

Towards sustainable TCLF industries in Serbia

EU social partners and representatives of Serbian employers, trade unions, universities and the government met on 6-7 December in Belgrade to discuss how to meet the opportunities and challenges of the new EU Textile Strategy and changing market.

Serbian textile, clothing, leather and footwear (TCLF) industries employ 60,000 workers in the home textiles, fashion and automotive supply chains. As an EU candidate country and a major exporter to the European markets, the sector will be deeply impacted by the European Union's goals to transform the textile ecosystem to be sustainable, circular and competitive in the global perspective.

The Serbian government has adopted an industrial strategy 2021-2030, which aims to fulfil the demands of EU's industrial policy, with focus on transformation into a circular model of business, digitalisation and innovation. The Ministry of Economy said that for the textile cluster this means investments in environmental performance and competitiveness.

Trade union representatives from SSTKOS, Nezavisnost and ISS invited the employers to work with them on improving social dialogue, the right to organise and bargain collectively, and technological upgrading of production.

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PKS) and the Association of Employers (UPS) spoke about the need to improve competitiveness, attract skilled workforce, and clear the obstacles in labour law for collective bargaining.

Textile cluster FACTS provided an example of public-private cooperation by connecting 20 export-oriented textile and leather companies with universities to compete with design and technology, instead of wage costs.

The European textile, clothing, leather and footwear associations, EURATEX, COTANCE, CEC and the trade union, industriAll Europe, pledged their support for a master plan that would bring together the social partners, government and education providers to work for a sustainable and competitive industry that takes care of the workers.

Luc Triangle, industriAll Europe's General Secretary said:

"Never is strong social dialogue more important than during times of transition. Workers are at the heart of the green and digital transitions of the TCLF sector in Serbia and should be involved in all stages of this journey. There is a real chance to modernise the industry in Serbia and improve the working environment and conditions for workers, but this needs investment both in technology and in the workforce. A Just Transition for the sector can only happen if there are strong social partners engaged in quality social dialogue. We'll continue to support our affiliates to make sure that TCLF sectors in Serbia transform without leaving worker behind."

Dirk Vantghem, EURATEX Director General, said:

"The Serbian textile industry offers great potential in the wider European textile ecosystem, both in the area of fashion and technical textiles. Its proximity to the EU market and skilled workforce are a great asset on which to build. The EU textile strategy, which is pushing the industry towards more sustainability and more transparency, will require a significant effort from the Serbian textile entrepreneurs; therefore, the Serbian authorities should offer

support to the industry and recognise the strategic importance of textiles in the Serbian economy.”

Gustavo Gonzalez-Quijano, COTANCE Secretary General, said:

“Leather as a renewable material is perfectly aligned with the principles of the Green Transition and the Circular Economy that the EU is promoting in its TCLF Strategy. Serbia, with its remarkable craftsmanship in the leather sector, has the opportunity to become an important player in the EU. For this to happen, it requires committed businesses and workers and the support of the Serbian Government.”

Carmen Arias, CEC Secretary General, said:

“The sanitary, political and economic crisis have reinforced the need for employers and workers to work together, supported by the Government, towards the digital and circular transformation of the TCLF industries, and promote shorter supply chains within Europe. Serbian footwear components, footwear and leather goods companies can play a big role in this respect. It is particularly important to invest in people’s skills and talent, the main asset of our industries, and have access to modern technologies to face the transition.”

The workshop was part of an EU-funded social dialogue project *‘Ensuring a sustainable future for the Southeast European textile, clothing, leather and footwear industries’*, carried out in cooperation between European industry associations EURATEX, COTANCE, CEC and industriAll Europe. The two-year project covers Bulgaria, Croatia, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia, where the TCLF industries employ over 400,000 workers.