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Pathways for Strategic International Cooperation among Trade Unions in Central Europe

Policy Recommendations

1. Despite rising "domestic" pressures surrounding trade unions, international trade union cooperation is increasingly important. Trade unions need to acknowledge renewed forms of cooperation, which not only serves information exchange but also facilitates shared learning and coordinated responses to regional, European, and global challenges.

2. Central European trade unions prioritise fair working conditions, occupational health and safety standards, youth employment, tackling working poverty, and managing digital transformation. Coordinated action on these issues should be supported by systematic cross-border exchange of successful organising, bargaining and representation practices. For example, linking international and bilateral union cooperation in the unionisation of migrant workers is a practice which, if adequately adjusted, can be transposed across many sectors and countries.

3. Holding an intensive, congress-style event every two years, with a rotating presidency, would provide an opportunity or rather a commitment to discuss concrete issues and formulate key strategic commitments for the next two-year period.

Abstract

Central Europe faces a range of political, economic, and institutional challenges, but these vary considerably across countries due to differences in industrial relations systems, social dialogue traditions, collective bargaining coverage, labour market structures, and the capacity of public institutions and social partners. In Central Europe, there are different political and institutional challenges due to varying degrees of institutional stability and the strength of social partnerships. As a result, international cooperation among social partners requires a new approach, as it is becoming increasingly important as a mechanism for developing coordinated responses to common challenges. Beyond adequate and timely information exchange, there is considerable scope for strengthening cooperation through joint foresight, strategic learning, capacity building and the development of shared approaches to emerging regional, European and global challenges. Such strategic international cooperation can improve the ability of social partners to anticipate change, identify their joint needs and allocate resources more efficiently to support competitiveness, quality employment and social cohesion. Building on a recent study on transnational cooperation of trade unions in Central Europe, this policy brief identifies the main structural challenges that unions face as well as key priorities and avenues for strengthening international trade union cooperation in the region.

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Introduction

Labour markets in the Central European region are being reshaped by several long-term transformations. The green and digital transitions, technological and demographic changes, migration, and the protracted energy and cost-of-living crises are putting new pressures on workers, firms and public institutions. In this context, effective labour-market governance increasingly depends on the capacity of governments, employers, trade unions, and other stakeholders to anticipate change, build skills, manage transitions, and maintain constructive social dialogue. Strong institutions, effective social partnership, and well-functioning collective bargaining arrangements can help support adaptation to these transformations while balancing economic and social objectives.

In this context, trade unions face growing pressures to strengthen their organisational capacity, expand membership, and reinforce their collective influence. To address these pressures, the only logical response for trade unions is to organise in order to grow their membership base and strengthen trade union power. Trade unions typically insist on and reinforce the planning and implementation capacities of state institutions, as well as the political commitment to social partnership. Furthermore, they press for the revitalisation and expansion of sectoral collective bargaining. This is a particularly important task in countries where the rule of law and labour law principles are under threat (Kahancova et al. 2026).

To address these pressures, the only logical response for trade unions is to organise in order to grow their membership base and strengthen trade union power.

These conclusions are based on a multi-methods research conducted in 2025 for the Central European Trade Union Network (CETUN), which included an original multilingual survey, three co-creative workshops with social partners, and desk research. We gained insight into the formal institutional arrangements and everyday practices of trade unions and institutions of social dialogue in nine Central European countries: Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Switzerland. The research also showed that, although international cooperation poses a challenge for trade unions, it may simultaneously strengthen their capacity at the domestic level.

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Priorities of trade unions in Central Europe are more similar than different

The results of the CETUN Survey, conducted by the Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI) in 2025, show that trade unions across nine Central European countries largely share common priorities. These priorities include improving fair working conditions, strengthening health and safety standards and their implementation, supporting youth employment, addressing working poverty, and responding to digital transformation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Shared trade union priorities in Central European countries



Source: Central European Trade Union Network (CETUN) survey, 2025.

Divergences were most visible in relation to politically and socially sensitive topics, such as migrant workers, climate change, gender equality, and concerning institutional priorities shaped by national political contexts. Table 1 summarises the key priorities and differences therein. By acknowledging both shared and country-specific priorities, the findings provide a solid basis for forward-looking forms of international cooperation among trade unions.

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Table 1a: Union priorities compared

Politically & socially sensitive topics

Support for migrant workers

High priority in Austria, Liechtenstein, Slovenia, Switzerland; low priority in Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia.

HIGH AT LI SI CH

LOW CZ SK HU RS

Digitalisation, AI, data protection

Higher priority in Western/Alpine countries; lower and more uneven in other Central-Eastern and South-East European countries.

HIGHER AT CH LI SI LOWER & UNEVEN other CEE / SEE

Climate change and decarbonisation

More salient in Western/Alpine countries; marginal in most Central-Eastern and South-East European countries.

MORE SALIENT Western / Alpine MARGINAL most CEE / SEE

Gender equality

Low practical priority in Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, partly Slovenia.

LOW HU SK CZ SI (partly)

Housing

Politically salient mainly in Austria and Switzerland; low relevance in Central-Eastern and South-East European countries, e.g. Slovakia and Czechia.

SALIENT AT CH LOW RELEVANCE SK CZ e.g.

Platform work

Some priority in Austria and Slovenia; low in Czechia, Croatia, Hungary.

SOME AT SI LOW CZ HR HU

Source: The CETUN survey – Kohancová et al. (2026).

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Table 1b: Union priorities compared

Political & institutional priorities	
Hungary and Serbia	Restoration of basic political conditions for social dialogue; enforcement capacity; governmental accountability.
Slovenia	Defending tripartite governance against bypassing by large foreign capital.
Czechia and Slovakia	Effectiveness of sector-level collective bargaining and employer engagement as core bottleneck.
Austria	Threat to compulsory Chamber of Commerce membership; platform work misclassification; cross-border labour standards.
Slovakia	Bottom-up organising and workplace-level power building.
Liechtenstein	Expansion of collective bargaining coverage (target: 50% → 80%).
Switzerland	Defence of real wages, flanking measures against social dumping, use of direct democracy.

Source: The CETUN survey – Kohancová et al. (2026).

Challenges of international cooperation: from capacity constraints to geopolitical tensions

The above-identified forms of cooperation, however, require a systematic approach and the ability to address also the associated challenges. Trade unions' access to information, research and communication capacities differs significantly across countries. Research capacity within trade unions is particularly uneven and not equally institutionalised across the countries covered by the study. While trade unions across all countries maintain regular internal training activities and established practices of efficient internal communication, unions in Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Serbia, and Slovakia make comparatively limited use of public relations and external communication

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to disseminate their achievements and mobilise broader support, thereby reducing opportunities for international cooperation. International trade union cooperation in these countries is widely recognised as necessary. However, the limited internal capacities available for international cooperation are increasingly constrained by growing workload faced by member organisations.

Trade unions' access to information, research and communication capacities differs significantly across countries.

Next, the high presence of foreign-owned companies (Martišková et al. 2025; Trappman 2015) and the region's integration into international production networks create specific challenges for cross-border trade union cooperation and solidarity. In a region increasingly shaped by geopolitical tensions, economic uncertainty, industrial policy competition, and elements of de-globalisation, trade unions face growing pressures to protect and strengthen the domestic economic interests. This can generate tensions between workers in different countries, even within the same multinational company, as locations compete for investment, production mandates, technological upgrading, and high-quality jobs. In this context, a key challenge is to balance legitimate national interests in securing investment, skills development, and employment opportunities with the need for constructive cross-border cooperation and coordinated trade union responses to shared challenges across the Central European region.

In a region increasingly shaped by geopolitical tensions, economic uncertainty, industrial policy competition, and elements of de-globalisation, trade unions face growing pressures to protect and strengthen the domestic economic interests.

At the same time, we argue that rising domestic pressures and workloads, together with intensified competition among workers from lower-wage countries for employment opportunities, increase rather than reduce the need for international trade union cooperation. Such cooperation necessarily starts with the timely and adequate information exchange, and extends shared learning and coordinated responses to regional, European, and global challenges.

In turn, cross-border trade union cooperation requires clearer transnational communication, organisational innovation, and sustained investment of time, resources, and institutional commitment. A shared calendar and a jointly agreed action plan should be developed based on the basis of common data and evidence-based approaches to trade union priorities. An intensive congress-style event should be held every two years to provide a forum for discussing concrete challenges, exchanging experiences, and agreeing on strategic priorities and joint commitments for the subsequent 12 to 24 months.

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International cooperation as a space for trade union renewal

Findings from the CETUN survey and related events, namely international trade union workshops involving union representatives from nine Central European countries,

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show that trade unions face challenges in maintaining membership, representing an increasingly diverse workforce, and influencing complex and rapidly changing labour markets. In some countries in Southeast Europe, concerns have emerged regarding the weakening of social dialogue structures and the enforcement of labour legislation. This development affects not only the countries concerned but also has broader implications for the region. Strengthening monitoring, information exchange, and joint reflection on these trends at the international level could support more coordinated action and strengthen collective responses across the region.

> ***In some countries in Southeast Europe, concerns have emerged regarding the weakening of social dialogue structures and the enforcement of labour legislation.***

At the same time, trade unions in Western Europe may benefit from paying closer attention to the activities and restructuring strategies of multinational companies across their European operations and from advocating for stronger national and territorial social dialogue structures to move beyond individual company-level solutions. It is especially important to facilitate the exchange of experiences where social dialogue structures are more fragile and where the rule of law in employment and worker representation remains contested.

Particular attention should be given to the growing importance of cross-border information sharing among trade unions. The ability to demand, process, and share high-quality information to support worker participation, worker protection, and workplace democracy is becoming increasingly critical in times of overlapping crises. Strengthening these capacities would enable social partners to engage more actively with the rapidly expanding policy agenda at both the EU and national levels. This agenda ranges from adequate minimum wages and collective bargaining coverage to health and safety, gender equality, protection against non-standard and precarious forms of work, discrimination, and opaque algorithmic management. It also includes skills development, vocational training, youth employment, and workers' right to disconnect. Equally important is the role of social partners in monitoring, influencing, and implementing key EU redistributive instruments that support social dialogue, including the European Social Fund. For example, practices such as the of unionisation of migrant workers, trade union activities to combat undeclared work, or how to deal with AI, could be transposed across many sectors and countries through effective cross-border union cooperation.

> ***Particular attention should be given to the growing importance of cross-border information sharing among trade unions.***

Learning from the best practices: cross-border cooperation in organising migrant workers

In the Croatian tourism sector, for example, the successful unionisation of migrant workers was achieved through international support and cooperation between various trade unions (EFFAT, 2025). According to the publication of EFFAT, one significant outcome was the increased use of contracts for foreign workers in Croatian hospitals. Cooperation between the Croatian and North Macedonian trade unions provides another successful example. Workers initially joined trade unions in their home country

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of origin before being introduced to Croatian trade unions upon entering the labour market. Migrant workers were placed to work in hotels where trade unions already had an established presence, helping to support awareness of and compliance with contractual standards and working conditions. Employers initially expressed reservations about this trade union-led approach during negotiations and sectoral social dialogue. Over time, however, they eventually recognised operational advantages and viewed the approach as a potentially more stable alternative to recruitment through external agencies. As a result, employers began communicating staffing needs to trade unions, enabling Croatian unions to facilitate matching processes with suitable candidates. Public institutions also benefited, as this approach supported efforts to improve labour-market matching and reduce incentives for the informal economy. Similar transnational initiatives have also been documented in the Croatian construction industry (ELA, n.d.).

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