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# Advancing labor legislation in alignment with European integration standards



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**Abstract** The labor legislation of Ukraine is the oldest among all branches of law, and, therefore, requires immediate improvement. The alignment of domestic labor legislation with European standards is one of the conditions for Ukraine's accession to the EU. In this regard, there is a chance for successful reform of this sector in domestic labor practice, which will create a favorable working environment and will be able to protect employees' rights and interests. Enhancing the legal framework in the field of labor legislation will strengthen the desire of European partners to attract investment in various economic sectors, thereby contributing to the growth of new jobs and economic development. Taking this into account, studying the issue of improving labor legislation in accordance with European principles is extremely relevant and important for our country since this process will improve citizens' lives and make them part of a large European family. The purpose of the academic paper is to reveal the features of improving the labor legislation in accordance with the European integration principles. When studying the issue of improving labor legislation in accordance with European integration principles, it should be noted that this process will contribute to strengthening the legal protection of employees in the context of fair wages, social guarantees, and safety in the workplace. This process will help ensure fair labor conditions, social stability and reduce social-economic problems in society. Improvement of labor legislation in accordance with European integration principles is a key aspect of the strategy of modern Ukraine. Deepening European integration cooperation and the desire to become integrated with the EU require reforms in the field of labor legislation, which is currently far from European standards. Outdated and inefficient regulations should be canceled. They should be replaced by effective and expedient legal norms in the field of labor law that would ensure the protection of all subjects of labor relations, and promote the development of economic and social policy in the state.

**Keywords:** labor relations, reformation, European standards, employee rights, European integration, legal framework

## 1. Introduction

An important stage of legal reform is the alignment of Ukrainian legislation with EU norms. Currently, an urgent need has arisen to bring labor legislation in line with European standards. The sphere of labor law has not been sufficiently updated since Ukraine's independence (Sergiienko et al., 2020). In this regard, many problems have arisen that currently require priority intervention. At the same time, the need to reform labor legislation and adapt it to European standards is driven by our country's accession to the EU. Ukraine has adopted many international documents since its independence; however, there is a certain obsolescence of the same labor standards that hinders the effective and full development of this sector.

Many publications have been devoted to studying the improvement of labor legislation and bringing it in line with European integration principles; however, the problem of its covering persists. The number of works currently available in the domestic literature contains the views of various lawyers on this issue. Currently, the study of this issue has both theoretical and practical aspects, the main of which is the modernization of legal norms and their harmonization with European standards.

The scientific work of Kaida fully covers the issues of adapting Ukrainian labor legislation to EU legislation. The author emphasized that the European Union has been considered one of the best and most effective ways to fulfill the interests of society in Ukraine for many years, as well as one of the most important issues of state policy (Kaida, 2020).

The study of Chyzhmar (2020) indicates that the gradual harmonization of labor legislation with European standards is a significant step since Ukraine lags behind EU countries in terms of social development. This is precisely why an important issue is not only the legislative regulation of legal acts but also the search for the necessary mechanism through which legal acts are implemented.



The joint publication of Kulachok-Titova and Stoyanova (2015) defines the peculiarities of reforming Ukrainian labor legislation and bringing it in line with EU standards. The authors point out the need to amend the labor legislation of Ukraine since these changes will contribute to the development of both labor and related rights.

The purpose of this research is to reveal the features of improving labor legislation in accordance with European integration principles.

## 2. The Research Methods

The dialectical method of understanding legal phenomena helped determine the issues of analyzing the essence and problems of correlation between domestic labor legislation and the norms of EU labor legislation. The application of this systematic method made it possible to define the key concepts of this research. Thus, the concepts of "labor law", "labor legislation", "improvement of labor legislation", and "EU labor legislation" are disclosed using a systematic method.

In the course of studying this issue, logical methods and techniques were used. The method of comparative analysis was applied to reveal the features of the correlation between national and European labor law, and the positive experience of the EU in overcoming the problems caused by imperfect legislative norms was analyzed.

## 3. Results and Discussion

European integration is a term that generally characterizes cooperation between the European countries that have generally become members of the EU or are preparing to join it. In general, integration provides broad opportunities for those countries that are still on the verge of joining the EU. The EU countries jointly develop their economic potential and legislative framework and maintain close political cooperation. The European integration of the countries took place primarily through the European Union and its policies. Currently, it is one of the most powerful associations in the international legal space and an example of an effective and coordinated mechanism of state cooperation (European integration, 2023).

The process of Ukraine's integration into the European Union dates back to the declaration of Ukraine as an independent democratic state. Close cultural, historical, and political ties have significantly strengthened the country's desire to be united with leading European countries and develop at a single pace. The steps that Ukraine is taking toward the European goal should, among other things, significantly strengthen the Ukrainian economic system, approach national, economic and social European standards, and bring national legislation in line with it (Harbar, 2021, p. 38).

Reforming domestic legislation is always a difficult and long-term process that requires strength and certain skills in addition to effort. In light of the need to improve labor legislation, Ukraine is guided by the experience of EU countries, introducing new ideas in the domestic legal space step by step. Bringing legislation in line with European integration principles has a number of advantages that will contribute to the successful development of Ukraine in the future. Reforming legislation in the field of labor law is faced with the task of considering the new realities posed by the development of society. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that no reform should lead to the restriction of fundamental human rights. The reform should be based on the basic principles of labor law. In addition, it is important to create conditions for discussing the content of the planned reform (Dutchak et al., 2020; Hora et al., 2023).

In general, the term "improvement" in the context of labor law implies amendments aimed at improving national legislation and bringing it in compliance with EU standards and requirements. This process includes the analysis of legal acts, taking into account the norms of European labor legislation, their expediency and the need for application in the national legal doctrine. The improvement of legislation is aimed at ensuring the harmonization of Ukrainian labor law with national standards and EU values (Bondarenko et al., 2022).

According to Article 43 of the Constitution of Ukraine, everyone has the right to work, which includes the opportunity to earn a living by work he or she freely chooses and agrees to (Constitution, 1996). However, current trends in labor processes do not always satisfy both employees and employers. Certain problems arise that need to be addressed immediately. Currently, the labor sphere is the most unprotected since outdated legal norms cannot fully regulate labor relations between labor law subjects. In this regard, the problem of reforming the labor sector, involving European integration principles in this process, is currently extremely urgent. According to part 1 of Article 2 of the Labor Code of Ukraine, the right of citizens to work is ensured by the state (Code of Labor Laws of Ukraine, 1971).

The labor legislation of Ukraine from the very beginning and in the process of formation was focused on improving the situation of the employed population. According to Inshyn, the state of development of labor law in Ukraine should be characterized as unstable and containing a number of contradictions caused by low economic development and an unwillingness to expend a large amount of money to meet employees' social needs (Inshyn, 2014, p. 22).

The necessity of reforming labor legislation in line with European integration principles is conditioned by outdated norms that continue to regulate labor relations in the 21st century. The Labor Code as of 1971 contains many norms that ceased to function in the distant 1990s. Endless attempts to adopt an updated codified legal act did not yield the desired result, and the issue remained floating in the air. Along with this, another argument for the need to improve labor legislation is the contradiction between the Labor Code and specialized laws adopted to regulate particular important issues. For instance, the

Labor Code of Ukraine currently regulates the right to work of Ukrainian citizens, while the Constitution guarantees this right, in addition to citizens, to foreigners and stateless persons who are legally staying in the territory of Ukraine. Therefore, there are grounds to argue that the codified act grants fewer powers than does the Constitution. Such inconsistencies in labor legislation do not fully comply with international labor standards (Khromey, 2018, pp. 32-33).

It is worth noting that the adaptation of labor legislation to EU legislation is aimed at gradually bringing the content of domestic regulatory legal acts by introducing organizational, legal, social, economic, political, and technical norms by specially authorized state bodies in accordance with the requirements set for Ukraine before its accession to the European Union. Such actions are aimed at creating a common system of legal regulation of labor relations in the EU and Ukraine, taking into account the social realities of our state. The adaptation of Ukraine’s labor legislation to the European Union’s legislation is being carried out with a clear objective – to create a unified system of legal regulation of labor relations both in the European Union and in Ukraine. This means that the result of the adaptation is to adjust Ukrainian labor legislation to a state where it will cooperate with the EU labor legislation on the basis of common principles and standards. At the same time, the sources of labor law of Ukraine will become the sources of labor law of the European Union.

Bringing domestic labor legislation in line with European integration principles is determined by certain peculiarities, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Peculiarities of bringing domestic labor legislation in line with European integration principles.

Peculiarities	Description
The alignment of domestic regulations with European regulations	Adapting Ukrainian labor legislation to the norms and standards of the European Union to ensure compliance with European standards.
Adoption and implementation of new regulatory legal acts taking into account European legal standards	Developing and adopting new laws and regulations that meet European labor and social protection standards.
Bringing Ukraine’s labor legislation in line with European standards by reforming the national legal system	Changes in the structure and content of national labor legislation to comply with European norms and standards.
A set of organizational, legal, socioeconomic, and technical measures aimed at introducing EU labor law standards into national labor legislation	Implementation of a wide range of measures aimed at introducing European standards into national labor legislation.
Activities of state bodies aimed at raising the level of domestic labor legislation and bringing it in line with EU norms	The efforts of government institutions to enhance labor legislation and implement modifications to guarantee compliance with European standards.

Source: Problems of EU adaptation (2023)

Chyzhmar rightly notes that Ukraine is currently in the process of harmonizing its labor legislation with EU norms. Several regulatory documents have already been updated in line with European standards. The author emphasized that the gradual harmonization of domestic legislation in accordance with European standards may soon yield positive results (Chyzhmar, 2020, p. 365).

Kulachok-Titova and Stoyanova point out that domestic labor law and international labor law regulate relations related to the employment of hired labor. Currently, there is a situation in the domestic legal field, the solution of which is related to the application of foreign experience and international legal principles that can determine the mechanism for recognizing and protecting labor rights and freedoms. The authors emphasize that several drafts of the updated Labor Code have already been adopted since independence. However, given the multilevel nature, the large number of legal acts containing these drafts, the conflict and archaic nature of some provisions that have long outlived their usefulness, and the emergence of new forms of labor relations, all of these issues require detailed revision. Researchers have focused on a number of significant features that make up the difference between domestic labor legislation and the legislation of EU states. One of these differences is the introduction of written and oral forms of employment contracts. In the European Union’s states, an employee may conclude an employment agreement in writing or orally. In Ukraine, the written form of an employment agreement between an employee and an individual employer is mandatory. It is quite controversial whether the state authorities will be able to control contracts concluded orally and prove in court that such a contract was actually concluded (Kulachok-Titova & Stoyanova, 2015, p. 85).

Makohon emphasizes that labor law cannot develop in isolation from the processes taking place in the world. For EU countries, the discussion about the superiority of business-centeredness over human-centeredness is far from new. Europe has long focused on the development of the latest technologies, automation of production, and expansion of the protection of labor relations. In Ukraine, these processes are being implemented step by step (Makohon, 2023, p. 30).

Sereda, studying the exercise of the right to work in the conditions of Ukraine’s integration into the European Union, emphasizes that when exercising the right to work, the Ukrainian legislature should determine which provisions of European legislation are effective and, therefore, should be implemented in domestic legislation. The indiscriminate drag-and-drop of European law to form domestic labor legislation will have negative consequences and will not improve the current situation. The author notes that one of the main conditions for Ukraine’s successful integration into the EU is the formation of a new



level of labor legislation and the introduction of the most accessible opportunities for the exercise of the right to work for Ukrainian citizens (Sereda, 2016, p. 74).

The first step of the European integration course in the area of exercising the right to work was the achievement of Ukraine's independence and, consequently, the desire of our citizens to live in a free, democratic and legal state. After gaining independence, the issue of forming relations with developed countries arose. The first document on the path to European integration was the President's Decree "On Approval of the Strategy of Ukraine's Integration into the EU" as of June 11, 1998. This legal act determined the prospects of Ukraine's foreign policy goal of joining the EU. One of the conditions for such accession (even at that time!) was to update the national legal system in line with European legislation (On the approval of the Strategy of Ukraine's integration into the European Union, 1998).

The next step was the approval of the National Program for the Adaptation of Ukrainian Legislation to EU Legislation (On the National Program of the Adaptation of the Legislation, 2004). According to several lawyers, Ukraine's accession to the European legal space will contribute to the further development and consolidation of democracy and the rule of law in the country (Arsentieva, 2016, p. 9).

According to the national researcher Hutsu, every legal act operating in the system of labor law, including the Labor Code, should consider a person as the main subject of labor relations and recognize him or her as having the highest social value. In other words, the establishment of the constitutional principle in this case will contribute to a more comprehensive and effective exercise of the right to work (Hutsu, 2013, p. 108).

Shemshuchenko noted that unification of the national legal terminology in accordance with the terminology of European countries is a very important condition to be fulfilled before Ukraine's integration into the EU (Shemshuchenko, 2004, pp. 108-109). At the same time, based on the statement of Butynska, it should be noted that the development of an effective mechanism for the exercise of the right to work and the approximation of domestic labor legislation to European integration principles, first and foremost, requires significant efforts from specialists in the field of labor law and social security law. Sufficient developments in this area can become the basis for the expression of scientific and well-reasoned approaches in this direction (Butynska, 2020, p. 146).

When studying the issue of improving labor legislation in accordance with European principles, it is important to understand that this is a process that takes more than one day or even more than one year to complete. As previously mentioned, the challenges posed by domestic labor legislation will increase if simple copies of European labor law standards are incorporated. Therefore, the improvement involves the creation of new political and democratic bodies capable of effectively implementing the newly adopted legal norms, ensuring the protection of the rights and freedoms of the subjects of labor legislation. The improvement of legislation in line with European standards will give Ukraine a chance to become a real democratic country focused on economic development and capable of ensuring the rule of human and civil rights and freedoms.

It is important to note that Ukraine is actively participating in the ratification of various international conventions of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in the field of labor relations. It prioritizes international law over domestic law, as reflected in Article 81 of the Labor Code of Ukraine. The country emphasizes human rights and the importance of universal human values in the field of labor. In total, Ukraine has ratified more than 50 ILO conventions, including almost all key ones. However, it is worth noting that, in practice, compliance with some of their provisions is not always ensured by proper domestic legislation (Shpytalenko, 2016). For example, Article 2 of the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention No. 87 provides for the right of employees and employers to establish organizations without prior authorization, as well as the right to join them in accordance with their charters (VRU, 1948). However, according to Article 6 of the Law of Ukraine "On Trade Unions, Their Rights and Guarantees of Activity", foreign citizens and stateless persons cannot form trade unions but may join them if it is provided for in their charters (VRU, 1999). According to Ukrainian law, foreigners and stateless persons are not allowed to participate in a trade union, which restricts employees' right to freedom of association under Convention No. 87. Hence, legislative modifications in the domain of labor may have a significant practical impact on the daily lives of both individuals and enterprises (Nikolenko, 2019). Since most international agreements ratified by Ukraine in this area are specialized in nature, developing an effective legal model for the realization of the right to work, and adapting national labor legislation to the requirements of EU legislation is becoming an urgent task. This task necessitates the collaboration of experts in the fields of labor law and social security law to employ scientifically sound approaches and devise rational strategies in this regard (Butynska, 2020).

It is worth noting that the necessity of introducing amendments to the current labor legislation is based not only on the EU orientation but also on the glaring inconsistency of its principles with modern realities, including the creation of a legal framework for decent work, employment policy, safe and healthy working conditions, social dialog, gender equality and nondiscrimination. Considering the labor legislation of European countries, it should be emphasized that each state has its own unique specifics in the field of labor relations. This means that there is no single approach to the formation of legislation. At the same time, it should be noted that European labor legislation is aimed at protecting human rights and freedoms, and all issues are regulated by international law and European Union labor standards (Shlapko & Kyselova, 2023; Bielousov et al., 2023).

When discussing the issue of bringing labor legislation in line with European integration principles, it is worth considering this problem in the spectrum of events related to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It should be emphasized that full-scale invasion did not affect Ukraine's aspirations toward the EU. Despite the difficulties faced by our country every day, reforms continue to step up, and all efforts in the political and legal fields are focused on accession to the EU.

The imposition of martial law in Ukraine pursuant to Law № 389-VIII (Law № 389-VIII, 2015) has led to a new stage in the development of domestic labor law. The challenging relationship between employees and employers in peacetime became more complicated only during the period of martial law. The imposition of martial law has launched a new stage of reforming Ukraine's labor legislation. The legislative activity in regulating labor relations has increased in the country in a relatively short period of time. The first regulatory act adopted under martial law was the Law of Ukraine "On the Organization of Labor Relations under Martial Law" as of March 15, 2022, No. 2136-IX (Law No. 2136-IX, 2022). The next legal act was Law №2220-IX, which defined the conditions of citizens' social protection in the case of unemployment during martial law (Law No. 2220-IX, 2022).

In addition, the amendments concerned not only the labor sphere but also the regulation of other social institutions related to labor law. It is worth noting that most amendments are already of a European integration nature. The primary objective of domestic labor legislation is still to implement an effective labor policy, which in turn would help ensure the key principles and standards set forth in international and European norms (Hryshyna, 2023, p. 377).

Currently, the labor legislation of Ukraine enshrines formal inequality, where employees are forced to obey internal labor regulations, follow orders from their supervisors, and bear disciplinary responsibility. This inequality is contained in the norms of domestic legislation and significantly restricts its rights. Meanwhile, the economic interests of employers far outweigh the real interests of employees. As a result, there is neither formal nor real equality between the employee and the employer, as defined in European labor law. Thus, national labor legislation should overcome the significant imbalance created by ineffective legislative norms and provide employees with additional guarantees. In addition, international labor market regulation instruments are aimed at providing additional guarantees for employees in their relations with employers to compensate for their inequality at all stages of labor relations (Vnuchko & Skoryk, 2021, p. 7).

According to Ovsyanko, the issue of improving national labor legislation should be addressed comprehensively. For this purpose, it is necessary to take certain steps toward its implementation, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** Peculiarities of bringing domestic labor legislation in line with European integration principles.

Peculiarities	Description
Adoption of a new Labor Code of Ukraine	Developing and adopting a completely new Labor Code that will take into account the current needs and realities of labor relations in Ukraine and is aimed at future development.
Reviewing and removing outdated labor laws and regulations	Analyzing and updating labor legislation by removing and revising provisions that are no longer relevant or do not correspond to the current realities of labor relations.
Conducting scientific research	Systematically conducting research on the implementation and adaptation of labor legislation to modern requirements and labor relations in order to improve the legal framework.
Studying the practice of the European Court of Human Rights	Analyzing the practice and judgments of the European Court of Human Rights to avoid possible shortcomings in legal technique when adapting national labor legislation to European integration standards.

Source: Ovsyanko (2016)

Addressing these problems can be achieved through the optimization and improvement of the process of adapting national labor legislation to the requirements of the European Union's legislation (Ovsyanko, 2016, p. 284).

It is crucial for Ukraine to take into account the economic, political and social consequences of adopting relevant labor laws that have been aligned with the requirements of EU legislation. This means considering international standards and norms as well as the specific conditions and needs of Ukrainian society and the possible consequences arising in this regard (Karavaeva, 2023).

#### 4. Conclusions

The development of national labor law has a long and difficult history of formation. The morally outdated labor standards currently in force in Ukraine and regulating labor relations are already losing their relevance, significance, and legal principles. Society is evolving, and all social institutions are evolving with it. Improving domestic labor standards and bringing them in line with European standards and principles will solve numerous urgent issues that have not yet been resolved. It is important to bear in mind that rather than attempting to make rules and regulations more externally comparable, improvements should be significant and focused on accomplishing the overall goals that need to be governed.



## Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Funding

This research did not receive any financial support.

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