



(Proj. 101126483)

Country report Slovakia

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1.1 Introduction

This report examines the processes of building and maintaining trust, as well as the sources of trust and distrust between social partners across different levels in Slovakia. It explores the role of trust in industrial relations, focusing on how social partners perceive its impact on social dialogue and collective bargaining. We analyse various dimensions of trust, key obstacles to its development, and the broader implications for industrial relations. The findings are based on interviews with stakeholders and experts at national, sectoral, and company levels in three sectors. The report is part of the TRUE EUROPE research project, which investigates the determinants and outcomes of trust in social partner relations. Interviews were conducted in eight countries, focusing on the metal, transport, and banking and finance sectors. We explored trust levels across different social dialogue topics—from core issues like wages to less contentious areas such as digitalisation, skills and training, and health and safety.

This report is based on 1) Desk research of data such as reports, webpages, and previous research; 2) 14 interviews from 2024 and 2025 with representatives from trade unions (TU) and employer organisations (EO), and in one case, a regional actor at the national, sectoral, and local levels in the three sectors (Table 1). Two interviews were conducted in person, two in written form, and the rest digitally, mainly via Zoom. The interviews lasted 38–71 minutes, were recorded, and transcribed.

Table 10.1. Interviewees: levels and sectors (no. of respondents)

Level	Banking & Finance	Metal	Transport	Cross-sectional	Total
Local					
Employee rep.	1	1	1		
Employer rep.	1	1			
Sectoral					
TU official	1	(1*)	1*		
EO official	1	1	1		
National					
TU official				2	
EO official				1	
Other (Gov./Civ.)				1	
TOTAL	4	3	3	4	14

*This interviewee represented both metal and transport (only counted in transport totals)

Besides the national level, where the largest trade union confederation in Slovakia and one of the largest employer organizations were approached, we recruited two representatives from the main trade unions involved at the sectoral and local company levels for each sector. On the employer side, we recruited local HR professionals and/or managers, as well as sectoral employer organizations. For confidentiality reasons, we refer to the interviewees as (#1 SK), (#2 SK), etc., and have chosen not to link specific representatives to the selected sectors.

1.2 Industrial relations at national and sectoral level

Slovakia is a central European post-state socialist country and since its independence status from 1993 it has gone through several changes and important stages. Slovakia has undergone significant transformation to a capitalist market system, and from late 90s and early 2000s Slovakia embraced foreign direct investment (FDI), becoming heavily reliant on multinational manufacturing and retail companies, particularly in low-cost, low-skill assembly operations. This dependence has characterized Slovakia as a "dependent market economy," with limited domestic decision-making and creativity in production (Šumichrast and Bors, 2023, 71). From industrial relations perspective, Slovakia is classified as an "embedded neoliberal regime," which is characterized by a permanent search for compromises between market transformation and social cohesion (Bohle and Greskovits 2012).

Slovak trade unions, while firmly established as legitimate representatives of workers' interests at both enterprise and industry levels, operate within a legal framework that deeply embeds their institutional powers. However, they frequently face criticism for being influenced by party politics and business interests. The unions' structure remains relatively transparent and not highly fragmented, although fragmentation has been on the rise over the past decade. Their organization, influence, and access to power are largely shaped by legally defined representativeness criteria.

A pivotal amendment to the Labour Code and the Act on Tripartite in 2021 expanded access to national tripartism, allowing unions that do not meet the 100,000-member threshold to participate. This legislative shift has effectively introduced a forced pluralism into the tripartite negotiations. The Confederation of trade unions of Slovak republic (Konfederácia odborových zväzov Slovenskej republiky, KOZ SR) remains the largest and dominant confederation of twenty-four independent trade unions. Prior to the 2021 legislative amendment, KOZ SR was the sole trade union confederation meeting the legal representativeness criteria for national tripartism. However, the landscape has since shifted, with newer and independent trade unions forming the Joint Trade Unions of Slovakia (Spoločné odbory Slovenska, SOS) in 2018. Despite failing to meet the official representativeness criteria, SOS has been participating in tripartism negotiations since 2021 (Kahancová-Uhlerová 2023, 949-951).

On the employers' side, four entities are represented in the tripartite negotiations. The Association of Industrial Unions and Transport (Asociácia priemyselných zväzov a dopravy, APZD) primarily covers the industrial sector, including multinational corporations in the automotive industry and sectors such as construction. The Republic Union of Employers (Republiková únia zamestnávateľov, RÚZ) has a strong presence of Slovak companies, including shared service centers and retail businesses. The Association of Employer Unions and Associations (Asociácia zamestnávateľských zväzov a združení SR, AZZZ) mainly represents smaller enterprises. Additionally, the Association of Towns and Municipalities of Slovakia also effectively stands on the employers' side.

Collective bargaining in Slovakia plays a crucial role in shaping labour relations, yet it remains highly fragmented. The Labour Code grants employees the right to collective bargaining under Act No. 2/1991, with agreements negotiated at both company and sectoral levels. However, most agreements are concluded at the company level, leading to significant wage disparities—especially between the well-covered public and manufacturing sectors and the lagging service and retail industries. Currently, Slovakia has around 18 sectoral agreements, primarily covering public sector employees and key manufacturing industries such as engineering and metallurgy. However, collective bargaining coverage is only 25%, far below the European directive on adequate minimum wages target of 80%. Since the 1990s, coverage has steadily declined due to falling union density, deindustrialization, privatization, and decentralized bargaining.

Industrial relations and social dialogue in Slovakia have been influenced by political cycles, particularly the alternation of right-wing and left-wing governments. Right-wing liberal governments in the early 2000s imposed austerity measures, prompting trade union-led protests against wage and welfare restrictions. As political shifts occurred, labour activism adapted, with left-leaning governments providing more space for negotiation, while conservative and populist administrations often forced unions into a defensive position (Navrátil et al. 2025).

Industrial relations in banking & finance, metal, and public transport

The three sectors exhibit significant differences. In Slovakia, which remains a relatively industrialized country and was even more so following its establishment in 1993, manufacturing industries has traditionally been a sector where collective bargaining has operated, including at the sectoral level. However, in recent years, the level of sectoral bargaining has been deteriorating. Increasing complications arise as employers increasingly resist sectoral collective bargaining.

Sectoral-level collective bargaining now occurs only in certain subsectors of the metal industry and the Slovak context, a relatively high number of higher-level collective agreements are negotiated, covering the electrotechnical, metallurgical, engineering, and glass industries. A distinctive feature is that the metalworkers' trade union OZ KOVO, as the largest trade union in Slovakia, also attracts members from other sectors. As a result, it currently represents public road transport workers and certain areas of the retail sector. Additionally, OZ KOVO participates in the negotiation of collective agreements for firefighters as well as for public and civil service employees.

Despite Slovakia's status as an "automotive powerhouse," higher-level collective bargaining does not occur in the automotive sector. While partially covered by the engineering industry agreement, employers have long resisted sectoral bargaining and ignored OZ KOVO's proposals. OZ KOVO's automotive commission continues efforts to engage employers, without success (#4 SK). Slovakia has four car manufacturers (with one in development) and over 350 suppliers. In 2020, the sector employed 125,100 people (5% of total employment)

and produced 1.35 million vehicles in 2020. Slovakia is the leader in car production per capita (Šumichrast and Bors 2023, 74).

In the public road transport sector, the Independent Trade Union of Public Road Transport ceased to exist in 2008, as it merged with OZ KOVO. This process suppressed sectoral bargaining in road transport for several years, and although it was later revived, significant regional disparities in wages emerged during this period (#4 SK). The last higher-level collective agreement was negotiated for 2019. In 2020, a change in the statutes of the employers' association led to the termination of negotiations, and this situation persists to this day. Similarly, the presence of trade unions and dialogue at the company level in the public road transport sector, like in the metal sector, has been long-established, making it a traditional industry from this perspective. Another complicating factor for the sector is the involvement of a third player – local governments, which influence financial decision-making. These finances, in turn, are dependent on state funding, creating a complex conglomerate of relationships.

The banking sector has the shortest tradition of social dialogue and collective bargaining compared to other industries. Social dialogue in the sector no longer exists in Slovakia; it ceased after the Trade Union of Banks and Insurance Companies and the Slovak Bank Association (SBA) removed collective bargaining from the SBA's statutes in 2016. There are no meetings between these organizations (SBA and the Slovak Association of Insurance Companies) in any forum, nor is there any discussion outside of them. Trade union efforts to restore social dialogue—directed at the SBA, the management of individual banks in Slovakia, Slovak employer organizations, their foreign management, and European banking associations—have remained unanswered (#8 SK).

1.3 National and sectoral level interactions and trust

This section looks at how social partners interact and build (or fail to build) trust at both the national and sectoral levels in Slovakia. While cooperation at the national level benefits from established structures, a relatively stable tripartite framework, and personal continuity among key actors, developments at the sectoral level paint a more fragmented and inconsistent picture. Industrial relations vary significantly between sectors such as metal, public transport, and banking—each shaped by its own history, institutional landscape, and practical constraints. In some sectors, traditions of bargaining still persist, while in others, dialogue has broken down entirely or remains largely symbolic. Broader economic changes, shifting employer strategies, and political developments have all played a role in shaping these varying trajectories. The sections that follow explore these dynamics in more depth, outlining how trust is formed, challenged, or eroded across different levels and sectors of Slovakia's industrial relations system.

Characterizing national and sectoral level interactions

At the national level, social partners are influenced by two opposing factors. On one hand, social dialogue has functioned in a relatively stable manner since its foundations were established after the Velvet Revolution, even before the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, the functioning of tripartism has been significantly shaped by different governments, particularly along the left-right political spectrum. These political shifts have tended to steer tripartite relations in different directions—governments on the left have generally been more open to union involvement, while centre-right administrations have often leaned more towards employer interests. While natural antagonisms persist, recent years have seen a certain harmonization of relations between trade unions and employer organizations, supported by their representatives (#1 SK; #2 SK). A contributing factor was the leadership change within the KOZ SR in 2021 (#1 SK). This change, combined with a more pragmatic approach on both sides, has helped stabilize national-level dialogue despite ongoing political variability. Tripartite negotiations have recently been substantive, professional, and argument-based, operating within established structures. However, challenges often stem from the government's stance—most notably in 2020, when trade unions withdrew from tripartite talks after the centre-right government, in agreement with employers, reduced the minimum wage calculation threshold from 60% to 57% of the average national wage. Recently, however, a unifying factor between trade unions and employers has been their joint opposition to government efforts to fast-track legislation through parliament, bypassing standard mechanisms, including social partner participation.

Despite relatively good relations at the national level, reaching an agreement on the minimum wage remains challenging. The only historic agreement between trade unions and employers on the minimum wage was achieved in 2022. Trade unions traditionally advocate for the highest possible minimum wage, while employers push for lower levels. An even greater point of contention is the linkage of night and weekend work bonuses to the minimum wage (#2 SK).

Representatives of sectoral unions also participate at the tripartite level, and in addition to the tripartite negotiations, ad hoc working groups, advisory committees, and sectoral Tripartite forum also function, although the standardized format is the primary structure and holds the most influence, with others being supplementary. Furthermore, several sectoral Tripartite forums have already been dissolved. For example, in the transport sector, the ministry coordinates the process, involving railway workers, and there is mutual information exchange on the situation and discussions on legislative proposals, but no formal negotiations—just an advisory body (#6 SK). In the early 2010s, also an informal "industrial tripartite" declaration of cooperation existed for a while, but it never became legally formalized. After approximately three years, it ceased to function due to a lack of trust between social partners and vastly differing views on what should be prioritized (#4 SK).

Dimensions and bases of trust at national level

Institutional-based aspects of trust are important at the national level. The system of tripartite functioning and its clear rules and framework contribute to this, including the composition of the parties involved. The employers' side is more heterogeneous in this regard. There is cooperation and agreement on fundamental issues, but since each representative represents a slightly different segment and, in terms of numbers, businesses of varying sizes, there are also differing perspectives on certain matters (#2 SK).

Respondents confirmed that tripartite negotiations are conducted in a professional manner, with emotional outbursts being rare. Whenever possible (except for typically contentious issues such as the mentioned minimum wage), the discussions aim at presenting positions in a non-conflictual way (#1 SK, #2 SK, #4 SK). The fundamental basis for building trust is a simple rule: "Trust works when the rules are followed" (#2 SK). In this sense, a helpful factor is that the people involved have been stable in recent years, and from a personal perspective, the relationships are normal. The change in leadership of the KOZ SR in 2022 also contributed to this. However, social partners are aware of their positions and the different interests they represent. It is not just about personal preferences; they act with the mandate of their respective organizations (#1 SK, #2 SK). However, a critical view has also emerged regarding tripartite negotiations, namely that the process often lacks genuine dialogue and results in little constructive exchange of ideas (#4 SK).

Sectoral level interaction and trust

In contrast to the national level, where trust and cooperation can be observed, the situation at the sectoral level is quite the opposite. Industrial relations in Slovakia are not built on the dominant position of sectoral bargaining, which is reflected in the lower level of trust at this level. There is still limited trust, and ideological differences remain a challenge. Employers often see unions as a problem rather than a partner. They feel unions are radical, they put too much pressure on wages, the unions have been accused of a radical, class approach.

From an industrial relations perspective, union organization has been steadily declining, and although it has stabilized in recent years, when employers perceive that unions are weak, there is no pressure to negotiate, and no relationships are formed. As a result, trust cannot be built according to trade union representatives. The issue is that it is not a mobilizing topic even for trade unions (#3 SK). Among union members, there is sometimes noticeable scepticism towards sectoral bargaining, with more importance placed on negotiations at the company level (#1 SK). They also acknowledge that even existing sectoral bargaining is more formal and has a limited real impact, especially when it comes to provisions in favour of workers. If it exists at all, it is perceived as supplementary; this is how even ordinary union members perceive it (#4 SK). Building trust within the union ranks is a fundamental challenge, with internal communication often cited as a barrier. Rank-and-file union members frequently feel disconnected from higher levels of union leadership, which leads to a lack of trust in the unions' ability to represent their interests (#3 SK).

As the research indicates, sectoral collective bargaining helps unions retain control over working conditions and maintain their bargaining power. It ensures transparency within unions, reduces conflicts, and creates stable conditions for their operations. Through sectoral bargaining, unions can improve their leadership and negotiation skills, taking on greater responsibility for decisions that impact millions of workers. This role places unions as key political and societal actors, contributing to labour market governance and democracy (Ceccon et al. 2023, 33-34). Furthermore, achieving the goal of 80% collective bargaining coverage, as outlined in the Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages, will be impossible without strengthening sectoral collective bargaining.

The biggest issue has been, and continues to be, wage-related matters. This was particularly the case because sectoral bargaining in the observed sectors ended precisely over this issue. As mentioned earlier, with the exception of a few subsectors within the metal sector, bargaining does not take place in the largest and most important industrial area, the automotive sector, nor in banking and finance, or in the public road transport sector. This has also strained personal relationships among the various stakeholders. In the last-mentioned sector, the situation is even complicated, because there is a third and also maybe fourth actor involved: the municipalities and central government.

Dimensions and bases of (dis)trust at sectoral level

Wage negotiations remain the most contentious topic in sectoral collective bargaining, with all parties acknowledging that these discussions often lead to deadlock. According to several respondents (#7 SK, #8 SK), the issue of wages is difficult to resolve due to radical differences in perspective. This is particularly evident in the banking sector, where wage discussions have become a significant source of distrust, leading to the breakdown of social dialogue (#7 SK, #8 SK). The inability to reach agreement on wages has also resulted in the perception that sectoral bargaining is ineffective and ultimately undermines trust.

In the banking sector, the absence of sectoral collective bargaining is seen as a result of radical stances on wage demands. The Slovak Banking Association, in the context of the absence of sectoral-level collective bargaining and in response to the European directive aimed at promoting collective bargaining, adopted in 2019 the so-called “Memorandum on Respecting the Rights of Employees in the Banking Sector,” which it updates on an ongoing basis. In the Memorandum, banks commit to upholding and supporting the rights of their employees. It goes beyond legal obligations and outlines commitments that employers in the banking sector provide in the form of benefits applied uniformly across the sector.¹ The Slovak Banking Association views the memorandum as a certain form of fulfilling social dialogue (#8 SK). (#8 SK). The Trade Union Association of Banks and Insurance Companies responded critically to the existence of the memorandum, considering it vague and legally unenforceable.² This lack of cooperation between sectoral unions and employers has led to

¹ Press release on the adoption of the memorandum:

<https://www.sbaonline.sk/novinka/memorandum-o-dodrziavani-prav-zamestnancov-bankoveho-sektora/>

² Position of the Trade Union Association of Banks and Insurance Companies:

https://ozbp.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Memorandum_a_poznamky_OZPPaP.pdf

a breakdown in trust and an unwillingness to engage in broader discussions about the future of the sector, including issues such as AI implementation (#7 SK, #8 SK).

The level of trust and the dynamics of sectoral collective bargaining vary significantly across different sectors. In the public transport sector, EU regulations and the push for liberalization have led to a focus on price reduction, which has diminished the role of collective bargaining in some areas. While some employers in the sector support the inclusion of collective bargaining as a requirement for public procurement (#6 SK), there is resistance from local authorities, who control the budget and are more focused on cost efficiency (#9 SK).

The automotive industry exhibits a preference for company-level bargaining, citing the differences between small and large companies as a reason why sectoral bargaining is not effective (#5 SK). Sectoral agreements are perceived as insufficiently representative and are often seen as irrelevant due to these disparities.

External factors, particularly EU regulations, have influenced sectoral collective bargaining. For example, the EU directive on minimum wages could play a pivotal role in strengthening sectoral bargaining. However, employers remain resistant, expressing uncertainty about the changes and whether they will be compelled to negotiate under new legal requirements (#8 SK).

1.4 Local level interactions and trust

The findings regarding trust in company-level collective bargaining reveal a nuanced and complex dynamic, with significant variations in how trust is established and maintained between employers and trade unions. The key themes include the perceived antagonism between employers and trade unions, the importance of building trust through communication and compromise, and the role of leadership changes in shaping the relationship.

Characterizing company level interaction

The situation in the observed cases varied significantly. In the metal sector, the analysis covered a case of a supplier company in the automotive industry. From the perspective of trust, this case represented a positive example, as trust currently prevails within the company, and mutual relationships are standardized (#1 SK0, #1 SK1). A foreign company with a Korean owner initially followed a familiar pattern seen in other similar factories in Slovakia. Drawing from experiences with a militant trade union movement in its home country, the foreign owner was wary of union presence and initially resisted engagement (Šumichrast and Bors 2023, 78-79). The early stages of establishing dialogue were difficult, as unions were not welcomed. However, over time, the situation improved, and labour relations gradually stabilized and became more cooperative (#10 SK; #11 SK). As the trade union respondent stated:

Of course, the situation at the beginning was very complicated, as the Korean management did not want to allow the formation of a trade union as such. This was accompanied by certain repressive actions on their part. But over time, the employer also realized that it would be better to cooperate and strive for mutual collaboration rather than to fight. (#10 SK)

Interestingly, the relationship was not affected even by the fact that the main trade union leader ran in the last European elections as a candidate for a radical socialist party. He had informed the employer's side about his decision in advance (#10 SK; #11 SK) which indicates a relationship based on open communication and existing mutual trust.

Existing trust has many benefits. It helps solve problems faster and reduces conflicts during bargaining and also other interactions (#1 SK). When trust exists at the company level, it can also be advantageous for the employer to rely on trade union representatives in certain situations:

Of course, when there are any concerns raised by employees, we try to address them together in order to maintain a certain level of objectivity. There is a third party involved, and people trust the fact that the trade union was part of the solution proposed by the company. So even when a concern is initially raised by the employee alone, it often happens that we call in the trade union or reach a solution together, followed by meetings. (#11 SK)

In the banking sector, it was not possible to establish a unified case. In one smaller bank operating on the Slovak market, December 2023 saw the first-ever strike in the Slovak banking sector, which in itself indicates a lack of trust. The deliberate disregard of the trade union at the workplace, including its requests for negotiations and wage demands, ultimately led to the strike situation (#1 SK, #4 SK). The strike was successful, with the bank's trade union receiving broad support not only from its own members but also from other trade unions and the trade union confederation. The strike was accompanied by considerable media coverage.

However, the impact of the strike on the situation within the bank remains unclear. At the time, there was no indication of a significant improvement of situation the workplace or a shift in the level of trust. Quite the opposite, the strike further disrupted relationships and trust (#13 SK). From the sectoral employer level, it was stated that it had a negative impact on the public image of the banking sector as a whole (#8 SK). On the other hand, from the unions' perspective, the strike earned them respect and also gained the attention of the foreign management (#13 SK).

The second case, with the employer's representative, was one of the largest banks in Slovakia. In this case, while labour relations had been strained in the past, a management decision to appoint a new individual responsible for negotiations with trade unions led to an improvement and regular meetings with the unions. As a result, stable collective bargaining at the company level was established. But the meetings are not limited only to the process of collective bargaining:

For the last three years, we have set up a functioning system based on partnership communication, on regular partnership communication. This means that we have regular meetings... there are no surprising pieces of information (#14 SK).

Regular communication, along with a stable and predictable environment, has been key to building greater trust. The case from the public road transport sector highlighted a complex situation characterized by prevailing distrust. Once again, wage negotiations proved to be particularly problematic (#1, #2 SK). The complexity of the situation is further exacerbated by the fact that regional management of bus companies receives funding from municipalities, which, in a broader sense, remain dependent on state financing:

But this is your ceiling, because those limits are set by the contract between the transport companies in our region... and the municipality. So, this is—on one hand, we're trying, but on the other hand, they tell us yes, but this is your ceiling. You can negotiate, yes, but I see this as a fundamental problem. Basically, we addressed this with the municipality as well, but they didn't really respond. So basically, we see this as a denial of our most basic right to collective bargaining. (#12 SK)

The situation in the sector is further complicated by broader developments. In 2022, suburban bus drivers in one Slovak region planned to strike in response to low wages and poor working conditions. However, their employer blocked the strike by invoking a ministerial order on economic mobilization.

The order had been introduced during the Ukrainian refugee crisis to ensure uninterrupted transport capacity during a national emergency. While such measures may have been justified at the time, the situation later stabilized—yet restrictions that limit constitutional rights, including the right to strike, remained in place (Košč 2022).

In the most negative cases at the company level, trade unions are perceived as an undesirable element by some employers. Employers often view them as antagonistic, particularly when they intervene in decision-making or challenge the employer's authority over managing a private business (#4 SK). The demand for higher wages by trade unions is seen as a direct increase in operating costs, which employers argue reduces profitability. In some instances, the reaction to the formation of a union within a company is one of surprise and scepticism, with employers questioning the necessity of such an organization when, in their view, workplace issues could be resolved through direct communication rather than formal union intervention (#4 SK). This response highlights the deep-seated tension between employers and trade unions, particularly regarding perceived threats to managerial autonomy. On the other hand, the employers' side, for example, negatively perceives the cooperation of trade unions with other actors, as was the case in the banking sector, where the trade union collaborated with NGOs such as Working Poor (Pracujúca chudoba) and the results of this cooperation, in the form of various analyses and contributions presented on social media (#8 SK).

The failure to honour collective agreements also damages trust. In some cases, employers do not engage with unions to explain why certain provisions are not being implemented, leading to frustration and further distrust (#3 SK). Personal trust between negotiating

parties plays a significant role in these dynamics. Some employers are more open to dialogue, but others approach negotiations with the intention of not reaching an agreement and operate from a position of power (#3 SK). Trust is further eroded by the frequent turnover of management on the employer's side, which disrupts continuity and requires rebuilding trust from scratch (#7 SK).

Dimensions and bases of (dis)trust at local level

Company-level negotiations have a distinct character, with a clear difference from sectoral or national negotiations. While employers at the national or sectoral levels might avoid negotiations, the presence of unions at the company level often ensures that negotiations cannot be entirely avoided (#3 SK). However, the level of trust at this level can be strained, particularly during collective bargaining. For example, there are challenges in the negotiation process, where decisions were ultimately made by a manager located abroad, rather than locally, leading to a perception that the negotiations were ineffective (#3 SK). The role of foreign management and its influence on wage policies is another factor, especially mentioned in banking sector (#8 SK, #1 #4 SK). A similar situation was reported in the banking sector, where decision-making processes were often out of the hands of local management, further diminishing the efficacy of negotiations (#8 SK).

Building trust at the company level is a long-term process that hinges on honouring agreements. Several respondents agree that trust is primarily built through consistent and honest communication. A willingness to negotiate in good faith, with a genuine desire for compromise, is essential (#4 SK, #6 SK). Employers and unions must approach negotiations with the intent to reach a mutually beneficial solution, rather than engaging in superficial negotiations that lack sincerity (#4 SK). Compromise, rather than a revolutionary approach, is seen as critical for maintaining stability in business operations (#6 SK). Once trust is broken, it is difficult to rebuild, especially when the system of political cycles or changes in leadership disrupts continuity and reliability (#4 SK).

The personal relationship between the employer and union representatives is another important factor in trust-building. When both parties share a sense of mutual respect, negotiations are more likely to be productive, and agreements can be reached more easily (#4 SK). However, when there is a lack of respect or when parties are solely focused on protecting their own interests, trust is undermined. Also, after many years in the same workplace, it is difficult not to develop more personal relationships in some cases; however, during collective bargaining, it is important to maintain a certain level of distance and professionalism (#10 SK, #11 SK).

1.5 Conclusion

In the context of Slovak industrial relations, there is a clear division between three main levels: national, sectoral, and company-level, each with varying degrees of trust within their respective frameworks. Currently—setting aside specific nuances—the highest level of

trust is found at the national level. At the sectoral level, particularly in the areas under study, and at the company level, the situation is more complex. We have observed both positive and negative examples: some cases where trust in the basic structures functions well or has shown improvement in recent years, and others where trust has long been eroded and either functions poorly or is virtually absent.

Wage related issues are the most complex and create the greatest potential for eroding trust or maintaining distrust. This was confirmed by nearly all respondents and applies across all three levels—national, sectoral, and company. Another significant factor contributing to distrust is the very absence of collective bargaining. Trade union representatives consistently state that employers' avoidance of sectoral collective bargaining significantly undermines trust, which is understandable. If one party deliberately avoids negotiations, it cannot be perceived positively. Employers, however, provide their own justifications—some argue that the system's inefficiency or non-compliance by all parties is the main issue, rather than the concept of sectoral bargaining itself. At the same time, some trade union representatives also show a degree of indifference, emphasizing that company-level bargaining remains the priority. However, the fundamental principle remains: for trust to exist, bargaining must take place. The impact of recent legislative changes, introduced in line with the European Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages, remains to be seen. These changes have reinstated the extension of collective agreements and will compel employer associations that previously used legal loopholes to avoid negotiations to return to the bargaining table.

When it comes to trust vertically within and between the TU-organizations, at the company, sectoral, and national levels—and back again—trust works on a very good level. Of course, there are also nuances regarding certain difficulties that arise, though these were only mentioned marginally, acknowledging that not everything always works perfectly even within "our team."). Between the opposition parties it does not work like that – either because, they do not even come into contact with each other, or because there is a clear lack of trust: if, for example, even trust on the company level works fine, within the company, it does not work in relation to the representative of the opposing party on the sectoral level (#1 SK0).

In most cases, respondents agreed that the arrival or replacement of individuals within an organization does not have the potential to fundamentally change the level of trust. This is primarily because new appointees are typically not entirely new to the field or the organizational level in question but rather individuals who have already operated within the sector. However, there were differing general assessments, such as the observation that the new generation of employers tends to be more driven by capital interests, which has led to a deterioration in social relations compared to previous generations. Older management was perceived as more socially oriented, while new management is seen as more focused on profitability. This shift has affected the level of trust between employers and trade unions, with the newer generation of employers being less open to negotiation and compromise (#4 SK).

Respondents unanimously agreed that building trust at all levels is a long-term process. The key factors that contribute to its development, support, growth, and maintenance include open, clear, and sincere communication, a willingness to compromise, a genuine commitment to negotiation, and adherence to both formal and informal agreements. Also, regular meetings could help address operational and structural problems. These meetings, or in general, a more predictable environment, create greater stability. Additionally, collective bargaining itself can be viewed in this regard as a stable institution.

Nearly all respondents also agreed that trust is of paramount importance and considered it a critical factor. It was evident that when trust is present, it benefits all parties involved—workers, companies, the economy, and society as a whole. This conclusion was clear and unambiguous. The reality and various nuances, however, presented a significantly more complex narrative, revealing that trust is not easily attainable and, in some cases, there is not even a genuine ambition to achieve it or to sit down at the negotiating table with the opposing party.

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