

Editorial

This second issue of the *SEER Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* for 2023, ‘Albania and Romania in focus’, collects articles drawn from empirical evidence from both countries. For Albania, the articles deal with poverty, gender equality and political representation. As a follow-up to the previous issue of *SEER*, we also continue the analysis of the vulnerable situation of Romanian workers in the EU, notably in Germany and Austria, based on publications by the journal *Sociologie Românească*.

We start the issue with Peter Scherrer reporting on the Balkans Civil Society Forum organised by the European Economic and Social Committee and held in Thessaloniki, Greece, in October 2023. His article addresses the keynote presentations, featuring also interviews conducted by the author exploring issues linked mostly to the question of EU enlargement. As a result of the war in Ukraine and the applications of both Ukraine and Moldova for EU membership, EU enlargement is back on the agenda giving some hope for the Western Balkans, as well.

The article by Ela Golemi and Anxhela Llaftiu evaluates gender equality in politics and the labour market in Albania. The authors provide an assessment of the progress made in Albania to achieve gender balance in two main areas – political decision-making and the labour market – in terms of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Statistical analysis was carried out using data from the Institute of Statistics of Albania (INSTAT) and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). The findings indicate that women remain under-represented in parliament as well as in the labour market. Progress was made prior to Covid-19 in the context of gender gaps in employment, but with a temporary setback in 2020 due to the pandemic. The results also reveal that, as regards the gender pay gap and women’s political participation in the Albanian cabinet, Albania performs better than the EU27 average.

Ardita Borici and Alba Kruja conduct an analysis of poverty and its measurement for Albania based on INSTAT data using surveys such as the Household Budget Survey and Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). The article follows different approaches of measuring poverty and provides a comparative overview of poverty indicators across the EU as well as in candidate and accession countries. They find that Albania has the highest share of households at risk of poverty among this broad group.

The article by Belina Bedini looks at different aspects of political representation in Albania examining, among others, if there is a direct relationship between the size of the population and the number of members of the representative body. The author argues that, due to massive shifts in the population in the last 25 years, due mostly to changing emigration and birth rates, it is time to reconsider the number of representatives in the Albanian Parliament.

The article “‘Slaves’ without coercion?” by Christian Sperneac-Wolfer, Andrei Botorog and Ferdinand Sutterlüty looks at the situation of tens of thousands of Romanian migrants in the German construction sector. The authors provide an insight

into the risky and exploitative nature of the conditions under which they work and how this is reflected in their negative self-evaluation of their engagements as ‘slave labour’. Based on qualitative interviews with and participant observation among Romanian construction site workers, the article reconstructs four work classifications, each of which offers a different reason to make hard manual labour plausible in the eyes of the workers themselves. Without direct physical coercion, these ideas motivate workers to take on work that they themselves criticise as ‘slave labour’.

The article by Paul Sperneac-Wolfer looks at the self-organised mobility of Romanian workers in relation to exploitation in highly segmented labour markets, using the example of the Austrian fresh food sector. The author shows how growers capitalise particularly on labour intermediation to maintain the resilience and profitability of local agricultural businesses in the Austrian agricultural market. The resulting workplace regime ensnares workers in a two-fold exploitability: not only is their labour power subject to labour extraction but so are their interpersonal relations. This analysis draws attention to the persistent exploitation of migrant workers and their reproductive capacities across segmented labour markets.

Daniela Ana and Ștefan Voicu analyse strikes, unionisation and the role of organic intellectuals in the German meat industry after the German *Arbeitsschutzkontrollgesetz* in 2021 aimed to grant equal employment conditions to the majority of workers in slaughterhouses. The law created new avenues for trade unions to gain more members and organise industry-level negotiations for better wages and a collective agreement. The article explores the lessons from three slaughterhouse strikes where the authors highlight the role of organic intellectuals – Gramsci’s term for those who grasp class interests and who generate cohesion and self-awareness of their class’s position in society – showing that they can be instrumental in articulating resistance but that they can also be co-opted by employers to manufacture consent within the company. In conclusion, the authors reflect on the labour struggles and negotiations of 2021 and on the benefits that the presence of a general collective agreement managed to bring to workers, as well as its limitations.

The article by Eleonora Ushatova-Kalinova examines the Office of the National Ombudsman as a possible channel for the exercise of citizens’ participation in democratic life in Bulgaria. The exercise of civic participation through the Office is illustrated by describing a case drawn from Bulgarian practice – the protests of workers and employees in defence of their rights to unpaid wages and other compensation in 2017 – which resulted in changes to the legislation championed by the Ombudsman.

Finally, a book review by Christophe Solioz discusses the book by Attila Ágh: *Awaking Europe in the triple global crisis. The birth pangs of the emerging Europe* (2021). Ágh cites the triple crisis facing Europe – socioeconomic crisis, climate crisis and Covid-19 crisis – to which Christophe Solioz adds a fourth: the security crisis with reference to the war in Ukraine. These add up, in sum, to a systemic crisis which Solioz argues points to an impending Age of Transition affecting not just south-eastern Europe, whose countries are particularly vulnerable, but leading to the establishment of a new world order in which Europe will need to reconceptualise itself.

Dear Readers of the *SEER Journal*, let us inform you that, after 26 volumes, from next year our journal will go online only, and we will stop printing and distributing hard copies. This will allow us to be more flexible but, equally importantly, to continue to improve our main role as a platform of exchange. We will be in touch further, not least as regards a website address where you can continue to read current and past issues of the Journal, in due course. In the meantime, we wish all readers a peaceful and prosperous 2024; and we look forward to seeing you and hearing further from you via our online platform in the next 12 months and beyond.

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