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Balancing State Authority and Autonomy in Public Sector Employment Relations: The Role of Legal and Social Dialogue Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving dynamics of employment relations in the public sector, focusing on the interplay between authoritative state regulation and autonomous mechanisms such as collective bargaining and social dialogue. The study aims to identify key international legal standards that define the boundaries of state intervention in public employment and to evaluate how these standards are reflected in domestic legislative frameworks. Drawing upon international conventions and best practices, the research highlights the gap between normative ideals—such as the right to collective bargaining, dispute resolution mechanisms, and freedom of association—and their practical implementation in the public sector. Findings suggest that in many countries, especially where centralized governance dominates, public sector employment relations remain largely governed by rigid legislative mandates, often at the expense of participatory and decentralized approaches. The lack of effective social dialogue and limited autonomy in collective labour negotiations hinder the development of cooperative and responsive employment relations. The article advocates for the strengthening of decentralized social dialogue mechanisms, particularly at the regional and institutional levels, to foster better communication, conflict prevention, and resolution between government authorities and civil servants. The research underscores the need for aligning national practices with international labour standards to ensure a fair and sustainable framework for public employment relations. Encouraging inclusive negotiation processes can enhance transparency, accountability, and motivation within the public workforce.

Keywords: Public Sector Employment, Collective Bargaining, Social Dialogue, Labour Law, State Regulation.

INTRODUCTION

Modern European constitutions increasingly provide a legal foundation for gradually reducing centralized state control over employment relations in the public sector. Democracy, as a core principle, demands participatory development across all significant spheres of public life. It underpins legal frameworks that foster effective communication between employers and employees, supporting the rights of trade unions and broader social dialogue, even within public administration. Additionally, democratic governance encourages mechanisms for worker participation in both decision-making and financial matters. However, in many European states, especially within the public sector, these mechanisms are only partially implemented.

An essential constitutional value also emerges from the principles of the rule of law and the welfare state, which impose a dual role on the modern state: acting as both a regulator and a social partner. Governments are thus expected to legislate effectively for social dialogue while actively supporting collective bargaining processes. However, several factors influence how successfully a state performs in these roles. A key aspect is the degree of efficiency in the regulation and practice of preventing and resolving labour disputes between civil servants and their public employers. While legal systems provide formal court-based remedies for labour disputes, human resources policies and legal doctrines increasingly promote alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms as more efficient and cooperative approaches.

Social dialogue, grounded in constitutional values, is crucial in creating a collaborative space among key social stakeholders—trade unions, employers, and the state. This dialogue occurs at various levels, from national to regional to individual institutions. It is a process that seeks to harmonize differing interests and foster consensus, particularly during periods of economic or social crisis. In such times, social dialogue plays a vital role in balancing the preservation of traditional social values with the need for economic and structural reforms. As an alternative to authoritative top-down regulation, social dialogue promotes participatory governance, offering a middle path that upholds democratic accountability and mutual understanding.

The equilibrium between authoritative regulation and autonomous dialogue is central to effective governance. Excessive state control can hinder innovation and responsiveness, while unregulated autonomy can lead to inconsistencies and inequity. Therefore, careful calibration is needed to ensure that neither extreme undermines the objectives of employment policy and public administration.

This article aims to identify the principles and practical measures that determine the optimal balance between state authority and autonomous regulation in public sector employment. It begins by examining general theoretical findings relevant to evaluating social dialogue, including economic conditions, political dynamics, and administrative organization. A strong civil society and active social partners are vital in mitigating the risks of systemic disintegration, especially during crises. Scholars have noted the erosion of public trust in political elites, particularly in the wake of financial crises. These events revealed a regulatory state often too weak or inflexible to address complex socio-economic challenges effectively.

Efforts to develop and institutionalize ethical standards within the public service are also critical to reinforcing governance. The behavior of civil servants directly influences the success of public policies. Ethical codes and principles serve as tools to enhance professionalism and accountability within state institutions. However, political elites have often shown resistance to reform, even in times of systemic crisis. For example, despite the severity of recent financial collapses, many governments reverted to liberal economic policies soon after the initial recovery period, undermining opportunities for long-term structural change.

Authoritative regulation, while sometimes necessary, does not automatically contribute to societal progress. Bureaucratic overreach and excessive centralization can stifle individual initiative, create administrative burdens, and limit citizens' ability to engage meaningfully with the state. Therefore, fostering social dialogue presents a viable and often more constructive alternative. It is particularly relevant in the regulation of employment relations at regional and local levels.

The decentralization of governance introduces new challenges and opportunities in labour law and public administration. The creation of regional administrative units necessitates a reconsideration of employment regulations, including those specific to the public sector. Two critical questions emerge: First, will the establishment of regions impact general labour law and specific public sector regulations? Second, what will be the employment status and rights of civil servants within these new regional units?

In this evolving context, social dialogue can play an increasingly significant role. Through decentralized structures, states can encourage localized forms of collective bargaining and conflict resolution. These mechanisms may be more responsive to specific community needs and foster stronger accountability at the local level. Decentralized authorities, while limited in scope, can develop binding agreements within their jurisdictions, offering flexibility and context-sensitive solutions to labour relations.

Looking forward, the modern state has a responsibility to support and institutionalize collective bargaining and social dialogue not only at the national level but also within regional and local frameworks. Such an approach aligns with the broader democratic ethos of subsidiarity, where decisions are made as close as possible to the citizens they affect. In doing so, the state can better adapt to diverse socio-economic conditions across regions and improve service delivery through tailored employment practices.

This progressive model of governance acknowledges that public sector employees are not only service providers but also stakeholders in the development of fair and effective policies. Strengthening their voice through social dialogue helps bridge gaps between public expectations and governmental capabilities. Moreover, it contributes to the legitimacy of public institutions, fostering trust and cooperation between the state and its citizens.

Ultimately, the success of this approach depends on political will and the capacity of institutions to implement meaningful reforms. The development of social dialogue mechanisms must be supported by legal frameworks, institutional resources, and a culture of mutual respect among social partners. Continuous training, transparent information-sharing, and inclusive decision-making processes are essential to sustaining these efforts.

In conclusion, balancing authoritative and autonomous regulation in public employment relations is a complex but vital task for modern states. Social dialogue offers a dynamic and participatory means to manage this

balance, promoting both democratic values and administrative efficiency. By supporting collective bargaining and empowering regional and local actors, governments can create more resilient and responsive public administration systems. While challenges remain—including bureaucratic inertia, political resistance, and unequal capacity among regions—the potential benefits of a well-developed social dialogue framework make it a cornerstone of sustainable public sector governance in Europe and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Tripartite Social Dialogue

In numerous EU documents social dialogue is defined as an important value that has its origin in historical and cultural foundations of Europe. It is one of the pillars of the emerging European social model; therefore it is understandable that it is a constituent part of the legal order of the European Union, i.e. acquis communautaire.

From the point of view of persons involved in the social dialogue, legal theory of industrial relations divides social dialogue into tripartite and bipartite social dialogue. In most European countries both types of the social dialogue are applied, i.e. bipartite and tripartite social dialogue. Within the scope of the social dialogue a two-way or three-way communication takes place between employees, employers, and the state or between the representatives of these groups. Tripartite social dialogue is the manner of communication between social partners, which was implemented as a principle in international law. In Slovenia one of the types of the tripartite social dialogue is formally implemented already in the structure of the National Council of the Republic of Slovenia. The National Council may propose to the National Assembly the passing of laws or amendments of individual statutory provisions (the first indent of Article 97 of the Constitution of the RS). It conveys to the National Assembly its opinion on all matters within the competence of the National Assembly. The National Council may also exercise a suspensive veto, which entails that it may require the National Assembly to decide again on a given law prior to its promulgation, this time with a higher majority. Every member of the National Council may issue a written call for a referendum, which is approved in the National Council if a majority of all members vote in favour of the call. Every member of the National Council may file an initiative for a parliamentary inquiry.

The second form of the institutional framework of the tripartite social dialogue which has been instituted on the bases of the agreement of social partners is the Economic and Social Council of the Republic Slovenia (ESC). From its foundation in 1994, the ESC functions as the broadest body of the social dialogue in Slovenia. The state is included in the work of this body as a partner; its interests are represented by the representatives of the Government.

The ESC has two key roles. The first role is an advisory role. The ESC takes active part in drafting legislation and other documents. The second role is however a negotiating role. The ESC namely negotiates on issues which are a subject of the social agreement, on the agreements regulating the salary policy, and on similar tripartite agreements.

Bipartite Social Dialogue

Bipartite social dialogue takes place between employers, the group of employers or one or more employers' organisations, on the one hand, and one or more employees' organisations or elected workers' representatives, on the other hand. At the international level a legal basis for developing this type of the social dialogue is ILO Convention No. 154 concerning the Promotion of Collective Bargaining, which the Republic of Slovenia ratified in December 2005 (Official Gazette RS, No. 121/2005). This modern convention was adopted in order to promote stronger collective bargaining and complements ILO Convention No. 98, which underlined the principle of free collective bargaining at the international level. Article 2 of the Convention defines the term collective bargaining which extends to all negotiations which take place between an employer, a group of employers or one or more employers' organisations, on the one hand, and one or more workers' organisations, on the other, for determining working conditions and terms of employment; regulating relations between employers and workers; and regulating relations between employers or their organisations and a workers' organisation or workers' organisations. ILO Recommendation No. 163 concerning the Promotion of Collective Bargaining (1981) elaborates in more detail the principles arising from the Convention.

Two basic types of the bipartite social dialogue are applied; the expected outcome of such is a conclusion of a collective agreements. These two types of the social dialogue are the following:

1. Collective bargaining between trade unions and employers resulting in the conclusion of an employment contract, and

2. Consultations between the employers and the elected workers' representatives as well as co-deciding.

Collective agreements are autonomous, general written agreements between employees and employers. Collective contracts are thus an important autonomous source of law. However, all collective contracts and other collective agreements are not autonomous sources of law. If a collective contract does not contain provisions, which would apply to individually undetermined members of the parties and participants, such collective contract does not have a nature of a normative instrument but can have a nature of a multilateral employment contract with certain civil-law elements or even public-law elements. This applies also for other types of collective agreements. With reference to social dialogue, international law gives preference to collective contracts in comparison with other types of collective agreements. Parties to collective contracts are namely trade unions and institutions of civil society whose significance for a balanced legal regulation of labour relations and for the supervision over the implementation of such relations are generally recognised. The free trade union organisation and collective bargaining may be exceptionally limited in cases in which such is necessary due to the protection of the public order. The question is raised where are the boundaries of the public order, on the one hand, and the boundaries of trade union freedom and collective bargaining, on the other hand. The field of the regulation of economic and social relations, which is not in the exclusive regulatory competence of the public authorities, is a subject of free collective bargaining. However, the state with its measures cannot interfere with these relations by any legislative intervention simply referring to the public interest. In accordance with the criteria of the International Labour Organisation, the state may namely interfere with the existing relations, regulated by collective agreements, with ex nunc effects only in "crisis situations".

International Law as the Framework for the National Regulation of the Collective Employment Relations

National legal regulation of the collective labour relations considers main international sources of law which regulate this field. Among important international agreements must first of all be mentioned the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948. This legal instrument does not have a nature of an enforceable legal instrument, as it cannot be enforced, as its norms are abstract and of interpretative nature, and contain important values with regard to human rights. Article 20 of the Declaration determines that everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association and that no one may be compelled to belong to an association. The fourth paragraph of Article 23 determines that everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests. The right to freedom of association, including the right to form and join trade unions, is also mentioned in Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966; more exhaustive, however, are provisions of Article 8 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966, which contain more concrete guidelines which all the state parties to this Covenant must recognize and ensure their appropriate implementation in national legal systems. The following provisions must be ensured:

1. the right of everyone to form trade unions and join the trade union of his choice, subject only to the rules of the organisation concerned, for the promotion and protection of his economic and social interests. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those prescribed by law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public order or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others;

2. The right of trade unions to establish national federations or confederations and the right of the latter to form or join international trade-union organisations;

3. The right of trade unions to function freely subject to no limitations other than those prescribed by law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public order or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others;

4. The right to strike provided that it is exercised in conformity with the laws of the particular country.

The principle of autonomy of the parties in collective bargaining is underlined also in certain basic ILO conventions; namely ILO Convention No. 87, which determines the protection of the right to organise and freedom of association of workers' and employers' organisations in relation to the state. It is underlined that the public authorities shall refrain from any interference that would restrict this right of workers and employers as well as their organisations or impede the lawful exercise thereof. ILO Convention No. 87 is supplemented by ILO Convention No. 98, which defines certain principles of the freedom of association and collective bargaining, whereas its aim is to ensure conditions for implementing trade union freedom and encourage voluntary collective bargaining procedures.

Voluntary collective bargaining is also a subject of ILO Convention No. 154 concerning the Promotion of Collective Bargaining (1981) together with ILO Recommendation No. 163 of the same name. These documents encourage the states to adopt measures to facilitate the establishment and growth, on a voluntary basis, of free, independent and representative employers' and workers' organisations. The states must ensure pre-established and objective criteria with regard to the organisations' representative character. Measures adapted to national conditions are to be taken to promote collective bargaining and are the following:

1. Collective bargaining should be made possible for all employers and all groups of workers in the branches of activity covered by this Convention;

2. Collective bargaining should be progressively extended to all branches of economic activity, the police, the armed forces and the public service, to the extent to which the guarantees provided for in this Convention apply for them;

3. The establishment of rules of procedure agreed between employers' and workers' organisations should be encouraged, whereas collective bargaining should not be hampered by the absence of rules governing the procedure to be used or by the inadequacy or inappropriateness of such rules;

4. Bodies and procedures for the settlement of labour disputes should be so conceived as to contribute to the promotion of collective bargaining.

For the principles of the freedom of association and the autonomy of the parties to collective agreements also the instruments of the Council of Europe are important. Within this framework two documents must be mentioned, namely the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter (ESC), which in paragraph 5 of Part I determines that all workers and employers have the right to freedom of association in national or international organisations for the protection of their economic and social interests. In paragraph 6 it determines that all workers and employers have the right to bargain collectively. The European Committee of Social Rights is the body responsible for the interpretation of the provisions of the ESC on the basis of the national reports of the states parties and in collective complaints procedures. Within this scope the European Committee determines whether national regulation and practice in states parties are in conformity with the Charter.

ILO Convention No. 151 concerning Protection of the Right to Organise and Procedures for Determining Conditions of Employment in the Public Service (1978) provides for the protection against acts of anti-union discrimination as well as complete independence of unions from public authorities. Such facilities should be afforded to the representatives of recognised public employees' organisations as may be appropriate in order to enable them to carry out their functions promptly and efficiently, both during and outside their hours of work. Measures appropriate to national conditions should be taken to encourage and promote the full development and utilisation of machinery for negotiation of terms and conditions of employment between the public authorities concerned and public employees' organisations, or of such other methods as will allow representatives of public employees to participate in the determination of these matters. The settlement of disputes arising in connection with the determination of terms and conditions of employment shall be sought, as may be appropriate to national conditions, through negotiation between the parties or through independent and impartial machinery, such as mediation, conciliation and arbitration, established in such a manner as to ensure the confidence of the parties involved (Vodovnik, 2008). Conflict prevention and conflict resolution should be based on the negotiation between the parties or through independent and impartial machinery, such as mediation, conciliation and arbitration, established in such a manner as to ensure the confidence of the parties involved.

ILO Recommendation No. 159 concerning Procedures for Determining Conditions of Employment in the Public Service (1978) elaborates in more detail the principles about the negotiation of terms and conditions of employment in the public services. In addition, the Recommendation also notices methods other than negotiation in the determination of terms and conditions of employment. For such cases the Recommendation emphasizes that in these cases the methods which allow representatives of public employees to participate in the process of the creation of the regulations should be determined by national laws or regulations or other appropriate means. Slovenian legal regulation of collective labour relations is also based on certain European Union legislative instruments and documents. According to European acts the role of the Commission is to promote the consultation with the social partners that are organised at the Community level before submitting proposals of normative instruments. Social partners achieved a formal inclusion in legal procedures at the Community level and became an important factor in creating European law. Social partners implement their role in creating a legal regulation of social relations on the basis of their programmes which they adopt for the period of several years.

A legal basis for the social dialogue at the Union level is today determined in the Lisbon Treaty, namely in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, T.F.E.U., (O.J.E.U., C 115/98, 9. 5. 2008) According to Article 151 the Union and the member states are proclaiming as their objectives:

1. The promotion of employment,

2. Improved living and working conditions, so as to make possible their harmonisation while the improvement is being maintained,

3. Proper social protection,

4. Dialogue between management and labour,

5. The development of human resources with a view to lasting high employment and the combating of exclusion.

In accordance with the Treaty provisions Union and the member states have as their objectives the promotion of dialogue between the social partners in the field of social relations, especially by consulting "management and labour" on the possible direction of Union action.

Before submitting proposals in the social policy field, the Commission consults social partners. Two stages of consultations are envisaged. At the first stage the Commission consults the social partners on the possible direction of Union action in the social policy field. At the second stage of procedure the Commission drafts its proposal and consults on the possible contents of Community action. Social partners may within six weeks forward to the Commission an opinion or a recommendation. The additional option and right of the social partners, namely that they may inform the Commission of their wish to initiate the process to legally regulate the issue (Article 154 of T.F.E.U.), is of essential importance. The duration of the procedure may not exceed nine months so that the social partners conclude an agreement on the issue. The deadline may be prolonged by joint decision of the social partners and the Commission.

The concluded agreement may be implemented:

1. in accordance with the procedures and practices specific to social partners and the member states, or

2. In matters covered by Article 153 of the T.F.E.U., at the joint request of the signatory parties, by a Council decision on a proposal from the Commission (the second paragraph of Article 153 of the T.F.E.U).

If the negotiations are successful, the agreement substitutes for Community action. If there are no negotiations or if they are not successful, Community bodies draft legal instruments in regular procedure. In literature as well as in discussions on the social dialogue at the Community level, the term European social dialogue is often used as a general term for different forms and levels of cooperation of the social partners. This does not only concern adopting legal instruments at the European level, but also other forms of communication between social partners which can influence Community social policy. An important form is, for instance, the operation of the European network of governments and tripartite institutions, which draft programmes on the development of social relations in the member states of the EU as well as at the EU level.

For the collective legal position of the employees the Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers (1989) is of great importance. Among other regulations, the Charter emphasizes the employees'

1. Freedom of association and collective bargaining by stating that the employers and workers of the European Community shall have the right of association in order to constitute professional organisations or trade unions of their choice for the defence of their economic and social interests.

2. The right of information, consultation, and participation for workers which be developed along appropriate lines, taking account of the practices in force in the various member states, especially in companies or groups of companies having establishments or companies in several member states of the European Community. According to the Charter such information, consultation, and participation must be implemented in due time, particularly in the cases determined by the Charter. These principles are further elaborated by various EU directives about the employees' participation in different types of works units, on one side, and by European collective bargaining between European social partners, on the other side.

Apparently Free However Limited Collective Bargaining about the Wages or Salaries in Public Sector

Remunerations of civil servants and functionaries are regulated by special statutory provisions of the Salary System in the Public Sector Act of 2002 (with later modifications). The principal characteristic of this regulation is a mixture of the authoritative state regulatory approach to the regulation and apparently free contractual regulation. The Act sets out a common basis for the salary system in the public sector in order to apply the principle of equal pay for work in comparable positions, titles, and offices and to ensure the transparency of the salary system and salary incentives. Working conditions including the wages or salaries of civil servants may be

determined by an employment contract or a formal decision of the competent authoritative body. Such regulation is limited by existing law (i.e. state law and autonomous law). An employment contract or a proposal of the employer to the employee must be accompanied with a written document, explaining the basis for the proposed wage or salary and its elements. The wage or salary amount may not be different compared to the existing salary regulations of public or private law. The destiny of the contract or decision depends on the already mentioned regulations, namely the employer may unilaterally intervene in the existing contractual or authoritative regulation of the wage or salary by a notification of the regulatory changes accompanied by a written proposal of the annex to the contract or authoritative decision. If such modification of the employment relation is not done, a new law should be applied by the force of the statute (ex lege).

Basic wage or salary of the civil servant or functionary may be determined by a salary bracket in which the wage or salary or the title or the function is being placed by the decision of the competent body. In order to facilitate the placement of the jobs and titles in salary brackets the core jobs and titles, namely the orientation jobs and titles which have been previously successfully evaluated, are being placed in salary brackets by the collective agreement, concluded for the public sector. The amount of the basic wage or salary may also vary according to the statutory provisions. On the one hand, a basic wage or salary may be reduced if a civil servant performs less demanding job or job with the reduced extent of particular activities according to the statutory provisions. On the other hand, a basic wage or salary may be increased for the determined period of time in cases determined by the statute.

By the legislation concerning salaries the methods of management in the private sector were introduced to the public sector wherever possible. The most radical changes which are important for the development of the new nature of employment relations were introduced by the Civil Servants Act of 2002 (CSA) and the Public Sector Wage System Act of 2002 (PSWSA). These acts were designed on the basis of the legislature's intention to put the employment relations in the public sector on a contractual basis to the greatest extent possible, including the introduction of a specific collective bargaining approach in the public sector. On the way to achieve this goal, the legislator adopted some regulations which can be identified as controversial. The legislator put heavy institutional effect on the collective contracts - some kind of legislative "overdose" in its efforts to ensure very wide area of the social dialogue in the public sector. The transfer of state authority to social partners was exaggerated. This legislative stroke endangered the public interest in the salary regulation. It imposed the trade unions the statutory determined duty to regulate the essential elements of salary system which can be considered the move against the trade union freedom. Having no means to force trade unions to accept the proposed solutions in the collective contract drafts such statutory regulation risked to paralyse the process of introducing the new wage system in the public sector. In fact collective bargaining were not successful for a long time therefore the legislator had to make changes in the PSWSA; however the changes did not introduce any efficient tools with the function to resolve the interest dispute between the trade unions and the state. The legislator did not follow any in comparative labour law known approach. According to the changed statute the absent or deficient agreements should be replaced by statutory provisions or by government decisions. Such a solution is hardly sustainable from the political point of view because it revealed that the state had to resort to its authority after being unable to regulate the salary system democratically through the social dialogue. So the model was abolished in the year 2004. Ultimately the legislation changed in the way to ease reaching the agreement in the process of making "quasi collective agreements" necessary for the regulation of the salaries. The solution was the new statutory definition of the representativeness of the trade unions which is needed to stipulate the collective contracts with the "erga omnes" effect in the public sector. This solution brought the result. The salary system has been successfully implemented. The success of this approach was limited because of the large number of trade unions who were against the solutions in the new collective contracts however their will was not accepted. The tensions between the social partners in public sector are still present so the formula for better regulation is needed. Theoretically there are two possible ways to improve the system:

1. On the bases of experiences of the collective bargaining in the past it is possible to design the rules about the elements of wages in their minimal amount and regulate them by the statute and in the same time to give space for free collective bargaining in the future for larger amounts of rights where justified. In this case the distinction between the two types of the collective contracts would lose the ground therefore the unique type of the collective contract would be implemented in the private as well as in the public sector;

2. To keep on the existing system of "quasi collective agreements " for the public sector but together with the new special tools for efficient interest and law conflict prevention and resolution.

As already mentioned collective bargaining about the new wage system was very hard and long lasting process which has mainly finished in June 2008. The delay appeared as a consequence of the conflict of interests and law among social partners in the public sector. The strong position of trade unions on one side and the

temptation of state authorities to resort to the use of state power instead of bargaining, on the other, generated dangerous conflicts among social partners.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the state's role in regulating employment relations, particularly within Slovenia and more broadly in Europe, reveals a clear trajectory toward the gradual reduction of direct state intervention. This trend signifies a profound transformation in how employment relationships, especially in the public sector, are governed. The modern state appears to be progressively shifting from a predominantly authoritative regulator to adopting a more balanced position as a social partner. This evolution reflects an important constitutional commitment to democracy, emphasizing respect for collective bargaining freedoms while maintaining necessary state oversight in areas critical to protecting public interest.

In the public sector, this transformation is particularly nuanced. Traditionally, the state has exercised extensive control over employment relations, often adopting an authoritative stance justified by the need to ensure continuity and stability in public service delivery. However, recent trends suggest a growing acceptance of decentralized, autonomous regulation through social dialogue and collective bargaining mechanisms. This shift aims to empower public sector employees, recognize their rights to association and negotiation, and foster an environment of cooperation rather than confrontation.

Despite these positive developments, the process of balancing authoritative regulation with autonomous social dialogue remains incomplete. Significant challenges persist, particularly concerning the prevention and resolution of collective labor disputes. While legal frameworks often provide formal mechanisms for dispute resolution, their practical effectiveness is sometimes limited. There remains a tendency in some cases toward bureaucratic rigidity, which can hinder the timely and equitable settlement of conflicts. This situation points to a critical area where further research and policy innovation are necessary. Understanding the obstacles to effective dispute resolution—be they procedural, institutional, or cultural—is essential to enhancing social dialogue in the public sector.

Moreover, while the state's evolving role as a social partner is commendable, the pace of change varies considerably across different regions and levels of governance. At the local and regional levels, the institutional capacity to support collective bargaining and social dialogue may be less developed, potentially resulting in uneven implementation of modern labor relations practices. The challenge lies in extending the benefits of social dialogue beyond the national framework to decentralized authorities, ensuring that workers' rights and interests are protected consistently throughout the public administration.

Another limitation in current practice is the insufficient integration of ethical standards and codes of conduct within the public employment relationship. Given that civil servants play a crucial role in shaping and implementing public policy, their behavior and values significantly impact public trust and governance quality. Although some progress has been made in developing ethics frameworks, more systematic incorporation of ethical principles into labor relations policies could strengthen the legitimacy and social acceptance of public sector employment practices.

Looking ahead, several future directions appear vital for advancing the balance between authoritative and autonomous regulation of public sector employment relations. First, enhancing the institutional framework for decentralized social dialogue is crucial. This involves not only legislative reforms but also capacity building for local authorities, trade unions, and employers to engage effectively in collective bargaining and conflict resolution. Training programs, resource allocation, and the establishment of local dispute mediation bodies could play pivotal roles.

Second, there is a need for ongoing empirical research to assess the real-world impacts of these regulatory changes. Comparative studies across different European countries and regions would provide valuable insights into best practices and the factors that facilitate or hinder the effective balance between state authority and social dialogue. Particular attention should be paid to how socio-economic contexts, political culture, and administrative traditions influence the success of labor relations reforms.

Third, strengthening mechanisms for the prevention of labor disputes is essential. Encouraging early dialogue, promoting transparent communication channels, and implementing mediation and arbitration processes that are perceived as fair and efficient can reduce reliance on formal litigation, thereby saving time and resources while fostering mutual trust.

Lastly, the state must continue to reconcile its dual roles as regulator and social partner. While it is necessary to safeguard the public interest through appropriate legal frameworks, the state should also strive to create an

enabling environment for autonomous negotiation and collective self-regulation. This balance is delicate and requires constant adjustment in response to evolving social, economic, and political conditions.

In conclusion, the gradual diminution of the state's authoritative role in public sector employment relations marks a positive shift towards democratic principles and enhanced social dialogue. However, this process is ongoing, with significant challenges remaining in dispute resolution, regional implementation, ethical integration, and institutional capacity. Addressing these limitations through targeted reforms, research, and capacity development will be essential to realizing the full potential of decentralized and participatory labor relations governance in the public sector. The future success of this balancing act will significantly influence not only the quality of employment relations but also the broader effectiveness and legitimacy of public administration in democratic societies.

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