

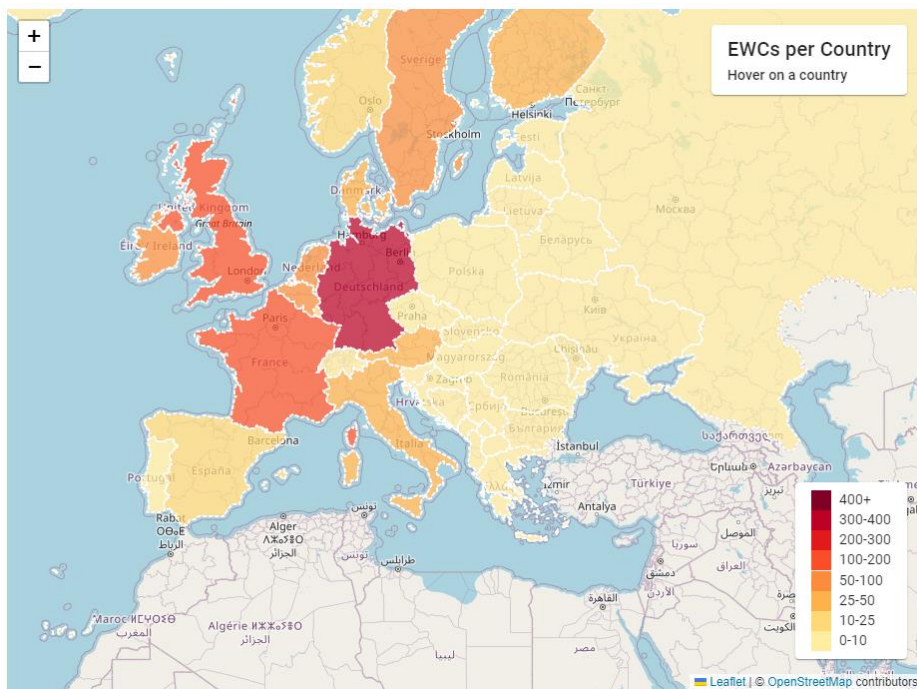
European Works Councils: Specific recommendations for Central and Eastern Europe

With the increasing trend of multinational companies to outsource or relocate activities in a number of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries¹, one would expect to have many European Works Councils (EWCs) based in those countries and for workers' representatives from these countries to be actively involved in the work of the EWCs. However, when looking at the numbers and statistics, it appears that very few EWCs are established under the national legislation of Central and Eastern European countries and that some EWCs are even often missing representatives from those countries.

As of 2024, from the **1.010 active EWCs**:

- 5 EWCs are based under Hungarian legislation
- 3 EWCs under Polish legislation
- 3 EWCs under Czech legislation
- 1 EWC under Slovenian legislation

No EWC is based on the laws of Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia.



Source: ETUI EWC Database (www.ewcdb.eu (2024))

¹ Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia. As candidate states to the EU there is also Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.



Several elements can explain this:

- Different industrial relations culture; (European) works councils are perceived not as a tool but as an enemy for trade unions;
- The knowledge regarding EWCs can be rather low or only amongst the top management of unions;
- A lack of awareness among the workers on the possibility and conditions for establishing a new EWC or a lack of communication between trade unions in different Member States as to formally launch the process of setting up an EWC;
- A lack of communication, cooperation between unions of the same country;
- Management playing with the divisions between unions and sometimes even contributing to the election/nomination of representatives from the management as SNB/EWC member;
- Scepticism or mistrust towards the EWC which can be seen by some trade union organisations as competing with their work, discouraging people from joining trade unions or be abused by management to avoid the organizing of workers' unions;
- In most countries in the CEE region, EWC delegates are directly elected by the entire workforce and therefore, they sometimes lack the direct contact and support from the trade unions;
- The information and consultation process can already be covered by national legislation or some unions prefer to focus on national issues within national fora, thus allocating little resources for the preparation and participation in EWCs;
- Trade union organizations can be absent in some multinational companies or not strong enough as to enable the election of a representative from the trade union movement;
- The language can be a significant barrier, not only regarding the information and documents shared by management, but also for the informal discussions where interpreters are not always present;
- The fear of reprisal as the level of protection provided to EWC members is often lower than in Western European countries;
- The lack of sanctions for management which limits the coercive capacities of trade unions².

EWCs are the only genuinely transnational bodies for information and consultation in the workplace, which is essential to protect workers and promote democracy at the workplace. When adequately integrated in the mainstream trade union work, they can also manage to anticipate changes, get a grip on transnational restructuring measures and ensure that workers' rights are entirely respected. They have a great potential power to influence corporate decisions. Yet, in order to reach their full potential, it is essential for them to reflect the business structure and include all countries where the company operates. Indeed, **only a fully composed EWC, including representatives from CEE countries will ensure that all interests are taken into account, hence that no worker is left behind.**

Central and Eastern Europe was designated as a priority at the ETF Congress in Barcelona in 2017 and reconfirmed at the last Congress in Budapest in 2022. Since then, different projects and

² For a more detailed analysis see Institute of Public Policy (IPP), European Works Councils in Eastern Europe, 2020, https://irmo.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Comparative_summary_EWC.pdf.



initiatives have taken place in the region. An ETF Strategy for CEE was also developed in May 2021, putting a strong emphasis on union building, organising and collective bargaining.

In order to link two important priorities for ETF, namely EWCs and CEE, ETF organised as part of an EU-funded project a workshop in October 2024 to discuss with its affiliates the challenges linked to EWC members from CEE countries and develop recommendations to improve their participation.

Those **recommendations** are:

1) For the ETF

- Further develop and disseminate a common/shared understanding on the EWC's role as a transnational body of meaningful information, consultation and workers involvement;
- Disseminate information on the conditions for setting up an EWC and if requested, assist the creation of new EWCs in CEE countries or with unions from these countries;
- If possible, coordinate the election/nomination process with the affiliates to ensure that the right persons are elected/nominated to sit in the SNB/EWC;
- Provide extra support to delegates from these countries through information sharing, trainings, if requested and possible ensuring interpretation in the mother tongue of the participants;
- Developing skills for social dialogue culture.

2) For the Special Negotiating Body (SNB)

While negotiating the EWC agreement, SNB members should ensure that:

- Interpretation of all meetings and translation of all documents are foreseen in the languages of the representatives (ensuring qualitative participation in the EWC);
- Trainings are foreseen, including English trainings if requested;
- Members from CEE countries receive the same degree of protection as in Western European states;
- Time dedicated for the EWC is recognized and paid as working time;
- Some meetings can take place in CEE countries and access to sites is possible (to allow exchanges with workers and local trade unions).

3) For the EWCs

- Clarify the responsibilities and roles of all EWC members;
- When foreseen in the agreement, use the opportunity to organise trainings;
- Meet with local trade unions when EWCs meetings are taking place in CEE countries. This can increase awareness and understanding of the functioning and potential of EWCs.

4) For the trade unions in CEE countries

- To get acquainted with the European and national framework on consultation and participation;
- To actively look for opportunities for organising in multinational companies;
- To provide the necessary support to EWC delegates from their region;
- To take part in company networks organised by the ETF.