

RESEARCH

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RECOMMENDATIONS

JAN CZARZASTY

UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE POLYCRISIS CENTRAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

INSTITUTE OF
PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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Social Policy Programme

This report is one in a series presenting the findings of research carried out in Bulgaria, Czechia, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia as part of the project CEE CAW ‘Challenges for Organising and Collective Bargaining in Care, Administration and Waste collection sectors in Central and Eastern European Countries’, which was led by the Institute of Public Affairs (Warsaw). The other partners were the: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Sofia), Central European Labour Studies Institute (Bratislava), Lithuanian Centre of Social Sciences (Vilnius), and Centre for Democracy Foundation (Belgrade).



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1. Methodological preface

The report provides a comparative analysis of the data collected in the course of the research on national collective bargaining systems and social dialogue in the central public administration (hereafter: CPA) sector. The fieldwork (backed by desk research) was conducted in 12 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries in 2024. The study and the following report come from the research project “CEECAW: Challenges for Organising and Collective Bargaining in Care, Administration and Waste collection sectors in Central and Eastern European Countries”. The project’s main objective is to shed light — with a view of enhancing understanding — on the role of collective bargaining and other forms of social dialogue in devising public policies to mitigate key problems (identified by the research) in the CPA sector.

There is no standardised definition of Central Public Administration (CPA). Biletta (2013: 10) notes that “various methodological issues challenge all analytical comparisons when studying CPA: the variety of the delimitation of CPA across Member States; the difference in starting points, either in quantitative terms or in reform issues; the inability of statistics to capture the overall situation”. There are at least three main approaches that should be taken into consideration in any attempt to demarcate the field of study: (1) OECD’s ‘general government sector’ that includes different levels of government (core ministries, agencies, departments and non-profit institutions that are controlled and mainly financed by public authorities), as well as public corporations and quasi-corporations that are owned or controlled by the government; (2) the ‘public administration sector’ as defined in terms of NACE (revision 2): NACE 84, which includes central, regional and local governments; (3) the European System of Accounts (ESA), where there is a sub-sector labelled as central government (S.1311), including “all administrative departments of the state and other central agencies whose competence extends normally over the whole economic territory, except for the administration of social security funds.”

Taking into account the aims of the study, the ESA approach seems optimal. However, bearing in mind that sectoral selection of the fields/areas of work and labour activity for the sake of industrial (work and employment) relations research usually relies on NACE, it should be noted that ESA S.1311 largely overlaps with NACE 84.1.1 (Administration of the State and the economic and social policy of the community), 84. 1.2 (Regulation of the activities of

providing health care, education, cultural services and other social services, excluding social security); and 84. 1.3 (Regulation of and contribution to more efficient operation of businesses).

The report is based on national contributions from the following countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

2. General characteristics of the sector in the countries covered

In all countries covered, CPA remains a significant employer. It is also essential in securing the provision of various types of public services. In all countries covered, there has been a tendency towards downsizing of CPA. At the same time in most countries, there is a problem of vacancies, which is analysed and elaborated on in more detail in the following sections of the report. In Table 1, there is an overview of employment in CPA provided, based on the data extracted from the national reports. For that reason, any cross-country comparisons must be done with caution, due to methodological disparities in how the data is collected, aggregated and presented, not to mention the gaps in the data available.

A bird's-eye view of the approaches that de facto mark the frontiers for CPA at a national level within the country sample reveals that they largely overlap, with CPA employees belonging to either the Civil Service or not. Within the Civil Service, they may either hold the status of 'civil servants' (regarding national legal definitions determining what makes a civil servant and what specific formal and procedural conditions apply) or simply be employed therein. Those working for the Civil Service but not holding the 'civil status' are covered by the general labour law regime, which puts them in the same dimension—in terms of work and employment relations—as employees who are not part of the Civil Service but whose administrative duties/functions place them within the domain of CPA in line with the domestic law. In other words, there are three basic categories: **civil servants, Civil Service employees, and other employees**. For the sake of precision and clarity, in some countries covered there might be cases of further sub-categorisations, especially regarding the 'other employees' (e.g. Bulgaria) or incidents of persons/groups of workers working within CPA on the basis other than

either Civil Service regulations or labour law but they, nevertheless, remain marginal and do not impact the general picture in any significant way.

Table 1. Size of the CPA sector

Country	Employment	Remarks
BG	143,815	107,079 in central/functional administration and 36,736 in territorial administration
CZ	127,108	Of whom, 76,410 are state service employees
EE	27,935 civil servants	No other data given
HR	~27,000	—
HU	NA	—
LT	56,200	23,886 career civil servants; 21,875 employees working under employment contracts, 7,690 statutory civil servants, 942 civil servants of political (personal) trust, 709 judges, 1,098 persons in the Prosecutor's Office
LV	~57,200	Of whom, roughly 11,300 civil servants
PL	1,085,840 (787,222 if soldiers and functionaries are excluded)	Civil Service — senior officials: 3,738 Civil Service — other staff: 121,399 Soldiers and functionaries: 298,618 Others: 662,085
RO	826,522	—
SK	~207,000	—
SI	17,000	—
SR	NA	—

Source: Own elaboration based on national contributions.

3. Major problems and challenges in the sector in the countries covered

While there are cross-national variations as far as the key problems and challenges are concerned, there is also an overlap with wage-related problems and workforce shortages commonly listed. There are, however, certain country-specific hardships and challenges that are noteworthy as early indicators (alarming signs) of potential risks and problems which, despite being present in only a part of the country studies (sometimes even in only one), may escalate and spread. Politicisation, although often not being brought up directly is one of them, especially in terms of digitalisation, which is another one.

In all countries covered, CPA — in a manner similar to the entire public sector — seems to be struggling with the consequences of the ongoing polycrisis. The notion which has gained popularity since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic denotes the interaction of multiple crises at once (Tooze 2022). In particular, the most prominent and consequential crises that combine into the 2020s polycrisis include the environmental crisis, demographic crisis, energy crisis, migration crisis, inflation crisis, political crisis (marked not only by the rising wave of populism but also by the turbulent geopolitical situation, including the war in Ukraine), public health crisis and — the most significant in the context of the report — the chronic crisis of public services. The roots of the latter can be traced back to the 2008+ crisis and austerity policies and politics. The pressure on stabilisation of public finance and controlling public debt translated into budgetary cuts affecting public administration in all the Member States countries covered by the study, albeit to various degrees, manifesting in wage stagnation. For instance, Romania, while not being part of the Eurozone, was subjected to a bail-out by the Troika and Poland, while remaining the ‘green island’ in the ocean of the global crisis introduced a ‘pay-freeze’ for public administration in 2010. The post-COVID-19 wave of inflation heavily impacted the already stagnated level of real wages in the sector. At the same time, political and societal expectations towards CPA were growing, as the pandemics accelerated digitalisation processes and the development of e-government arrangements.

In **Bulgaria**, the main challenges reported are related to the goal of modernising CPA, particularly in terms of: improving efficiency, transparency, and digitalisation of administrative processes. More specifically, challenges concern improvements in the areas of electronic infrastructure; electronic literacy of the workforce; wages in the sector; and the legal framework to enhance social dialogue and collective agreements.

In **Croatia**, a fragmented and inefficient administration structure inherited from the past is named as a key challenge. Furthermore, CPA remains under a strong influence of national politics, and the instability of the domestic political situation, especially since 2008, has translated to shifts and alterations in not only the top but also territorial structures of central government. Wages seem to be a significant problem, with the private sector being attractive in terms of pay rises. In addition, non-transparent pay structures in public administration contribute to disparities between public servants of the same educational status and with similar job complexity working in various segments of the state administration.

In **Czechia**, wages appear to be a key problem too, especially because they are not subject to collective bargaining, and the absence of ‘automatic’ indexation. As a result, post-COVID inflation has not been compensated for public sector workers, leading to a real wage decrease of 25% between 2021 and 2023. Wages and employee benefits have further decreased in recent years due to changes in the tax system, yet politicisation has not been a major issue since the adoption of the Act on State Service in 2014, which offers some degree of protection against politically motivated layoffs to state service employees. The digitalisation of public administration is an ongoing process which has accelerated since the outbreak of COVID-19, but in general, Czechia has been lagging in digitalisation efforts, namely one of the reasons being the lack of IT specialists and internal expertise. When it comes to the impacts of digitalisation on working conditions, there is a critique of insufficient retraining (e.g. in relation to labour offices’ digitalisation or the recent digitalisation of construction permits in 2024) and increased workloads for employees associated with digitally submitted applications. For instance, the number of employees in labour offices decreased by 1,500 employees in the last two years as a consequence of digitalisation.

In **Estonia**, in 2022, the average total salary of the Civil Service (state and local government authorities) was 2,072 Euros (an increase of 11.9% since 2021). The average total salary in Estonia amounted to 1,685 Euros, after a year-to-year increase of 8.9%, which was the biggest increase in at least the last fourteen years. In the Civil Service, there are very strong wage pressures in certain areas (e.g. information and communication, financial and insurance activities, vocational, scientific and technical activities), as the private sector pays significantly higher salaries than civil servants. Remote work is an interesting phenomenon, as Estonia has been considered a European forerunner in e-government implementation for years (e.g. Espinosa & Pino 2025). The number and share of employees working remotely gained significant momentum after the COVID-19 crisis. While around 7.3% of employment participants worked remotely in 2012, in 2022 this figure was close to 28%. In the public sector, there is some trend in the desire of civil servants to return to the office, but in general, teleworking in institutions continues to be encouraged.

In **Hungary**, pay is highlighted as a problem. Although yearly wage adjustments are set by legislation, actual wage increases have not occurred since 2008. As a result, in 2021, 84.7% of the actual values in the Pay Scales were covered by the minimum and guaranteed minimum wages, compared to

just 22.4% in 2011. Despite making considerable progress, Hungary is still behind the EU when it comes to digitalisation, adoption, and effectiveness of e-public services, according to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI). The stable legal framework provides a foundation for further development, but significant challenges remain, including infrastructure improvements and addressing societal digital readiness.

Lithuania reports a serious understaffing problem. In mid-2024, 55,169 out of 64,104 posts were occupied, which translates to a vacancy rate of 14%. The level of employee satisfaction is low. According to the Ministry of Interior's survey of civil servants, only one in three civil servants enjoyed working in the public sector, while the rest were not motivated to perform well due to an unfair remuneration system, an unviable career path, and other factors, as well as missing out on professional development programmes in 2020. Only 50% of public sector workers in the survey said they feel free to criticise their managers, which indicates the haunting legacy of authoritarian management whose roots may be traced back to the 'real socialism' era. In addition, the government proposed reform of the Civil Service undermining the attractiveness and competitiveness of the Civil Service, introducing more uncertainty in the determination of remuneration, freezing civil servants' pay for at least two years due to the newly proposed base rate, and removing the already poor social guarantee. Under the current reform, persons whose functions relate to personnel administration, accounting, document management, accounting and storage, procurement, internal audit, project management, public relations, legal representation, prevention of corruption and internal investigations, information and communication technology administration and asset management will not be considered civil servants. The conversion of these former civil servants to contract staff, in trade unions' opinions, has limited their future access to higher salaries.

In **Latvia**, the number of administrative staff decreases annually. This reduction is due to reorganisations, job cuts based on budget constraints, and difficulties in filling vacancies due to uncompetitive pay. At the same time, management staff are held to high standards in terms of education, competence, language skills and loyalty. As a result of state optimisation, the workload for the remaining employees is increasing. All of this leads to overwork and inappropriate working conditions, but digitalisation and the use of e-signatures are improving the situation. The issue of remuneration in public administration is complex. The law sets minimum and maximum salaries based on the position held, but in practice, salaries are often influenced

by the budgetary constraints of each institution or municipality. As a result, the statutory minimum is not always adhered to by a number of public authorities. For example, at the Ministry of Welfare, the salary for the specified minimum is lower for half of the employees, while at the Ministry of Culture, it is lower for a third of the employees. Despite challenges in reaching the minimum wage, the first 7 months of this year have seen an 18% increase in public sector wages.

In Poland, the average pay in the Civil Service substantially exceeds the national average wage (in relative terms the difference amounts to 30%), yet the vast majority of public administration receive considerably lower pay. The base salaries of lower-ranking CPA employees often do not match the level of the national minimum wage, so in order not to violate the law, they are supplemented by various extras. In addition, the current levels of pay in public administration have been to a certain extent, a result of a single upswing that occurred in 2024, when the government decided on a one-time 20% raise in pay. Furthermore, the increase should be placed in the context of real wage deterioration observable in Poland in the post-COVID-19 period of accelerating inflation. According to the report by the national auditor, in the Civil Service only, in 2022 the average total salary fell by 4.6% in real terms compared to 2021.

In Romania, there are wage inequalities among the same type of institutions and occupations in the sector. There is an absence of collective bargaining contracts for civil servants, unlike other institutions which can have contracts for up to three years. Besides pay and collective contracts, the stakeholder is concerned about workplace health and safety. Working extensively with digital technologies can impact eyesight and body posture. A recent court case on protecting the safety and health of workers who work with display screen equipment concluded that employers from public administration must pay for spectacles and other corrective appliances for workers who work primarily in front of screens.

In Serbia, due to a workforce shortage, state employees are compelled to cover two or three posts, resulting in overtime hours, which cannot be fully compensated financially due to the limits set by law. Furthermore, overtime is paid out on a maximum of 32 overtime hours, rather than proportionally to the time spent working, which leads to increased workplace injuries, reduced focus, and exhaustion. All the aforementioned factors act as a disincentive for employees in public administration.

In Slovenia, one of the main problems in the sector is low wages. For instance, the union representative mentions that public employees with a high school diploma receive the minimum wage, and when someone leaves, they are practically irreplaceable as there is no interest in employment. As a result, there is a pronounced labour shortage.

The long-term challenges in the Civil Service in **Slovakia** are as follows: politicisation of the Civil Service, professionalisation is considered a serious issue and a factor influencing the acquisition and stabilisation of high-quality employees, low interest in the Civil Service (the demand for state servant positions decreased; during 2017–2019, the number of recruitment procedures reduced by half. A third of civil servant positions were occupied by those in the selection process who could not fill them), and there is a problem attracting applicants to fields where the private sector is increasingly rewarded (administration of IT systems, public procurement). As a result, around 5,000 planned positions (4%) in the central state administration are unfilled annually. Reducing civil servants is often a focal point in political discussions to mitigate public debt and enhance operational efficiency. The most recent proposal involves a 30% reduction in the number of civil servants. There is a noticeable trend of substantial personnel turnover.

4. Industrial relations and social dialogue in the countries covered

Freedom of association and bargaining are not severely limited in the countries covered, not even mentioning radical exclusions debatable in the context of ILO standards and EU regulations. First, the right to be a union member is rarely denied, except for narrowly designated categories of servants such as members of the military or judges. Second, the rights to collective bargaining are somewhat limited with certain groups excluded. Third, the right to strike is substantially limited, with certain groups/categories excluded, provided that in some countries it is not fully taken away (as the right to collective disputes and/or mild forms of industrial grief may be retained) but the ultimate instance, that is collective and solidary refraining from performing work, is outlawed.

Bulgaria provides the example of the third point above, as there is “a right to strike, only without a strike” for civil servants. According to the national report, “civil servants can call a strike, but the realisation of the strike is carried

out by wearing appropriate signs and symbols, protest posters, tapes, etc., without suspending the performance of the Civil Service”. Consequently, there is advanced pluralism and fragmentation in the union movement.

Career civil servants and employees working in Lithuanian CPA and the trade unions representing them are not subject to the relevant restrictions on strikes. Judges, prosecutors, police officers, fire-fighters or rescue workers, border guards, employees of state security institutions, wardens and soldiers are prohibited from striking. Trade unions operating in statutory bodies are prohibited from organising and participating in 1) strikes; and 2) pickets or rallies which directly interfere with the activities of a statutory body or the performance of the official’s duties.

In Croatia, collective bargaining takes place entirely at a sectoral level, almost without additional agreements at lower levels. In this model, wage provisions are mostly not strictly defined. Social dialogue in state administration occurs between the government as an employer and representative trade unions. CPA employees have a right to strike and no specific groups of employees are excluded from collective bargaining and/or the right to strike.

Trade unions in the **Czechia** public sector, as well as in the broader economy, are grappling with declining membership rates. Considering the number of employees (around 127,000 employees) in CPA, the estimated trade union density is around 10 to 15% in this sector. The absence of wage bargaining at both organisation and sector levels has significantly reduced the importance of collective bargaining in this sector, and thus also the role of the trade unions.

In Estonia, there is a fairly good union density, compared to the national average and no union pluralism, as the Federation of State and Municipal Workers’ Unions (ROTAL) is the only federation active in CPA. A significant part of CPA employees are employed under the Civil Service Act. This narrows their possibilities for collective bargaining since there is no clear “counter-party” for negotiations, with wages defined by various laws and regulations, and depending on the budget provided by the state to the agency. These employees do not have the right to strike. The main difficulty in the trade union movement in the state sector stems from the restrictions created by the law on civil servants: wage conditions should be agreed in the collective agreement, but the Civil Service Act says that the government does not have the right to negotiate on wages.

In **Hungary**, approximately 10–15% of the civil servants are members of trade unions active in public administration (2017). The level of collective bargaining coverage shows a decreasing trend over the years. Public sector employees, particularly those in CPA, do not enjoy equal collective bargaining rights compared to their private-sector counterparts. Their right to strike is also limited.

In **Latvia**, there is low union density but collective agreements apply to civil servants in the same way as they do to other public sector employees. The possibility of engaging in collective bargaining is not excluded by law even for those groups of workers that are subject to the restrictions on the right to association, since trade union representation is not mandatory for the conclusion of a collective bargaining agreement. The CPA sector, as a whole, does not have specific strike restrictions. The Strike Law prohibits strikes by judges, prosecutors, police officers, fire safety personnel, national security services officers, border guards, prison supervisors and members of the armed forces. During a strike, a minimum level of essential service required by society must be maintained.

In **Lithuania**, there is low union density, and collective bargaining coverage, albeit higher than average for the whole labour market. Collective bargaining and collective agreements in the Civil Service are governed by the Labour Code. There are certain categories exempt from the right to strike (i.e. judges, prosecutors, fire-fighters, rescue workers, police officers, and members of other uniformed services).

In **Poland**, there is advanced fragmentation and competitive pluralism (multiple unions existing within the range of one employer), and union density is low, albeit higher than average. The Collective Disputes Act denies employees in public administration (including local government and judiciary) the right to strike. They are allowed, nevertheless, to engage in milder forms of industrial grievance such as rallies.

In **Romania**, pluralism and fragmentation of the union movement are advanced. Unlike other institutions which can have contracts for up to three years, civil servants must conclude collective labour agreements annually. Yet the central public administration sector has the highest coverage of employees in trade unions and collective bargaining agreements.

In **Slovenia**, there is a complete ban on strikes (based on judicial practice) in the military, while other activities of societal importance can only have their strike activities **limited by law**. It is challenging to reach a consensus on what constitutes essential tasks that, for example, doctors, police officers, firefighters, and similar professionals must perform during a strike.

In **Slovakia**, there is pluralism and fragmentation of the union movement. In August 2024, the collective agreement for state and public administration employees expired. Trade unions and the government did not agree upon a new agreement and the trade unions declared a strike emergency.

In **Serbia**, a strike may be organised in a company or other legal entity, as well as in a branch or sector, making it possible to organise a strike within the public administration as well. Membership in trade unions has generally remained static, with little difference between the private and public sectors.

4.1. Challenges of organising employees

The challenges of organising employees in CPA may be in principle divided into general and country-specific. The former includes a generally low liking of trade unions to undertake organising campaigns. In the absence of horizontal campaigns, it is hardly surprising that there have been no campaigns dedicated to CPA identified. Trade unions struggle with a scarcity of resources — financial, organisational, and human — and the past experiences with organising, whose initial promising effects have often proved short-lived (Poland), do not serve as incentives for making commitments that do not translate into noticeable gains in membership. On the country-specific side, one of the reasons stems from little awareness of the organising model of unionism in some countries, where service provision to actual members (thus, activities that are aimed at retaining members rather than recruiting new ones) have been mentioned in the reports. As one of the key challenges, a general reluctance of employees in the sector (not much different from the overall attitudes in the entire labour market) is mentioned (Romania, Slovakia, Estonia, Bulgaria), which is closely related to free-riding tendencies due to universal coverage of collective bargaining (Estonia, Latvia), along with union pluralism, which sometimes turns ‘competitive’ (Croatia, Poland). Indifference towards unions by the state acting as the employer at the same time also seems to play a part (Lithuania, Poland).

Table 2. Unionisation in CPA

Country	Unionisation	Remarks
BG	National trade union density is estimated at approximately 12–15% but is likely higher in the sector.	As there is no available data on the membership of separate trade union sections/organisations that belong to different federations, it becomes challenging to precisely determine the trade union density within the CPA.
CZ	Estimated trade union density: 10 to 15%.	NA
EE	NA	The Federation of State and Municipal Workers' Unions (ROTAL) brings together about 2,000 members.
HR	NA	The Union of State and Local Government Employees and State Employees of the Republic of Croatia (USLGESE of the RC) is one of the largest trade unions in Croatia with almost 7,000 members.
HU	About 10–15% of the civil servants were members of trade unions active in public administration (2017).	NA
LT	NA	NA
LV	NA	Due to the cross-sectoral nature of most relevant trade unions and the lack of information on the smaller ones, it is not possible to determine the total number of members in the CPA sector.
PL	NA	NA
RO	NA	NA
SI	NA	The Union of State Bodies of Slovenia counts between 6,000 and 8,000 members and is the representative union for public employees in CPA.
SK	NA	There is no specific data pertaining to CPA density of trade unions based in the country. However, as of 2021, the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Slovak Republic (KOZ) reported a total of 239,632 members, of whom 102,382 were affiliated with non-production trade unions, i.e. 43% of all members connected with KOZ.
SR	NA	NA

Source: Own elaboration based on national contributions.

Unionisation within the CPA sector in the countries covered is often not at a satisfactory level, although while put in the wider context of general de-unionisation in CEE, coupled with noticeable disparities between public and private sectors in terms of density, it may still be regarded as a positive frame of reference. This can be safely assumed (based on the observations by the national investigators), even though there is a scarcity of precise data on density, and besides the estimates, there are some gaps (Table 2). In addition, the public sector remains a relatively ‘friendlier zone’ (as compared with the private) for trade unions to operate and undertake organising activities. Nevertheless, ‘friendlier’ is a relative term, and it should not be overlooked that unions and their leaders often encounter a non-cooperative stance on the part of employers (Croatia, Lithuania, Poland), and sometimes have to cope with autocratic management tendencies.

In more detail, the bureaucratic hurdles and stringent regulations (primarily related to trade union representativeness) are said to be the main impediments in **Croatia**. Still, divergent interests and priorities among employees within the public sector can make it difficult to garner unified support for unionisation efforts as well. Furthermore, organising activities have been hampered by tendencies of free-riding, so the unions are discouraged by this. In Bulgaria, the main challenge for organising refers to the understanding of the purpose of trade unions and the added value of social dialogue among the employees in CPA. In **Lithuania**, confrontational stances by the state acting at the same time as the employer adds to union leaders’ duties overlapping with their work and civil servants. In **Estonia**, free-riding tendencies among the public add to the resilient bad image of trade unions that are still associated with the post-Soviet legacy. In **Latvia**, it is also a matter of free-riding which amplifies union disempowerment. In **Czechia**, the absence of wage bargaining at both organisation and sector levels has significantly reduced the importance of collective bargaining in the sector, and thus also the role and attractiveness of trade unions. In **Slovakia**, general anti-union sentiments (generally) combined with a lack of awareness of unions’ roles and benefits are mentioned. In **Hungary**, the main point of a fragmented structure of the workforce is brought up. In **Romania**, a lack of awareness of unions’ roles and benefits is pointed out. In **Poland**, fragmentation of industrial relations, facilitated by law and historical legacies seems to be the key issue. In **Serbia**, there seems to be a disparity between ‘theory and practice’, as “most trade unions in the public sector have formally adopted

such strategies or plans (of union development — JCz) in recent years, but these activities were only carried out while they had donor support.”

4.2. Good practices for organising employees

Trade unions in CPA (and in public administration in general) **do not engage in organising campaigns**. In fact, most of the practices reported can be associated with ‘business unionism’ rather than organising, understood as active seeking and recruitment of new members combined with expanding union structures to non-unionised workplaces and sectors. Nevertheless, some practices aiming at gaining and retaining members have been identified, sometimes even (rarely) leaning on ‘community unionism’ type of actions. In **Bulgaria**, all of the respondents pointed to some social and material benefits in collective agreements as examples of good practices. Aside from that, lobbying within law-making processes attempts to establish inter-union coordination, as well as some mild forms of industrial actions (protests, information campaigns) have been reported. In **Croatia**, attempts to establish inter-union coordination for the sake of improving the efficiency of collective bargaining and implementation of the Law on Wages and the Law on Civil Servants were taken in 2024. In **Czechia**, the only activities reported are information campaigns. In **Estonia**, there is an interesting attempt to break in with a sort of ‘closed-shop’ collective arrangement. In the course of the negotiations currently underway with the Ministry of the Interior, ROTAL is trying to introduce for the first time a practice on the working conditions of police officers and rescuers, where the working conditions achieved as a result of the negotiations are slightly more favourable for union members. The state used to oppose this, seeing it as unequal treatment of workers, but recently it has been possible to open negotiations on this issue. By using such a method, it is hoped to convince workers that joining a trade union is beneficial. In **Hungary**, the unions’ activities are reportedly mostly defensive ones. For example, the resistance to the government’s attempts to trim the right to strike. In **Lithuania**, the application for the provision of national collective agreements, especially those relating to additional time off (for education, health, and child-rearing), have been identified as factors contributing to the increase in the number of members in the last years (in some cases, it has even doubled), particularly among younger civil servants and employees. To attract members, **Latvian** unions organise their own events and offer benefits that the employer might not be able to afford or provide, such as creating social risk funds, purchasing health insurance, or social bonding activities.

In **Poland**, NSZZ “Solidarność” provides comprehensive online information for prospective union members, giving instructions not only on how to join existing union organisations but also on how to set up a new one. Unions reportedly experiment with various organising initiatives. In one of the district courts, the employer provided newly hired employees with information about union organisations active in the workplace, including contact details of the union leaders. Trade unions attempt to attract new members through the means of general mobilisation, whose intentions are not only to exercise pressure on public authorities but also to enhance the image of unions as viable organisations. This is also the approach taken in CPA by **Romanian** unions that resort to protests to, among others, capture public attention and raise influential awareness about the importance of union membership in protecting employee rights and benefits. In 2023–24, there were protests against wage cuts, austerity measures, wage inequalities among employees, and the elimination of some job vacancies. No specific campaigns in recruiting new members were reported in **Slovenia**, which may be attributed to the higher trade union membership in the public sector in general, so it is just ‘business as usual’. Further, the SLOVES trade union for employees in public administration and culture in **Slovakia** decided to renew the Commission for Young People. **Serbian** unions have been experimenting with launching social media campaigns, creating a comprehensive database covering all union branches and members, cooperating with the non-governmental sector, and starting a so-called ‘Trade Union Academy’ targeting young people interested in learning more about unions or training for union organisers.

4.3. Characteristics of employer representation

What makes CPA unique — as far as the industrial relations analytical framework is followed — is the position of employers. The employers are the State and its agencies, which affects collective bargaining and social dialogue. As a result, in a vast number of countries covered, there are no employer organisations for CPA (or even a part of it), and those which are identified as such for the purpose of European social dialogue (e.g. Eurofound 2017) are often quasi-organisations (administrative bodies of government). However, stating plainly that “the state is an employer” would be an oversimplification, as the state acts via a number of proxies, with the “central government” being one of them, whose duties are delegated further down. In addition, in certain countries, such as **Poland**, the labour law follows the “managerial definition” of employer, meaning that it is a specific organisation/institution and its

head, who is legally considered the party to the employment relationship. **Bulgaria** seems a similar case as negotiations often take place with the heads of the various administrative structures. In **Croatia**, the central government has named the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration as its branch responsible for the organisation and functioning of CPA. In **Czechia**, the responsibilities are diffused among three ministries, with it being similar in Slovakia (two ministries and the Prime Minister directly). In **Lithuania**, for the purpose of collective bargaining, the government has adopted a position of avoidance by limiting the scope of such bargaining to agreements that have a minimal financial impact, and by taking the principled stance that bargaining can only be carried out in respect of those provisions that are explicitly and unequivocally identified as the subject of bargaining in the law itself.

5. Collective bargaining practices in the countries covered

Varieties of collective bargaining exist across the cluster of countries covered. It is due to different traditions and path dependencies of industrial relations systems that have retained some resilience. Yet, on the other hand, there are certain similarities. In no case is the freedom of bargaining absolutely restricted, although some limitations and exclusions, especially pertaining to specific occupational groups and civil servants, do exist. In **Bulgaria**, collective bargaining coverage is very high: collective agreements in CPA (121 in total) cover around 83,000 persons, which would roughly translate to 80%. In **Croatia**, collective bargaining coverage is high, at 47%, and employees in CPA enjoy the right to collective bargaining mostly on equal terms with other employees. In **Latvia**, there are no uniform statistics on the total number of collective agreements. The law gives the right to collective bargaining for all workers, and in particular, the Civil Service Law references collective agreements, implying that they apply to civil servants in the same way as they do to other public sector employees. In **Estonia**, the share of CPA employees covered in collective agreements is minimal because their employment under the Civil Service Act makes it impossible. While it is difficult to determine exact collective bargaining coverage in **Lithuanian** CPA, presumably it is rather high, judging by the fact that the recent increase in the overall collective bargaining rate (from less than 10% in 2018 up to 25% in 2021–2022) was mainly determined by the increase in collective bargaining coverage in the public sector, including CPA. In **Czechia**, collective agreements at the sector level covers only state service employees (76,000 employees, or 58% of all CPA employees), while the average for the country is

35%. However, the current collective agreement for state service employees ended on December 31, 2024. In **Slovakia**, based on Eurostat data, more the 83% of the employees working in CPA were covered by collective pay agreements (but not collective agreements per se, as of 2018). The explanation is that collective bargaining continues within the entire public and state sector, with the benefits of hierarchical bargaining being visible. For **Hungary**, no precise data is available as the one at the disposal (26.9%) refers to NACE O only and for 2015. In **Romania**, while there are no specific figures regarding the coverage of collective agreements, based on the national investigator's diagnosis, CPA has the highest coverage by collective agreements. In **Poland**, no data is available, although it could be safely assumed that the coverage rate for CPA is higher than the national average (13%). While there is no data for **Serbia**, according to the national report, the public sector (CPA as well) is almost entirely covered (primarily by special collective agreements).

5.1. European sectoral social dialogue

The study shows that the European sectoral social dialogue dimension is not the subject of primary interest to the trade unions in CPA in the countries covered. This is understandable due to the sector's specific nature (as indicated in the opening part) and vague contours of the employer representation. The Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee for Central Government Administrations (SDC-CGA) has not been mentioned in any national report apart from Slovakia.

As far as the relevant European social partners, that is, the Trade Unions' National and European Administration Delegation (TUNED) and the European Public Administration Employers (EUPAE)—which according to Eurofound (2017) are the most representative European organisations in central governments—are concerned, in most of the countries (except for one member state, Slovenia, and Serbia) there are trade unions which are tied to TUNED (via EPSU and CESI). From the employer's side, only some of the countries covered (Czechia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia are permanent members with Hungary, Latvia and Slovenia holding observer status) are represented in EUPAE, which as mentioned earlier, should be considered as a quasi-employer organisation, where member states are represented mostly by government officials. On a practical level, though, interaction between national and European levels of social dialogue is very limited or even non-existent, which is well exemplified and explained by the following statements: “given the very specific national contexts, the EU level participation

and coordination is rare” (Czech nat. rep). or “[trade unions] are aware of the current developments in European social dialogue but express the view that their influence does not come to Latvia until real action is taken” (Latvian nat. rep).

What is offered in terms of evidence are rare observations of the role of EU-level legislation (directives and regulations) and criticism for the inadequate domestic impact of the EU-level autonomous agreements of various types, such as on restructuring, the right to information and consultation, digitalisation, and the right to disconnect. On the other hand, the image of the European Social Dialogue (ESD) in the eyes of national-level social partners (their views reconstructed from the national reports) looks as if that specific institutional mechanism was a one-way avenue, with ESD expected to make a positive impact on industrial relations and working conditions in the countries covered, while national trade unions consider themselves as having little agency in the context of ESD.

6. Conclusions

The study performed in 12 Central and Eastern European countries allows us to see that—despite significant variations in national systems of industrial relations as well as the institutional architecture of the specific countries—there are many similar problems.

In CPA, collective bargaining is present, and in terms of coverage in many countries, the picture looks good or even impressive especially if we take into account Slovenia, whose situation is specific due to neo-corporatist legacies. In Czechia, the state even promotes collective bargaining—in 2016, the Act on State Service introduced collective bargaining in the public sector for the first time. Nevertheless, it is not only quantity but also quality that matters and a closer look at the content of collective agreements in the national reports reveals that the substance of autonomous regulation is often quite modest and decentralisation of collective bargaining, a process advancing throughout Europe since 1990s, has led to the decomposition of regulatory frameworks setting terms and conditions for collective labour relations. Certainly, it is not the sole reason, as ongoing changes in the general legislation have also left a deep mark. A clear result is the segmentation of the sectoral labour market, where usually three relatively separate groups of staff can be seen: civil servants, other public officials with no civil servant

status employed by the civil service, and finally, all remaining employees, whose terms of employment are set by the general labour law regime. Within those groups, there could be further divisions (e.g. Bulgaria). The conditions of employment, level of protection, and most importantly, rules for promotion and pay differ for the various groups. One important observation that should be made is the interference of two factors: 1) the uniqueness of the CPA sector in general (the government as the employer), and 2) the predominantly state-driven industrial relations nature in most of the countries in focus (with Slovenia being somewhat an exception). Those two create unfavourable preconditions for developments in social dialogue and collective bargaining, as they enhance the voluntarism of the state. Further, the negative impact of the state's policies, which have not been meeting a sufficient level of resistance on the part of organised labour over the years is demonstrated by two major, commonly indicated and inter-related problems in the CPA sector: **pay and understaffing**. As far as wages are concerned, the picture is complicated because in most of the countries covered aggregated figures (means) suggest that the overall situation is relatively better than in the private sector. On the surface, it creates an impression that working for the public sector, and especially public administration (with emphasis on CPA), remains attractive financially but the pay distribution may be (and often actually is) stretched, due to sectoral labour market segmentation, so that certain groups of employees (senior officials, specific branches of administration, organisational units etc.) are privileged over others (junior employees, auxiliary staff etc.). For labour market entrants and people at the early stage of their careers, this is a source of serious concern which might be further amplified by the non-clarity of career prospects. Taking all that into account, the challenge of generational turnover is growing. Despite not having complete data allowing us to draw conclusions, some countries' average age for public administration is reported (e.g. Latvia, where it is 44 or Czechia, where the number of state employees aged over 45 was continuously growing compared to younger age groups, whereas the total number of employees was decreasing), and this highlights the problem of age-related workforce replacement in CPA and proves it is swelling. As a result, meeting another challenge, that of digitalisation becomes increasingly difficult.

The unilateralism of the state in industrial relations in CPA is showcased by the instances of rapid and massive nominal wage increases that happened in recent years (mostly 2023 and 2024) in some countries (Estonia and Poland) after the years of a general halt in nominal wage dynamics. It was hardly

a result of a sudden leap of generosity of the state towards its employees but rather the manifestation of a sort of ‘inflation scare’. Had such moves not been taken, the combined effects of long-term nominal wage stagnation (the case of Croatia, where in the 21st century CPA went from superior to inferior in wage terms against the private sector encapsulates it nicely) with the deterioration of real wages (and purchasing power) would have inevitably accelerated the outflow of staff from CPA (choosing the ‘exit’ option and moving to other areas of the labour market).

Collective bargaining coverage rates are primarily above average in a country context, yet quality (in terms of the content of collective agreements) does not always match quantity, and the agency of the employee side when it comes to claiming its rights and entitlements. Social dialogue — besides collective bargaining — in the countries covered does not play a significant role. Its shortcomings cannot be fully compensated for by the means of industrial conflict, as the freedom to strike is limited in most covered countries for certain groups and categories of CPA staff, some of which limitations (not those affecting soldiers and other functionaries in uniformed services, as well as judges/prosecutors) are debatable.

The impact of European social dialogue on collective regulation in the countries under scrutiny is assessed as low, and many of the national social partner representatives interviewed are not aware of its agenda and outcomes.

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