Editorial

This first issue of the *SEER Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* for 2025 focuses on 'The European integration perspectives of the western Balkans' in its first part; while continuing to report on access for domestic workers to labour and social protection, a theme explored in our previous issue, with three more country case studies included in its second part.

Acknowledging that the accession of western Balkan countries has gained new momentum and that the region is gaining greater attention at EU level, in May 2025 the *SEER* held in Belgrade a symposium devoted to this topic. The two panels of the symposium highlighted particular issues that have been examined in these pages in the past, as indeed they will be in the future. Čedanka Andrić, vice-president of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), kindly introduced the symposium for us.

The first panel of the event delivered a good discussion on the EU Minimum Wage Directive and its possible effects on the region. Tea Jarc, ETUC confederal secretary, gave a presentation on the impact of the Directive on the region, reflecting also on the articles *SEER* published in its first issue of 2024, while offering insight into the documentary work being undertaken within the ETUC.

Bart Vanhercke, director of the research department of the European Trade Union Institute (the publisher of this journal), underlined why the increased attention on the region makes the *SEER* an important platform for the European trade union movement as well as academic audiences, both in the EU and in the western Balkans.

The second panel concerned EU integration and the political climate in Serbia. Christophe Solioz provided a panorama of the accession process, putting it also in a historical and geopolitical perspective. Nicola Burazer, from the Centre for Contemporary Politics, Belgrade, delivered a critical account of Serbia's political system and the lack of willingness of the current government to comply with EU accession criteria.

This issue of the journal thus picks up the thread of the symposium, starting with an article by Christophe Solioz under the conceptual title 'Central Europe: the very idea. Riding the wave of the Age of Uncertainty'.

The author takes a critical approach to the very idea of the 'western Balkans' which he finds misleading. With the purpose of avoiding the legacy of Yugoslavia, it defines 'the region' by its relationship to the European Union, more specifically including those countries that have not joined the European Union but are supposed to. He argues that, as the integration process progressed (Slovenia and Croatia becoming EU member countries), fewer were left to be targeted by the concept. He also sees this approach as one that introduces a counterproductive split between the former Yugoslav republics and that also contradicts the Union's own regional cooperation narrative. Further, it acknowledges neither that the EU integration process has lost most of his pull effect and its credibility, nor that the broader central European regional level should be taken seriously, not as an alternative but as a complementary level. The author stresses that the Union's centre of gravity is shifting eastwards

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and that Central Europe is back – reversing, at a political level, the core-periphery divide. Acknowledging, first, 'the Balkans' as an obsolete political concept and, second, that the regional initiatives limited to the western Balkans have, so far, failed to produce the expected transformative effects, Central Europe presents the nearest regional framework that – geographically, politically and culturally – makes sense for the former Yugoslav republics, independently of whether or not they are part of the Union.

Suela Spahija and Shqipe Xhaferri examine the impact of European integration on the labour market in Albania with a view to the main challenges, opportunities and perspectives. In a comparative analysis, the authors look at western Balkan countries and current EU member states, focusing on unemployment, the employment structure, the impact of digital technology and migration.

Eva Hyna and Ela Golemi analyse how adapting the EU Farm to Fork Strategy would affect Albania as regards the opportunities and challenges for sustainable agricultural transformation.

The article by Besiana Elezi and Alma Zisi reports on a study examining the impact of remittances on economic development and the labour market structure in Albania, with both the short-term and the long-term effects in mind. The authors follow a quantitative approach, utilising data from the Bank of Albania, INSTAT and international organisations for the period 2015-2024.

Sanja Paunović and Rajko Kosanović take a critical look at the pension system in the Republic of Serbia. Mandatory pension and disability insurance is based on the pay-as-you-go financing model, where pensions are funded through contributions made by the current generation of workers supplemented by voluntary schemes. The authors show that the average pension remains well below 50% of the average gross wage in Serbia, raising concerns about pensioners' standard of living. Therefore, they propose the introduction of an extraordinary pension adjustment mechanism, triggered in cases where the average pension falls below 50% of the national gross average wage.

The second part of this issue is based on the report *Access for domestic workers to labour and social protection,* concluding the publication of country studies from within the region started in our issue 2024/2.

Nikolina Obradović reports on access for domestic workers to labour and social protection in Bosnia and Herzegovina being conditional on the payment of social insurance contributions. However, these rights are not always ensured for all employees and, while most domestic workers work unregistered, this means they are left mostly without access.

Elira Jorgoni, Enkelejd Musabelliu and Ada Shima examine the case of Albania. While the labour code does not provide any reference to domestic workers and nor does the specific legislation on social and health insurance, if domestic workers have a regular working contract, then their social and healthcare contributions are paid and they are covered from these particular schemes. However, they remain excluded from other social insurance benefits. The authors argue that, in order to improve social protection and labour rights for domestic workers, it is essential to extend

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social insurance coverage to all branches, while contributions should be indexed to the official minimum wage.

Jadranka Kaluđerović and Iva Vukčević provide an insight into the situation of domestic workers in Montenegro, pointing to the high incidence of undeclared work and its implication that a large part of these workers are in a precarious situation.

In the open section of this issue, Rati Ratiani describes an emerging new labour landscape in Georgia based on social movement unionism and independent labour organising. The author provides a review of the current situation in the country through the specific lens of trade unionism and the role of new independent unions in the street protests that took place during 2024 in relation to the country's controversial 'foreign agent' law, and then later in the year against the outcome of the general elections.

We hope that, following the new momentum in Brussels around the accession of the countries of the region covered in this publication that are not already member states, you find something to inspire, challenge or encourage you. There is plenty of new thinking in this volume about the accession process and about what it means to ordinary working people and pensioners, as well as in terms of the political processes that governments engage in to further, or otherwise in some cases to delay, their own accession processes. Within the space provided by the *SEER*, we are thinking of additional ways to monitor these developments and provide information which helps deliver our core aims of providing a platform for discussion about what is going on within the region and to help shine a light on the direction of those developments. We will be reporting further on that – so, watch this space! – but, in the meantime, if you have been inspired to write something for us about what you see going on around you, do get in touch: we'd love to hear from you.

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