

## Editorial

This second issue of the *SEER Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* for 2025 focuses on ‘Economic and social developments in south-east Europe’.

The first block of articles devoted to this particular theme starts with an account by Sanja Paunović and Bruno S. Sergi, two economists from the Southeast Europe Trade Union Economic Experts network, of the prospects for economic growth alongside an exploration of the erosion of social rights in the region. They present the latest developments on macroeconomic stability, income levels and labour productivity, contrasting these with social protection and workers’ rights. They point to the significant challenges that the region continues to face, despite periods of growth and partial alignment with EU standards, including structural weaknesses, low productivity, demographic pressures and persistent inequality compared to the EU average. The international financial institutions and the European Union have prioritised fiscal consolidation and structural reforms that have often come with pressures on labour rights and the wearing away of systems of social protection. They conclude that, in order to ensure inclusive growth with macroeconomic stability, policies should be developed with stronger social dialogue and for better labour protection for the region’s workers.

The article by Maria Prohaska ‘The Bulgarian path to the euro and the expected effects of its introduction’ reviews Bulgaria’s long and politically burdensome path towards the adoption of the euro, finally achieved on 1 January 2026 after almost twenty years of membership of the EU. The author also analyses the degree of social and economic convergence when member states have adopted the euro in the past, pointing to the largely positive impact for those joining the euro area after 2004. The article explores the public discourse in Bulgaria on adopting the euro and the impression that has made on the development of public opinion, concluding with some thoughts on the lessons which may be drawn from Croatia.

Lyuboslav Kostov’s contribution ‘Human capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: structure, challenges and economic growth’ examines demographic change, both globally and in the context of the wider region of Europe, paying specific attention to the situation in Bulgaria which has been experiencing a deteriorating demographic position. He warns that, if Europe continues to rely solely on its own human capital, it will lead to uneven economic development and to significant changes in its demographic structure. As regards Bulgaria, its population has decreased by approximately 30 % since 1989 (and by 17 % since its EU accession in 2007), indicating a lasting and deepening demographic crisis. This should be seen as a threat of a national nature.

In their article ‘Bulgaria: empowering base-level trade union leaders to ensure growth in membership numbers’, Lyuboslav Kostov and Rositsa Makelova examine innovative practices of trade union renewal in Bulgaria. Drawing on desk-based research and in-person interview research contributions, the authors deliver both quantitative and qualitative data for the sectoral context and its implications for organising.

The open section of this issue is devoted to job quality under the growing influence of platform economy and artificial intelligence.

Martin Serreqi and Xheni Rusi look at the importance of job quality characteristics for current and prospective employees. They address the diversity of the workforce by age, ethnicity, educational background and professional experience. They conclude that multigenerational or cultural perspectives should be employed to improve knowledge about workforce diversity and work characteristics.

In her account, ‘The use of artificial intelligence and discrimination in the labour market’, Biljana Chavkoska uses desk-based research to explore the effects of artificial intelligence in the labour market on vulnerable groups already experiencing discrimination, such as women, older workers and disabled people. Her article examines the EU’s AI Act and the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention on the issue, the first attempts to develop institutional regulation in the field, as well as the situation across the western Balkans and expressly in North Macedonia. She finds that the vast majority of jobs now require basic digital skills, but there are huge gaps with regard to the number of women accessing career roles within STEM. Based on employer perceptions, gaps are also appearing in the ability of older people to understand new technology and there is a lack of involvement of disabled workers in the design of adaptive technology.

The article by Julejda Aliaj and Abela Lame, ‘Making sense of globalised AI in the context of the workplace’, takes a perspective from Albania to review the current legislative framework introduced within the EU on artificial intelligence, workplace applications of which are transforming the dynamics of employee-employer relations. It seeks to develop understanding within Albania of how employment legislation can adapt to the new challenges in the sense of ensuring a fair, inclusive and ethical working environment which serves the preservation of the rights and dignity of workers.

In their contribution, Fatjona Kroni and Ermira Kalaj examine ‘The role of online platforms in shaping tourism and labour dynamics in northern Albania’. Based on secondary data, literature reviews and sectoral reports, they take a closer look at the role of digital tourism in driving labour market changes and economic development. Their results suggest that digitalisation is lowering entry barriers for small businesses, enhancing competitiveness and supporting micro-entrepreneurship, particularly among young people and women. Yet, persistent skills gaps, weak infrastructure and a reliance on unstable demand risk reinforcing insecurity and exclusion.

Finally, a review article by Christophe Solioz closes the issue: Giustina Selvelli’s 2024 publication ‘Understanding the border. Gorizia and Nova Gorica: an anthropologist’s perspective on the border’. Prepared in the context of GO!2025, a cultural and artistic programme celebrating both those cities being jointly named European Capital of Culture, the review emphasises and celebrates the multiple identities that take shape when borders are no longer seen as dividing lines.

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