



Personal and household services in Central and Eastern European Countries: Improving working conditions and services through industrial relations

D5.2 Comparative Policy Brief

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The project is funded by the European Union; Ref. 101052340.

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Project PERHOUSE

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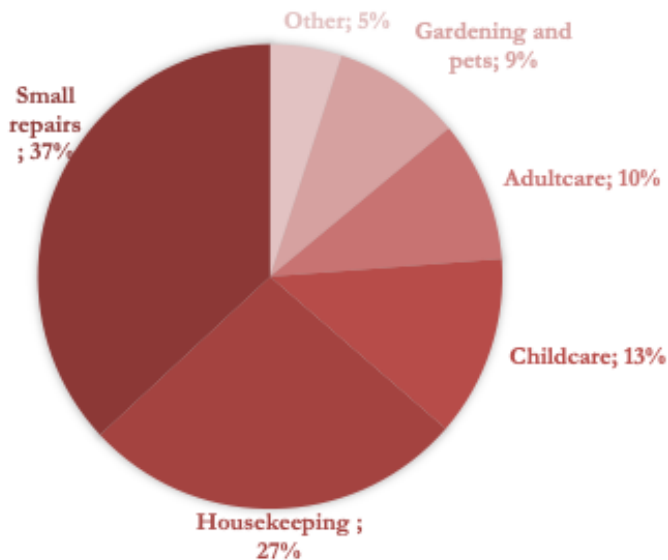
Policy Brief

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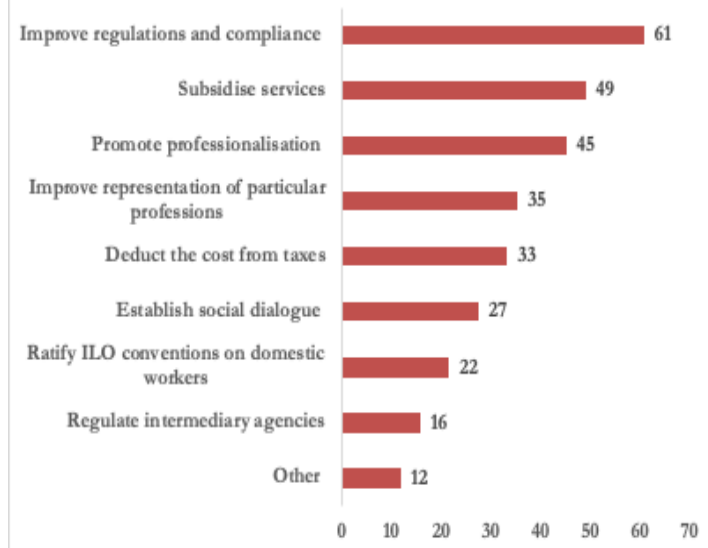
The main characteristics and challenges of the personal and household services

- This policy brief presents the key findings of the comparative report on social dialogue in personal and household services (PHS) in Central and Eastern European countries (CEE). The objective is to improve working conditions and service quality in the sector.
- The report's geographical coverage includes 12 Central and Eastern European countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.
- It draws information from diverse research activities, including online surveys, stakeholder interviews, and focus groups with domestic workers.
- Personal and household services are vital for the well-being of families and individuals. From childcare, elderly care, and cleaning to home repairs and ICT support, PHS transform households into workplaces.
- The personal and household services sector, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, faces poor working conditions and undervalued work due to weak regulations and ineffective industrial relations, hindering improvements for home carers and service providers.
- Home care service usage in these CEE countries is below the EU27 average, indicating differing levels of development and integration. Women comprise 90% of the workforce.
- In a survey across 12 Central and Eastern European countries, 76% of respondents used personal and household services in the last five years, with minor repairs and cleaning being the most common (see Graph 1).
- The personal and household services sector in CEE countries operates informally, leading to job insecurity and inadequate worker protection.
- Economic challenges such as low wages emphasise the need for increased investment to ensure fair compensation.
- Recognition of this work and the high number of vulnerable workers call for better integration and protection, especially for marginalised groups. Addressing health and safety concerns is crucial for improving working conditions and worker welfare.
- Undeclared work and bogus self-employment highlight the need for regulatory reforms to formalise employment relationships and protect workers' rights.

Graph 1: Most frequently used types of personal and household services in the last five years (N= 254, in %)
Source: Demand Survey in 12 CEE countries



Graph 2: Views of social partners on addressing challenges in PHS (N= 51, in %).
Source: Survey on social dialogue in PHS in 12 CEE countries;



The percentage increase in PHS workers in CEE countries was 14.6% from 2013 to 2023, rising from 2.1 million to the current 2.5 million workers. If informal carers were to become part of the formal labour force, the number would increase by 3.4 million in CEE countries.

Key findings on social dialogue in personal and household services

- The analysis of social partners and actors clearly identified stakeholders within each of the six partner countries who could contribute to standardising social dialogue in the PHS sector. We have thoroughly acknowledged barriers to higher engagement by social actors in the field of PHS and strategies to overcome them.
- A common challenge to the effectiveness of social dialogue is the high levels of informal employment, which significantly hinder active representation and collective bargaining across these countries. A persistently weak union presence and influence exist, especially in the private and non-care sectors.
- A distinct divide exists in representing workers in the public versus private, and informal sectors across these countries. Public sector workers consistently enjoy better representation due to state funding and structured dialogues, while private and informal sector workers contend with low unionisation and limited bargaining power.
- The findings also emphasise the diverse levels of integration and influence of national social actors within EU-level organisations across the CEE countries, with each country displaying distinct patterns of engagement and affiliation.
- Based on the social dialogue survey data, we explored the most relevant ways to address or prevent challenges in the personal and household services sector within the national context of Central and Eastern European countries.
- The most desired approach identified by the CEE national stakeholders is to enhance existing regulations and ensure compliance. This underscores the need for robust legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms to address issues such as undeclared work, worker protection, and quality standards in the PHS sector (see Graph 2).
- Nearly half of the respondents believe that subsidising services is crucial. By providing more financial resources to the sector, subsidies can also help improve wages and working conditions.
- Promoting the professionalisation of workers is seen as a vital step towards improving the sector.
- Enhancing the representation of specific professions within the sector is considered important. This could involve strengthening unions or professional bodies that advocate for workers' rights and interests, ensuring that their voices are heard in policy-making processes.
- Ratifying international labour standards, such as the ILO conventions on domestic workers, could provide a framework for protecting workers' rights and signal a commitment to aligning national policies with international norms.

In all CEE countries, there is low recognition of EU-level and international strategies and agreements, which significantly weakens the negotiating leverage of all regional social partners.

Solutions and policy implications

- Addressing the challenges in the PHS sector demands a comprehensive approach incorporating legal, financial, and social dimensions. Prioritising these strategies is crucial to creating a more equitable, sustainable, and professionalised sector in CEE countries.
- Recognising the diverse levels of integration and influence of national social actors within EU-level organisations across the CEE countries is imperative, as is taking action to strengthen social dialogue and enhance trade union capacity. This is particularly essential in countries such as Czechia, Poland, and Slovenia.
- North Macedonia and Slovenia underscore the importance of public-private partnerships and the expansion of public funding to enhance service quality. At the same time, Czechia, Slovenia, and Slovakia prioritise improving wages and working conditions to address labour shortages. Additionally, Estonia and North Macedonia emphasise the role of digital platforms and financial incentives in promoting formalisation and improving sector efficiency.
- The entrenched gender regime in the care sector remains a crucial consideration, highlighting the need for policies that address gender inequalities and improve conditions for workers in these essential roles.
- The policy implications recommend enhancing the personal and household services (PHS) sector by standardising statistical variables and expanding the European Care Strategy to include PHS, thereby strengthening the care infrastructure.
- To address gender imbalances in the care sector, policies should encourage more men to participate in care services, especially in roles involving children and dependents. Implementing the Pay Transparency Directive and reevaluating the value of work in the PHS sector are crucial for achieving pay equity and recognising workers' contributions.
- Professionalise home care workers by linking certification and training to improved financial compensation and benefits. Efforts should also focus on equalising social security and working conditions for all PHS workers and reducing undeclared employment by increasing the associated risks.
- Supporting informal caregivers requires tools for decent working conditions similar to those in the formal labour market. Strengthening social dialogue through European financial mechanisms and developing platforms for national and EU-level social partners is important. Establishing a unified EU-level social dialogue in the PHS sector requires increased engagement and capacity building among national stakeholders.

Project information

Project outputs include comprehensive reports on personal and household services and social dialogue in 6 partner countries and a comparative report for 12 Central and Eastern European Countries. All project outputs are available at <https://celsi.sk/en/projects/detail/209/>
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