

BARSERVICE

Towards smart bargaining in the publishing sector in North Macedonia

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Table of contents

- Executive summary 3
- I. Sector identification and trends 3
- II. Current state of collective bargaining 4
- III. Challenges to collective bargaining 6
- IV. Towards Smart Bargaining 7
- V. European Perspectives 10
- VI. Conclusions 11

List of Tables

Table 1: List of interviews



Executive summary

The publishing sector in Macedonia faces significant challenges, including the ongoing digital transformation, fragmented collective bargaining mechanisms, and weak union representation. These issues complicate negotiations, often leading to inequalities in employment conditions across the sector. Digitalization has disrupted traditional publishing workflows, requiring a reassessment of labor agreements to include provisions for freelancers and new technological demands. Additionally, the fragmented nature of union representation limits workers' collective power, further hindering progress. This report explores the state of collective bargaining in the publishing sector, identifies key challenges, and outlines actionable strategies to adopt smart bargaining practices for a more equitable and collaborative future.

I. Sector identification and trends

The publishing sector in Macedonia forms a vital part of the cultural and educational framework, with its primary output ranging from educational materials and textbooks to professional and general content. Key players, including Ars Lamina, Prosvetno Delo, and Trimaks, from which we interviewed representatives, dominate this space, shaping the market and meeting the evolving demands of readers and institutions. While the demand for educational materials remains robust due to government-supported initiatives, the general book market has seen a steady decline in print sales as digital formats such as e-books and audiobooks gain popularity. As the representative from Ars Lamina stated: "The rise of e-books and audiobooks has been both a challenge and an opportunity for us." (INT1, 2024).

The sector's economic dynamics are significantly shaped by technological advancements. The adoption of digital publishing has introduced new methods and processes, requiring employees to acquire advanced technical skills. Concurrently, the increasing reliance on freelancers and part-time workers has fragmented the workforce, complicating efforts to ensure fair and consistent working conditions. Additionally, global supply chain disruptions and rising production costs have pressured profitability, forcing publishers to innovate and diversify their offerings. The impact of globalization has further intensified competition, as international publishers encroach on the market, compelling local companies to balance competitiveness with preserving their unique cultural and educational contributions.

II. Current state of collective bargaining

In the publishing sector in Macedonia, collective bargaining primarily takes place at the firm level. Sector-wide agreements are non-existent, stemming from a fragmented approach to labor relations. "Collective bargaining in North Macedonia is predominantly decentralized, with no sectoral agreements, reflecting the broader trends" (Ristovski, 2022). Employers such as Ars Lamina, Prosvetno Delo, and Trimaks individually negotiate terms with employees, often bypassing broader collaborative frameworks. This firm-specific bargaining model caters to immediate operational needs but limits consistency across the sector. "We negotiate contracts individually to address specific needs," said a representative from Prosvetno Delo (INT2).

Collective bargaining in the publishing sector is highly decentralized. Agreements tend to focus on short-term priorities such as setting wages, adjusting working hours, or managing temporary staff arrangements. There is little to no coordination between firms, and the absence of sector-wide agreements has exacerbated disparities in employment conditions. This decentralized approach, while flexible, lacks the structure needed to address systemic challenges like digitalization or workforce fragmentation.

The current bargaining mechanisms offer both benefits and drawbacks. On the positive side, firm-level agreements allow employers to tailor terms to specific organizational needs, facilitating quick decision-making. However, the absence of sectoral coordination has led to inconsistencies in employee rights and benefits. This fragmentation weakens the bargaining position of workers and creates gaps in addressing issues like training, digital skill acquisition, and job security for freelancers.

The primary actors in collective bargaining within the publishing sector include employers, employees, and unions. Employers, represented by firms like Ars Lamina, Prosvetno Delo, and Trimaks, hold significant influence in negotiations. Employees comprise a mix of full-time staff, freelancers, and contractors, with varying levels of representation. Unions are present but fragmented, limiting their ability to exert collective pressure or advocate effectively for standardized agreements across the sector.

Over the past ten years, the publishing sector has seen a shift in its labor composition. There has been a notable increase in freelancers and part-time workers, driven by cost-cutting measures and the rise of digital publishing. This shift has further weakened union representation, as freelancers often operate outside traditional collective bargaining structures. Employers have consolidated

their influence, leveraging these changes to maintain flexible and cost-effective labor arrangements.

Power dynamics in the publishing sector heavily favor employers. This imbalance is particularly pronounced for freelancers and non-unionized workers, who lack collective representation. While unions exist, their fragmented nature and limited coverage reduce their ability to counterbalance employer dominance. This power asymmetry has allowed employers to shape bargaining outcomes unilaterally, often prioritizing operational efficiency over employee welfare.

The relationship between bargaining actors is characterized by unequal power distribution. Employers dictate the terms of negotiations, leveraging the fragmented union landscape and the individualized nature of agreements. Employees, particularly freelancers, face challenges in voicing collective concerns, further exacerbating this imbalance. Unions, though present, lack the cohesion and resources needed to challenge employer-driven practices effectively.

Over the last decade, employers have gained even greater leverage in bargaining. The shift toward freelance and part-time labor has diluted collective representation, while the decentralization of bargaining processes has eroded the influence of unions. This change has entrenched employer dominance, reducing opportunities for collaborative and equitable bargaining.

Single-employer agreements dominate the publishing sector, often focusing on basic employment terms such as wages and hours. These agreements are typically reactive and tailored to individual firm needs, with little regulatory oversight or alignment with broader legislative goals. Sectoral agreements are virtually nonexistent, leaving significant gaps in addressing industry-wide issues like digitalization or workforce development. Unilateral employer practices further exacerbate these gaps, as many agreements fail to incorporate worker input or reflect long-term strategic planning.

Bargaining coverage in the publishing sector has steadily declined over the past decade. The rise of freelance and part-time work has shifted employment away from traditional bargaining structures, leaving many workers outside the scope of collective agreements. This trend reflects a broader move toward individualized contracts, which prioritize flexibility for employers but undermine collective representation.

Increasing bargaining coverage in the publishing sector requires a multifaceted approach. Legal mechanisms, such as extending sectoral agreements to cover non-unionized workers, could address the gaps in representation. Strengthening

unions and fostering collaboration between employers and employee groups are also critical. Legislative reforms that mandate minimum standards for digital roles and freelancer protections could further support the expansion of bargaining coverage, ensuring more inclusive and equitable labor practices across the sector.

III. Challenges to collective bargaining

The publishing sector in Macedonia faces a range of challenges that complicate collective bargaining efforts and limit the effectiveness of agreements. One significant issue is the deregulation of labor markets, which has led to flexible employment practices that often favor short-term contracts and freelance arrangements. These practices undermine job security and weaken collective representation. Gender segregation is another persistent challenge, with women often concentrated in administrative or lower-paying roles, while men dominate technical and managerial positions. This imbalance affects wage equity and opportunities for advancement within the sector. Digitalization poses a critical challenge as traditional publishing workflows are increasingly replaced by digital processes. This transition requires workers to acquire new skills and adapt to evolving technologies, but collective agreements have yet to adequately address these needs. Additionally, the fragmentation of the workforce, driven by the rise of freelance and part-time employment, has diluted collective representation. Many freelancers operate outside the scope of collective agreements, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and inconsistent working conditions. Economic pressures, including rising production costs and global competition, further exacerbate these challenges. Publishers prioritize cost-cutting measures, often at the expense of employee rights and benefits. The lack of sectoral agreements and coordination among firms contributes to disparities in employment terms and hinders efforts to address these systemic issues.

Social partners, including unions, employers, and employee representatives, identify several critical challenges to collective bargaining in the publishing sector. Digital transformation is viewed as a top priority, as it demands significant changes in workforce training and adaptation. Employers highlight the need for flexibility to remain competitive in a rapidly changing market, while employees emphasize the importance of job security and access to training programs. Weak union representation is another challenge frequently cited by social partners. The fragmented nature of unions and their limited membership base reduce their ability to advocate effectively for workers' rights. Employers often resist coordinated bargaining efforts, favoring individualized agreements that align with their operational needs. This resistance further weakens collective bargaining

mechanisms and limits their scope. Ristovski (2022) highlights that weak union representation in North Macedonia exacerbates the power imbalance between employers and employees, a trend evident in the publishing sector. Gender equity is also recognized as an important issue, with social partners acknowledging the need to address wage gaps and promote equal opportunities for advancement. While some progress has been made, particularly in administrative roles, significant disparities remain in technical and leadership positions. Addressing these inequalities requires targeted interventions within collective agreements.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that combines policy reforms, capacity building, and collaborative initiatives. Strengthening union capacity is a critical step. Providing resources for organizing and advocacy can help unions expand their membership base and increase their influence in negotiations. Training programs for union leaders can also enhance their ability to represent workers effectively. Promoting sectoral agreements is another important tool for addressing fragmentation and ensuring consistent employment standards across the industry. By establishing baseline conditions for wages, benefits, and working hours, sectoral agreements can reduce disparities and improve job security for all workers, including freelancers. Policymakers play a crucial role in this process by enacting legislation that supports the extension of sectoral agreements to non-unionized employees. Digitalization challenges can be addressed through targeted training programs and upskilling initiatives. Employers and unions should collaborate to develop agreements that prioritize workforce development and ensure employees have the resources needed to adapt to technological changes. Public-private partnerships can provide additional support for these initiatives, leveraging government funding and expertise to expand their reach. Gender equity requires specific measures within collective agreements, such as pay transparency clauses, gender-neutral job classifications, and commitments to equal representation in leadership roles. Employers should also implement mentorship programs and career development initiatives to support women in advancing their careers. Finally, fostering a culture of collaboration among social partners is essential for overcoming resistance to collective bargaining. Regular dialogue and mutual learning initiatives can build trust and create opportunities for innovative solutions. By addressing these challenges with a coordinated and proactive approach, the publishing sector in Macedonia can strengthen its collective bargaining framework and promote more equitable and sustainable labor practices.

IV. Towards Smart Bargaining

Smart bargaining in the publishing sector refers to a forward-thinking approach to collective bargaining that aligns the operational needs of employers with the rights

and development of employees. "We need agreements that reflect modern realities like remote work and freelancing" (INT3, 2024) This emphasizes collaboration, transparency, and adaptability, creating agreements that address immediate needs while preparing for future challenges. In the Macedonian publishing sector, smart bargaining integrates considerations for digitalization, freelance labor, and gender equity, aiming to balance fairness with sustainability. Insights from the interviews highlight the sector's unique challenges. Angelina from Prosvetno Delo noted that digitalization has rendered traditional agreements inadequate, emphasizing the need for adaptability in bargaining strategies. Similarly, Valerija from Trimaks underscored the importance of creating agreements that address freelancers' rights, as they form a growing part of the workforce. Drawing on these perspectives, smart bargaining seeks to address these gaps while fostering sectoral cohesion. The concept prioritizes proactive engagement over reactive conflict resolution. By fostering open dialogue among employers, employees, unions, and policymakers, smart bargaining seeks to develop comprehensive agreements that encompass wage fairness, digital skills training, and protections for freelancers. Such agreements aim to enhance productivity, employee satisfaction, and sectoral resilience.

To increase bargaining coverage in Macedonia's publishing sector, several key actions and actors must be involved:

1. **Strengthening Unions:** Unions must expand their membership to include freelancers and part-time workers. Marija from Ars Lamina emphasized the need for targeted outreach and resources to represent the diverse workforce within the sector. Additionally, unions should offer training programs to build negotiation skills and foster solidarity among diverse employee groups.
2. **Employer Engagement:** Employers should embrace collective bargaining as a tool for achieving stability and operational efficiency. Angelina highlighted that employers often resist sectoral agreements, preferring individual contracts. However, engaging in good-faith negotiations and collaborating with unions to address shared challenges, such as digitalization and workforce development, is essential.
3. **Legislative Support:** Policymakers must enact laws that promote collective bargaining. Mechanisms to extend sectoral agreements to non-unionized workers can significantly increase coverage. Valerija noted that legislative reforms mandating protections for freelancers would ensure more inclusive agreements.
4. **Collaborative Platforms:** Establishing platforms for regular dialogue among stakeholders, including employers, employees, unions, and policymakers, can facilitate mutual understanding and cooperation. These platforms can address industry-wide challenges and develop shared

strategies for improvement.

5. **Public and Private Partnerships:** Partnerships with NGOs and international labor organizations can provide resources and expertise to support collective bargaining initiatives. These collaborations can also introduce global best practices to the local context. The collective agreements reviewed demonstrate the potential for leveraging international examples to strengthen local frameworks.

Legal regulation plays a foundational role in shaping the effectiveness of collective bargaining. In Macedonia, the existing labor laws provide a framework for bargaining but require updates to address modern challenges, particularly those related to digitalization and the gig economy. Strengthening legal provisions can enhance bargaining coverage and ensure fair treatment for all workers. One crucial area for improvement is the extension of sectoral agreements. By mandating that agreements negotiated at the sectoral level apply to all workers, regardless of union membership, policymakers can create consistent employment standards. This approach would address disparities and provide protections for freelancers and non-traditional workers who currently operate outside the scope of most agreements. The collective agreement for the private sector highlights how sectoral agreements can be a starting point for broader application. Another critical aspect is the enforcement of existing labor laws. Ensuring compliance with collective agreements requires robust regulatory oversight and accessible dispute resolution mechanisms. Strengthening penalties for non-compliance and increasing awareness of workers' rights can reinforce the effectiveness of legal regulation. Angelina's input pointed out that many employees are unaware of their rights under existing agreements, further complicating enforcement. Legal frameworks must also evolve to accommodate the digital transformation of the publishing sector. This includes provisions for remote work, intellectual property protections in digital publishing, and guidelines for upskilling initiatives. Aligning legal regulation with the sector's needs will create a more supportive environment for collective bargaining. The relationship between legal regulation and collective bargaining is reciprocal. While laws set the stage for negotiations, the outcomes of collective agreements can inform future legislation. Successful agreements that address emerging challenges, such as gender equity or digital adaptation, can serve as models for broader regulatory reforms.

Achieving smart bargaining in the publishing sector requires a collective commitment to innovation and inclusivity. Strengthening unions, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and aligning legal frameworks with modern realities are critical steps. By embracing these principles, the sector can create

a more equitable and sustainable bargaining environment, ensuring long-term growth and resilience for both employers and employees. The insights from interviews and collective agreements underscore the need for a balanced approach that integrates the voices of all stakeholders into a unified vision for the future.

V. European Perspectives

The European Commission's Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages serves as a crucial instrument for ensuring fair pay across EU member states and associated countries. In Macedonia's publishing sector, this directive sets a benchmark for wage standards, influencing collective bargaining practices. By addressing wage disparities and establishing a baseline for fair compensation, the directive empowers social partners to focus on broader issues such as workforce development and digital adaptation. For example, the directive's emphasis on transparency in wage setting can be instrumental in tackling gender wage gaps, a persistent issue in the sector.

EU-level social partners, such as the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and Business Europe, play a pivotal role in enhancing bargaining coverage. These organizations provide resources, policy recommendations, and training modules to strengthen the capacity of national unions and employer associations. In the Macedonian context, these resources can help unions overcome fragmentation and expand their representation to include freelancers and part-time workers. The interviews highlighted the need for international support to address gaps in bargaining coverage, particularly for non-traditional employees. Additionally, EU-level social partners can facilitate cross-border collaboration, allowing Macedonian stakeholders to learn from successful bargaining strategies in other EU countries.

Mutual learning and cooperation among social partners are vital for addressing shared challenges in the publishing sector. Cross-border initiatives, such as workshops and joint projects, provide opportunities to exchange best practices and innovative solutions. For instance, learning from countries with established digital training frameworks can help Macedonian stakeholders develop agreements that address the sector's digital transformation. Marija from Ars Lamina noted that exposure to international practices would enhance the sector's ability to negotiate agreements that align with global trends. Cooperation also fosters trust among stakeholders, creating a more collaborative environment for collective bargaining.

The content of collective bargaining agreements in Macedonia's publishing sector remains limited in scope, often focusing on basic employment terms such as wages and working hours. The reviewed CBAs lack provisions for addressing digitalization, gender equity, and protections for freelancers. Incorporating elements inspired by EU standards, such as clauses on pay transparency and training initiatives, can significantly enhance the relevance and impact of CBAs. Aligning CBA content with the principles of the EC Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages and leveraging the support of EU-level social partners can create a more comprehensive and forward-looking framework for collective bargaining in the sector.

By integrating these European perspectives, Macedonia's publishing sector can strengthen its collective bargaining practices, ensuring fair treatment for workers while enhancing competitiveness in a rapidly evolving industry.

VI. Conclusions

The publishing sector in Macedonia stands at a crossroads, facing significant challenges but also opportunities for transformative change. Smart bargaining emerges as a critical pathway to address the sector's fragmented workforce, weak union representation, and the disruptive effects of digitalization. The current state of bargaining, characterized by decentralization and limited coverage, underscores the need for more inclusive and forward-thinking agreements. Key insights from the analysis reveal that the adoption of smart bargaining practices can provide solutions to persistent issues. By integrating digitalization into collective agreements, the sector can equip its workforce with the necessary skills to adapt to technological changes. Additionally, addressing the needs of freelancers and part-time workers through expanded bargaining coverage can foster a more equitable labor environment. Strengthening unions and encouraging employer collaboration are pivotal actions to enhance the sector's bargaining framework. Challenges such as the lack of sectoral agreements, gender disparities, and the growing prevalence of non-standard employment require targeted interventions. Legal frameworks must evolve to include mechanisms for extending sectoral agreements and ensuring compliance with labor standards. The role of EU-level social partners and international collaboration offers valuable opportunities for the sector to align with global best practices and enhance its competitiveness. In conclusion, smart bargaining presents a strategic opportunity for the Macedonian publishing sector to address its unique challenges while unlocking its full potential. By fostering collaboration among stakeholders and integrating innovative practices, the sector can establish a more sustainable and equitable bargaining environment, paving the way for long-term growth and

resilience.

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Annex

Table 1:

INT1	Representative from Ars Lamina Publishing Skopje
INT2	Representative from Trimaks