed that a market economy was possible without social compensation mechanisms." Social stability was less important than economic growth.

PODKREPA President Dimitar Manolov freely admits: "We didn't have any experience [this refers to the period around 1990 – editor's note]. We didn't know what the labour movement is, we had to start from less than scratch." With the help of western partners, new members such as PODKREPA learnt initial fundamental aspects of how the social dialogue works

An unfinished process

This process is still not finished today. As shown by Marta Kahancová's studies, "the social partners in Eastern Europe have access problems. They don't yet have the language skills or the knowledge to fully participate in European social dialogue. The European Union has poured a lot of money into capacity building. It remains doubtful whether that was effective." This imbalance in terms of access led to misconceptions about the role played by the EU in social policy on the national scale: "It took them a while to understand that Europe's not going to win the battles for them that they really should be fighting at home", says Kahancová.

Elmar Brok adds: "Strong, independent national trade unions were simply missing, something that still applies today in some cases. Back then, this was not particularly helpful in developing a strong role for the social dimension of the social market economy."

Second-class Europeans?

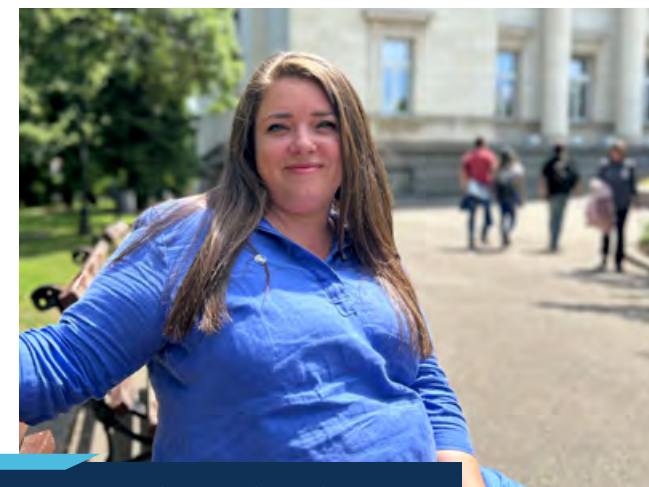
Alongside weak trade unions and potentially unstable governments, one reason for current EU scepticism also consists in unequal treatment of the new EU member states. "Major, downright inexcusable mistakes were made after 2004", says Günter Verheugen (Social Democrats – SPD), who was Commissioner for Enlargement under Commission President Romano Prodi from 1999 to 2005. "Most of the new EU member states were treated as second-class members. They still feel it's like that today." He sees that as one explanation for the frustration and disappointment pervading wide sections of the population. Verheugen is of the opinion that this misperception still persists today. This is illustrated, for example, by the way civil servants are appointed within the EU institutions. "We've got quotas on the top level with the Commissioners. The Commission also makes sure that all countries are represented among the Directors-General too, the highest non-political appointments. But below that, the situation

is less promising. This reinforces the feeling of being second class." Inadequate access to training and a lack of appointments in the EU institutions are compounded by an administration that is inadequately staffed with compatriots from the Central and Eastern European member states.

Among others, this unequal treatment has led to a growing interest in cooperating with other international players, says Verheugen: "If you look at the situation today where all our new members are loyal supporters of the USA with the tendency to disassociate themselves, for example, from Europe's strategic emancipation from the USA, one of the reasons is that the USA actively looked after these countries from 1990."

Looking ahead

But despite all the hindrances and hurdles, transformation and integration are slowly beginning to bear fruit, particularly for young workers. Maria Petrova, President of PODKREPA's youth movement in Sofia, says: "For the last three or four years, young workers have been returning from abroad because they see that the general situation and working conditions are improving in Bulgaria." While there are also many people with a nationalist mindset in this age group, most meanwhile feel that they're European. "Many young people see the advantages that are offered by projects such as ERASMUS+, for example. I think that we can be European citizens." Bulgaria and the EU still have a long way ahead of them in terms of sustainably consolidating the country's integration in the EU. Bulgaria is a representative example of the problems facing most of the Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU between 2004 and 2007: weak social dialogue with unstable governments on the national level, coupled with unequal treatment accompanied by information deficits on the part of the EU and its institutions. "Despite all the deficits, the enlargement of the EU was a great success. But we must make every effort to explain it all in better terms for ourselves and for the other countries", concludes Elmar Brok.



MARIA PETROVA FROM PODKREPA



GÜNTER VERHEUGEN WITH ROBERTA METSOLA, PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, AT THE CELEBRATIONS MARKING 20 YEARS OF EU EASTWARD ENLARGEMENT IN 2024

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM 2004 AND 2007

What does the experience gained from the EU enlargements mean for current accession processes – and how can the trade unions get involved?



TEXT: Lukas Fleischmann
PHOTOS: Adobe Stock

There are currently nine countries on the list of EU accession candidates (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine). Some only joined the list recently, such as Georgia and Ukraine, while others have been waiting for decades. Five conclusions can be drawn from the previous accession negotiations for trade unions to use in the current negotiations. Here's an overview.

1. Realistic expectations management

Experience from 2004 and 2007 has shown that euphoria can swiftly dissolve into disappointment and provide fertile soil for populism. It is wrong to presume that joining the EU will soon bring an improvement in living conditions. The former EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Günter Verheugen (SPD), puts it like this: "Problems begin when EU enlargement is explained just in terms of improving living conditions, in other words, higher income. Although things do gradually get better after a country joins the EU, expectations management must be realistic."

This expectations management also applies to the local trade unions: national social dialogue cannot be orchestrated from Brussels. "Social security systems are a national matter up to now, even under the Lisbon Treaty", explains Elmar Brok, author of the European Parliament's Brok Reports on EU enlargement, "and for good reasons. For example, if Bulgaria and Romania were to want German, Danish or Dutch standards, it would be financially unviable, and would have to be co-funded by other EU countries; this is not a European competence."

2. Enabling access

Social dialogue is a difficult, protracted affair that needs the right access. For a long time, Western and Northern European countries underestimated the implications of this for the accession countries. For the European social model and social dialogue to work also in potential new EU member states, a sophisticated system of capacity building is needed. It is particularly important to take a broad approach, as explained by Marta Kahancová from the CELSI research institute: "Trade unions often appoint just one person with good English skills to be their international contact. This person then has to travel everywhere and is simply overwhelmed. In many trade unions, the burden of international exchange rests on the shoulders of one person, who often becomes alienated from the reality back home in their own country." Capacity-building measures ought to extend right across trade

unions in order to facilitate widespread communication. This has been neglected in recent years so that many Central and Eastern European partner countries don't understand the EU jargon used in Brussels. Furthermore, this lack of visibility and inadequate interaction capability in Brussels has led to unequal treatment.

3. Treating new partners as equals

Many experts are of the opinion that unequal treatment of accession countries is a central problem for European integration. It happens on many levels. In institutional terms by appointment policies within the EU institutions, and on the parliamentary and intergovernmental level by ignoring Central and Eastern European experience, says Günter Verheugen. "They are members who are treated with condescension. At the meetings of the heads of state and government, nobody listens to what they say. Their suggestions and ideas fail to get adequate attention in many areas." Marta Kahancová agrees: "They still get the feeling that they're not really welcome. Or they're seen initially as rivals, as someone who'll steal jobs, for example. Creating cross-border interaction and connections has not worked well." Social partners such as trade unions can tackle this directly with dialogue-enabling measures, seminars and joint campaigns etc. It's also important for everyone involved in international exchange and sharing to listen carefully. Through their members, local trade unions and workers' organisations have an extensive range of influence within the population at large. They are in a good position to judge the mood and hardship situations, and are well able to deconstruct common prejudice and myths.

Elmar Brok finds that the EU is making good progress in this respect: "Today there is already a good number of important Commissioners from the Eastern and Central European countries. Furthermore, work is in progress on developing the civil servants, something that's taking time but is now showing improvement."

4. Breaking out from the dilemma: reforming the EU

Although trade unions are not directly involved in the decision-making process for a fundamental reform of the EU, they are definitely in a position to contribute valuable information and lobbying work. If the EU intends to continue the integration and enlargement process, many experts feel a reform is inevitable. At the moment, the EU simply is not capable of further enlargement, despite the many candidate countries. There is currently no unanimity, which would be necessary for further enlargement. "The enlargement and integration dynamic is broken. A new EU treaty cannot be expected in the near future. Any attempt to negotiate a new treaty is doomed to fail under the current circumstances", says Günter Verheugen. Elmar Brok (CDU) adds: "It all depends on an appropriate reform of the European Union, particularly with regard to the decision-making processes."

Populist governments, in particular, are taking advantage of the current stalemate by blaming the EU and its dysfunctionality for their own sociopolitical failings. Accession countries, the EU and social partners such as the trade unions should therefore start thinking along alternative lines to consider whether full membership is in fact the only way. Elmar Brok makes a case for different integration levels: "Some countries, such as the Western Balkan states, have been waiting for decades. In the meantime, we have to make progress and go much deeper in certain areas to show people that we are open and eager to have them. Norway, Iceland and Switzerland have a kind of alternative model based on economic interdependence without being full members."

5. Selling social dialogue and the welfare state as a success

In the end, we can learn from the past that focusing on economic growth brings short-term success in terms of GDP, but can cause greater social inequality within the population in the long term. This arouses fears of loss and social tension. That said, the European social model

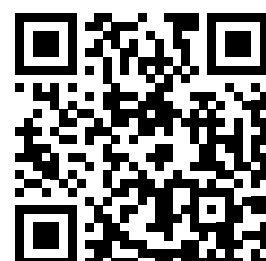


with a strong welfare state is a successful compensation model which can provide stability and prosperity when applied correctly, and is highly efficient in crisis situations. Trade unions can promote this by doing away with neo-liberal myths that put general economic growth on the same footing as general improvements in the quality of life or working conditions.

However, a welfare state with compensation mechanisms does not mean everyone can help themselves to a cornucopia of social benefits. It is currently not possible for the same social benefits to be available in every country. This also has to be featured in communication and in policy-making: "It is important to always keep a balance between social policy and competitiveness", says Elmar Brok. "The social dimension in competition gets neglected far too often. For example, what does the European Green Deal mean for a shipyard worker in Gdansk or a steel worker in Eastern Europe? I'm only now starting to feel that we're back on track in finding this balance."

More Information: The "We Work Europe"-Podcast

The current series of the EZA podcast "**We Work Europe**" takes you to the journalists' strike in Sofia. It also gives you insights into the history of the accession negotiations with former EU Commissioner Günter Verheugen and former MEP Elmar Brok. To hear the episodes, simply scan the QR code or go to the website we-work-europe.podigee.io.



"TODAY WE ARE DISILLUSIONED"

Konstantin Trenchev – dissident, trade union founder and contemporary witness about the past and future of Europe's trade unions



KONSTANTIN TRENCHIEV: DISSIDENT, FORMER POLITICAL PRISONER AND TRADE UNION FOUNDER

INTERVIEW: Lukas Fleischmann
PHOTOS: Lukas Fleischmann/Adobe Stock

Dissatisfied with the communist regime, Dr Konstantin Trenchev founded the underground trade union PODKREPA ("support" in English) on 8 February 1989, which was his birthday. Subsequently he was repeatedly prosecuted and put in prison, with him becoming one of the best-known dissidents in Bulgaria. In this interview, he talks about his hard-won freedom – and about the reasons why he is so disappointed today, particularly with the EU.

EZA: Mr Trenchev, in 1988 you started playing an active role in political resistance. What were your motivations?

Trenchev: At the age of 33, I was one of the first members of a human rights organisation in Bulgaria. It was founded by former political prisoners and dissidents as a reaction to Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika. I was also constantly dissatisfied with the regime. While studying medicine and subsequently working as a surgeon, I kept on coming across various methods of medical treatment from France or Germany that were simply forbidden in Bulgaria because the regime prohibited them.

EZA: How did you progress from being a human rights activist to a trade unionist?

Trenchev: In January 1989, the secretary-general of this human rights organisation went on hunger strike. I visited him in February and then gave Radio Free Europe a call because I wanted to report about it. As a doctor, I declared that his health was in a critical condition. Things then started to happen and we decided to found a trade union.

EZA: What made you opt for a trade union?

Trenchev: In those days, a trade union was the only form of opposition that was more or less "accepted". It was far too dangerous to call yourself a politician. To be a trade unionist was kind of in-between. That's why so many people waited until later to join, because they would have been severely oppressed otherwise. I was practically taken hostage by my own deeds – and had no choice but to continue.

EZA: Is it true that PODKREPA was founded on your birthday?

Trenchev: Yes. On my birthday, on 8 February 1989, I used

the excuse of a family party to gather dissidents and activists without alarming the secret service. The trade union PODKREPA was thus founded once we had signed the corresponding protocol. This was the second independent trade union in Eastern Europe after Solidarność in Poland. All members were activists, intellectuals without a criminal record and other like-minded people.

EZA: What came next? Did you go public?

Trenchev: Back then, the Bulgarian labour code didn't regulate how to go about founding a trade union. The communists were sure they had total control and believed that the workers were on their side anyway. So it wasn't explicitly prohibited. However, when we submitted the corresponding records to court, they refused to register us. Nevertheless, we declared PODKREPA as an independent trade union – which was when the actual repression began.

EZA: What happened?

Trenchev: My home was searched and then something crucial took place: the government withdrew all rights from the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. They were forced to swap their Turkish name for a Bulgarian one, they weren't allowed to go to the mosque, and speaking Turkish was prohibited. We challenged this injustice. In May 1989, we organised a hunger strike with Bulgarians and Turks – this was our only weapon.

EZA: How did the regime react?

Trenchev: The communists organised a counter-demonstration with banners saying "Death to the traitor" and "Death to Trenchev". American photographs recorded it all. Until the regime was overthrown, I was thus one of the best-known but also most threatened people in Bulgaria – and landed in prison.

„WE WERE THRILLED TO BE PART OF THE EUROPEAN FAMILY. IT'S DIFFERENT TODAY. WE'RE DISILLUSIONED. THE FIRST PROBLEM WAS COMMUNICATION. MANY BELIEVED THAT JOINING THE EU WOULD MAKE EVERYTHING BETTER OVERNIGHT AND WE'D HAVE WESTERN LIVING STANDARDS IMMEDIATELY.“

EZA: What happened when you were arrested and how long were you in prison?

Trenchev: They took us to prison on 21 May by order of the investigating authorities: solitary confinement for political activists. We stayed there all summer. The International Labour Organisation asked the government why they were arresting people for being involved in a trade union. In September, they threw us out of prison, literally without giving any reasons. Three countries offered exile to my wife and myself: USA, France and Germany. My wife went, I stayed to wait and see what would happen. In November, the regime was then overthrown by a putsch from within the party.

EZA: How did PODKREPA develop once the Iron Curtain came down?

Trenchev: The first few years were really dynamic. There were several strikes. Many Western trade unionists came to show us how to build up a real trade union. We really only knew the communist "unions" which were actually no more than "transmission belts" for the party. We set up PODKREPA initially on a territorial basis and then according to the individual sector of industry, resulting in a stable, functioning network. We organised several nationwide strikes up until the overthrow of the last socialist government in 1997.

EZA: What was the political situation in those days?

Trenchev: The political sector was shaped by corruption and oligarchy – and it still is today. After the end of communism, the old elite shared their networks and money between themselves. Large-scale investment from the West was blocked, with the result that three million Bulgarians left the country. Ironically, this meant unemployment wasn't a great problem – people just left and went abroad.

EZA: The official EU accession negotiations began on 15 February 2000, leading to membership in 2007. What did that mean for you?

Trenchev: We were thrilled to be part of the European family. It's different today. We're disillusioned. The first problem was

communication. Many believed that joining the EU would make everything better overnight and we'd have western living standards immediately. Of course that didn't happen. What irritates me most today is that everything is dictated from Brussels, there's no national sovereignty. We've got specific Bulgarian problems that Brussels cannot solve.

EZA: Which role does PODKREPA play in all this?

Trenchev: All they did was to ask for our consent. We weren't part of the Bulgarian delegation for the negotiations, although we urged them to include us. We founded a national trade union committee for EU integration, which was used above all to inform our structures about the European social model. We supported the process with campaigns, training courses etc. about the social acquis and European labour relations.

EZA: So was it a mistake to join the EU?

Trenchev: No, definitely not. It's brought us huge advantages: we can work and travel where we want, buy things that simply weren't there before. Today young emigrants are coming back to Bulgaria from France or Germany. Germany is not the same country as it was in 2005: the economic crisis brings them back home again.

EZA: The Bulgarian GDP has more than doubled since 2007. So is the country seeing a great economic benefit from the EU?

Trenchev: Not necessarily: the figures need to be seen in relative terms. Under the socialists, a flat with 130 square metres living space cost around 7,000 leva (3,500 euros). Today the price is between 200,000 and 300,000 euros –out of all proportion.

EZA: How do you see the future for Europe?

Trenchev: I fear we might be heading for disaster. The fact is we're all different: Germans, French, Bulgarians, Scandinavians. But Brussels thinks on uniform lines. We'll never become the United States of Europe. The model must be corrected to reduce the centrifugal forces that are currently tearing us apart. But even so, we must remain moderately optimistic!



THE EU ISN'T A MAGIC WAND – BUT IT OFFERS A RELIABLE FUTURE

A commentary by Ljuban Bulić, Policy Officer for Education and Training at EZA

We often hear how disappointed some new EU member states are with their EU membership. Is such disappointment justified? Only in part. Expectations were set unrealistically high, and many countries failed to keep up with their “homework”. The EU was never meant to turn a country into heaven overnight; it is a framework – a large market, clear rules, funding and a rule-of-law anchor. What citizens get from it depends on what we do ourselves. Yet in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), support for membership remains strong, with around 70% of citizens in favour. This optimism is not without reason.

In the early 2000s, BiH’s income levels were not far from several other countries that later joined the EU. Two decades on, those countries have moved decisively ahead. The gap did not open because Brussels performed miracles, but because membership locked in reforms, opened the single market and attracted investment in more productive jobs. That is what raises living standards over time.

From this perspective, BiH’s hope is straightforward: a future people can put their trust in – predictable, fair and noticeable in daily life. That hope translates into clear, fairly applied rules, stronger institutions and less room for corruption. It also means access to a larger market that can attract investors and create better jobs at home. People look for safer borders, more trust in public services and a justice system that works the same for everyone.

For citizens, the EU path brings the freedom to study, work and travel – and the confidence that rights will be protected. In short, it offers stability, opportunity and a real chance to end the cycle in which the most talented feel they have to leave in order to succeed.

For young people in particular, this hope takes on a very concrete meaning. They want a fair start, a real voice and a reason to stay. A fair start means education that matches the labour market, paid internships instead of unpaid “work experience” and first jobs with contracts and social protection. A real voice means being genuinely included in policymaking. A reason to stay means wages moving closer to EU levels, affordable housing and modern public services. Values matter too: cleaner air, equal treatment, transparent government and rule of law. They want a country where merit beats connections, where starting a business doesn’t take months and where unions and employers work with government to improve working life, rather than talking at cross purposes. If the EU path helps deliver these things, then integration feels like a future – not just a slogan.

Some may argue that there are alternatives to EU membership. However, none of them offers the same combination of market scale, predictable rules, freedoms, funding, labour standards and protections for citizens. The bottom line is simple: the EU will not solve our problems for us, but it remains the most reliable route for people in BiH – especially the young – to build a dignified future at home.

EZA-NEWS

EZA joins the Global Coalition for Social Justice

EZA has joined the Global Coalition for Social Justice initiated by the ILO Director-General – an initiative by the ILO (International Labour Organisation) that advocates socially just working conditions and decent work. In doing so, the EZA underlines the central role played by workers’ organisations in anchoring fair working standards on a global scale, alongside the right to protection and respect in the world of work. The coalition attaches great importance to ensuring that labour rights are recognised as an integral part of human rights, and protected all over the world. Together we can make the world of work more just, thus delivering a sustainable contribution to the United Nations’ objectives for decent work and social justice.



New EZA member

Welcome to KVV – Katholischer Verband der Werktätigen!

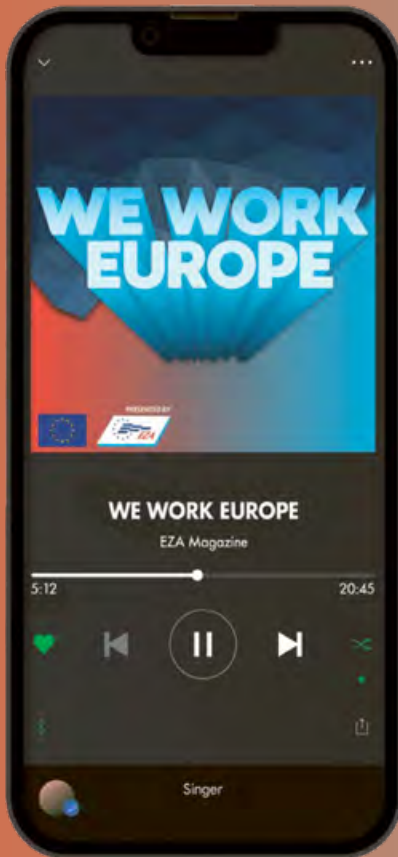
It is our great pleasure to welcome a new member to our European Network: the Catholic Association of Workers (KVV) from South Tyrol! The KVV is a social organisation with a long history that was founded in 1948 and has been securely anchored in the region ever since. It actively advocates social justice, solidarity, sustainable development and Christian social values. The KVV has a clear, human-centric mission and is committed to just living conditions, equal opportunities and active participation in society, regardless of origin, age or social status.

It is worth giving a special mention to the close cooperation between more than 1,900 committed volunteers and around 100 employed staff working throughout South Tyrol in order to provide an impressive range of social services through 234 local groups and numerous specialist departments. As a new voice in the EZA network, the KVV contributes not only many years of experience but also innovative ideas, committed involvement in civil society and a strong foundation of social responsibility.





MAGAZINE



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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.

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