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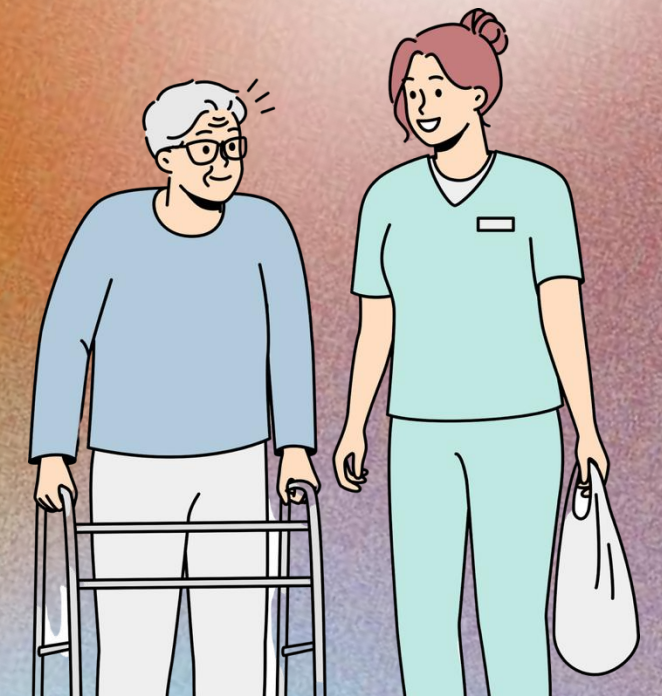
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2025
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Collective bargaining in Europe's care sector:

Mutual learning event

May 15 2025



Agenda

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**Comparative findings
across 12 countries**
Simona Brunnerová

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Discussion
Dana Búriková, ALICE
Czechia
Prof. Valeria Pulignano, KU
Leuven

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**Insight into country
experiences**

Croatia – Hrvoje Butković, IRMO
Romania – Alina Popescu, ASE
Türkiye – Ceyhun Güler, DEU

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Towards smart bargaining in the care sector – a comparative study



May 15 2025

Simona Brunnerová

Central European Labour Studies Institute
(CELSI)

- **Structural features and challenges of the care sector**
- **Current landscape of collective bargaining in care**
- **Potential for, and practices of, smart bargaining**



**mixed system of
providers**

**gendered nature
of care work**

**permanent labour
shortage**

**fragmented
employment
conditions**

→ All the countries in our study have some form of bargaining in place in the care sector, but the degree of coverage and effectiveness varies substantially

→ Across nearly all countries, one consistent pattern emerges:
the weakest bargaining outcomes are in private residential and home-based care





Croatia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, France

Established sectoral agreements that apply to public care workers but do not always extend to private providers



Italy

Primary collective agreements cover both residential care and domestic work, though the latter lacks regional or company-level bargaining



North Macedonia, Czechia

Collective bargaining is mostly company-based, and sectoral agreements have not materialized due to funding disparities between public and private providers



Türkyie

Sectoral agreements for the healthcare and social services sector as a whole, but these agreements are not directly related to social care services

- **Bargaining coverage is highly fragmented and uneven across countries**
- **Public sector workers usually have better protections than private/domestic workers**
- **National-level agreements exist in some countries (e.g., Italy, France), but others rely on company-level talks (e.g., Czechia, North Macedonia)**

Recurring obstacles hinder effective collective bargaining in the care sector:



- Fragmentation of social partners
- Weak collective bargaining in the private sector
- Declining union membership and engagement
- Gender segregation and workforce composition
- Legal and institutional barriers
- Precarious and informal work
- Employer resistance and lack of social dialogue



What do we mean by smart bargaining?

- Bargaining practices at the most feasible level leading to collective agreements **beyond** wages
- Provisions for:
 - Career progression
 - Skills training and certification
 - Health and safety
 - Work-life balance
 - Staff-to-patient ratios
 - Digitalisation and innovation

the need for expanding bargaining coverage

leveraging digital tools

**addressing
workforce
shortages, gender
disparities, and
informality**

integrating underrepresented groups

Expanding Bargaining Coverage:

- In **Italy**, smart bargaining focuses on reducing undeclared work by offering incentives for families to formalize employment
- **France** has experimented with tax incentives and simplified contract templates to encourage formal hiring in the domestic care sector
- **Slovakia** could introduce a mid-level bargaining structure specifically for social services, ensuring that private providers and non-unionized workplaces are included in agreements

Addressing Workforce Fragmentation:

- In many countries, bargaining power is weakened by declining union membership and employer resistance
- Countries face challenges due to the presence of numerous small service providers, making union organization difficult
- To counteract these issues, unions are advocating for mandatory extension mechanisms and stronger legal requirements for sectoral bargaining

Addressing Gender Disparities in the Care Sector:

- Feminization of care work remains a central challenge
- In **Croatia**, over 90% of workers in social care institutions are women, but the government argues that this does not affect collective bargaining outcomes since wages are centrally regulated
- In contrast, **France** and **Italy** highlight gender disparities in wages and career mobility, prompting unions to push for gender-sensitive job evaluations and equal pay audits
- **Türkiye** faces additional challenges, as domestic care workers, who are mostly women, struggle with societal norms that discourage union participation and collective bargaining.

Utilizing Digital Tools for Bargaining:

- Some countries have begun integrating digital solutions to improve worker engagement in bargaining
- **France** has developed mobile applications to connect with domestic care workers
- **Czechia** is working on digital outreach strategies to counteract declining union membership
- In **Slovakia**, unions are encouraged to leverage online platforms and social media campaigns to improve bargaining coverage and raise awareness about workers' rights

Government Intervention and Improving Legal Frameworks:

- **Slovakia** and **Romania** emphasize the importance of aligning bargaining practices with legislative frameworks to ensure that agreements are enforceable
- **Italy** calls for state intervention to incentivize formal employment, regulate hiring through digital platforms, and reduce labour costs for families employing domestic workers
- In **Türkiye**, restrictive union laws, including high sectoral thresholds, make bargaining difficult, leading to calls for reforms to facilitate union recognition and participation in negotiations

Addressing Workforce Shortages and Professionalization:



- **France** has developed fast-track certification programs to attract and retain care workers, particularly in rural areas where staffing gaps are more pronounced
- **Italy** stresses the need for government intervention to support families employing caregivers while also ensuring professional development opportunities for workers
- **Slovakia** calls for systemic reforms in social service funding to create a more stable workforce

Innovative Strategies for Collective Bargaining:

- **France** introduced a national training fund as part of a multi-year agreement following union-led strikes, demonstrating how industrial action can be leveraged to secure long-term gains
- **Romania** proposes capacity-building initiatives for union leaders to strengthen negotiation skills and improve bargaining strategies
- **Türkiye** highlights the need for model contracts to protect domestic workers and ensure standardized labour conditions

Final

- **remarks**
Smart bargaining emerging, but still in early stages
- In many countries bargaining remains reactive, focused on short-term crisis management rather than proactive quality improvements
- Essential priorities for developing smart bargaining: coordination and inclusive dialogue structures that also bring together smaller providers

Thank you for your attention!

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BARSERVICE Mutual Learning Events

UNDERSTAND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING IN EUROPE'S CARE SECTOR



15TH MAY
THURSDAY

9:00 AM - 10:30 AM CET

[REGISTER NOW](#)

*The speakers and a detailed agenda for each session
will be available soon.*

Online via  zoom



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Towards Smart Bargaining in the Social Care Sector in Croatia

15. 05. 2025.

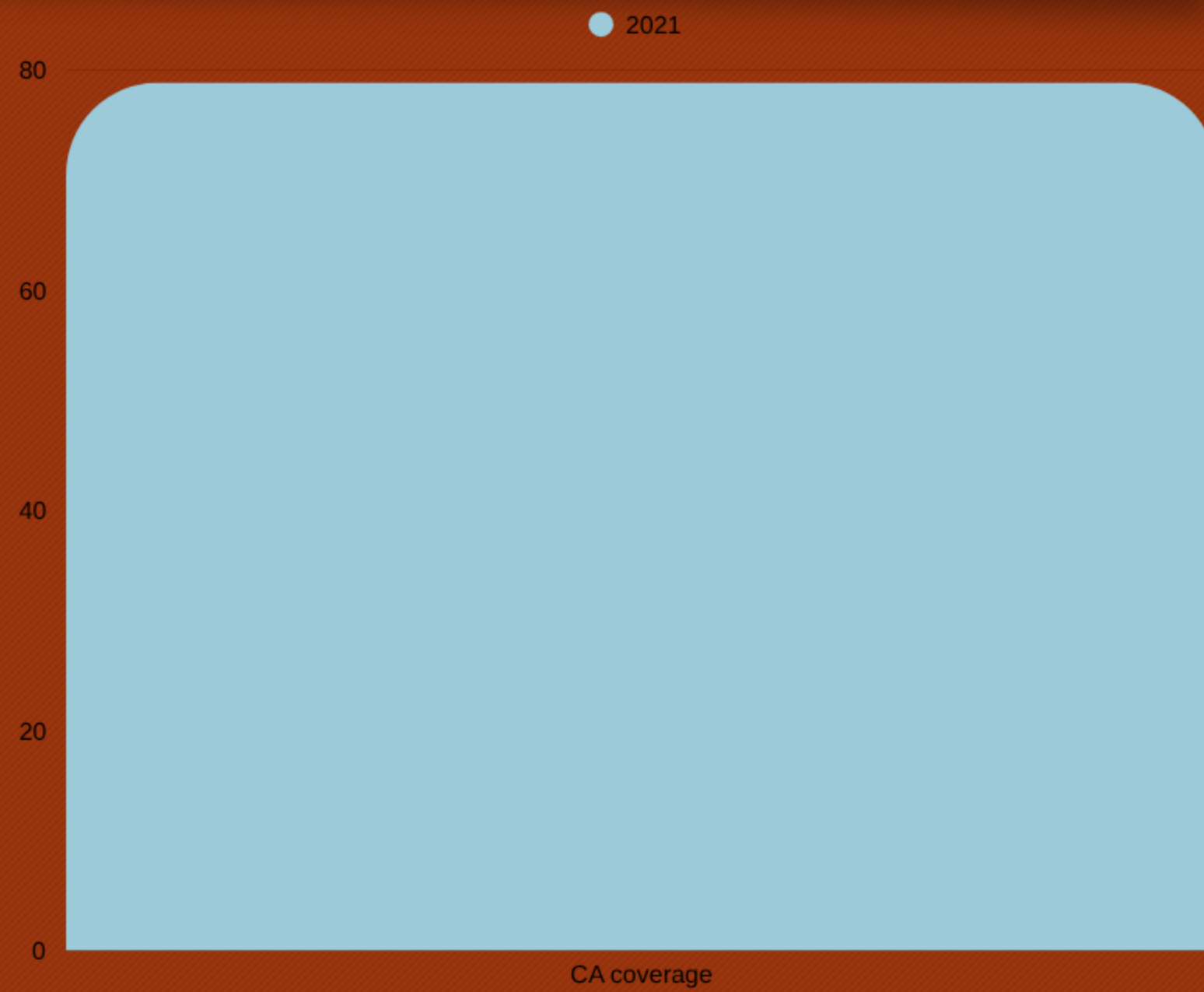
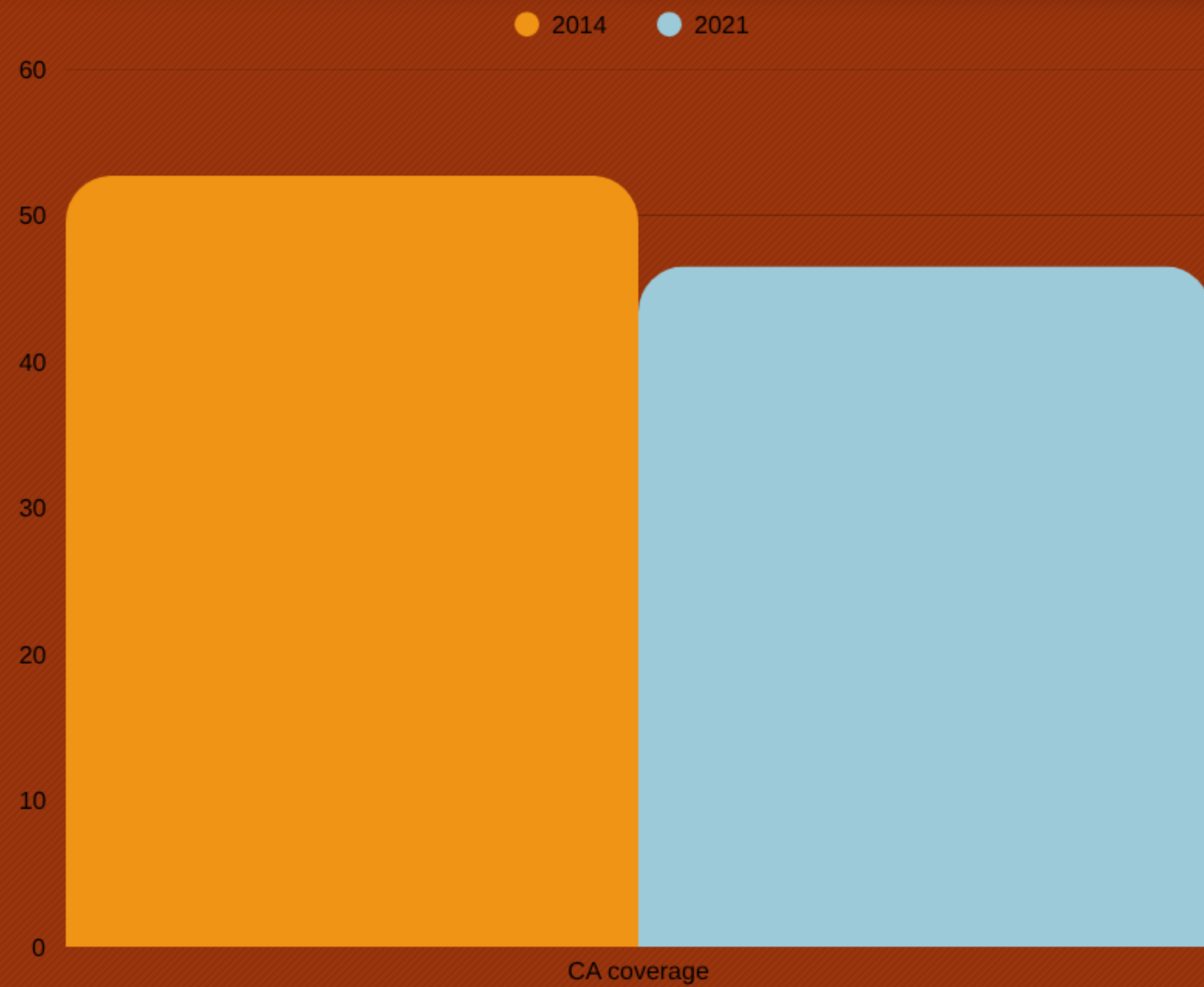
Hrvoje Butković, PhD

Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO) Zagreb

Sector identification and trends

- The system composed of 220 institutions of different type
- 10,000 employees in the public sector
- 14,736 overall number of employees - NACE 87 - (2023)
- Basic Collective Agreement for Employees in Public Services
- Sectoral Collective Agreement for Social Care Activities
- Share of services gross value added in the total gross value added 72% (2024)
- Share of gross value added of social care activities within services 1.2% (2024)
- Emigration of the qualified labour force

Coverage with collective agreements



Current state of collective bargaining

- Sectoral CA in extended application although it expired in 2022 (better quality since 2018)
- Sectoral CA only applies to the public sector employees
 - Institutions founded by the state
 - Institutions founded by the counties and cities
- More than 60% of employees in the system are members of the SZDSSH sectoral union
- Two representative trade unions
 - Trade Union of Croatian Social Care Employees (SZDSSH) 4,500 members
 - Trade Union of Health and Social Care of Croatia (SSZSSH) 11,000 members (700 in social care)
- SZDSSH bargains with the Government on the BCA and with the ministry on sectoral CA
- Two branch associations of Croatian Employers Association (HUP) relevant for the sector
- House level bargaining practically non-existent

Challenges to collective bargaining

- Lack of organization of private employers and their lack of interest in collective bargaining represent the greatest challenge
- Possible solutions:
 - Extending the provisions from the sectoral collective agreement to the private sector
 - The legal obligation for the private provider to comply with the sectoral CA
- Lack of qualified staff:
 - Employment is conditional on the one year of work experience in the system
 - Recognition of foreign qualifications is complicated and timely
- Migrant workers are usually employed as caregivers for which only basic qualifications are needed

Towards smart bargaining

- The sectoral union believes that the most important is better content of collective agreements
- The line ministry attaches the most importance to greater bargaining frequency
- Both social partners agree that establishment of new actors is unimportant
- Both social partners attach great importance to trust building efforts
- Both social partners agree that the approach to smart bargaining cannot be based on the "one size fits all" principle
- The sectoral union agrees with the claim that the legislation is too detailed and leaves little room for bargaining while the line ministry disagrees
- The sectoral trade union would like to see more wage bargaining while the ministry disagrees

European perspectives

- Directive (EU) 2022/2041 on adequate minimum wages in the EU affects only the private sector workers - public sector workers already have better working conditions
- Social partners from Croatia have not cooperated with social partners at the EU level concerning their possible support for increasing the bargaining coverage
- Sectoral union believes the EU-level social partners can develop communication strategies vis-à-vis their subsidiaries to strengthen bargaining and coverage with collective agreements
- The line ministry experienced mutual learning and cooperation with the EU level social partners during bargaining for the Basic Collective Agreement for Employees in Public Services

Conclusions

- Despite ongoing reforms, according to the sectoral union the social care system in Croatia is centralized and highly bureaucratized
- Collective bargaining occurs at the sectoral level, and for public services at the intersectoral level
- The problem of disorganization of private employers and their lack of interest in collective bargaining
- Collective agreement coverage could be increased by making more extensive use of existing collective agreement extension mechanisms
- According to the ministry, more work should be done to improve the visibility of the bargaining results so that the public could understand benefits of the social dialogue



Thank you!

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The Care Sector in Romania

Alina Popescu

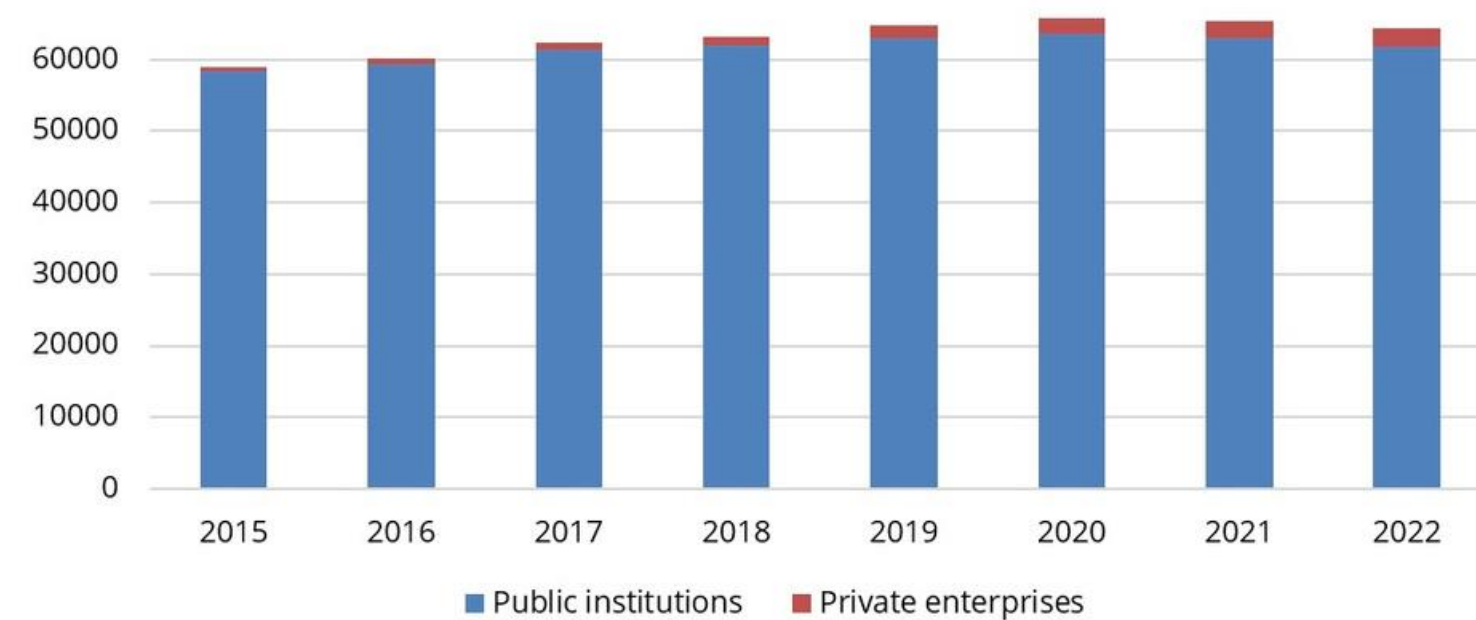
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Key Characteristics of the Care Sector in Romania

- Dominated by public sector (96% of workforce in 2022)
- High dependency on public funding
- Restructuring driven by EU mandates (de-institutionalization)

Figure 1. The evolution of the number of employees in the social assistance sector by type of employer

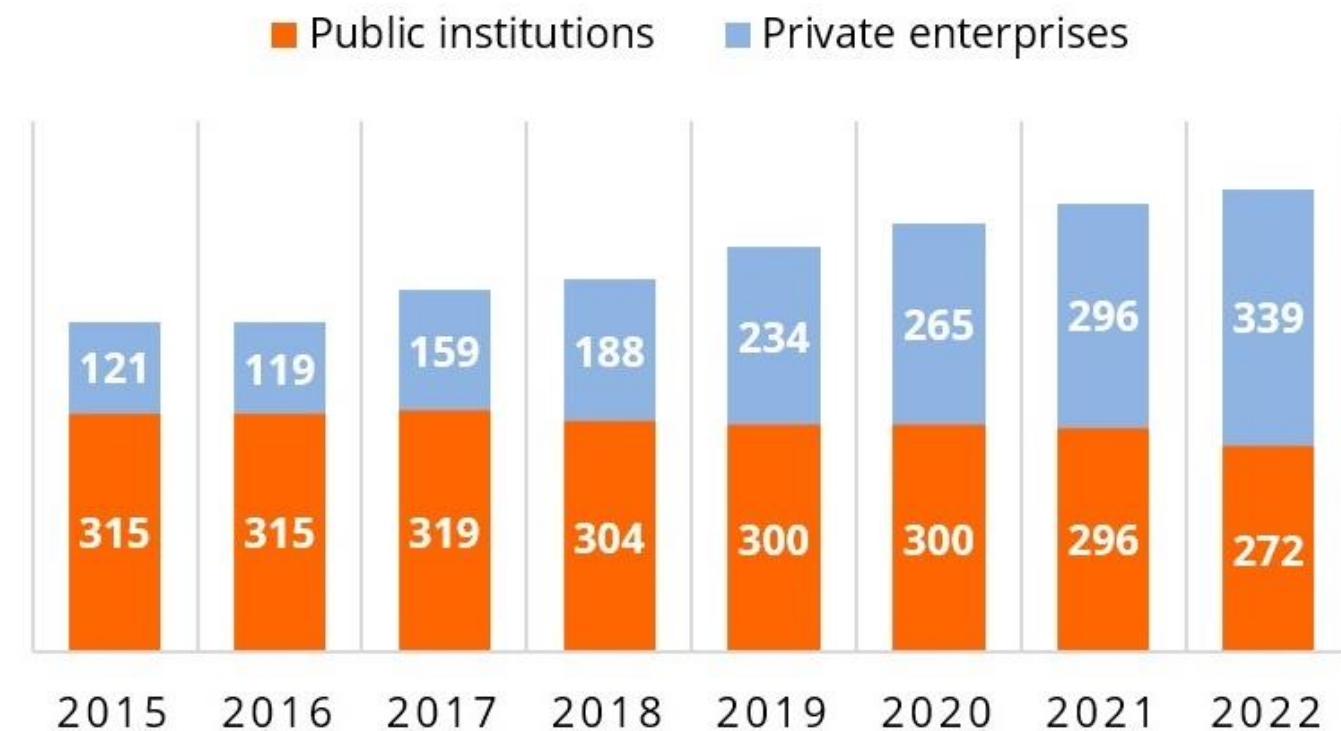


Source: National Institute of Statistics of Romania (2024)
Note: Data refer to NACE code 87 Residential care activities

Key Characteristics of the Care Sector in Romania

- Private care units have grown rapidly but remain small, fragmented, and hard to scale.
- The sector struggles with staffing due to low wages, burnout, and migration abroad.
- Technological changes aiding unionization and efficiency

Figure 2. The evolution of the number of social assistance units by type



Source: National Institute of Statistics of Romania (2024)

Note: Data refer to NACE code 87 Residential care activities

Collective Bargaining (CB)

- Sectoral Collective Agreement (December 2024)
- Sectoral agreement sets minimum standards; unit-level adds specifics
- CB levels: sectoral (public) and unit-level
- Key trade unions: FNS Pro Asist, SANITAS, Federation Columna
- Employers: Ministry of Labour and Family & local authorities for social assistance and child protection (– 47)
- Public sector negotiations limited by law (no bargaining on wages)
- Private sector bargaining minimal due to weak employer organizations

Collective Bargaining (CB)

Main Strengths:

- Broad coverage in public sector; procedural public sector participation
- Legal framework supports formal negotiation structures
- Mandates allow non-representative unions to participate via federations

Main Limitations:

- Cannot negotiate wages in public sector (legal constraint)
- Fragmentation of unions and employers
- Low private employer engagement

Smart Bargaining

- Data-driven, inclusive, and legally grounded
- Improve working conditions and broaden coverage
- Focus on tailored agreements reflecting service and workforce specifics
- Long-term: Transform unions into proactive policy stakeholders
- Requires strong unions with legal and economic expertise
- Encourages private employers' participation through incentives

Suggested improvements

- Support union capacity-building through legal, negotiation, and data training programs.
- Create incentives for private employers to participate in collective bargaining.
- Establish legal protections and fair labour standards for home-based caregivers and maternal assistants.
- Amend legislation to allow wage bargaining in the public social assistance sector.
- *Erga omnes* extension to cover entire Care sector

Thank you for your attention!

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Towards smart bargaining in the care sector of Türkiye

Ceyhun Güler
Dokuz Eylul University



Discussion

- 1. Which strategy proves to be the most effective in addressing shortages in the care sector and organizing care workers?**
- 2. What are your plans to strengthen collective bargaining, e.g., at what level do you think bargaining is the smartest/most effective in your sector?**
- 3. Can you think of examples that can possibly help improve bargaining in the care sector? E.g., overcoming union fragmentation, extending the level at which bargaining occurs, cooperation of social partners across borders to identify good practices?**
- 4. Do you think collective bargaining in the care sector can be strengthened by onboarding new topics beyond traditional bargaining themes, such as digitalisation, green transition, shortening the working week, etc.?**
- 5. Which practices already mentioned do you also recognise in your countries?**

Thank you for your attention!

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36 country reports (4 sectors, 9 countries)

4 sectoral comparative reports

9 country policy briefs

9 country videos

Report on collective agreements

Report on undeclared work