

**Group 5 “Social & Labour Policies and Social Dialogue”
Annual Meeting Report**

10 July 2017, Brussels

Thon Hotel Brussels City Centre, Avenue du Boulevard 17, 1210 Brussels

Summary

On 10 July, the WG5 meeting brought together **18 representatives of the EaP CSF Working Group 5 and Brussels-based stakeholders**.

The one-day working meeting offered discussions and exchange of information on relevant developments in the EaP countries, WG5 re-granting projects, as well as on the strategy of the Forum’s next cycle. The first round of internal debate was followed by an exchange with the stakeholder from DG EMPL. The closing internal session focused on issues relevant for the upcoming period until the EaP summit and the EaP CSF Annual Assembly.

Opening Session

The Group’s Coordinators, **Goda Neverauskaite** and **Siarhei Antusevich**, opened the WG5 meeting and welcomed all participants. Siarhei Antusevich explained that he just attended the Steering Committee (SC) meeting in Vilnius, where the role and meaning of WG5 as a group has been discussed. Goda Neverauskaite announced that Ihar Rynkevich has prepared a written declaration about the idea of incorporating WG2 and WG5 that came up during SC.

Ihar Rynkevich expressed his concern about the risk of “suppressing WG5”. On the other hand, Siarhei Antusevich stated that meeting after SC could allow WG5 members to react promptly to decisions taken there.

Internal Discussion – update from WG5 subgroups and EaP countries

Subgroup on Social Dialogue

Ihar Rynkevich took the floor, saying that on 20 August the Ukrainian National Platform will hold an event in Kiev, together with WG2 and Belarus, as a consequence of the recently adopted Law on Employment in Ukraine. He also commented that his sub-group is not active enough and that its members could do more, especially to demonstrate that WG5 is important and it matters. He remarked that often communications are poor and could be improved, and asked to request the new leaders that will be elected in Tallinn not to eliminate WG5.

Subgroup on social inclusion of people with disabilities

Davud Rehimli turned to social issues, saying that he would like these to be taken more into consideration. The sub-group on social inclusion of people with disabilities is rather new and it is showing some weaknesses: when it was created, Mr Rehimli hoped that public organizations of

disabled people would be included too. In addition, in the past year there has not been a clear direction in such group. Another discouraging fact is that as the outcome of the selection process for this year's Assembly, none of the organizations of disabled people has been chosen. He believes that all of these deficiencies are caused by the lack of the necessary financial help.

Subgroup on Social Policy

Sergiu Sainciuc focused on the development of social dialogue in Moldova. The subgroup on social dialogue has recently adopted a decision against the state laws recently adopted in the country; he also stressed that if a consensus had been reached on the basis of a compromise, many decisions would not have been taken. In this regard, their role is to decide how to lead and develop this social dialogue, as all issues can be solved through it and through continuous consultations, which should be further improved. In addition, Moldova has included the pension system reform in its reform process, as well as a schema of social security. However, in the subgroup the work has not been sufficiently effective and certainly more can be done. **Davud Rehimli** asked him about discrimination of disabled people in Moldova and why Sergiu Sainciuc had only focused on the pension system. Sergiu Sainciuc replied that his focus on retired women was because they represent a particularly discriminated category, but it is clearly not the only one. Unfortunately, disabled people still go through a great deal of discrimination in Moldova.

On the subject of the subgroups' perceived inefficiency, **Goda Neverauskaite** suggested the members be more proactive in communicating on their projects and activities, as clearly they are very dynamic on the national level. The Group's Coordinators reiterated that a closed Facebook Group of WG5 already exists and is a good forum to discuss the Group's activities and output.

Ukraine

Vasyl Shylov commented on the situation in Ukraine, saying that the country is undergoing a privatization process and it is implementing a series of reforms, primarily of the healthcare system, but also of the pension one. He added that in Ukraine the social security system is extremely poor. Other problematic aspects in the country are the competition in business and the public services. In this respect, he pointed out that he did not want to complain, but in his opinion the SC reacted very mildly. He then mentioned the International Trade Unions Confederation, as well as joint business directions among Ukraine, United States, the EU and Japan, as well as the Canada-Ukraine Free Trade Agreement, signed a year ago.

Moldova

Liliana Postan pointed out that if everyone read the Policy Brief commenting on the JSWD "Eastern Partnership – Focusing on key priorities and deliverables" they would know that the first priority is the economic development and market opportunities. She agreed with this, but also reminded everyone that social issues are equally fundamental, so she urged WG participants not to forget it and to closely monitor and read the documents produced by the Forum. It is important to be heard as a group now more than ever and their contribution is precious – in this instance it would have been advisable to

point out that economic issues are not the only priority. Even if the WG is small, they should be more active and lobby more for their interests. She also suggested that it would be good to find a way to finance sub-groups somehow.

Vladislav Caminschi outlined that this year was a big and important one for Moldova in relation to WG5 topics, but warned that the role of their social dialogue might be slightly diminished. He said that there have been three proposed changes to labor legislation, of which the last one might be especially detrimental. The pension system was also recently reformed: it is a bit better than before but it could be still substantially improved. He also mentioned the Law on Employment and the need for labor inspections.

Armenia

Naira Arakelyan made only a brief comment, as it was decided that she will include a small country update during her re-granting presentation.

Azerbaijan

Sahib Mammadov said that in Azerbaijan, nothing good happened recently, nor the pension system, nor the system of employment contracts. He was skeptical on the WG role in contrasting this, highlighting that in his subgroup he only happened to work with very incompetent people so it was difficult to produce something meaningful. He concluded saying that the SC needs to give more importance to trade union organizations and employers' organizations.

Similarly, **Agil Dadashov** said that the elimination of WG5 would be a defeat and that they have serious problems in Azerbaijan, especially the economic ones. However, there is one recent positive development in the country – the Tripartite Commission on Social Dialogue (Трехсторонняя Комиссия по Социальному Диалогу), which is now working quite well.

Georgia

Amiran Gelashvili stressed the importance of WG5 as a very specific group – though small – which makes it particularly rich and necessary.

Raisa Liparteliani introduced herself as she is a new member of the group, coordinator of WG5 within the Georgian platform. Among other things, she remarked that the labor code is now quite good, but it is not enough. She then talked about the proposed amendments of the constitutional system and she pointed out issues related to salaries in Georgia, which are the lowest in the whole EaP region. She also mentioned labor inspections.

Belarus

Siarhei Antusevich commented on the so-called “law on social parasites” and pointed out that the protests that it sparked were not only social but also political. Belarus always tries to pursue a

'balanced' course of action, both showing support to the EU, but also to Russia. In the meantime, the struggle to change the labor code in the country continues.

Presentation of the regranting projects

The following EaP CSF 2017 Re-granting projects were presented:

1. **The impact of social dialogue on the optimization of labor migration in Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine** (presenter by the lead organization: Liliana Postan, Labour Institute, Moldova)

PP presentation is available here (saved in the WG5 folder/presentations)

2. **Step forward to social services decentralization in Eastern Partnership countries** (presented by partner organization: Naira Arakelyan, Armavir Development Center, Armenia)

PP presentation is available here (saved in the WG5 folder/presentations)

During her presentation, Naira Arakelyan also gave a brief update on the activities on the national level (in **Armenia**), and in particular on the reforms of social services in the country, most notably the fact that grants and subsidies are now distributed through an open call, which improves transparency and openness of the process.

She has also commented on the issue of the risk of WG5 closing down, adding that it is most probably linked to weak communication on outputs and activities.

Following the presentations of EaP CSF Regranting projects, Darya Mustafayeva from the EaP CSF Secretariat presented an update on the **EaP CSF Index**, the Forum's flagship project, which will be officially presented in Brussels in September and in Tallinn (during the Annual Assembly) in October. She also gave an update on the internal reform and the **EaP CSF new strategy**. Currently we are waiting for the selected experts to draft concrete proposals and submit them to the SC. A vote on the strategy will take place in October, during the Annual Assembly.

Darya Mustafayeva finished her presentation by calling on the group's members for input to the **alternative civil society Declaration**. The draft, once ready, will be circulated among members at the beginning of October, when the members will have a chance to comment on the draft. A final version will be available two weeks before the Assembly and voted during the Assembly in Tallinn, where no amendments or changes will be possible.

In the context of the new structure of the EaP Platforms and Panels, the issue of WG5 disappearing was again raised.

Meeting with external stakeholders

The afternoon session started with the speeches of two stakeholders, Frédérique Rychener from DG EMPL and Andrzej Adamczyk from EESC, who also participates in the Forum's activities as an observer.

Frédérique Rychener delivered a speech on the topic *“Main challenges and priorities of the EU employment and social policy”*.

The first part of her speech was dedicated to a brief overview of the situation employment in the EU, which was followed by a list of initiatives aimed at counteracting unemployment.

In her overview, Ms Rychener mentioned the fifth year of economic recovery and the constantly growing GDP, which is expected to be 1.9% both in 2017 and 2018. Improvements in the labour market's trend have also been registered and the employment rate (20-64) has reached 71% in 2016: if the trend continues, it will increase up to 75% in 2020, therefore meeting the set EU target.

However, Ms Rychener also highlighted the substantial differences among member states, both in case of employment and unemployment rates, especially between countries from northern and southern Europe. Referring to the Union as a whole, she mentioned that 20 million European citizens are still suffering from unemployment and among them about 10 million turn out to be long-term unemployed.

As far as gender equality is concerned, the gender pay gap is closing, but employment rates among women are still lower than among men. According to Ms Rychener, the increasing employment of women has to be seen as a driver for general employment.

Although decreasing, the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion is still high. Among them, there are nearly 50% of unemployed people: the lack of employment is one of the biggest factors contributing to poverty, albeit this is also depending on elements such as the working status.

After this overview, Ms Rychener listed the programs developed in order to counteract unemployment. Among them there are special programs dedicated to youth, but also programs designed for low skilled people or for long-term unemployed.

Unemployment still concerns 20% of the young Europeans and the Youth Guarantee program was set to provide young people with an offer for a job, a traineeship or further education.

In her speech, Ms Rychener has presented several other programs and initiatives, which range from the integration of long term unemployed people in the labour market to the acquirement of digital skills. Some of the problems which emerged after 2008's crisis are indeed related to the challenges of the digital age: it is in fact estimated that 45% of adult European citizens have almost no digital skills at all.

Support of the modernisation of VET system and the revision of the European Qualifications Framework, aimed at improving transparency and comparability of skills and qualifications, are at the top of the EU agenda as well.

As a last point, Ms Rychener has presented one of the most recent initiatives, which is aimed at revising the EU social strategy in face of new challenges. The initiative is called Open Pillar of Social Rights and it is based on fundamental principles such as equal opportunities and access to labour market, fair working conditions, social protection and inclusion. The program, adopted in April, has been the subject of a broad discussion among various stakeholders, ministers, NGOs, social partners, citizens, with a wide public consultation.

Q&A session

Q: Criticism of the Youth Guarantee program. CSOs should be more involved in this kind of initiatives, for the moment the governments took social partners involvement more as information rather than a real consultation.

Q: Issue of the existence of WG5 and convergence in platform 2. Please bring our aim to the competent authorities.

A: The issue of the existence of WG5 will be discussed at EaP in October. The ideas of a dialogue on employment did not bring large results. But you have an important voice to be heard, so you should advocate for more dialogue.

Q: Are opportunities for disabled youth included in your report? Is this included in the EU agenda? This issue is present in several countries.

A: Yes, we feel more and more the importance of the issue. You should learn from other member states their previous experiences. We can share expertise, but there is a need to follow at the national level. The colleagues of the delegation in Yerevan (in this case) can help you to make sure that things are made in the right way.

Q: What would you suggest to trade unions in EaP in order to be more efficient and to create a more inclusive labour market?

A: There should be more dialogue among employers, unions, and partners. Learning from others' experience would also be helpful.

Q: Wouldn't it be possible or even necessary to set a minimum wage for all countries in Europe? Differences are too big.

A: The idea was discussed during the preparation of the social pillar. But this cannot be regulated by the European Commission, legally we can't intervene in this issue, so I don't think this is feasible.

While answering the questions, Ms Rychener has also encouraged WG5 members to make their voice heard, taking advantage of the existing platforms and fora, while following the example of the countries which have recently faced similar challenges.

Andrzej Adamczyk from the European Economic and Social Committee has presented the Joint Civil Society Platforms established by Association Agreements and the Domestic Advisory Groups focusing on trade in the context of sustainable development in DCFTAs.

His speech began with the description of the Civil society platforms, joint bodies built on a bilateral basis and consisting of members from both parts, which are supposed to monitor the implementation of AA and DCFTA. On the EU side, the members mainly come from the ranks of the EESC; as far as EaP countries are concerned, the platform consists of the widest possible spectrum of civil society organizations.

According to Mr Adamczyk, Civil society platforms' importance lies in the fact of being joint bodies, which can have a say in all aspects of the Association Agreement, including trade. They indeed have

the right to be consulted from bodies connected with the national governments on the implementation and interpretation of the DCFTA.

The implementation of the DCFTA includes the approximation, step by step, of the legislation to the *acquis communautaire*. In the quite long period of approximation, the role of civil society organizations turns out to be fundamental, as they need to be periodically consulted by the authorities.

Andrzej Adamczyk also presented the Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs), which are solely focused on the issue of trade. Mr Adamczyk underlined how this function is overlapped with that of the civil society platform and how DAGs appear to be unfruitful and even disadvantageous. According to him, in fact, there should be only one body, with a strong mandate and good financing, which can have a strong position on the implementation of DCFTA. One single body would also ensure a more efficient process and more transparency.

Session on EaP CSF Strategy, Alternative civil society declaration and EaP CSF Annual Assembly in Tallinn

The session was opened by a discussion of a draft declaration on behalf of WG5 members, reacting to the possibility of the Group's disappearance under the new Forum structure. After a debate on the text, it was decided that the work on the wording will be continued online by a task force and presented for an online vote to all members.

The discussion then focused on the upcoming 9th Annual Assembly of the Forum and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Conference will take place on 25-27 October in Tallinn, Estonia. This is the first that that two events, the Annual Assembly of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Conference – conducted as a side event to the Eastern Partnership Summit on a biennial basis – will be merged into one event with a common agenda.

Topic for the stakeholder session

This year, there will be four stakeholder sessions at the Annual Assembly, and WG2 and WG5 will share the session. The topic chosen is that of **Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)**. WG5 members discussed which aspects important to WG5 should be included in this broad subject. It has been decided to focus on **social aspects** of the small and medium enterprises. This topic should include the issues of social responsibility and inclusiveness of people with disabilities, and be connected to the stakeholder's interest. As for the speakers, WG5 suggested two of its members, Mr Andrzej Adamczyk and Mr Davud Rehimli.

WG5 members then have moved on to discuss the input to the alternative Civil Society Declaration that will be voted in Tallinn during the Annual Assembly. In this context, the idea of putting transversal issues in the document has been approved. The Group suggested the following aspects:

- **Structured engagement with civil society**
Civil society engagement in real consultations on the national level, not only on formal information
- **Gender equality and non-discrimination**
Inclusion of vulnerable groups into the labour market. Exclusion of gender pay gap and ensuring proper work of labour rights and non-discrimination assuring and supervising (I mean Labour inspections etc.) institutions.

- **Trade and DCFTA implementation**
Strengthening civil society's position on participation and monitoring on implementation of agreements.
- **Energy efficiency, renewable energy and reduction of Greenhouse Gas emissions**
Need for a "Just transition"* Ensured access to basic public services for everyone at affordable price (this is more general as sanitation and water etc.).
- **Youth, education, skills development and culture**
Support for strong social partnership/ social dialogue on the national level to improve:
employability of young people through better skills matching;
better awareness of young people about labour market needs and opportunities, workers' rights and European values;

*Explanation of "just transition":

A just transition brings together workers, communities, employers and government in social dialogue to drive the concrete plans, policies and investments needed for a fast and fair transformation.

It focuses on jobs, livelihoods and ensuring that no one is left behind as we race to reduce emissions, protect the climate and advance social and economic justice.

Presentation of project during the Annual Assembly

As last point on the agenda, WG5 members have discussed the format of its upcoming meeting during the Annual Assembly. After a vote, it has been decided that the project that will frame the WG5 meeting will be *The impact of social dialogue on the optimization of labour migration in Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine* (leader: Labour Institute, Moldova).

The Group has also decided to invite locally-based stakeholders (Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Economy), given the budget constraints.

All items on the agenda having been discussed, **Goda Neverauskaite** have thanked all those present for their participation and closed down the meeting.