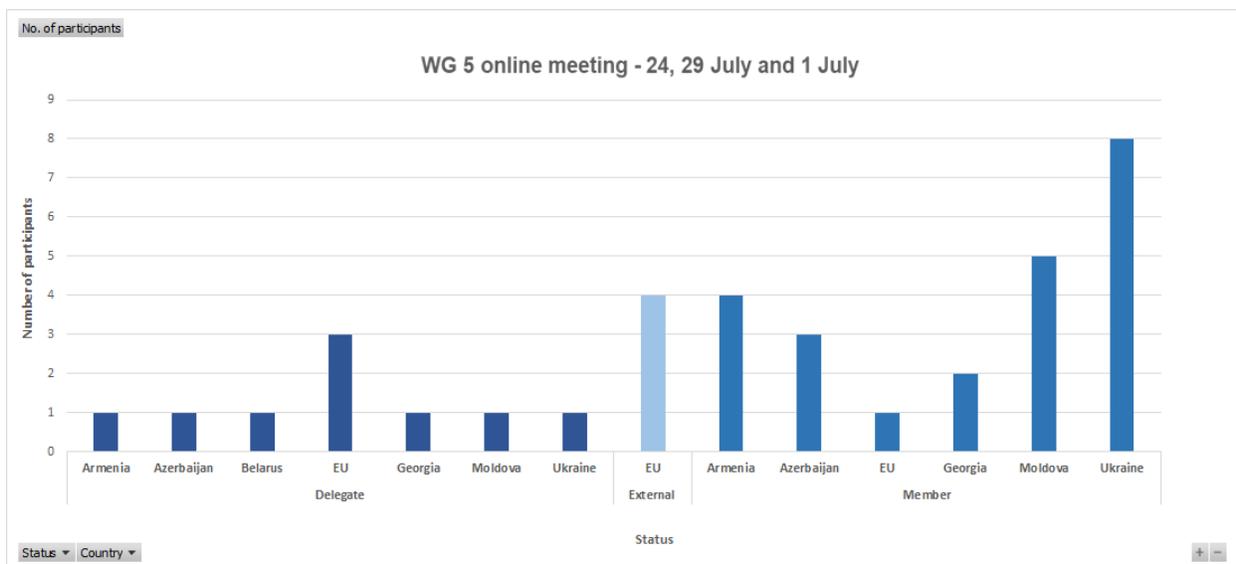


Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Working Group 5

Online Meeting, June/July 2020

Meeting Report

This year EaP CSF Working Group 5 met in an online format due to circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Three online sessions were organised and took place between 24 June and 1 July, and these all proved that the impossibility to meet in person can bring about new opportunities. The online policy debate on the impact of COVID-19 on employment and labour markets and the meeting with EU experts were open to all WG5 members and delegates. Out of 36 attendees, 9 were current delegates, 23 members, and 4 external guests. The chart below shows the distribution of these attendees between the 6 EaP countries and EU member states.



Meet & Greet Session

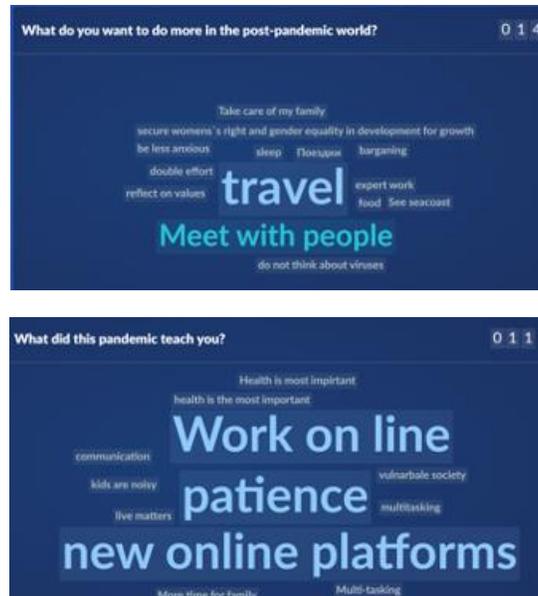
Wednesday 24 June, 10:00-11:30

Session PowerPoint presentation available [here](#).

Summary

The Meet and Greet session started with the opening remarks by WG5 Coordinators, Tatiana Marian and Dzmitry Babicki; participants were then engaged in a short icebreaker via Sli.do. During the icebreaker - which consisted of four questions about the way participants experienced

the pandemic -, they expressed some of the difficulties they encountered personally and professionally, and shared a number of their hopes and predictions for the post-COVID-19 world.



Next, the EaP CSF Secretariat made an introductory presentation about the work, structure and main advocacy activities of the Forum.

In light of the current epidemiological situation, delegates will be asked to approve two changes to the Forum's activities: extending the mandate of the current Steering Committee and WG Coordinators until the Annual Assembly, or the end of the year (whichever the sooner), and extending the current project, which is due to expire at the end of this year.

Updates were given on the Forum's #PrepareEaP4Health campaign, the new membership database and members' newsletter, the current regranting cycle, and the recent successes and future priorities of the Forum's advocacy work.

Going forward, the immediate priorities and actions for WG5 include deciding on a topic for the group's next policy paper (which should address the impact of COVID on an aspect of the group's area of expertise), participating in EaP platform and panel meetings when they resume in an online format, and providing concrete recommendations and inputs to the European Commission's elaboration of the next EaP deliverables.

Following this introduction, the discussion moved on to the WG5 policy paper. After members of the Secretariat clarified the purpose of this paper, and the circumstances from which the funds to commission it had come about, the coordinators presented the three main ideas for the paper's topic which had surfaced during registration for the sessions: the implications of COVID-19 for labour markets *in* the EaP countries, the impact of COVID-19 on labour migration *from* the EaP

countries, and stimulating employment in the EaP region. One purpose of the upcoming policy session and meeting with stakeholders would therefore be to see if a consensus can be formed around one of these 3 topics, or an alternative one.

Policy session: Impact of COVID-19 on employment and labour markets

Tuesday 30 June, 14:00-16:00

Session PowerPoint presentations available [here](#).

Summary

Ahead of this session, participants were asked to prepare brief presentations on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic labour markets in their respective countries, as well as on labour migration to and from their countries.

In **Armenia** it was reported that some 32% of firms had been forced to reduce or cease operations during the state of emergency, of which 63% were SMEs. However, approximately 89% of businesses maintained their pre-pandemic staffing levels, without resorting to redundancies, partly due to various incentives and financial support measures from the central government. These measures - consisting of 13 social programmes for disadvantaged families, unemployed people, students, and more, and 9 programmes to support the economy - included grants, loans, and tax relief, as well as support for SMEs and micro-projects. One particularly positive development to come from the current situation has been an uptick in the number of unregistered workers regularising their situation, thus enabling themselves to benefit not just from the social programmes referenced above, but also from the added security of a formal employment contract. Notwithstanding this positive development within the labour market, unemployment in the country remains high, with many of the jobs available being seasonal work in agriculture during the harvest.

In **Azerbaijan**, the government has introduced a 2.5 billion AZN (1.3 billion EUR) package to support the economy, aiming to stave off a sharp rise in unemployment through tax relief, the part payment of 300.000 salaries, additional help for the unemployed, and financial support to 300.000 micro entrepreneurs. As in Armenia, a large number of workers have formalised their employment situation, with 100.000 more people now enjoying the protections and security afforded by an official work contract. However, with oil workers reporting non-payment of overtime, doctors and healthcare professionals having to work exceptionally long shifts, and a number of sectors (including hospitality and retail) dismissing employees, a number of measures need to be taken to stabilise and improve the labour market going forward. Important measures to advocate for would be expanding paid leave and state unemployment benefits, moratoriums on evictions and deferrals of mortgage payments, assessing and addressing health and safety concerns related to the COVID pandemic, and providing extra support for women.

With no quarantine or lockdown measures having been introduced in **Belarus**, the government's response to the economic difficulties posed by downturns in external trade and businesses' self-imposed quarantine strategies has been similarly lax. No social dialogue has taken place between the government and trades unions, and the result has been a decree, adopted very late in the crisis (24 April), which has been criticised on all sides. Not only does it refuse to award compensation to anyone except healthcare workers - as well deserved as that assistance may be - it also allows employers to change employees' working conditions with one day's notice instead of 30 days.

In contrast, the government of **Georgia** has been very proactive in its response. Government measures to mitigate the impact of the crisis on the economy have included 200 GEL/ month for a period of 6 months (58 EUR) compensation payments to those who lost their jobs due to lockdown restrictions, a strategy to promote local production, a 4 month tax holiday for the tourism sector, a 3 month grace period for loan repayments, and 3 months of exemption from communal business taxes. Faced with business closures and redundancies, trade unions have also taken active steps to mitigate the impact of the crisis on the labour market, including the provision of legal aid to employees and support for businesses' strategic litigation, and lobbying the government for additional assistance. One successful example of this advocacy on behalf of employees was the creation of a measure preventing firms from dismissing employees in self-isolation or compulsory quarantine. Going forward, in addition to further virus mitigation measures, the implementation of ILO Convention 144 on Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards) and Labour Code reform will be particularly important.

As elsewhere, the pandemic has put pressure on employment rates, wages and social protection schemes in **Moldova**. Government measures adopted so far have included tax relief and postponements, direct grants to businesses, subsidising salaries, and an increase in the state unemployment benefit to 2775 MDL (138 EUR). Targeted support to particularly impacted sectors and employees has consisted of a reduction in the VAT rate from 20% to 15% for the Horeca sector, a temporary 50% monthly salary increase for medical staff, and a one-time payment of 16.000 MDL (799 EUR) to public sector and healthcare workers on the front line. In the future, steps should be taken to implement a much more systemic approach to the post-crisis economic recovery, to ensure a minimum income for the population, and to build labour market confidence through trust and dialogue.

Ukraine has seen a 65% increase in the number of people out of work, this figure rising by 249.000 to 511.267 since this time last year. Taking into account the size of the shadow economy, the true figure is likely to be much higher. The main impact of the crisis has been on businesses which are unable to work online, SMEs and micro-businesses, and the transport, tourism and hospitality, and retail sectors, with 60% of firms estimating they will need up to 1 year to recover. While there are currently almost 59.000 vacancies in the country, 68% of these are in agriculture. Government measures adopted so far amount to some 6 billion UAH (200 million EUR), including 1.3 billion UAH (43 million EUR) for unemployment benefits. In addition to these measures, trades unions and business organisations are also lobbying for tax holidays and for social dialogue on the longer-term structural changes required in the country's labour market

after the end of the pandemic. Among these changes should be a greater focus on women's employment, since they account for more than half the country's unemployed, and are much more likely to work either abroad or in the shadow economy, meaning they are unable to register for state unemployment benefits and other support.

Finally, from the perspective of the **EU member states**, more than 60m people are now unemployed across the EU27, with 40m people on reduced hours or temporarily unemployed due to the pandemic. The current situation has thus highlighted a number of areas requiring greater attention, including the social value (and therefore the remuneration) of essential workers who were previously considered 'unskilled', the place and role of migrant workers on whom many economies are reliant but whose working conditions are either poor or lack formal protections, and the livelihoods and job security of the self-employed. With most frontline workers in the healthcare and retail sectors being women, the gender perspective should be much more mainstreamed in future policy discussions around employment, while youth unemployment and job losses in the Horeca sector representing additional challenges for the future.

Meeting with stakeholders

Friday 1 July, 14:00-15:30

Session additional materials available [here](#).

Summary

This session presented participants with an opportunity to hear the perspectives of a number of stakeholders in employment affairs, and to share the priorities and recommendations discussed over the course of the week's meetings.

The first speaker was **Magnus Berge**, from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), who gave participants an overview of the ILO's policy recommendations on how to tackle the consequences of the pandemic, and how the ILO's standards have been applied in the EaP countries. From the ILO's perspective, government policies aimed at mitigating the immediate socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis should: 1) stimulate the economy through a job-led recovery; 2) support incomes; 3) protect the health and safety of employees in the workplace; 4) be underpinned by solutions arising from fruitful social dialogue. In the longer term, the key element to strengthening the resilience of labour markets and the economy as a whole is strengthening social dialogue, freedom of association and collective bargaining. The signature and ratification of ILO conventions will be particularly important in this process, including ILO C158 on termination of employment, ILO C102 on social security, ILO C144 on tripartite consultation, ILO C095 on protection of wages, ILO C155 on occupational health and safety, ILO C081 on labour inspections, and ILO C097 and 151 on the rights of migrant workers.

The next speaker was **Andrzej Adamczyk**, a current member of the European Economic and Social Committee's Workers' Group (Group II) and former Director of International Affairs of the

Solidarność trade union. He took the opportunity to highlight the importance of social dialogue and collective bargaining in seeking to stave off the worst effects of the COVID-19 crisis on jobs. Indeed, with a very real risk that some employers (and even governments) might take advantage of the current situation to cut labour rights and undermine social dialogue and collective bargaining, trades unions will have an important role to play in the post-virus recovery. Even prior to the crisis, it was often difficult to get governments or employers to enter into meaningful social dialogue - some firms even relocated jobs to countries with lower wages and fewer protections of freedom of association. Yet with the effects of the pandemic now adding to pre-existing issues around deindustrialisation and globalisation, it is more important than ever that workplace democracy and social dialogue are not just permitted, but also encouraged and facilitated, in order to ensure a sustainable and resilient economic recovery built on social justice. With the unprecedented assistance they have received from governments across the EaP region and the EU member states, businesses can no longer argue they are merely accountable to stakeholders: they are accountable to society now, too.

Finally, **Dominika Michalska**, Chief Migration Specialist at Poland's Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, gave an overview of the labour migration situation in the country in recent years and during the current crisis. While Poland's migration rate has slowed down gradually in recent years, and is likely to continue to do so, the COVID pandemic has exacerbated this trend: entries into Poland from Ukraine fell by 90% compared to the same period last year, while closed borders, quarantine restrictions and transportation difficulties prevented significant flows of labour into and out of the country. In light of labour supply shortages in agriculture, logistics and a number of other essential sectors, the government has facilitated legal work stays for foreigners - particularly for seasonal agricultural workers - in addition to resuming work visa issuances for citizens of Belarus and Ukraine, extending the validity of existing work permits, and encouraging employers to boost labour demand. With the pandemic having forced consumers to alter their behaviour, it remains to be seen if these changes (frequenting restaurants less, shopping online, limiting food shops to one large purchase per week, etc.) will become longer-term habits with knock-on effects on labour demand in the sectors affected.

Participants then had an opportunity to exchange with the session's invited speakers. Topics covered included ways to promote social dialogue, how to encourage the adoption of ILO conventions (particularly C105 on social security), and the role trades unions can play in ensuring gender equality in the labour market and employment policies and practices.

Summing up the session, the WG5 coordinators highlighted the importance of boosting new employment opportunities and social dialogue to ensure a strong and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 health and socio-economic crisis. They also encouraged participants to step up their individual and collective efforts to build the future they wish to see for the labour market in their respective countries and across the EaP region. A decision on the WG5 policy paper topic will follow, based on the exchanges over the last three sessions.