

Editorial

This second issue of the *SEER Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* for 2024 focuses on ‘Domestic workers and their access to social policy’ in the Western Balkans.

The focus section is based on the report *Access for domestic workers to labour and social protection* prepared in the framework of a project supported by the European Commission as part of an expert network for analytical support in social policies in co-operation with the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER). However, the contributions set out in the individual country chapters included in the report reflect the views only of the authors involved.

Non-standard forms of work are not only emerging in the digital and platform economy, but appear also in more traditional segments of the labour market such as domestic work. While these work arrangements may enable greater flexibility and facilitate work-life balance, they are not necessarily beneficial to workers. In general, domestic employment is insecure in relation to the power dynamics and negotiations that occur at the intersection of age, class, gender and ethnicity. As the three country case studies included in this issue – North Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia – illustrate, this is particularly true in the Western Balkans. The key questions are who are these workers, how secure is their employment situation and do they have access to policies offering labour and social protection in times of labour market hardship.

The article by Maja Gerovska Mitev examines the access of domestic workers to labour and social protection in North Macedonia. In mapping domestic work in the country – i.e. the number and main sociodemographic characteristics of domestic workers – the article describes the legal and employment arrangements frameworks that apply to domestic workers before setting out the specific conditions for (and possible gaps in) access to social and labour protection for such workers. Referring to a new draft law on labour relations, the author identifies a major gap as it omits from its protection a significant number of workers who are actually in work but without an employment contract: the new, as well as the old, law defines as an employee anyone in an employment relationship based on an employment contract. The author finds that this is not in accordance with European legislation and international standards.

Amir Haxhikadrija and Artan Mustafa look in their contribution at access for domestic workers to labour and social protection in Kosovo. Following a similar structure to the other studies under the project, but also looking at collective agreements and the situation of migrant workers, they draw several important conclusions as regards policy action. While the authors acknowledge that the government of Kosovo has recently intensified its efforts to regularise the employment of domestic workers, echoing similar initiatives in place aimed at seasonal agricultural labour, they also identify significant challenges ahead. To tackle these, their recommendations include enhancements in several areas, such as improving data collection and coordination, effective registration and strengthening the legal framework, while

they also make suggestions for raising awareness and empowering stakeholders to engage actively in these efforts.

Ljiljana Pejin Stokić presents the case of domestic workers and their access to labour and social protection in Serbia. Also following the structure of the other studies, she points to significant shortcomings in the country's legislative framework. Referring to a draft law from 2021 on non-standard forms of work engagements in construction, tourism and creative jobs, but also encompassing domestic work, she points to the broad criticisms this received from trade unions and civil society organisations. Chiefly, these focus on the draft law's potential to strip an unprecedented number of workers of their labour rights, including the right to unionise. A special concern is related to the violation of migrant worker rights as the proposal relaxes the requirements around the recruitment of foreign workers by allowing their engagement without a work permit (those who may enter the country without a visa). Agreeing with the broad criticism, the author supports the view that the draft is inconsistent with the provisions of the Serbian constitution and with Serbia's international human rights commitments, including those stemming from its ILO membership and the ILO conventions it has ratified.

Two of the articles in the open section of this issue are also related to the broad topic of working and living conditions.

Slobodan Milutinović analyses the relationship between workers' rights and environmental goals in Serbia in terms of the challenges trade unions face during the process of decarbonisation. Serbia is moving towards alignment with European Union policies, including in the area of energy via the development of environmental regulations that have significant implications for industries such as coal mining, manufacturing and agriculture. This shift presents unions with a dual challenge: safeguarding jobs while supporting Serbia's transition to a sustainable economy. After presenting a short history of trade unions and the country's progress in decarbonisation, the article focuses on the coal sector. The author argues that the active involvement of trade unions is critical in guaranteeing that the economic opportunities generated by the green transition are equitable and inclusive. Through social dialogue and collective bargaining, trade unions can help shape policies that address the needs of workers in a rapidly transforming labour market. The forthcoming development of a Just Transition Diagnostic Study will be instrumental in identifying strategies to support workers and communities affected by the decarbonisation process, ensuring they are not left behind.

Moving beyond the Western Balkans, the final two articles in this issue focus on Türkiye.

The article by Emirali Karadoğan looks at the living conditions of workers and retirees in Türkiye in the context of the rising cost of living. After definitions and a discussion on what is meant by 'the cost of living' and how it is interpreted, the author presents a broad range of data on how it affects Turkish society, workers, households and retired people. He paints a bleak picture of the current reality of living conditions in a country in which the cost of living is increasing day-by-day. Both inflation and rising real unemployment are aggravating the conditions of people already under the impact of a rising cost of living. He expresses the concern

that wages which are leaving workers in conditions of working poverty, alongside pensions which are on the breadline for retirees, will remain the reality of Türkiye in future years. Concludingly, he delivers a sweeping criticism of government policies that benefit capital, not workers and the rest of the people.

Finally, the article by Can Büyükbay analyses the motivations of incumbent voters in Türkiye's 2023 presidential elections through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with supporters of the AKP, the party of the president. The author seeks to present an anatomy of populism based on the personal narratives provided by the participants that illuminate their voting behaviour, allowing for a rich, contextualised understanding of their motivations. Here, populism and security concerns are emphasised as key drivers of voter loyalty amidst continuing economic and social challenges, while a pro-government media actively reproduces and reinforces this narrative. The wider message is that populist leaders able to manufacture consent through media-driven, highly personalised leadership may suggest a weakening of traditional party structures and an increase in leader-centric politics, with an impact on the stability of political parties across Europe and including in the Western Balkans.

If you read something here that challenges your thinking, or if you have research work that reinforces or contradicts the conclusions reached in this or any other edition of the *Journal*, do let us know. We are contactable at the addresses on the inside front pages and would love to hear your voice as we shape future issues of the *SEER* amidst the increased momentum for the EU integration of our region. We are open to a discussion at any time and would welcome your input.

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