

Boguslavas Gruževskis
Inga Blažienė

**POLICY PAPER –
LITHUANIA**



LITHUANIAN SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTRE

Boguslavas Gruževskis
Inga Blažienė

Policy paper - Lithuania

Vilnius, 2020

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This policy paper was produced for the ARTUS CEE project (Articulation of the trade unions' strategies on upward convergence of social standards in the enlarged European Union – voice of CEE countries) co-financed by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission.



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The opinions expressed in this report reflect only the authors' view.

Publisher:

Lithuanian Social Research Centre

A. Gostauto st. 9, LT-01108 Vilnius, Lithuania

Phone: (+370 5) 211 3774

E-mail: institutas@lstc.lt, <https://www.lstc.lt/>

Table of contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 1. PROJECT ARTUS CEE– SHORT OVERVIEW..... | 6 |
| 2. KEY CONCLUSIONS FROM THE LITHUANIAN CASE STUDY..... | 8 |
| Industrial relations in Lithuania..... | 8 |
| Lithuanian trade unions on the international scene..... | 9 |
| International cooperation of Lithuanian trade unions..... | 9 |
| The views of trade unions on the European integration process..... | 9 |
| Quality of relations (CEE vs "old" MS)..... | 10 |
| Protectionism/isolationism of Western trade unions..... | 11 |
| European social model (ESM) and European pillar of social rights (EPSR)..... | 11 |
| European social dialogue (ESD) as a tool to build common standards..... | 11 |
| 3. RECOMMENDATIONS ON STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS IN THE COUNTRY AND EU INSTITUTIONS..... | 13 |
| Focused and coherent improvement of knowledge and competences of trade union members at the national level..... | 13 |
| Strengthening the possibility of trade union organisations to receive qualified assistance and expert services at the EU level..... | 14 |
| Increasing the representativeness of delegates from different countries (groups of countries in trade unions or social partner organisations at the international (European) level)..... | 14 |
| Increasing financial possibilities for trade union representatives from CEE countries to participate in the activities of EU-level institutions and social dialogue development measures..... | 15 |
| CONCLUSIONS..... | 16 |
| REFERENCES..... | 18 |

1. Project ARTUS CEE– short overview

The main objective of the ARTUS CEE project was to analyse the possibilities for trade unions in Central and Eastern Europe (hereinafter referred to as CEE) to take effective action to converge (upwards) the labour and social standards in the enlarged EU when there is a noticeable disparity in the quality of industrial relations between "old" and "new" EU Member States to the detriment of the latter. This goal was to be achieved by examining the views of trade unions from CEE countries on selected areas of traditional trade union activity related to the functioning of the European social model (ESM). The research was conducted in two dimensions: internal and external. The internal dimension concerned the expectations towards the policy of the ETUC as a body that influences the EU institutions and as a partner for BusinessEurope and other EU employers' organizations in the following areas: cross-border negotiations, including in transnational corporations (conclusion of TCA), freedom to provide services, free movement of workers (including the problem of so-called social dumping). The external dimension of the research concerned the following issues: how trade unions perceive the future of social Europe and whether the European social model is likely to survive in an enlarged EU; to what extent the European Pillar of Social Rights initiative will contribute to strengthening the ESM in CEE countries; what should be the role of the European Social Dialogue (ESD) and the European Commission as the main force "supporting" the ESD mechanism.

The leader of the ARTUS CEE project was the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA, Poland). The project involved research institutions from 5 countries: Slovenia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Romania and Bulgaria¹, representing different variations of the "quasi model" of industrial relations in CEE. In order for the results of the research to be relevant to the perspective of the trade unions from the "old" Member States, the industrial relations researchers from the old Member States² belonging to different industrial relations clusters submitted their written comments to the project. In addition, in the final stage of the study, the comments were provided by the industrial relations authorities recognized at European level: Prof. Juliusz Gardawski, Prof. Oscar Molina and Prof. Guglielmo Meardi. Within the project, project meetings were held in Warsaw (March 2019) and in Bucharest (February 2020). Subsequent meetings which were to take place in Warsaw and Ljubljana took place online due to the Covid -19 outbreak. The result of the project is the Comparative Report prepared

¹Researches participated in the project: Poland – Institute of Public Affairs, Barbara Surdykowska; Slovenia – University of Ljubljana, Branko Bembič, Alenka Krašovec; Lithuania – Lithuanian Social Research Centre, Boguslavas Gruževskis, Inga Blažienė; Slovakia – Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI), Mária Sedláková; Romania – Institute for Public Policy (IPP), Alexandra Johari; Bulgaria – Center for Economic Development, Mária Prohaska.

² Michael Halpenny (Ireland), Jens Arnholtz (Denmark), Christophe Teissier (France), Salvo Leonardi (Italy), Jan Drahokoupil (EU).

by Jan Czarzasty (IPA)³ on the basis of 5 national reports. The latter were based on desk research, focus workshops with trade union representatives involved in transnational activities (EWC members, people active in European trade federations, etc.) and interviews with trade union experts. The national reports can be found on the project partners' websites⁴.

The conclusions of the Comparative Report are ambiguous. They show that while CEE trade unions agree on the need for cross-border cooperation within the EU on issues related to the convergence (upwards) of social standards, their assessment of individual areas and the quality of cooperation with organizations from the "old" EU differs in many respects. It is also interesting to discover that, apart from the income gap, there are many other factors influencing the relationship between the two sides. During the discussion of the experts participating in the project, it was considered whether the mere hypothesis of the existence of differences in articulation of views between unions from the old and the new Member States does not suggest an affirmative answer to this question. It was pointed out that East-West differences are not the only ones, and North-South differences are equally important. The view was also expressed that issues such as attitudes towards climate change actions or ideological views (gender, human right etc.) may be more important sources of differences than what policy should be pursued towards transnational corporations or what was the attitude towards the idea of a European minimum wage. Undoubtedly, within the ARTUS CEE project we did not focus on cultural factors. Thus, the question remains open as to whether cultural factors/differences are an element which influences the differences in attitudes adopted by trade unions to a greater extent.

³Polish report available at: [Lost in the fog: Polish trade unions versus the europeanisation of industrial relations \(isp.org.pl\)](#).

⁴Lithuanian report available at: [Lithuanian trade unions in the Europeanization of industrial relations](#).

2. Key conclusions from the Lithuanian case study

Lithuanian report was based on the desk research as well as on the survey, Focus Group interview and individual interviews with experts and representatives of trade unions. Majority of the interviewees were trade union representatives from two main national trade union confederations with solid experience in international trade union cooperation and collaboration.

Industrial relations in Lithuania

The main national trade union organisations in Lithuania are: the Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation (LPSK), which represents around 50,000 members (4.1% of Lithuanian employees), and unites 26 sectorial trade unions; the Lithuanian Trade Union 'Solidarumas' (LPS 'Solidarumas'), which represents around 20,000 members (1.5% of Lithuanian employees) and unites 15 sectorial and 21 regional trade unions; and the Lithuanian Trade Union 'Sandrauga' (LPS 'Sandrauga'), which represents around 10,000 members (0.7 per cent of Lithuanian employees).

Comparing to other EU Member States Lithuania can be regarded as country having one of the least developed systems of industrial relations. Trade union membership in Lithuania in general is quite low and during the last decade it has been steadily decreasing. According to Lithuanian Statistics, between 2006 and 2018 the number of trade union members in Lithuania fell from 115,7 to 86,6 thousand, with trade union density thus falling from 9.8 % to 7.1 % (the exception was only year 2009 when both – the number of trade union members and trade unions density – slightly increased).

Low trade union density, as well as a number of other related factors, determines the low collective bargaining coverage in the country. Lithuania is positioned towards the bottom of the EU ranking with regard to collective bargaining with coverage at 7-15% according to different data sources (ICTWSS, 2016; Eurofound, 2013; Eurofound, 2017; Benchmarking, 2019).

The current situation is strongly influenced by the absence of industrial relations tradition at company level evidenced by the low trade union density, and is closely related to the poor financial and human capacities, including legal, analytical and organisational skills, of trade union organizations, which impedes collective bargaining development at company level (MLP, 2018). Though there is no particular research carried out on the issue, from the interviews with trade unions we may say that in general often in foreign, multinational companies conditions are more favourable for social dialogue comparing to the national ones.

Though there are actually no real (i.e. having significant impact on social and labour conditions in the country) national level collective agreements, the main national tripartite social dialogue institution – the Tripartite Council of the Republic of Lithuania – plays an important role

in the decision-making process in the area of social and working life in Lithuania. The Council, together with specialised tripartite councils and commissions as well as tripartite councils under local municipalities is the main scene of interaction between public authorities and social partners (MLP, 2018).

Lithuanian trade unions on the international scene

International cooperation of Lithuanian trade unions

Lithuanian trade unions closely cooperate with international organisations and are members of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and its Pan-European Regional Council (PERC), and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). National confederations represent Lithuanian trade unions in the following ETUC committees and working groups: Lifelong Learning, Migration, Economic and Social Cohesion, Social Protection, Energy and Climate Change, and others.

In co-operation with the International Labour Organization (ILO), the national confederations implement international labour standards in Lithuania and represent employees engaged in the activities of this organisation as well as participate in the activities of the Baltic Trade Union Council.

The Lithuanian trade union confederations represent the interests of Lithuanian employees and trade unionists in various European Union institutions: the European Social Fund, the Advisory Committee on Free Movement of Workers, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), the European Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work, the European Economic and Social Committee, CEDEFOP, and other social dialogue bodies.

The confederations are members of the Baltic Sea Trade Union Network (BASTUN), participate in the activities of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), and cooperate with other European and world trade unions.

Bilateral agreements between Lithuanian trade unions and foreign trade unions also have an important role, allowing closer cooperation in pursuit for common goals.

The views of trade unions on the European integration process

In general, basing on the conducted interviews, we may conclude, that Lithuania's accession to the EU has greatly helped trade unions at all levels. According to trade unions, Western European (WE) partners were very friendly, providing various kinds of support (advisory, monetary, support in solving our internal problems, paying visits, etc.). Various trainings, consultations, involvement of Lithuanian trade union members in the activities of European trade union structures and confederations were particularly useful. However, it should be noted that, according to trade unions, initially there was some "cautious" approach towards Eastern and Central European (CEE) trade unions. According to trade unions, those unions who were brave, open and involved in international activities prior to the accession gained the most from accessing the EU. Trade unions of the old (communist) type benefitted less: they lacked adequately trained people; their representatives often did not speak foreign languages and were not interested in European trade unions' activities.

Four-five years after the Lithuanian trade unions' involvement in the activities of European trade unions, the attitude towards CEE trade unions normalised. It can be said that the dividing line

between CEE and WE trade unions has completely disappeared after the 2008-2009 crisis and there emerged interest groups, which were mainly geographically neutral. The same refers to elections to various leading positions: Focus Group participants claim to feel no neglect of CEE trade unions – they have been often asked if they have their candidates. Yet, it should be admitted that there are few Lithuanian representatives in the leading positions in EU trade union organisations/institutions. According to Focus Group participants, this is primarily due to the quality of trade unions' human resources in our country – few members have a good command of foreign languages; they lack long-term experience in (international) trade unions, adequate (legal, economic) training and, most importantly, they do not have charismatic people to land a leadership position. According to Lithuanian trade union representatives, if there is enhanced involvement of any of the Lithuanian representatives in various EU institutions, he/she is immediately noticed and more actively involved in managerial or organizational work. However, it is sometimes the case that CEE countries representatives receive less attention.

Quality of relations (CEE vs "old" MS)

In the opinion of the representatives of Lithuanian trade unions, in general, there have been no serious/considerable controversies in the East–West (We–They) relationship. However, the differences of values remain and interests that are not permanent in their nature are becoming more and more apparent. We can say that we are getting more alike, but diversities in values remain. For example, “Eastern countries less support LGBT initiatives, pay less attention to climate changes”, oppose (or are more moderate about) EU's refugees policy, are less focused on the integration of immigrants.

One of the more marked differences between Eastern and Western trade unions is their awareness. Eastern trade union representatives (except for, perhaps, Polish, Slovakian and Slovenian trade unions) are often less informed about new EU initiatives, EU-level solutions, and are more likely to be influenced by various lobby groups. This is due to the fact that in most CEE countries trade unions do not have their analytical centers, have limited domestic cooperation, do not have time to analyse foreign experience or study documents or analytical material produced by EU institutions and SPs. This Eastern “information gap” has narrowed significantly since the EU accession, but is still affecting the activity of CEE trade unions at EU level. According to trade union representatives, differences in CEE trade unions' positions are increasingly dependent not on the East–West (We–They) relationship, but on the trade union's representative representing the CEE country or on the trade union he/she represents, i.e. whether the representative (1) belongs to an “old” (Soviet-type) trade union or a “new” trade union (formed after the declaration of Independence). The “old” trade unions are more isolated and more conservative, whereas the “new” ones are more open, and their activities are more based on modern principles of the EU social dialogue (although trade unions recognise that the situation is gradually changing in this area: new leaders are coming and trade unions are renewing); (2) belongs to Christian trade unions, the attitudes and positions of which are in many cases different from other, more “secular” trade unions; (3) has sectoral trade union affiliation (trade union representatives point out that sectoral affiliation is often more important than geographical or even conceptual one, i.e. trade unions in one and the same sector may be more often in solidarity with EOs in their sector than with other trade unions).

Protectionism/isolationism of Western trade unions

According to Lithuanian trade union representatives, the problem of protectionism and isolation of WE trade unions is not very relevant and has no significant influence on trade unions' activities at EU level. Some manifestations of isolation or protectionism are felt only on individual points or in solving individual problems. According to TU representatives, some protectionism of WE trade unions manifests when it comes to issues relating to the construction, transport and industrial sectors. Here it occasionally happens that WE trade union representatives are more supportive of the interests of their employers than the interests of CEE trade unions. Likewise, requests or comments from Lithuanian trade unions or trade unions of other CEE countries are not always adequately or expeditiously addressed when adopting EU-level recommendations.

In sum, Lithuanian trade union representatives nonetheless are of the opinion that clear, open divisions between East and West are steadily narrowing, and there is increasing mutual understanding between East and West.

European social model (ESM) and European pillar of social rights (EPSR)

Lithuanian trade unions welcome the ESM and EPSR initiatives. EU policies in this area help them in their negotiations with the Government and employers for more social justice, better social security and decent payment for work. However, the vast majority of trade union representatives in the Focus Group and those interviewed individually expressed some dissatisfaction with European initiatives being too "soft" and their implementation at national level being too liberal; they lacked control of the national commitments made and the demanding approach from the EU.

Although Lithuania has long been allocating the least financial resources to social protection, inequality in the country remains one of the highest in the EU, and poverty and many other social problems are not diminishing, the reaction from EU institutions has been generally mild. Against this background, Lithuanian trade unions are of the opinion that it is appropriate to provide for operational control and impact mechanisms in order to translate the commitments made into real guarantees and to promote relevant positive developments in national policy.

European social dialogue (ESD) as a tool to build common standards

Lithuanian trade unions are positive about the ESD as a tool to build common standards within the EU. Most trade unions highlighted it as "an authoritative level of social dialogue development that encourages and disciplines national governments and employers". According to trade union representatives, national trade unions can learn from the ESD and adopt some of its tools, initiatives or practices. National trade unions often rely upon European SP initiatives and organise various national debates and meetings on this basis, which, in turn, serve social dialogue development in Lithuania.

Therefore, in the opinion of Lithuanian trade unions, it is expedient to strengthen ESD initiatives by giving them the status of normative documents wherever possible and to press harder national governments for the decisions or agreements of the European SP to be implemented. At this stage, the “top-down” development of social dialogue (e.g., through EC Recommendations or other EU legislation) can be very beneficial for CEE countries, as real dialogue between employees and employers is still lacking power and governments tend to take the employers’ side.

3. Recommendations on strengthening the role of trade unions in the country and EU institutions

Summarising the information sourced during the project and based on the opinions and positions of Lithuanian trade unions, in order to strengthen the role of trade unions in the country and their capacity for more active participation in EU-level institutions, it is recommended to:

- (1) improve knowledge and competences of trade union members at the national level in a focused and coherent way;
- (2) strengthen the possibility of trade union organisations to receive qualified assistance and expert services at the EU level in the area of social security, labour market and work organisation;
- (3) increase the representativeness of delegates from different countries (groups of countries) in trade unions or social partner organisations at the international (European) level;
- (4) increase financial possibilities for trade union representatives from CEE countries to participate in the activities of EU-level institutions and measures for social dialogue development (seminars, conferences, etc.).

Focused and coherent improvement of knowledge and competences of trade union members at the national level

When asked about measures that could be taken to strengthen their role in the country and capacity for more active participation in EU-level institutions, Lithuanian trade union representatives primarily noted the need to improve trade union members' knowledge and relevant competences necessary for trade union activities in a focused, high-quality and consistent way.

Practical implementation of the above could be ensured by a standing national training centre (e.g. a national training centre for social dialogue). Today, trade union members, like employers' representatives, have no opportunity to SYSTEMATICALLY improve their knowledge and develop the competences of leaders participating in social dialogue and collective bargaining. Such a centre could be set up on the basis of an existing university, college or research centre. An appropriate project could be prepared for commencing activities and organisational work in 2021-2022, while ensuring financial support from the Government. The founders (or managers) of the centre could be all the main trade union confederations operating in the country.

Such a national training centre should actively cooperate both with European-level organisations (ETUC, ETUI, TURI network, etc.) and similar centres and institutes for trade union training and education in other European countries, thus making maximum use of European and individual countries' best practices.

The training centre should provide training services at three levels: (1) generic theoretical knowledge of economic development, employment, labour market policy, social security, HR management and social dialogue development, basics of relevant EU documents and policy-making principles; (2) assessment and analysis of current national legislation and policy decisions (for managers at various levels, professionals and politicians); (3) analysis and assessment of existing legislation (for ordinary unionists, employers, entrepreneurs, politicians). At this level, it should be possible to provide training services outside the training centre (distance training, mobile training in regions, etc.).

In such training centre, it is appropriate to exploit to the fullest extent possible the competences and experience of local employers in developing social dialogue in Lithuania and their experience in participating in EU-level or international institutions (by inviting lecturers and coordinating curriculum with them).

Without improving relevant knowledge and competencies of trade union members (and employers) in a targeted manner in Lithuania, the quality and development of social dialogue could weaken in the future. In addition, centres of such a type could also ensure timely translation of relevant European and international trade union documents into the national language.

Strengthening the possibility of trade union organisations to receive qualified assistance and expert services at the EU level

This recommendation refers to the need for regional (e.g. Balkan, Visegrad, Baltic, etc.) structures of expertise and competences (such as knowhow centres and think tanks) to be established on the basis of existing research centres for producing analytical conclusions and recommendations to national trade union organisations on an ad hoc basis in the area of national and/or EU labour market policies and social dialogue developments. The establishment and operation of such centres could be coordinated by a dedicated body or a structural unit of an existing body (ETUC, ETUI, or other) that would also provide necessary methodological assistance. Representatives of Lithuanian trade unions, especially leaders of national-level organisations, strongly emphasised the lack of analytical and expert services, which limits their capacity to actively represent Lithuania's position at the EU level or engage in active debate at the national level, not to mention drawing up their own proposals or projects.

Increasing the representativeness of delegates from different countries (groups of countries in trade unions or social partner organisations at the international (European) level

In order to increase the visibility of trade union representatives from CEE countries and to activate their participation in EU-level institutions, it is appropriate to consider setting a sort of regional quotas (e.g. for Balkan, Visegrad, Baltic countries) in relevant working groups, commissions or committees.

Increasing financial possibilities for trade union representatives from CEE countries to participate in the activities of EU-level institutions and social dialogue development measures

This is a highly sensitive but very important issue in order to increase the possibility for trade union representatives of Lithuania (perhaps of many other CEE countries, too) to participate in the activities of EU-level (and international) organisations more actively. The leaders of Lithuanian trade union organisations emphasise that the lack of appropriate financial resources severely limits their capacity to participate in the activities of various committees or commissions on a regular basis, not to mention various temporary working groups. *“Our members often refuse of participation or do not nominate themselves as candidates, knowing that they will have to cover part of participation costs themselves. Every year, we miss about 70% of various trade union or social dialogue measures at the EU level, as we are unable to cover the travel and participation costs out of our own resources”* (from interviews with the trade union confederation).

Conclusions

Overall, the ARTUS CEE project was very useful in terms of not only helping trade unions in CEE countries to better see and understand the perception of differences between Eastern and Western trade unions, but also revealing their internal problems and assessing potential for trade union improvement in CEE countries. It is no secret that the EU remains a two- or perhaps three-speed Europe, and effective trade union activities and development of social dialogue can therefore be one of the most effective mechanisms for ensuring a harmonious development of the EU, particularly through greater East-West trade union cooperation.

In Lithuania, trade union membership is not abundant and the culture of social dialogue is not widespread. Compared with other EU Member States, Lithuania can be regarded as country having one of the least developed systems of industrial relations and is positioned towards the bottom of the EU ranking with regard to collective bargaining with coverage at 7-15% according to different data sources. However, both the general population and trade union members in Lithuania are very positive about the country's accession to the EU, emphasising that this has strengthened country's social development, promoted social dialogue and helps trade unions in taking a valid stand for workers' rights at all levels: company/organisation, sectoral and national. It could be mentioned in this context that Lithuanian trade unions welcome the ESM and EPSR initiatives. EU policies in this area help them in their negotiations with the Government and employers for more social justice, better social security and decent payment for work. On the other hand, they highlight the lack of coherence in the European Commission's acts (or omissions), when there is no or inadequate response from the national Government to Country Specific Recommendations for Lithuania which have remained the same for several consecutive years (e.g. with regard to more weighty participation of social partners in decision making or inappropriate tax burden).

As for the relationship between CEE – “old” EU Member States, Lithuanian trade unions do not see much tension, but pay attention to two main aspects: (a) insufficient preparedness and financial capacity of their own representatives for active participation in EU-level institutions; and (b) lack of understanding of the real economic and social situation and the specific nature of trade union activities in CEE countries from representatives of the “old” EU Member States.

In formulating the recommendations, we additionally addressed Lithuanian national trade union confederations; both the surveys of trade union representatives carried out within the framework of the project and our additional consultations show that, in order to strengthen the role of trade unions in the country and enable their representatives to participate more actively in EU-

level institutions, the first task is to strengthen the human capital of trade unions as well as to provide training and consultancy on a broader and consistent basis, and to improve provision of relevant expertise to trade union organisations that would considerably increase their capacity for increasing their internal and external visibility. The issue of financing participation of Lithuanian trade union representatives in the activities of international-level institutions also remains relevant.

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