



**Continuity and Change in Collective Agreements in the
Visegrád Countries Before and After the Covid-19
Pandemic**

Country Report

June 2023

BARCOVID

The BARCOVID project aims to improve knowledge about the content of collective agreements in Europe and to undertake research activities to enhance the collection of comparative information on collective bargaining outcomes. The project takes in account the Covid-19 impact on industrial relations in Europe, which is approached from different angles, such as government measures and occupational health and safety. Lead partner is the University of Amsterdam/AIAS. The Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI), Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies and WageIndicator Foundation are the project's key actors.

University of Amsterdam/AIAS-HSI

AIAS-HSI is an institute for multidisciplinary research and teaching at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), the largest university in the Netherlands. AIAS-HSI has as its objective the coordination, implementation and stimulation of interdisciplinary research into the practice of labour law and social security law. Therefore it combines insights from the social sciences, legal dogmas and legal theories in its research.

Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI)

Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI) is a non-profit research institute based in Bratislava, Slovakia. It fosters multidisciplinary research about the functioning of labour markets and institutions, work and organizations, business and society, and ethnicity and migration in the economic, social, and political life of modern societies. CELSI strives to make a contribution to the cutting-edge international scientific discourse.

Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies

Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies is a public university institute - with special autonomy - working in the field of applied sciences: Economics and Management, Law, Political Sciences, Agricultural Sciences and Plant Biotechnology, Medicine, and Industrial and Information Engineering. The School promotes the internationalization of didactics and research with innovative paths in the fields of university education, scientific research and advanced training.

WageIndicator Foundation

WageIndicator Foundation collects, compares and shares labour market information through online and offline surveys and research. Its national websites serve as always up-to-date online libraries featuring (living) wage information, labour law and career advice, for employees, employers and social partners. In this way, WageIndicator is a life changer for millions of people around the world.

Funding



BARCOVID (VS/2021/0190) is funded by the European Commission through its Social Dialogue Program. The views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union and the European Union cannot be held responsible for them

Bibliographical information

Szüdi, G., Fidrmuc, A. (2023). *Continuity and Change in Collective Agreements in the Visegrád countries Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic*. Country Report. University of Amsterdam, Central European Labour Studies Institute, Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, WageIndicator Foundation.

Contact

Gábor Szüdi, gabor.szudi@celsi.sk
Anna Fidrmuc, anna.fidrmuc@celsi.sk

@ 2023 University of Amsterdam/AIAS, Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI), Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, WageIndicator Foundation. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

This research report aims to investigate the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the content of collective bargaining agreements in the 4 Visegrád countries, namely Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

This report conducts a systematic comparison of altogether 17 collective bargaining agreements from the Visegrád countries for which both pre- and post-COVID-19 (i.e. concluded before and after March 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 crisis in European countries) documents could be found for comparison.

By analysing the presence or absence of specific clauses within these agreements, this report aims to assess how the pandemic has impacted the outcomes of collective bargaining, particularly in four specific areas of interest.

Taking into the inherent limitation stemming from a small sample of analysed agreements, the report concludes that there have been some noteworthy changes in the content of CBAs before and after the pandemic, in particular concerning the prevalence of once-only bonuses, the use of flexible hours and working conditions arrangements, the inclusion of health and safety provisions concerning health impairment and the relationship between health and work.

Furthermore, we found that explicit mentions of COVID-19 measures are rare in CBAs, similarly to other arrangements deemed more relevant in other countries, such as remote work, social distancing or relevant training measures.

2. Collective Agreement Renewals during the Pandemic

2.1 CBAs available for analytical purposes in the Visegrád countries

For this report, the WageIndicator Collective Agreements Database has been utilized as a primary resource for analysing Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs). The database, maintained by the WageIndicator Foundation (WIF), offers a comprehensive collection of CBAs from around the globe. As of June 2023 (the time of writing of this report), it contains more than 2 300 CBAs in 27 different languages, from 67 countries all across the globe. The database provides a unique opportunity to closely examine and compare agreements across countries, industries, and bargaining levels, with an added value of bringing CBAs out of the European context into its analytical framework.

The collection process for the CBAs involves downloading agreements from national registries, conducting smart Google searches, and directly requesting full-text agreements from bargaining social partners. In the case of the 4 Visegrád countries, different challenges persist as to the maintenance of CBA registry systems. Each country maintains a registration system for CBAs but with significant hindrances for analytical purposes.

Hungary is the only country having a database¹ containing each concluded CBAs within the country. The database is maintained by the Ministry for Technology and Industry but does not provide third-parties with full-text versions of the CBAs. Only basic data is available for free and permission for analysis has to be granted by the ministry.

In the other 3 Visegrád countries, the functioning online databases are maintained only for the so-called ‘higher-level’ (multi-employer or sectoral) collective agreements. The Slovak database² is operated by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, while the Czech database³ is run by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic. Both databases have the advantage of containing readily available full-text agreements however they only do so for higher-level agreements. Single-employer CBAs have to be sought for from other sources.

The Polish database⁴ for the higher-level agreements is maintained by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, while labour inspectorates handle registers of single-company collective agreements. Access to these agreements is possible at the request of trade unions and there are not freely available for third-party analysis.

The limitations of these databases resulted in an imbalanced sampling of the CBAs that could be analysed in the BARCOVID project: on the one hand, most of the CBAs were “higher-level” (and not single-employer) agreements and, on the other hand, they predominantly stemmed from the two countries with an online platform containing full-text agreements (Czech Republic and Slovakia). The researchers working with the agreements tried to mitigate these challenges by exploring other ways of data collection, among others being in touch with trade union and other employee organisation representatives or conducting systematic searches in (online) sources of relevant employers.

Nevertheless, the hindrance posed by the lack of universal access to all CBAs in each of the countries could not have been fully circumvented. Wageindicator foundation and all the other involved parties in potential future research concerning CBAs from Visegrád countries are looking into other opportunities on how to collect more and better-quality data in the future.

2.2 The annotation process for CBAs from the Visegrád countries

The annotation process of CBAs in the database is based on a comprehensive coding scheme with more than 800 variables related to fourteen macro-topics. This scheme is constantly evolving and is updated according to the most relevant topics emerging from public debates worldwide. Each CBA is annotated by professionals with knowledge and understanding of

¹ <http://www.mkir.gov.hu/ksznylv.htm>

² <https://www.employment.gov.sk/sk/praca-zamestnanost/vztah-zamestnanca-zamestnavateľa/kolektívne-pracovnoprávne-vztahy/kolektívne-zmluvy/zoznam-kolektívnych-zmluv-vyššieho-stupňa/>

³ <https://www.mpsv.cz/kolektivni-smlouvy-vyssiho-stupne-zavazne-pro-dalsi-zamestnavatele>

⁴ <http://www.dialog.gov.pl/dialog-krajowy/uklady-zbiorowe-pracy/stan-rejestru-prowadzonego-przez-ministra-rodziny-pracy-i-polityki-spolecznej/>

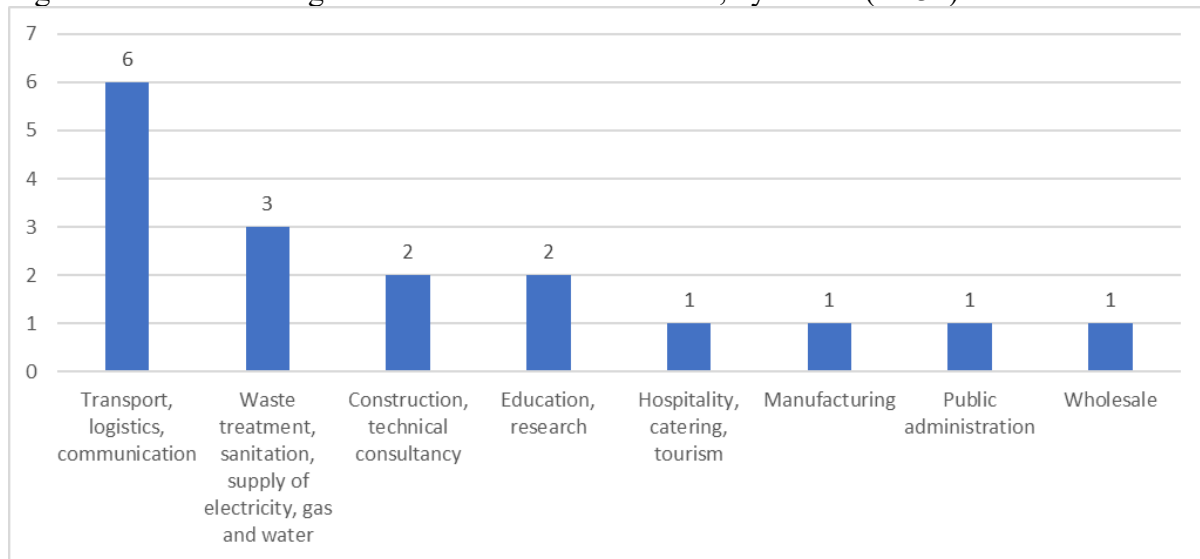
industrial relations and collective bargaining. In the case of Visegrád countries, the annotation process was done by the two authors of this report who – with the exception of Polish – had an advanced level of knowledge of each relevant language. For more detailed information on the coding scheme and variables used in the annotation process, the WageIndicator Collective Agreements Database Codebook (Ceccon and Medas, 2022) can be consulted as a reference.

For this report, 34 out of 57 CBAs from the Visegrád countries in the database could be analysed. This means that from the 40 CBAs collected within the framework of the predecessor projects of BARCOVID (i.e. BARCOM and COLBAR-Europe – 10 CBAs per each Visegrád country) 17 renewed agreements could be found after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020). As explained, this does not preclude that some of the other agreements were not renewed but the involved researchers could not locate the (full) texts. We have information of more renewed agreements from Poland but could not work with full-text renewed agreements therefore these CBAs were ultimately dropped from the final analysis presented in this report.

Each CBA is analysed in pairs, consisting of a pre-pandemic version and a renewal since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the report is based on 17 pairwise comparisons of pre- and post-COVID agreements (i.e. predecessor plus successor agreement). The “post” COVID-19 period refers to the period since the start of the pandemic, here demarcated as May 2020 onwards. The CBA-pairs are broken down by country in the following way: Slovakia with 14 CBAs, Czech Republic with 12 CBAs, Poland and Hungary with 4 CBAs each, showcasing the different level of difficulties experienced at the data collection process.

The CBAs analysed cover a range of sectors, see Figure 1. An overview of the 17 pairs of agreements can be found in the appendix. The most prominent sectors include transport, logistics and communication (6 pairs of agreements) and waste treatment, sanitation, supply of electricity, gas and water (3 pairs of agreements), while there are 2 pairs of agreements from the construction and education (research) areas. Finally, the majority of the CBAs, 10 pairs in total, are from the public sector (unsurprisingly given the nature of “higher-level” agreements available from the Slovak and Czech databases), while only 5 pairs originate from the private sector and another 2 pairs from the semi-public sector.

Figure 1. Pairs of V4 Agreements in the CBA Database, by Sector (N=34)



This research report aims to investigate the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the content of collective bargaining agreements. To achieve this, the analysis focuses on examining the clauses of collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) across four distinct categories (based on the main categories used within the WIF CBA database). Within each category, the presence and absence of clauses are compared before the pandemic and since its inception. The report aims to identify any observed changes in the CBAs' clauses, taking into account the small sample of CBAs.

Since Hungary and Poland are only present with 2 pairs of agreements in the database therefore a country-level analysis is not feasible. All analytical results are presented in relation to the Visegrád countries as one country sample, not emphasising but bearing in mind the (industrial relations) differences between the countries.

In line with the analysis concerning the Netherlands (see Jansen, 2023), we focus on the following four key categories based on the classification used by the WIF CBA database:

1. Compensation: This category includes clauses related to wages, structural wage increases, one-time bonuses, other extra payments, and overtime payments.
2. Working hours and work-life balance: This category focuses on work/family balance arrangements, such as working time, including flexible work arrangements, and gender equality measures.
3. Social security and job security: This category encompasses social security and pensions, and individual employment contracts, but also clauses on job titles, training/apprenticeship.
4. Health and safety: This category includes clauses on sickness and disability, health and medical assistance, health and safety provisions, health and safety monitoring, and specific COVID-19 mentions or arrangements.

2.2 CBA Renewals: General information

Before the start of the Barcovid project, altogether 40 CBAs from the Visegrád countries were collected in the WIF CBA database, with an equal distribution of 10 agreements for each country. Out of these 40 agreements concluded before 2019, 17 renewed agreements could be found and added to the database. The remaining 23 CBAs were either not renegotiated after the outbreak of the pandemic, were just renewed shortly before the cut-off date of March 2020, were in the process of renewal at the time of the writing of this report (June 2023), or their renewed full-text version could not be found for analytical purposes. The exact proportion of CBAs in the last category is not entirely known and requires further investigation.

Out of the 17 pairs of CBAs, only 4 pairs of CBAs were not concluded with a single employer, which might be surprising given the high relevance of “higher-level” agreements in the database. This result can be caused by that – apart from the private Polish companies – public entities having a (quasi-)monopolistic position in their sectors signed many of the agreements, e.g. state railway and other transport companies, state postal service or telecommunication companies. As regards other signatories, employers’ associations were only involved in 4 pairs of agreements, while trade unions were always (in all 34 cases) among the other signatory parties. No changes can be observed post-pandemic in any of these categories.

3. Pairwise Comparisons of pre- and post-Covid CBAs

In the following sections, we will conduct before-after comparisons for the 17 pairs of collective bargaining agreements collected from the Visegrád countries. Utilizing the coded information from the CBA Database, these comparisons will focus on changes in the four key topics mentioned in Chapter 2.1, starting from the wages and working hours, and then checking the potential effect of COVID-19 on social security and job security, as well as on health and safety.

3.1 Wages

Wages and related clauses, such as structural wage increases, one-time bonuses, other extra payments, and overtime payments are always present in CBAs from Visegrád countries; there were no changes in this regard post-pandemic. Out of the 17 pairs of CBAs, 8 pairs contained pay scales, with one more CBA having only one pay scale after the pandemic. Structural wage increase was also part of the negotiations in case of 10 pairs of agreements both before and after the pandemic.

The only relevant change post-pandemic can be seen in the inclusion of once-only bonuses within the agreements: 8 CBAs have such clauses post-pandemic, while beforehand there were no explicit clauses on such bonuses. Similarly, there was a small rise (2 CBAs) in agreements having clauses on annual extra or bonus payments agreed next to the regular wages. However, when looking into the issue closer, we observe that none of these once-only bonuses are directly

related to the pandemic but rather with other (indirectly related) issues, such as social assistance, anniversary bonuses, childbirth bonuses, etc. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 crisis could have served as a trigger to make such clauses on one-time bonuses more explicit within the agreements.

Similarly, there were no significant changes regarding in the number of CBAs with clauses on typical premium for specific reasons such as evening or night work, overtime hours or Sunday (weekend) work. A raise in the benefit level was rarely observed, e.g. in case of meal vouchers or other in-kind benefits, the more visible trend was again the explicit inclusion of such clauses within agreements.

Table 1. Clauses on wages, in numbers of CBAs (N=34)

	Pre-pandemic	Since pandemic	Change
Wages	17	17	0
Pay scales	8	8	0
Structural wage increase	10	10	0
Once-only bonus	0	8	8

3.2 Working hours and work-life balance

The second category of clauses where we expected to observe changes in CBA content was related to the broad topics on working hours and work-life balance, such as working time, flexible work arrangements, and other work/family balance arrangements or gender equality measures.

Next to wages, working hours are another prominent topic within agreements from the Visegrád region: all 34 CBAs had such clauses. With the exception of certain specific areas, such as state railway, almost all (27) agreements have an agreed amount of (max.) working hours per week ranging from 36 to 40 weeks (with 37.5 hours indicated in many cases). No significant changes in the working hours can be observed post-pandemic.

We have observed an increase in the number of CBAs including explicit clauses on flexible work arrangements. Only 10 agreements had such clauses before the pandemic, while this number rose to 16 post-pandemic, mainly due to agreements in Slovakia: before the pandemic 6 Czech, 2 Hungarian, 1 Slovak and 1 Polish CBA had such arrangements, while after the pandemic 6 Czech, 6 Slovak, 2 Hungarian and 2 Polish CBAs – this also means that both Hungarian and Polish agreements included such clauses after the negotiation rounds in pandemic time (due to the small number of agreements we can however not deduce whether this is a more general trend as visible in Slovakia).

As regards the concrete flexible work arrangements, interestingly remote work (work from home) is not the most popular option (and its relevance is not growing). Flexible working hours are present in 15 agreements (out of 17 agreements so almost universally) post-pandemic,

which is 5 more CBAs than before. Changing work-status and extended leave are new options in 2 agreements (as well as job share in one case).

Table 2. Clauses on flexible work arrangements, in numbers of CBAs (N=34)

	Pre-pandemic	Since pandemic	Change
Flexible work arrangements (all measures),	10	16	6
<i>out of which:</i>			
Flexible hours	10	15	5
Remote work, incl. tele-work	2	2	0
Changing work-status	0	2	2
Extended leave	0	2	2

Checking other clauses in CBAs that might have been changed in a beneficial direction due to the effect of COVID-19 on work-life balance we observed a change in the number of CBAs containing clauses on paid leave to care for dependent relatives, in particular children. Only 2 agreements (1 Czech and 1 Slovak) had such clauses before the COVID-19 pandemic, while this number grew to 9 agreements post-pandemic (6 Slovak and 3 Czech). The increase is thus due to two countries in essence, but again we cannot be sure how generalizable the trend is because of the small sample size.

There were no significant differences in clauses regarding gender equality clauses pre- and post-pandemic, with only a few CBAs containing such measures. In overall, 8 pairs of CBAs had clauses on equality or violence in the workplace, with 6 pairs of CBAs addressing discrimination at work. However, only 3 agreements had any special references to gender.

3.3 Health and safety

The third category of clauses investigated includes provisions on sickness and disability, health and safety measures, and specific COVID-19 mentions or arrangements. As can be seen in Table 3, both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, all coded agreements contained clauses on sickness and disability, and almost all – with the exception of 2 agreements – on health and medical assistance.

Health and safety provisions are also quite often mentioned in CBAs from the Visegrád countries and their numbers increased from 10 to 14 agreements after the pandemic. If we check the specific health and safety provisions included in CBAs before and after the pandemic, we observe an increase in the importance of each main categories. The agreements tend to have more types of provisions than before: work accidents remain the most important provision, followed by general improvements in working conditions and occupational diseases.

However, the relevance of clauses on health impairments significantly increases post-pandemic (when 9 agreements have such provisions in contrast to only 1 agreement before the pandemic), and arrangements on individual working time and working hours, as well as on individual

working conditions only appear in CBA texts after the pandemic (in 4 and 5 CBAs respectively). This is in line with the inclusion of (more) flexible work arrangements in post-pandemic CBAs.

Similarly, there are 4 more CBAs after the pandemic containing clauses on some kind of health and safety monitoring (increasing from 11 to 15 agreements). The trend is similar as for the health and safety provision in the sense that agreements tend to have more clauses post-pandemic. While the most important monitoring measure was related to professional risks before the pandemic, the relationship between health and work became more relevant after the crisis, showcasing a potentially higher interest in health (and sanitary) measures in the working place.

Lastly, we should mention that there were questions regarding the potential explicit mentions of COVID-19 health and safety measures in CBAs renegotiated after the outbreak of the pandemic. We did not find any agreements having clauses on masks, sanitizers or social distancing (given options within the database) – these topics do not seem to be in the focus of collective bargaining negotiations in the Visegrád countries. Altogether 4 renewed agreements (3 Czech and 1 Slovak) contained COVID-19 related clauses: the Czech CBAs dealt with special regulations on working conditions, including temporary work, wage negotiation or the discussion on new health and safety provisions, while the Slovak CBA arranged for a leave after the COVID-19 vaccination.

Table 3. Clauses regarding health and safety in numbers of CBAs (N=34)

	Pre-pandemic	Since pandemic	Change
Sickness and disability	17	17	0
Health and medical assistance	15	17	2
Health and safety provisions	10	14	4
Health and safety monitoring	11	15	4
COVID-19 mentions or arrangements	0	4	4

3.4 Social security and job security

The last category of clauses which is analysed encompasses social security and pensions, and individual employment contracts, but also clauses on job titles, training/apprenticeship. There were slight changes post-pandemic: almost all CBAs include clauses on social security and pensions (15 and 16 pairs of agreements out of 17 pairs, respectively). Where the CBA-database contains specification, these clauses refer to pension funds (12 CBAs before, and 11 CBAs after the pandemic); disability or unemployment funds were rarely mentioned (3 pairs of agreements).

As regards clauses on individual employment contracts and job security, the vast majority of agreements had such stipulations in their text before and after the pandemic (13 and 14 pairs of agreements out of 17 pairs, respectively). As regards specific clauses on employment contracts, there was an increase in the use of trial periods before and after the pandemic: 5

Continuity and Change in Collective Agreements in the Visegrád Countries before and after the Covid-19 Pandemic

agreements had a trial period mentioned before the pandemic, which increased to 10 agreements after the pandemic. Severance payment was included in 11 CBAs before the pandemic, which increased to 14 agreements post-pandemic, with no beneficial changes in terms of payments, dismissal grounds or legal assistance (in many cases data are missing).

Job titles do not seem to be a relevant part in the CBAs since only 6 pairs of agreements included such clauses both before and after the pandemic, and all 6 pairs contained job classifications but no detailed job descriptions.

Lastly, before the pandemic 11 collective agreements included provisions on training and 6 on apprenticeships; both numbers increased with one agreement post-pandemic. Out of the 23 agreements having clauses on training, 21 mentioned a company training programme, usually not specified further (and if yes, then mostly referring to acquiring new skills need for the job).

Table 4. Clauses regarding social security and job security, in numbers of CBAs (N=34)

	Pre-pandemic	Since pandemic	Change
Social security and pensions	15	16	1
Individual employment contracts and job security	13	14	1
Job titles	6	6	0
Training	11	12	1
Apprenticeship	6	7	1

4. Conclusion

This report conducts before-and-after comparisons of 17 pairs of collective bargaining agreements from the 4 Visegrád countries, focusing on changes in wages, working hours and conditions, social security and job security, as well as health and safety.

While there are only 4 agreements with an explicit mention of COVID-19-related arrangements, in other areas relevant shifts in clauses can be observed. These changes might be attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic and include the following: flexible hours and working condition arrangements are more likely to be included in post-COVID agreements, with new arrangements, such as extended leave or changing work-status also being featured in a few renewed CBAs. In this context there are more agreements containing clauses on paid leave for relatives, which again supports employees in maintaining a more flexible working time in crisis times.

In addition, once-only bonuses are more prominently featured in agreements; however, these payments are not directly related to COVID-19 but rather seem to support employees indirectly from potential effects of the crisis on their working life, such as social assistance.

As regards health and safety measures, more post-COVID agreements contain such clauses, in particular about monitoring of relationship between health and work or health impairment provisions. Such clauses were not in the focus of pre-pandemic CBAs, potentially showcasing a higher interest in sanitary and health measures in COVID-times.

Continuity and Change in Collective Agreements in the Visegrád Countries before and after the Covid-19 Pandemic

We must note that all these findings are based on a small but sectorally diverse sample of CBAs therefore they cannot be considered representative or typical for the whole region or individual countries. Further research would be required to validate these findings, which would require a more systematic data collection from underrepresented countries from the region, in particular Hungary and Poland. This preliminary analysis could provide a first step on deciding how to proceed with such a future data collection and analysis with the aim of conducting a more detailed assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on collective bargaining in the Visegrád countries.

References

Cecon, D. and Medas, G. (2022). Codebook WageIndicator Collective Agreements Database – Version. 5 – February 2022. WageIndicator Foundation, Amsterdam.

Jansen, G. (2023). Collective Bargaining in the Netherlands during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Country Report. University of Amsterdam, Central European Labour Studies Institute, Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, WageIndicator Foundation.

Appendix

Overview of the collective bargaining agreements from V4 countries in the CBA Database

Topic	Country
České dráhy railway	Czech Republic
Energy sector higher-level	Czech Republic
Prague public transport	Czech Republic
Skanska	Czech Republic
Prague University of Economics and Business	Czech Republic
Civil sector higher-level	Czech Republic
MÁV railway	Hungary
Electricity sector higher-level	Hungary
Arcelor Mittal	Poland
Zywiec	Poland
University of Economics in Bratislava	Slovakia
Slovak Telekom	Slovakia
Trade and Tourism higher-level	Slovakia
Energy sector higher-level	Slovakia
Slovenská pošta – Slovak Post	Slovakia
ZSSK railway	Slovakia
Slovak city administration higher-level	Slovakia