

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to Portugal and to the city of Maia, one of the most dynamic and sustainable cities in our country!

It is a great pleasure for me to take the floor before such a distinguished group of representatives of the European liberal professions.

I was requested to share with you a few words about the importance of social dialogue in Portuguese society. As you probably know, we have an institutionalized social dialogue process since the 1980s, which has proved to be essential on several critical occasions (the financial crisis, the sovereign debt crisis, the pandemia...).

In the meantime, although the world and our lives have significantly changed, the social dialogue process and its core actors remain pretty much the same.

This begs the question: **Is it time to rethink the existing model?** Should we adopt different procedures, or perhaps open the door to new actors?

Let us take the example of the liberal professions. Should liberal professionals – self-employed and independent professionals such as engineers, architects, designers, journalists, health and legal professionals, IT specialists, and many others – also be part of the social dialogue process?

There are, of course, several compelling arguments that point in that direction.

- **First, representation.** Social dialogue is meant to give voice to the main actors in the world of work. Today, a growing share of value creation comes from people who are neither standard employees nor traditional employers. Leaving independent professionals outside the room creates a voice gap. When a sizable group affected by rules on taxation, social protection, training, competition, and procurement is not represented, decisions risk being less legitimate and less fair.
- **Second, effectiveness.** Policies work better when they reflect how work is actually organized. Consider issues like access to social protection, parental leave, sick pay, pensions, late payment by clients, liability, or the classification of platform work. Bringing independent professionals into structured dialogue improves problem diagnosis and implementation, leading to higher compliance and fewer costly revisions later.
- **Third, economic performance and innovation.** Liberal professionals are often at the frontier of innovation – exporting services, adopting new tools, and helping small firms digitize. Their practices set the standards for quality and safety across many sectors. When they are included, dialogues gain practical insights on productivity, skills, and technology adoption. The result is a more competitive ecosystem and a better diffusion of good practices across supply chains.
- **Fourth, resilience and social protection.** The last few years exposed deep gaps in income security for people outside

standard employment. Including their representatives helps design portable, contributory social protections that follow the person across contracts and borders. It also supports realistic financing arrangements, ensuring protections are sustainable without distorting competition.

- **Fifth, skills and lifelong learning.** Independent professionals must finance and organize their own upskilling, yet their talents are essential to national competitiveness. Dialogue can align incentives for co-investment, develop portable training accounts, and ensure that certification frameworks recognize non-standard career paths. This increases overall employability and reduces the skills shortages that hold back growth.
- **Sixth, digital and cross-border realities.** Many liberal professionals work across jurisdictions or via digital platforms. They can flag practical barriers – such as tax coordination, data standards, and the recognition of qualifications – and suggest interoperable solutions. Their participation helps avoid fragmented rules that create friction for trade in services.

However, there are also valid concerns that must be taken into consideration.

The first is complexity. Tripartite systems are already demanding. But a “tripartite plus” approach need not replace core bargaining between government, unions, and employers. Instead, it can add structured, consultative participation where appropriate – in economic and social

councils, sectoral working groups, or task forces on topics that directly affect independent work. The goal is complementarity, not dilution.

Another concern is representativeness (which, by the way, is an existing challenge affecting a large number of the actors currently involved...). Independent professionals are highly diverse and not always unionized. This can be managed with clear accreditation criteria, evidence-based thresholds, and umbrella bodies that aggregate voices while respecting competition law. Rotating seats, transparency requirements, and conflict-of-interest rules can safeguard balance (as a matter of fact, many countries and regions already operate councils that successfully include professional chambers, associations, cooperatives, etc.; these experiences should be taken into consideration).

A third concern involves legal boundaries, particularly around competition rules. Dialogue can focus strictly on non-price issues (such as payment terms, health and safety, access to training, standard clauses on intellectual property and liability, dispute resolution, and social protection) where collective discussion actively improves market functioning. Where collective bargaining is relevant for solo self-employed workers in a worker-like position, governments can provide legal clarity consistent with competition frameworks.

How might this inclusion work in practice? I see three pragmatic, immediate steps standing out:

1. **The creation of formal consultative seats** for independent professionals in national economic and social councils or equivalent bodies, backed by transparent selection and reporting.
2. **The establishment of sectoral dialogue tables** where self-employment is highly prevalent – such as media, creative industries, tech, construction, and health – tasked with co-developing model contracts, fair payment practices, and clear training pathways.
3. **The setting-up of cross-cutting working groups** on portable social protection, late payments, platform work, and public procurement access, each with a clear mandate, timelines, and impact evaluations.

The benefits of this shift would be concrete: better-targeted regulation, higher compliance, fewer disputes, improved service quality, and stronger overall buy-in for reforms.

Most importantly, social dialogue would regain its core function – **aligning the interests of those who create value** – so that transitions in technology, demography, and climate can be managed fairly.

In short, including other relevant actors, such as liberal professionals, does not change the purpose of social dialogue; it fulfils it. If we want rules that fit today's economy, we should seat all those who live that economy every day.

Evolution from a tripartite model to a "tripartite plus" model is the practical step toward more legitimate, effective, and future-ready labour governance.

Thank you very much – and I wish you an excellent journey here in Portugal and great success for the near future!

Maia, 26 June 2026

Luís Pais Antunes

President of the Economic and Social Council of Portugal