



DGB

fair
Labour Mobility EU

Counselling that crosses borders – for fair work across Europe

We connect trade-union-related counselling centres across several EU countries so that mobile and migrant workers can claim their rights – quickly, in multiple languages, and across borders.

This network now needs permanent funding – to ensure that rights don't get lost along the way.

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When work crosses borders, workers' rights (all too often) get left behind

Hundreds of thousands of people work in another EU country each year – on construction sites, in the fields, in cramped truck cabins or as live-in care workers in private households. Wages go unpaid, working hours spiral, accommodation is unacceptable. These are not isolated

cases but business models – structural problems that affect entire sectors.

Without knowledge of the language or the applicable labour laws, it is almost impossible for workers to claim their rights, let alone enforce them.

The human reality behind the cases

Labour mobility within the EU continues to rise: labour shortages and demographic change will accelerate it further – including with more workers from third countries. Those

who work only temporarily in another EU member state are particularly exposed to precarious, sometimes exploitative situations: different legal systems, complex subcontracting chains, language barriers, unclear documents – rights

that exist on paper too often fail in practice.

Yet while companies operating across Europe benefit from extensive EU-level support structures, mobile workers lack any comparable system of protection.

Europe relies on mobile labour – but that labour is not yet protected everywhere. To keep mobility fair, workers need counselling that works across national jurisdictions.

Fair European Labour Mobility (FELM) – the European counselling network for fair labour mobility – shows how this can be achieved. Through cooperation, trust and shared expertise across borders, the network helps workers understand their rights and enforce fair working conditions.

Those who keep Europe running need counselling that crosses borders.

A Network for Fair Mobility in Europe

Since 2015, EU-supported cross-border counselling structures for fair labour mobility have been established and expanded. Union-linked counselling centres in several countries work trust-based, independently and in multiple languages to ensure that mobile and migrant workers can genuinely enforce their rights.

The current project **FELM** (2024–2025) is funded by the European Union and builds on the successful predecessor initiatives of recent years. From 2026 onwards, the work will continue under the pilot project **Fair Labour Mobility EU**. However, funding will remain project-based and time-limited until then.

FELM connects counselling centres in eight European countries. Counsellors explain rights, review contracts, coordinate between sending and receiving countries, and cooperate with trade unions, labour market institutions and inspectorates. Only through coordinated cross-border cooperation can violations be identified, responsibilities traced along subcontracting chains, and rights effectively enforced.

A coordinating body ensures consistent procedures across the network through regular exchange, training and quality standards, and strengthens cooperation between the countries.

An important partner is **Faire Mobilität** in Germany. This structure, funded by the German Ministry of Labour and the German Trade Union Confederation, brings long-standing practical experience and established standards into the cooperation and thus makes a key contribution to the development of the network.

Together, these efforts create a cross-border support network that begins where national responsibilities end – an essential step towards a permanently established European counselling network for mobile and migrant workers.

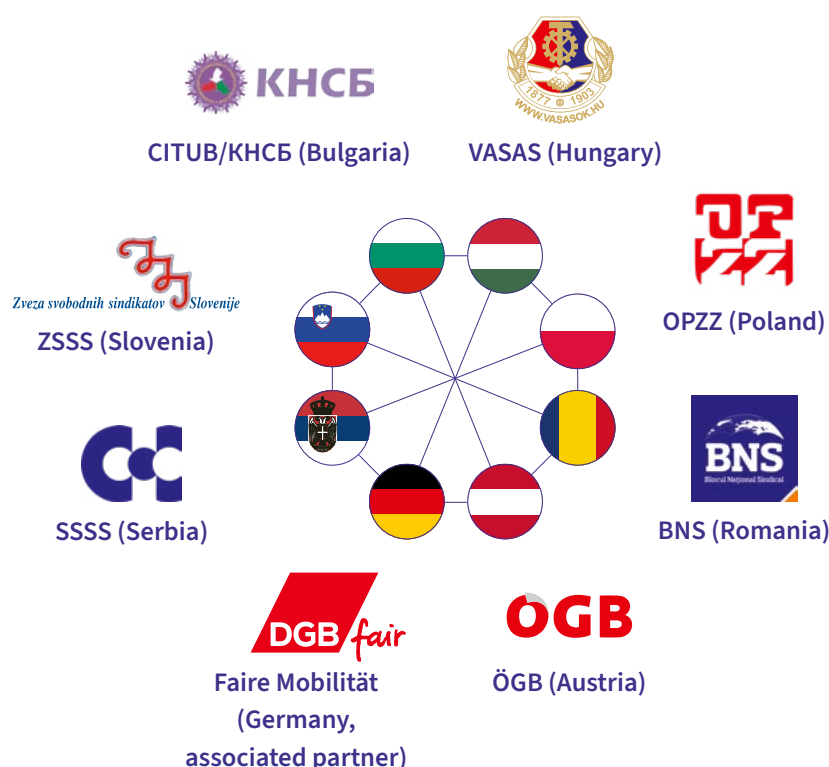
Trust, expertise and strong cross-border partnerships require time and continuity. This is why counselling services must be funded on a long-term and stable basis – so that fair working conditions become a reality across Europe, independent of national borders.

FELM in Numbers

8 participating countries

8 Partner organisations

around 1,400 counselling cases per year



Key sectors: construction, transport, agriculture, metal and electrical industry, live-in home care



“Trade unions are at the forefront of defending the rights of mobile and migrant workers. This is why the EU needs to support trade union counselling structures, which play a crucial role in protecting seasonal workers from exploitation.”

Enrico Somaglia, EFFAT

Photo: Public Domain/CC0 1.0 Universal

Between Rollers and Forms

First day. Wrong angle

Early summer in Lower Austria. Damp rows of strawberries, the soil is heavy. Elena S.¹, a Bulgarian seasonal worker, ties her headscarf. A push of a button – the tarp tightens – a corner of the fabric gets caught in the roller. Her head is pulled into the machine. Then everything goes dark. She never hears the helicopter coming.

Elena wakes up in the hospital. She hears voices in a language that isn't hers. They ask for papers, forms, words.

No language – no rights

Elena S. has suffered severe injuries – including a scalp wound, several broken arms, and torn earlobes on both sides. What now? She doesn't know her rights.

Someone picks up – and stays on the line

By sheer luck, she gets in touch with the FELM counselling centre at the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB). Someone says: “Talk to Blagovesta.” Finally – on the other end of the line, a voice that understands. And helps. Sick pay. Continued remuneration. One-off compensation. An application to the accident insurance.

Later, back home in Bulgaria: Marina, counsellor at the FELM project of the Confederation of Independent Trade

Unions of Bulgaria (CITUB), helps her apply for a disability pension. Paths across borders are long, deadlines short – but Elena S. is not walking them alone.

Not high. But permanent

In court in Vienna, they calculate soberly: first day, short contract – the pension will remain low. But it will come. Not high. But it will be there. And permanent.

Without the cross-border advisory network, an accident would have turned into a disaster.

Two countries, one path to security

Benefits must be documented, recognised and continued across borders. This can only be achieved if counselling centres in both countries work together seamlessly. This requires continuity: reliable EU funding so that no one is held back by language, forms or borders.



КНСБ

ÖGB

¹ The cases described are real; the names of the individuals concerned have been anonymised.



**“Transparency
brings accountability:
once contractors understand
the chain, they can act –
counselling makes
that possible.”**
Oliver Röthig, UNI

The chain is liable

Dust, noise, orange-striped traffic cones. The crack in the asphalt becomes a rut. Three men from Slovenia are laying fibre-optic cables in Bavaria: laying pipes, blowing in cables, closing manholes. Piecework without a clock; it's the metres that count, not the hours.

Two months of work, zero pay

They work hard throughout May and June. Summer arrives, but their wages remain unpaid. Who is responsible remains a mystery: **everyone points to the next link in the subcontractor chain.**

No one wants to be responsible

The men write emails, hear waiting loops. Excuses come, payments do not. ‘Contact the company in Slovenia,’ they are told in Bavaria. When they call there, they are told: ‘Please contact the local subcontractor directly.’ Responsibility is quickly shifted. The wages do not arrive.

Chain made visible

Then a contact: the **FELM** counselling centre at the Slovenian Trade Union Confederation **ZSSS** in Ljubljana. A second: **Fair Mobility** in Germany. Finally, someone is listening to them. The advisors lay out the contracts side by side, trace payment routes and meticulously reconstruct the subcontractor chain.

The leverage lies not with the last subcontractor, but with the general contractor: **general contractor liability** means that responsibility does not end with the cheapest link. When the general contractor initially fails to budge, a major client intervenes. **Pressure, for fear of public embarrassment.**

An isolated case with spillover effects

€5,620.49 are paid retroactively. Not as a gesture of goodwill, but as a result of systematic, persistent enforcement of basic labour rights. And: the general contractor changes its processes – transparency instead of passing the buck, clear responsibilities for the next construction site.

Why cross-border?

Because contracts are transnational – and rights get stuck without a network.

ZSSS and **Faire Mobilität** connect the country of origin and the destination country, share standards, secure evidence and meet deadlines. This turns ‘no one responsible’ into a payment on a bank statement. **This is exactly why a permanently funded European counselling network is needed.**



“Third-country drivers in international road transport face systematic exploitation – without a strong cross-border counselling network, nothing will change.”

Livia Spera, ETF

Photo: Faire Mobilität

Wages remain the same, lorries keep driving

At night at the service station. Tomislav M., a lorry driver from Bosnia, just grabs his coffee on the go. Tours through Germany, dispatch in Slovenia. The kilometres are right, but the wages are not. He is paid according to the Slovenian minimum wage, even though the trips are in Germany. Month after month, the gap grows – until it amounts to a few thousand euros.

Actually a clear-cut case

Tom calls Ljubljana, the Slovenian Trade Union Confederation **ZSSS**. He quickly gets through to **FELM** advisor Marko. They both speak the same native language – that alone helps. Together, they check the facts: reading driver cards, calculating hours, sorting receipts. Then they build a bridge to Germany: **Faire Mobilität** checks the facts – the result: Tomislav is clearly entitled to the German minimum wage. The case file is ready. Now one last attempt to settle the matter amicably before it goes to court.

Quick agreement – thanks to professional help

Marko contacts the employer, presents the evidence, refers to the network: **FELM**, **Faire Mobilität**, trade unions in Germany and Slovenia, labour inspectorate, and, if necessary, the general contractor. In the end, the transport company relents. Less out of insight than because of the prospect of a

long legal battle. An out-of-court settlement is reached, with the employer paying €5,000 net. This is close to the claim, but above all, it is much quicker than a court case would ever be heard.

Why it matters

Many third-country nationals posted by EU companies fear for their residence status, so they don't speak up – and end up being cheated out of their wages. Counselling that is independent of governmental institutions and transcends borders can help: it alleviates fears, secures evidence, negotiates under pressure – and puts money in their accounts.

In this and other cases: without lengthy court proceedings, with quick results.

What is needed

If freight routes are Europe-wide, rights must be too. **ZSSS**, **FELM** and **Faire Mobilität** show how it can be done: in a coordinated, multilingual and rapid manner. To make this the norm – and not a matter of luck – this network needs permanent EU funding.



“In the construction sector, responsibility and risk are shifted along subcontracting chains – Europe needs cross-border counselling and liability rules to break this cycle.”

Tom Deleu, EFBH

Photo: Faire Mobilität

Behind the façade

North Rhine-Westphalia, spring. A Romanian construction worker has been working on a building site for six weeks. He had to hand over his employment contract on arrival – without a copy, without a photo. The accommodation provided by his employer is infested with bedbugs. For over 200 hours of work, he receives only around €400 in advance – €2,500 remain unpaid. When he resigns, the general contractor also demands a contractual penalty – without any legal basis.

Post box instead of business

Faire Mobilität in Dortmund and **BNS** in Bucharest take up the case. They check registers, company status, payment flows – and find that the ‘posting’ Romanian company has been inactive since 2021, with no employees – there is only a post box address. What is striking is the family connection between the Romanian and German companies.

Registers, receipts, reports

The advice centres secure evidence, involve the Romanian labour inspectorate and inform Duisburg customs – with all available receipts. Advice in the interests of the employee – and with a signal effect for the authorities.

Investigations instead of stagnation

As of autumn 2025: Still no wages in the account. But: Investigations are underway. The case highlights suspected

abusive posting structures; **information from counselling centres increases the pressure to monitor.** Sometimes, the initial impact is simply the initiation of proceedings – a necessary step to ensure that claims can be enforced later on.

Why cross-border?

Because contracts, responsibilities and company chains span two countries. Only the network can bring together register data and inspection feedback, secure evidence and address the right authorities. This turns a ‘case without papers’ into a suspicion pursued by the authorities – and powerlessness into pressure for clarification. This is precisely why there is a need for permanent EU-funded counselling that works across borders.



Be there. Explain. Connect.

Examples of actions from the counselling network

Four places, one principle: creating short pathways to rights – for people who are otherwise rarely reached by counselling. Multilingual, trade-union-related, with clear levers for enforcement. This practice works. But to make it last, it needs stability: continuity instead of project logic.

BULGARIA · Well-informed before departure



Photo: FELM

systemic gaps became visible — especially concerning health insurance coverage after return, and the oversight temporary work agencies and opaque subcontracting structures. A press conference generated significant national media attention.

The result: Hundreds of people reached, many individual consultations; FELM becomes visible and accessible in rural regions. Based on the tour, CITUB is developing an information leaflet (before/during/after employment in DE/AT). A video podcast summarises the most important guidance. Hundreds of people now know their rights — and where they can seek help if they face exploitation: prevention where migration begins.

In March 2025, at the start of the harvest season, CITUB, Fair Mobility and ÖGB carried out a joint information campaign in structurally weak rural regions in northern Bulgaria. Many people from these areas regularly work as seasonal workers in agriculture in Western Europe because there is hardly any local employment. Many of them end up in highly exploitative situations.

The mobile counselling teams offered short presentations, individual conversations and multilingual leaflets: Which contracts are trustworthy? What do minimum wages, PDA1 and accommodation standards mean? Where can workers turn if something goes wrong? In meetings with municipalities, labour offices and the labour inspectorates,



Photo: FELM

SERBIA · Counselling at the Job Fair



Photo: FELM

Belgrade, 10 June 2024: European companies are recruiting workers at a job fair; Faire Mobilität (Germany), SSSS (Serbia) and ZSSS (Slovenia) provide on-site counselling about rights related to posting and employment abroad. Every year, tens of thousands of people leave Serbia to work temporarily or permanently in EU Member States. Slovenia acts as a bridge country: a large share of these workers are posted to Germany and Austria via companies based in Slovenia. Indirect posting chains are a common model in Serbia — and they blur responsibilities even further. In parallel, a policy round table provided the institutional framework:



Photo: FELM

33 participants from the ministry, the public employment service, the labour inspectorate, the German Embassy and the employers' association took part. The public response was strong.

Outcome: Numerous first-time counselling sessions, new contacts and firmly established cooperation channels along the Serbia–Slovenia–Germany corridor. Hundreds of people received information about their rights before signing contracts.

HUNGARY · Posting trainings across the country

Knowledge protects – on-site and online: As part of the FELM network, the metalworkers' union VASAS regularly informs workers who are temporarily posted to Germany, especially in companies in the automotive and metal/electrical industries. Participants receive concise, practice-oriented input on their rights and common problems – based on the Posting of Workers Directive as well as Hungarian and German labour law – and get answers to their individual questions. Topics include wage transparency, working and rest time rules, accommodation and travel costs, and the differences between posting and other forms of mobility. The sessions take place nationwide in workplaces and regional centres, plus online events reaching workers in more remote areas.

Result: From 2024 to mid-2025, dozens of in-person and online sessions reached hundreds of workers. Many



Photo: VASAS

participants pass on their knowledge or later contact FELM partners in Germany and Austria with concrete cases — a direct path from prevention to effective case resolution. Again, workers are empowered through information long before problems arise.

POLAND · Facebook Live Session for Domestic Care Workers

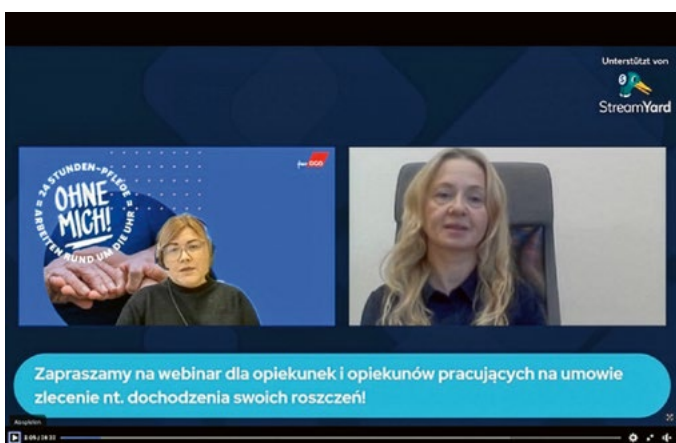


Photo: FELM

around the clock. Traditional in-person counselling rarely reaches them.

In November 2024, the Polish confederation OPZZ therefore launched a Facebook Live session specifically for Polish so called 24-hour care workers in Germany. Together with Faire Mobilität, counsellors explained service contracts and guided participants step by step through the process of claiming outstanding wages — in their native language.

The video was shared in relevant groups, reached more than 5,200 views within a few days and generated numerous follow-up questions. Crucially, the live session was only the starting point: questions from the chat turned into individual counselling, more stable messaging channels, and recurring micro-formats.

Many Polish women regularly work as live-in care workers for elderly people in Germany – often under problematic conditions, isolated in private households and “on call”



Photo: Faire Mobilität

“Counselling is not just problem-solving – it restores dignity.”

On fair labour mobility, shared standards, and why counselling must remain trade-union-related.
An interview with Mirela Caravan, BNS

What convinced you personally to start counselling mobile and posted workers?

Mirela Caravan: Many Romanians go abroad full of hope and end up in complex, often opaque situations: missing or unclear contracts, unpaid wages, poor accommodation – all within a system whose language and rules they do not know.

When BNS joined the FELM project in 2019, it provided the framework: counselling already in the country of origin, connected to partners in Germany. For me, it is about more than handling individual cases – it is about dignity and giving people the confidence to stand up for their rights.

What do the first minutes of a counselling session usually sound like?

Mostly confusion and immediate distress: “Is this legal? What can I do?”

At the beginning, it’s about listening and creating structure: What evidence exists, which deadlines apply, who

is responsible? These first steps already take off the pressure – and show that there is a way forward.

What are the most common problems?

Underpayment or withheld wages, missing written contracts, unpaid social contributions, poor living conditions.

Added to this are language barriers and uncertainty about which legal framework applies – Romanian or German. Subcontracting chains and abusive arrangements that obscure responsibility are also frequent problems.

Many cases can only be solved across borders. How does that work in practice?

Indeed, cross-border cooperation is essential, since the problems of mobile workers often involve several legal systems. Such cases are more the rule than the exception – without cooperation across borders, most of them would remain unresolved.

We coordinate case files and information with partners such as Faire Mobilität in Germany. One example: a group of Romanian construction workers had worked for months in Germany for a subcontractor who withheld their wages. Together with our German colleagues, we verified the company's status, the general contractor, the legal framework and the proper posting procedure – in the end, significant wage arrears were recovered. This shows how strong the network is when each side contributes its local expertise.

What role does general contractor or chain liability play?

A crucial one. Liability at the top of the chain becomes a lever when the documentation is solid and the legal framework allows it.

This is exactly what workers often lack – they have no access to reliable company data or have already returned to their home country. Without cooperation between counselling centres, many cases would simply vanish in the system.

How does cooperation with public authorities work – and where are the obstacles?

In principle, cooperation is constructive: we are in contact with the labour inspectorate, the A1 issuing authority and the social insurance institutions; we report violations and refer workers to the right bodies.

But procedures are often slow, responsibilities unclear, and digital data exchange across borders still too weak. What's needed is a more proactive, digitally supported inspection and enforcement system.

Especially in cases of bogus posting, Romanian authorities should take the initiative to contact their counterparts in Germany – these are rarely isolated cases but often affect dozens of workers.

What are the biggest obstacles in everyday counselling – and what would help most?

Beyond language barriers and legal complexity, access to legal aid is a major hurdle – it takes time, money, and often requires physical presence in the country of employment, even after workers have returned home. Another key challenge is the complexity of subcontracting chains.

What would help? Preventive information before departure, simplified procedures, and stable funding for free and independent counselling. Many problems could be prevented before they even arise.

How do you recognise when counselling really makes a difference – when the network works?

Of course, in recovered wages. But also in those moments when someone says: "Now I understand

my rights," and only signs a contract after having it checked.

At network level, you can see it when communication flows smoothly, trust is established, and cases are resolved faster.

Every successful cross-border case strengthens the whole system – and deters repeat offenders.

Why is permanent funding so important for these services?

Mobility and the risk of exploitation are not temporary phenomena – they are a permanent reality.

That's why mobile workers need permanent counselling structures, familiar and reliable contact points. Within the FELM network, we have built up strong expertise. Our model works – the cooperation between counselling centres in sending countries and Germany is highly effective.

We have gained valuable experience and achieved tangible results. Losing all this because funding runs out would be a major setback.

Why should these counselling services remain trade-union related?

Because we are part of the world of work and bring the necessary structures: sectoral knowledge, trusted representatives, and partnerships – for instance with EURES Romania or the Labour Inspectorate.

Even those who are not yet union members find credible, approachable support here.

We reach vulnerable groups who, for various reasons, are reluctant to contact state authorities.

This union anchoring combines reach, reliability and low-threshold access – exactly what mobile workers need.

Your conclusion in one sentence?

Cross-border counselling makes rights tangible – it brings cases to a successful outcome across systems. To ensure this is not left to chance, we need digital interfaces, clear liability rules and permanent EU funding.



Enforcing Rights. Across Europe

What it's all about

The cases presented in this brochure show: For workers who are temporarily and only for a short period employed in another EU Member State, the situation is often precarious. Too many are pushed into poor working conditions – sometimes into outright exploitation. Without knowledge of the local language and the applicable rights, they are barely able to claim or enforce what they are legally entitled to.

What works

Yet this brochure also shows: a European counselling network works. Trust-based, independent and trade union-related counselling – coordinated across borders – turns rights into reality.

A Public Responsibility – A Shared Commitment

Ensuring fair mobility is a public responsibility of pan-European interest. Trade unions have been taking responsibility in this area for years, creating structures and contributing expertise – but the financing of this task must be secured through European funds. Mobile workers are often only present for a short period and rarely become members of the local trade union. Protecting their rights is a joint task for the EU, Member States and social partners.

Our demand

The DGB and ETUC call for a Europe-wide counselling and support network for mobile and migrant workers – including posted and third-country workers

The network must be designed as follows:

- Permanent funding: stable resources to enable expertise, trust and partnerships to grow. Long-term funding should be secured through the EU budget.
- Trust-based and worker-oriented: independent from governmental institutions and trade union-related - offering access to sector-specific know-how and established networks.
- Transnationally coordinated: a Europe-wide coordination body ensures exchange, standards and training – so that advice flows seamlessly across borders.
- Strong sector-specific focus: focus on high-risk sectors (construction, transport, agriculture/seasonal work) in close cooperation with European sectoral trade unions.
- Flexible and reliable: tailored to countries of origin, destination and transit, while ensuring uniform quality and cooperation standards – so that counselling remains comparable and professional throughout Europe.

Why now?

Europe guarantees rights – but enforcement remains the bottleneck. A strong counselling network closes this gap: it makes entitlements tangible, secures wage recoveries and prevents repeat violations – regardless of origin or place of work.

Call to action

It is time for the European Commission, Parliament and Member States to act together and create the political framework for a permanently funded EU-wide counselling network.

Those who take Europe seriously must ensure that rights do not end at the border.



Photo: Joanna Kosowska für DGB

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