

State of labour rights in the western Balkans: a comparative analysis and perspectives for trade union action

Abstract

This article examines labour market transformation and labour dignity in the western Balkans, analysing how economic and demographic developments are affecting the realisation of the latter. It combines a review of international labour standards with a comparative analysis of labour market developments, migration trends, trade union rights and institutional responses, paying particular attention to demographic decline, outwards labour migration, growing labour shortages, the increasing reliance on migrant workers and the expansion of non-standard forms of employment. The findings suggest that labour dignity cannot be reduced to employment levels or wage indicators alone; rather, it depends on the interaction between opportunities, effective forms of protection, social dialogue and access to collective representation. For sustainable labour market development, policies are required that both address labour shortages and strengthen labour rights, social protection and collective bargaining institutions.

Keywords: *labour dignity; labour rights; labour migration; trade unions; collective bargaining; social dialogue; migrant workers; labour market transformation*

Introduction

Human dignity constitutes one of the fundamental values upon which contemporary labour law, social policy and international human rights standards are built (Kant 1998; Waldron 2012). Work is not only a source of income and economic security but also an essential dimension of personal identity, social inclusion and individual self-respect (Sen 1999). The recognition of human dignity as an inherent and inalienable right has been embedded in key international legal instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the core conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO).¹ These documents affirm that every worker is entitled to

- 1 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Arts. 22-24, accessed 23 June 2026 at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), Arts. 6-8, accessed 23 June 2026 at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>; ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-Up, accessed 23 June 2026 at: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/ILO_1998_Declaration_EN.pdf.

fair working conditions, equal treatment, social protection and respect for fundamental labour rights.

The concept of dignity at work has gained increasing importance in academic and policy debates during the last decades. Globalisation, technological change, labour market flexibilisation and the expansion of non-standard forms of employment have profoundly transformed employment relations across the world (Viebrock and Clasen 2009; Standing 2011; ILO 2021a, 2024). While these developments have generated new economic opportunities, they have also created the conditions in which many workers are experiencing insecurity, discrimination, inadequate wages, restrictions on trade union freedoms and various forms of exploitation. Consequently, the gap between formally recognised labour rights and the actual experience of workers has become a growing concern for researchers, policymakers and social partners alike.

These challenges are particularly visible in the countries of the western Balkans, a region that has undergone profound political, economic and social transformations since the 1990s. The transition from centrally planned to market economies, large-scale privatisation, labour market restructuring and integration into European economic and institutional frameworks has significantly altered employment relations and systems of social protection (Galgóczi 2015). Although important progress has been achieved in legislative harmonisation and the formal protection of labour rights, persistent problems remain including precarious employment, weak enforcement of labour legislation, social inequalities and limitations on workers' collective rights.

Moreover, these challenges have been further intensified by demographic decline and large-scale labour migration. Most countries of the western Balkans face declining populations, ageing workforces and the sustained emigration of both skilled and low-skilled workers. Labour shortages have become increasingly evident across a number of sectors, among them construction, manufacturing, transport, agriculture, tourism and care services. In response, employers and governments have increasingly relied on the recruitment of migrant workers from Asia, Africa and other regions. These developments have fundamentally reshaped labour markets and generated new challenges concerning working conditions, equal treatment, access to social protection and the effective protection of labour rights.

The growing international mobility of labour has exposed structural weaknesses in labour market governance and enforcement mechanisms. Reports of international organisations, trade unions and monitoring bodies continue to identify cases involving excessive working hours, non-payment of wages, restrictions on freedom of association, inadequate accommodation, labour exploitation and barriers to effective legal protection (ILO 2022; Council of Europe 2025). While migrant workers often face heightened risks due to language barriers, dependency on employers and limited knowledge of local institutions, many of these challenges reflect broader shortcomings that also affect domestic workers. As a result, the dignity of labour has emerged as a central issue linking labour rights, social justice and sustainable economic development.

Previous research has examined various dimensions of labour relations, social protection and socioeconomic development in Serbia and across the wider region. Studies have analysed labour market developments, pension systems, social security

and demographic change, highlighting the importance of social rights as a foundation of sustainable economic development (Kosanović 2011; Kosanović and Paunović 2010, 2019; Paunović and Kosanović 2025). Recent research has also explored broader issues of social and economic transformation, labour market performance and social cohesion (Paunović and Sergi 2025).

Building upon these contributions, this article focuses specifically on the relationship between labour dignity, labour rights and contemporary labour market transformations in the western Balkans in the context of demographic change, labour migration and evolving employment relations. Drawing upon international labour standards, comparative labour market indicators, the findings of the International Trade Union Confederation's Global Rights Index over several years (e.g. ITUC 2024, 2025, 2026) and reports of international monitoring bodies, the study analyses how labour rights protection, social dialogue and institutional effectiveness influence the realisation of dignity at work. Particular attention is devoted to the interaction between labour shortages, migration dynamics, collective labour rights and the protection of vulnerable categories of workers.

The central argument is that the dignity of labour depends not only on the formal recognition of rights but also on the broader economic and social conditions that enable workers to exercise those rights in practice. In the western Balkans, demographic pressures, labour market restructuring and increasing labour mobility have created new risks and vulnerabilities that require stronger institutional responses, more effective social dialogue and the enhanced protection of both domestic and migrant workers. In combining normative analysis with comparative evidence, the article contributes to the broader debate on decent work, social cohesion and sustainable labour market development in south-east Europe.

The next section presents the theoretical and conceptual framework concerning human dignity, labour rights and decent work. The article then goes on to analyse demographic and labour market developments in the western Balkans, followed by an examination of labour rights and labour dignity, with a particular focus on the position of migrant workers in the region. The final section discusses the main findings and offers concluding observations and some policy recommendations.

Human dignity, labour rights and social justice: theoretical and normative framework

Human dignity as a fundamental human value

Human dignity is one of the fundamental values upon which modern democratic societies and contemporary systems of human rights are built. It represents the intrinsic worth of every human being and serves as the normative foundation for civil, political, economic and social rights. The idea that every person possesses inherent dignity simply by virtue of being human has become a cornerstone of international law, social policy and labour regulation. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins by affirming the 'inherent dignity' and the 'equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family' as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace

in the world.² Similar formulations can be found in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the revised European Social Charter and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.³

From a socioeconomic perspective, human dignity cannot be reduced solely to formal legal equality. As Sen (1999) argues through the capability approach, dignity requires the real freedom of individuals to live lives they value and to participate fully in society. Nussbaum (2011) further emphasises that dignity depends on the existence of the social and economic conditions that enable individuals to develop their capabilities and exercise their rights. Consequently, access to decent work, fair income, social protection, education and healthcare become essential dimensions of a dignified life.

Within labour relations, dignity is closely connected to the recognition of workers as subjects of rights rather than merely factors of production. Employment is not only a source of income but also a key mechanism of social inclusion, personal development and participation in public life. When workers are exposed to precarious employment, discrimination, unsafe working conditions, poverty wages or restrictions on collective representation, their dignity is directly undermined (Hodson 2001).

In contemporary Europe, discussions on human dignity increasingly intersect with debates on social justice, labour rights and the quality of employment. Growing economic inequalities, labour market segmentation, informal work and declining collective bargaining coverage have raised concerns regarding the capacity of existing institutions to guarantee dignified living and working conditions (ETUI 2024, 2026). These challenges are particularly visible in the countries of south-east Europe and the western Balkans where economic transformation, demographic changes and persistent institutional weaknesses continue to affect the realisation of social and labour rights (Paunović and Sergi 2025).

Therefore, human dignity should not be understood merely as an abstract ethical principle. It represents a practical benchmark for evaluating the effectiveness of labour market institutions, social policies and protection systems for workers' rights. The extent to which workers are able to enjoy fair wages, safe working conditions, social security and effective representation provides an important measure of the degree to which human dignity is respected within a society (Budd 2004).

Dignity at work in international labour standards

The concept of human dignity acquires its most practical expression in the sphere of work. Since employment remains the primary source of income, social inclusion and individual self-realisation for most people, the protection of workers' rights has become one of the key mechanisms through which human dignity is safeguarded in

2 Preamble to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

3 European Social Charter, accessed 23 June 2026 at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-social-charter/the-revised-european-social-charter>; Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, accessed 23 June 2026 at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/char_2012/oj/eng.

modern societies. Consequently, international labour standards have evolved around the principle that economic development should be accompanied by social progress and respect for fundamental rights at work.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has played a central role in establishing this normative framework. Since its foundation in 1919, the ILO has promoted the idea that lasting peace and sustainable development can only be achieved through social justice. This principle is reflected in the ILO Constitution,⁴ the Philadelphia Declaration (1944)⁵ and, more recently, in its ‘decent work’ agenda (ILO 1999). The concept of the dignity of labour finds a particularly important institutional expression within this framework, which links productive employment with rights at work, social protection, social dialogue and equality of opportunity (see also ITUC 2021). By integrating economic and social dimensions of work, ‘decent work’ has become one of the most influential international benchmarks for assessing the quality of employment and the practical realisation of human dignity in labour markets.

Particular importance is attached to the fundamental labour rights embodied in ILO Convention No. 87 concerning Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise⁶ and ILO Convention No. 98 concerning the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining.⁷ These conventions recognise workers’ ability to organise collectively and defend their interests as essential components of democratic labour relations and human dignity. Without effective freedom of association and collective representation, workers remain significantly disadvantaged in their relations with employers and public authorities. Moreover, numerous studies have demonstrated that collective bargaining contributes not only to higher wages and improved working conditions but also to reduced income inequality and stronger social cohesion (OECD 2019). Consequently, restrictions on trade union activity often have implications that extend far beyond the workplace, affecting the overall distribution of economic and social power within society.

The European Social Model has traditionally complemented international labour standards through a broad system of social rights, collective bargaining institutions and social protection mechanisms which lays the groundwork for social dialogue to go hand-in-hand with economic competitiveness. Both the European Social Charter and the European Pillar of Social Rights⁸ reaffirm the importance of fair working conditions, adequate wages, social security and social dialogue as prerequisites

- 4 Constitution of the International Labour Organization, accessed 23 June 2026 at: <https://www.ilo.org/publications/ilo-constitution>.
- 5 Declaration of Philadelphia, accessed 23 June 2026 at: <https://webapps.ilo.org/static/english/inwork/cb-policy-guide/declarationofPhiladelphia1944.pdf>.
- 6 ILO Convention No. 87, accessed 23 June 2026 at: https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312232.
- 7 ILO Convention No. 98, accessed 23 June 2026 at: https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO:12100:P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312243:NO.
- 8 European Pillar of Social Rights, accessed 23 June 2026 at: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union_en.

for social cohesion and inclusive development. However, economic crises, fiscal adjustment policies, demographic changes and evolving forms of work have placed significant pressure on established labour institutions.

Recent research, however, indicates that labour rights cannot be taken for granted even in advanced European economies. Analysing labour market developments in Europe, Piasna et al. (2026) argue that economic integration, labour mobility and increasing competitive pressures are generating tensions between economic efficiency and social protection. Researchers have also pointed to the growing challenges associated with labour market segmentation, wage disparities and unequal access to social protection across European countries (Galgoczi 2017), while others emphasise that sustainable development and successful economic transformation require strong institutions capable of protecting social rights and promoting inclusive growth (Paunović and Sergi 2025). Economic growth alone cannot serve as a sufficient indicator of social progress (Sergi 2019; Paunović and Sergi 2025).

These processes have been particularly visible in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe where economic restructuring has frequently been accompanied by labour market segmentation, outwards migration and growing inequalities. Here, the persistence of structural economic vulnerabilities, weak labour market institutions and demographic challenges raises important questions regarding the quality of employment and the extent to which economic development translates into improved living and working conditions for citizens.

Consequently, the assessment of labour rights has become an important indicator not only of the state of industrial relations but also of nations' broader democratic and developmental performance. The degree to which workers are able to exercise their rights, participate in collective representation and secure fair working conditions provides a valuable measure of the practical realisation of human dignity within any society.

Labour rights as a prerequisite for social justice

The relationship between labour rights and social justice has long occupied a central place in social and economic thought (Rawls 1971). While social justice encompasses a range of principles related to equality, fairness, participation and the distribution of opportunities and resources, labour rights constitute one of its most important practical foundations. Without the effective protection of workers' rights, the pursuit of social justice remains largely unattainable.

The concept of social justice is rooted in the idea that all members of society should have access to opportunities that enable them to lead dignified lives and participate fully in economic, social and political life. In this regard, employment is not merely a source of income but also a means of social inclusion, personal development and civic participation. Consequently, the quality of working conditions and the extent to which workers are able to exercise their rights have a significant influence on patterns of social inequality and exclusion (Sen 1999).

Labour rights contribute to social justice through several interrelated mechanisms. First, they provide workers with legal protection against arbitrary treatment, discrimination, exploitation and unsafe working conditions. Second, they establish

institutional channels through which employees can collectively defend their interests and participate in decision-making processes affecting their working lives. Third, they support a more equitable distribution of economic gains by strengthening workers' bargaining power and promoting fair wages and decent working conditions.⁹

Contemporary debates on social justice have further highlighted the importance of labour rights in the context of globalisation, technological change and labour market flexibilisation. While these processes have generated new economic opportunities, they have also contributed to growing labour market insecurity, the expansion of precarious forms of employment and increasing inequalities in many countries. As a result, the protection of workers' rights has become increasingly important as a mechanism for preventing social exclusion and ensuring that economic growth translates into broader societal benefits (Stiglitz 2012). The extent to which labour rights are respected thus represents an important indicator of both social justice and democratic development in the region, providing valuable insight into the broader social and developmental trajectories of modern societies.

These considerations are particularly relevant for the countries of south-east Europe. Although all countries in the region have formally adopted labour legislation which is largely aligned with international labour standards and, to varying degrees, with the European Union *acquis communautaire*, significant gaps persist.

Labour rights and human dignity in south-east Europe

The countries of south-east Europe have undergone profound political, economic and social transformations during the past three decades. The transition from centrally planned economies toward market-oriented systems, accompanied by processes of privatisation, economic restructuring, globalisation and European integration, has significantly altered labour markets, labour rights protection and industrial relations across the region.¹⁰ Furthermore, while governments have sought to attract investment and increase labour market flexibility, which have contributed to economic modernisation, trade unions have faced difficulties in adapting to rapidly changing institutional environments. As a result, collective bargaining systems have been weakened in many countries, trade union density has declined and the influence of workers' organisations on socioeconomic policymaking has become more limited (Vaughan-Whitehead 2003; Galgóczi and Drahokoupil 2017; De Spiegelaere and Vitols 2026).

These developments have had important implications for the protection of human dignity at work. Problems such as informal employment, precarious work, insufficient labour inspection capacities, anti-union practices and limited collective

9 Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, accessed 23 June 2026 at: <https://www.ilo.org/resource/other/ilo-declaration-social-justice-fair-globalization>.

10 See various editions of the World Bank's *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report* and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's *Transition Report*.

bargaining coverage continue to affect workers across the region.¹¹ The persistence of undeclared and other forms of informal work further undermines labour dignity by limiting access to social protection, effective legal remedies and collective representation.

The challenges are particularly visible in the western Balkans, where these factors often weaken workers' bargaining power and are contributing to the persistence of low wages and insecure forms of employment. Consequently, the realisation of labour rights continues to be closely connected to broader issues of social justice, economic development and democratic governance (Sergi et al. 2018; Sergi et al. 2019, Paunović and Sergi 2025).

Countries of the region which are featured in this article share certain common historical experiences but differ considerably in terms of institutional development, economic performance, industrial relations structures and progress toward European integration. Croatia, as a member of the European Union since 2013, operates within a more developed regulatory and institutional framework. By contrast, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to pursue accession processes while simultaneously addressing the challenges related to labour market modernisation and social dialogue.¹²

Against the background of the theme of social protection going hand-in-hand with economic development, the situation with regard to labour rights represents a particularly valuable analytical lens through which broader patterns of democratic governance and social development can be examined. The extent to which workers are able to exercise freedom of association, engage in collective bargaining and participate in social dialogue reflects not only the condition of industrial relations but also the broader capacity of societies to uphold human dignity and social justice.

Consequently the following sections employ the ITUC Global Rights Index as a comparative instrument for assessing labour rights protection in a selection of countries from the region. By examining trends and differences among them, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between labour rights, human dignity and social development in south-east Europe. At the time the research for this article was undertaken, the 2025 version was the current one; the 2026 Index has now been published, and reference to this is also made, but it is largely the 2025 version that is reported on here.

- 11 See the various reports of the 'decent work' country programmes contributed by the International Labour Organization, accessed 23 June 2026 at: <https://www.ilo.org/resource/other/decent-work-country-programmes-europe-and-central-asia-region>; and the annual enlargement reports of the European Commission, accessed 23 June 2026 at: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports_en.
- 12 See the annual reports of the European Commission subsumed within the 2025 Enlargement Package.

The ITUC Global Rights Index as a framework for assessing labour rights

Global trends in the deterioration of labour rights

The protection of labour rights has increasingly become a matter of global concern. Despite the existence of a comprehensive international framework based on ILO conventions and other international human rights instruments, evidence from recent decades indicates a widespread deterioration in the practical realisation of workers' rights (ILO 2021a, 2024).

Processes such as globalisation, technological change, labour market flexibilisation and the growing fragmentation of production have significantly transformed employment relations worldwide. While these developments have generated opportunities for economic growth and innovation, they have also contributed to increased job insecurity, the expansion of precarious forms of employment and mounting pressures on collective labour institutions. In many countries, trade unions have experienced declining membership and reduced bargaining power, limiting their capacity to protect workers' interests effectively (OECD 2019).

These developments have raised concerns among international organisations regarding the sustainability of social dialogue and the future of democratic industrial relations. The ILO has repeatedly emphasised that respect for freedom of association and collective bargaining remains essential for achieving decent work and inclusive economic development (ILO 2021a, 2024).¹³

The ITUC has played a particularly important role in documenting these trends through its annual Global Rights Index. Since its introduction in 2014, the Index has provided systematic comparative evidence regarding violations of workers' rights across the world. The findings consistently indicate that restrictions on labour rights have become increasingly widespread, affecting both developing and developed economies. Recent reports reveal a continuing deterioration in key indicators such as freedom of association, collective bargaining rights and access to justice for workers. This has been the consequence of direct governmental interference in trade union activities via limitations on collective bargaining and restrictions being placed on the right to strike, while acts of anti-union discrimination and interference in trade union activities remain common. The ITUC believes that these developments reflect a broader weakening of democratic governance and institutional accountability in many parts of the world (ITUC 2025).

Against this background, systematic assessment tools have become increasingly important for evaluating the actual state of labour rights. Among these instruments, the ITUC Global Rights Index occupies a unique position because it enables comparative analysis of labour rights protection across countries and over time. The following section examines the methodology and indicators used in the construction of the Index.

13 See also the ILO's Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization.

Methodology and indicators of the ITUC Global Rights Index

The Global Rights Index is currently one of the most comprehensive international instruments for assessing the protection of workers' rights, evaluating the extent to which countries respect internationally recognised labour rights with particular emphasis on freedom of association, collective bargaining and the right to strike (ITUC 2025).

The methodological framework of the Index is based on standards established by the ILO, although additional reference points include other relevant international labour standards and human rights instruments. The objective is to measure not only the existence of legal guarantees but also the degree to which these are effectively respected and implemented in practice. A key feature is the use of a broad set of indicators covering different dimensions of labour rights protection. The assessment framework evaluates restrictions on trade union registration, interference in trade union activities, obstacles to collective bargaining, limitations on the right to strike, anti-union discrimination, violence against trade unionists, arbitrary dismissals, restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, and barriers to access to justice.

The Index is constructed through a systematic assessment of the violations recorded during a twelve-month observation period. Information is collected from multiple sources including national trade union centres, global union federations, labour rights organisations, legal documentation, media reports and expert assessments. Based on the recorded violations, each country receives a rating ranging from 1 to 5+, reflecting the overall degree of respect for workers' rights. The rating system is designed to facilitate international comparison while also identifying trends over time.

Table 1 – ITUC Global Rights Index rating system

Rating	Description
1	Sporadic violations of rights
2	Repeated violations of rights
3	Regular violations of rights
4	Systematic violations of rights
5	No guarantee of rights
5+	No guarantee of rights due to the breakdown of the rule of law

Source: ITUC (2025)

Countries receiving a rating of 1 generally possess strong legal frameworks and effective enforcement mechanisms, although isolated violations may occur. Ratings of 2 and 3 indicate increasing levels of concern regarding the implementation of labour rights, while ratings of 4 and 5 reflect serious and persistent deficiencies in the protection of workers and trade unions. The category 5+ is reserved for situations

in which the rule of law has effectively collapsed due to conflict, authoritarian governance or severe institutional dysfunction.

An important advantage of the Index is its capacity to combine legal and empirical dimensions of labour rights protection. Unlike purely legislative assessments, the Index focuses on the actual experiences of workers and trade unions. Consequently, it provides a more realistic picture of the extent to which labour rights are respected in practice. This characteristic makes it particularly useful for comparative research examining the relationship between labour rights, democratic governance and social development (Kucera and Sari 2019).

At the same time, certain methodological limitations should be acknowledged. As with any composite indicator, the assessment relies on the availability and quality of the reported information. Differences in reporting capacities between countries may affect the visibility of certain violations. Furthermore, the Index places particular emphasis on collective labour rights and trade union freedoms, while other aspects of working conditions may receive less direct attention. Nevertheless, the Index remains one of the most widely recognised international instruments for monitoring labour rights and is regularly used by researchers, trade unions, policymakers and international organisations.

Labour rights in Europe according to the ITUC Global Rights Index

Europe has traditionally been regarded as one of the regions with the strongest systems of labour protection, social dialogue and collective bargaining. The development of welfare states, comprehensive labour legislation and well-established trade union institutions have all contributed to the perception of Europe as a global benchmark in the protection of workers' rights.

Europe remains the highest-performing region globally; however, its overall performance has steadily worsened since 2014 during which time the regional average rating has increased from 1.84 to more than 2.5, indicating a growing number of violations. This trend suggests that even countries with long traditions of social dialogue are facing increasing challenges in maintaining effective labour rights protections, as the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) have also reported (Piasna and Theodoropoulou 2024; Piasna et al. 2025; Piasna et al. 2026).

One of the most significant developments identified by the ITUC concerns restrictions on collective action. In several European countries, workers have encountered legal and administrative obstacles limiting the exercise of the right to strike, while trade unions have reported increasing difficulties in conducting collective bargaining and organising workers in emerging sectors of the economy. These challenges have been intensified by labour market flexibilisation, digitalisation, platform work and the expansion of non-standard forms of employment.

The deterioration of labour rights is not confined to any single group of countries. Serious violations have been documented both in countries undergoing democratic backsliding and in advanced economies typically associated with strong labour institutions. Cases where workers have faced obstacles in accessing justice, obtaining legal protection against unfair dismissal or exercising their rights through independent

trade unions, are particularly alarming but the ITUC reports also identify growing concerns regarding surveillance practices, restrictions on public protests and employer interference in union activities. Such developments undermine not only labour rights but also broader democratic principles based on participation, representation and the rule of law.

Important differences do persist among European countries, however. Nordic countries continue to demonstrate relatively high levels of labour rights protection, supported by strong collective bargaining systems and extensive social dialogue institutions. By contrast, several countries in central, eastern and south-east Europe continue to face structural challenges related to weaker labour market institutions, lower collective bargaining coverage and limited enforcement capacities. These disparities reflect broader differences in institutional development, economic structures and political traditions. Researchers have argued that labour rights constitute an important component of upwards social convergence within Europe (Galgóczy 2016). Consequently, persistent inequalities in the protection of workers' rights may hinder efforts to achieve more balanced and inclusive socioeconomic development across the continent.

The position of south-east European countries within the Index provides valuable insight into both the strengths and weaknesses of labour rights protection in the context of ongoing economic transformation and European integration. The following section examines the comparative positions of selected countries as reported in the 2025 ITUC Global Rights Index.

Position of south-east European countries in comparative perspective

The countries of south-east Europe occupy diverse positions within the framework of labour rights protection as measured by the Global Rights Index. Although all these countries have formally accepted the fundamental principles and rights at work established by the International Labour Organization, and have incorporated labour-rights guarantees into their national legal systems, significant differences remain in the practical implementation and enforcement of these standards.

According to the 2025 Index, Croatia achieved the most favourable rating among the selected south-east European countries, receiving a score of 2, indicating repeated violations of rights but generally functioning labour rights institutions and mechanisms of social dialogue. Croatia's membership of the European Union and its relatively developed institutional framework have contributed to stronger labour rights protection compared with other countries in the region. Nevertheless, trade unions continue to report challenges related to precarious employment, labour shortages and declining collective bargaining coverage in certain sectors (European Commission 2024).

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania received a rating of 3, which indicates the existence of regular violations of labour rights. In these countries, legal frameworks generally provide protection for freedom of association and collective bargaining; however, implementation remains inconsistent. Weak institutional capacities, limited labour inspection resources and fragmented systems of industrial relations often reduce the effectiveness of labour rights enforcement. Furthermore,

economic dependence on sectors characterised by seasonal or insecure employment contributes to the vulnerability of workers and trade unions.

Serbia and North Macedonia were assigned a rating of 4, indicating systematic violations of workers' rights. According to ITUC assessments, workers in these countries frequently encounter obstacles in exercising fundamental labour rights, particularly in relation to trade union activities, collective bargaining and protection against anti-union discrimination. Although both countries have undertaken substantial labour law reforms as part of their European integration processes, concerns remain regarding implementation gaps and the effectiveness of institutional safeguards (European Commission 2025a, 2025b).

Table 2 – Position of selected south-east European countries in the 2025 ITUC Global Rights Index

Country	ITUC rating	Interpretation
Croatia	2	Repeated violations of rights
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3	Regular violations of rights
Montenegro	3	Regular violations of rights
Albania	3	Regular violations of rights
Serbia	4	Systematic violations of rights
North Macedonia	4	Systematic violations of rights

Source: ITUC (2025)

The differences observed among these countries reflect broader socioeconomic and political factors. Countries with stronger institutional capacities, more developed systems of social dialogue and greater collective bargaining coverage tend to achieve better labour rights outcomes. Conversely, countries characterised by weaker labour market institutions, higher levels of informal employment and limited administrative enforcement capacities generally record poorer performance within the Index.

The Index documents the details of the persistent violations of trade union rights occurring not least in south-east Europe. These findings are particularly relevant because they demonstrate that labour dignity depends not only on wages and employment opportunities, but also on workers' ability to participate collectively in shaping working conditions.

Table 3 – Trade union rights challenges in the western Balkans: selected findings from the ITUC Global Rights Index 2025

Area of concern	Examples identified
Restrictions on the right to strike	Albania and Montenegro cited among countries where governments have broadened the definition of ‘essential services’, limiting the exercise of strike action
Anti-union practices by employers	Serbia identified as among those countries where employers actively undermine trade union activity
Employer-dominated representation structures	The emergence of employer-influenced ‘yellow unions’ reported in North Macedonia
Restricted access to justice	Growing barriers to accessing justice in Serbia, including shortened deadlines for challenging labour law violations and high litigation costs

Source: ITUC (2025)

It is important to maintain the perspective that, right across the western Balkans, the findings reported by the ITUC illustrate broader regional patterns affecting labour dignity, largely via weakening genuine worker representation and, thereby, reducing workers’ capacity to exercise agency in the employment relationship. They do not reflect isolated national shortcomings. The protection of trade union rights is thus not merely an institutional concern but a fundamental dimension of labour dignity itself applying across the region.

The comparative results suggest that labour rights protection in south-east Europe remains uneven and that significant challenges persist despite the substantial amount of legal harmonisation with international and European standards. The discrepancy between formal legal guarantees and actual workplace practice constitutes one of the most important issues affecting the realisation of human dignity and social justice in the region.

Consequences of labour rights violations for social justice and social cohesion in south-east Europe

In-work poverty and economic insecurity

The deterioration of labour rights is increasingly reflected not only in the workplace itself but also in broader socioeconomic outcomes. One of the most visible consequences is the growth of in-work poverty, a phenomenon in which employment no longer guarantees an adequate standard of living. While paid work has traditionally been regarded as the primary safeguard against poverty and social exclusion, contemporary labour market transformations have weakened this protective function in many European countries (ILO 2024a).

Recent analyses have highlighted that precarious forms of employment, low wages, informal work arrangements and weak enforcement of labour standards significantly increase the risk of poverty among those in employment. ETUI research shows that rising living costs, housing insecurity and growing labour market seg-

mentation have contributed to a situation in which a substantial number of workers remain economically vulnerable despite being employed (Piasna et al. 2026).

Labour market indicators in several south-east European countries have improved during the last decade, but wage growth has often failed to keep pace with increases in housing, food and energy costs. Consequently, many workers are experiencing economic insecurity even when formally employed. Temporary contracts, subcontracting arrangements, platform work and other forms of non-standard employment further contribute to unstable incomes and limited access to social protection. The relationship between labour rights and economic security is especially visible in sectors characterised by low wages and weak collective bargaining coverage. In such circumstances, formal employment does not necessarily translate into social inclusion or economic security, contributing to the emergence of a dual labour market in which certain groups of workers remain particularly exposed to poverty and exploitation despite being formally employed (Council of Europe 2025).

From a social justice perspective, in-work poverty represents a significant challenge because it undermines the principle that work should provide not only income but also dignity, social participation and economic security. Where labour rights are weakly protected, employment may cease to function as an effective mechanism of social integration, thereby increasing social inequalities and weakening social cohesion.

Outwards labour migration, demographic challenges and the 'brain drain'

Labour rights violations have implications that extend beyond individual workplaces and directly affect broader demographic and developmental trends. In south-east Europe, persistent problems related to low wages, insecure employment, weak collective bargaining structures and limited opportunities for career advancement have become important drivers of labour migration. As a result, many countries in the region face a paradoxical situation: while experiencing labour shortages in key economic sectors, they are simultaneously continuing to lose significant portions of their workforce through emigration (OECD 2024b).

Over the past two decades, south-east European countries have recorded substantial outwards migration, particularly among younger and highly skilled workers. Economic disparities between the region and western European labour markets remain an important factor explaining these movements. However, research increasingly suggests that migration decisions are influenced not only by wage differentials but also by broader working conditions including employment security, opportunities for professional development, workplace democracy and respect for labour rights (European Commission 2024).

The consequences of these migration patterns are particularly visible in those sectors which are facing chronic labour shortages. Healthcare, construction, manufacturing, information technology and transport services have all experienced difficulties in retaining qualified workers. The departure of skilled labour has generated additional pressures on public services and social protection systems while simultaneously limiting the long-term development potential of national economies (ILO 2024a).

Furthermore, the continued emigration of younger workers contributes to population ageing and places additional pressure on pension systems, healthcare services and long-term social protection arrangements. ETUI and OECD analyses suggest that demographic decline and labour shortages are becoming increasingly interconnected challenges across central, eastern and south-east Europe. Without improvements in working conditions, wage levels and labour rights enforcement, outwards labour migration is likely to remain a significant factor shaping the socioeconomic future of the region (OECD 2024c; Piasna and Theodoropoulou 2024).

This should not be viewed exclusively as a demographic or economic phenomenon; it also reflects the capacity of societies to provide decent work, social security and opportunities for individual advancement. The strengthening of labour rights is, therefore, not only a workplace issue but also an important component of broader strategies aimed at demographic sustainability, social cohesion and inclusive economic development.

Migrant workers and new forms of labour exploitation

At the same time, recurring labour shortages due to population ageing, declining birth rates and the continued emigration of the working age population toward higher-income EU member states have encouraged governments and employers throughout the region to recruit workers from third countries, particularly from south and south-east Asia. Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, amongst several others, have witnessed a rapid increase in the employment of workers originating from India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Vietnam and other countries (IOM 2026).

Recent data highlight the rapid increase in the employment of foreign workers across the region (see Table 4). In Serbia, more than 52,000 work permits and temporary residence approvals linked to employment were issued to foreign nationals during 2023, representing a several-fold increase compared with pre-pandemic levels.¹⁴ Croatia recorded an even more pronounced trend, issuing more than 170,000 work permits to foreign workers in 2024, primarily in construction, tourism and service activities (Hrvatski zavod za zapošljavanje 2024). Similar developments have been observed in Montenegro and in North Macedonia, although on a smaller scale (IOM 2024).

14 Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Interior and National Employment Service (NES), *Statistical Bulletin on Foreign Workers and Employment Permits*, 2024.

Table 4 – Foreign workers and labour migration trends in selected south-east European countries

Country	Foreign workers (latest available data)	Main sectors employing migrant labour	Key challenges
Serbia	Approx. 52,000 work permits (2023)	Construction, manufacturing, mining, logistics	Labour inspection, subcontracting chains
Croatia	Over 170,000 work permits (2024)	Tourism, construction, transport	Seasonal work, accommodation standards
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Increasing inflow since 2021	Construction, services	Weak monitoring mechanisms
Montenegro	More than 30,000 seasonal workers	Tourism, hospitality, construction	Enforcement of labour standards
North Macedonia	Growing number of foreign workers	Manufacturing, construction	Informal employment
Albania	Modest but increasing inflow	Tourism and services	Regulatory adaptation

Source: IOM (2024); ILO (2024); national labour market statistics

The growing reliance on migrant labour has become one of the most significant developments shaping labour markets across south-east Europe. While it has contributed to addressing workforce shortages in key economic sectors, migration has simultaneously exposed important weaknesses in labour rights protection frameworks.

Migrant workers are disproportionately concentrated in sectors characterised by low union density, extensive subcontracting and weaker institutional oversight (European Labour Authority 2026).¹⁵ They often occupy vacancies characterised by low wages and precarious contracts, and face restricted access to information regarding their legal rights. Language barriers, dependence on recruitment agencies and employer-controlled accommodation arrangements further increase their vulnerability. These factors create the conditions in which labour rights violations can remain hidden or be insufficiently addressed by labour inspectorates and other similar monitoring authorities (ILO 2019). At the same time, such practices raise concerns not only regarding labour standards but also regarding human dignity and fundamental rights (ILO 2024b).

The issues raised are even more pronounced in the context of foreign direct investment projects based on low labour costs and extensive state incentives, becoming especially visible when investment agreements include special legal arrangements or when state authorities prioritise economic objectives over labour rights protection.

15 See also the Resolution by the European Trade Union Congress on ‘Ensuring fair recruitment for migrant workers in the EU’, accessed 23 June 2026 at: <https://www.etuc.org/en/document/ensuring-fair-recruitment-migrant-workers-eu>.

Several cases reported in Serbia have raised particular concerns over migrant labour, including over the Vietnamese workers engaged in the construction of the Linglong tyre factory in Zrenjanin, as well as to labour exploitation at the operation of the plant which has led to the export of its products to the US being banned on the grounds of forced labour (Dragojlo 2021; Stojanovic 2025). Similar concerns have also been raised in relation to certain mining and industrial projects in Serbia involving foreign investors and subcontracted labour (Krunić 2024; ITUC 2026),¹⁶ while it is clear from the same sources that the vulnerabilities associated with migrant labour are not confined to a single national context.

Particular concerns have emerged regarding recruitment practices. Reports indicate that migrant workers are frequently employed through complex subcontracting chains that obscure employer responsibility (Astra Anti-Trafficking Action 2022). Subsequently, workers have complained of excessive recruitment fees, misleading information regarding employment conditions, that their identity documents have been withheld and that they face restrictions on their mobility and freedom of association (Kupiszewski et al. 2009; ILO 2021b; OECD 2022). Such cases demonstrate that labour exploitation in contemporary labour markets often differs from traditional forms of workplace abuse. Rather than occurring exclusively through direct employer coercion, exploitation is increasingly emerging through the presence of fragmented subcontracting structures, transnational recruitment systems and extended chains of responsibility. As a result, legal accountability becomes more difficult to establish while workers may struggle to identify effective mechanisms for protecting their rights (Ollus 2016).

These developments have attracted growing attention from international monitoring bodies. The Council of Europe GRETA experts have repeatedly highlighted labour exploitation as an emerging challenge across Europe, emphasising the need for stronger labour inspections, improved victim identification procedures and more effective cooperation between labour market institutions and anti-trafficking mechanisms (Council of Europe 2021). Similar concerns have been raised by the ILO and the ITUC, which have identified migrant workers as one of the groups most exposed to labour rights violations globally (ILO 2024c; ITUC 2026).

This demonstrates a deep structural problem. Countries that fail to provide decent working conditions often lose domestic workers while simultaneously attracting migrant workers willing to accept less favourable conditions due to economic necessity. This dual dynamic is altering traditional employment structures and introducing new challenges for labour market governance since it is contributing to the emergence of segmented labour markets characterised by unequal levels of protection and differentiated access to labour rights. Meanwhile, from a social justice perspective, the exploitation of migrant workers raises broader concerns regarding equality, dignity and non-discrimination. Labour markets that tolerate differentiated standards of protection based on nationality or migration status risk undermining the universality of

16 See also the various materials published by the Council of Europe GRETA experts and collected together on its Serbia country page, accessed 23 June 2026 at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking/serbia1>.

labour rights. Moreover, poor working conditions affecting migrant workers may exert downward pressure on labour standards more generally, contributing to increased labour market segmentation and social inequalities (Lewis et al. 2008; Kahanec and Zimmermann 2016).

Thus, although labour migration has contributed to sustaining economic activity, it has also exposed weaknesses in labour market regulation and enforcement. These weaknesses form structural conditions which increase the risk of labour rights violations and complicate effective access to legal protection. The expansion of labour migration therefore represents not only an economic phenomenon but also provides an important test of institutional capacity: the extent to which labour inspectorates, social partners and public authorities are able to ensure equal treatment and effective protection for migrant workers increasingly influences the overall quality of labour standards in the region.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive policy approach that combines effective labour inspection, a stronger regulation of recruitment agencies, enhanced access to legal remedies and greater involvement of trade unions and civil society organisations in the protection of migrant workers. Ensuring equal treatment and equal access to labour rights for all, regardless of nationality or migration status, remains an essential precondition for achieving socially sustainable labour market development in south-east Europe and, indeed, beyond.

Empirical evidence from south-east Europe: labour migration, labour rights and trade union responses

Labour rights violations and vulnerable workers: evidence from the region

Labour rights violations such as those highlighted in the previous section which affect migrant workers are not isolated incidents but rather manifestations of the broader structural challenges affecting labour market governance in south-east Europe.

In Serbia, as well as at the Linglong tyre factory in Zrenjanin, similar concerns have been raised regarding working conditions among subcontracted workers associated with the operations of Zijin Mining in Bor, while trade unions have repeatedly criticised labour practices in export-oriented manufacturing companies such as Jura Corporation Serbia. Reports from trade unions indicate that social dialogue challenges have also emerged during restructuring processes involving Stellantis Serbia.

Trade unions in Croatia have increasingly highlighted labour rights concerns involving migrant workers. Particular attention has been devoted to working conditions among workers engaged by subcontractors connected with major construction projects, as well as those employed through temporary work agencies in the tourism sector. Several investigations have also focused on conditions affecting migrant delivery workers operating through digital labour platforms such as Glovo and Wolt.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, labour rights organisations have identified recurring problems among workers employed through intermediary recruitment agencies. Cases involving Chinese contractors participating in infrastructure projects, including

sections of the Corridor Vc motorway, have raised concerns regarding the transparency of employment relationships and effective labour supervision.

Unions in Montenegro have reported cases involving seasonal workers employed by large hotel groups operating along the Adriatic coast, particularly during periods of peak tourist demand. The rapid expansion of tourism-related employment has often exceeded the capacity of labour inspection authorities to monitor compliance with labour standards effectively.

In North Macedonia, labour rights concerns have frequently been associated with enterprises operating in technological industrial development zones. Trade unions and civil society organisations have documented complaints regarding excessive overtime, production pressure and limitations on collective worker representation in export-oriented manufacturing companies, including suppliers linked to the automotive industry such as Kromberg & Schubert and Lear Corporation.

Concerns over labour rights in Albania have emerged primarily in the garment, footwear and tourism sectors. Reports have highlighted precarious working conditions among workers employed by subcontractors producing for international supply chains, while labour shortages have recently increased the recruitment of foreign workers in hospitality and tourism-related services.

Although the specific circumstances differ across countries and sectors, these cases reveal common patterns: labour rights violations are more likely to occur where subcontracting chains are extensive, labour inspection capacities limited and collective bargaining coverage weak, and where trade unions encounter difficulties in reaching vulnerable groups of workers. These findings largely correspond with the broader trends identified by the ITUC Global Rights Index and reinforce the concerns this repeatedly raises.

International monitoring and institutional responses

The international and European monitoring mechanisms on labour rights and human rights featured in this article provide a converging evidence base on the structural risks affecting labour dignity in the western Balkans. While their mandates and methodologies differ, their monitoring frameworks and their findings consistently point to recurring systemic vulnerabilities.

Labour exploitation is on the increase in sectors characterised by flexible, low-wage and subcontracted labour and weak regulatory oversight, particularly in construction and agriculture and in selected service industries, where workers often lack clear information while being frequently tied to structural dependency relationships with employers and working in areas with low bargaining power in practice. European Commission progress reports on western Balkan countries consistently underline the persistent weaknesses in labour inspection systems and the limited enforcement capacity of judicial institutions. This results in a gap between formal legal standards and their implementation in practice, particularly in cases involving cross-border employment and private recruitment intermediaries. The European Labour Authority and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2025) add an additional dimension by documenting heightened vulnerability in cases where

migration status intersects with low skills, limited language proficiency and restricted access to information and legal support.

Taken together, the labour rights violations which have been observed are not merely individual deviations but reflect broader institutional and structural weaknesses in labour market governance. In this sense, labour migration functions primarily as a visible manifestation of deeper systemic imbalances affecting the dignity of labour.

Trade union responses and the protection of labour dignity

Trade unions remain among the most important institutional actors in protecting labour dignity and addressing the vulnerabilities associated with contemporary labour market transformations. While governments and international organisations are primarily focused on regulatory and enforcement mechanisms, trade unions contribute in practice through collective bargaining, workplace representation, legal assistance, advocacy and social dialogue.

At European level, the ETUC has repeatedly stressed that labour shortages and labour migration should not be addressed through deregulation or the weakening of labour standards. Instead, the policy positions adopted by the ETUC advocate equal treatment, fair recruitment practices, effective labour inspection regimes and the extension of collective bargaining coverage to all workers regardless of nationality or migration status. Similarly, the ITUC has highlighted the close relationship between labour rights and the broader concept of decent work.

At national level, trade unions have increasingly engaged in monitoring labour rights violations, providing legal support to vulnerable workers and participating in policy debates concerning labour migration, recruitment practices and employment regulation. However, their effectiveness is often constrained by declining union density, fragmented labour markets, the expansion of non-standard forms of employment and limited institutional capacities. These combine to provide an environment in which traditional mechanisms of worker representation are more difficult to establish and then sustain. As a result, the protection of labour dignity is likely to become increasingly dependent on the ability of trade unions to adapt their strategies to changing labour market realities and to reach groups of workers who have historically remained outside established systems of representation.

Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between labour market transformations and the dignity of labour in the western Balkans, combining normative perspectives on the value of work with an analysis of contemporary demographic, economic and institutional developments. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Kant, Hegel, Sen and Nussbaum, labour dignity is understood not merely as access to employment or income generation but as the capacity of individuals to achieve autonomy, social recognition, participation and economic security through work.

The analysis demonstrates that labour markets across the region are being simultaneously shaped by demographic decline and the large-scale emigration of domestic

workers, amidst increasing labour shortages and a growing reliance on migrant labour. At the same time, the expansion of non-standard forms of employment, subcontracting arrangements and labour market flexibilisation has created new forms of vulnerability affecting both migrant and domestic workers.

The findings further indicate that migrant workers often represent the most visible manifestation of labour market precarity. However, evidence from international monitoring mechanisms, including GRETA, the ILO, the European Commission and trade union organisations, suggests that many of the evident challenges associated with labour dignity are rooted in broader structural weaknesses. These include inadequate labour inspection systems, opaque recruitment practices, unequal bargaining power, limited access to effective remedies and the insufficient enforcement of labour standards. Consequently, the vulnerabilities experienced by migrant workers are not isolated phenomena but indicators of wider institutional shortcomings affecting labour market governance.

The analysis of trade union rights adds an extra dimension to the understanding of labour dignity. Findings from the ITUC Global Rights Index demonstrate that the quality of working life cannot be assessed solely through economic indicators such as employment rates, labour supply or wage growth. Workers' ability to organise, bargain collectively, participate in social dialogue and seek protection against rights violations remains a fundamental component of labour dignity and democratic (and sustainable) labour market governance.

The experience of the western Balkans therefore illustrates a broader policy challenge. While governments are increasingly seeking to address labour shortages through labour migration and labour market flexibility, what sustainable labour market development requires in practice is equal attention to the protection of workers' rights and working conditions. Policies aimed at ensuring labour supply cannot be considered successful if they simultaneously erode the institutional foundations of labour dignity.

Ultimately, labour dignity should be understood not only as an ethical principle but also as a prerequisite for social cohesion, democratic participation and long-term economic development. Against the background of ongoing demographic change and labour market restructuring, the protection of labour dignity for all workers, regardless of nationality or migration status, remains one of the central challenges facing the western Balkans in the twenty-first century.

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