



Industrial relations and social dialogue
**Slovakia: Developments in
working life 2023**

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Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine in the period from 2020 to 2023 was significantly negative for the Slovak economy and Slovak households. GDP first fell, only to grow slightly afterwards (by 1.1% year-on-year in the three quarters of 2023). However, the General government gross debt increased significantly - by about 10 percentage points (p.p.) already in 2020 and is currently at the level of 57% of GDP. This significantly limits the government in investment and social policy. However, the government could and can count on support from the European Union - both from the Multiannual Financial Frameworks and from the Recovery and Resilience Plan.

The pandemic period also had a negative impact on employment, which first fell and then grew slightly. There are currently 2,610.8 thousand workers in Slovakia. On the contrary, the rate of registered unemployment in the given period grew (to the level of 7.5% in 2021), only to subsequently decrease (to the level of 5.9% in the third quarter of 2023). There have been currently 162,800 unemployed in Slovakia.

In the monitored period, nominal wage growth was recorded - for example, in the first three quarters of 2023, 9.2% year-on-year, but real wages fell (by -4.5% in 2022, by -2.5% in 2023). The average monthly wage in the third quarter of 2023 reached the level of €1,403.

The problem in the later period of the pandemic was the inflation increase. While the Annual HICPS inflation rate (year-on-year change) reached the level of 2.8% in 2021, it was already 12.1% in 2022 and remained at this level in the first half of 2023, only to decrease later (in November 2023, according to the Statistical Office, it reached an annual level of 6.5%). The government dealt with the inflation increase with one-time financial subsidies for various categories of the population with low incomes and measures to cap energy prices for businesses and households.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the government's relationship with the social partners was very lukewarm, which manifested itself in the practical cessation of social dialogue. In 2020, the tripartite body Economic and Social Council (HSR) met only twice, and most economic laws were approved in parliament in abbreviated legislative proceedings, which meant that it was not discussed with the social partners. Later, however, the government consulted more with the social partners. However, in 2023 the HSR met only five times, while it was 13 times in 2022.

Political context

The year 2023 was marked by several changes of governments. The changes were caused by dissatisfaction with the solution of people's problems. The year began with the resignation of Eduard Heger's government (representatives of the parties OĽANO, Sme rodina and Za ľudí). On 31 January 2023, the parliament decided to shorten the election period and announced early parliamentary elections for 30 September 2023. The temporary Heger government ended its mandate in May 2023, and the president Zuzana Čaputová appointed a caretaker government headed by Ľudovít Ódor on 15 May 2023. Although the appointed government did not win the confidence of the parliament on 15 June 2023, it ruled on the authority of the president until the formation of the new government that emerged from the elections. The opposition won the autumn parliamentary elections. The government was formed by the party SMER - SSD (Direction - Slovak Social Democracy 22.94%), together with the parties HLAS - SD (Voice - Social Democracy 14.7%) and SNS (Slovak National Party 5.62%). The following parties still entered the parliament: PS (Progressive Slovakia 17.96%), OĽANO and friends coalition, KÚ and Za ľudí (Common people and independent personalities and friends, Christian Union and For the People 8.89%), KDH (Christian Democratic Movement 6.82%) and SAS (Freedom and Solidarity 6.32%). The government headed by Prime Minister Róbert Fico was appointed by the President on 25 October 2023. The parliament approved the Program Statement of the Government on 21 November 2023.

The year 2023 was also marked by extraordinary situations. Since 12 March 2020, a state of emergency related to the COVID-19 pandemic has been in place, and since 26 February 2022, a state of emergency has been in place in connection to the war in Ukraine. While the government revoked the state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic on 15 September 2023, the state of emergency due to the war in Ukraine continues. There is still a difficult situation with refugees from Ukraine (more than 111,000 people are currently living with the support of the government in Slovakia), but also with illegal migrants, mostly from Syria, Turkey and Afghanistan.

Governments also had to deal with high inflation and high energy prices in 2023; it must be stated that the governments financially supported businesses and households and that there were no strikes or protests for economic reasons. However, the social partners pointed out that governments in 2023 acted slowly and to an insufficient extent.

Actors and institutions

Social partners

There were no changes to the organisations of social partners. No information is available about establishment of relevant new employer or trade union organisations or mergers. and social partner organisations proceeded with their activities. Sectoral organisations of social partners are affiliated to peak organisations of employers and trade unions, these are still: the Federation of Employer Organisations (AZZZ SR), the National Union of Employers (RÚZ), the Association of Industry Unions and Transport (APZD), the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia (ZMOS); the Confederation of Trade Unions of Slovakia (KOZ SR), the Joint Trade Unions of Slovakia (SOS), and the Independent Christian Trade Unions of Slovakia (NKOS). With the exception of NKOS, all organisations are member of the HSR (Úrad vlády SR, 2024).

Social dialogue bodies or frameworks

There were no changes in framework of social dialogue. The Economic and Social Council (HSR), the tripartite body at the national level, met only five times in 2023. This was significantly less than previous years – it held 13 meetings in 2022 and 11 the year before that. The Council discussed a wide range of topics on which they mostly reached an agreement, notably including the minimum wage (second year in a row after more than 10 years) (Hospodárska a sociálna rada SR, 2024).

The employers' organisations and unions together repeatedly called for the MPs and the president to stop the "legislative chaos" which ensued in the first half of 2023 – there has been an unusually high use of a fast-track procedure for legislative proposals by the MPs (APZD, 2023). These proposals do not have to go through the interdepartmental comment procedure nor contain an impact analysis (except for a fiscal impact). Additionally, since these proposals are not subject to social dialogue or professional debate, they sometimes need to be amended even before entering into effect, which at times can result in substantial changes to the proposals. On multiple parliamentary sessions there has been a few hundreds of MP legislative proposals and according to the social partners, none of them have been consulted with them and show characteristics of populism and are not applicable in practice. According to the social partners in the HSR (except the SOS), the MPs do not understand and respect the role of social dialogue and by some this has been seen as an election campaign of sort. It has led to an unpredictable business environment. Consequently, the KOZ SR representative met about this situation with the president to complain and propose an idea that MP legislative proposals should go through the interdepartmental comment procedure as well so that the social partners would have the opportunity to point out their shortcomings before they are passed. The president agreed it was a good idea and that it would improve transparency and quality of laws and encouraged the parliament to make it is beyond her competences (RTVS, 2023a).

After multiple criticism, in April 2023 the parliament has amended Act No. 350/1996 Coll. on the Rules of Procedure of the National Council of SR as follows: legislative proposals must include explanatory report with the clause on compatibility with legislature of the EU and clause on selected impacts; the Ministries must assist the MPs with these; any non-governmental proposal must always be negotiated with the Ministry of Economy regarding its impact on the business environment;

when non-governmental proposals are presented, the position of the government, Ministry of Finance (regarding the impact on the budget) and Ministry of Economy (regarding the impact on businesses) shall be presented and the proposal shall be amended according to the Ministry of Economy's position on the impact on the business environment. Similar amendments were made to the Act No. 400/2015 Coll. on the Creation of Legal Regulations and on the Collection of Laws of SR, where the most notable change is that a bill which according to the clause of selected impacts would affect businesses can come into effect only on January 1 or July 1 (there are exceptions). However, no interdepartmental comment procedure or previous discussion with the social partners is required.

The amount of MPs legislative proposals has been an issue before, though not in such a magnitude – similar complaints regarding the MP proposals and unpredictable business environment have been made repeatedly by the employers' representatives over the years. According to the analysis by Slovak Business Agency (2022) the 25 laws which regulate the businesses were altogether amended 308 times between 2017 and 2021.

Other working life related institutions

The amendment to Act No. 125/2006 Coll. on labour inspection, entered into force as of January 1, 2023. In the field of labour inspection, the competence of the National Labour Inspectorate was added to conduct an aptitude test of the applicant for recognition of the professional qualification of a safety technician. The amendment shall make the activities of labour inspectorates more efficient, mainly by introducing the managerial function of "director of the labour inspectorate" instead of the function of "chief labour inspectorate" without the obligation to have the professional qualification of a labour inspector, but with the obligation of five years of professional experience in the field of health and safety or labour law, or work inspections. The selection of suitable candidates will thus focus on their management skills (Zákon o inšpekcii práce, 2023).

Alliance of Sectoral Councils was created on February 1, 2023 as juridical persons' interest group. However, this is not a completely new organisation. In some capacity it has existed since 2019 as a part of four national projects which culminated in its establishment as a permanent institution. Its role is to coordinate activities of the 24 Sectoral Councils in order to promptly respond to changes on the labour market, to create and update the National System of Occupations and the National System of Qualifications, to enable harmonisation of employers' practical needs with competitive lifelong learning, and help in transformation of the Slovak economy. It consists of representatives of the Ministries, the Labour Offices, the Government Office, unions, employers, and municipalities (Sektorovo riadené inovácie, 2024).

Developments in collective bargaining

Changes to the collective bargaining structures and frameworks

There were no changes in this area in 2023. The high degree collective agreements still (from 2021) cannot be extended to bind also those employers in the sector who are not members of the employers' organisation that signed said agreement,

The applicability of multi-employer collective agreement (KZVS) on employers has been changing continuously since the Slovak independence. In 2016 the Constitutional Court has deemed the extension of KZVS on all employers in a given sector unconstitutional, so in 2017 a new type of KZVS was created – representative KZVS, which could be signed between an employers' organisation that contains employers who altogether employ the greatest number of employees in a sector (or its branch) and a trade union which organises employees in more than 30 % of employers in the same sector. This type of collective agreement then extended to all other employers in a given sector. (Act. No. 2/1991 Coll. on Collective Bargaining) This was cancelled in 2021 which was criticised by the trade unions since, as well as by Global Rights Index (2021) – in 2021 sectoral and company-level collective agreements were said to cover only 26 % of employees, which without the representative KZVS would fall even further (though unfortunately no statistics are available).

The Global Right Index for 2021 also says that the change *“severely undermined trade unions in the country by modifying the rules regarding trade union presence at the workplace and by gravely interfering in trade unions' freedoms to establish their own statutes and rules, to elect their representatives and to organise their activities. These changes, which were adopted without prior consultations with the unions, were purposefully adopted to weaken the position of the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Slovak Republic (KOZSR) as the most representative body in tripartite dialogue and to allow access to completely non-representative workers' organisations, especially those in favour of the Ministry of Labour.”*

Data on collective bargaining

In 2023 25 multi-employer collective agreements (KZVS) were registered at the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (MPSVR SR, 2024). The sectors covered are construction industry; wood processing industry; electrical engineering; energetics; metallurgy; mining industry and geology; trade and tourism; food industry; glassworks; civil service and public service; water management; healthcare; chemical and pharmaceutical industry; agriculture and forestry; civil aviation; housing sector. Missing sectors that have had multi-employer collective agreements in the past are transportation, finance, and engineering. There is no statistical data available on the number of workers covered by these agreements since 2019.

Topics, other than pay, included in the collective agreements include: number of vacation days; working hours; safety and health protection at work; catering during work hours; conditions of creation and termination of contract including severance period and pay; family assistance in the event of the death of an employee; compensation of income in case of temporary incapacity for work; supplementary pension savings; procedures complaints and disputed between employers and employees; employment policy within a firm (employers would try to avoid layoffs due organisational reasons, e.g. by requalification of employees who move to a new workplace or type of

work); other forms of work (home office, kurzarber) and conditions under which employees can be monitored; on-call shifts; regulations for obstacles at work (work-free days for doctors' appointments, care for sick/old relatives, in case of death of a relative...); discrimination and harassment; compensation and expenses of business trips; mass layoffs; regulations and provisions for the activities and responsibilities of unions with the employers; raised pay during night, afternoons, weekends, holidays and/or overtime; vaccinations (fire and rescue department specific).

Social partners in the engineering sector, which has not had a collective agreement since 2019, resumed attempts for collective negotiations. In June 2023, OZ KOVO (Odborový zväz KOVO – trade union KOVO, in HSR they are organised under KOZ SR) announced that negotiations for KZVS 2023-2026 were ongoing but so far unsuccessful. This sector does not have KZVS for 2024 yet and there is no news on the state of negotiations (OZ KOVO, 2023).

Collectively agreed pay outcomes and wage-setting mechanism

In 2023, no changes were adopted in the area of Collectively agreed pay outcomes and wage-setting mechanism.

The bargaining process is set in Act No. 2/1991 Coll. on Collective Bargaining, §8 Procedure for concluding collective agreements. According to this *“collective bargaining begins with the submission of a written proposal for the conclusion of a collective agreement by one of the contracting parties to the other contracting party.”* The addressed contracting party must respond in writing within 30 days and comment on the parts of the agreement they find unacceptable. The negotiations must begin no less than 60 days before the current agreement ends. The contracting parties must negotiate and cooperate if it does not conflict with their legitimate interests.

Marek Švec from Labour Law Association mentions this paragraph in his publication *Kolektívna zmluva* (Collective Bargaining) from 2016. He says that in practice it is not unusual that the trade union and an employer simply take the document which regulates the working conditions of the employees in a company and upgrade it into a collective agreement. According to him it is then debatable whether it can be called a collective agreement because prior to signing one there legally needs to be a collective negotiation which in reality did not take place.

Vertical coordination here happens by associating smaller trade unions (company-wide) under a few big unions (nation-wide). There are 3 nation-wide trade unions: the Confederation of Trade Unions of Slovakia (KOZ SR), the Joint Trade Unions of Slovakia (SOS), and the Independent Christian Trade Unions of Slovakia (NKOS). These then negotiate in the name of the trade unions who are their members with the employers or the employers' organisations.

Collective bargaining and inflation

KZVS do not usually make provisions for inflation. However, for example the housing sector's agreement says that *“employers will, within their possibilities, create conditions for an increase in average wages depending on inflation as it is presented in macroeconomic statistics for the national budget”* (the state uses HCIP measure) and that it should be further dealt with in company collective agreement (Higher Level Collective Agreement concluded between the Trade Union KOVO and the Association of Housing Industry in Slovakia for the years 2021-2023, concluded on July 1. 2021).

Mining industry has set a wage rise on average of 50% in 2022 and 55% in 2023 of the previous year's inflation as announced by the Statistical Office of SR (which is in CPI measure). However, a new KZVS was signed in 2023 encompassing more employers and does not have the inflation measure (MPSVR 2024).

KZVS are usually in effect from one to three years. If the collective agreement is in effect for more years, each year an amendment is usually signed with the new wages. Sometimes, mainly in the public sector, agreements set a rise in wages in the future in percentage (e.g. in 2023 it was a rise by 7% on January 1 and by 10 % on September 1; the agreement is effective until August 31, 2024).

Inflation in 2022 was according to the Statistical Office and its CPI measure at a record high for SR (12.8%) and in 2023 it was 10.5% (with consumer-prices for groceries and non-alcoholic beverages rising on average by more than 17%, housing and energy by more than 9%; fuel prices dampened the inflation effect as they lowered on average by almost 7%) (ŠÚSR, 2024). However, even with such inflation, not many amendments to KZVS that would raise the wages were made, with the exception of the above mentioned mining industry. Instead, the next year's agreement usually takes into account the past inflation and the trade unions say the wages they propose reflect the expected inflation, but they are usually lowered quite significantly during the bargaining (e.g. wage raise proposed in mining sector by OZ KOVO was 14.3% which took into account the expected inflation plus 2% rise in real wages, the agreement set the rise in wages on 8.32%)(OZ KOVO, 2023a).

Since 2020 there is a wage-setting mechanism for minimum wage: the social partners try to reach an agreement, if they do not, the matter enters Economic and Social Council (HSR) where it can be negotiated until the end of August. If there is no agreement, the minimum wage is set as 57% of the average wage from 2 years ago (Act No. 663/2007 Coll. on Minimum Wage).

Inflation has not caused any significant delays in collective agreements or minimum wage setting – on the other hand, the social partners have found an agreement after more than 10 years in 2022 and continued this streak in 2023. The minimum wage for 2024 was agreed on August 18 and was set on €750, while the indexation would have put it at only €744. (OZ KOVO, 2023b).

Developments in governmental responses to inflation

To mitigate negative consequences of inflation on certain population groups the government agreed the third inflation subsidy package which followed the previous two packages from 2022. The measure was based on the Government Regulation No. 155/2023 Coll. amending the Government Regulation No. 131/2022 Coll. which sets some measures in the field of labour, social affairs and family in connection to the war in Ukraine. The aim of the measure was to provide the financial support to households with low income who did not receive the subsidy in 2022. In contrary to the previous two packages, the third package was a means-tested measure. Low income was defined as an average income not higher than 1.81 times the amount of the subsistence minimum. Same as in 2022, the eligible households received one-off subsidy €100. Estimated number of recipients was 50,000. Social partners were not involved in designing the measure.

As a result of the war in Ukraine and the subsequent increase in energy prices, measures focused on households, companies and public administration bodies and churches continued in 2023. Regarding the households, the government agreed two regulations – Government Regulation No. 464/2022 Coll. and Government Regulation No. 523/2022 Coll. to support households to pay increased energy prices. The regulations set the limits for regulated entity delivering heat to end consumers in residential buildings. For 2023 the maximum price limit was €199 per MWh. The state pays the difference between this limit and actual heat production costs. Total amount of subsidy paid to the regulated entities was almost €250 million between 1 January 2023 and 22 August 2023.

The aid to support companies to pay increased energy prices was introduced based on the Act No. 71/2013 Coll. on the provision of subsidies under the purview of the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic, in accordance with the Temporary Crisis Framework for State Aid Measures to Support the Economy as a Result of Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine No. SA.104846 (2022/N).

The subsidy covered increased costs of natural gas and / or electricity with maximum limit of prices €199 per MWh (for electricity) and €99 per MWh (for gas). The subsidy is the difference between the real energy costs of the company and the limits set by the state. Maximum amount of subsidy per company was €2 million, €200,000 per company operating in agricultural sector and €300,000 per company from fishing and aquaculture sector. Total estimated amount was €600 million.

The subsidy for public administration and churches can be provided up to 80% of eligible energy costs. The maximum amount of the subsidy is €200,000 per applicant per month during the eligible period. Eligible period was from 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023. Total allocation is €210 million (MH SR, 2023). As of 26 June 2023, total amount paid out exceeded €118 million to more than 100,000 applicants (TASR, 2023).

Social partners (trade unions and employers' organisations) were consulted in designing all three measures at the tripartite body The Economic and Social Council (HSR) earlier in 2022.

Regarding the assistance in material need new rules for housing allowance based on the number of household members became effective on 15 July 2023. By 15 July 2023 there were two rates for housing allowance (for household with one member and household with two and more members). Since 15 July 2023 there are five different rates ranging from one-member household to the

household with more than four members which means increased amounts of housing allowance and higher support of households in material need (ÚPSVR, 2023a).

Moreover, the sums of benefits and ad-on allowances in material need increased since 1 October 2023 in response to the subsistence minimum increase in July 2023.

As of 1 October 2023, the level of basic material need benefit ranges from €84.90 a month for an individual adult person to €297,50 a month for a couple with five and more children. Between 1 January 2023 and 30 September 2023, the sums ranged from €74 a month for an individual adult person to €259.40 a month for a couple with five and more children.

In case of eligibility for add-on allowances the household receives monthly:

- protection allowance: €86.80,
- activation allowance: €86.80,
- dependent child allowance: €23.70 and
- housing allowance: based on the number of household members it ranges from €95,20 (for one-member household) to €291,90 (for household with more than four members) (ÚPSVR, 2023b).

Labour disputes and industrial action

Changes to the right to strike

When the mediation fails, trade unions can go to an arbitrator or go on strike. In 2023, there were no changes in the regulation of strikes.

Data on industrial action

According to the Statistical Office, there were two genuine strikes in 2023. They caused a loss of 530 working hours in the economy. Data on the total number of strikers are not available.

Unsatisfied employees of the UniCredit Bank Czech Republic and Slovakia went on strike in Bratislava on 12 December 2023. Collective bargaining on wages between representatives of local trade union organisation and company management took several months but the social partners did not reach an agreement. Collective labour dispute was dealt by mediator who proposed some compromise. Though trade unionists were willing to accept the proposal of mediator, the management refused it. After four days of negotiations, the social partners reached an agreement, and the employees ended the strike on 15 December 2023. Social partners concluded the collective agreement in which an 8% average wage increase was agreed since 1 April 2024. In addition, they agreed that employees will receive a single bonus at €1,130 at least in December. According to the chair of local trade union organisation, in average about 156 employees participated in strike each day. But the strike did not harm the operation of the bank.

There was a one-day genuine strike in Municipal Public Transport Company in Kosice. Two local trade union organisations went on strike on 14 February 2023. The reason for the strike was unsuccessful wage bargaining and lacking finances to cover transport operation without job cuts. In May 2023, representatives of the trade unions and company management concluded the supplement to existing collective agreement in which they agreed on wage increases from 16% to 19% effective from 1 May 2023.

Besides these strikes, some serious bargaining disputes between the unions and company management can be mentioned.

Strained relations between the local trade union organisation Technologies Unions Slovakia (TUS) and American Dell company management worsened in early 2023. The management started with a dismissal of leading persons of the union and argued the need for organisational changes. Among them, also the Chair of the trade unions was dismissed without the approval of unions, which is against the Labour Code. He is also the Chair of Dell Technologies European Works Council, which should also approve his dismissal. The EWC strictly refused his dismissal. According to the trade unionists, the management is bullying leading persons of the union and tries to break the unions in the company by brute force.

A serious labour dispute in metal manufacturer company Booster Precision Components in Beluša was published. The reason for the dispute was unsuccessful wage bargaining. The metal trade union organisations of OZ Kovo and the management had three controversial bargaining rounds from 2 February to 3 March 2023. However, they were not able to reach an agreement on the conclusion of the Supplement to existing collective agreement. According to the OZ Kovo, negotiations in the

company degenerated into bullying of the chairman of local trade union organisation. The dispute was dealt with by a mediator. More information on the resolution of this dispute was not published.

Collective labour disputes in 2023

The number of labour disputes registered at the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (MPSVR SR) in 2023 was the same as in 2022. According to the MPSVR SR, in total, 18 labour disputes were registered in 2023. Local trade union organisations and representatives of management in individual companies were involved in these disputes. Disputes concerned collective bargaining and conclusion of collective agreements. Out of 18 registered disputes, the mediation failed only in three cases, which were successfully resolved by an arbitrator (in 2022 not any dispute was dealt by arbitrator). These disputes concerned the determination whether the trade union organisation is authorised (according to §3 of the Act on collective bargaining) to collective bargaining in the company. The rest of disputes were dealt by a mediator. Out of them 11 concerned the conclusion of new company collective agreements and four concerned the conclusion of supplements to already concluded agreements. Among labour disputes dealt by mediator 13 of them were successfully resolved. According to the MPSVR SR, about 92% of registered labour disputes was successfully resolved in 2023 (in 2022 it was 85%).

Developments in working time

Changes to legislation

There was no significant change in the area of working hours in 2023. The maximum weekly working time of an employee was: 40 hours in one-shift operation, 38 and 3/4 hours in two-shift operation, 37 and 1/2 hours in three-shift operation or continuous operation. The average weekly working time of an employee, including overtime, may not exceed 48 hours. A maximum of 33 and 1/2 hours per week may be performed by an employee who works with a proven chemical carcinogen or in work processes with a risk of chemical carcinogenicity or who performs activities leading to exposure as a category A employee in a controlled zone with a source of ionizing radiation other than a controlled zone in a nuclear power plant. In the case of young employees who are under 16 years of age, the working time is a maximum of 30 hours per week. It is quite valid, that is, even if he works for several employers. If the young employee is over 16 years of age, his working hours may be a maximum of 37 and ½ hours per week (Zákonník práce, 2023).

The amendment to the Labour Code introduced a new type of employment agreement as of January 1, 2023, namely an employment agreement for the performance of seasonal work. This agreement on work activity for the performance of seasonal work can be concluded for a maximum of 8 months in terms of the new one. The Labour Code stipulates that employment based on an agreement can only be carried out for a maximum of 10 hours per week. Seasonal work for the purposes of the agreement on work activities for the performance of seasonal work according to § 228a par. 1 letter b) is a work activity that depends on the alternation of the season, is repeated every year and does not exceed eight months in a calendar year. It must be work that is included in Annex 1b to the Labour Code.

These are some work activities in the field of agriculture, tourism, food industry and forestry (e.g. growing, harvesting, sorting and storing selected types of fruit, renting and leasing recreational or sports equipment, running camps, running artificial water bodies, running cable cars).

The seasonal work can be performed for a maximum of 520 hours in a calendar year. The work activity that the employee performs for the same employer on the basis of another agreement on work activity for the performance of seasonal work is also included in this set scope. The average weekly working time for the duration of the agreement, but not more than four months, may not exceed 40 hours (Zákonník práce, 2023).

As of June 1, 2023, the amounts of surcharges for working hours on Saturdays, Sundays, holidays and surcharges for increased risk at work have increased. The amendment grants an employee a wage discount of at least 50% of the minimum wage in € per hour for each hour of work on Saturday, which, given the minimum hourly wage for 2023, represents a wage discount of at least €2.0115 per hour. The adjustment of the wage discount for work on Sunday has undergone the same correction, according to which the employee is entitled to a wage discount in the amount of at least 100% of the minimum wage in euros per hour in addition to the wage earned for each hour of work on Sunday. This increased the claim for work on Sunday from the original amount of €3.58 to the new €4.023.

From June 1, 2023, employees in night work are entitled to a discount of at least 40% and 50% of the minimum wage in euros per hour, which represents the amount of €1.6092 per hour for the minimum wage for 2023 and the amount of €2.0115 per hour for risky work.

With difficult work performance, the legislator adjusted the wage compensation from the original € 0.72 to at least 20% of the minimum wage in € per hour, which is €0.8046 per hour.

The amendment also affected the provisions related to agreements on work performed outside the employment relationship, where employees who perform work based on agreements on work performed outside the employment relationship are entitled to the agreed remuneration increased by at least the amount of the minimum hourly wage for each hour of work on a holiday. From the original €3.58, the amount for work on the holiday increased to €4.023 per hour. (Zákonník práce, 2023).

Bargaining outcomes

Most of the collective agreements negotiated at the end of 2022 are valid for the period of 2023 to 2024. There were no fundamental changes in the length of working hours or in the organization of working hours.

Debates on duration and organisation

The Confederation of Trade Unions KOZ SR (TU SR) started a national debate on the shortening of working hours and a shorter working week in the conditions of Slovakia at the conference entitled "The Future of Work in the 21st Century" held on November 22, 2023. In Slovakia, the topic of shortening working hours is all the more relevant, because we belong to the countries of Europe where there is significantly more work. The Trade Union promote a model of real reduction of working time, i.e. reduction of hours worked per day, while maintaining the same salary and benefits, as well as the workload. This debate then reached the media, which further developed it. It is assumed that the Slovak government will also deal with this issue in 2024 (KOZ SR, 2023).

Other important policy developments

Regulations on employment status and contracts

The amendment to the Labour Code introduced a new type of employment agreement as of January 1, 2023, namely an employment agreement for the performance of seasonal work. This agreement on work activity for the performance of seasonal work can be concluded for a maximum of 8 months in terms of the new one. The Labour Code stipulates that employment based on an agreement can only be carried out for a maximum of 10 hours per week. Seasonal work for the purposes of the agreement on work activities for the performance of seasonal work according to § 228a par. 1 letter b) is a work activity that depends on the alternation of the season, is repeated every year and does not exceed eight months in a calendar year. It must be work that is included in Annex 1b to the Labour Code.

These are some work activities in the field of agriculture, tourism, food industry and forestry (e.g. growing, harvesting, sorting and storing selected types of fruit, renting and leasing recreational or sports equipment, running camps, running artificial water bodies, running cable cars).

The seasonal work can be performed for a maximum of 520 hours in a calendar year. The work activity that the employee performs for the same employer on the basis of another agreement on work activity for the performance of seasonal work is also included in this set scope. The average weekly working time for the duration of the agreement, but not more than four months, may not exceed 40 hours (Zákonník práce, 2023).

Policies to reduce the gender pay-gap

Gender pay gap in Slovakia remains one of the highest among the EU countries exceeding the member countries average. According to the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, women earned an average of 18.8% less than men in 2022 when average gross monthly salaries were €1 343 for women and €1 654 for men. Differences in average gross monthly salary between men and women varies by occupation and education. In 2022, the highest pay gap – 28% – was among those with secondary vocational education with school leaving certificate (*úplne stredné odborné vzdelanie s maturitou*), and the lowest – 13.3% – was among those with PhD degree (*3. stupeň vysokoškolského vzdelania*). Considering the occupation (according to ISCO-08), the highest gender difference – 25.6% – in monthly gross salaries was among craft and related trade workers.

In Slovakia, the first steps towards reducing gender pay gap are beginning to form. This issue is covered in the section 4 - Equality of opportunities and access to the labour market, economic dependence and poverty of women of the Action Plan for Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities for 2021-2027 (*Akčný plán rovnosti žien a mužov a rovnosti príležitostí na roky 2021-2027*)¹ where tasks addressing gender pay gap are set, specifically mainly creating proposal of measures and

¹ The development of The National Strategy for Equality between Women and Men and Equal Opportunities in the Slovak Republic for 2021-2027 is based on the resolution of the Government of the Slovak Republic No. 498 of 19/08/2020 (the Strategy is implemented through the Action Plan). The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic is responsible for the development of the Strategy.

solutions to the pay gap between men and women and creating legal analysis of equal pay institute, as well as regular monitoring of compliance with the principle of equality in remuneration.

Health and safety regulations and policies

The amendment to Act No. 124/2006 Coll. on safety and health protection at work (OSH entered into force on January 1, 2023). This amendment brought several positive changes, but its main goal was to reduce the administrative burden for employers. The declared goal of these innovations is less burden for employers, but without reducing the existing level of health and safety protection. Other related laws also underwent a corresponding transformation. The deadline for reporting an occupational accident has also changed and is set at eight working days (Zákon o BOZP, 2023).

The main changes are primarily: the regularity of repeated OSH briefings has been extended from the original two years to once every three years; the minimum deadline for commenting on the submitted documentation has been set for a minimum of five working days for employee representatives. Changes also occurred in the issuance of certificates of professional competence, a changed status of safety technician was introduced. The amendment merged the professional qualification of a security technician and an authorized security technician, and left only one professional qualification of a security technician with expertise at the level of the current authorized security technician. The goal was to ensure a uniform level of expertise and, at the same time, increase the expertise of persons performing the function of safety technician. The uniformity of the professional level of all safety technicians will be ensured primarily by the uniform verification of their professional knowledge through examinations before the examination board established by the National Labour Inspectorate. Professionally qualified persons, i.e. safety technicians, who were issued a safety technician certificate by 31/12/2022, will have to apply to the National Labour Inspectorate to take safety technician exams, which will guarantee their professional level, as if they were currently authorized safety technicians. (NIP 1b, 2023).

In the 43rd calendar week of 2023, in the days from October 23 to October 27, the Labour inspection system in Slovakia commemorated the European Week of Safety and Health Protection at Work. As part of the European OSH Week, the National Labour Inspectorate officially launched the campaign EU OSHA: Healthy workplaces for the years 2023-2025, entitled "Safe and healthy work in the digital age". The Healthy Workplaces campaign is one of the main activities of the European Agency for Health and Safety, with which the National Labour Inspectorate closely cooperates as the national Focal point in Slovakia (NIP 1c, 2023).

By Resolution of the Government of Slovakia no. 446 of September 13, 2023, the emergency situation in connection with the threat to public health of the second degree due to the disease COVID-19 caused by the corona virus SARS-CoV-2 on the territory of Slovakia, which was declared from March 12, 2020, was revoked. Revocation of the emergency state entered into force on September 15, 2023 (Nariadenie vlády SR, 2023).

Work-life balance related policies

Slovakia follows the National Strategy for Equality between Women and Men and Equal Opportunities for Years 2021-2027 (*Celoštátna stratégia rovnosti žien a mužov a rovnosti príležitostí na roky 2021-2027*). In its implementation document, the Action Plan for Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities for 2021-2027 (*Akčný plán rovnosti žien a mužov a rovnosti príležitostí na roky 2021-*

2027), specific goals to promote gender equality in eight areas² - including the reconciliation of family and work life - are defined. Tasks covering work-life balance for 2023 tackle various problems, such as improving the conditions for the reconciliation of work and family life to increase the employment of persons with parental responsibilities, especially women, and to support measures to facilitate their return from parental leave to the labour market; making the economic contribution of the unpaid domestic and care work visible and promoting a more balanced gender division of unpaid work; or refining the system for reducing negative effects of maternity/parental leave to determine the amount of social insurance benefits and others.

Life-long learning and skills development

Within the framework of the European Year of Skills 2023 the National Institute of Vocational Education (ŠIOV) provided various activities under the auspices of the main coordinator – the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the SR. The activities were focused on support of life-long education and skills development, for instance:

- Campaign “Nikdy nie je neskoro” (It's never too late) launched in February 2023 and provided to April 2023 was focused on support of adult education,
- Study “Nové prvky v kvalifikačných systémoch” (New elements in qualification systems) was published on 17 March 2023,
- Round table of the Slovak Academy of Science (SAV) and ŠIOV “Vzdelávanie dospelých na pracovisku – potreby nových zručností” (Adult Education at workplace – the need for new skills) was held on 20 March 2023,
- Course “Rozvoj základných zručností dospelých” (Development of adult basic skills) was held on 21 March 2023,
- Workshop “Zručnosti v Industry 4.0” (Skills in Industry 4.0) – practical workshop provided in cooperation with Fablab¹ at the Slovak Technical University (STU) on 22 March 2023,
- Conference: “Podpora rozvoja zručností pre život v meniacom sa svete” (Support of Skills for Life Development in Changing World) held on 6 June 2023 and
- “Festival zručností” (Festival of Skills) – conference and workshops focused on skills for labour market, employability and employment held from 25 to 29 September 2023 (ŠIOV, 2023).

Moreover, the Month of quality in vocational education was announced for April 2023. Within the framework European Year of Skills, it was focused on skills development. The month was closed by the final conference of the month of quality “Kvalita OVP – imperatív pre budúcnosť” (Quality in vocational education and training – imperative for the future) and the National Prize of Quality in Vocational Education and Training (ŠIOV, 2023; Kováčová, K., 2023a).

Social partners were also included in the activities of the European Year of Skills 2023. According to ŠIOV, cooperation of various actors at all levels of vocational education, social partners, employment

² 1. Dignity and body integrity; 2. Work-life balance; 3. Education, science and research; 4. Equality of opportunities and access to the labour market, economic dependence and poverty of women; 5. Political and economic participation and participation in decision-making; 6. Provision of a participatory mechanism to promote gender equality and institutional provision of gender equality 7. Inclusion of vulnerable groups and multiple discrimination against women and minor children/girls 8. International development cooperation and humanitarian aid.

services, employers, employers' organisations and companies will be required to meet the goals of the European year of skills. (Kováčová, K., 2023b)

The Week of life-long learning is provided annually by the Association of Adult Education Institutions in the Slovak Republic (AIVD). In 2023 it was provided within the framework European Year of Skills with main topic "Life Skills". Most of the activities were held between 18 September and 24 September 2023 (AIVD, 2023).

Other topics

Regarding the digital transformation, there is an Action Plan for the Digital Transformation of Slovakia 2023-2026 (2022), however, all measures are only in the first steps – creating analyses, mapping the situation, preparing strategies. Most of the measures are set to be in place in 2026.

Other recent and relevant topic is the issue of employees leaving for an early retirement as the legislature has changed. Before 2023 early retirement was possible 2 years ahead of their regular retirement age. However, this has changed: if one has worked for 40 years, the retirement age is no longer taken into account. There has been a 56 % annual increase of older employees wanting to retire early, in November monthly increase was 120 % (TREND, 2023b). However, 0.3% of the early pensioner's pension is reduced for each month left till the retirement age. That is why it has not been possible but not even very economical for people to retire early, but due to the change of conditions in combination with the raise in pensions in January 2023 by 11.8% and in the summer 2023 by 10.6%, combined with a raise again in January 2024 by 3.6% and an extra payment of €300 for which they can apply, these create quite favourable conditions for many older workers to leave early all at once (RTVS, 2023b). The employers' organisations warn that this threatens the stability of the labour market and will affect critical infrastructure, as a great deal of employees are to leave the railways, bus companies and bakeries (RÚZ SR, 2023). The unions argue that the problem of absenting drivers is not the new legislature and their ability to retire early, but the conditions in which they work – their shifts exceed 40 hours a week (when not just driving but also idle time when waiting for the next departure of their vehicle is included), they have little to no measures supporting work-life balance and inadequate pay, according to the unions (OZ KOVO, 2023c).

Commentary and outlook

Slovakia experienced much political change in 2023; three governments took turns, two of them without the support of the parliament. As a result of the war in Ukraine, the state of emergency continued. High inflation also continued, especially in the first half of the year (in January it was 15.2% but had fallen to 5.9% in December). Nominal wages increased, but real wages fell slightly. Following an agreement between employers and trade unions, the minimum wage was increased to €700 per month.

To mitigate the negative consequences of inflation, the inflation subsidies continued into 2023. They were provided to vulnerable households as well as to public and private companies, public administration bodies and churches. Their main goal was to mitigate increased energy prices. To increase support to households at risk, the housing allowance was increased as much as threefold, and at the end of the year, the amounts of other benefits addressing material need were also increased over 30%.

There was no significant change in the area of working hours. The Labour Code added a new option for work performed outside the employment relationship, the so-called agreement on work activity for the performance of seasonal work. It defines seasonal work as work that depends on the change of seasons, repeats every year and does not exceed eight months in a calendar year.

The amendment to the Act on Safety and Health Protection at Work brought several changes that aimed to remove the administrative burden for employers without reducing the level of safety for employees.

The wage gap between women and men in Slovakia reached 18.8% in 2022. The government approved the Action Plan for Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities 2021–2027, with the intention of reducing the gender wage gap, improving the conditions for reconciling work and family life, increasing the employment of people with parental responsibilities, and making visible the economic benefit of unpaid work.

Social dialogue is guaranteed by several laws, but in the private sphere, especially in small businesses, the absence of union organisation persists. The extension of the binding nature of collective agreements is still suspended. The Economic and Social Council (a tripartite body) met only 5 times in 2023 compared with 13 times in 2022. In total, 26 multiemployer collective agreements and 18 collective labour disputes were registered at the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in 2023. Almost all labour disputes were successfully resolved by mediation or arbitration procedures. Only disputes in the transport and banking sectors resulted in strikes, the duration of which was short.

The new government, which emerged from the early elections in September 2023, in its programme statement signed up to supporting social dialogue and collective bargaining, especially its quality and employee participation in decision-making.

Based on Eurostat data, Slovakia is among the EU Member States with the highest proportion of night work and overtime hours (non-standard hours). Therefore, the government aims to limit non-standard working hours. Measures related to digitalisation as well as the greening of the economy in order to create better-quality and better-paid jobs are also planned. Changes are also foreseen to

improve the quality of labour law regulations and regulations in the field of safety and health protection at work and to strengthen the performance of labour inspection.

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