Challenges and paths to a well-functioning social dialogue and social partnership in Central Europe

FULL FINAL REPORT
JANUARY 6, 2026

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Co-funded by the European Union

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CENTRAL EUROPEAN TRADE UNION NETWORK

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Executive Summary

This report analyses the role, capacities, and evolving practices of trade unions in strengthening social dialogue across nine Central European countries: Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Its objective is to identify key characteristics, challenges and emerging opportunities for social dialogue and to draw implications for future development in social dialogue and transnational trade union cooperation in the region.

Methodologically, the report adopts a comparative, practice-oriented approach. It draws on three sources of evidence collected by the Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI): desk research; an original multilingual survey conducted in 2025 with 204 respondents (174 trade unions and 30 employer organisations); and three co-creative workshops with social partners from all nine countries. Together, these sources provide insight into both formal institutional arrangements and everyday practices of social dialogue.

Key findings

The findings reveal a differentiated yet coherent regional picture:

- **Institutional context is decisive.** Coordinated corporatist systems provide the most stable frameworks for effective social dialogue, while partially coordinated and weakly institutionalised systems face uneven performance and systemic constraints, despite strong trade union commitment.
- **Trade unions generally perceive their capacity as strong.** Nearly two thirds report a high and stable capacity to engage in social dialogue, often more confidently than employer organisations. However, several countries report deteriorating capacity, signalling growing pressures rather than structural collapse.
- **Political support is a critical enabling condition.** Only Austria and Liechtenstein report a clearly stable political environment. In Hungary and Serbia, weak political will and poor enforcement undermine both dialogue outcomes and the authority of social partners.
- **Trade unions remain central to worker participation at company level.** Where unions are weak or absent, especially in small firms, worker participation structures are also missing. Attacks on freedom of association and fear of repression, most pronounced in Serbia and Hungary, directly weaken workplace democracy.
- **Unions' shared priorities** include fair working conditions, health and safety, youth employment, working poverty and digital transformation. Divergences are most visible on politically and socially sensitive topics (e.g. migrant workers, climate change, gender equality) and on institutional priorities shaped by national political contexts.
- **Information, research and communication capacities are uneven.** Access to information is generally positive, but research capacity is polarised and not equally institutionalised. Training and internal communication are widespread strengths, while external communication and international cooperation remain underutilised.

Strategic implications

Survey and workshop participants consistently identified the need to strengthen trade union power through organising and membership growth, to rebuild state capacity and political commitment to social partnership, and to revitalise sectoral collective bargaining, particularly in Visegrad and South-Eastern European countries. Despite rising domestic pressures, international trade union cooperation is seen as increasingly important. Such cooperation not only serves information exchange but also facilitates shared learning and coordinated responses to regional, European and global challenges.

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Introduction

This report examines the role, capacity, and evolving practices of social partners in strengthening social dialogue across nine Central European countries: Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Its primary aim is to identify key characteristics, challenges but also emerging opportunities in the functioning of social dialogue in these countries.

The definition of social dialogue is anchored in EU law (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union Articles 151–155) (EURLEX), and it encompasses discussions, consultations, negotiations, and joint actions between organisations representing employers and workers, at both national and EU levels, to shape employment and social policies. Social dialogue can take the form of a bipartite dialogue between social partners (representatives of workers and employers) and a tripartite dialogue also involving public authorities. All in all, social dialogue is a governance mechanism that allows social partners to influence policy outcomes, as well as through agreements that may be implemented autonomously or via EU legislation.

It is important to distinguish social dialogue and collective bargaining. While social dialogue is a broad concept covering information exchange, consultation, and negotiation, collective bargaining refers to more focused, narrow negotiations between employers (or employers' organisations) and authorised workers' representatives, such as trade unions, aimed at concluding binding agreements on working conditions and employment terms. In this sense, collective bargaining, especially if coordinated between several employers (multi-employer bargaining), is one of the core instruments within social dialogue (besides workers' workplace representation and tripartite national-level social dialogue), but not all social dialogue results in collective agreements or legally binding outcomes. Typical issues on the bargaining agenda include wages, working time, training, occupational health and safety, and equal treatment. The objective of these negotiations is to arrive at a collective agreement that regulates the terms and conditions of employment (ILO Topic Portal).

From the perspective of organisations that engage in social dialogue and/or collective bargaining, it is important to acknowledge the terms social partners and social partnership. Social partnership refers to a collaborative framework in which social partners – representatives of employers, workers (through trade unions) and often public authorities – cooperate, consult, and negotiate in a constructive and consensual way, with the aim of shaping working conditions and relevant policies promoting socio-economic stability.

The report considers existing social dialogue structures and practices across nine Central European countries, which can inform future policy development and transnational cooperation of trade unions in this region. The underlying premise of the report is that social dialogue can be strengthened to varying degrees by intensifying existing institutional structures (e.g., the legal regulation of social dialogue and the recognition of social partners entitled to engage in social dialogue), opening new or underdeveloped spaces for dialogue, and building on mutual learning and shared objectives in EU-level social dialogue.

The analysis is embedded in a context of transformations reshaping European labour markets

and welfare systems. The green and digital transitions, automation and decarbonisation, migration, the protracted energy and cost-of-living crises and deepening demographic challenges are generating new pressures on employment relations, social cohesion, and workers' well-being. These changes are unfolding alongside rising social inequalities and heightened risks of social exclusion, prompting increasingly active intervention by national governments and EU institutions.

Against this backdrop, the report pays particular attention to the growing importance of information sharing and cooperation for improving social dialogue in both national and transnational arenas. The ability to demand, process, and share quality information, to support worker participation, and to strengthen worker protection and workplace democracy is becoming ever more critical in times of compounded crises. At the same time, social partners are called upon to actively engage with a rapidly expanding policy agenda at EU and national levels, ranging from adequate minimum wages and collective bargaining coverage, health and safety, gender equality, protection against precarious employment and discrimination, to skills development, vocational training, youth employment, or the right to disconnect. Equally important is the potential role of social partners in monitoring, influencing, and implementing some of the EU's key redistributive instruments to support social dialogue, including the European Social Fund Plus.

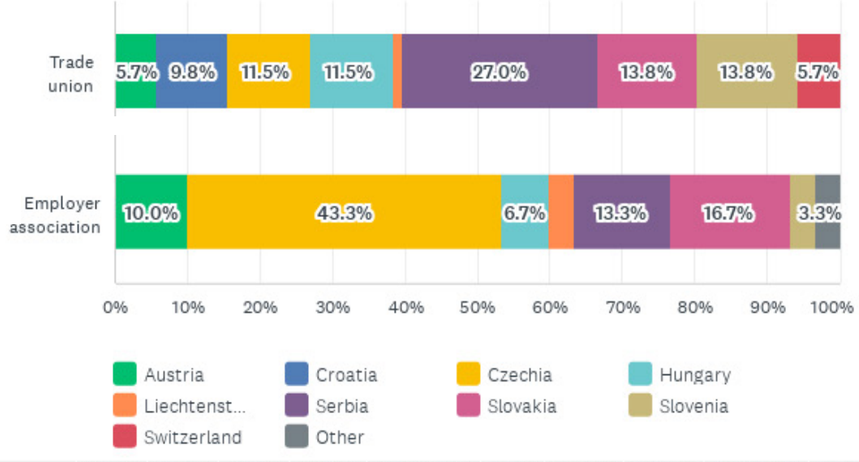
Particular attention is paid to to the growing importance of information sharing and cooperation for improving social dialogue in both national and transnational arenas.

The report adopts a comparative, practice-oriented approach, assessing variations in trade union roles across the studied countries and their involvement in social dialogue beyond formal institutional frameworks. It maps current initiatives, barriers, risks, and emerging opportunities for strengthening dialogue at national and transnational levels. Particular attention is paid to the challenges of anchoring social dialogue within trade union constituencies amid intensified social insecurity, declining trust, and the growing appeal of authoritarian political alternatives. In this context, the study also explores the renewed importance of transnational trade union cooperation in an environment of increased intra-EU labour and capital mobility, identifying avenues for coordinated and future-oriented trade union action.

The analysis is based on three sources of data, collected and analysed by the Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI). First, the authors engaged in desk research and utilised their extensive previous knowledge on social dialogue in most of the studied countries. Second, evidence has been collected in an original online survey, implemented between April and September 2025 across social partners in the studied countries in their own language (see Figure 1.1). The processed survey data delivered 204 responses from 9 countries, consisting of 174 trade union (85,3%) and 30 employers' organisation (14,7%) respondents. If not stated otherwise, the analysis in this study is based exclusively on trade union responses, while insights from employers' perceptions are highlighted separately where relevant. Third, CELSI organised three online co-creative workshops with social partners, mostly trade unions, from all studied countries. The workshops were held in November 2025 for three country clusters: Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia; Austria, Liechtenstein and Switzerland; and Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia. During the workshops, participants engaged in mutual exchange on key challenges they are facing in their countries and discussed how the Central European Trade Union Network (CETUN) can support their efforts, as well as their international cooperation. The workshops were facilitated in local languages to allow participants to fully engage in the discussions without language barriers.

The study comprises eight chapters, moving from an introduction and an assessment of the current state of social dialogue to a forward-looking evaluation of future priorities and capacities. After the introduction, Chapter 2 takes stock of the state of social dialogue in Central Europe, followed by insights concerning the political environment for social dialogue and collective bargaining in Chapter 3. The subsequent Chapters are explicitly forward-looking, focusing on how social dialogue can be strengthened in the coming period. Chapter 4 focuses on workers' participation at the company level, and Chapter 5 presents commitments, plans, and priority areas in social dialogue. Chapter 6 evaluates the capacities, information, and domestic communication practices of trade unions within social dialogue. Chapter 7 reviews international cooperation and the transnational dimension of trade union cooperation. The concluding Chapter 8 summarises the main findings and outlines implications for social partners and policymakers.

FIGURE 1.1 Survey respondents' structure



	AUSTRIA	CROATIA	CZECHIA	HUNGARY	LIECHTENSTEIN	SERBIA	SLOVAKIA	SLOVENIA	SWITZERLAND	OTHER
Q2: Trade union (A)	5.7% 10	9.8% 17	11.5% 20 B	11.5% 20	1.1% 2	27.0% 47	13.8% 24	13.8% 24	5.7% 10	0.0% 0 B
Q2: Employer association (B)	10.0% 3	0.0% 0	43.3% 13 A	6.7% 2	3.3% 1	13.3% 4	16.7% 5	3.3% 1	0.0% 0	3.3% 1 A
Total Respondents	13	17	33	22	3	51	29	25	10	1

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

02

State of social dialogue in Central Europe

This part of the report focuses on the state of social dialogue in the examined Central European countries. First, we provide an overview of the general state of play in each country included in the study. The country-specific overview is followed by a comparative analysis drawing on survey responses and insights gathered during the workshops.

2.1

Country-specific insights

2.1.1 Austria

At the national level, the primary institutions responsible for social dialogue are the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB), the Chamber of Labour (AK), the Economic Chamber (WKÖ) and the Chamber of Agriculture (LKÖ). On the workers' side, the primary institutions responsible for social dialogue are the Austrian Trade Union Federation and the Chamber of Labour. The ÖGB is the sole organisation responsible for collective bargaining on the workers' side. It includes seven sectoral sub-unions that each engage in social dialogue and collective bargaining and advocate for their respective industries and sectors. Industrial relations are highly organised in Austria and include distinctive features such as obligatory membership of employers in the WKÖ, the exclusion of the state in bargaining a national minimum wage and the predominance of bipartite sectoral bargaining, which results in nearly complete bargaining coverage (Gotthardová and Kahancová 2025). Respondents of the survey mainly agree that the state of social dialogue in Austria remains stable and constructive: authorities engage in social dialogue, and the system is characterised by a high commitment to social dialogue of the respective organisations.

In particular, survey respondents saw a very high commitment to social dialogue in their own organisation with slightly less commitment in other organisations. Most respondents agree that social dialogue is meaningful and forms a regular, systematic part of social partnership, where all relevant issues are addressed. A significant number of respondents (30,4 % disagree and 8,7 % strongly disagree) believe that the political environment for social dialogue is not improving currently.

The majority of respondents saw collective bargaining as a key mechanism to the labour market and social partnership in their domain. They also agree that their organisations are focusing on strengthening collective bargaining. Additionally, survey respondents believe that their members' commitment to social dialogue should be improved, that there are more frequent meetings with social partners representing the same interests and that a major aim is the expansion of the membership base. Union membership has remained fairly stable or increased in the last decade with the slight decrease of -0,41% of members in the ÖGB trade union sectors in 2024 as an outlier.

2.1.2 Croatia

The key tripartite social dialogue institution is the Economic and Social Council of Croatia

(GZS). Besides the government and the Croatian Employers' Association (HUP), three Croatian trade union federations participate in its work: the Association of Croatian Trade Unions - Matica (Matica), the Independent Trade Unions of Croatia (NHS), and the largest, Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia (SSSH). Sectoral and territorial regional social dialogue structures also exist. In the last decade, national level social partners put intensive efforts to establish and strengthen sectoral councils for social dialogue.

Social partners evaluated the state of social dialogue in Croatia in a cautious and positive manner, albeit with reservations. Interestingly, a nearly equal proportion of respondents judged the political environment as neither improving nor deteriorating, with a relative majority stating stagnation. 43.8% reported regular engagement with the authorities, and the majority only partly agreed with the statement on constructive cooperation. Similarly cautious evaluations were given for the engagement and preparedness of social partners, as well as their capacity to enrich the agenda of social dialogue. Almost all respondents viewed their own commitment highly positively. At the national level, social dialogue occurred at the Economic and Social Council (GZS - Gospodarsko socijalno vijeće), which held 10 meetings in 2024. Some of these meetings were attended by the Prime Minister and other high-ranking officials, and several key strategic normative acts and matters were discussed. Nevertheless, the 2024 report states that there are several problems with the GZS's work: non-compliance with the Agreement on the Establishment of the Economic and Social Council, the obligation for public policies, national strategies, draft laws, regulations, programmes, and other documents to be discussed before parliamentary procedures; the untimely inclusion of social partner representatives in working groups; the untimely submission of draft regulations to social partners for comment; a lack of planning and preparation for issues of strategic significance, etc.

2.1.3 Czechia

At the national level, the key institution for social dialogue in Czechia is the Council of Economic and Social Agreement (Rada hospodářské a sociální dohody, RHSD), commonly referred to as the tripartite council. It brings together representatives of the government, employers, and trade unions to discuss major economic, social, and employment policies. Although its role is mainly consultative, the tripartite council provides an important platform for coordination and consensus-building (Martišková 2025). The institutional framework for social dialogue was established in the early 1990s through the Collective Bargaining Act and the Tripartite Consultations Act, which remain the foundation of Czech industrial relations today (Myant 2019). Social dialogue in Czechia is relatively stable and institutionalised, supported by regular tripartite meetings. The main trade union confederation, the Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions (Českomoravská konfederace odborových svazů, ČMKOS), remains the dominant social partner on the workers' side, along with the Association of Independent Trade Unions (ASO ČR). Despite generally constructive relations among social partners, the overall impact of social dialogue on policymaking is often limited due to its advisory nature and the high degree of decentralisation in collective bargaining (Martišková and Šumichrast 2023).

This broader context is also reflected in the survey findings. The evaluation of social dialogue in Czechia presents a mixed and cautious picture. Respondents express both positive and critical views, indicating that while the institutional mechanisms function, their consistency and political support fluctuate. Some perceive gradual improvement in the political environment, while others note stagnation or decline. Cooperation among social partners is often described as constructive but limited in scope, with concerns that dialogue may at times serve formal purposes without real policy effect. Preparation and focus of discussions are viewed as uneven, reflecting variable quality across levels and themes. Despite these reservations, most respondents consider their own organisations committed and constructive, though they remain less confident about the engagement of other actors. Compared to employer organisations, trade unions assess the overall state of social dialogue more positively, emphasising its constructive aspects and gradual improvement. Employers are more sceptical, often describing dialogue as formal or lacking real impact, and expressing doubts about the consistency of state engagement. Both sides, however, share a similar pattern of self-perception: they view their own organisations as committed and constructive but remain less confident about the reliability and engagement of their counterparts. Overall, social dialogue in Czechia appears functional yet fragile, maintaining relevance but struggling to achieve stronger practical outcomes.

2.1.4 Hungary

Since 2011, social dialogue in Hungary at the national level is institutionally weak, and there is no tripartite institution covering all employed. The Standing Consultative Forum for the Private Sector and the Government (VKF), is constrained to the private sector with only consultative role on minimum wages and average wage increases, while the National Economic and Social Council (NGTT), is a consultative body, including not only employer and trade union federations, but also civil society, church and academia, but not representatives of the government. Hungary has six traditional trade union confederations, out of which the Hungarian Trade Union Confederation (Magyar Szakszervezeti Szövetség, MASZSZ) is one of the largest, gathering mostly private sector union federations, while the Trade Union Cooperation Forum (Szakszervezetek Együttműködési Fóruma, SZEF) mostly gathers public sector union federations. Sectoral level social dialogue is traditionally weak, and weakened further since 2010.

Not surprisingly, respondents assessed the overall state of social dialogue in Hungary as poor to critical. Only a small share (around 10%) indicated that social dialogue in their field is well prepared, systematic and meaningful. None of the respondents strongly agreed that social dialogue has improved, become more regular or more constructive over the past two years. Instead, most expressed the view that the situation is worsening and that existing dialogue structures function more as a formality rather than as a platform for meaningful engagement. Available strategic documents and congress conclusions of two Hungarian trade union confederations, the Hungarian Trade Union Confederation (Magyar Szakszervezeti Szövetség, MASZSZ) and the Trade Union Cooperation Forum (Szakszervezetek Együttműködési Fóruma, SZEF), reinforce this perspective. They highlight persistent shortcomings, including the declining relevance of social dialogue and shrinking opportunities for effective interest representation despite the increasing urgency of issues requiring consultation. Institutions responsible for social dialogue at both national and sectoral levels are evaluated critically in terms of their practical operation, regularity, agenda-setting capacity, and representativeness.

Both confederations call for revitalising the institutional framework of social dialogue, including the reactivation of sectoral social dialogue mechanisms and the reform or strengthening of national tripartite bodies. According to their assessments, the current structures lack transparency, legitimacy and the ability to support substantive negotiations or agreements. Strengthening sectoral dialogue is also seen as essential for enabling the conclusion of sectoral collective agreements.

The situation has been particularly acute regarding the channels for (atrophied) sectoral social dialogue and interest reconciliation in the public sector. In the latter, a maximum of two sessions were held annually in the 2019-2023 period. SZEF made urgent appeals for the establishment of a system of interest reconciliation in many concrete public subsectors, and for an end to the state practice in delegating this role to lower-level bodies on an ad hoc basis, specifically to bodies without real competence. Although there were some timid but constructive signs of improvement in 2024, the government side only sent deputy state secretaries to the discussions. These individuals had no negotiating power and could only commit to passing on the main conclusions to higher levels and promising to continue the work in a constructive manner. As one respondent expressed it: "The government does not provide an authorised negotiator, and there is no substantive reconciliation of interests. The government only carries

out subsequent notification of already promulgated legislation for educational purposes. There are no real written proposals, no substantive debate and no decision on the agenda item in question."

2.1.5 Liechtenstein

In Liechtenstein, only one trade union, the Liechtenstein Employees' Association (LANV), represents workers in social dialogue. Employers' interests are represented by two major and equally important employers' associations: the Liechtenstein Chamber of Commerce (Wirtschaftskammer Liechtenstein, WKL), which primarily represents small and medium-sized enterprises and the craft sector, and the Liechtenstein Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Liechtensteinische Industrie- und Handelskammer, LIHK/LCCI), which represents large companies, including major banks. In addition, several sector-specific employer organisations exist, such as the Banking Association, the Chamber of Lawyers, and the Chamber of Trustees.

All survey respondents highlight a high commitment for social dialogue in Liechtenstein, within their own organisations, as well as vis-à-vis other social partners and authorities. Social dialogue meetings usually take place quarterly or twice a year. One survey respondent suggested that issues related to the minimum wage and working hours, and their mutual compatibility, constitute a central part of a well-established and constructive social dialogue.

Furthermore, respondents have pointed out that they would like to see an expansion of their membership numbers. Another priority task is the enhancement of committing more members to actively participating in social dialogue. One respondent further pointed to the need for greater political awareness of social dialogue in underdeveloped sectors, including agriculture and care. On the other hand, social partners perceive the current state of social partnership to be stable and with a high autonomy for each social partner. All respondents agree that collective bargaining is a key mechanism for their organisation and its social partners. Social partners make an effort that each session of social dialogue is meaningful and well prepared. The employers' association is fully committed to improving the collective bargaining coverage in Liechtenstein.

2.1.6 Serbia

At a national level, the primary institution for social dialogue in Serbia is the Social and Economic Council (SES). It operates through four specialised standing committees (working groups): one for legislation, one for collective bargaining and the peaceful resolution of labour disputes, one for economic issues, and one for occupational health and safety. According to the law, the SES should meet once a month. Meetings of the SES have been irregular over the past three years and its operations have been affected by the current deep political crisis. While survey respondents indicated a high level of commitment to social dialogue, they also highlighted its poor state.

The authorities' engagement in social dialogue was viewed with particular scepticism by respondents. In congress materials and relevant strategic publications, both the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia (Savez samostalnih sindikata Srbije, SSSS) and Ujedinjeni Gradjanski Sindikati "Nezavisnost (United Branch Trade Unions "Independence", UGS) pointed out that the SEC was bypassed by government actors on main strategic decisions and was increasingly serving as a secondary body and a mere façade of social dialogue. They reflected on the priority function and extra-institutional role of foreign capital, which is treated preferentially by the Serbian government. This locks out both trade unions and employer organisations and strips social partners of their meaningful intermediary and co-management roles. Ultimately, this situation indicates that the Serbian government is not listening to the opinions and interests of its workers and citizens, but to those of dominant foreign capital. Most respondents indicated that the sessions of social dialogue are not regular. Most respondents saw collective bargaining as a key mechanism for regulating the labour market and expressed a commitment to strengthening it and increasing collective agreement coverage. Some respondents indicated initiatives to increase coverage, such as educational and promotional activities, seminars and media appearances, as well as calls to relevant ministries. Employers highlighted alarming structural obstacles, noting that most Serbian Employers' Association (Unija poslodavaca Srbije, UPS) members were small and medium-sized, non-unionised companies. Furthermore, a high percentage of companies were registered in Belgrade rather than locally, thus preventing representation at the local level. The largest challenge and priority task for almost all respondents was expanding the membership base.

2.1.7 Slovakia

At the national level, the main institution for social dialogue is the Economic and Social Council of the Slovak Republic, commonly referred to as the Tripartite Council. The Council discusses key economic, social, and employment policies with the aim of reaching consensus among the three parties. According to its rules of procedure, the Tripartite should meet at least once every quarter. The Confederation of Trade Union Federations of the Slovak Republic (Konfederácia odborových zväzov Slovenskej Republiky, KOZ SR) derives most of its organisational power from its formal representativeness and its institutional position within the tripartite framework (Kahancová and Uhlerová 2023). In recent years, social dialogue at the national level in Slovakia has been characterised by a relatively high level of mutual trust between social partners. Trade unions and employers have often been able to find common ground and coordinate joint positions towards the government. Nevertheless, the overall perception of social dialogue remains cautious, partly due to inconsistent approaches across governments (Šumichrast 2025).

This broader context is also reflected in the survey findings. Overall, the responses reflect a generally critical attitude towards social dialogue, although in many areas opinions are rather balanced – often "half and half" and only rarely somewhat positive. Respondents from employers' organisations, though fewer in number, tend to be even more critical and negative than trade unions. An interesting contrast appears in the self-assessment: respondents from both groups largely view their own organisations as highly committed and constructive in social dialogue, even if their trust in the commitment of other partners remains limited.

2.1.8 Slovenia

While social dialogue was exceptionally well institutionalised in Slovenia since its independence, since 2008 major economic and political shocks weakened the coordination capacity and roles of main institutions, such as the Economic and Social Council (ESC). The largest trade union confederation remained Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (Zveza svobodnih sindikatov Slovenije, ZSSS), but it significantly weakened in the last decade.

Respondents' answers suggest that social dialogue in Slovenia is experiencing a structural and institutional crisis. Notably, when evaluating the role and function of social dialogue, respondents were divided on whether social dialogue merely serves an administrative function. Most respondents (60%) agreed with the statement that social dialogue has been constructive in a limited number of areas, while 30 per cent either partly agreed or partly disagreed. Respondents were very critical of the commitment, preparedness and ability of social partners to engage in and enrich social dialogue. The lack of regular engagement by the authorities has also been highlighted. This corresponds to recent analyses of social dialogue in Slovenia, which has moved away from a centralised neocorporatist model (where strong employer organisations and trade unions actively shape socioeconomic policies alongside other political actors) towards increased fragmentation of wage models and a weakening of the negotiating power of higher-level trade unions, who find themselves in a defensive position when it comes to slowing down neoliberal reforms and negotiating welfare cuts (Stanojević et al., 2023).

2.1.9 Switzerland

Swiss industrial relations have remained relatively stable and decentralised for a long time, although this stability increasingly coexists with growing tensions in several sectors with Swiss trade unions settling often against powerful employers' associations (Oesch 2010). The Swiss Trade Union Confederation (SGB) is the primary institution for social dialogue at the national level in Switzerland. It is the largest workers' representative in the country and includes 20 trade unions and around 310,000 members in 2024, with a slight decrease in members by 1.84%. Labour market regulations usually take place through collective bargaining and social dialogue, based on decentralised relations between trade unions and employers' associations, organised by economic sectors (Bonvin et al. 2023). This approach aims at a regulation of working conditions directly by those on the ground, but it also places significant responsibility on trade unions to organise and defend workers in increasingly fragmented sectors. Survey respondents highlight that especially the political environment for social dialogue is deteriorating, partly due to increasing employer resistance to extending collective agreements and growing political polarisation. However, there is still a consensus that social dialogue is very meaningful and more than just a facade in Switzerland.

Particularly noticeable in the survey was that authorities regularly engage with social partners, although the intensity and quality of this engagement vary significantly across sectors. Trade unions are highly committed to social dialogue. All respondents reported that meetings in their domain take place regularly, at least twice a year but for most quarterly or monthly, at least in sectors where institutional social dialogue is well established. All respondents agree that collective bargaining is a key mechanism for labour market regulations especially in the context of rising wage pressure and new forms of precarious work and that trade unions are very committed to increasing bargaining coverage in Switzerland. Next to measures to increase collective bargaining coverage, trade unions have pushed for and implemented protective measures to the EU Freedom of Movement Act that allows EU citizens to work in Switzerland and institutionalised tripartite commissions to monitor the labour market in order to protect wages.

An obstacle to social dialogue for respondents is the strong ideological and strategic resistance from employer organisations in several sectors. However, as Switzerland is governed as a direct democracy, it was also mentioned that dialogue is an immanent factor, and one of the reasons why mobilisation and the political legitimacy of trade unions remain relatively stable, despite the challenges in organising workers in increasingly precarious and fragmented sectors. Additionally, the information flow between social partners needs improvement, as current limitations often hinder effective cooperation and enforcement.

2.2

Comparative survey analysis

The distribution of respondents across different levels of social dialogue indicates that participation is most common at the company or establishment level (41.2%) and at the national tripartite level (40.7%). A considerable share of respondents is also active at the sectoral level, both in bipartite (30.9%) and tripartite formats (26.3%). In contrast, regional (17%) and local territorial dialogue (21.1%) appear less developed, and only a very small number of respondents selected other forms of engagement. As the sample consists predominantly of trade unions (174 compared to 30 employer organisations), the results primarily reflect trade union engagement patterns across the surveyed countries. Therefore, the comparative analysis presented in this chapter is based primarily on trade union responses. Employer-organisation responses, due to their very small and uneven number, are addressed separately in a short supplementary section.

2.2.1 General Assessment of Social Dialogue

A general reading of trade union responses suggests a rather critical perception of how social dialogue currently functions across the surveyed countries (see Figure 2.1). Respondents indicate limited confidence in the broader political and institutional environment, with more trade union representatives agreeing that conditions have deteriorated rather than improved in recent years. Many also disagreed or only partly agreed that state authorities regularly consult social partners, and similar reservations emerge regarding the preparedness, regularity and meaningfulness of social dialogue structures. Statements describing social dialogue as constructive only in a limited number of areas, or merely formal without substantial impact, received comparatively high levels of agreement. These patterns point to experiences of social dialogue that are often fragmented, irregular or symbolic rather than strategic.

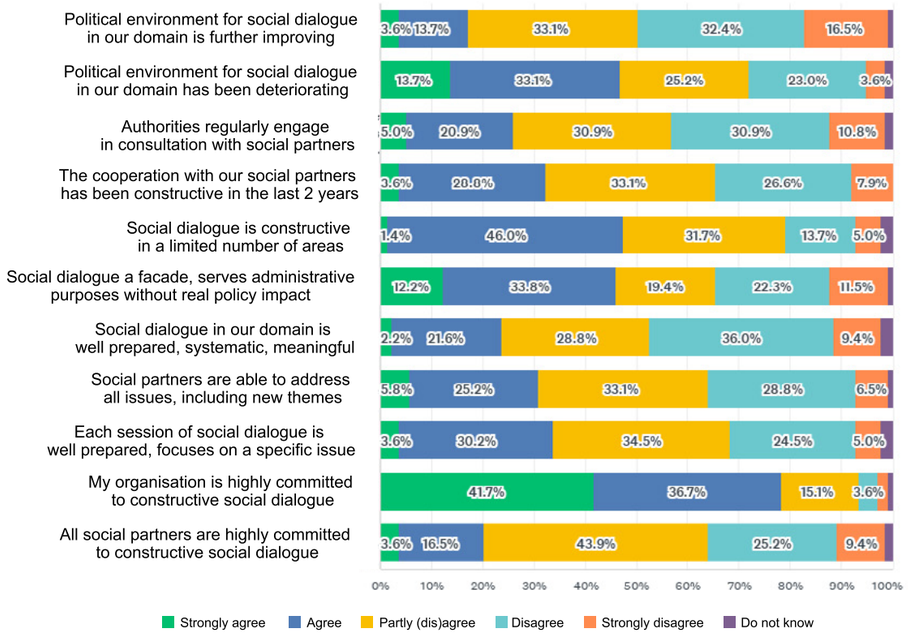
A deconstructed insight into country regimes suggests similar patterns across three types of country clusters. These only partially reflect the existing literature (Bohle and Greskovits 2012, Bechter et al. 2012). Rather than implying a linear hierarchy of "strong" versus "weak" systems, the clusters capture different configurations and degrees of institutionalisation of social dialogue as perceived by trade union respondents.

CLUSTER 1: Coordinated corporatist social partnership regimes (Austria, Switzerland and Liechtenstein)

Trade union respondents in these countries provide predominantly positive evaluations of

FIGURE 2.1 Trade union perceptions on the functioning of social dialogue

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.



social dialogue, although these perceptions vary across sectors and coexist with emerging pressures and limitations. They report regular and meaningful engagement with public authorities, constructive cooperation among social partners despite persisting areas of conflict and diverging interests, and dialogue processes that are generally well prepared and systematic in sectors with established institutional structures. Collective bargaining is widely viewed as an effective and central mechanism, supported by strong organisational capacities. However, bargaining coverage and influence vary considerably across sectors, and unions report increasing pressure on established agreements. While open breakdowns of dialogue are relatively rare, significant disagreements persist, particularly in sectors facing restructuring, wage pressure or increased subcontracting. Although some respondents express concerns about stagnation in the political environment, these concerns do not fundamentally undermine the perceived stability and reliability of social partnership; however, political shifts and employer-driven deregulation pressures pose growing challenges. Overall, the results reflect long-standing, institutionalised systems with high levels of autonomy, expertise and mutual recognition underpinned by trade unions' sustained mobilisation capacity. The regularity of dialogue is equally evident, with meetings occurring on a monthly, bimonthly or quarterly basis and no indication of irregular or ad hoc engagement in those sectors where structured dialogue exists.

CLUSTER 2: Embedded neoliberal - partially coordinated and fragmented regimes (Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia)

In these countries, social dialogue is described as functional but inconsistent. Respondents frequently combine agreement with partial disagreement, indicating ambivalence or variability in how dialogue works in practice. Preparedness of sessions, engagement of authorities, and the meaningfulness of outcomes are often assessed as uneven. Dialogue is perceived as constructive in certain areas but limited or formalistic in others. Trade unions maintain generally positive views of their own organisational commitment yet display less confidence in the engagement and reliability of other actors. This cluster reflects structural characteristics typical of post-socialist systems: decentralised bargaining architectures, fluctuating political support, capacity constraints, and varying levels of institutionalisation. Social dialogue is neither fully robust nor fundamentally undermined; rather, it is situational and influenced by external conditions. The frequency of interactions mirrors this variability, ranging from quarterly meetings in some sectors to irregular or only annual engagement in others, underscoring the fragmented and situational character of social dialogue in these systems.

CLUSTER 3: State-centred and weakly institutionalised regimes (Hungary and Serbia)

Trade union respondents in these countries express the most critical assessments across nearly all statements presented in the table. Social dialogue is commonly described as irregular, formalistic or lacking substantive influence. There is widespread scepticism toward the authorities' willingness to consult social partners, and respondents highlight weakened autonomy, reduced representativeness, and limited opportunities to shape policy agendas. Multiple items receive high levels of disagreement or strong disagreement, significantly more than in any other country, indicating systemic barriers to meaningful dialogue. Despite this, organisations still report strong internal commitment to social dialogue, suggesting a discrepancy between trade union willingness to engage and a political-institutional environment that provides few effective channels for participation. The overall picture is one of structurally eroded or politically constrained systems.

Meeting frequency further reflects this weakness, with many respondents reporting no regular interactions or only very infrequent sessions, reinforcing the perception of structurally eroded institutional channels.

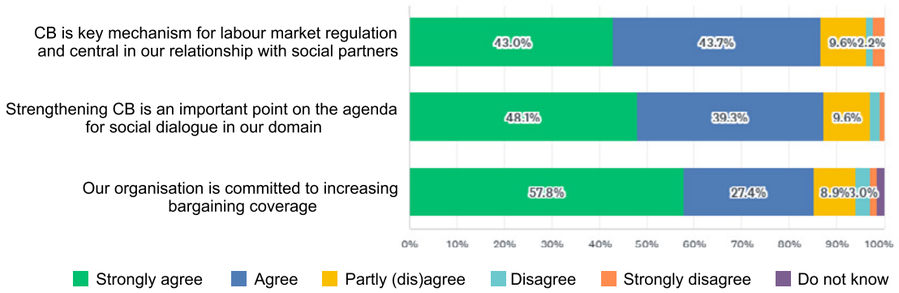
To summarise, there is a clear differentiation among the studied countries in how trade unions perceive the state of social dialogue. Institutionalised corporatist systems (e.g., in Austria, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland) continue to function in a stable and constructive manner. Nevertheless, during the workshops, Swiss participants shared concerns about the stability of this system. In contrast, transitional post-socialist systems (especially Croatia and Czechia) exhibit ambivalent but functional dialogue structures, and politically constrained systems face persistent obstacles that undermine the effectiveness of social dialogue. These findings complement the country-by-country profiles presented earlier and provide a comparative framework for analysing subsequent survey questions in this report.

2.2.2 Collective Bargaining: Importance, Measures and Initiatives

Across all countries, trade unions overwhelmingly view collective bargaining as a central mechanism of labour market regulation and as an integral component of their relationship with social partners (see Figure 2.2). Most respondents also express strong organisational commitment to strengthening collective bargaining and expanding coverage. While this broad consensus is evident across all clusters, the intensity

FIGURE 2.2 Perceived relationship between social dialogue and collective bargaining

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.



and consistency of these perceptions differ across the three identified clusters.

CLUSTER 1: Coordinated corporatist social partnership regimes (Austria, Switzerland and Liechtenstein)

Trade unions in these countries express broad, though not entirely uniform, perception that collective bargaining is a key mechanism of labour market regulation and central to the functioning of social dialogue. In Austria and Switzerland, responses are heavily concentrated in the "agree" and "strongly agree" categories, with no negative answers recorded. However, several respondents note that operational challenges persist despite the overall consensus. Liechtenstein shows similarly uniform support, reflecting a well-consolidated, institutionally embedded bargaining framework.

Trade unions also report very high internal commitment to improving bargaining coverage, even though resource constraints and sectoral fragmentation pose growing challenges, with Switzerland and Liechtenstein showing 100% agreement and Austria demonstrating strong majority support. These findings underscore systems in which collective bargaining is both structurally central and widely perceived as effective and legitimate but increasingly exposed to employer-driven flexibilisation pressures.

Alongside their strong commitment to collective bargaining, unions in coordinated corporatist regimes also report well-established and clearly identifiable measures supporting bargaining coverage, whose effectiveness, however, depends heavily on political will and enforcement capacity. Austria and Switzerland show large majorities confirming the existence of such initiatives, while Liechtenstein indicates ongoing development of new measures with full awareness among respondents. This reflects the still relatively predictable and institutionalised character of collective bargaining in these regimes, while also highlighting the need to adapt these tools to address new forms of precarious and platform-based work.

Individual responses point to very concrete and institutionalised tools supporting bargaining coverage, such as statutory extension mechanisms, sector-specific collective agreements (e.g., for courier services), targeted information campaigns, and Switzerland's well-established flanking measures and tripartite labour-market monitoring commissions. These illustrate the mature institutional infrastructure behind collective bargaining in coordinated regimes.

CLUSTER 2: Partially coordinated and fragmented regimes (Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia)

In this cluster, collective bargaining is also recognised as central, but the responses display greater ambivalence and dispersion. In Czechia and Slovakia, most respondents agree with the central role of collective bargaining. Yet, sizable portions fall into the "partly (dis)agree" group, indicating mixed experiences and sectoral variation. Slovenia shows similar patterns, with a generally strong agreement but also noticeable levels of partial disagreement. Croatia is somewhat more positive, though still less uniform than Cluster 1.

Commitment to increasing bargaining coverage remains high but more uneven. Czechia and Slovenia show notable shares of partial disagreement or uncertainty, suggesting capacity constraints or unstable institutional settings. Slovakia displays a relatively mixed structure, combining strong commitment with visible scepticism. Overall, collective bargaining is valued, but its institutional functioning appears less predictable and more dependent on sectoral or political contingencies.

In these more uneven systems, the presence and visibility of initiatives to expand bargaining coverage are much more variable. Croatia and Slovakia report relatively high levels of existing measures, while Slovenia shows mixed awareness and Czechia displays the most fragmented pattern, with many respondents indicating that initiatives are only in preparation or not clearly identifiable. This variability mirrors the broader fragility and partial institutionalisation of collective bargaining in these countries.

Open responses point to sector-dependent and uneven practices, ranging from internal union support services (legal help, coordination, mediation) to isolated sectoral developments such as Slovakia's new obligation for sectoral bargaining in banking and insurance. Croatian unions describe information campaigns, training, and participation in social dialogue bodies, while others mention limited or no concrete measures.

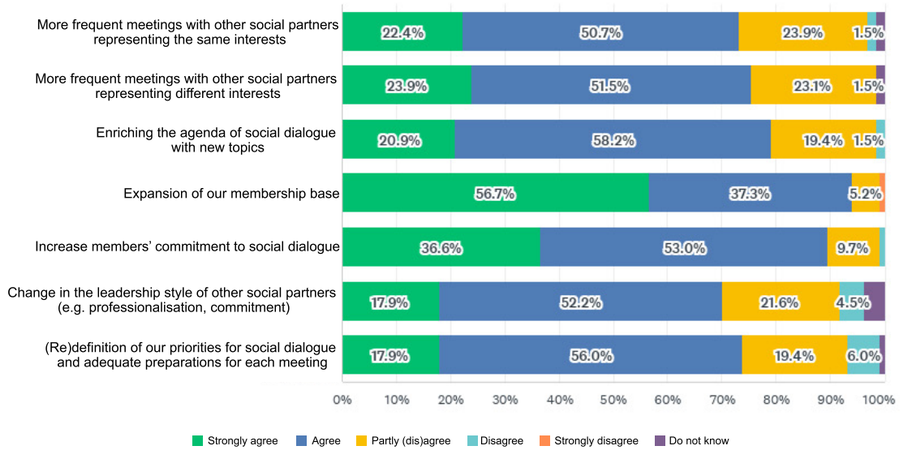
Across all countries, trade unions overwhelmingly view collective bargaining as a central mechanism of labour market regulation and as an integral component of their relationship with social partners.

CLUSTER 3: State-centred and weakly institutionalised regimes (Hungary and Serbia)

Here the pattern diverges most clearly from the first two clusters. While majorities in both countries affirm that collective bargaining is important, responses are substantially more dispersed, and negative or partly negative evaluations are far more common. In Hungary, agreement is split between strong support and sizable shares of partial disagreement or outright disagreement – much higher than in any other country. Serbia shows a similar structure, with only about half of the respondents fully agreeing.

FIGURE 2.3

Expected improvements in social dialogue



Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

Commitment to expanding bargaining coverage is also less consistently expressed, with both countries showing non-negligible levels of disagreement and uncertainty. This mirrors earlier findings that political and institutional barriers limit the practical impact of collective bargaining, even when unions remain normatively committed to it. The results reflect systems where collective bargaining is valued in principle but hampered in practice by constrained institutional environments.

In weakly institutionalised regimes, perceptions of initiatives to support collective bargaining are uncertain and inconsistent. Serbia reports a mix of existing and absent measures, while Hungary shows low recognition of concrete initiatives and a high share of responses indicating that measures are only in preparation or are unclear. This aligns with broader structural constraints on social dialogue and with limited governmental support for strengthening collective bargaining.

Additional individual comments from these countries reinforce the picture of weak institutional support. Hungarian respondents frequently note the absence of concrete measures, relying instead on basic organising, training, and legal assistance. Serbian responses refer to attempts to negotiate broader agreements and various local initiatives, but also explicitly describe the situation as poor or insufficient. These contributions highlight unions' efforts to fill gaps in systems where collective bargaining initiatives lack stable institutional backing.

2.2.3 Expected improvements in social dialogue practice

Trade union respondents across all countries express a generally strong wish to improve the functioning of social dialogue in their domains (see Figure 2.3). The most frequently endorsed areas concern more regular interaction with social partners, broader and more forward-looking agendas, strengthening organisational capacity (especially membership and commitment), and improving the professionalism and preparedness of actors involved. The intensity and focus of these desired improvements, however, vary significantly across the three regime clusters.

Coordinated corporatist social partnership regimes (Austria, Switzerland and Liechtenstein)

In coordinated systems, respondents tend to support incremental rather than fundamental improvements although some emphasise the need for more substantial adjustments in response to increasing labour market fragmentation. They express high agreement with enriching the agenda of social dialogue (particularly to address emerging challenges such as subcontracting chains, platform work and cross-border labour mobility) and strengthening members' commitment (especially by improving outreach in precarious, migrant, and hard-to-organise sectors), while also favouring more frequent and results-oriented meetings with actors holding different interests. Membership expansion is widely supported, and while perceived urgency may be lower than in other clusters, unions still emphasise its critical importance for maintaining bargaining power. Views on improving the leadership style or professionalism of other social partners are more mixed, partly because tensions often stem from conflicting interests rather than managerial or procedural shortcomings, indicating that perceived deficiencies are specific rather than systemic. Overall, the desired improvements indicate a system that is perceived as stable, yet increasingly confronted with pressures that may require both fine-tuning and selective structural adjustments.

Partially coordinated and fragmented regimes (Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia)

Respondents in this cluster show broad but uneven support for a wide range of improvements, mirroring the mixed institutional development of social dialogue. There is consistent demand for more frequent interaction – both within the same side of industry and with opposing social partners – and for expanding the agenda with new issues. Strengthening organisational capacity through membership growth and higher member commitment receives strong endorsement, particularly in Croatia and Slovakia. Calls for better preparation and clearer priorities for each meeting are more pronounced here than in coordinated regimes, reflecting the fragmented and unstable routines in these countries. Moderate support for improving the leadership style of other social partners further underlines the need for more predictable and professional engagement.

State-centred and weakly institutionalised regimes (Hungary and Serbia)

In weakly institutionalised systems, respondents highlight large-scale, structural deficiencies. Desire for improvements is strong across all items, especially regarding more frequent meetings, richer agendas, expanding membership, and strengthening internal commitment. In Hungary and Serbia, high shares of agreement for redefining priorities and improving preparation for meetings indicate a perceived need for fundamental organisational strengthening. Support for changes in the leadership style of other social partners is also higher and more consistent than elsewhere, reflecting frustrations with politicised, inconsistent or insufficient engagement from counterparts. Overall, the pattern points to a context where social dialogue is seen as requiring deep institutional reinforcement, not just adjustments.

2.2.4 Employer Organisations: Summary of Survey Insights

Employer organisations provide a generally cautious and moderate assessment of social dialogue (see Figure 2.4). Their responses often fall into middle categories rather than strong agreement or disagreement, indicating ambivalence and mixed experiences rather than clear endorsement of how social dialogue currently functions. Evaluations of the political environment, the meaningfulness of dialogue, and cooperation with social partners reveal functioning but constrained practices, with clear

room for improvement but limited confidence in the consistency or effectiveness of existing arrangements.

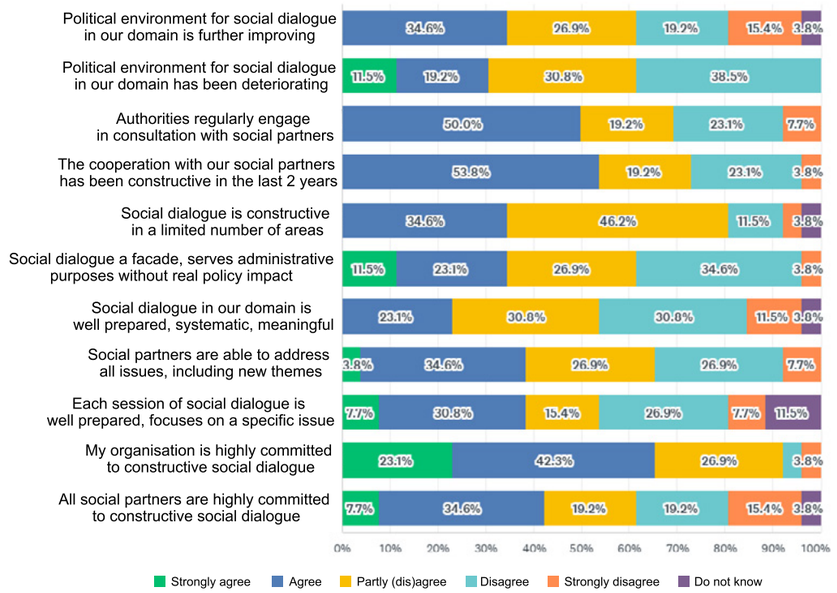
Across items related to collective bargaining, employers recognise its relevance but express more reserved attitudes compared to trade unions. Agreement that collective bargaining plays a central regulatory role is present but not dominant, and support for expanding bargaining coverage or adopting new initiatives is similarly moderate. This pattern reflects the heterogeneous and sector-specific nature of employer representation, where incentives for stronger collective bargaining vary widely.

When asked where they would like to see improvements, employers most frequently point to the need for more regular interactions, broader dialogue agendas, and stronger internal commitment within their own organisations. Views on the leadership style or professionalism of other actors are mixed, suggesting that perceived shortcomings exist but are not universally viewed as systemic.

Overall, employer organisations express expectations for incremental rather than far-reaching changes, highlighting the desire for better coordination and clearer processes rather than a fundamental redesign of social dialogue structures.

FIGURE 2.4

Employers' perceptions on the state of social dialogue



Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

2.3

Conclusions

The findings presented in this section reveal a highly differentiated landscape of social dialogue across Central Europe, structured above all by the degree of institutionalisation and political support. Coordinated corporatist regimes continue to provide stable and predictable frameworks in which social dialogue and collective bargaining are mutually reinforcing and widely perceived as effective, even if concerns about future sustainability are emerging. In partially coordinated post-socialist systems, social dialogue remains functional but uneven, shaped by fragmented bargaining structures, fluctuating political backing and sector-specific capacities. In contrast, state-centred and weakly institutionalised regimes face systemic constraints that render social dialogue largely formalistic and limit its real influence on policy and labour-market outcomes, despite sustained trade union commitment to engagement.

Across all clusters, collective bargaining retains strong normative importance, particularly among trade unions, but its practical effectiveness increasingly depends on supportive institutions, regular interaction and credible political partners. Expectations for improvement mirror these structural differences: while coordinated systems emphasise incremental fine-tuning, fragmented and weakly institutionalised regimes articulate demands for more fundamental reinforcement of dialogue structures, organisational capacity and agenda-setting. Employer organisations, for their part, express more cautious and moderate views, generally favouring incremental improvements over systemic change. Taken together, the results underline that strengthening social dialogue in Central Europe cannot rely on uniform solutions but must account for distinct regime contexts, institutional legacies and power asymmetries that shape both current practice and future reform potential.

03

Political environment for social dialogue and collective bargaining

This section provides a country-based summary of survey results related to freedom of association, contractual autonomy, harmful measures, obstacles to collective bargaining and continues with a comparative discussion and additional notes.

3.1

Country-specific insights

Figure 3.1 illustrates how social partners evaluate the security of social dialogue and their own capacity to engage in collective bargaining in nine countries. We first discuss the findings at the country level, followed by a comparative analysis.

3.1.1 Austria

The great majority of survey respondents have noted that social dialogue in Austria enjoys overall institutional stability and security, and that social partners are sufficiently autonomous and recognised as legitimate. Respondents also indicated that social partners are able to monitor collective bargaining and that they receive sufficient external support.

Nevertheless, several respondents have noted that social partners are affected by harmful measures, and few respondents expressed a worry that the political environment for social dialogue is deteriorating with around 5% of respondents agreeing that the autonomy or freedom of association of social partners has been harmed in the last five years.

3.1.2 Croatia

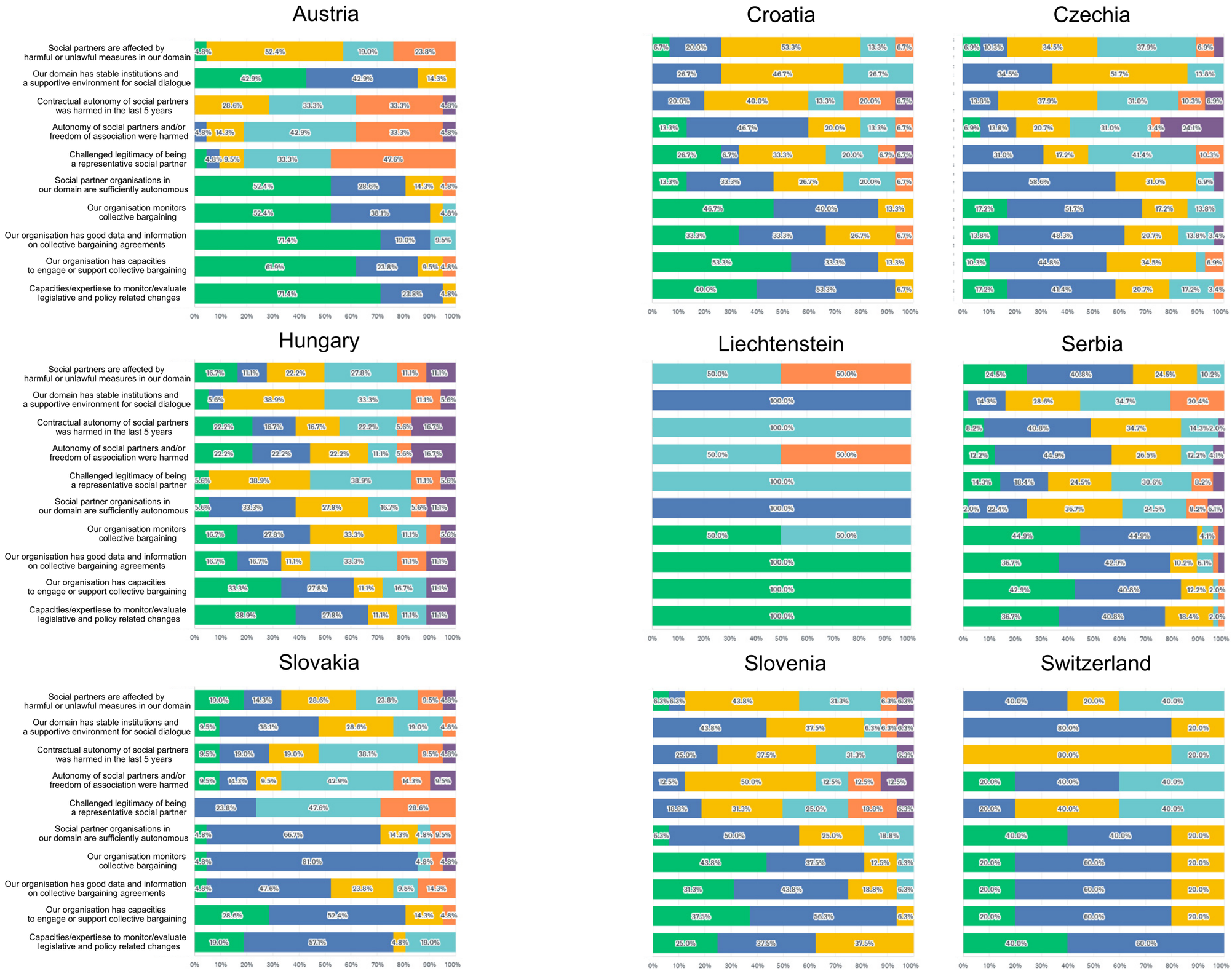
A significant proportion of respondents (26.7%) evaluated the institutional stability and environment critically, also reporting harmful or unlawful measures within their area of operation. The vast majority (86.7%-93.3%) strongly agreed with the respective statements regarding sufficient monitoring capacities and support activities that enable collective bargaining. A slightly lower proportion of respondents (66.7%) considered that they had good data and information on collective bargaining agreements. One survey respondent reported that the representativity law needs urgent amendment, as the current regulation restricts trade unions' access to collective bargaining. Croatia has shown some positive developments in collective bargaining in recent years, most notably the conclusion of a

FIGURE 3.1

Evaluation of security of social dialogue and capacities to engage in collective bargaining by countries

Note: Responses by all social partners

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.



sectoral collective bargaining agreement in the wood and paper sector. While the public sector is well covered, analyses of the private sector showed the persistence of problems in sectors with small and medium-sized companies. In the private sector, only around 35% of workers are covered (Bejakovic and Klemenčić 2024). As outlined in its programme document for 2022–2026, the Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia (Savez samostalnih sindikata Hrvatske, SSSH) aims to continue improving the collective bargaining system (increasing sector-level coverage and coordination, improving data and strengthening implementation).

3.1.3 Czechia

The assessment of the safety and stability of social dialogue in Czechia indicates a relatively solid internal capacity of social partners, combined with the perception of external fragility. Most respondents agree that their organisations are autonomous, well-informed, and capable of engaging in or supporting collective bargaining. A clear majority also report that they regularly monitor developments and possess sufficient data for negotiations.

At the same time, a significant proportion expresses concern about the broader environment. Many respondents note that the autonomy or freedom of association of social partners has been challenged in recent years, and around one third perceive that contractual autonomy was harmed or that social partners have been affected by harmful or unfair practices. These findings point to a situation in which social dialogue actors feel competent and prepared internally but operate within an environment that is not always stable, predictable, or fully supportive of their independent functioning.

Trade unions tend to perceive the environment for social dialogue as more fragile and exposed to external pressures, with several respondents referring to cases of limited autonomy, harmful practices, or challenges to representativeness. Employers, by contrast, describe the institutional setting as largely stable and supportive, expressing fewer concerns about external interference. Both groups, however, agree that their organisations are well equipped internally – they report sufficient autonomy, access to data, and expertise to monitor and engage in collective bargaining. The main divergence thus lies not in internal capacity but in the perceived security and predictability of the broader environment in which social dialogue operates.

In terms of individual responses, several participants highlighted deeper structural and attitudinal problems affecting social dialogue in Czechia. Trade unions are often perceived as outdated or ideologically biased, which undermines their legitimacy and limits willingness for genuine negotiation. Respondents also mentioned excessive administrative and legal burdens, insufficient preparation and professionalism among negotiators, and generally low representativeness of trade union structures.

3.1.4 Hungary

A significant proportion of respondents from Hungary (strongly) agreed that harmful or unlawful measures affected their operation (27.8%) including contractual autonomy (38.9%) or freedom of association (44.4%). Institutional stability and environment were most typically evaluated as poor (44.4%). For the public sector, protecting the legally defined status of specific public sector professionals and subsectors has been a constant priority, necessitating the involvement of the ILO and the preparation of expert studies to support these efforts.

Not only has coverage by collective bargaining agreement remained very low, but hardly any measures have been taken to implement the EU Directive 2022/2041 on adequate minimum wages in the European Union, despite the implications this has for increasing collective bargaining coverage (Gyulavári and Kártyás, 2024). Both SZEF and MASZSZ considered this an urgent issue requiring action. They also prepared expert analyses on other regulatory issues, such as the implementation of Directive 2003/88/EC concerning certain aspects of the organisation of working time (Working Time Directive), but these were not adopted by the government. Respondents indicated that legislative changes and policy were the areas of focus requiring the most attention. In the private sector, a respondent reflected on the swiftly changing labour market situation that needs constant monitoring and analysis. Beyond insufficient access to information, structurally weak trade union capacities, which further deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic, hindered the functioning of social dialogue and collective bargaining.

3.1.5 Liechtenstein

Overall, social dialogue in Liechtenstein appears to be very stable, with no recent harmful practices reported by associations or social partners. Over the past five years, the contractual autonomy of social partners has not been compromised. Freedom of association remains a core value and has not been violated. Nevertheless, some survey respondents indicated uncertainty when asked to assess statements related to contractual autonomy, legitimacy, and freedom of association.

Focusing on collective bargaining, survey respondents were convinced that they had the necessary organisational capacities and practices to successfully engage in collective bargaining.

3.1.6 Serbia

Survey respondents were very critical of the authorities' engagement with social dialogue. While social dialogue was irregular, its quality was also deemed poor in terms of both content and the implementation of decisions. Another issue raised was weak state capacities: only the Ministry of Labour engaged with social partners, while other ministries considered it an unnecessary operational burden. At a national level, interaction with other ministries was almost non-existent except for the setting of minimum wages, which involved the Ministry of Finance. This hindered the implementation of decisions and did not guarantee the involvement of social partners in the legislative process.

In their congress documents and strategic papers, both SSSS and UGS Nezavisnost emphasised that the Social and Economic Council of the Republic of Serbia (Socijalno-ekonomski savet Republike Srbije, SES) has increasingly been sidelined in key strategic decision-making, functioning more as a symbolic institution than as an effective forum for social dialogue. They further highlighted the dominant and largely extra-institutional influence of foreign capital, which benefits from preferential treatment by the Serbian government. This dynamic marginalises both trade unions and employer organisations, undermining the role of social partners as meaningful intermediaries and limiting their involvement in co-governance processes. Despite this perceived situation, most survey respondents indicated that the sessions of social dialogue are happening regularly, while some respondents noted that these do not occur at all.

Survey responses in Serbia indicate that the Serbian government is not listening to the opinions and interests of its workers and citizens, but to those of dominant foreign capital.

Earlier reports and studies (Urdarevic, 2024; Stojiljkovic, 2023) indicated that the security of

collective bargaining and the institutionalisation of social dialogue had remained precarious in the last decade. Congress documents from SSSS in 2020 noted the extremely short deadlines set by the government for discussing and providing opinions/recommendations on draft laws at the time. In the worst cases, the government entirely bypassed debate within the SEC, resorting to adopting laws under urgent procedures. Union reports complained that the government does not respect the value of social dialogue and that it is not a criterion in policy-making processes (SSSS 2020). Nevertheless, the most alarming development in Serbia, which culminated at the end of 2024, was the overall instability of democratic institutions and the rule of law. In their responses to the survey, respondents also indicated the alarming lack of institutional stability and the poor environment for conducting social dialogue.

3.1.7 Slovakia

Less than half of respondents from Slovakia indicated that institutional stability of social dialogue and its environment is stable. Respondents were even more critical in their evaluation of contractual autonomy, freedom of association and legitimacy of social partners.

Respondents generally perceive themselves as well-organised, informed, and capable actors in collective bargaining and related policy processes. They express confidence in their autonomy, access to data, and ability to engage in or support collective bargaining negotiations. At the same time, a notable share believe that the contractual autonomy or freedom of association of social partners has been limited in recent years, and some report experiences of harmful practices or cases that were individually perceived as unfair. This combination suggests relatively strong internal capacity but a more fragile external environment for social dialogue.

Individual responses illustrate both negative and positive experiences. Some referred to cases of dismissals or discrimination against trade union representatives, while others reported no harmful employer practices, noting instead tensions at workplaces where more than one union operate. One respondent also highlighted limited financial and expert capacities, emphasising the need for stronger legal and economic expertise to support social dialogue.

3.1.8 Slovenia

While a significant proportion (12.6%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that harmful or unlawful measures had affected their organisation, the stability of institutions of social dialogue was generally evaluated as moderately stable. No respondent strongly agreed with the statement on institutional stability; only 43.8% agreed with it and 37.5% partly agreed or disagreed. Crises surrounding the operation of the tripartite Economic and Social Council (ESS) appear to be rooted in a deeper political crisis of representative democracy in Slovenia, which has been managed by extraordinary elections over the last decade. Breznik (2024) highlights that the ESS resumed activity in late 2022, following a year of inactivity under the previous right-wing government. Employer organisations complained about insufficient involvement in the regulation of social care. In July 2023, during the final stage of negotiations on the Employment Relationships Act, employer organisations withdrew from the body. The Employment Relationships Act (ZDR-1D) was eventually submitted for parliamentary approval without the consent of the social partners, contrary to the ESS protocol. Respondents evaluated their own capacity to monitor, collect data and support collective bargaining positively; most agreed that their organisation had sufficient capacity and engagement. On the employers' side, Breznik also noted the increasing influence of foreign chambers representing the interests of foreign companies in Slovenia.

At a sectoral level, the main challenge is reforming wage systems. The current system is outdated; the entire bargaining system is still based on negotiating wage supplements. It is also necessary to evaluate working conditions and indicators of quality employment, not just wages. A major reform is required but would necessitate the engagement and commitment of all social partners. However, employers are not (always) willing to participate. Recently, employer organisations have frozen their membership because they did not agree to biannual bonus payments, which has caused a crisis in social dialogue. This has resulted in the company level becoming dominant, with all details left to the company-level social partners to define. Company-level dialogue risks weakening the traditionally strong sectoral system, thereby increasing wage and working condition dispersion across companies and regions. Company-level bargaining tends to amplify power asymmetries, particularly in small and medium companies, where union presence and bargaining capacity are limited, making outcomes highly dependent on company performance and management discretion (Ceccon et al. 2023).

3.1.9 Switzerland

Overall, 80% of survey respondents perceived the institutional environment for social dialogue in Switzerland as stable and supportive, although the absence of strong agreement suggests a fragile setup. Authorities' engagement was widely seen as active, reflecting the embedded role of dialogue in Switzerland's system of direct democracy, where regular exchanges are an expected part of policy-making, albeit with significant variation across sectors and policy areas. While most social partners considered themselves sufficiently autonomous and organisationally capable of engaging in and monitoring collective bargaining, respondents were more critical of other social partners' commitment.

Trade union respondents noted criticism of employers' commitment to social dialogue, highlighting significant tensions linked to diverging interests, ideological opposition to regulation, and resistance to extending collective agreements.

Still, despite these tensions, social partners regularly meet to stay informed regarding social dialogue and relevant information about social dialogue is readily available according to survey respondents.

3.2

Security, stability, capacities for social dialogue and collective bargaining: comparison and discussion

Categorising the survey findings helped us to cluster countries based on the perceived security of social dialogue and the prospects of collective bargaining. This partly, but not fully, overlaps with the expectations. The first cluster comprises Austria, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, which are often described as having a relatively stable political environment and traditionally institutionalised forms of social dialogue. Respondents, however, underline that this stability is increasingly uneven across sectors.

However, Switzerland is a partial outlier as a significant proportion of respondents (40%) from Switzerland indicated that harmful measures were affecting social dialogue, such as political attempts to weaken labour regulation, employer resistance to extending collective agreements, and the expansion of subcontracting. According to this indicator, Switzerland shows characteristics typically associated with the second cluster of countries, highlighting internal tensions within an otherwise coordinated system.

The second cluster comprises Croatia, Czechia, Slovakia and Slovenia, which struggle to maintain security and capacities for social dialogue. Croatia reported mostly positive developments, while Slovakia reported the most alarming trends, with trade unions in Czechia and Slovenia being entrenched in long-term institutional battles.

The last cluster comprises Hungary and Serbia, where respondents evaluated developments as alarming for both social dialogue and the prospects of collective bargaining. Very low scores were given for the regularity of social dialogue, the political atmosphere and political will.

3.2.1 Security of social dialogue

In terms of security of social dialogue and collective bargaining, the countries most affected by harmful measures, according to respondents, were Serbia (65.3% strongly agreeing), followed by Hungary and, to a lesser extent, Slovakia and Croatia. Notably, 40% of respondents from Switzerland also agreed with negative developments, pointing to concerns such as increasing subcontracting, political pressure to deregulate labour standards and challenges in maintaining collective agreement coverage. A minority of respondents from Czechia and Slovenia gave negative evaluations, and hardly any from Liechtenstein or Austria did so.

Conversely, a significant proportion of respondents from Austria (83.8%), Liechtenstein (all agreed) and more cautiously, Switzerland (80%) evaluated the institutional stability of social dialogue positively, although this perceived stability in Switzerland coexists with growing sectoral tension. A smaller proportion of respondents from Slovenia (47.6%), Slovakia (34.5%), Czechia (26.7%) and Croatia (26.7%) also agreed. The most negative evaluations came from Serbia (16%) and Hungary (11.2%). A similar pattern emerged in terms of the evaluation of the autonomy of social partners in their operational domain.

In terms of harming contractual autonomy or freedom of association, social partners from Serbia and Hungary expressed the most concern, although trade unions from Croatia also complained about freedom of association being harmed. In the second group – Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland and Czechia – around 20% of respondents also reported negative developments. The underlying causes differ significantly, ranging from weak institutional frameworks to pressures linked to subcontracting and political stagnation. Such practices were reportedly very rare in Austria and Liechtenstein.

3.2.2 Examples and additional reflections

While most survey respondents highlighted that there are stable institutions and a supportive environment for social dialogue, 40% of respondents agree that social partners are nonetheless affected by harmful measures in their domain, indicating that institutional stability does not fully protect against political or employer-driven pressure. For instance, one respondent reported that Switzerland lacks robust legal protections against dismissals linked to trade union activity, resulting in cases where union activists are dismissed without effective legal remedies. Therefore, it regularly happens that union members are dismissed over their involvement in unions. In addition, respondents also mentioned political attacks, including attempts to weaken collective bargaining structures or reduce the scope of labour-market regulation. 60% of respondents also noted attacks happening on the (contractual) autonomy of social partners and the freedom of association often linked to employer resistance, political interference, or pressures arising from decentralised bargaining structures and the majority of respondents partly agree that there have been harmful attacks on the autonomy of social partners in the last five years. These developments may be reinforced by Switzerland's highly decentralised bargaining system and minimalist labour law provisions, which leave social dialogue more exposed to political and employer-driven pressure (Bonvin et al. 2023). Nonetheless, there seems to be a consensus among respondents that trade unions in Switzerland hold a legitimate position in social dialogue and have enough capacities and data to monitor and support collective bargaining, although it is increasingly challenged in some political arenas. Respondents stressed the need to prioritise the labour market position of women and LGBTQ+ people in Switzerland, but most (80%) highlighted the urgent need to focus on work and safety as an issue to be addressed by social dialogue.

A significant challenge for trade unions in Switzerland is increasing their membership base. While the largest trade union confederation, the SGB, counted a small plus in new memberships in 2023, it is the first plus after ten years of steady decline in membership. In 2024, membership numbers again declined by 1.8% at SGB. Thus, the survey responses align with these numbers and highlight the need to continuously advocate for additional members in trade unions. Respondents also see a need to increase the commitment of members for social dialogue. They would also like to see a change in leadership of other social partners, for instance, in their dedication or professionalism. In recent years, the main counterpart organisations have become more ideologically driven and are seen by trade unions as less reliable partners. This aligns with the fact that organised labour is decentralised, with the main trade union SGB having only 48 % of all union members, partly because of Switzerland's decentralised labour relations system.

Some workshop participants, in general, highlighted that a lack of adequate, supportive political will not only prevents social dialogue from functioning but also hinders the implementation of agreements, setting in motion a negative cycle that affects the internal authority of social partners. In Croatia, for example, there are good institutional structures. Still, the operation of social dialogue bodies is suboptimal and weak due to a lack of allocated resources, and since institutions operate in an uncoordinated and unresponsive manner. Except for the Ministry of Labour, most ministries and authorities ignore the work of the national tripartite body or fail to consult it; the Ministry of Finance is the most problematic in this regard. For example, taxation policies are not discussed with social partners. In Slovenia, Slovakia, and Czechia, the entire wage-setting system is outdated and in need of significant reform, but the employer side is less interested in this, focusing instead on lobbying activities rather than engaging in joint institutional reform with worker representatives. In Slovenia, the employers' federation has frozen its membership in the national tripartite body, which has put the national-level social dialogue into crisis. The public sector is under strain in many countries. A survey respondent from Czechia indicated that a major obstacle to social dialogue is that there is a lack of expertise behind decision making, that is, respective ministries make decisions without consulting and gaining sufficient expertise on the relevant subject matter.

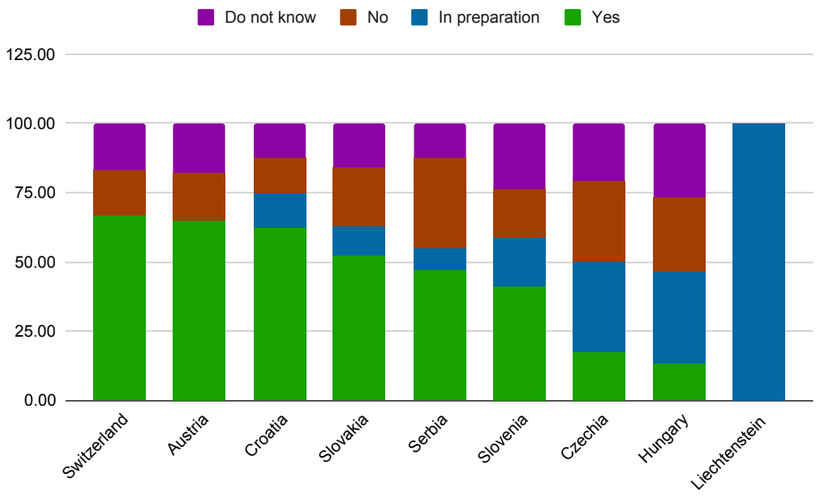
The most alarming developments were reported by social partners from Hungary and Serbia. Social dialogue was reported as irregular at all levels (national, sectoral, company), but social partners pointed out the general poor quality of social dialogue, the low interest of state representatives and low state capacities that would grant the institutions of social dialogue a relevant role in decision making. In Serbia, beyond no implementation of legislation, and ignorance of the provisions of the labour code there was a deep, protracted political crisis, implying an overall institutional crisis, including institutions of social dialogue.

3.2.3 Capacities to engage in collective bargaining

The least variation across countries was seen in terms of monitoring and supporting collective bargaining, as the majority of social partners in all 9 surveyed Central European countries engaged in this practice. A partial exception is Hungary, where there is a lack of data on collective bargaining agreements. However, we see a different picture when we examine the measures and/or initiatives introduced to promote collective bargaining coverage and effective social dialogue. In this respect, Switzerland, Austria and Croatia performed significantly better than other countries (see Figure 3.2).

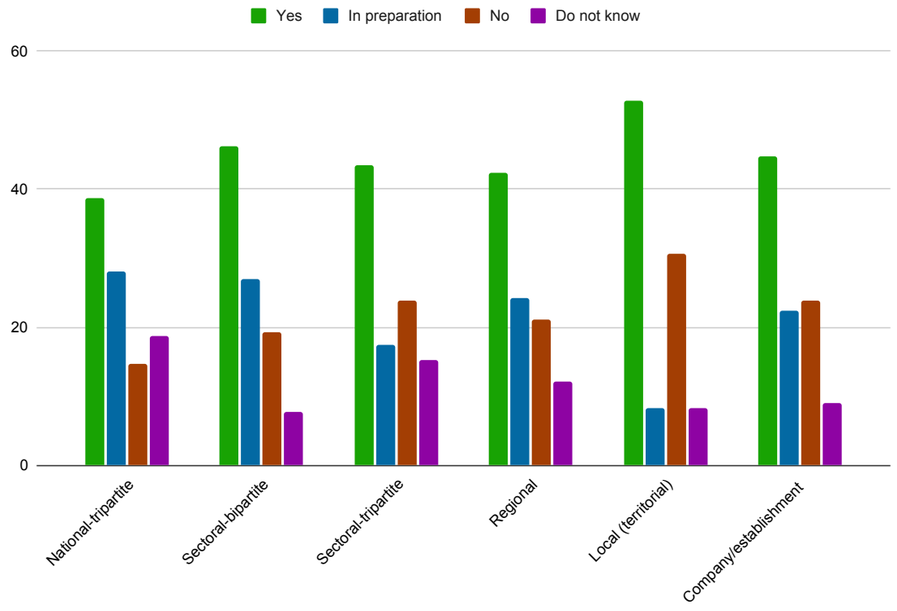
It is also interesting to note that, as shown in Figure 3.3, social partners at all levels of organising observed a launch of new measures or initiatives promoting collective according. However, social partners at the sectoral bipartite level noticed the greatest positive change. At this level, about 72% of respondents indicated that measures or initiatives were either implemented or were in preparation (see Figure 3.3). The distribution of responses was the following in terms of number of answers by domain: national tripartite (75), sectoral bipartite (52), sectoral tripartite (46), regional (33), local territorial (36), company/establishment (67).

FIGURE 3.2 Presence of measures/initiatives to promote collective bargaining (by country)



Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

FIGURE 3.3 Assessment of the presence of measures/initiatives to promote collective bargaining



Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

3.3

Conclusions

In our sample of countries, only respondents from Austria and Liechtenstein reported an overall stable political climate and a secure social dialogue. In other countries, especially Serbia and Hungary, respondents highlighted that a lack of adequate, supportive political will not only prevents social dialogue from functioning but also hinders the implementation of agreements, setting in motion a negative cycle that also affects the internal authority of social partners. A common complaint for the majority of cases was weak implementation and poor or shrinking state capacities. With the partial exception of Hungary, the majority of Central European social partners engaged in full to satisfactory monitoring of collective bargaining agreements. In terms of initiatives introduced to promote collective bargaining coverage and effective social dialogue Switzerland, Austria and Croatia performed significantly better than the other countries.

Some respondents from Switzerland reported that harmful measures were impacting social dialogue. Croatia reported mainly positive developments, Slovakia indicated the most concerning trends, and trade unions in Czechia and Slovenia found themselves entrenched in prolonged institutional conflicts. In Hungary and Serbia, respondents assessed the developments as alarming for both social dialogue and the future of collective bargaining.

04

Workers' participation and co-determination at the company level

Worker participation and co-determination are key elements of the European industrial relations system and pillars of the European Social Model. Worker participation in the workplace and co-management are closely linked to industrial democracy. Industrial democracy can be defined narrowly as worker participation in management (e.g. Poole et al. 2001). However, in democracies, workers' participation in decision-making has constitutional, legal, and practical implications. It is of key importance not only for the functioning of democratically organised states as political communities and key economic units (the companies) operating on their territories, but also for the relationship between the two. Specifically, in democracies, worker participation is anchored in the question of the extent to which the principles of macro-level democracy are compatible with, or in conflict with, the micro-level hierarchical relations of production at firms or workplaces, which typically operate on non-democratic, hierarchical lines of control and efficiency (e.g., Mitchell 1998). From the outset, the entire field of industrial relations has paid critical attention to resolving this conflict and its institutionalised solutions (Webb & Webb 1897, Traxler 2002), as embodied in questions regarding the role of trade unions in the workplace, the institution and role of works councils, and the inclusion of workers in decision making and company-level supervision. In recent decades, democratic backsliding has gone hand in hand with attacks on institutions of worker participation, even in countries with strong traditions of co-management, such as Germany, in line with calls on increasing efficiency, economic performance, and productivity at the expense of the involvement and participation of workers and their representatives at companies and workplaces. Worker participation has been a key indicator of job quality too, against which the efficiency-based discourses of job creation and job preservation have been used in recent managerial and state discourses, especially in crisis periods.

This chapter provides an overview of institutions of worker participation and co-determination at the company-level in nine Central European countries: Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Based on relevant data from the CELSI survey conducted in 2025, this analysis examines trade unions' and employers' assessments of the key institutions of company-level worker participation in respective countries and their functioning regarding workers' access to information.

The survey covered two key areas: the predominant form of worker participation in workplaces and the primary objectives of trade unions and employer organisations. The study aimed to contrast these findings with existing scholarly knowledge on the prevalent forms of workers' participation and information sharing with workers.

The chapter consists of three parts. First, we provide a brief overview of the institutional and regulatory framework of worker participation in each of the nine countries. Secondly, we set out the structural determinants of worker participation and present the findings of our survey. In the final section, we highlight the main issues of interest and concern. We argue that trade unions are pivotal in ensuring worker participation in the workplace. Recent attacks on trade unionism and the global anti-union trend imply a structural shift to discourage workers from participating.

4.1

Institutional and regulatory overview of worker participation in nine Central European countries

4.1.1 Austria

Austria combines strong legal foundations for company-level worker participation with high collective-bargaining coverage. Company-level participation is embedded in Austria's broader system of social dialogue and sectoral collective bargaining, which covers more than 95% of workers (Eurofound, 2023). Sectoral collective agreements define wages and core working conditions, while works councils (Betriebsräte) operationalise and complement these standards at workplace level (Gotthardová and Kahancová, 2025). However, the practical effectiveness of participation remains contingent on employer attitudes, sectoral traditions, and the quality of social-partner relations, including the relationship and trust between works council representatives and union representatives at the sectoral level (Gotthardová and Kahancová, 2025).

The operation of works councils is regulated by the Labour Constitution Act (Arbeitsverfassungsgesetz, ArbVG). Companies with at least five employees are legally entitled to establish a works council, which is elected by employees through a secret ballot (Melzer-Azodanloo, 2018). Once established, works councils enjoy extensive legal protections, including protection against dismissal and the right to paid time off for representative duties (usp.gv.at, 2024).

Works councils have wide-ranging rights to information, consultation and co-regulation. Employers are legally obliged to inform and consult them on staffing issues, dismissals, transfers, restructuring, health and safety, and working conditions, as well as on key economic matters such as business outlook and investment plans (usp.gv.at, 2024; Transatlantic Law, 2024). In defined areas, works councils can also conclude company-level agreements (Betriebsvereinbarungen) that regulate working time, data protection or workplace organisation (c.f. Geyer et al. 2025).

Gotthardová and Kahancová (2025) highlight that trust between management, works councils and trade unions is a decisive precondition for effective workplace representation, e.g., in sectors exposed to restructuring and digitalisation such as metal, transport and finance. At the same time, participation is uneven across companies and sectors, with smaller companies and service sectors displaying weaker representation and more limited influence of works councils (ibid.).

In addition to works councils operating under the Labour Constitution Act (Arbeitsverfassungsgesetz, ArbVG), workers in Austria have a legal entitlement to appoint representatives to the supervisory board (Aufsichtsrat) under company law rather than by labour law. According to Melzer-Azodanloo's (2018) analysis of Austrian labour law, while works councils are the primary vehicle for workers' voice within companies, board-level participation is a separate, statutory right that allows workers to be represented in strategic governance bodies in larger companies, reflecting Austria's dual system of workers' involvement in both internal and corporate decision-making.

4.1.2 Czechia

As regulated in the Czech Labour Code, the roles and rights of works councils and trade unions overlap but also differ to some extent. Only trade unions possess the authority to participate in collective bargaining, while differences exist concerning the areas of information, consultation, and agreement required from workers' representatives prior to implementing changes. Both local unions and works councils are entitled to be informed about the company's economic status, potential developments, environmental impact, structural changes, employment measures including redundancies, and key health and safety issues, among other topics. If a company employs fewer than 10 individuals, representatives' access to information regarding economic situations and environmental impacts is restricted, and their consultation rights are limited to specific issues such as transfers and health and safety matters. Additionally, there are formal consultation procedures regarding collective redundancies that require both trade unions and works councils to be consulted in advance to potentially avoid layoffs and mitigate their impacts on workers.

In the workplace, available reports (Worker participation.eu) suggest that the local union remains the primary means of worker representation. Additionally, works councils, which possess fewer rights, can be established. An amendment to the Labour Code (Act No. 262/2006 Coll.) effective from March 2008 allowed trade unions and works councils or health and safety representatives to coexist within the same company, ending the earlier principle of mutual exclusivity. Since this reform, unions, works councils and occupational health and safety representatives may operate in parallel but are not interchangeable. Works councils (zaměstnanecké rady) have general rights to information and consultation on economic developments, employment, organisational change, and working conditions, but they cannot engage in collective bargaining, which remains the exclusive domain of trade unions. Health and safety representatives (bezpěčnost a ochrana zdraví při práci, BOZP) have a narrow, function-specific mandate limited to occupational safety and health. In undertakings without trade unions, employers may meet information and consultation obligations through a works council or, if none exists, through health and safety representatives. However, their competencies do not overlap, and they do not replace one another. Despite this legal change, available evidence indicates that works councils still remain uncommon.

4.1.3 Croatia

Legally, Croatia has dual workplace representation through both trade unions and works councils. However, if there is no works council at a company or establishment, a trade union representative can perform almost all its duties and responsibilities. Such a legal constellation provides weak incentives for establishment of works councils.

At companies and establishments employing at least 20 workers, they have the right to establish and elect works council members. The Labour Code grants key advisory roles to the works council, especially in the protection and promotion of workers' interests and in participation in decision-making. Employers must inform the works council every three months about business conditions, worker impacts, and health and safety measures. Prior consultation with the works council is required for significant decisions affecting workers, including changes to employment rules, policies, and working hours. Similarly, as in Slovenia, the works council has 8 days to respond, and its voice must be considered. Certain dismissals require works council approval. The rights of the works council can be expanded through a collective bargaining agreement with trade unions. Trade unions are nevertheless the dominant interest-representative bodies at the company level. Trade unions are granted workplace presence either through external union officials or through union representatives who are also company/establishment workers. Depending on whether a separate trade union is established at the workplace level, trade union presence may have a stronger company-based identity or a more general one. Earlier research indicated that almost half of the companies had works councils in place, while trade unions were more concentrated at larger companies (Bagić, 2010).

4.1.4 Hungary

In the private sector, Hungary has a dual workplace representation system, via both local trade unions and elected works councils, with historically uneasy relations. The 2012 Labour Code redefined the roles and rights of trade unions and works councils by establishing trade unions as the primary interest-representation organisations of workers and the only actors entitled to engage in collective bargaining, while removing their information and consultation rights and their responsibility for monitoring compliance with employment regulations and labour law. Trade unions only have the right to request information and express their views. Workers are under no obligation to consult with them. On the other hand, works councils have information and consultation rights, as well as powers to influence decisions on company-based welfare, but they do not have any means to exert influence on part of workers, or sanction company decisions. Works councils in practice can also sign company agreements which may regulate all aspects of working conditions except for wages and remuneration. Quite interestingly, worker-elected health and safety representatives enjoy the highest level of legal protection from dismissal.

The employer must provide the works council with information on the following issues at least twice a year: fundamental issues affecting the employer's economic position; developments in wage and salary payments and their impact on the company's cash position; the characteristics of the workforce; the use of working time and working conditions; the number of agency workers and the tasks they perform. The works council can request documents relating to these issues, as well as more general documents concerning workers' economic and social interests. The employer must consult the works council in advance about plans for measures that will impact a large number of workers, particularly those relating to: restructuring, outsourcing or privatisation; the introduction of new investments, including new technology; processing and protecting personal worker data; the implementation of worker surveillance; health and safety; new methods of work organisation and setting performance norms; training and education plans; job assistance subsidies; rehabilitation for disabled workers; working arrangements; pay principles; measures to protect the environment; measures to support equal treatment and the coordination of work and family life. The Labour Code states that consultation on these issues should take place 'with a view to reaching agreement', but there is no obligation to do so.

In the event of collective redundancies, employers must notify the works council, of their plans at least seven days before negotiations begin and wait at least 15 days after negotiations start before deciding. In Hungary, a redundancy qualifies as a collective redundancy under the Labour Code if, within a 30-day period, at least 10 workers are dismissed in establishments with 20–99 workers, at least 10% of the workforce in establishments with 100–299 workers, or at least 30 workers in establishments with 300 or more workers, calculated based on the average workforce over the preceding six months.

When these thresholds are met, employers are subject to specific information and consultation obligations vis-à-vis the works council before any dismissal decisions can be implemented (Illés 2020). Desk research, the survey findings and discussions with social partners during the workshop suggest that often, information is only

provided at the meeting, which gives the works council little opportunity to respond. Works councils are obliged to inform constituencies about their activity only twice a year.

Works councils thus secure worker participation formally or in a delegated way, but they do not have real power to influence or secure active participation of workers. There are also recorded instances of established works councils being used by company management to circumvent trade union presence altogether, as in the case of Suzuki (Neumann and Tóth 2009), but such instances have multiplied since 2010 (Meszmann 2023).

Company-level trade unions, when sufficiently well organised, successfully ran their own candidates for works council positions. Works council representatives then operated closely with trade unions, providing key information for collective bargaining. Similarly, trade union candidates also run for the post of health and safety representatives. In practice, information sharing and worker involvement could occur via shop floor trade union representatives.

In the private sector, workers are represented at the workplace level by both trade unions and elected works councils. Compared to trade unions, works councils have greater information and consultation rights, but no means of influencing company decisions. In companies with well-established industrial relations, both operate in a cooperative way. In the public sector, there are no works councils.

4.1.5 Liechtenstein

Workers' participation at the company level in Liechtenstein is formally anchored in law and embedded in a cooperative model of social partnership. In enterprises with at least 50 workers, workers have a legal right to establish a worker representation body (Arbeitnehmervertretung). Once this threshold is reached, the employer is obliged to initiate the process and to agree with workers on the procedure for electing their representatives (LANV, n.d.). This reflects a regulatory approach that frames participation as structured cooperation rather than adversarial codetermination (Portmann, 2012).

The Liechtensteinischer ArbeitnehmerInnenverband (LANV) is the only nationwide trade union and plays a central role in supporting company-level representation, collective bargaining and legal protection of workers across all sectors (LANV, n.d.). Where worker representations are established, their rights typically include information and consultation, and in many cases are voluntarily extended through internal agreements or collective arrangements to cover areas such as working conditions, health and safety, restructuring, and staff-related decisions (LANV, n.d.). This flexible design allows firms to go beyond the statutory minimum but also leads to variation in the scope and strength of participation across companies.

From a broader legal perspective, Liechtenstein's participation framework is closely aligned with European standards on information and consultation, despite the country not being an EU member. Portmann (2012) demonstrates that Liechtenstein and Switzerland have widely adopted the core principles of the EU Information and Consultation Directive through national implementation and functional legal adaptation. This has ensured a stable minimum floor of workers' consultation rights in cases such as business restructuring and collective redundancies.

At the same time, the system remains threshold-based and company-dependent. Smaller enterprises fall outside the legal obligation to establish representation, and even where worker representation bodies exist, their actual influence depends heavily on employer cooperation and the strength of union organisation (LANV, n.d.; Opilio, n.d.). As a result, while participation can be substantive and institutionalised in larger firms and public-law entities, it remains uneven across the economy, with significant differences by company size and sector.

Overall, workers' participation in Liechtenstein is characterised by a legally secured but consultative model, supported by a single national union and a strong tradition of social partnership. While the framework provides meaningful channels for worker representation in many companies, its voluntaristic extensions, size thresholds and reliance on cooperative employer attitudes continue to shape both the strengths and the limits of participation in practice (Portmann, 2012; LANV, n.d.).

4.1.6 Slovakia

Workers' participation at the company level in Slovakia is formally anchored in the Labour Code, primarily through trade unions acting as the main channel of worker representation and, where unions are absent, through works councils. In practice, however, workplace participation remains highly uneven, strongly dependent on trade union presence, employer attitudes and sectoral traditions. In large industrial enterprises, i.e., in the automotive, metalworking, steel, and energy sectors, trade unions play a relevant role in collective bargaining, consultation on working conditions, including dismissals, and health and safety. By contrast, in services, SMEs and fragmented supply chains, workers' participation is often weak or entirely absent.

A central and repeatedly contested issue in Slovakia is the protection of union representatives against dismissal. The protection of workplace union officials resonates in current debates following the increase in dismissals. Exact numbers are not available, but trade unions acknowledge an increase of dismissals upon establishing a trade union.

While the Labour Code formally requires the prior consent of the trade union body to terminate a union official, employers have increasingly relied on organisational changes, redundancies, or alleged misconduct to justify dismissals. This has led to a series of legal disputes in which courts have had to assess whether dismissals were genuinely economic or in fact anti-union repression, i.e., union busting. Examples in the last two years alone include the case of four union officials being dismissed at the Dell company in 2024, or four union founders also being dismissed at the Javorina social care home in Western Slovakia. Such practices create a "chilling effect" on workplace representation, discouraging workers from taking on union functions for fear of retaliation (Brunnerová et al. 2025). Both unions in the cited examples were members of the UniJA trade union, a member of the sectoral Energy and Chemical Trade Union (Energeticko-Chemický odborový zväz, ECHOZ). UniJA cooperates with the Austrian trade union GPA (Union of Salaried Employees, Printing, Journalism and Paper, GPA) on gaining support on dismissal court cases.

Unions repeatedly call for stronger legal safeguards, faster judicial procedures, and stricter sanctions for unlawful dismissals of trade union representatives (Slovak Spectator 2024). In 2025, the initiative to strengthen the legal protection of trade-union officials against dismissal in Slovakia was launched by the opposition party Progresívne Slovensko (PS). The legislative proposal was formally submitted by a group of PS Members of Parliament, as an amendment to the Labour Code. The core aim of the initiative was to prevent employers from effectively bypassing union consent by ensuring that the employment of a union official would be considered continuous until a final court decision on the lawfulness of dismissal. The proposal was framed as a response to repeated cases of contested dismissals of union representatives (see above). It was strongly supported by trade unions, while facing resistance from employer organisations and the governing coalition.

To sum up, workers' participation at the company level in Slovakia remains institutionally recognised but practically fragile. Where unions are established, their participation can secure access to relevant consultations or even co-determination processes (e.g., on the introduction of new technology and the use of artificial intelligence in human resource management, see Kahancová and Zholdasbay 2026). However, where unions are weakly established, lacking members and capacity, worker representation is often reduced to a formal, defensive function. The protection of union representatives from dismissal is currently emerging as a key theme in Slovakia, aiming to ensure effective workplace democracy.

4.1.7 Slovenia

After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Slovenia

was the only country with a major institutional commitment to preserve some legacies of the worker self-management system. Compared to the earlier system, trade union presence and role became dominant. The 2013 Employment Relations Act (ZDR-1) grants the union with members at a company the power to "appoint or elect" an individual, known as a trade union trustee, to represent (unionised) workers with the employer. In 1993, the Law on the Participation of Workers in Management was also enacted, setting the rules for the second leg of worker participation in works councils (svet delavcev) or in smaller companies: worker representatives.

Establishment of a works council is not compulsory, and it is established only if workers vote in favour of establishing it. If in place, works councils facilitate worker representation in company management through information, consultation, and soft co-determination. The law sets out different provisions for worker participation in public and private companies, and there are special rules in specific sectors, such as banking. Worker participation in these organisations may be regulated by special agreements relating to the nature of the work, but these laws are based on common principles. (Skledar, 2003). Employer and the works council representative meet monthly, in line with workers' information, consultation, and co-determination rights. The council monitors compliance with laws, collective agreements, proposes beneficial measures, and aids worker integration. The employer must keep the council informed about the company's economic status and changes, provide annual reports, and must provide relevant documentation upon request. Joint consultation is required on personnel and health and safety matters before decisions are made. The employer must seek the council's consent for key proposals, such as annual leave policy and performance assessments, and cannot proceed if consent is denied within eight days.

Altogether, the works councils' function alongside trade unions in a dual representation system. Most importantly, participative agreements made by works councils do not alter existing labour rights, pay, or conditions governed by collective agreements. In other words, works councils have a secondary role to trade unions but have extensive information rights. Health and safety representation is primarily provided through the works council. If there is no works council established, a health and safety representative is elected. In practice, works councils are established especially at large companies. Here, trade union representatives and activists run for mandates to become works council members (Skledar 2003, Worker-participation.eu). Earlier research findings indicate that trade unions are dominant, and employers also consider the two channels overlapping i.e. in practice they deal with the same person in a dual role (Franca and Pahor, 2014).

4.1.8 Serbia

After the end of Yugoslav worker self-management, Serbia underwent a long transition in terms of worker involvement in company-level participation and co-determination, and institutions and their roles still have not been consolidated. Legislation on worker participation is rudimentary. Legislation and practice allow committees on occupational safety and health (OSH), and union representation in social, economic and other councils outside the company (at the municipal, provincial or republic level), strike committees and bodies for the resolution of conflicts of interest (Jašarević, 2023). More controversial is the existence of works councils. Namely, the Labour Code posits that if an employer fails to conclude a collective agreement and there is no trade union in a company, wages, salaries and other employee benefits may be regulated by an "agreement", concluded by the managing director with the representative of the works council or the employee empowered to do so by at least 50% of the total number of company employees. According to Jašarević (2023) this measure was meant to encourage other forms of worker participation in companies, other than those existing between the union and the employer. In this relative institutional vacuum, trade unions and their shop-floor representatives took up the role of representing workers.

Serbia's trade unions see works councils as rivals that would undermine their role within companies, and they openly oppose their establishment. No policy solutions were proposed to turn unions and works councils into allies rather than competitors (Marinković, 2013). Altogether, state authorities have shown little interest in regulating worker participation at the company level (Jašarević 2023). This has left trade unions as the only available channel for worker participation, including with regard to information rights and codetermination. Although this arrangement is not inherently problematic, trade unions continue to lack sufficient institutional authority to secure access to company-level information.

4.1.9 Switzerland

Workers' participation in Switzerland operates through a decentralised and consultative model, embedded in the traditions of social partnership and voluntarism rather than legal obligation. It functions effectively in some industrial sectors and multinational firms but remains uneven, fragile and structurally limited in services, SMEs and emerging forms of work. As the economy becomes more digitalised and fragmented, existing firm-based participation models face increasing pressure to adapt (Ziltener and Gabathuler, 2019; Gabathuler, 2015). The system is anchored in a moderate, legally framed system of information and consultation ("Mitwirkung"), complemented by voluntary worker representation bodies (Arbeitnehmervertretung, Personalkommission, ANV) and collective agreements. Unlike systems with strong co-determination by workers' representatives at the company level, the Swiss model relies primarily on consultative rights (SECO, 2023; betriebsrat.de, 2023).

The legal basis for workers' participation is the Federal Act on Information and Participation of Employees in Enterprises (Mitwirkungsgesetz, MWG). It grants workers the right to information and consultation on major company matters, particularly on health and safety, business transfers, mass redundancies and substantial organisational changes (SECO, 2023). These rights apply whether participation is exercised directly by employees or via a formally elected worker representation body (Angestellte Schweiz, n.d.).

Members of worker representations enjoy protection against dismissal and time resources for their mandate, but their rights remain limited to consultation; co-determination or veto rights do not exist (betriebsrat.de, 2023), which restricts workers' ability to influence key strategic decisions and underscores the need for union advocacy and collective bargaining to secure real participation. This has led scholars to describe the Swiss model as participation rather than co-determination (Ziltener and Gabathuler, 2019).

Where established, ANVs function as interfaces between workers, management and trade unions. Their tasks typically include representing worker concerns, participating in consultations, and ensuring compliance with health, safety and restructuring procedures (Angestellte Schweiz, n.d.). However, their effectiveness varies widely across sectors and companies, and remains particularly weak in SMEs and service sectors, often due to limited resources, management resistance, or lack of union support. Health and safety issues are seen as an area where workers' participation is well established.

Empirical research shows that industry-related sectors with strong collective agreements provide the most stable terrain for firm-level participation (Ziltener and Gabathuler, 2018). In contrast, many service-sector firms lack formal representation entirely, reflecting the voluntaristic nature of the Swiss model (Ziltener and Gabathuler, 2019). Collective agreements (Gesamtarbeitsverträge, GAVs) can significantly broaden participation rights beyond the statutory minimum. Ziltener and Gabathuler (2018) demonstrate that many GAVs contain provisions on information rights, participatory procedures and consultation duties, particularly in restructuring or working-time regulation. However, these rights are entirely dependent on bargaining outcomes rather than legal entitlement, highlighting the critical role of unions in negotiating and maintaining effective participation frameworks.

Finally, the role of European Works Councils (EWCs) is important for Swiss subsidiaries of multinational companies. Gabathuler (2015) shows that Swiss workers participate in EWCs mainly through union-mediated channels, yet interaction between company-level ANVs and EWCs remains weak and fragmented.

4.2

Structural determinants of worker participation determinants and survey results

Available evidence suggests that, with respect to the structure of worker participation, there is a wide discrepancy between small and large companies. Trends can be analysed using two sources of data: (a) the European Company Survey implemented by Eurofound and analysed by CEDEFOP (2019); and the CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe implemented in 2025. As Figure 4.1 outlines, company managers among 6 EU member states evaluated the presence of trade unions, works councils and/or other institutions of worker participation. According to these pre/Covid results, structures of worker participation were in place in the majority of large companies (ranging from 53% in Slovakia to almost 80 % in Austria), they were less common at medium sized companies (ranging from 32% in Czechia to 51% in Austria) and rare in small companies (ranging from about 4% in Czechia to 18% in Austria). Overall, even in Austria only about 23% of all companies had established structures, while the share for Czechia remained below 10%.

The same survey of Eurofund and CEDEFOP (2019) covering all EU countries found that employees are predominantly informed about changes via their direct superiors, but that alternative communication channels were also used.

Against this backdrop and in light of the significant changes in information technology and dissemination practices following the Covid-19 crisis, the issue of the dominant channel and the information provided via worker representative bodies arose. In the CELSI CETUN survey, we first asked about the institution primarily responsible for securing worker participation, and secondly, how workers receive information.

Initially, social partner respondents from nine countries were asked to evaluate the prevailing institution that secures worker involvement in company-level social dialogue within their field of expertise.

The following figures show the overall evaluation of the dominant institution's efforts to secure worker participation at the workplace level. Figure 4.3 shows the absolute numbers distributed by countries and answers. Figure 4.4 shows the proportional distribution. Note that

FIGURE 4.1 Presence of structures for employee representation, evaluation of management, by country and company size

Source: Eurofund European Company Survey and CEDEFOP survey, 2019

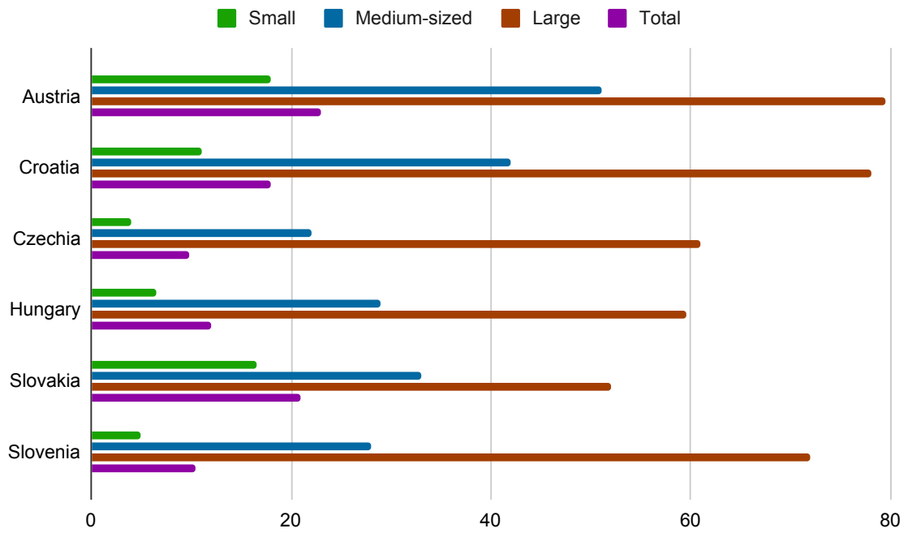


FIGURE 4.2 Prevalence of tools for engaging with employees and their frequency of use in percent in the whole EU

Source: Eurofund European Company Survey and CEDEFOP survey, 2019

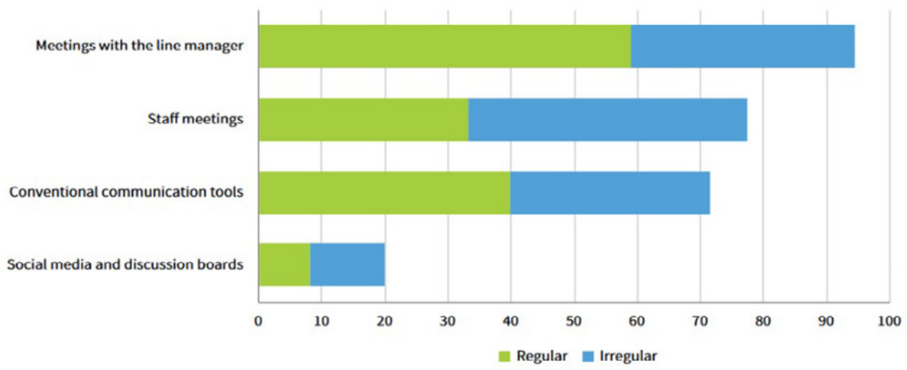
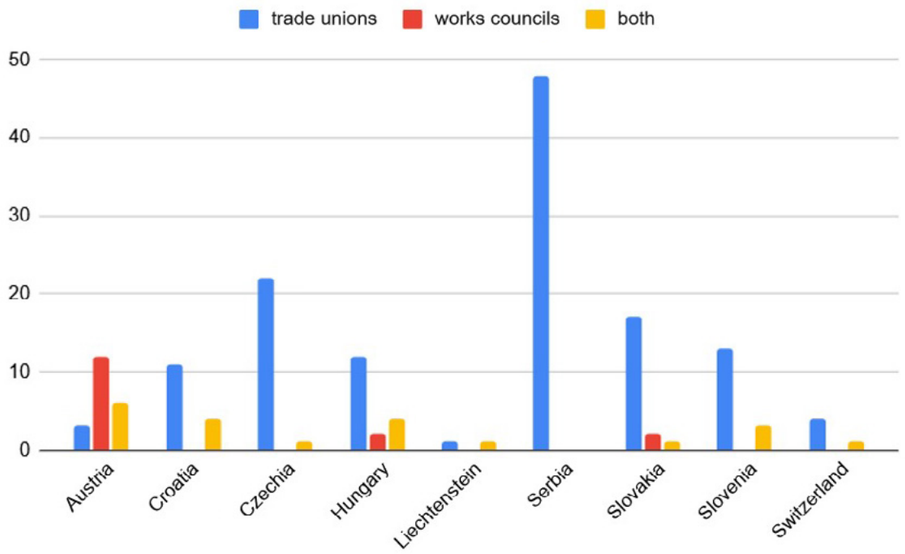


FIGURE 4.3 Dominant form of worker participation (distribution by country)

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.



the data were corrected, as many respondents indicated both trade unions and works councils.

Figure 4.3 shows the answers disaggregated by country in absolute terms, and Figure 4.4 shows the answers in proportional terms.

The survey was filled out by a total of 175 respondents, or nearly 20 trade unions and less commonly, employer organisations per country. As Figure 4.3 indicates, the typical spread was between 15 and 23 respondents per country. There are three outliers: significantly more respondents from Serbia filled out the questionnaire (48), and significantly fewer from Switzerland (5) and Lichtenstein (2).

Figure 4.4 Illustrates the answers in proportional terms, and as such, is more suitable for discussing the results. Perhaps most surprisingly, the responses from Hungary, which has a pronounced worker dual participation system, indicate a different situation, with a much weaker estimated role for works councils. This is partly because many respondents come from the public sector, where trade unions are the main representatives and works councils are not present. Secondly, even where work councils are present, the trade union strategically overlaps with them for information purposes.

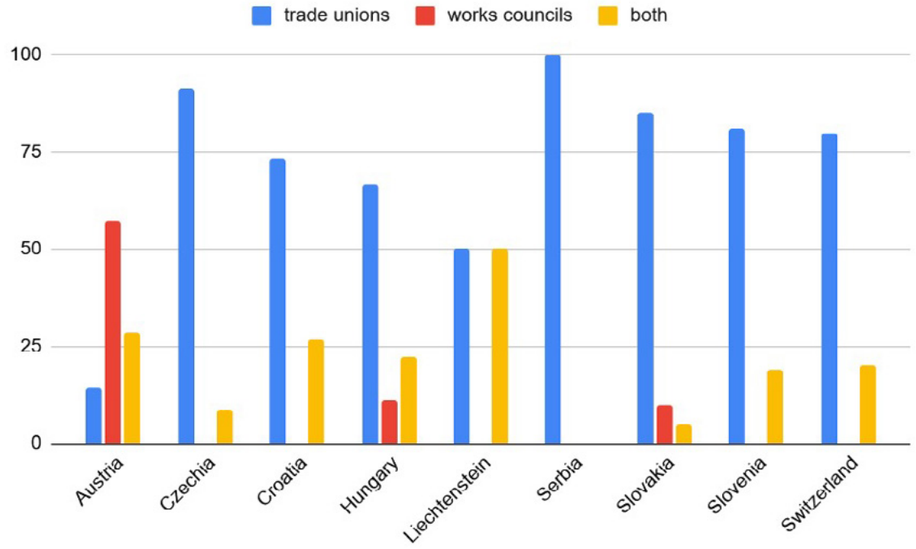
In Slovakia, the law permits dual representation at the workplace level, but reportedly, works councils are much less common than dual representation. Our survey confirms this, with only a few respondents indicating that dual representation was in place, predominantly through trade unions. Only a few respondents also indicated that works councils were the main body securing worker participation.

In Czechia, it is expected that worker representation will be dominated by trade unions, as workplace-level works councils are reportedly rarely established. In theory, both channels can exist alongside each other, with no suggestion that works councils should replace unions. Survey results for the Czechia confirm the prevalence of trade union participation and the current situation: 91% of respondents indicated participation only in trade unions, while one respondent indicated participation in both trade unions and works councils.

As mentioned above, workplace-level representation in Slovenia is dual, via trade unions and works councils. Both have informa-

FIGURE 4.4

Proportional responses by country (in %)



Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

tion and consultation rights, but the rights of works councils are more extensive. Surprisingly, survey results do not show a significant role for works councils: only a few respondents indicated a dual channel of worker participation, while the vast majority indicated that trade unions are the sole representative body of workers.

Lichtenstein survey data suggest that trade unions are the key institution for worker participation, sometimes in conjunction with works councils.

In Switzerland, workplaces with at least 50 workers allow workers to elect their representatives to similar worker bodies, but establishing these bodies requires significant worker initiative and support, limiting their prevalence and effectiveness without union involvement. The establishment of these bodies requires the support of at least a fifth of all workers: this can be a significant barrier, especially in smaller or less unionised workplaces, highlighting the need for proactive union mobilisation. Trade unions are also present, and their candidates also run for works councils. As in Slovenia and Croatia, trade unions are the main channel for worker participation. However, only a quarter of survey respondents indicated that they participate via both worker representative bodies and trade unions. This suggests that meaningful worker participation in company-level social dialogue only occurs if it is backed by a trade union.

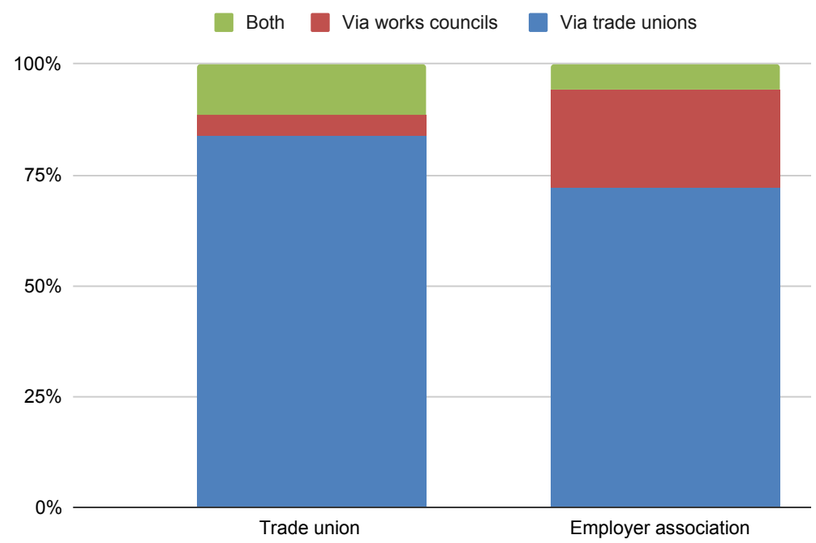
At the other end of the spectrum is Serbia, where trade unions were the only source of information for workers. The survey results confirm this with all 48 respondents agreeing.

Employers and trade union respondents evaluated the dominant form slightly differently; employers generally evaluated the role of works councils more positively. Controlling for the domain of operation of the respondents showed that, in general, respondents from the company/establishment level considered the trade union channel to be more important than those from the national level, who evaluated the role of works councils more positively in comparative terms.

Our second question focused on how social partners assess the way in which workers are informed about changes (including legislative changes and company regulations) affecting employment, working conditions, and social security within the respective field of activity.

FIGURE 4.5

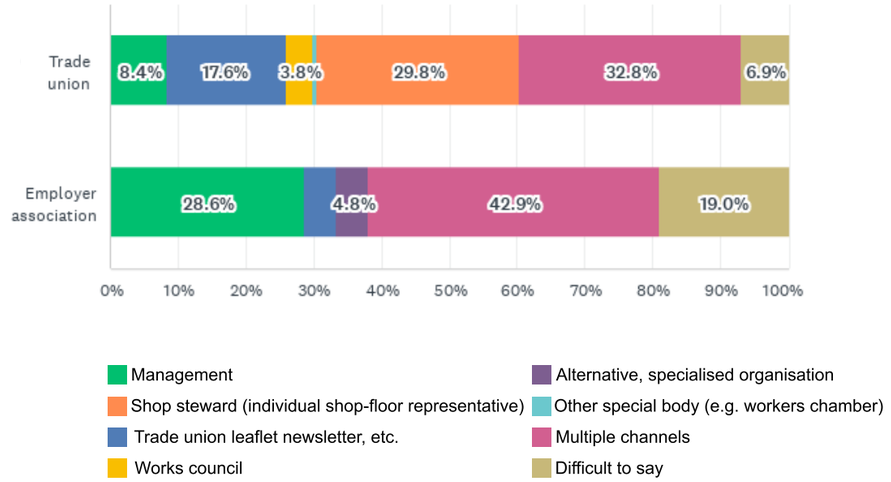
Dominant form of worker participation at company-level social dialogue (in %)



Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025. Trade unions N=130, employers N=22.

FIGURE 4.6

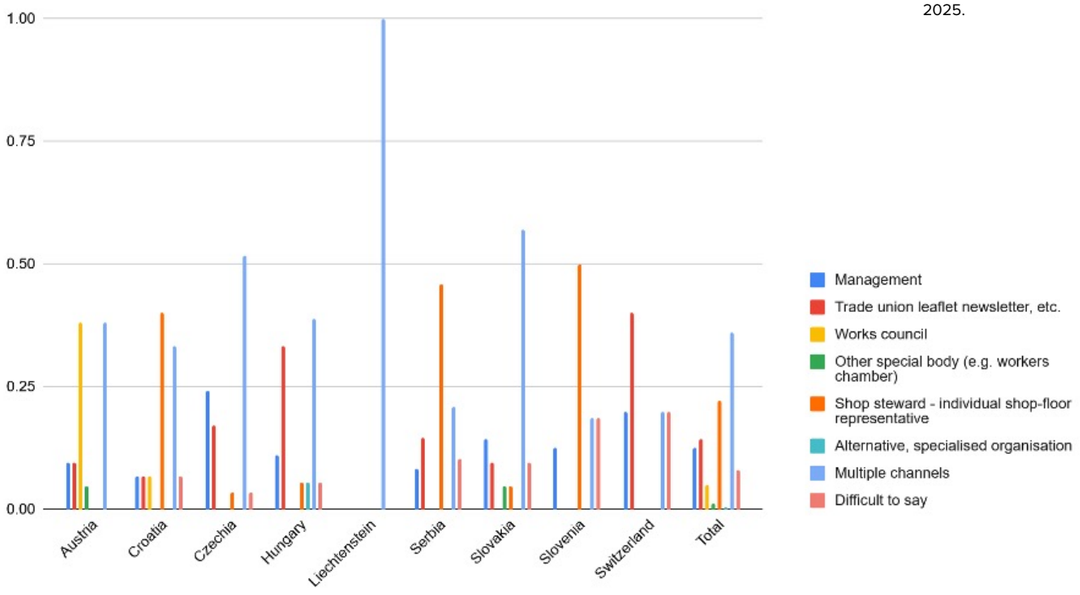
Overall evaluation of predominant information channels for workers



Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

FIGURE 4.7 Predominant information channel for employees disaggregated by countries (in %)

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.



The majority of respondents indicated that workers are informed via multiple channels (see Figure 4.6). Among individual channels, responses were dominated by shop-floor union representatives and trade union communication channels, followed by management information.

If we look at the data disaggregated by countries, the picture is more mixed, also in terms of variation of responses: in some countries there was one or few dominant answers, in others, it was more widespread.

As Figure 4.7 shows there is a significant variation among countries. In all countries, the majority of respondents indicated that employees are informed via multiple channels. In Liechtenstein, all respondents selected this option; in Croatia and Czechia, the majority selected multiple channels as the predominant way. Interestingly, the second most common response referred to receiving information through company-level union representatives, a channel that was particularly prevalent in the cluster of former Yugoslav countries, including Slovenia, Serbia, and Croatia.

Among the nine Central European countries, from the survey the role of works councils in obtaining information is dominant only in Austria. Respondents in Slovakia and Hungary mentioned the works councils in this respect. Especially respondents from large private-sector companies indicated this choice separately. Elsewhere, trade unions provided information, or unions and management jointly offered it.

In Liechtenstein and Croatia, works councils played a significant role in information sharing but alongside with trade unions. In Croatia, trade unions substitute the role of works councils in almost all areas where a works council has not been set up, which is frequently the case. By contrast, in Austria, board-level representation in the private sector is limited to large, limited liability companies, and in the public sector to all limited liability companies with only one board member representing workers.

4.3

Looking ahead: challenges and relevant examples

A main conclusion of this report is that, with the partial exception of Austria, trade unions are central and essential organisations for securing worker participation. As trade unions were barely present in small companies, so too were they missing any structures of worker participation. We thus conclude that preserving and developing trade union presence in the workplaces is key to securing worker participation. The CETUN survey and other reports indicate that trade unions are under attack across the board, a sign that workers are also being discouraged from taking part in decisions at their workplaces.

Freedom of association and unionisation has been reportedly under attack in several countries, most pronounced in Serbia and Hungary, but also elsewhere in Central Europe. A survey respondent from Serbia indicated that there is a great fear of repressions and loss of jobs among workers, which prevents their participation in trade unions, and generally at the workplace. Such fears, unfortunately, had a very real base. In Serbia, worker participation in strike action and collective bargaining has been undermined by the strike-breaking practice of the Serbian government itself. Arguably, the most notorious case occurred in June 2024, when the government failed to take measures against illegal practices of a foreign company, despite extensive reports by the inspectorate, but tricked worker representatives into ending the strike. At the occasion, in his speech to workers, the president of the Autonomous Metalworkers Trade Union of Serbia expressed his discontent, stating that the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Serbia have been violated; and institutions were not operating to protect workers' rights, despite the fact that the labour inspectorate found that the employer had violated the laws and rights of workers. In the case at hand, the employer did not allow workers to take a weekly rest day, hiring strike-breakers to replace those on strike. (Jugpress, 2023, Radnički glas 2024).

Worker participation at unions was also discouraged in countries with less alarming developments, as in Slovenia or Switzerland. A Slovenian survey respondent indicated that non-unionised workers enjoyed beneficial treatment from the employer; a Swiss respondent outlined an ideological shift in employer organisations, undermining both social dialogue and worker participation at trade unions.

Worker participation nevertheless remains a key issue and a central issue worth struggling for with technological change stemming from automation, digitalisation, and the introduction of AI. In Slovakia, for example, some large employers with strong trade union presence are only now preparing to discuss the implementation of AI-related changes with trade unions, in line with requirements to respect unions' information and consultation rights. Despite AI becoming a significant topic, there are no concrete initiatives yet, neither from the unions nor from employers to discuss this via workers' participation. The introduction of AI differs from processes of worker participation in overall technological change. Managers consider the determination of technological changes a company prerogative, without worker participation.

05

Trade union priorities

This section analyses topics that emerge as priorities for trade unions in the studied countries. After a more detailed look into country-specific union priorities, emerging largely from country-specific survey responses and workshop discussions, a comparative assessment of these priorities is presented based on survey data. Both types of data are then compared to formulate key summarising points.

5.1

Comparative union priorities

Utilising the overall findings on union priorities from the survey, it is interesting to observe that the highest ranked priorities in all 9 countries, acknowledging some over-representation of respondents in Serbia, considered the following topics to be the union priority (see also Figure 5.1):

- quality employment and fair working conditions
- work and safety
- youth employment
- working poverty
- digitalisation and AI

These topics interest trade unions across borders; therefore, they could serve as subjects for international thematic cooperation within the CETUN network, beyond institutional priorities focused on the overall stabilisation of social dialogue.

Figure 5.2 shows the results disaggregated by countries, following the structure of the three workshops. Interestingly, among unions from Austria, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, no topic was indicated on which they strongly disagree. In the other countries, unions indicated strong punctual disagreement – which is most visible among Hungarian, Czech, Serbian and Slovak responses (see Figure 5.2).

The most significant difference in terms of priority related to supporting migrant workers, which was considered of lowest priority in Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Serbia, and high in Austria, Liechtenstein, Slovenia, and Switzerland, with Croatia in between the two poles. Similarly, great variation in responses, but with different priorities across countries, is visible in the case of challenges stemming from AI, digitalisation, data protection, climate change (with more Western EU members prioritising it somewhat more), and, to a lesser extent, gender equality. For these themes, joint training and information sharing could facilitate international cooperation among trade unions in the region. While not a general priority, one respondent also mentioned that democratic backsliding and the rise of autocratic regimes could also become a theme within union priorities.

FIGURE 5.1 Overall union priorities - survey findings

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025

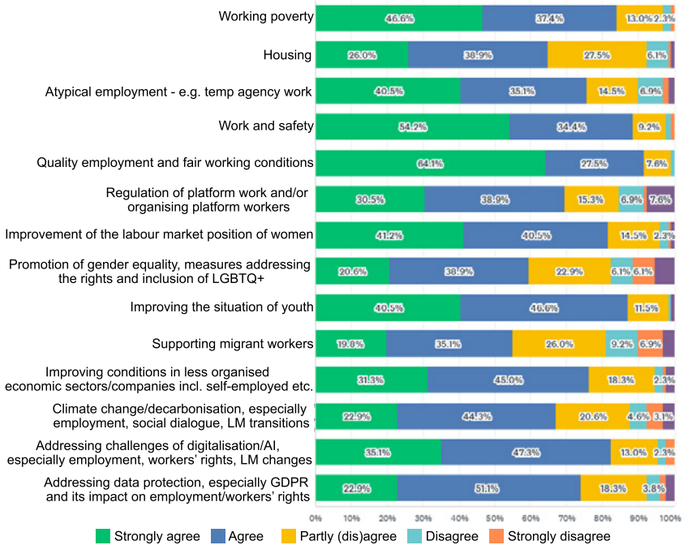
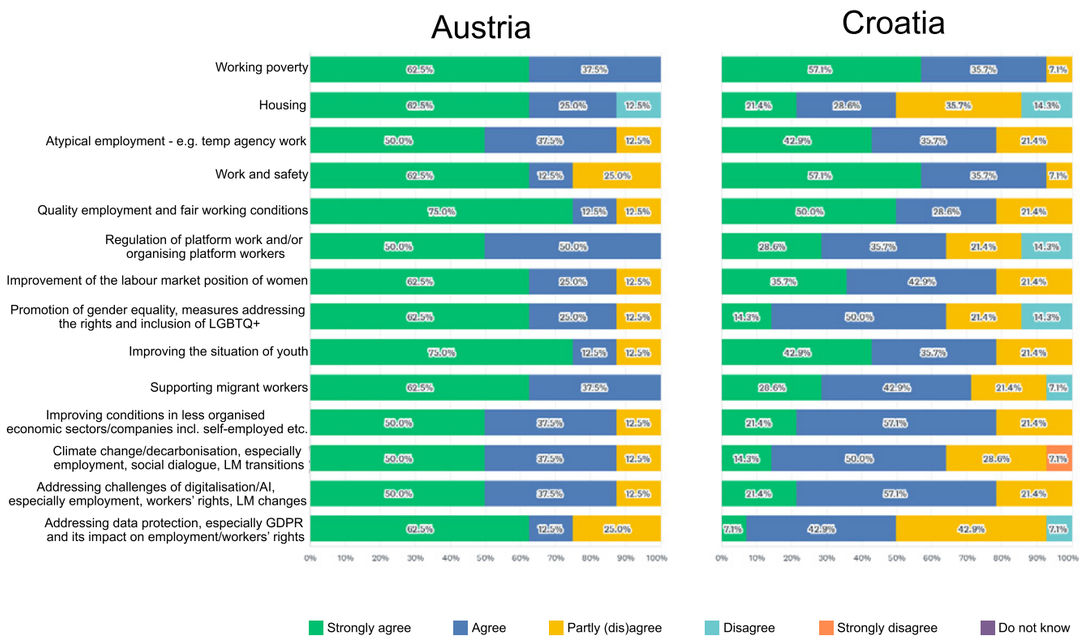


FIGURE 5.2 (PART 1/3) Thematic priorities of trade unions in 9 countries

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.



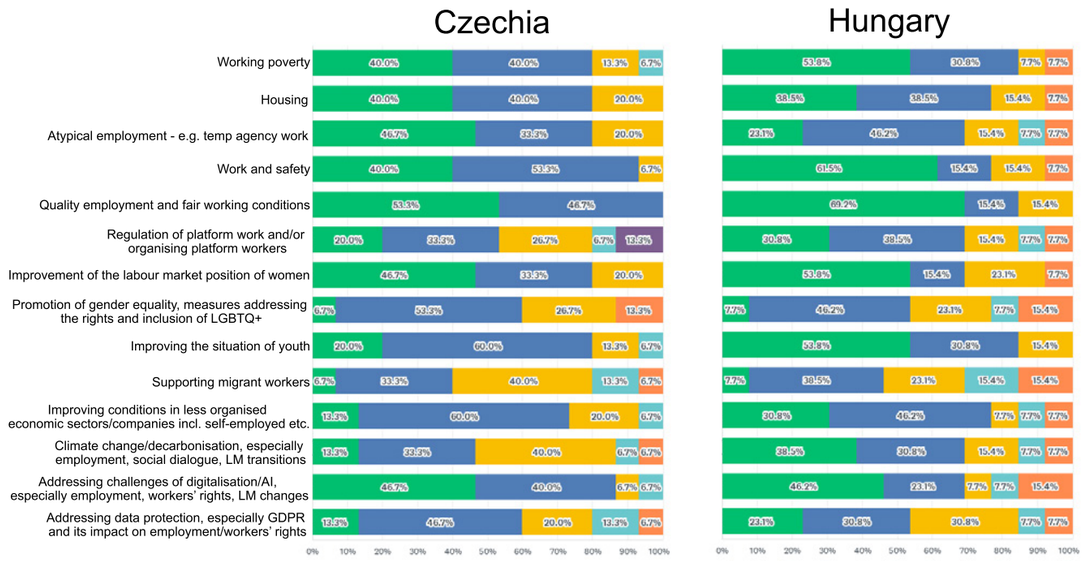
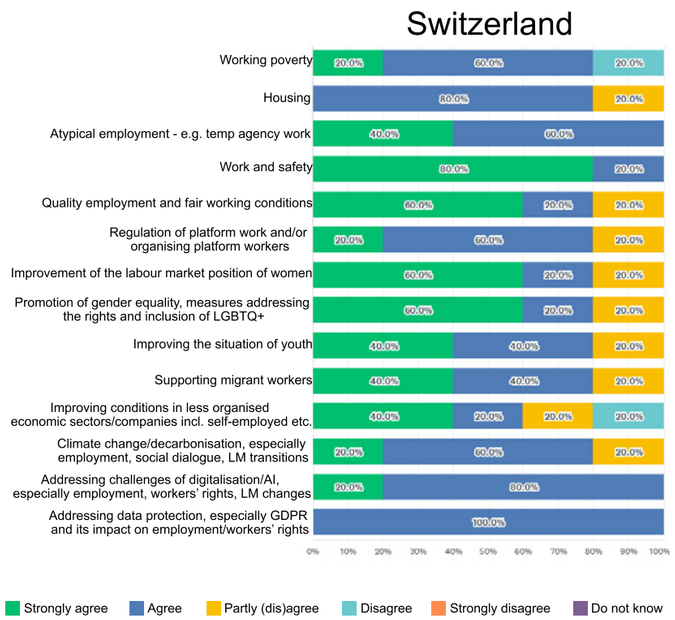


FIGURE 5.2 (PART 3/3) Thematic priorities of trade unions in 9 countries

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.



5.2

Country-specific union priorities

5.2.1 Austria

The majority of survey respondents stress the importance of improving and addressing issues such as housing and the labour market position of women in Austria, the situation of youth and fair working conditions. Supporting migrant workers through social dialogue found the most support among respondents, given that these workers often face difficulties entering the labour market, are less informed about workers' rights and often pursue atypical forms of employment (for instance temporary agency work) that generally tend to have less worker protection.

Topics such as housing, data protection and improving conditions in less organised sectors generated more mixed views, with more respondents seeing them as less pressing issues for social dialogue. Overall, engagement with social dialogue and social partnership in Austria remains relatively stable. Due to the systematic and organised corporatism that governs social dialogue in Austria, the legitimacy of social partners is not seriously questioned by any party or organisation. Nonetheless, there seems to be concern that this can change depending on the political power in place. However, concrete harmful measures to undermine social dialogue remain very few and insignificant. In general, organisations are well organised and have stable legitimacy, with sufficient capacity for collective bargaining and its monitoring. Survey respondents still see room for improvement in international cooperation for campaigning and advocating, as well as research and analysis. For more than one third of respondents, regular monthly bipartite or tripartite meetings are organised.

Based on workshop discussions, a central concern of Austrian unions is the growing political debate over compulsory membership in the Economic Chamber, which unions view as a serious threat to bargaining coverage: "Compulsory

membership of all enterprises… is put in question," and "that would not help the collective bargaining coverage." Safeguarding institutional density and preventing erosion of coverage therefore stands out as a core priority.

Another concern for Austrian trade unions, based on workshop discussions, is the emerging issue of platform work misclassification. Trade union representatives stress that many allegedly self-employed workers are in reality dependent workers: "In the platform economy… that's bogus self-employment… they are workers and should be organised…". At the same time, organising the genuinely self-employed is not considered a union priority in Austria, as they are legally members of employer organisations.

> **We must ensure companies respect social dialogue in host countries… no double standards.**
>
> Austrian Union member
> **WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS**

A further priority is safeguarding labour practices in cross-border business activity. Austrian unions are worried that weak social dialogue in neighbouring countries may spill over into Austria: "Practices that employers are drawing from the Western Balkans and Central Europe are a risk for Austria." They therefore prioritise international solidarity and oversight to prevent double standards: "We must ensure companies respect social dialogue in host countries… no double standards."

Finally, the management of layoffs and cross-border restructuring remains a priority. Trade union representatives point out that "industries with the most significant layoffs are usually those with lots of cross-border trade," which increases the need for transnational union coordination.

5.2.2 Croatia

The two least prioritized issues were data protection and GDPR (53.3%), followed by climate change, gender equality, and the regulation of platform work. Interestingly, these two topics were given separate headings in the SSSH programme document, which nevertheless devoted more space to health and safety, public policies, fighting the deregulation of employment relations, and equality and non-discrimination in the labour market.

While social dialogue has improved formally, substantively there are many areas that need attention, reform and change. There is a preparedness of trade unions to systematically work on better regulation via collective agreements and foster consistent implementation. Emerging from workshop discussions, trade union priorities in Croatia reflect a mixed picture of formal institutional structures combined with limited real influence.

Croatian unions identify quality employment and fair working conditions as their top priority, fully aligned with Slovenia and Serbia. Youth employment is also ranked very highly. Unlike Serbia, support for migrant workers is a relatively significant priority in Croatia, reflecting Croatia's position both as a sending and receiving country for migrant labour. In contrast, gender equality does not rank among high priorities, following the general regional pattern where immediate labour market and wage issues dominate union agendas.

Regarding international cooperation, Croatian unions stress the need for joint initiatives and actions as their top international priority. As presented in the findings, "in Croatia, the respondents identify joint initiatives and actions" as the main gap. This indicates a Croatian focus on visible, collective regional mobilisation, rather than primarily on research or data cooperation.

5.2.3 Czechia

The survey results show that trade union respondents in Czechia prioritise traditional socio-economic themes within social dialogue. The strongest consensus centres on quality employment, fair working conditions, occupational health and safety, and tackling in-work poverty, issues widely perceived as core to the mission of social partners. Topics such as atypical employment, housing, and improving conditions in less organised sectors also receive considerable attention, though views are somewhat more diverse.

Newer or broader themes, including the regulation of platform work, digitalisation and AI, climate change, and inclusion, related issues such as gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and migrant workers, are generally seen as relevant but less urgent. These issues tend to be approached more cautiously, with respondents holding more polarised views.

While trade unions and employer organisations broadly align on the main priorities of social dialogue, particularly with respect to traditional labour market issues, differences emerge in emphasis and openness to expanding the agenda. Trade unions place greater importance on addressing in-work poverty, atypical and precarious employment, and improving the position of women, while employers tend to prioritise stability in established areas and show less inclination to extend dialogue into newer or socially sensitive topics. Overall, the findings indicate a strong preference for maintaining focus on established labour and social protection priorities. The expansion of social dialogue towards newer or cross-cutting social and environmental issues remains limited and uneven.

Survey results also suggest that the overall functioning of social dialogue in Czechia is evaluated relatively positively, more favourably than in Hungary and in a broadly similar way to Slovakia, particularly in terms of regularity and institutional presence. However, significant weaknesses persist at the sectoral level, especially regarding employer willingness to engage in collective bargaining. This is framed not as a general institutional breakdown, but as a concrete obstacle to achieving outcomes. As highlighted in workshop discussions, employer organisations at sectoral level are often perceived as unwilling or unable to negotiate, claiming a lack of mandate or capacity. Restoring effective sectoral collective bargaining therefore emerges as a key Czech priority, seen as a missing link between national-level institutions and workplace-level outcomes.

In terms of substantive policy priorities, Czech trade unions align closely with their counterparts in Slovakia and Hungary. Across the three countries, the most pressing priorities include combating in-work poverty, improving job quality and fair working conditions, strengthening health and safety, improving the position of young workers, and responding to digitalisation. By contrast, supporting migrant workers and organising platform workers are assigned lower priority in Czechia, suggesting a continued focus on traditional employment relations and established bargaining structures, alongside greater hesitancy in engaging with newer labour market segments.

Finally, Czech trade unions view international cooperation primarily in pragmatic terms. The main perceived gaps concern the sharing of data for research, joint initiatives and actions, and mutual support in national processes. This indicates that international cooperation is valued mainly as a practical resource to strengthen national-level bargaining and policy influence, rather than as an abstract or symbolic objective.

5.2.4 Hungary

Hungarian survey respondents considered quality employment and fair working condi-

tions (83.4%), improving the situation of young people (83.4%), workplace safety (77.8%), and tackling working poverty (77.8%) to be the four most important areas for action. As Figure 5.2 shows, while most respondents considered all issues to be priorities, the least popular issues were supporting migrant workers and data protection.

Interestingly, the issue of migrant workers was raised in MASZSZ strategic documents from the perspective of potential risks of downward wage pressure. As a result, limitation on their number were suggested together with more substantial support for local workers and active labour market policies. In terms of potential improvements to international trade union cooperation, respondents identified joint project applications as the most promising area (94.1%), followed by joint advocacy and protest campaigns (88.2%) and joint research and analysis (82.4%).

The transposition of the European Minimum Wage Directive seems to present the main challenge and opportunity for Hungarian trade union confederations, besides increasing institutional stability, governmental accountability and responsiveness. At a public-sector social dialogue event in 2024, following the transposition of the Directive and the statutory minimum wage for the following year, SZEF and other trade union confederations demanded an assessment of the Directive's impact on public-sector wages. Government representatives did not accept this proposal. Notably, while governmental representatives did not deny the existence of wage tensions and inconsistencies in sectoral wage determination, they did not provide a substantive response to the problems raised.

In Hungary, trade union priorities are shaped by a context of systemic political constraints and severe institutional weakening of social dialogue. Hungarian respondents consistently evaluated the state of social dialogue as the most critical among the three countries (Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia), especially in terms of regularity and autonomy. As one Hungarian workshop participant highlighted, "Hungarian respondents indicated that either there is no regularity or an insufficient number of social dialogue events happening in their respective domain." This leads to a core Hungarian priority that is less visible in Czechia and Slovakia: the restoration of basic political conditions for meaningful social dialogue. Hungarian trade unionists explicitly link their strategic capacity to the lack of political will. During the group discussion, it was stressed that "probably governmental change would be needed to create a new situation." Political context is therefore not a background condition in Hungary; it is one of the central strategic priorities. Despite this fragile institutional environment, Hungarian unions show a high level of commitment and mobilisation. As noted in the evaluation, "the Hungarian respondents seem to be the most committed to social dialogue," even though their autonomy is the weakest.

The combination of weak institutional power and strong activist commitment shapes Hungarian priorities toward both defensive strategies (protecting union space) and political pressure for systemic change. Substantively, Hungarian unions share the same top socio-economic priorities as their Czech and Slovak counterparts: in-work poverty, job quality, health and safety, youth employment and the challenges of digitalisation. However, there is one important divergence. In Hungary, the least prioritised issue is the support of migrant workers. This reflects both the political sensitivity of migration in Hungary and the constrained space in which Hungarian unions operate.

In international terms, Hungarian unions are primarily concerned with joint initiatives and communication, rather than research cooperation. The survey shows that for Hungarian respondents, the main gaps in international cooperation are "joint initiatives and actions" and "communication and coordination." This indicates a priority for visible, collective cross-border action, rather than purely technical cooperation.

Finally, fragmentation within the union movement itself is identified as a strategic obstacle. During the workshop discussion it was noted that "the union scene in Hungary is fragmented and even cooperation with other confederations… is not happening or there are clear barriers to it." This makes internal labour movement cohesion a unique and urgent Hungarian priority.

5.2.5 Liechtenstein

Most importantly, respondents see social dialogue as a key tool to improve the rights of marginalised people, for instance migrant workers, LGBTQ+ people and women. In addition, another priority area for social dialogue is the enhancement of quality work and improving working conditions. Other main issues that can be addressed by social dialogue include the improvement of advocacy in less organised sectors, and upcoming challenges in AI and digitalisation and safety for workers. Opinions are more mixed regarding using social dialogue to improve the situation of the youth on the labour market or for housing.

The conditions of social dialogue, according to LANV, are seen as very high and stable; the organisation has enough capacity to prepare and engage in social dialogue. There is regular engagement with the organisation's key social partners to stay informed. Nonetheless, LANV does not conduct its own research on key topics of their interest. On an irregular basis or as needed, the Employees' Association offers internal training to improve the functioning of social dialogue. Regarding international cooperation, respondents see improvements in sharing data and research with other international associations and highlight that there could be more joint initiatives and actions at the international level, including joint project applications for funding. Nonetheless, one respondent remarked that Liechtenstein as a small country with a single trade union organisation is very well connected internationally and regionally through various transnational initiatives, and projects.

Above all, trade unions also emphasise above all the preservation of the tripartite model and state-supported social partnership. Social dialogue is seen as structurally dependent on cooperation between unions, employers and the state: "The social partnership… and the state should support but not dominate." The tripartite commission is identified as a key institutional tool through which working conditions can be shaped, although the process is experienced as slow and cumbersome: "That is very slow, very heavy."

A very concrete strategic priority in Liechtenstein is the expansion of collective bargaining coverage. Trade union representatives articulate a clear quantitative goal: "Coverage must grow from around 50% to about 80%." This indicates a strong focus on extending the reach of collective agreements as a way to stabilise working conditions.

> **The Hungarian respondents seem to be the most committed to social dialogue.**
>
> Hungarian Union member
> **WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS**

LANV also sees international standards and cooperation as leverage for domestic strengthening. Even though EU directives are to be transposed as a general rule, they may still become mandatory for Liechtenstein as a member of the European Economic Area (EEA) to implement and LANV places hopes in international frameworks: "We hope for a lot from these guidelines… even with reservations." International policy is thus viewed as an indirect but important support for national bargaining power.

5.2.6 Serbia

Survey respondents indicated that the priority areas of work are health and safety, quality employment and fair working conditions. However, respondents also stressed the urgent need to improve the labour market situation for women and young people, as well as organising less organised sectors. These priorities also align well with the adopted resolutions and congress documents of UGS and SSSS. For example, at its June 2025 Congress, SSSS adopted resolutions on tackling working poverty and the cost-of-living crisis, protecting trade union representatives, and ensuring the right to free information and consultation. Other resolutions covered youth, health and safety, and creating jobs while preserving the environment. By contrast, the support of migrant workers is a low priority in Serbia, explicitly identified as one of the most substantial cross-country differences.

> **The situation in Serbia... is the worst... quite critical if you look at it.**
>
> Serbian Union member
> **WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS**

Based on workshop discussions, Serbian union priorities are overwhelmingly shaped by the weak institutionalisation of social dialogue and lack of political will. Survey results and discussion consistently describe Serbia as the country with the most critical situation among the three countries covered in the workshop (Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia): “the situation in Serbia... is the worst... quite critical if you look at it”. While Serbian unions report very high commitment, they at the same time face an environment of institutional instability and weak enforcement: “respondents from Serbia... indicated high institutional instability, harmful measures”.

A central Serbian priority is therefore not only to improve working conditions, but in securing the basic functionality and enforcement of social dialogue itself. This is closely linked to frustration with state institutions and weak administrative capacity. As one participant stressed, the problem is not the lack of dialogue platforms, but the lack of administrative capacity to implement dialogue in practice. In substantive policy terms, Serbian unions place their highest priority on quality employment and fair working conditions.

In international terms, Serbian unions primarily prioritise mutual support in national processes, reflecting their need for external backing in a politically constrained environment. As the analysis noted, in Serbia the main perceived international gap is “mutual support in national processes”. This shows that Serbian unions see transnational cooperation less as a technical exchange and more as a source of political and strategic reinforcement.

5.2.7 Slovakia

The results show that social partners in Slovakia primarily emphasise traditional socio-economic themes as the key priorities for social dialogue. The strongest agreement was found on quality employment and fair working conditions, working poverty, work and safety, and the challenges of digitalisation and AI. These areas are widely recognised as the core issues where social dialogue should have a strong and active role.

Topics such as labour market position of women, and the regulation of platform work are also considered important, although opinions are somewhat more varied (housing appeared as the most irrelevant area). They represent relevant but not universally prioritised issues among social partners. By contrast, themes like LGBTQ+ inclusion, support for migrant workers, and climate change or decarbonisation generate more mixed views, even with some strongly negative views expressed by trade union respondents. These are often perceived as less pressing or less directly linked to the immediate scope of social dialogue. The largest differences between trade unions and employer organisations were found in the areas of atypical employment and work and safety, which employers did not consider as a high priority.

Overall, the findings suggest that while social partners share a clear commitment to improving employment quality and working conditions, they remain more reserved or divided regarding newer and broader social or environmental aspects relating to the labour market.

The workshops show that Slovak trade union priorities are shaped by a relatively strong technical and organisational capacity, combined with ongoing struggles to achieve effective outcomes. Among the three Visegrad countries (Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia), the Slovak respondents reported the strongest infrastructure for collective bargaining, especially regarding data and expertise.

This does not mean, however, that Slovak unions see social dialogue as unproblematic. Like Czech unions, they identify sector-level bargaining and employer engagement as key bottlenecks, especially where negotiations start but fail to lead to binding outcomes. One of the shared problems across countries was described as the difficulty “not just to bargain but to come to some final result.”

Substantively, Slovak trade unions fully align with the core regional priority set: tackling working poverty, improving job quality and working conditions, strengthening health and safety, supporting young workers, and managing digital transformation. These were again identified as the top shared priorities across all three countries.

A notable Slovak-specific feature is the low prioritisation of gender equality, which, according to the survey results, was the least prioritised issue in Slovakia. This does not mean gender issues are absent from Slovak union agendas, but it signals that immediate socio-economic and employment security concerns dominate strategic priorities.

In terms of international cooperation, Slovak unions are particularly focused on practical cooperation for knowledge and capacity building. Together with Czech unions, they identify their biggest international gaps as “sharing of data for research, joint initiatives and actions, and mutual support in national processes.”

> **There is a difficulty not just to bargain but to come to some final result.**
>
> Slovak Union member
> **WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS**

This reflects a Slovak priority for evidence-based bargaining and coordinated regional strategies, especially in the context of multinational companies and cross-border restructuring. Finally, Slovak representatives emphasised the importance of bottom-up organising and workplace-level power building, ranking this as a higher strategic priority than political lobbying alone (see also the chapter on workers’ participation at the company level). One participant explicitly framed the bottom-up capacity building for unions as the number one priority, signaling a strategic turn toward rebuilding union strength from the workplace upward.

5.2.8 Slovenia

For the majority of survey respondents, all the listed areas of work were a priority for their organisations' present and future work. Nevertheless, 93.8% of respondents prioritised the topics of quality employment, fair working conditions and improving the situation of young people. There was a significant difference in intensity between the two issues: 66.8% strongly agreed with the former, compared to 31.3% stongly agreeing with the latter. The most intensively supported themes were work and safety, and in-work poverty, while the least popular were the promotion of gender equality and the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people. The ZSSS programme for 2022–2027, under labour market activities, has two sections on improving the position of young people, as well as a separate section on organising and unionising young people. In addition to health and safety, social security and retirement, the programme also has special sections on gender equality, digitalisation, the inclusion of migrant workers and research. The organisation of platform workers and the commitment to addressing migrant labour stand out as novel achievements in response to new labour market realities.

In Slovenia, union priorities are framed by a relatively stable institutional system, but also by structural tensions related to capital and the state's role. Slovenian respondents described social dialogue as constructive "in a limited number of areas", but not fully effective across the system. A particularly notable Slovenian concern is the privileged treatment of large foreign capital outside social dialogue channels, which was described as especially pronounced in Slovenia. This makes defending the integrity of tripartite governance against bypassing by multinational investors a key Slovenian priority. Like in Croatia and Serbia, the dominant substantive priority in Slovenia is quality employment and fair working conditions, with extremely high agreement levels (around or above 90%).

Youth employment is again a shared high priority. Unlike Serbia, support for migrant workers is a strong priority in Slovenia, ranking significantly higher than in both Croatia and Serbia, the other two countries in the regional cluster. Finally, in international cooperation, Slovenian unions are the most vocal of the three countries to signal the need for evidence-based social dialogue and stronger analytical capacity at the transnational level. Almost 80% of Slovenian respondents indicated that sharing data should be strengthened within international cooperation.

> **We believe that our ability to negotiate decent working conditions, to guarantee purchasing power, and to ensure a better quality of life at work is under threat.**
>
> Swiss Union member
> **WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS**

5.2.9 Switzerland

Swiss respondents perceive major gaps in communication and coordination with international partners, indicating a need to strengthen cross-border collaboration to address issues such as social dumping, labour mobility and posting of workers. The survey also indicates that there are not enough joint initiatives and actions that are internationally coordinated. Swiss respondents evaluate the state of social dialogue as fairly stable and trade unions' role as legitimate within social dialogue. Social dialogue is seen as particularly important to increase collective bargaining coverage and is more than a mere facade. Nonetheless, there are some harmful measurements that have destabilised and diminished the freedom of association in Switzerland, such as for instance the lack of a termination law. Trade union members still get regularly dismissed over their activities in trade unions. In addition, the system of Swiss trade unions is more fragmented than in other countries and therefore, they are less organised than the more cohesive and powerful employers' associations. Strengthening internal coordination and membership mobilisation is therefore a key strategic priority. Trade unions face a continuous decline in membership which needs to be improved according to trade union respondents.

In Switzerland, trade union representatives place the defence of collective bargaining, real wages and purchasing power, combining workplace negotiation with political and public mobilisation to secure decent working conditions at the centre of their agenda. Union leaders explicitly warn that their capacity to secure decent working conditions is being weakened: "We believe that our ability to negotiate decent working conditions, to guarantee purchasing power, and to ensure a better quality of life at work is under threat." This concern is closely linked to the demand for real wage growth and effective minimum wage protection, even outside the EU framework. Following recent economic developments, unions stressed that "workers needed real wage increases and real bargaining power" and underlined a normative standard that "all workers… must receive a wage that meets the minimum standards for a decent life."

Swiss unions also strongly prioritise youth, in-work poverty and social precarity, explicitly challenging any suggestion that these are marginal issues: "Youth and working poverty are really our priority." Housing is recognised as a major social problem, although unions see it more as a political rather than a collective bargaining issue: "Housing… for us… is much more indirect. It's a priority for political parties and not mainly trade union subjects."

Another core priority is closing legal loopholes and combating precarious and abusive forms of employment, especially in the context of labour mobility and posting. Unions insist that "there must be no legal loopholes" and view flanking measures for fair mobility as essential tools against social dumping. At the same time, Swiss unions express deep concern about the ideological shift of employer organisations, which they see as undermining the foundations of social dialogue: "There's just no reliable partner at the top of the main counterpart organisations," and "they became much more ideological… that's worrying."

Swiss unions strategically leverage direct democracy as a tool to defend workers' rights, mobilising members and the public in referenda, respectively launching popular initiatives for achieving real social progress. However, the system of direct democracy is a double-edged sword: right-wing political forces, business elites, and employer interests frequently force labour unions to launch referenda to impede the enactment of political attacks on workers' rights, thereby deliberately diverting the unions' limited resources. This reality requires unions not only to mobilise for their own campaigns but also to monitor and counteract initiatives that threaten labour standards constantly. At the same time, trade unions explicitly rely on their mobilisation capacity in referenda: "We are credible when we say… otherwise we mobilise not only with labour battles but also by going out to vote." This political leverage is seen as a crucial counterbalance to weakening employer commitment.

5.3

Conclusions

The above in-depth look at union priorities, disaggregated by country but also compared across countries, yields three types of priorities: shared, diverging on sensitive topics, and diverging on institutional and political priorities. This threefold clustering is presented in Table 2.

TABLE 1 Union priorities summarised and compared

SHARED PRIORITIES (high alignment across all 9 countries)	POLITICALLY & SOCIALLY SENSITIVE TOPICS	POLITICAL & INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITIES
Fair working conditions	**Support for migrant workers:** High priority in Austria, Liechtenstein, Slovenia, Switzerland; Low priority in Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia	**Hungary and Serbia:** Restoration of basic political conditions for social dialogue; enforcement capacity; governmental accountability
Occupational health and safety	**Digitalisation, AI, data protection:** Higher priority in Western/Alpine countries (AT, CH, LI, SI); lower and more uneven in other Central-Eastern and South-East European countries	**Slovenia:** Defending tripartite governance against bypassing by large foreign capital
Youth employment	**Climate change and decarbonisation:** More salient in Western/Alpine countries; marginal in most Central-Eastern and South-East European countries	**Czechia and Slovakia:** Effectiveness of sector-level collective bargaining and employer engagement as core bottleneck
Tackling working poverty	**Gender equality:** low practical priority in Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, partly Slovenia	**Austria:** Threat to compulsory Chamber of Commerce membership; platform work misclassification; cross-border labour standards
Digitalisation and AI (as a general challenge)	**Housing:** Politically salient mainly in Austria and Switzerland; low relevance Central-Eastern and South-East European countries, eg in Slovakia and Czechia	**Slovakia:** Bottom-up organising and workplace-level power building
Women in the labour market (general recognition)	**Platform work:** Some priority in Austria and Slovenia; low in Czechia, Croatia, Hungary	**Liechtenstein:** Expansion of collective bargaining coverage (target: 50% → 80%)
		Switzerland: Defence of real wages, flanking measures against social dumping, use of direct democracy

06

Capacities, information and communication

This chapter focuses on the self-perception of trade unions in the studied nine countries, focusing on their internal capacities, information and communication channels internally as well as vis-a-vis their constituencies. The chapter first focuses on internal activities towards capacity building and information, then on external communication and stakeholder engagement.

6.1

Internal capacity, information and communication for improving social dialogue

Figure 6.1 shows that in general, over 64% of trade unions from the nine surveyed countries (compared to 55% of employers' responses in these countries) perceive a high and stable capacity to prepare for and engage in social dialogue. 14% of unions perceive their capacities as high but deteriorating, and 12.4 % as low to moderate, without significant change.

When we disaggregate this finding by country, Figure 6.2 suggests that the unions' perceived capacity to prepare for and engage in social dialogue is high and stable in most countries, particularly in Austria and Serbia. High capacity yet deteriorating has been reported from Slovakia (29.3% of union respondents), Croatia (21.4%) and Slovenia (21.4%). Reservations were reported from Switzerland, Czechia and Slovenia. In most countries, which lacked high and stable capacities for social dialogue engagement, a potential for improvement has been reported (yellow and light blue bars in Figure 6.2, e.g., in Switzerland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Czechia and Croatia).

Focusing on the perceived access to relevant information necessary for social dialogue, unions in Austria, Liechtenstein, but also in Slovakia, Switzerland, and Czechia are perceived to have access to relevant information (see Figure 6.3, green and dark blue bars). In contrast, reservations regarding access to relevant information necessary for social dialogue, albeit minimal, are reported in Serbia (4.8% resp. 9.5%), Hungary (16.7%), Croatia (7.1%), and Slovakia (5.9%). Czech unions seem to be divided on their access to relevant information: while almost half of the unions agree they do have access to relevant information necessary for social dialogue, the other half (53.3%) partly disagrees with this statement (see Figure 6.3).

Regarding unions' internal capacity building initiatives, Figure 6.4 shows how unions in 9 Central European countries perceive their own funds being invested in their own research on key topics of interest. The best reported situation is in Switzerland where 60% of unions strongly agree or agree with the statement on

FIGURE 6.1 Overall trade union capacity to prepare for and engage in social dialogue

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

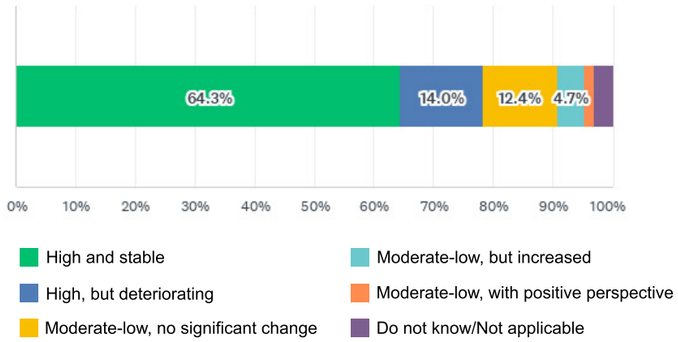


FIGURE 6.2 Trade union capacity to prepare for and engage in social dialogue by country

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

FIGURE 6.3 Unions' opinions on whether access to relevant information necessary for social dialogue is available

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

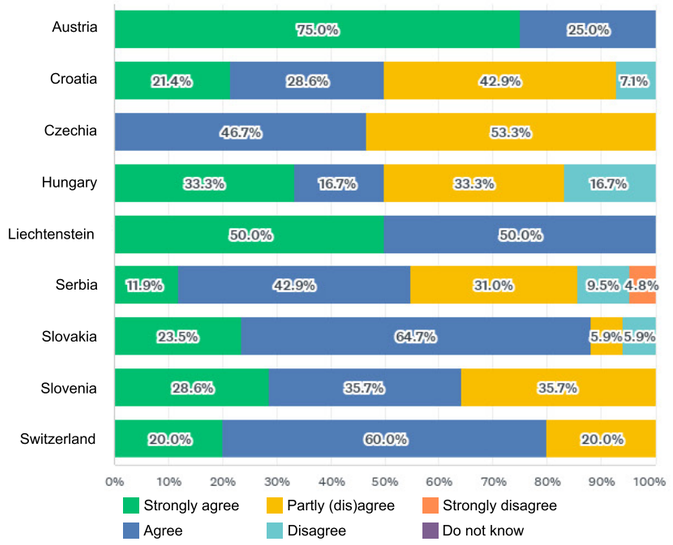


FIGURE 6.4 Unions' opinions on funding or conducting own research on key topics of union interest

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

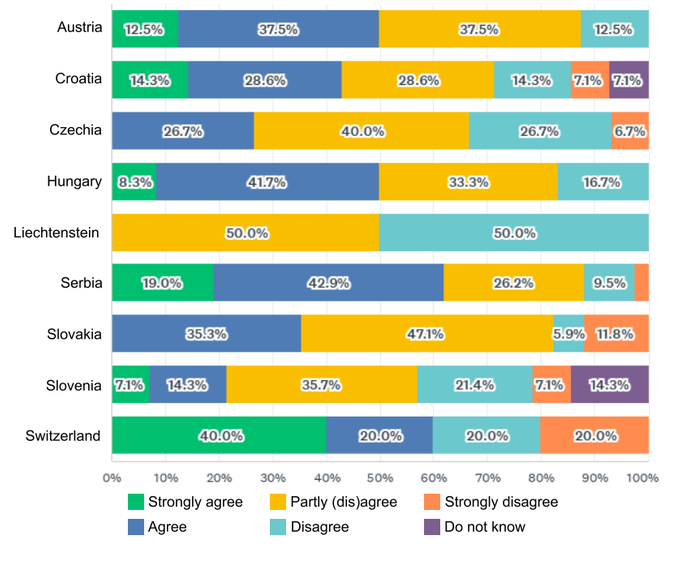


FIGURE 6.5 Training or education for internal capacity building

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

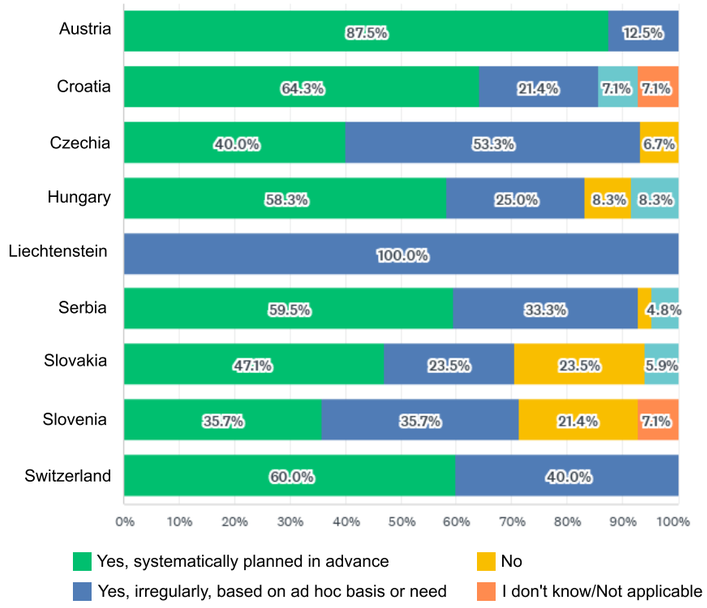
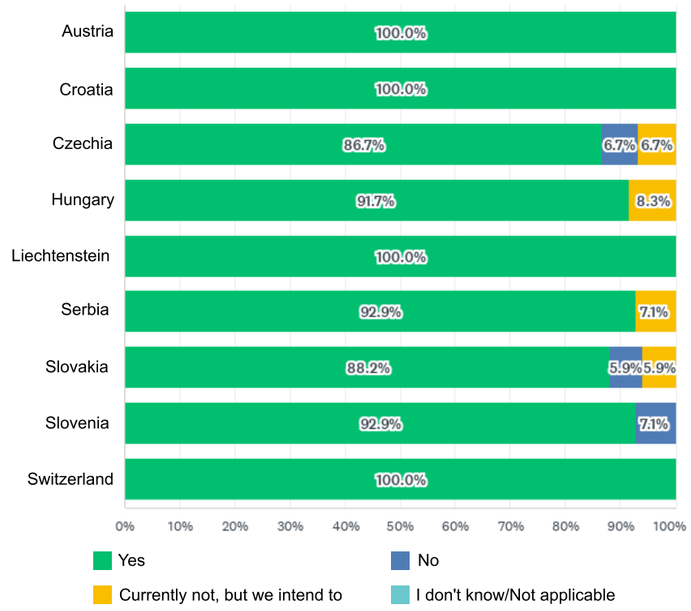


FIGURE 6.6 Internal communication on achievements and problems related to social dialogue

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.



own funding or conducting research on topics of union interests. Such activities are perceived as established also in Serbia (61.9%, green and dark blue bars in Figure 6.4), Hungary and Austria (50% in each country, green and dark blue bars in Figure 6.4). Interestingly, the survey findings suggest a polarisation in unions' perceptions in almost all countries, where except the perceived funding and/or conducting their own research unions perceive that such initiatives are missing or partly missing (yellow, light blue and orange bars in Figure 6.4).

The survey also aimed to collect data on whether unions organise training or education for internal capacity building, with the aim to improve the functioning of social dialogue. The results (see Figure 6.5) show that in every country, unions do organise such training regularly (green bars) or irregularly (dark blue bars). The lowest extent of organised union training for internal capacity building is reported from Slovakia (23.5%, see Figure 6.5) and Slovenia (21.4%).

Finally, internal communication on achievements and problems related to social dialogue is perceived as an important tool for trade unions, but also employers and other actors. 93% of trade unions, and 90% of employers that participated in the survey indicated that they communicate achievements or problems related to social dialogue to an internal audience. Figure 6.6 shows the findings for trade unions only, structured by the countries surveyed.

6.2

External communication vis-a-vis the general public and stakeholders

Beyond internal communication, the survey suggests the unions' engagement in training for attracting (potential) union members, including organising, is high in most of the studied countries (see Figure 6.7). Lack of such training has been reported in Slovenia (28.6%), Hungary (25%), Slovakia (23.5%) and Czechia and Switzerland (20%, respectively).

External communication also embraces communication activities vis-a-vis the general public, as well as relevant stakeholders including public authorities and other actors that can potentially influence the conditions for high-quality social dialogue. In total, 68.2% of trade unions, compared to 45% of employers in the nine countries, communicate their achievements or problems related to social dialogue to the general public. Figure 6.5 shows these communication efforts exclusively for trade unions and allows a country-based comparison. In Serbia, Austria and Croatia (green bars) unions rate external communication to the general public the highest. Liechtenstein is not evaluated due to the small sample size. In contrast, countries where a noticeable share of union survey respondents perceive that such communication does not target the general public (dark blue bars) include Slovenia, Switzerland, but also Slovakia and Czechia (see Figure 6.8).

Finally, assessing external communication on achievements or problems related to social dialogue also includes regular communication oriented at key stakeholders. These include, i.e., public authorities, research institutes or other stakeholders that may contribute to the improvement of social dialogue. Figure 6.9 shows that communication vis-a-vis key stakeholders is perceived as regular and functioning in Austria, Croatia, Switzerland and Slovenia. Some reservations are reported from Slovakia, Serbia and Hungary.

FIGURE 6.7 Training for attracting (potential) union members

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

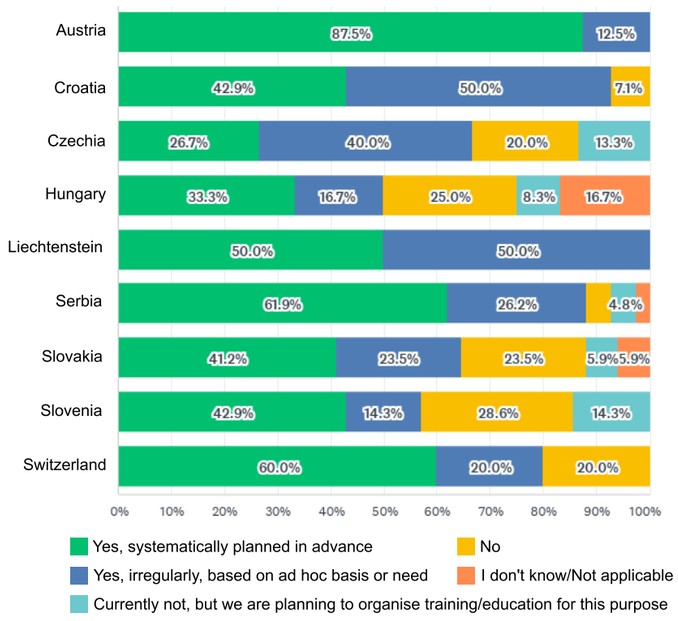


FIGURE 6.8 External communication on achievements or problems related to social dialogue - general public

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.

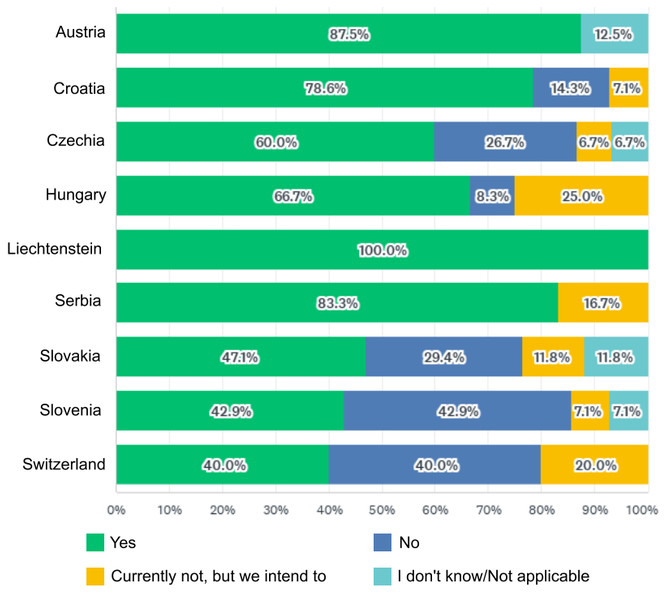
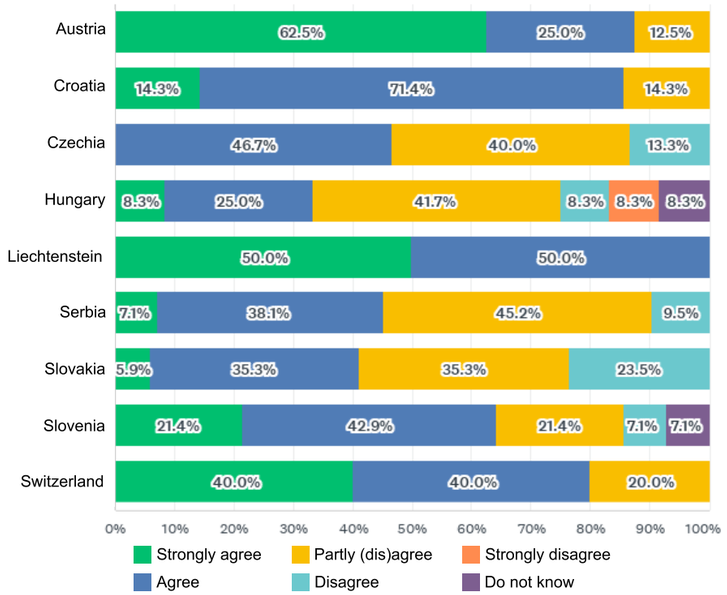


FIGURE 6.9 External communication on achievements or problems related to social dialogue - key stakeholders, e.g. public authorities and research institutes

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025.



6.3

Examples of good practices by trade unions

Across the region, surveyed trade unions reported a range of good practices in information, cooperation, and capacity-building, often built through networking, evidence-based work, and personal dialogue. This section highlights several illustrative examples of such practices, without implying that other unions do not engage in similar activities, and while recognising that many additional initiatives and union priorities exist.

In Croatia, unions regularly participate in EU-funded projects; sectoral unions reported cooperation with the EU-level sectoral federation EFFAT and the FES offices for Croatia and Slovenia. Moreover, unions engage through SSSH in the work of the ILO, ICFTU and ETUC. Croatian sectoral unions, including those in early childhood education, systematically conduct surveys to inform bargaining strategies and develop feasible policy solutions, which strengthens their credibility as negotiators.

In Slovenia, good practices include strong cooperation within the confederation ZSSS, active collaboration with the other unions, and access to training, educational materials and timely information, although some unions note the absence of structured support at the organisational level.

Czech and Slovak unions highlight the importance of personal contact and argument-based dialogue, as well as participation in tripartite bodies such as the RHSD in Czechia and its working groups for health and social affairs, alongside regular engagement with ministries and regional authorities.

In Hungary, unions report innovative internal practices such as reading circles and collective learning focused on legislation regulating public servants, while combining official government data with their own research to support advocacy.

In Serbia, unions underline the use of official statistical sources complemented by union-led research, despite generally weak cooperation with ministries.

6.4

Conclusions

The survey shows that trade unions across the nine Central European countries generally perceive themselves as capable and legitimate actors in social dialogue, with almost two-thirds reporting high and stable capacity to prepare for and engage in dialogue. This finding is consistently higher than among employer organisations. The union confidence is strongest in Austria and Serbia, although the situations and pressures faced by trade unions in both countries are very different. While Serbian unions would also welcome additional support for capacity building, unions in other countries, notably Slovakia, Croatia and Slovenia, signal deteriorating capacity, pointing to growing pressures rather than structural collapse and indicating scope for targeted capacity building.

Access to relevant information is assessed positively overall, particularly in Austria, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Slovakia and Czechia, yet notable internal divisions and country-specific gaps remain, especially in Czechia, Hungary, Croatia and Serbia. These information constraints are closely linked to uneven research capacity: while unions in Switzerland, Serbia, Austria and Hungary more frequently fund or conduct their own research, perceptions are polarised in most countries, suggesting that evidence-based negotiations are not equally institutionalised.

Training and internal communication emerge as key strengths. Unions from all countries report some form of training for internal capacity building. Internal communication on social dialogue achievements and challenges is nearly universal, underscoring its role in maintaining organisational cohesion and legitimacy. However, the intensity of training varies across countries.

Finally, external communication shows the greatest cross-country variation. Unions are generally more active than employers in communicating with the general public and key stakeholders, but this engagement is strongest in Serbia, Austria and Croatia, and weaker in Slovenia, Switzerland, Slovakia and Czechia. Overall, the findings point to a solid internal foundation for social dialogue, combined with the unions' perceived needs to strengthen research capacity, information access and external communication.

07

International cooperation and capacities

This chapter examines international trade union cooperation in Central Europe, highlighting where international cooperation currently works best. It also identifies strategic planning, shared research, clearer communication and more focused, high-intensity coordination formats as key pathways for strengthening future transnational cooperation.

7.1

Survey results

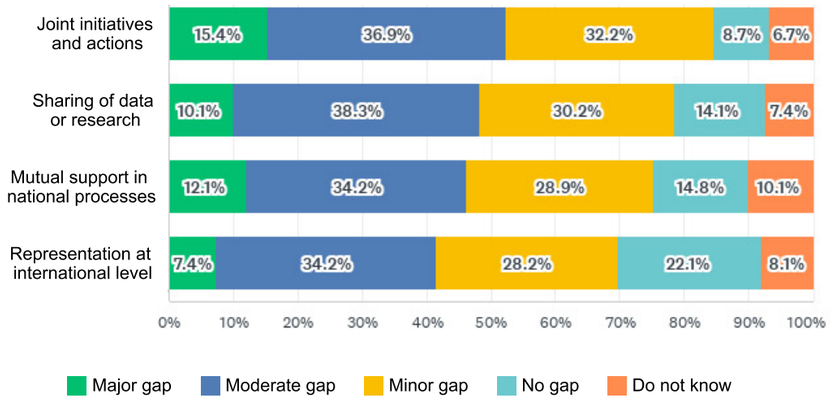
In the survey, we asked about the most important and/or realistic areas for international cooperation. The following options were offered: capacity building; advocacy and influence; the exchange of practices and knowledge; joint campaigns or actions; and policy development and coordination. All these options were popular, with at least 76.3% of respondents considering them to be very important. Exchange of practices and knowledge was the most popular option, with 50% of CETUN respondents considering it very important and 34.2% considering it important.

The question was also formulated in terms of perceived gaps in international cooperation and/or areas for improvement. Joint initiatives and actions were evaluated similarly: a major gap was identified by 15.4% of respondents in total (36.9% identified a minor gap), followed by the options 'communication and coordination' (12.1% identified a major gap, and 36.9% identified a minor gap), 'sharing data and research' (10.1% identified a major gap, and 38.3% identified a minor gap), and 'mutual support in national processes' (12.1% identified a major gap, and 34.2% identified a minor gap).

The current situation indicates that international cooperation requires clearer transnational communication and organisational investment. Our findings suggest that developing a calendar and an agreed action plan based on shared data and research, and communicating concerns and pressing issues, could be the right approach. Our results also indicate a bottleneck in modest internal capacities for international cooperation, which is under pressure due to the increased workload of member organisations on the domestic front. We recommend holding an intensive, congress-like event every year or two, where concrete issues can be discussed and commitments can be made for a six-month or one-year period.

FIGURE 7.1 Perceived gaps and expectations regarding international cooperation

Source: CELSI survey on social dialogue in Central Europe, 2025



7.2

Obstacles to international cooperation

There are both concrete examples of where international cooperation could help and organisational limitations that hamper greater engagement by CETUN members. A respondent indicated that the language barrier is an obstacle to foster cooperation, other reasons include also lack of relevant personnel, and fewer opportunities for project funding.

A respondent from Slovakia noted limited willingness to engage in international activities, explaining that colleagues in Western Europe often face very different conditions and challenges than those in Eastern Europe and are therefore frequently unable to fully understand or support them. Another respondent confirmed this assessment, adding that international solidarity is particularly difficult to develop in production-related sectors.

A survey respondent from Austria indicated that sectoral development and high inflation is a general obstacle, also impacting on international cooperation. From a Western perspective, restructuring of production and relocations of operations and jobs will make it more difficult to organise transnational solidarity, as the employers succeed in playing off workers from one site against the other.

Czech trade unions see international cooperation primarily through the lens of data sharing and mutual support in national processes. Among Czech respondents, the biggest perceived gaps in international cooperation were “sharing of data for research, joint initiatives and actions, and also mutual support in national processes.” This indicates that Czech unions prioritise international cooperation as a practical resource for national-level bargaining and policy influence, rather than as an abstract political goal.

7.3

Examples of good practices

This section summarises examples of good practices shared by respondents from Croatia and Serbia. These practices resemble perceived success stories of international cooperation at sectoral and city levels. Similar examples were not provided from other countries, nevertheless, this does not mean unions in other countries do not engage in similar activities.

In the construction sector, for example, Croatian unions received international support and assistance from the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW), the Building and Woodworkers' International (BWI) and the European Construction Industry Federation (FIEC) in resolving current issues at the sectoral and national levels, such as combatting unfair competition from third country contractors and violations of trade union and labour rights by foreign contractors, as well as organising and recruiting foreign workers.

As previously mentioned, positive developments in collective bargaining were particularly evident at the sectoral level in Croatia. Two examples from the construction and tourism/hospitality sectors underline the importance of international cooperation.

In the Croatian tourism sector, the successful unionisation of migrant workers was achieved through international union cooperation (EFFAT, 2025). A major achievement was the direct employment of a large number of foreign workers in Croatian hospitality via employment contracts. The cooperation between the Croatian and North Macedonian trade unions was particularly successful. First, workers joined trade unions in their home country, and then they were introduced to Croatian trade unions. Migrant workers were placed in unionised hotels to help ensure understanding of, and compliance with, standard contractual terms and working conditions. Initially, this union-led approach faced resistance from employers during negotiations and sectoral social dialogue, but they eventually recognised its advantages and found it to be more cost-effective than recruiting through external agencies. Consequently, they proactively informed trade unions of their staff-

ing requirements, enabling Croatian unions to match these with suitable candidates. The state also benefited from this system as it sought and found ways to support effective mechanisms of matching labour supply and demand, while it could also tackle the spread of an informal, grey economy.

At a city level, the Belgrade city chapter of Serbian SSSS participated in a joint ILO project, 'Empowering Social Dialogue in Serbia', which launched initiatives that gave city-level trade unions a voice at city-level decision-making meetings. Participants from ILO who visited Belgrade provided the sufficient leverage for trade union and employer representatives to participate in social dialogue at several levels. Due to international support and pressure a mechanism was set into motion allowing and enabling social partners to have their say during city level consultations and decision making in several areas.

7.4

Summarising the ways forward for international cooperation

While survey respondents indicate a need for increased international cooperation, limited organisational capacities coupled with increased workload on various domestic national levels seem to prevent many social partners, especially trade unions from greater involvement in international meetings and initiatives. Our findings further suggest that a bottleneck exists regarding the limited internal capacities for international collaboration, and this is being strained by the growing workload of member organisations at the domestic level. Fruits of international cooperation were most evident at the sectoral level, as the best practices also illustrate, and in cases, as in Serbia, but also Hungary, where the greatest need for international support is recorded.

In sum, international cooperation faces a paradox: it requires strategic planning that considers and calculates the mobilisation of shrinking resources for key activities. More structured transnational communication, alongside systematic exchange of research findings and practical experiences, could form a foundation for strengthened cooperation, including the development of a shared calendar or joint action framework. To this end, we propose convening a high-intensity, congress-style gathering every one to two years, focused on targeted issues and aimed at agreeing on concrete commitments and follow-up actions for the subsequent six to twelve months.

08

Conclusions and key takeaways

This report has analysed the role, capacities and evolving practices of trade unions in strengthening social dialogue across nine Central European countries (Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Switzerland). The findings point to a differentiated, yet coherent, regional picture. While social dialogue remains an essential and widely recognised mechanism for regulating labour relations, effectiveness, traditions and capacities for engaging in social dialogue vary substantially across the studied countries.

Overall, the study confirms that institutional context matters decisively. Coordinated corporatist systems continue to provide the most stable frameworks in which social dialogue and collective bargaining are mutually reinforcing, even if concerns about long-term sustainability are emerging (e.g., in Switzerland). In partially coordinated systems in the region, social dialogue remains functional but uneven. Systemic constraints may limit the real impact of dialogue despite strong trade union commitment (e.g, Serbia).

Across the analysis, several key findings stand out:

- Social dialogue capacity is generally perceived by trade unions as strong, with nearly two thirds of unions reporting a high and stable capacity to engage in dialogue, often more confidently than employer organisations. This confidence is strongest in Austria and Serbia, while several

countries report deteriorating capacity, pointing to growing pressures rather than structural collapse.

- Political support is a critical enabling condition. Only Austria and Liechtenstein report a clearly stable political environment for social dialogue. In Hungary and Serbia, the lack of political will and weak enforcement undermine not only dialogue outcomes but also the internal authority of social partners.

- Trade unions remain central to worker participation at the company level. Where unions are weak or absent, i.e., in small firms, worker participation structures are also missing. Attacks on freedom of association and fear of repression, most pronounced in Serbia and Hungary, directly weaken workplace democracy.

- Technological change poses unresolved challenges for participation. Despite widespread recognition of digitalisation and AI as key issues, concrete mechanisms for involving workers and unions in technological decision-making remain underdeveloped across countries.

- Trade union priorities show both strong convergence in some areas and clear divergence in others. Shared priorities include fair working conditions, occupational health and safety, youth employment, working poverty, and managing digital transformation. Divergences are most visible on politically and socially sensitive topics such as migrant workers, climate change and gender equality, and on institutional priorities shaped by national political contexts.

- Information, research and training are unevenly distributed resources. While access to relevant information is generally assessed positively, research capacity is polarised and not equally institutionalised. Training and internal communication are widespread strengths, but their intensity varies across unions in the studied countries.

- External communication and international cooperation show a greater potential than currently utilised. Trade unions are generally more active than employers in public and stakeholder communication, yet engagement varies strongly by country. International cooperation is widely seen as necessary but constrained by limited capacity and increasing domestic workloads, functioning best at the sectoral level and in countries with acute institutional weaknesses. This weakness may refer to underdeveloped social dialogue, low collective bargaining coverage, or limited enforcement capacity of public authorities. It typically manifests in fragmented representation, unstable or politicised governance arrangements, and insufficient resources for social partners to effectively regulate working conditions and resolve conflicts.

Importantly, both the CELSI survey (2025) and the three co-creative workshops with social partners from the nine countries add a clear strategic dimension to these findings. When asked how social dialogue could be strengthened, trade union participants repeatedly highlighted the need to expand and renew their membership base, through stronger organising efforts. As a Croatian workshop participant noted, increasing mobilisation and organisational capacity is crucial, particularly in contexts where mobilisation becomes a last-resort tool to compensate for weak state enforcement and poor implementation of agreed rules.

A second, closely related line of action identified by participants concerns engagement with state authorities and governments. Influencing political will, rebuilding trust in tripartite institutions, and preparing incoming governments for the routine operation of social dialogue, especially at the national tripartite level, were seen as indispensable for restoring credibility and effectiveness.

At a more structural level, trade unions in the Visegrad (Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia) and South-East European (Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia) countries emphasised the shrinking capacity of the state to engage in and facilitate social dialogue. This problem is compounded by persistent weaknesses at the sectoral level, where outdated wage-setting systems and employer disinterest in sectoral bargaining, often replaced by a focus on lobbying activities, constitute major obstacles to meaningful reform of established social dialogue traditions.

Finally, despite growing domestic pressures arising from inflation, restructuring of production and rising workloads, international trade union cooperation was consistently identified as increasingly important. Beyond information exchange, participants stressed the value of learning alternative organising strategies and coordinated responses to challenges that are increasingly global in nature. As one Serbian trade unionist succinctly put it, while problems may be global, so too must be at least some of the solutions.

In sum, these conclusions underline that strengthening social dialogue in Central Europe requires context-sensitive national activities combined with investment in trade union power (e.g., by capacity building activities and recruitment-oriented activities), state capacity to facilitate and support social dialogue and transnational cooperation among trade unions.

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