



Event report: Third European Sunday Alliance Conference: *Work-Life Balance 4.0 – Challenges in a time of digitalisation*

15/12/16 – Digitalisation is changing our society in many ways. How it impacts our relationship between work and personal time was at the centre of discussion of the third European Sunday Alliance conference on 15 November 2016. Under the heading “*Work-life balance 4.0 – Challenges in a time of digitalisation*”, more than 100 participants examined the risks, but also opportunities of the digital shift and expressed the need for proper labour regulation at EU level.

I. Context and Opening: European Sunday Alliance launches Resolution to call for proper EU policies that shape the impact of digitalisation

The one-day event was hosted by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). It started with the keynote speech of Günther H. Oettinger, EU Commissioner for Digital Economy & Society, followed by two panel discussions with EU officials, researchers and representatives of the European Sunday Alliance. On the occasion of the conference, the alliance also launched a [Resolution for a better work-life balance and synchronised free time in the age of digitalisation](#). The Resolution is aimed at activating civil society and politicians to use the opportunities for a better work-life balance and to limit the risks created by digitalisation for the benefit of European citizens.

Luca Jahier, President of Group III of the EESC and a supporter of the European Sunday Alliance from the very beginning, opened the event, together with the **Members of the European Parliament Evelyn Regner (S&D) and Thomas Mann (EPP)**. Thomas Mann highlighted that “*work-life balance is a crucial factor in the debate of health and safety at work*” and that “*we have to stand for a work-free day for all European citizens*”. He therefore called to “*establish the Sunday as a work-free day within the Working-time Directive*”. Evelyn Regner added that “*workers must be able to disconnect in their home life*”. She underlined that “*the right to have breaks, to be unavailable during leisure time and to have at least one work-free day per week has to be secured for all workers in Europe. To achieve all this, we need a fair distribution of work and profits.*”

“Work-life balance is crucial factor in the debate of health and safety at work. We should therefore establish the Sunday as a work-free day within the Working-Time Directive.

MEP Thomas Mann (EPP)

II. Keynote: Shape digitalisation with proper labour law and well-suited education policy

The framework of the conference was set by Günther H. Oettinger. The European Commissioner for Digital Economy & Society spoke in his keynote in favour of a right to unavailability and highlighted the importance of digital education.

Commissioner Oettinger outlined the ambivalent consequences of the transformative shift, which according to him had a great potential to work-life balance, but likewise could provoke a culture of permanent availability. He stressed that digitalisation could not be stopped and that politics should shape the trend in a way that it benefits employers and employees. *“We need a right to switch-off our mobile phones, to be unavailable and to be able to put an end to the working day”*, said Commissioner Oettinger.

Apart from proper working-time regulations, education would play a crucial role, the German Commissioner underlined. He admitted that many jobs would phase out, but that many more would be created in the IT and related sectors. He therefore explained that digital literacy, in particular in the framework of vocational education and training, was of vital importance to enable people adapting to the changing labour market realities.

“We need a right to switch-off our mobile phones, to be unavailable and to be able to put an end to the working day.”

Commissioner Günther H. Oettinger

He announced that the [EU would launch a multi-stakeholder partnership on 1 December, the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition](#) to ensure that EU citizens are equipped with adequate digital skills. The Commissioner emphasised that all organisations taking actions to boost digital skills in the EU can become members of the coalition by endorsing its objectives and principles.

III. 1st panel: New forms of employment – Flexibilisation of working time

In the first panel, the conference participants discussed with representatives of the EU Commission, trade unions, the EU agency Eurofound, and an entrepreneur on the risks and opportunities of work-life balance in a time of new forms of employment.

Irene Mandl from the *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound)* set the basis for the discussion. The research manager presented the findings of the recent Eurofound publication *New Forms of Employment* and related follow-up research projects. She illustrated that in the past 15 years, new work arrangements had increased in importance, especially crowd working with the emergences of online platforms and ICT mobile works through the possibility of flexible workplaces, for instance home office. Irene Mandl explained that the emergence of these new forms transformed the traditional one-to-one relationship between employer and employees triggering both positive and negative consequences. While she mentioned that people could improve their work-life balance and increase the productivity due to more flexible and individualised working-time arrangements, the research manager also explained that the new forms increased the risk of self-exploitation, burnout, social isolation for people working from home and raised questions about the representation of interests for crowd workers.

Philip von Eberhardt, agreed with the two-sided concept of digitalisation. The entrepreneur indicated that the trend was a crystal ball, which under the right policies could substantially improve the balance between private and work life. The Managing Partner at N2S – *New Network Solutions* explained that companies should adapt their well-established business models to maintain their competitiveness. *“We can see today that young professionals stop to pick a job, but pick a boss”*, he

“Nowadays, young professionals care more for their free time and consequently, companies have to respond to this requirement to attract the right talents.” ”

Philip von Eberhardt

stated explaining that nowadays young people increasingly care for their free time. Consequently, he stressed, in order to attract the right talents, companies should respond to these requirements. Philip von Eberhardt also criticised that digital connectivity was still too often confused as a goal, but not as a mean to enhance cooperation and communication in the real world. He also underlined the importance of targeted

education policies that aim to provide all EU citizens with a basic understanding of the functioning of digital devices, including a fundamental knowledge on coding.

Delphine Latawiec looked at the impact of e-commerce on the traditional retail sector. Referring to a study of *ING bank*, the **National Secretary at the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions of Belgium (ACV/CSC)** explained that 53,000 jobs were projected to disappear in the wake of digitalisation while only 25,000 will be created. *“People cannot be trained overnight to become IT manager”*, she warned and stressed that employment was becoming more precarious because of increased competition with e-commerce platforms, such as Amazon. The trade unionist asked the participants to consider that flexibilization of work is a two-coined concept: for the high-qualified, it means they can choose their working hours; for others, it means they are imposed longer working schedules due to increased competition.

The fourth panellist **Baudouin Baudru from the European Commissioner** presented the initiatives through which the EU intends to shape the transformative shift on the labour market. The

“There is a huge waste of talents. Women are often better qualified than men, but participate less in the labour market. The revised Work-life Balance package shall address this problem.”

Baudouin Baudru

Member of the Cabinet of Employment and Social Affairs Commissioner Marianne Thyssen focused on the following three actions: first, the Commission will adopt in March 2017 a proposal for a European Pillar of Social Rights. This initiative should include a number of social principles, including one on work-life balance. He stressed that the Pillar aimed to renew social convergences and scrutinise if the present policy-framework is still fit for purpose. Second, Baudouin

Baudru outlined the purpose and context of the recently presented New Skills Agenda for Europe. This set of proposals intends to ensure that people are equipped with the skills needed in today’s and tomorrow’s labour market. Third, he announced that the Commission would present together with the Pillar of Social Rights in March a set of legislative and non-legislative initiatives to improve work-life balance. He argued that the revision of the present package from 2008 is needed to close the gender gap on the labour market. *“There is a huge waste of talents”*, Baudouin Baudru highlighted, *“Women are often better qualified than men, but participate less in the labour market”*. He stressed that the upcoming EU package should help closing this gap by facilitating the sharing of child rearing as well as the care of the elderly.

In the following roundtable discussion, participants agreed that politics should not hamper the trend of digitalisation, but identify the implications for the labour market and correct its potential negative consequences. All panellists urged the need for more regulation to ensure work-life balance and protect families in the digital economy. However, not all new types of work would be easily regulated, as **Irene Mandl** explained, *“since crowd workers provide their services across borders and operate on platforms that are often registered in non-EU countries, European legislations cannot address all loopholes”*. Instead, she therefore recommended to raise awareness of consumers on the conditions of employment of crowd workers and to highlight good practices

through certification systems. **Baudouin Baudru** meanwhile stated that a mixed approach of legislative and non-binding instruments would be an appropriate solution. The EU official highlighted that companies were starting to take into account their social impact and that [from 30 November to 1 December 2017 the EU under the Slovak Presidency of the Council would organise a Social Economy Conference in Bratislava/Slovakia to exchange about new business models and to launch the Social Business Act II.](#)

IV. 2nd panel: Life beyond work and digitalisation – The need for unavailability

The impact of digitalisation and flexibilisation of work on social engagement was the topic of the second panel. Whether the influence of the Internet on society facilitates or hampers civic activism remained disputed among the speakers.

Ingo Dachwitz, editor at netzpolitik.org emphasised the great opportunities of the digital society, but likewise stressed the need for a better understanding of the consequences of digital interactions. The **Youth delegate in the Synod of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD)** raised the following three points: first, he saw that digitalisation has a great potential to improve work-life balance as it frees people from rigid time frames. He, however, admitted that such a freedom presupposed a certain kind of self-determination and self-confidence in respect of work. Second, he asserted that the boundaries between work and social life did not longer exist. The young journalist therefore urged the need to establish a culture that facilitates the balance between working life and free time. Third, Ingo Dachwitz recalled the need for proper education policies that not only should equip people with the rights skills, but also explain the consequences of internet activities: *“Society needs to become aware of the fact that increased digital interactions means to leave a digital footprint”*, the German journalist stated. Yet, most of the people were not aware of the risk, but disturbing examples, such as the *Admiral Insurance* showed arising consequences according to him: the US-American company plans to price car insurances based on algorithm analysing social media to identify safe drivers.

“Society needs to become aware of the fact that increased digital interactions means to leave a digital footprint.”

Ingo Dachwitz

Evelyn Regner also agreed that digitalisation comes with risks and opportunities. The **Member of the European Parliament** stressed that platforms provide for many people an opportunity to offer a job that provides an additional income. On the contrary, the Austrian parliamentarian expressed her concern that these working models contained a lot of risks and unsolved questions about payment, workplace conditions and social security for those employees who earn their entire living with a crowd job. Evelyn Regner also highlighted the value of breaks. It would not only be important to provide leisure time for the employees but also for the productivity and creativity of companies. The member of the S&D group stressed the need for a right to unavailability. *“Especially for young people it would be sometimes important to “chill”; meaning doing nothing”*, she added. The Austrian MEP called for a legal framework at European level that provides a consistent definition of home office and ensures that not just the most privileged benefit from the digital shift.

“There are still too many unsolved questions regarding payment, workplace conditions and social security of crowd workers.”

MEP Evelyn Regner (S&D)

While focusing on the influence of digitalisation on personal relations and family, the fourth speaker **H. E. Mgr. Bruno Feillet** underlined that the trend could bring especially those families and friends together that live far away, e.g. via Skype, and likewise facilitate access to knowledge. On the other hand, the **Auxiliary Bishop of Reims (France)** stressed, that digitalisation could also alienate and isolate people from each other that live close together when they use smartphones or computers too often and forget to communicate with the people around them. He further said that the borders between the human way of thinking and computer algorithms became increasingly blurred by the attempts of making machine think like humans. A machine itself would not be valuable, he stressed, it is the human being who makes everything valuable.

“Digitalisation can bring family and friends together that live far away, but likewise can alienate or isolate people from each other that live close together.”

H. E. Bishop Bruno Feillet

Representing the movement of the **German Sunday Alliance**, **Hannes Kreller** urged the need for a new common definition of work and work-life balance as well as a right to unavailability. He stressed that through increasing flexibilisation of work, family, friends, cultural activities, and other leisure pursuits were running risk of being subordinated by the job. He expressed his concern that people benefitting from the positive effects of digitalisation would expect that others would adapt to their way of life. He pointed out that permanent availability of employees would lead to a decrease in social engagement, but likewise acknowledged that digitalisation likewise led to new forms of civic activism and democratic participation. Hannes Kreller, however, stressed that even these forms required a space of synchronised free time, such as the free Sunday as common *“time anchor”* for rest and family life in the week. He therefore called European legislators to find legal answers on the protection of the Sunday.

Hector Saz, specialist teleoperator, explained that the digital sector would be fast-paced, but that, in particular in his home country Spain labour law needs to be adapted to the new types of work. On the contrary, he highlighted that digitalisation could help workers to promote their interests as seen by the mobilisation for strikes in Spain. While he outlined also the opportunities, the crowd worker emphasised that most of his colleagues would work under atypical conditions, for instance, part-time, on short-term contracts or at unusual working hours. He also stressed that most of the employees in the call-centre sector were young and forced to do several jobs at the same time to earn an adequate living.

The Interest Group continues to follow the issue of work-life balance and digitalisation and will throughout 2017 organise several breakfast meetings on this and related topics in the European Parliament.

About the European Sunday Alliance

The European Sunday Alliance is a network of national Sunday Alliances, trade unions, business executives, civil society organisations, churches and religious communities committed to raise awareness of the unique value of synchronised free time and a work-free Sunday for our European societies. Committed to the issue of work-life-balance as a key role and the goal of enabling all European citizens to enjoy full participation in sports, cultural, social and religious life, the Interest Group brings together MEPs and representatives from civil society organizations and offers a platform for exchange and discussion.

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