

Industrial Relations and the Circular Economy in Europe: Comparative Insight



TURN PROJECT FINAL REPORT

SindNova

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Executive Summary

The TURN project – *“Addressing Industrial Relations Towards the Circular Economy in Metal, Chemical, Textile and Construction Sectors”* – is a European initiative funded under the ESF+ (SOCPL-2022-IND-REL) that explored how industrial relations and social dialogue can actively support the transition to the circular economy (CE). Carried out between 2023 and 2025, the project involved a transnational partnership of trade unions, research centres, and civil society organisations across five countries: **Italy, Spain, Slovakia, Albania and Turkey.**

The core aim of TURN was to assess and promote the role of social partners in managing the ecological transformation of production systems, with a focus on five strategic sectors: **metal, chemical, textile, energy, and construction.** These sectors are not only resource-intensive, but also represent critical nodes in the shift towards a sustainable and competitive European economy.

Objectives

TURN addressed five key objectives:

- To analyse national industrial relations systems and their alignment with CE principles;
- To assess the legal and institutional frameworks enabling or hindering the involvement of workers in CE-related processes;

- To identify best practices and comparative insights from countries at different stages of CE maturity;
- To empower trade unions and workers' representatives through training, dialogue, and capacity building;
- To promote transnational exchange, mutual learning, and evidence-based recommendations for EU and national policy makers.

Methodology

- The project adopted a multi-layered and participatory research methodology, combining:
- Desk research on policy frameworks and collective bargaining practices;
- National case studies and stakeholder interviews with social partners, company representatives, and EWCs;
- Surveys aimed at measuring awareness, preparedness, and needs;
- Two national Round Tables (Albania and Turkey) for cross-country dialogue;
- A multilingual Handbook of findings and recommendations;
- A final European Conference (Rome) to disseminate the outcomes.

Countries were selected to provide a diverse policy and regulatory landscape: Italy and Spain offer consolidated CE frameworks and advanced collective bargaining models; Slovakia is in active policy transition; Albania and Turkey face structural and institutional

challenges. This selection allowed the consortium to capture both best practices and systemic gaps, making the project relevant not only for Member States but also for Candidate Countries.

TURN's findings clearly demonstrate that industrial relations can – and must – play a strategic role in driving a socially fair circular transformation. However, to do so, actors must be equipped with skills, institutional support, and political recognition.

In this regard, particular emphasis was placed on the potential of European Works Councils (EWC) to act as transnational platforms for anticipation, consultation and coordination within multinational enterprises.

The project not only generated knowledge and tools to this end, but also strengthened a transnational community of practice committed to sustainable and inclusive industrial change.

Countries	Italy, Spain, Slovakia, Albania, Turkey
Partners	Trade Unions, Research Centres, Civil Society Organisations
Strategic Sectors	Engineering, Chemicals, Textiles, Energy, Construction
Main Objective	Enhancing the role of industrial relations in the ecological transition to a circular economy in resource-intensive sectors
Specific Objectives	Analysis of industrial relations systems and their consistency with EC principles Evaluation of regulatory frameworks for employee involvement Identification of good practices and comparative comparisons Empowerment of trade unions and employee representatives Promotion of transnational exchange and evidence-based recommendations for policy makers
Methodology	Desk research on regulations and collective bargaining Case studies and stakeholder interviews (including EWCs) Awareness and needs surveys Round tables in Albania and Turkey Multilingual synthesis manual and recommendations Final European conference in Rome
Transnational Approach	Countries selected to represent different regulatory environments: ITA/ESP = established EC systems SVK = in transition ALB/TUR = structural challenges
Thematic Focuses	Inclusiveness of social dialogue; active role of trade unions, workers, multinationals and EWCs in the circular transition
Expected Results and Impacts	Strengthening the skills and legitimacy of social partners; building a transnational community committed to sustainable transformation

Tab. 1 Executive Summary Box

Introduction

The transition to a circular economy (CE) represents one of the most profound transformations facing contemporary Europe. It is not simply a matter of environmental compliance or technological innovation. Rather, it calls for a paradigm shift in how societies produce, work, consume, and govern — one that affects the very foundations of labour relations, business strategies, and institutional legitimacy.

At its core, the CE challenges the linear, extractive model of economic growth that has dominated since the industrial revolution. Moving “from take–make–dispose” to “reduce–reuse–regenerate” requires reconfiguring entire value chains, redefining roles within companies, and ensuring that the green transition does not become a source of new inequalities. In this complex reordering, industrial relations are not peripheral — they are pivotal.

Yet, the relationship between CE and labour relations remains under-theorised and under-regulated. EU policy frameworks, including the European Green Deal and the CE Action Plan, have increasingly acknowledged the “just transition” dimension. Still, the translation of these macro-objectives into company-level practices, collective bargaining frameworks and participatory mechanisms is uneven and, in some cases, entirely absent. Too often, environmental goals are pursued in technocratic isolation, detached from the daily realities of workplaces, workers, and trade unions.

This gap is particularly evident in multinational companies, where the role of European Works Councils

(EWC) remains underdeveloped in addressing environmental transformation. As transnational bodies for worker consultation and information, EWCs have the potential to connect strategic sustainability planning with participatory governance – a dimension explored throughout the TURN project.

This is where the TURN project enters the conversation — not as an academic exercise, but as a political and social inquiry into how Europe's green ambitions are mediated, contested, and co-constructed through industrial relations. TURN is not just about CE readiness. It is about institutional intelligence. It explores how trade unions, workers' representatives, employers and policy actors can co-design new governance models that are environmentally sustainable, socially fair, and economically resilient.

Crucially, TURN invites us to reconsider: (i) what kind of production system do we want in a climate-neutral Europe? (ii) what kind of employment relations are necessary to support circularity without sacrificing rights and stability? (iii) who participates in shaping the rules of this transition?

The answers lie not only in regulation or market incentives, but in the capacity of social partners to anticipate change, engage in cross-sectoral cooperation, and renew their institutional missions. In this sense, CE is not just a destination — it is a negotiated journey, and industrial relations are the vehicle through which that negotiation takes place.

The TURN project spans five countries with distinct regulatory traditions, industrial relations cultures, and levels of policy maturity regarding the circular economy.

Italy and **Spain**, both EU Member States with strong trade union histories, are among the most advanced in embedding CE into national strategies. Italy, in particular, has positioned itself as a frontrunner in circular practices at both macro and micro levels, with robust collective bargaining mechanisms that increasingly incorporate environmental dimensions. Spain's recent legislative updates reflect a national commitment to aligning labour and environmental priorities.

Slovakia, while engaged in the EU's Green Deal framework, presents a more hybrid landscape. Efforts to institutionalise CE are evident, particularly through public-private initiatives, yet the integration of CE into collective agreements and sectoral negotiations remains limited. Trade unions are only beginning to explore this thematic terrain.

Albania, as a Candidate Country, faces structural challenges. The concept of CE is still emerging in the policy discourse, with fragmented legal foundations and limited operational guidance. Industrial relations are uneven across sectors, and the potential role of social partners in ecological transition is still underdeveloped — though not without pockets of innovation and engagement.

Turkey exhibits a similar asymmetry. While industrial capacity is significant and environmental concerns are gaining ground, the cultural and institutional frameworks supporting CE — including labour

participation — are nascent. In this context, the project serves not only as research but as capacity building.

These differences are not a liability. On the contrary, they reflect the richness of Europe's socio-institutional landscape. By comparing diverse trajectories, TURN enables the identification of transferable practices, systemic gaps, and shared priorities, fostering a deeper understanding of how CE can be socially co-managed across different economic geographies.

1. Comparative Overview of National Contexts

The circular economy (CE) represents a multidimensional challenge that touches on environmental sustainability, economic competitiveness, and social equity. While the EU has placed CE at the heart of its Green Deal and industrial strategy, its implementation remains strongly dependent on national capacities, institutional configurations, and the maturity of public and private actors. The TURN project, by engaging five countries with diverse political, economic, and social frameworks offers a unique opportunity to analyse how the CE transition is unfolding across different European geographies and governance systems.

These countries span a gradient of integration into EU structures: from core Member States (Italy, Spain) to a New Member State (Slovakia), to Candidate Countries (Albania, Turkey). Each country presents a different level of policy development, regulatory enforcement, and engagement with CE principles. While Italy and Spain show relatively advanced CE frameworks, supported by national strategies, sectoral plans, and institutionalised social dialogue, Albania and Turkey are in an earlier phase of experimentation, often supported by international cooperation and donor funding. Slovakia represents a hybrid case — aligned with EU objectives but still consolidating implementation capacity.

This chapter aims to map key systemic elements that affect the CE transition in each context:

- The legislative and policy frameworks in place;

- The existence of public and private initiatives supporting CE development;
- The involvement of social partners and trade unions in the transition process;
- The role played by enterprises in advancing circular practices;
- The main challenges and opportunities arising from each national experience.

By adopting this comparative approach, the TURN project not only highlights specific national trajectories but also identifies common gaps, scalable solutions, and structural tensions. These insights are essential for designing inclusive, effective, and transferable strategies that position industrial relations as a driver of — not a barrier to — circular economy implementation across Europe and its neighborhood.

1.1 Legislative and Policy Frameworks

A strong and coherent legislative framework is a prerequisite for guiding and accelerating the transition towards a circular economy (CE). Among the TURN partner countries, there is a clear differentiation in the maturity, scope, and enforceability of national CE policies. This section outlines the principal strategies, laws, and institutional drivers shaping the regulatory environments in Italy, Spain, Slovakia, Albania, and Turkey.

Italy and Spain: Advanced Regulatory Integration

Italy and Spain have demonstrated sustained political commitment to the CE transition, aligning early with the European Circular Economy Action Plans (2015 and 2020). Both countries have enacted comprehensive national strategies and translated them into binding legal instruments, often accompanied by sectoral guidelines, financial incentives, and regional adaptations.

- Italy adopted Law 221/2015, one of the first legal frameworks in Europe to codify CE principles. This was followed by the National Strategy for Sustainable Development and CE integration into the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), with substantial funding allocated to CE innovation and local implementation.
- Spain approved the Spain Circular 2030 Strategy and its first Action Plan (2021–2023), along with Law 7/2022 on Waste and Contaminated Soils, introducing obligations on product lifecycle management, producer responsibility, and municipal waste systems. The PERTE CE programme further strengthens institutional capacity with €1.2 billion in funding.

In both countries, regional governments play an active role in shaping CE policies, with strong subnational planning and implementation.

Slovakia: Policy Alignment, Limited Operationalisation

Slovakia has made important progress in aligning with EU CE targets through documents like the Slovak Circular Economy Roadmap (2020). However, implementation remains patchy and underfunded, with limited coordination between ministries, agencies, and local governments.

The legal base exists, but lacks the strategic continuity and institutional follow-through seen in Italy and Spain. Monitoring mechanisms are still being developed, and there is a gap between national ambitions and practical outcomes, especially for SMEs and municipalities.

Albania and Turkey: Emerging, Fragmented Frameworks

In Albania, CE has entered the national policy discourse mainly through the National Waste Management Strategy 2020–2035, which emphasises recycling, separation at source, and lifecycle extension. The legislative approach is largely reactive and donor-driven, with CE components embedded in sectoral policies (environment, energy, industry) rather than governed by a unified strategy.

Turkey has developed more structured policy instruments, including the Zero Waste Regulation (2019) and the application of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). Clean production, energy efficiency, and environmental certification (ISO standards) are promoted through various government channels.

However, fragmentation among ministries, inconsistent enforcement, and weak local implementation hinder the systemic uptake of CE principles.

Summarizing, the legislative landscape across TURN countries shows a clear divide:

- Italy and Spain: Consolidated legal frameworks with EU alignment, multi-level governance, and funding mechanisms.
- Slovakia: Well-articulated strategies but limited operational reach.
- Albania and Turkey: Nascent regulatory environments, heavily dependent on external support, with fragmented institutional anchoring.

This diversity highlights the importance of not only enacting CE legislation, but ensuring it is operationalised, monitored, and socially inclusive.

1.2. Public and Private Initiatives

Beyond formal legislation, the advancement of circular economy (CE) principles relies heavily on the implementation capacity of public institutions and the proactive engagement of the private sector. Across the five TURN countries, a variety of programmes, partnerships, and pilot projects illustrate how CE is being tested, disseminated, and adapted to local conditions — often in fragmented yet promising ways.

Italy and Spain: Multi-level Activation and Funding Synergies

In both Italy and Spain, CE implementation benefits from a combination of central coordination and territorial initiative. Public actors have launched national and regional investment plans, often supported by EU cohesion funds and NextGenerationEU resources.

- In Italy, regional administrations like Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy have established dedicated CE platforms, innovation clusters, and public-private partnerships to support eco-innovation, green procurement, and circular entrepreneurship. Municipal consortia play a key role in circular waste management, with cities like Milan and Bologna leading by example.
- Spain has leveraged the PERTE CE programme to finance large-scale industrial projects focused on resource efficiency, eco-design, and material recovery. Local governments collaborate with research centres and private actors through regional hubs, while industry-led initiatives (e.g. in the textile and chemicals sectors) are supported by public incentives and national recovery funds.

In both countries, CE is not solely state-driven: business associations, universities, and trade unions are often co-creators of local solutions and training programmes.

Slovakia: Donor Support and Emerging Ecosystems

In Slovakia, CE initiatives are frequently initiated through EU-funded pilot projects or bilateral cooperation, such as those supported by Norway Grants and Horizon Europe. The most significant example is Circular Slovakia, a platform connecting businesses, civil society, and policymakers to share knowledge, tools, and case studies. It serves as a national reference point, although its impact is still limited in geographic and sectoral reach.

Public authorities support isolated projects — especially in construction and municipal services — but lack a coherent pipeline or incentive framework for scaling.

Albania: Fragmented Practices, International Dependence

Albanian CE initiatives are project-based and externally funded, typically implemented with the support of GIZ, EBRD, or UNDP. These include:

- Pilot programmes for waste separation and recycling in selected municipalities;
- Technical assistance for green SMEs and industrial symbiosis;
- CE awareness campaigns targeting youth and local communities.

Despite growing interest, there is no systematic coordination among ministries or between the central government and municipalities. This limits the

institutional learning and sustainability of pilot initiatives.

Turkey: Private Sector Leadership, Public Lag

In Turkey, CE is often driven by corporate initiatives, particularly in the textile and automotive sectors. Companies such as Sun Textile and Borusan implement advanced CE tools (traceability, eco-labels, resource monitoring), mainly to comply with international market standards.

On the public side, the Zero Waste campaign has raised visibility but lacks deep integration with industrial policy. Local governments experiment with CE-related practices, such as recycling centres or smart collection systems, but outcomes remain inconsistent. Some universities and business associations promote CE training and research, yet with limited impact on SMEs or labour market strategies.

To conclude, CE-related initiatives across TURN countries reveal:

- High territorial dynamism where national strategies are well-anchored (Italy, Spain);
- Donor-dependency and limited institutional continuity in Albania and Slovakia;
- A market-driven but uncoordinated approach in Turkey.

The TURN project itself has contributed to filling institutional and informational gaps, acting as a knowledge catalyst and promoting transnational cooperation in otherwise fragmented ecosystems.

1.3. Social Dialogue and Trade Union Involvement

The capacity of industrial relations systems to contribute to the circular economy (CE) transition is highly dependent on their institutional strength, representativeness, and adaptability. Across the TURN countries, the involvement of trade unions in CE varies significantly — from structured, institutionalised engagement to marginal or project-based participation.

Spain and Italy: Institutionalised and Evolving Models

In Spain, social dialogue on environmental and CE-related topics is formally embedded within national and sectoral frameworks. Trade unions (CCOO, UGT) play an active role in consultative bodies, collective bargaining, and company-level environmental governance. The widespread adoption of the Environmental Delegate (ED) figure in collective agreements is a notable innovation, positioning unions as proactive actors in green transitions.

In Italy, although CE is less codified within formal agreements, there is growing integration of environmental concerns into sectoral Collective Bargaining Agreements and Interconfederal protocols. Trade unions (CGIL, CISL, UIL) increasingly use CE as a platform for advancing worker training, sustainable production, and workplace safety. Local union branches are experimenting with negotiating CE-linked issues such as waste reduction and supply chain transparency.

Slovakia: Structural Gaps, Emerging Awareness

The Slovak industrial relations system is comparatively weaker, with low union density and limited collective bargaining coverage. As a result, CE remains largely absent from formal dialogue. However, initiatives such as Circular Slovakia have begun involving trade unions in awareness campaigns and stakeholder consultations, albeit without formal negotiation power. The potential for structured participation remains largely untapped.

Albania and Turkey: Fragmented Involvement, Growing Interest

In Albania, the trade union movement is fragmented and under-resourced. CE-related dialogue is informal and largely driven by donor-supported projects like TURN, which helped initiate union–employer–government discussions on the environmental dimension of labour. Collective bargaining rarely includes environmental clauses, and there is no institutional mechanism for integrating sustainability into industrial relations.

Turkey presents a mixed picture: while major unions (e.g. Türk Metal, Öziplik-İş) are beginning to engage with CE themes, this engagement is often confined to awareness-raising and training, rather than formalised dialogue. Environmental topics remain peripheral in sectoral Collective Bargaining Agreements, though there

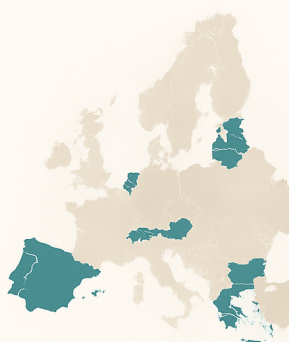
is potential for innovation via partnerships with companies involved in global supply chains.

Despite differences in maturity and structure, several transversal trends emerge:

- Where formal channels exist, unions can act as key enablers of CE, especially through workplace representation and training mandates;
- Legal recognition of environmental roles (as in Spain) enhances trade union legitimacy and effectiveness;
- In contexts with weaker industrial relations, projects like TURN can catalyse engagement, but sustainability of involvement depends on structural support;
- Across all countries, there is a need to mainstream CE into collective bargaining, not only as a technical issue but as a core labour agenda.

This comparative reading reinforces the idea that green transitions require social innovation as much as technological change. Without structured participation of workers and their representatives, the circular economy risks becoming socially blind — or worse, socially regressive.

KEY TAKEAWAYS - SOCIAL DIALOGUE AND TRADE UNION INVOLVEMENT



Social dialogue is uneven across countries, with Italy and Spain showing the most institutionalised and proactive models.

Slovakia is experiencing a transitional phase, with emerging sectoral and cross-sectoral initiatives

Albania and Turkey face structural limitations, including weak representativeness and limited recognition of trade unions in CE policy-making



There is a growing need for integrating environmental dimensions into collective bargaining practices.



Key factors essential to strengthen the role of social partners in the CE transition

- Training
- Legitimacy
- Early consultation

Tab. 2 Key Takeaways Box

1.4. Role of Companies in the Green Transition

The private sector plays a central role in operationalising the circular economy (CE), translating regulatory frameworks and societal expectations into business models, production systems, and supply chain practices. Yet, the way companies engage with the green transition varies significantly across TURN countries, depending on market exposure, regulatory pressure, access to finance, and internal capabilities.

Italy and Spain: Strategic Integration and Organised Innovation

In Italy and Spain, large enterprises — particularly in the fashion, energy, chemical, and construction sectors — are increasingly embedding CE principles into their corporate strategies. These efforts are often driven by:

- Regulatory compliance with EU directives;
- Market positioning as green leaders;
- Reputational incentives and stakeholder pressure.

Companies such as Inditex, Repsol, Mapei, and Luxottica demonstrate the potential for aligning business growth with CE innovation. In both countries, the existence of public funding, sectoral guidance, and trade union engagement enables structured dialogue between firms and their ecosystems. However, the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) remains limited. While some clusters and supply chain partnerships support CE experimentation, the

broader SME segment often faces challenges related to technical know-how, financial constraints, and administrative complexity.

Slovakia: Dependency on External Drivers

In Slovakia, CE-related practices are mostly seen in companies participating in EU-funded innovation projects, or those integrated into multinational value chains. Local firms rarely initiate CE strategies independently. The general approach to sustainability remains reactive and compliance-based, with limited strategic investment in circularity. Few incentives exist for companies to adopt CE beyond waste management or energy savings.

Moreover, cross-sectoral coordination is weak, and platforms for knowledge sharing are still in development. Initiatives like Circular Slovakia represent a first step towards a more systemic business engagement with CE principles.

Albania: Isolated Practices, Structural Barriers

The Albanian private sector exhibits a fragmented engagement with CE. Some larger or internationally connected companies — particularly in the metal, energy, and retail-construction sectors — have adopted basic circular practices (e.g., recycling, waste sorting, energy recovery). However, these are often isolated, donor-supported, or reputationally motivated actions rather than integrated strategies.

Most enterprises, particularly SMEs, lack awareness, tools, or incentives to initiate CE transformation. Structural barriers include informality, limited access to credit, lack of skilled personnel, and insufficient state support.

Turkey: Global Market Pressure and Internal Gaps

In Turkey, CE engagement is largely driven by the global integration of key sectors such as textile, automotive, and metals. Export-oriented firms, especially those supplying EU clients, are adopting CE-related certifications, traceability systems, and digital innovations. These shifts are often compliance-driven, aiming to retain competitiveness in high-standard markets.

While front-running firms invest in sustainability reporting and product innovation, the broader industrial base — particularly SMEs — faces a significant implementation gap. There is also limited coordination between private initiatives and national CE strategies, which remain fragmented.

Across all TURN countries, several cross-cutting reflections emerge:

- Corporate leadership in CE is more common in larger firms with export exposure or institutional partnerships;
- SMEs are systematically under-supported, requiring tailored incentives, technical assistance, and simplified regulatory paths;

- The role of business associations and industrial clusters is increasingly relevant in bridging gaps and scaling innovation;
- Without clear alignment between company practices and public policy, CE risks remaining a niche or symbolic commitment rather than a systemic shift.

Ultimately, the green transition will succeed only if enterprises are not just adopters of CE practices, but co-producers of inclusive, measurable, and socially aligned change.

1.5. Challenges and Opportunities in Each Country

The transition to a circular economy (CE) is shaped as much by local constraints as by shared global objectives. A comparative analysis of the TURN partner countries reveals a range of structural challenges and emerging opportunities that influence the pace, scope, and inclusivity of the transition.

Italy

Challenges:

- Integration of CE themes into collective bargaining remains uneven.
- SMEs face barriers in financing and adopting advanced CE practices.
- Opportunities:
- Strong institutional and territorial governance.
- Dynamic industrial clusters and sectoral dialogue on CE innovation.

- Public funding aligned with national and EU strategies (PNRR).

Spain

Challenges:

- Disparities in CE implementation across autonomous communities.
- Low municipal recycling rates despite national legislation.

Opportunities:

- Consolidated legal and financial frameworks.
- Institutionalised role of trade unions in environmental governance.
- Business leadership in CE, especially in textile and construction.

Slovakia

Challenges:

- Low visibility of CE outside pilot projects.
- Weak institutional coordination and trade union engagement.
- Limited private sector initiative, especially among SMEs.

Opportunities:

- EU funding as a lever for capacity building and experimentation.
- Growing stakeholder networks (e.g. Circular Slovakia platform).
- Potential for mainstreaming CE in industrial renewal strategies.

Albania

Challenges:

- Fragmented legal and institutional landscape.
- High landfill dependency and low recycling infrastructure.
- Minimal formal role for social partners in CE discussions.

Opportunities:

- Donor-driven pilot projects providing entry points for innovation.
- Emerging private sector interest in metal, energy, and construction.
- TURN as a catalyst for awareness and dialogue.

Turkey

Challenges:

- Fragmentation of policies and limited enforcement.
- Lack of alignment between public initiatives and enterprise strategies.
- CE absent from most collective agreements and social dialogue forums.

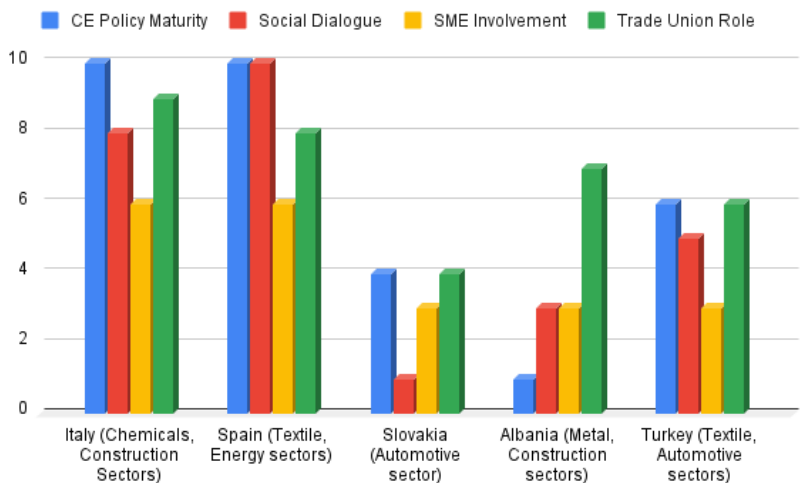
Opportunities:

- International market pressure driving innovation in export-oriented sectors.
- Corporate best practices in textile and automotive sectors.
- Growing union interest in sustainability and worker training.

This cross-country perspective shows that while contextual barriers vary, common themes emerge:

- The need to strengthen governance and policy coherence;
- The importance of scaling CE in SMEs through targeted support;
- The potential to institutionalise social dialogue on environmental transitions;
- The opportunity to align company-led innovation with public policy goals.

Recognising and responding to these challenges in a differentiated yet coordinated manner is essential for building a circular economy that is not only efficient, but also fair, inclusive, and socially embedded.



Tab. 3 Key Factors per Country Box

2. Company Case Studies and Sectoral Practices

The circular economy (CE) transition is embedded in national realities, shaped by institutional configurations, economic structures, industrial relations cultures, and sector-specific dynamics. This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of the five countries involved in the TURN project — Italy, Spain, Slovakia, Albania, and Turkey — offering a contextualised view of how CE principles are being interpreted, implemented, and negotiated across diverse European and candidate states.

The national reports underpinning this chapter were developed by country experts and project partners, drawing from desk research, stakeholder interviews, surveys, and enterprise case studies. Each section highlights:

- The regulatory and strategic frameworks guiding CE implementation;
- The role of social partners in shaping or responding to the green transition;
- The engagement of enterprises, both public and private, in developing circular models;
- The main challenges and gaps, as well as promising practices and replicable approaches.

Special attention is given to Italy and Spain, where the presence and activity of European Works Councils (EWC) is significantly more established than in the other countries analysed. This is due to a combination of factors: a higher density of multinational companies

with structured employee representation; mature industrial relations systems with strong trade union integration; and a more advanced implementation of Directive 2009/38/EC on transnational employee consultation. In these contexts, EWCs have shown potential — albeit still limited — to influence sustainability strategies and participate in the governance of circular transitions within large enterprises. Where relevant, case studies in these countries include thematic boxes highlighting the involvement of EWCs in environmental decision-making and transnational dialogue.

This comparative lens allows TURN to move beyond isolated case studies and generate insights into patterns, asymmetries, and leverage points that can inform EU-level policymaking, national strategies, and transnational trade union action. The structure of the chapter follows a country-by-country format (Sections 2.1 to 2.5), providing a detailed look at how circular economy transitions intersect with labour systems, social dialogue, and sectoral development pathways in each national context.

2.1. Italy

2.1.1. National Framework on Circular Economy

Italy has long demonstrated a strategic commitment to environmental transition and sustainable industrial policy. As one of the first EU Member States to formally integrate the principles of the circular economy (CE) into

national legislation, it has gradually built a solid legal and institutional framework. The cornerstone of this framework is Law 221/2015, which introduced a legal basis for waste prevention, material reuse, and eco-innovation.

This commitment was reinforced with Italy's alignment to the EU Circular Economy Action Plan (2015 and 2020) and further articulated through the National Strategy for Sustainable Development (2017) and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), funded through NextGenerationEU, which allocates significant resources to CE-related investments.

At the regional level, several Italian regions (such as Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, Veneto) have adopted their own CE strategies and waste management plans, highlighting the importance of territorial governance in achieving environmental objectives. Italy also performs relatively well in key CE indicators: it has one of the highest recycling rates in the EU and a growing number of companies adopting circular business models.

2.1.2. Industrial Relations and Role of Social Partners

The Italian industrial relations system, based on strong sectoral bargaining and structured employer–union dialogue, provides a fertile ground for the integration of CE-related themes into collective agreements. Trade unions, particularly CGIL, CISL, and UIL, have progressively adopted environmental sustainability as part of their negotiation platforms.

The Green Deal Transition has become a thematic priority in social dialogue, supported by inter-confederal protocols and sectoral agreements that often include clauses on environmental training, health and safety in green production processes, and the promotion of circularity within corporate strategies.

Initiatives at both national and territorial levels show a growing involvement of trade union federations in environmental governance and consultation, often in coordination with public authorities and employers' associations.

2.1.3. Sectoral Focus and Company Engagement

The TURN project investigated several key companies operating in different sectors that are emblematic of Italy's approach to CE:

- Saviola (wood recycling) stands out for its closed-loop production and innovation in recovered material use.
- Essilor Luxottica (fashion/optics) has incorporated CE principles in design and supply chain management.
- Mapei (chemicals/construction) exemplifies eco-efficient product innovation.
- Michelin, Marelli, Wartsila, and Thales Alenia Space offer examples of how large industrial players integrate circularity into high-tech production and mobility sectors.

These cases highlight the coexistence of multinational leadership and SME innovation, particularly where

environmental certifications, material traceability, and circular procurement practices are in place.

2.1.4. Key Findings and Challenges

Italy's experience shows that:

- Regulatory and policy alignment with EU goals is well-advanced.
- Industrial relations are increasingly mobilised on environmental topics, although integration is still uneven across sectors.
- SMEs remain less equipped to implement CE due to limited resources and access to funding.
- Vocational training, especially on CE and digitalisation, is a priority to ensure worker participation and upskilling in green transitions.

The Italian context demonstrates that a multi-actor, regionally grounded approach, with strong public-private-social cooperation, is key to accelerating circularity while maintaining social cohesion.

2.2. Spain

2.2.1. National Framework on Circular Economy

Spain has made substantial progress in defining a comprehensive policy and regulatory framework for the circular economy. Building upon EU directives and the European Green Deal, Spain launched its Spain Circular 2030 Strategy in 2020, followed by the 1st Circular

Economy Action Plan (2021–2023). These frameworks establish quantitative targets for material use reduction, recycling, waste prevention, and greenhouse gas emissions.

The country also adopted Law 7/2022 on waste and contaminated soils, establishing a legal backbone for CE implementation, particularly focusing on reducing waste production and improving recycling systems. Additionally, the PERTE Circular Economy Programme – a strategic component of the Spanish Recovery Plan – mobilises significant public funding (over €1.2 billion) to support CE innovation across key sectors, including textiles, plastics, and renewable energy equipment.

Spain's decentralised administrative structure means that CE implementation often occurs at the regional level. As of 2023, eleven of the seventeen autonomous communities had specific CE strategies or laws. While this diversity enables local adaptation, it also reveals gaps in coordination, consistency, and enforcement across territories.

2.2.2. Industrial Relations and Role of Social Partners

Spain benefits from a structured industrial relations system, grounded in dual representation: trade union sections and elected works councils. The main confederations, CCOO and UGT, are highly active in environmental and circular economy issues.

At the institutional level, trade unions participate in social dialogue platforms through the Economic and

Social Council and various sectoral and territorial bodies. Environmental sustainability is increasingly incorporated into collective bargaining, particularly in large companies and through Environmental Delegates (EDs), recognised in sectoral agreements (e.g., chemicals, cement).

Article 64 of the Spanish Workers' Statute formally provides workers' representatives the right to receive and discuss environmental information. While this legal provision is not always fully operationalised, it provides a strong basis for trade union involvement in CE transitions.

Trade union organisations, particularly CCOO through its technical foundation ISTAS-F1M, have developed training programmes, negotiation protocols, and tools to include environmental clauses in collective agreements. Spain is a leader in recognising the Environmental Delegate role in formal company structures.

2.2.3. Sectoral Focus and Company Engagement

Spain's business case studies demonstrate a strong commitment to CE among large corporations, particularly in sectors with high environmental impact:

- Inditex (textile): Circular innovation hub, eco-design mandatory for all designers, and strong union dialogue through 14 joint Environmental Commissions.
- Navantia (shipbuilding): Public company with zero-waste strategy, scope 3 carbon accounting,

and a joint sustainability governance structure with trade union involvement.

- Holcim (construction): Pioneer in CO₂ capture and reuse, waste co-processing, and participation in EU projects on circular materials.
- Repsol, Seat, Velcro, Siegfried: Each has adopted CE-related innovation with varying levels of union participation.

The sectoral cases reveal how CE efforts are strongest in large companies with defined sustainability strategies and pressure from regulation, market reputation, or global value chains. SME participation remains modest, often hindered by administrative complexity and financial limitations.

2.2.4. Key Findings and Challenges

Spain presents a mature and dynamic CE framework, supported by:

- Ambitious national legislation and funding instruments (e.g. PERTE CE).
- High-level trade union involvement, particularly in large companies.
- Well-developed environmental participation mechanisms, such as the Environmental Delegate role.

However, several challenges persist:

- Low municipal waste recycling rates (38.6%) and high landfill dependency.
- Fragmentation between national and regional governance levels.

- Uneven implementation of CE practices in SMEs and across sectors.
- Need for stronger coordination and enforcement of CE targets.

The Spanish case illustrates how strong institutional mechanisms and trade union engagement can support circular transitions — but also how success depends on coherence between policy, practice, and participation at all levels.

Summary of the Role of European Works Councils (EWC) in the Companies Analysed

Within the TURN project, the analysis of company case studies highlighted the existence and functioning of European Works Councils (EWC) in several of the enterprises involved. Particularly in Italy and Spain, the presence of active EWCs proved to be a significant factor in understanding how transnational governance mechanisms are supporting the circular economy transition. The table below summarises, for each company with an operational EWC, the main roles played by this body in shaping environmental policies and fostering trade union participation.

Country	Company	EWC Status	Role of the European Works Council (EWC)
Italy	Essilor Luxottica	Active	The EWC serves as a transnational forum for information and consultation across European sites. In the context of the TURN project, trade union representatives noted the EWC's potential to support the company's environmental strategy, especially the 'Eyes Circularity' programme. While not yet systematically engaged in CE governance, its role is seen as evolving.
	Michelin	Active	The EWC is a core component of the Group's sustainability governance, supported by a Global Framework Agreement. The Council's activities, coordinated with national unions, facilitate dialogue on environmental policies and CE initiatives, while also promoting training and structured union participation.
Spain	Inditex	Active	The EWC is fully operational and supported by a network of local Environmental Commissions. It plays a key role in coordinating actions across European sites, promoting eco-design, and supporting the negotiation of incentive schemes linked to environmental performance.
Spain	Holcim España	Active	The EWC, in synergy with workplace health and safety committees, contributes to environmental monitoring and dialogue. Spanish trade union delegates highlighted its value as a platform for sharing best practices in circular cement production, especially in CO ₂ recovery and waste reuse projects.

Tab. 4 Role of EWCs Box

2.3. Slovakia

2.3.1. National Framework on Circular Economy

Slovakia has progressively aligned itself with the European Union's environmental objectives, including the transition towards a circular economy. In recent years, it has taken significant steps to integrate CE into its national strategies. The Slovak Circular Economy Roadmap (2020) provides a baseline for policy planning, identifying key sectors, instruments, and targets aligned with the EU Green Deal and the 2020 CE Action Plan.

Nevertheless, the implementation of CE principles in Slovakia remains in an early and experimental phase, particularly when compared to more mature economies. The country still faces challenges in terms of public awareness, institutional coordination, and cross-sectoral engagement. Waste management policies, for example, are relatively advanced, but broader CE integration into production and supply chains is not yet widespread.

Some initiatives, such as the Circular Slovakia Platform (a public-private partnership), are helping to bridge the gap between policy and practice, bringing together businesses, NGOs, municipalities, and academic actors to develop and promote circular solutions.

2.3.2. Industrial Relations and Role of Social Partners

Slovakia's industrial relations landscape is influenced by its post-socialist heritage, with a more centralised and less institutionalised social dialogue compared to Western European countries. Trade union density has declined in recent decades, and collective bargaining coverage remains modest. That said, the Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ SR) is gradually engaging with environmental and sustainability issues, although CE-specific themes are still emerging in trade union agendas.

There are few examples of formal integration of CE in collective agreements or workplace consultation procedures. A lack of technical training and awareness among both employers and employee representatives limits the potential for structured participation. The involvement of social partners in CE planning at the national level is growing but remains inconsistent. CE is still primarily framed as a technical or environmental issue rather than a labour or social concern.

2.3.3. Sectoral Focus and Company Engagement

Several Slovak companies are starting to explore CE practices, mainly under the influence of multinational supply chains or EU-funded innovation projects. The chemical and automotive sectors show some early-stage experimentation with eco-design, material substitution, and energy efficiency. However, the

majority of SMEs still lack awareness, capacity, or incentives to adopt CE principles. Public funding exists but is often perceived as complex to access. The lack of binding CE-related obligations at company level reduces the pressure to act beyond compliance. Examples of good practice remain isolated, though platforms like Circular Slovakia are actively promoting knowledge exchange and pilot initiatives, including in public procurement, construction, and packaging.

2.3.4. Key Findings and Challenges

The Slovak experience reveals a nascent and uneven CE landscape, with important opportunities and structural constraints:

- Policy alignment with the EU is present, but implementation is fragmented and slow.
- Social dialogue on CE is limited by low union capacity, weak formal mechanisms, and lack of institutional incentives.
- Corporate engagement depends heavily on external (especially EU-level) pressure or project-based funding.
- There is a strong need for capacity building, especially among social partners and local authorities.

Despite these challenges, the Slovak case illustrates the importance of coalition-building platforms (like Circular Slovakia) in mobilising different actors and supporting experimentation. With adequate support and stronger social partner involvement, Slovakia can move

from peripheral adoption to structured integration of CE principles in its economy.

Summary of the Role of European Works Councils (EWC) in the Companies Analysed - U.S. Steel Košice

Role of the EWC

European Works Council (EWC): Active (Indirect Participation)

U.S. Steel Košice, as part of the multinational U.S. Steel Europe group, is linked to a functioning European Works Council. Slovak trade union representatives indicated that although participation is not always direct, the EWC plays an important role in ensuring access to transnational information and facilitating cross-border dialogue on corporate restructuring and sustainability. In the TURN project, the presence of this EWC was seen as a strategic channel for anticipating environmental and organisational changes, even though its influence on CE-specific decisions remains limited.

2.4. Albania

2.4.1. National Framework on Circular Economy

Albania has embarked on its circular economy (CE) transition with a primary focus on waste management, supported by the adoption of the National Waste Management Strategy 2020–2035. This strategy aims to move from a linear model to one based on waste

separation, product lifecycle extension, and increased recycling rates.

Despite progress in planning, implementation remains fragile. As of 2022, only 18% of household waste was recycled, while more than 80% ended up in landfills—many of them illegal or substandard. The country faces systemic issues, including limited infrastructure, weak institutional capacity, and poor enforcement of environmental laws.

Albania is not yet an EU Member State, but its policy orientation is strongly influenced by EU accession processes, including alignment with the EU Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. Several international donors, including GIZ and EBRD, have supported CE-related initiatives through technical assistance and funding programmes.

2.4.2. Industrial Relations and Role of Social Partners

Albania's industrial relations system is in a developing phase, marked by low trade union density, limited collective bargaining coverage, and weak institutionalisation of social dialogue. However, efforts are underway to increase the involvement of social partners in sustainability transitions.

The Federation of Trade Unions of Industry Employees of Albania, a TURN partner, has begun to integrate CE into its advocacy and training activities. Awareness among workers and union representatives is still emerging, but capacity-building sessions and

stakeholder dialogues are helping bridge the knowledge gap.

The National Labour Council (NLC) serves as a tripartite consultation body, but it has not yet developed a dedicated approach to environmental issues. Moreover, environmental clauses are rare in collective bargaining agreements, and CE themes remain largely outside mainstream negotiations.

2.4.3. Sectoral Focus and Company Engagement

The Albanian report highlights several companies experimenting with CE principles, particularly in metal processing, energy, and textile sectors. These include:

- Kurum International (metal industry): involved in steel recycling using scrap metal and energy efficiency practices.
- Fabrika e Energjisë: promotes alternative energy sources and has explored industrial symbiosis.
- Megatek (retail-construction): engages in circular logistics and has implemented selective waste collection systems.

However, most enterprises — especially SMEs — lack the technical and financial capacity to implement CE initiatives. The absence of fiscal incentives, green public procurement mechanisms, or regulatory pressure contributes to a weak adoption rate of circular practices.

There is also a limited connection between enterprise strategies and labour participation, making it difficult to ensure a just transition from both economic and social standpoints.

2.4.4 Key Findings and Challenges

Albania presents the profile of a country in early-stage CE transition, characterised by:

- Strong donor-driven support and alignment with EU objectives;
- Significant gaps in infrastructure, law enforcement, and institutional capacity;
- Emerging but weak social partner involvement;
- Isolated company-level practices without systemic support.

Nevertheless, the TURN project helped initiate dialogue and awareness-building among stakeholders, including trade unions, employers, and policy institutions. Albania's trajectory will depend on its ability to integrate CE into broader development strategies, strengthen governance mechanisms, and include workers' voices in the ecological transition.

2.5. Turkey

2.5.1 National Framework on Circular Economy

Turkey has increasingly integrated sustainability and circular economy (CE) concepts into its national development agenda. While not an EU Member State, Turkey has adopted several legislative and policy instruments in alignment with EU standards and international sustainability frameworks.

Key national policies include:

- The Zero Waste Regulation (2019), a flagship initiative promoting waste reduction, recycling, and sustainable resource use across sectors;
- The Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) system, encouraging producers to take responsibility for end-of-life product management;
- National strategies on energy efficiency, clean production, and eco-design, supported by various ministerial guidelines;
- Environmental standards such as ISO 14001 and ISO 14064, widely adopted by leading Turkish industries.

While the concept of CE is increasingly recognised, it remains fragmented across sectoral regulations, and enforcement mechanisms are inconsistent. Coordination among ministries, municipalities, and the private sector is still evolving, and CE is often understood primarily in terms of waste management rather than as a systemic economic model.

2.5.2. Industrial Relations and Role of Social Partners

The Turkish industrial relations system is structurally centralised, with trade unions playing a significant role in sectoral negotiations, particularly in traditional industries such as metal and textiles. However, environmental topics are only marginally integrated into collective bargaining agendas. The TURN project's partners — Öziplik-İş (textile) and Türk Metal (metal

industry) — have taken important steps to increase awareness and advocacy on CE. These unions are exploring how CE can be linked to decent work, occupational health and safety, and supply chain sustainability. Yet, environmental dialogue remains largely voluntary and project-based, rather than institutionalised.

There is an opportunity to develop environmental delegate roles, drawing inspiration from models in Spain and Italy, and to introduce environmental clauses in CBAs. Social partners are also beginning to address CE within training and digital transition frameworks.

2.5.3. Sectoral Focus and Company Engagement

The Turkish report focuses on good practices in the textile and metal sectors, two pillars of the country's industrial economy:

- In textiles, companies such as Sun Textile and others have implemented eco-labeling, traceability systems, and digital tools like AI-assisted quality control and digital fabric libraries. These are aligned with EU market expectations and international buyer requirements.
- In the metal sector, companies like Supsan, Borusan, and Mercedes-Benz Turkey have introduced resource efficiency, emission tracking, and circular logistics measures, often driven by global value chain obligations and international certifications.

Overall, large enterprises and multinational subsidiaries are the most advanced in adopting CE practices. SMEs often lack access to finance, awareness, and technical expertise.

The report also highlights community-based initiatives, corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, and efforts to integrate CE with social inclusion and employee satisfaction metrics.

2.5.4. Key Findings and Challenges

Turkey's CE transition reflects a hybrid model, with clear policy commitments but uneven implementation:

- The regulatory landscape is evolving, but institutional coordination and enforcement remain weak.
- Social partners show growing interest, but there is a need for systematic integration of CE in collective bargaining and labour relations.
- Large companies are aligned with global CE trends, but SME inclusion and supply chain coherence are still limited.
- Trade unions are positioned to become key actors in promoting CE, provided they are empowered with training, legal recognition, and strategic partnerships.

The Turkish case illustrates both the potential and fragility of a CE agenda that depends heavily on market-driven incentives and external pressure, underscoring the importance of embedding CE in national social dialogue structures.

Summary of the Role of European Works Councils (EWC) in the Companies Analysed – No EWC Structures Identified

Albania – European Works Council (EWC): Not Present

None of the companies or trade union structures analysed in the Albanian context are currently linked to a European Works Council. This absence reflects the limited presence of multinational enterprises headquartered in the EU and the early stage of transnational industrial relations in the country. As Albania moves forward in its EU candidacy path, the development of cross-border social dialogue mechanisms, including EWCs, may become increasingly relevant for supporting fair and inclusive circular transitions.

Turkey – European Works Council (EWC): Not Present

Despite the participation of large and export-oriented enterprises (e.g., Mercedes-Benz, Borusan) in the Turkish case studies, no operational European Works Councils were identified. This highlights the current disconnection between Turkish industrial relations and EU-level dialogue structures, especially in the absence of formalised participation in EWC frameworks. Strengthening institutional bridges between Turkish unions and European counterparts could support deeper alignment in CE strategies and sustainability governance.

3. Industrial Relations in the Transition Process

The green transition is not only an environmental or technological transformation — it is a socio-institutional shift. Industrial relations systems have the potential to act as engines of just transition, ensuring that changes in production models do not come at the expense of workers' rights, employment security, or democratic participation.

Within the TURN project, the analysis of five countries — with distinct economic systems and industrial relations frameworks — reveals how trade unions, employers, and institutional bodies are beginning to reshape their roles in light of the circular economy (CE). This chapter synthesises those findings by exploring four critical dimensions: trade union roles, social dialogue dynamics, emerging instruments, and cross-border challenges.

3.1. Comparative Role of Trade Unions

Trade unions are increasingly aware of their strategic position within the green transition, but their degree of involvement varies significantly.

- In Spain, unions have already institutionalised environmental action, through legally recognised Environmental Delegates, dedicated training platforms, and the integration of CE into sectoral CBAs.

- In Italy, unions are active at both the national and regional levels, although CE is often framed within broader sustainability or innovation agendas. Territorial agreements sometimes address green themes, but standardisation is lacking.
- In Slovakia, Albania, and Turkey, unions are only beginning to engage with CE topics, often through externally funded projects (e.g. TURN), awareness campaigns, or informal participation in company-led initiatives.

The common thread is that where unions are empowered and supported, they can become co-creators of CE strategies, not merely observers or implementers.

3.2. Social Dialogue at Company and Sectoral Level

Social dialogue on CE takes shape primarily where there is sectoral bargaining power and institutional support.

- Company-level dialogue is most developed in large firms and multinationals, particularly in Spain and Italy, where joint committees or union-led audits assess CE risks and opportunities.
- Sectoral dialogue is less structured, but growing — especially in sectors like textile, energy, and construction, where environmental transformation directly impacts working conditions and job profiles.

- In emerging contexts (Albania, Turkey, Slovakia), dialogue is often informal, non-binding, or limited to information-sharing rather than negotiation.

There is a widespread lack of formal frameworks to anchor CE within existing social dialogue processes. This limits the proactive participation of workers in shaping green transitions.

3.3. Environmental Delegates and Collective Bargaining

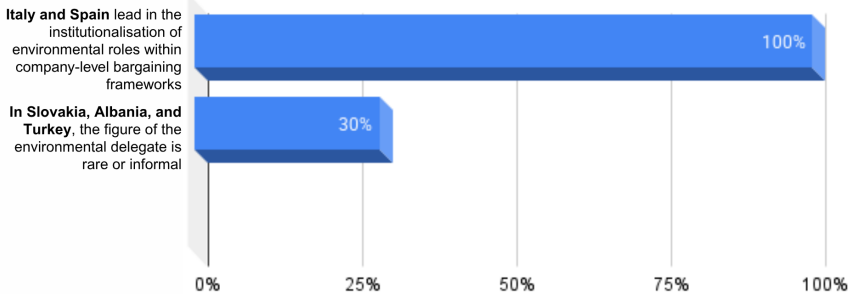
The figure of the Environmental Delegate (ED) represents a key innovation in linking environmental sustainability with industrial democracy.

- Spain provides the most advanced example, where EDs are recognised by law and embedded in workplace structures, with mandates on environmental monitoring and co-decision.
- In Italy, similar roles are emerging at the company level, but without unified legal recognition or consistent inclusion in Collective Bargaining Agreements.
- In the other countries, such roles are largely absent, although the TURN project has stimulated interest in developing such models.

Collective bargaining agreements rarely include dedicated CE clauses, except where sustainability is already a corporate priority. In most cases, Collective Bargaining Agreements focus on traditional issues (wages, hours, safety), and lack the language and tools to engage CE systematically.

Key Takeaways – Environmental Delegates and Collective Bargaining

The presence of environmental delegates varies significantly by country and sector



Environmental topics are increasingly being incorporated into collective agreements, but mostly in qualitative terms.

Strengthening the legal recognition of environmental delegates and including measurable CE targets in CBAs is a priority for policy innovation

Tab. 5 Key Takeaways Box

3.4. Cross-country Challenges and Solutions

Across the TURN partnership, four common challenges emerge:

1. Capacity gaps: Trade unions and workers often lack training and technical tools to engage meaningfully with CE.
2. Regulatory silence: National laws do not mandate CE-related social dialogue, leaving it to the discretion of individual actors.
3. Sectoral asymmetries: Green dialogue is more advanced in certain sectors, while others remain passive or resistant.
4. Disconnects between CE strategies and labour governance: Employers often treat sustainability

as a CSR issue rather than a subject of shared responsibility.

To address these gaps, the TURN experience suggests several promising directions:

- Institutionalising training for workers and union reps on CE themes;
- Embedding CE into sectoral negotiation frameworks;
- Formalising the role of Environmental Delegates;
- Promoting transnational knowledge exchange across unions and companies.

3.5. The Role of European Works Councils (EWC) in the Circular Transition

The ecological and circular transition of European industries increasingly requires cross-border coordination, inclusive governance, and participatory mechanisms that reflect the complexity of multinational company (MNC) operations. In this context, European Works Councils (EWCs) are uniquely positioned to act as strategic actors in supporting a just and inclusive circular economy (CE) transformation.

EWC Legal Framework and Strategic Relevance

Established under Directive 2009/38/EC, EWCs are institutions of transnational information and consultation representing workers in multinational companies operating across EU/EEA countries. They are designed to address issues of strategic relevance that

affect the workforce across borders, including corporate restructuring, industrial change, and – increasingly – sustainability agendas.

Although the lack of direct experience of EWC in the implementation of EC policies detected within the TURN project compared to the ambition and involvement of multinationals with established and functioning EWCs, their potential role in EC governance clearly emerged in the interviews, in the consultations with stakeholders and in the examination of business cases, particularly in Italy and Spain.

EWC Engagement in Case Study Companies

Several of the companies analysed in TURN – particularly large firms in the chemical, textile and construction sectors – have functioning EWCs. However, their involvement in CE-related decisions varies significantly. In more advanced contexts, such as in Spain and Italy, EWCs have occasionally been consulted on sustainability-related investments, waste management strategies, and circular innovation processes. In these cases, they facilitated transnational knowledge sharing and supported early dialogue with local works councils. However, in most cases:

- EWCs were only marginally informed about CE policies, often through generic sustainability updates;
- There was no structured training on environmental or circular economy topics;

- The consultation processes lacked depth, timeliness and strategic impact, limiting the possibility of proactive engagement.

This suggests that structural barriers – including insufficient institutional support, a lack of environmental expertise among worker representatives, and limited corporate transparency – continue to undermine the potential of EWCs as agents of green transition.

Opportunities and Strategic Functions

Despite the limitations, EWCs can play a transformative role in the CE transition if properly empowered. Their potential includes:

- Acting as transnational early-warning mechanisms for restructuring related to circular innovation;
- Facilitating worker participation in environmental governance and sustainability reporting;
- Supporting harmonisation of social standards across national subsidiaries during circular transformation;
- Strengthening the alignment of corporate climate goals with social protection mechanisms.

Recommendations from the TURN Project

To fully harness the capacity of EWCs in the circular economy transition, the TURN project recommends:

1. Mainstreaming CE topics into EWC agendas, ensuring that sustainability becomes a core element of social dialogue;
2. Developing targeted training programs on circular economy, climate change and environmental rights for EWC members;
3. Creating transnational platforms of exchange among EWCs to share best practices and coordinate strategies;
4. Enhancing cooperation between EWC representatives and national/local trade union structures to bridge the knowledge and influence gap;
5. Strengthening EU-level policy frameworks to explicitly integrate EWCs into just transition and sustainability strategies.

The TURN project confirms that EWCs are underutilised yet potentially transformative actors in the transition to a circular economy. Their strategic transnational position, if combined with adequate competences, institutional support, and political recognition, can significantly enhance the social legitimacy, transparency and fairness of the circular transition in European industries.

4. Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The TURN project has offered a unique opportunity to explore how the transition to a circular economy (CE) can — and must — be shaped through industrial relations and inclusive governance. By comparing five national experiences and engaging multiple sectors and stakeholders, the project has demonstrated that CE is not simply a technological or regulatory endeavour. It is a social transformation that requires negotiation, coordination, and co-responsibility across the entire ecosystem of work and production.

Several lessons emerge clearly from the TURN experience:

- Industrial relations are not peripheral to the CE transition: when empowered and involved, they can become strategic drivers of innovation, worker protection, and shared value creation.
- Trade unions, where recognised and resourced, are capable of promoting concrete and structured engagement with CE issues — from awareness-raising to bargaining, from monitoring to policy advocacy.
- Companies, particularly large and export-oriented ones, are increasingly adopting circular models. However, without an explicit connection to social dialogue and labour governance, these efforts risk remaining unbalanced or unsustainable.
- Public and private institutions must go beyond project logic, ensuring that CE initiatives are

embedded in national systems, funding mechanisms, and long-term industrial strategies.

TURN has also shown that the infrastructure for a just circular transition exists, but needs to be consolidated and scaled:

- Roles such as the Environmental Delegate should be institutionalised in more national contexts.
- Training and capacity-building programmes should be made accessible to workers, union representatives, and local authorities.
- Collective bargaining must evolve to include environmental dimensions — not as add-ons, but as core issues linked to employment quality, skills, and organisational change.

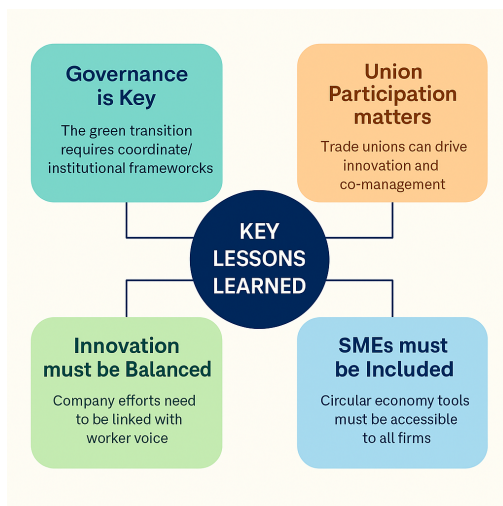
Likewise, European Works Councils (EWC) should be recognised and supported as key actors in the circular transition of multinational companies. TURN highlighted how, despite their potential to facilitate cross-border dialogue and anticipate environmental restructuring, EWCs remain underused and often disconnected from sustainability planning. Strengthening their mandate, providing thematic training, and integrating CE issues into their regular agenda can significantly enhance their role as bridges between environmental ambition and social dialogue at European scale.

From Italy to Albania, from Spain to Turkey, TURN has revealed both the divergence of national pathways and the convergence of structural needs: coordination, inclusion, and continuity. The circular economy will only deliver on its promises if it is rooted in democratic

participation and shared responsibility — principles that define the best of the European social model.

As the European Union moves forward with its Green Deal objectives and sustainable industrial policy, the findings of TURN provide a timely and evidence-based contribution. They call for policies that link environmental ambition with social justice, and for transnational cooperation that enables mutual learning and system-wide innovation.

TURN's legacy lies in the bridges it has built — between countries, between sectors, and most importantly, between the ecological transition and the world of work. These bridges are not only symbolic. They are practical, necessary, and ready to be crossed.





TURN. Addressing industrial relations towards circular economy in metal, chemical, textile, energy and construction sectors

The project, in the wake of the directives based on the European Commission's European Green Deal and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals programme, aims to deal specifically with the topic of the Transition of Companies towards a Circular Economy, where the concepts of re-use and sustainable disposal become the key principles on which social dialogue must and can operate. An intervention that must be a spokesperson for all the changes taking place, inherent to production processes, organisational changes and everything that not only impacts on the surrounding environment, but also and above all on workers and working conditions.