

# BARSERVICE



## Towards smart bargaining in the publishing sector in Czechia

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## Executive summary

This report explores the state of collective bargaining in the Czech publishing sector and examines opportunities for reform through "smart bargaining" approaches. Based on desk research and an interview with the National Library's trade union, it highlights significant challenges while identifying innovative practices to modernize labour relations in this diverse and fragmented industry.

The Czech publishing sector, valued at €1.6 billion in 2024, is characterized by a fragmented market structure and a workforce split between internal employees and external freelancers. Traditional collective bargaining is nearly absent, with most workers operating under individual contracts. Advocacy by professional associations, particularly for translators, has raised awareness of the precarious conditions many face, though these efforts lack the formal structure of sector-wide agreements.

The National Library of the Czech Republic provides a microcosmic view of the challenges in bargaining, including limited wage negotiation capacity due to public funding constraints and strained management-union relations. Despite these barriers, localized agreements and emerging practices like employee feedback mechanisms and non-monetary benefit enhancements signal a shift toward more adaptive approaches.

Smart bargaining offers a framework to overcome these challenges by increasing transparency, integrating unions into organizational processes, and leveraging digital tools to enhance employee participation. While procedural and structural barriers remain, the sector has the potential to innovate labour relations and align with broader European standards.

## I. Sector identification and trends

The publishing sector in Czechia reflects a dynamic and multifaceted industry marked by diversity, historical evolution, and contemporary challenges. With a developed market economy framework, the majority of Czech publishing houses operate privately, though academic institutions and other organizations also contribute through university presses and specialized publishing activities.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter outlines the key characteristics, trends, and structural elements shaping the sector, drawing insights from recent analyses and historical context. The publishing industry in Czechia, with a market size of €1.6 billion in 2024, comprises over 6,000 businesses.<sup>2</sup> Czechia's publishing landscape is notable for its relatively low level of monopolization compared to other countries. While major players such as Albatros Media and Euromedia Group lead the market with approximately 1,100 and 800 published titles annually, respectively, their collective influence remains modest. The five largest publishing houses account for only 12% of the market share. In contrast, 70% of the market is distributed among 236 mid-sized publishing entities. This fragmentation underscores the sector's diversity, fostering competition and a wide array of literary offerings. The publishing industry's composition further includes numerous smaller publishers.<sup>3</sup>

The development of the publishing sector in Czechia is deeply intertwined with the country's political and economic history. During the communist era (1948-1989), private publishing was effectively dismantled, with enterprises either nationalized or dissolved. This period disrupted the traditional structures of the industry. However, the sector witnessed significant revitalization after 1990, following the re-establishment of democratic governance and market liberalization. A key institution supporting the sector's growth is the Association of Czech Booksellers and Publishers. Founded in 1879, the Association endured a hiatus during the communist regime but was reconstituted in 1990. It plays a vital role in representing the interests of publishers, distributors, and booksellers. Its initiatives include legislative advocacy, copyright protection, and campaigns promoting reading and books. As a member of the Federation of European Publishers (FEP), the Association aligns Czechia's publishing practices with broader European standards and trends.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://justprint.cz/blog/co-ceka-tiskarsky-prumyslov-tyr-sktor-v-roce-2024-analyza-klicovych-trendu/>;  
<https://www.rmol.cz/novinky/trendy-vyzvy-tiskoveho-prumyslu-v-roce-2023>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ibisworld.com/czechia/industry/publishing-activities/200072/#TopQuestionsAnswered>

<sup>3</sup> <https://justprint.cz/blog/co-ceka-tiskarsky-prumyslov-tyr-sktor-v-roce-2024-analyza-klicovych-trendu/>;  
<https://www.rmol.cz/novinky/trendy-vyzvy-tiskoveho-prumyslu-v-roce-2023>

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

The Czech publishing sector faces several transformative trends, influenced by technological advancements and evolving consumer behaviour. The broader printing industry, a critical enabler of publishing, is experiencing a shift towards digitalization, automation, and sustainable practices. For example, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in production processes is enhancing efficiency and cost management. Publishers are increasingly exploring digital formats and e-books to cater to tech-savvy readers, reflecting a broader global trend. Sustainability has emerged as a significant focus area. The adoption of environmentally friendly materials and processes is becoming a priority as publishers respond to consumer demand for eco-conscious products. This shift not only aligns with global sustainability goals but also offers opportunities for innovation within the industry.<sup>5</sup>

Economic pressures, including fluctuating input costs and labour shortages, present ongoing challenges. Rising energy prices and the costs associated with sustainable production methods pose financial strains on smaller publishers. Additionally, the publishing sector's reliance on skilled labour underscores the need for targeted workforce development initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

## II. Current state of collective bargaining

The publishing industry in Czechia presents a unique environment regarding collective bargaining. After reaching out to several potential interviewees, the conclusion seems to be that collective bargaining has not been observed or discussed as a relevant topic in many workplaces. This reflects the sector's structural and organizational characteristics, which create specific challenges for collective representation and bargaining. The publishing industry exemplifies the difficulty of implementing traditional collective bargaining frameworks in sectors dominated by freelance and project-based work.

Publishing houses typically employ two main categories of workers: internal staff (employees such as editors or administrative personnel who are not organized into unions) and external collaborators (these include authors, translators, editors, and proofreaders). They work on a freelance basis under individual contracts for specific projects, such as book production. The prevalence of individual contracts significantly shapes the dynamics of labour relations in this sector.

Despite the absence of traditional collective bargaining, there have been some initiatives that resemble collective advocacy, particularly among professional associations of translators. These organizations focus on improving working

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<sup>5</sup> <https://justprint.cz/blog/co-ceka-tiskarsky-prumyslový-sektor-v-roce-2024-analyza-klicovych-trendu/>;  
<https://www.rmol.cz/novinky/trendy-vyzvy-tiskoveho-prumyslu-v-roce-2023>

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

conditions, especially advocating for higher remuneration rates. They have raised awareness about the precarious financial situations many of these workers face.

An important actor in the sector is the Association of Czech Booksellers and Publishers (Svaz českých knihkupců a nakladatelů). While not a labour union, the association engages in advocacy that benefits the entire industry, including its workforce. For instance, it has successfully lobbied the state for favourable policies, such as the introduction of a zero VAT rate on books. Such measures indirectly support both publishers and their collaborators, though they do not constitute direct collective bargaining.

### III. Challenges to collective bargaining

The primary challenge regarding collective bargaining in the publishing sector in Czechia revolves around the absence of a higher-level collective agreement, which severely limits the scope of negotiations and the ability to address sector-wide issues. One of the main reasons for this challenge is the decentralized structure of the sector.

The National Library of the Czech Republic, which also does publishing, is an example of the decentralized nature of the sector. While some libraries fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture, others are administered by municipalities or managed by various local authorities. This fragmented structure means that there is no unified negotiating partner for collective bargaining on a national level, making it impossible to negotiate a comprehensive, sector-wide agreement that could address issues such as wages, benefits, and working conditions across all libraries. At the National Library, the lack of a higher-level collective agreement has made negotiations particularly difficult. The library has a trade union organization that negotiates on behalf of the employees. However, these negotiations are limited to the local level, with agreements being tailored specifically to the needs of the National Library. While this allows for some flexibility, it also means that broader issues affecting the entire library sector cannot be addressed. For instance, one of the most pressing concerns at the National Library is the issue of wages. Because it is state funded, it is not able to negotiate wage increases through its local collective agreements. This limitation prevents the library's workers from advocating for wage increases, which could make the profession more attractive, particularly for younger workers. The inability to negotiate better wages is seen as a significant disadvantage for the library, as it struggles to attract and retain qualified professionals. Many workers at the National Library acknowledge that while they are passionate about their work, the low wages make it difficult to sustain a career in the long term, especially for those with families or financial obligations. A sector-wide agreement could also

address other important issues, such as the administration of the Cultural and Social Needs Fund (FKSP), which is a system for managing benefits for employees in the public sector. However, because local agreements are negotiated independently, the management and distribution of the FKSP varies from library to library, creating inconsistencies and inequalities across the sector. Without a higher-level agreement, these discrepancies are difficult to address, further limiting the potential for improvement within the library sector.

Another challenge highlighted by the National Library's experience is the strained relationship between management and unions. This tension came to a head when the library's management unilaterally terminated the collective agreement, sparking conflict between the two parties. The management's approach to negotiations was seen as top-down and authoritarian, with management attempting to dictate the terms of the negotiation process. For example, management insisted on limiting the number of union representatives allowed in meetings and controlling the location of the negotiations. These actions were perceived as attempts to control the process and undermine the unions' ability to negotiate on behalf of the workers. This created an imbalance of power, with union representatives feeling that they were not being treated as equal partners in the negotiations. The tension between the union and management led to a difficult negotiation process, but eventually, a compromise was reached. Despite the resolution, the experience revealed the challenges faced by unions in negotiating with a management that sought to control the process rather than engage in a collaborative, equal dialogue.

In addition to the challenges posed by strained relations and the lack of a higher-level collective agreement, there are also significant procedural barriers to expanding collective bargaining coverage across the sector. While larger libraries, such as regional libraries, are likely to have collective agreements in place, smaller libraries or those without union representation may not be covered by such agreements. This creates disparities within the sector, with some libraries benefiting from collective bargaining agreements and others left without any protections. Even where unions are present, the process of negotiating and implementing collective agreements can be complex and legally challenging. For example, when a collective agreement expires, a new one must be negotiated. However, this process can be delayed or hindered, leading to periods where employees lack the protections offered by a formal agreement. In some cases, the union may need legal support to help navigate the process and ensure that employees' rights are upheld.

Furthermore, extending the coverage of collective agreements to include all libraries in the Czech Republic would require significant effort. While the possibility

exists for individual libraries to establish trade unions and begin collective bargaining, the process of organizing unions and negotiating agreements is far from simple. Even if a union is established, it may face resistance from management, as was evident in the case of the National Library.

The National Library's experience offers several insights into how collective bargaining in the sector could be improved. One of the key lessons is the importance of strengthening the capacity of unions to negotiate effectively. Providing legal support and training for union representatives could help ensure that they are equipped to handle complex negotiations with management. Additionally, creating a framework for higher-level collective agreements would allow for more standardized terms across the sector, ensuring that all libraries can offer competitive wages and benefits. Such an agreement would help mitigate the current disparities between libraries and create a more equitable environment for workers.

The experience at the National Library also highlights the importance of fostering better relationships between unions and management. Negotiations are more likely to be successful when both sides approach them as equal partners, with a shared goal of improving the working conditions and well-being of employees. The contentious relationship between unions and management at the National Library demonstrates the challenges that can arise when one party seeks to dominate the process. For unions to be effective, it is essential that they are able to engage in negotiations without fear of intimidation or coercion.

#### IV. Towards Smart Bargaining

In the Czech publishing sector, where traditional collective agreements are less prevalent, smart bargaining presents an opportunity to adapt labour relations to a rapidly changing work environment:

- **Increasing Participation:** A key element of smart bargaining is actively involving employees in negotiations. This ensures that collective agreements reflect their practical needs and priorities.
- **Innovative Tools in Use:** Some organizations have introduced online platforms where employees can anonymously comment on draft agreements, suggest changes, and review negotiation records. These tools provide transparency and a safe space for participation
- **Focus on Non-Monetary Benefits:** In the publishing sector, collective agreements often prioritize non-monetary benefits over wage increases



- due to budget constraints and the nature of the industry. Agreements commonly include provisions for additional leave for life events, relocation support, and professional development opportunities.
- **Integrating Unions into Onboarding:** Unions are now included in onboarding processes for new employees. This ensures workers are informed about the role of collective agreements and how they can benefit from them.
- **Regular Information Campaigns:** Efforts to inform and engage employees are ongoing, including campaigns to demystify collective agreements and highlight their relevance to employees' daily lives.
- **Expanding Digital Tools:** Further development of online platforms for employee participation can increase transparency and engagement.
- **Strengthening Partnerships:** Collaborations with professional associations and unions can amplify advocacy efforts and improve workplace standards.

## V. European Perspectives

No evidence has been found neither through desk research nor through the conducted interview to suggest that the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages has had a meaningful impact on collective bargaining in the publishing sector in Czechia, largely due to the widespread lack of collective bargaining practices within the industry in the country.

## VI. Conclusions

The fragmented and project-based nature of the Czech publishing sector limits the effectiveness of traditional collective bargaining, with most workers excluded from formalized labour agreements. Despite these constraints, advocacy efforts and localized practices, such as at the National Library, illustrate the possibilities for progress through targeted reforms.

Smart bargaining provides a viable path forward, emphasizing employee engagement, digital transparency, and tailored agreements focusing on benefits rather than wages. Strengthening union capacity and fostering collaboration between unions and management are critical steps to advancing these efforts. While the sector has not yet felt the impact of broader European initiatives like the

EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages, its principles could serve as a foundation for addressing systemic issues. By embracing smart bargaining, the Czech publishing sector can overcome current barriers, improve labour relations, and set a precedent for innovative and equitable practices across similarly fragmented industries.

## References

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## Annex

### List of interviews

Respondent	Interview date	Interview code
Trade union of the National Library of the Czech Republic	November 8, 2024, online	BAR_union_publishing