EUROPE 22.11.2019 | Nikolaos Gavalakis

Come on mate, regulate!

Eastern Partnership countries need to put labour rights at the heart of their progress. And the EU should pay close attention

Read this article in Russian.

Initiated 10 years ago, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was meant to bring stability and prosperity to the European Union's eastern neighbours. The EaP's goal was that six countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – would strongly benefit from economic cooperation and intensified trade relations with the EU. In economic terms, there has been undeniable progress. So far, however, workers are not profiting from the economic growth in the EaP countries.

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine entered free trade agreements and signed Association Agreements with the EU, expressing their desire for even greater integration. In these agreements, the three countries committed themselves, among other things, to international labour standards. The problem? Although the necessary directives – for instance, concerning minimum workplace health and safety requirements – have indeed been transposed into national law, social rights often exist only on paper. In reality, little has been done to change the situation. The consequences for employees in the three countries are grave, and in many cases even deadly.

Alarming conditions

Social dialogue as a means to foster good-quality jobs, decent work and increased productivity is virtually non-existent in the three countries. There is simply no genuine, systematic approach to mediate between employers and employees in order to avoid social unrest and strikes. In many instances, workers are forced to use strikes not as a means of last resort, but rather as the only possibility to force employers to start negotiations in the first place. Without constructive face-to-face negotiations, it's extremely hard for workers to defend their right to fair wages and a safe working environment.

Furthermore, discriminatory practices are still alarmingly common in these countries. The issue of gender inequality goes far beyond the absence of equal pay. In some instances, female workers' service contracts have even been terminated after the employer learned about the employee's pregnancy.

For countries in the region, it's time to turn away from a business-only approach and find a better balance between economic development and social progress.

In Ukraine, the lack of a proper labour inspection system has led to horrendous conditions in the workplace. On construction sites, there are often no security measures at all. Construction workers operate hundreds of metres above the ground without any safety lines or nets. Reports tell of employees putting helmets and hi-vis jackets on their dead colleagues after fatal incidents to cover up safety violations. Fatal incidents per 100,000 workers are six times higher in Ukraine than in the EU. In Georgia and Moldova, the numbers are not significantly better.

Dream of a better future

In many post-Soviet countries, the dreadful experience with totalitarian socialism has led to a general rejection of any state interventions, especially in the field of social policy. Fearing corruption and bureaucratic obstacles, labour inspection and many other regulations in the field of employment have been abolished. However, the idea that unconstrained free market economies would bring prosperity to citizens have turned out to be a chimera. Despite not having a great track record, neoliberal approaches – with Georgia under Mikheil Saakashvili being a prime example – unfortunately further dominate in the region. The new government in Kyiv would be wise not to go down the same road. First indications, however, are not encouraging.

Many people in the countries of the Eastern Partnership, especially in the three associated countries, dream of a better future. They expect that the process of European integration will lead to tangible progress for them and a noticeable improvement in the quality of life. However, despite stable economic growth, ordinary citizens don't feel their lives changing for the better. Great achievements such as visa liberalisation benefit only those who can afford to travel abroad. That's merely a small percentage of the population. A huge gap between elites and ordinary citizens is not good for society as it weakens social cohesion. Even the International Monetary Fund now considers inequality to be a major threat to growth and prosperity.

For countries in the region, it's time to turn away from a business-only approach and find a better balance between economic development and social progress. In fact, a stable and safe work environment is conducive for increased productivity and economic growth.

Holding to account

Without noticeable improvements, people will increasingly seek to move to the European Union in pursuit of decent work and higher salaries. In Poland alone, currently two million Ukrainians live and work to provide a better life for themselves and their families. The migrant workers are not always seen as positive, as their arrival poses the risk of social dumping to the EU labour market. For their country of origin, it's a huge problem as well: their economies and societies suffer from the exodus of highly educated people.

The EU should consider systems of incentives as well as mechanisms to sanction the violations of social standards agreed upon.

If the countries have serious intentions regarding European integration, they must get their act together and put a stronger focus on social matters. The highest potential for immediate improvements in living standards lies here.

At the same time, the EU must hold the associated countries properly accountable for their commitments with regards to the social dimension. The EU should consider systems of incentives as well as mechanisms to sanction the violations of social standards agreed upon. As it already did in the field of justice reform, it could use the disbursement of financial assistance as leverage to force the countries to enhance the labour conditions of their workforce.

If citizens continue to perceive that their rights and interests are not being taken seriously by their government and the EU, this could lead to disenchantment within the broader population and subsequently endanger the integration process.



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