

CELSI POLICY BRIEF 2025

When trade unions learn to innovate (case of Czechia)

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Key points

- In 2013, OS KOVO introduced the **'grouping of members'** as a new organisational model of union membership to address legal reforms and workplace union-busting.
- The model offers low membership fees, anonymity, and flexibility, making it an attractive option for employees.
- However, it increases the workload for OS KOVO regional staff, and the current fee paid by members may not cover operational costs.
- The model has potential to increase the collective bargaining coverage if applied properly.

Recommendations:

- Introduce the debate about the "grouping of members" within the organisation to coordinate the policy transfer of the model.
- Introduce common guidelines and clarify the role of this membership form in the overall policy of members organising.
- Internal debate is needed on the model's long-term purpose and its potential to support greater coordination and centralisation of collective bargaining in Czechia.

Authors

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1 Context

In the Czech industrial relations system, there are two main models of union organisation. The first is traditional and most common model is the **basic organisation** (základní organizace). These are legally independent units that operate primarily at the company level, conducting collective bargaining directly with employers. Each basic organisation is a self-standing organisational unit with its own legal statute and legal obligations. Given the low bargaining coverage of multi-employer agreements at around 10%, company-level bargaining, with 31% coverage remains the most important channel through which working conditions can be improved. Its prominent feature is the check-off system, where employers deduct union fees from wages and transfer them to the union. Although it ensures stable payments, it compromises membership anonymity and often leads to union drop-off when employees change jobs.

In contrast, the **grouping of members** represents a new organisational model introduced in 2013. One of the main advantages of this model is that it ensures member anonymity, since the check-off system does not apply and membership fees are paid directly by individuals to OS KOVO. Secondly, the grouping of members is not a legal entity but is directly associated with OS KOVO and managed through its regional centres, which reduces the administrative burden for company-level unions. Finally, this model is cheaper for employees. Under the basic organisation and check-off method, the employer deducts one percent of the net wage—around 300 Czech koruna (CZK) per month (12 euros)—with 75% staying in the basic organisation

and 25% going to OS KOVO headquarters. In contrast, the grouping of members is based on a flat fee of 100 CZK (4 euros) per month, paid directly to OS KOVO, which then distributes the income between its regional offices.

2 Benefits for collective bargaining

One important benefit of the grouping of members is the professionalisation of collective bargaining. Since negotiations are often led by skilled staff from OS KOVO's regional centres rather than solely by company-level union members, the process becomes more consistent and effective. This is especially relevant in the Czech Republic's heavily decentralised bargaining system, where company-level trade unionists may lack the expertise or background to negotiate with confidence. In such cases, they benefit from the support of experienced professionals from the sector-level organisation—one of the main reasons OS KOVO continues to maintain its regional centres.

Although data confirming higher-quality or more standardised collective agreements is lacking, trade union representatives believe that the involvement of regional professionals leads to stronger bargaining outcomes. Importantly, professional negotiators also come from outside the company and are not influenced by personal histories with employers, which can reduce the employer's ability to exert pressure or intimidate negotiators.

However, since regional staff are not present in the everyday life of the company, social dialogue is managed by union members within the workplace. This gives the three members of the committee representing the grouping of members a valuable opportunity to act as employee representatives. OS KOVO supports members by offering educational courses to strengthen their knowledge of labour rights and legislation.

3 Challenges

Despite its innovative features, the grouping of members model lack coordinated approach within OS KOVO. Although the membership fee is similar to the amount retained under the traditional check-off system (75 CZK vs. 100 CZK), the model may place a greater burden on staff in regional centers and there are limits how many grouping can one regional centre handle.

The spread of the model thus depends largely on individual initiative from regional representatives and on demand from members seeking a cheaper, less administratively demanding alternative to traditional union structures. However, this decentralised and demand-driven approach would require more staffing and resources to implement fully.

Concerns also stemmed from the confirmation of its legal validity, which was confirmed by the courts only recently and thus the spread of the form might be expected in upcoming years.

Another concern is the limited internal participation of members in the negotiation process. Collective

agreements are often signed by regional centre representatives acting as group chairs, with little involvement of members.

Finally, policy transfer beyond OS KOVO has been minimal. Most other unions lack the regional infrastructure necessary for implementation. Additionally, OS KOVO itself has not conducted an analysis of the model's strengths and weaknesses, which further limits its transfer.

4 Recommendations

Despite its challenges, the grouping of members model remains favourable among employees, largely due to its lower administrative burden and reduced membership fees. Its growing relevance within OS KOVO is reflected in its increasing share—rising from 10% of reported organisations in 2018 to 16% in 2023. Although the grouping of members was initially subject to legal uncertainty, its legitimacy has since been confirmed by court rulings.

Our recommendation would be:

First, policy transfer would need to be formalised within the organisation through knowledge sharing and a common institutional approach to the grouping of members model. In other words, effective implementation requires clear guidelines. The policy should be **officially acknowledged** at the OS KOVO level and actively promoted across the regional centres. Only then can consistent policy learning between regional centres take place.

Second, the analysis of **the policy's impact on membership levels is needed**. Since its introduction, trade unionists have highlighted the positive effect on member recruitment as one of its key advantages. In terms of organising, the model deserves greater attention from union leadership: the flat-rate membership fee, paid directly by members to OS KOVO, suggests that lower costs may attract more members while still supporting union services. By avoiding the check-off system, the model also allows members to stay organised when they change jobs.

Third, the policy should be analysed from a broader perspective—specifically, its potential to **strengthen coordination and centralisation of collective bargaining in Czechia**. This would involve expanding the role of regional centres. While this may reduce the autonomy of company-level basic organisations, the two structures can continue to coexist, as they currently do.