

Assessment of legal solutions to facilitate work-life balance in the public services sector

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to present chosen aspects of assessing legal solutions facilitating reconciliation of work and private life for employees of the public services sector, based on empirical research conducted in five European countries. The research purpose was to indicate the role of labour law regulations in shaping the work-life balance and to determine the ways of their implementation, their usefulness and the needs that emerge in the changing socio-economic reality, as evidenced by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The need to isolate people quickly popularised remote (online) work and the possibility of staying at home, which possibly had a positive impact on private matters. However, the general situation is different. Hence, the hypothesis was adopted that despite the variety of solutions, they are insufficiently used in the public services sector. Although there are noticeable facilitations in combining professional and family duties, they still have too little impact on the attractiveness of work and are not of an innovative nature. The specificity of the public sector makes it difficult to freely choose solutions that increase the flexibility of employment and thus the activity of working parents, especially women on the labour market.

Keywords: labour law, professional and private life, work-life balance concept, employee, employer, public services sector

Ocena rozwiązań prawnych ułatwiających godzenie życia zawodowego z prywatnym pracownikom sektora usług publicznych

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie wybranych aspektów oceny rozwiązań prawnych, ułatwiających godzenie życia zawodowego z prywatnym pracownikom sektora usług publicznych, na podstawie badań empirycznych przeprowadzonych w pięciu krajach europejskich. Celem jest wskazanie roli przepisów prawa pracy w kształtowaniu równowagi między tymi sferami (tzw. *work-life balance*)

i określenie sposobów ich realizacji, przydatności oraz potrzeb, jakie pojawiają się w zmieniającej się rzeczywistości społeczno-gospodarczej, czego dowodem są skutki pandemii COVID-19. Konieczność izolacji ludzi szybko spopularyzowała pracę zdalną i możliwość pozostania w domu, co pozytywnie miało wpłynąć na sprawy prywatne. Jednak ogólna sytuacja jest inna. Stąd przyjęto hipotezę, że mimo różnorodności rozwiązań, są one niedostatecznie wykorzystywane w sektorze usług publicznych. Choć zauważalne są ułatwienia w łączeniu obowiązków zawodowych z rodzinnymi, to nadal mają one zbyt mały wpływ na atrakcyjność pracy i nie mają charakteru innowacyjnego. Specyfika sektora publicznego utrudnia swobodny wybór rozwiązań zwiększających elastyczność zatrudnienia, a tym samym aktywność pracujących rodziców, zwłaszcza kobiet na rynku pracy.

Słowa kluczowe: prawo pracy, życie zawodowe i prywatne, koncepcja work-life balance, pracownik, pracodawca, sektor usług publicznych

Striving to maintain a balance between work and private life is a topic that is gaining more and more popularity. There are many reasons for interest in the model *Work-Life Balance* (hereinafter: WLB concept), i.e. combining both these spheres into one whole, in accordance with the expectations and values of employees, but also the interests of employers. In particular, it is about maintaining gender equality and supporting the participation of women in the labour market, for whom the problem is the double burden resulting from employment and having a family. In addition, there is a need to intensify care without compromising professional activity in the face of declining fertility rates and an aging population. It is also necessary to take greater care of psychophysical health as a result of extended and irregular working hours, increasing the efficiency and availability of employees as elements of the competitiveness of companies (Borkowska 2010; Sadowska-Snarska 2008; Joshi et al. 2002; Kinman, McDowall 2009; Lockwood 2003).

The WLB concept is based on the fact that professional and personal life are fundamentally complementary to each other, they give a sense of comfort both at work and in fulfilling family obligations. On the other hand, they can be seen as competing or even conflicting goals (Crompton, Lyonette 2005). In the face of new risks, more and more solutions are being developed to alleviate the workload (Fagan 2004). However, they may not always be fully applicable, as is the case in the public services sector. Hence, the **hypothesis** of insufficient use of WLB instruments despite their systematic improvement and extension. The specificity of some services, the hierarchy and limitations in the freedom to manage organisational units, the multitude of regulatory provisions and the restrictive use of state budget funds are some of the barriers to extending the rights of employees in combining professional sphere with family life.

The attractiveness of employment in the national economy is not the same as the conditions that can be created by the commercial market. Although there are noticeable facilitations in reconciling work and family duties, they still meet the expectations of the interested parties and increase the quality of employment to an insufficient extent.

Research methodology

In order to verify the hypothesis, international empirical research was carried out. Its implementation took place in 2021 in five countries: Greece, Spain, Poland, Portugal, and Serbia (hereinafter abbreviations: GR, ES, PL, PT, RS) – participating in the project on employment conditions¹. The main research objective was to identify and evaluate solutions to facilitate employees' work-life balance within the WLB concept in the public services sector (McPherson 2006). The research questions were used to check the knowledge of legal solutions and the practice of their application in terms of usefulness and adequacy, to show the opportunities and threats of this idea for both sides of the employment relationship, development prospects and better use in departments marginalising the role of WLB.

The research was cognitive and exploratory, based on a bottom-up inductive method of observing specific phenomena in the impact of employment law solutions on work-life balance, followed by analytical development of theoretical positions. The behavioural methodological approach was used to confirm the interdisciplinary and multithreaded nature of the research topic, which was based on a quantitative method through the use of a survey questionnaire distributed electronically (CAWI) and a qualitative method through the use of individual in-depth interview techniques and focus groups to obtain broader knowledge and opinions of the interviewees on existing solutions, as well as missing WLB measures, barriers and opportunities for their development identified in the public services sector (more: Stiglitz 2010). The sample selection was purposive. The project partners were responsible for carrying out the research in individual countries, using a uniform methodology developed by a team of experts. After the research results were collected and coded for the purpose of creating national reports, a collective final document was finally prepared, which compares the respondents' approach to combining work with private duties.

Perception of work-life balance solutions

At the beginning, it is important to emphasise the consistency of the understanding of the WLB concept by a total of 216 respondents completing the questionnaire, despite the social and economic differences and legal systems present in the countries under study (Stoleroff 2013; Pešić 2017; Pangsy-Kania, Szczodrowski 2009; Kołodko 2017; Stacewicz 2017). While perceiving the mutual relationship between work and private life, the vast majority considered that the two areas are mutually permeating, forming

¹ The empirical research was a component of the international project titled "The role of collective bargaining in shaping work-life balance in public service sector – challenges and perspectives" (VS/2020/0118) carried out in the period 1.04.2020-31.03.2022, whose grantor was the European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Project leader – Coalición Sindical Independiente de Trabajadores de Madrid (CSIT Union Profesional). Project partners: University of Warsaw, Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych, Univerzitet u Beogradu – Filozofski fakultet, University of Thessaly, Universidad Nova de Lisboa.

a coherent whole to satisfy basic everyday needs, the model of functioning adopted by each person. Few people emphasised the singularity (separation) of work from other activities and the complementary position of personal and family matters or, conversely, the clear domination of non-work life and treatment of work only as a necessary source of income. Both of these areas are important and valuable, and therefore ensuring balance is crucial without prejudice to either of them. The family plays the most important role, and respondents mainly devote their free time to it (RS – 79%, PT – 77%, GR – 73%). Different positions are: job qualifications improvement, leisure, entertainment and sport, interests (hobbies), and health care.

The employer's main reason for introducing WLB measures was to identify employees with the requirements related to parenthood and the introduction of facilities (increasing assistance) for parents in response to the changing approach to social roles and the material situation. Employees' expectations need to be understood and realised. Otherwise, work in the public sector will not be an incentive for young, educated people with good professional background. Another important issue was gender equality, which consists of non-discrimination against women by equalising salaries, working conditions and increasing chances for promotion. Exceptionally, Polish respondents raised the issue of making work more attractive, as the public sector does not offer high salaries. On the other hand, taking care of mental and physical health of employees was mentioned mostly by Serbian respondents. Among other reasons for employers' facilitation, there were voices about the need to encourage women to remain employed, increase productivity, make better use of labour resources, respect the general policies of the employer and for the employer to create the right image.

When asked about their ability to maintain a balance in the WLB area, the vast majority of respondents from the five countries answered that they manage to maintain a balance, but it is quite difficult. Only a small percentage was able to combine work and privacy perfectly. For almost a third of Polish respondents, it is impossible to manage, in contrast to all Spanish representatives who stated that they reconcile both areas of life, of which 74% do so to some or quite a large extent. Analysing the workplace WLB solutions introduced for all employees, 57% of Spanish respondents admitted that they have a medium impact on their overall job satisfaction. However, a total of 65% spoke positively against a quarter with an antinomial attitude. Portuguese respondents rated WLB solutions more variably as satisfactory (36%), insufficient (29%), sufficient (19%) and very bad (7%). A slightly different distribution of responses was presented by respondents from Greece. Almost half of them said that they were sufficient, while a quarter held the opposite view. According to 48% of Serbian respondents, the WLB solutions adopted in the workplace are good or satisfactory, while 40% found them insufficient or bad. In Poland, a vast majority confirmed their unsatisfactory (46%), bad or even worse state (15%). For a small group, WLB solutions were sufficient (14%) and satisfactory (12%). In no country was there any indication in the very good evaluation category, which allows us to conclude that the issue of combining professional and personal responsibilities is still topical and requires further improvement.

Types of work-life balance solutions

Overall, when generalising the types of WLB support, different approaches should be noted. All Greek respondents affirmed the role of legal-institutional and psychological forms of influence on work-life balance. A significant proportion also favoured monetary and in-kind forms. On the other hand, Spanish respondents found organisational issues to be the best way to support WLB (67%) and in-kind (30%). A slightly different view was held in Poland, as the highest expectations were for monetary (64%) and organisational (46%) measures, indicating the need to improve the social situation of employees, which did not play a special role for Portuguese respondents emphasising organisational, psychological (39% each) and institutional (32%) forms. In Serbia, a wide range of measures to influence WLB were given high importance, mainly organisational (88%), legal-institutional (75%), psychological (69%) and financial (64%), which leads to the conclusion that there is a wide spectrum of needs of employees in their national public sector.

As far as the knowledge of work-life balance facilities which are commonly used in the public services sector is concerned, the respondents most often mentioned: flexible working time organisation; additional exemptions, days off for care; longer parental and medical leaves; additional financial benefits such as vouchers, passes; creation of a friendly working environment (integration); facilitation in improving professional qualifications. Less well-known were: atypical forms of employment; additional insurance; greater protection against the arduousness of work (limiting overtime, business trips, the monotony of work) and company nurseries, kindergartens, and children's clubs.

Based on their knowledge, observations and experience in the area of the most frequently applied WLB solutions in the company, the respondents believed that the following facilities are applied, although not always sufficiently, sometimes only in individual cases:

- varied working time, allowing tasks to be performed at home, in a remote or hybrid formula, in a non-standard system, more flexible, individually tailored to the employee's situation, based on tasks, movable working hours or days, allowing exits from work and the possibility of later working off;
- lower working time standards, such as extra breaks, reduced working hours;
- atypical forms of employment, especially part-time work;
- additional days off, mainly for children (when there are difficulties in providing care during breaks in school and kindergarten), and exemptions from work in extraordinary, random, family-related situations (care of the elderly or sick);
- the organisation of work to improve and adapt it to the individual needs of employees, effective allocation of tasks, rationalisation of overtime and business trips;
- social benefits, bonuses, the operation of a company fund providing support in kind and in cash;
- health care leaves (availability, unpaid leave), freedom to use holiday leave, including decisions on the date of its use, freedom (guarantees) to use parental and caring leaves;

- improvement of professional qualifications, continuing education;
- additional social insurance, pension schemes;
- institutional care for a child or other family member;
- pro-health offer (medical packages, sanatoria, rehabilitation, biological regeneration);
- shaping a friendly atmosphere and understanding in the workplace, principles of social coexistence, staff integration (family days at work, family picnics, sport and recreation events).

Respondents stressed that they are familiar with various labour law solutions. However, they are not commonly used in the public services sector. They are more often found in the offer of commercial enterprises. In practice, there is a deficit of various attractive work-life balance facilities. There is a lack of flexible working hours for the benefit of employees. Some professional groups have to work in shifts continuously, including Sundays and holidays, which disrupts family life. There is insufficient protection against arduous work that requires excessive effort, extra activities, and blurring the boundary between free time and work, with no right to be offline in the case of remote working, being available and willing to work overtime. Part-time employment can be used to a limited extent. There is an abuse of outsourced tasks concerning part-time work. The catalogue of material (financial) privileges, such as vouchers, cards, bonuses and incentive awards, medical packages, cash allowance, in-kind prizes, Christmas parcels, company equipment, interest-free loans, and subsidies for commuting to work, is too small. Institutional care for employees' family members (nurseries, kindergartens, daycare centres, various support facilities) is organised on a small scale in order to relieve them from everyday household duties. The lack of such assistance translates into lower quality of work due to fatigue, stress, and emotional disorders. Staff integration should be increased by organising family outings and special events, stimulating proper relations and creating a friendly atmosphere at work, motivating (supervision, mentoring, psychological support), equal treatment (mainly remuneration), and caring for professional development. Transfers to another workplace (department) do not consider the proximity of the place of residence, which implies separation. There are no assured health and safety conditions or health care (prevention, availability of specialists).

Guaranteed employment is important for many respondents, which ceases to be a feature identified with the public sector. In this context, Serbian respondents asked for respecting the existing guidelines and the rules previously set by the parties and using appropriate personnel management methods, including transparent procedures and improving interpersonal relations in the workplace (*team-building*). On the other hand, Spanish respondents expected faster procedures for granting leaves, more remote work and other forms of employment flexibility, ensuring the flow of information and transparency of activities with the involvement of trade union organisations in the consultation process. Due to the incomplete recognition of some facilities, they reported that they should be regulated in national legislation, regardless of their validity in collective agreements concluded by the social partners. For the Polish and Greek respondents, the key issue is the type of institution and the nature of the work, which

determines the choice of appropriate WLB measures. The specificity of certain professions may preclude the use of solutions that employees who want to maintain work-life balance depend on. However, it must not be an overused argument for an employer to refuse to establish them in internal regulations. Therefore, measures should be implemented at the company (branch) level, adequate to the workforce's needs, after careful consideration of the capabilities of the public sector, so that they do not remain in the formula of ineffective provisions included in the category of recommendations for the future. The Portuguese interviewees presented a similar line of thinking. According to them, working conditions in the central administration are less favourable due to the strictness and conservatism of the law, bureaucracy and hierarchy than at the municipal (local) level allowing more freedom in shaping family-oriented working conditions. Although the public sector is not oriented toward competition, pressure to work more efficiently and build one's own career to the same extent as in private entities, the focus on work is often at the expense of the family, which women mainly experience. It is impossible to negotiate flexible working hours, longer holidays or additional days off. Despite the identified problems in achieving a balance between the professional and private spheres in the face of circumvention of regulations and abuse of instructions by superiors, there is still a lack of initiatives to improve the situation of employees in terms of normalisation of working time, stabilisation of employment conditions, restriction of their mobility and accessibility.

Problematic situations arise when responsibilities and staying longer at work clash with personal life activities. Conflicting roles have a negative impact on family and social relations and constitute a serious threat to personal property, mainly health.

Benefits of implementing work-life balance solutions

The WLB concept is perceived only positively, because it is supposed to mitigate or avoid the contradictions between the requirements a person encounters in both basic spheres of life, i.e. activities performed professionally for gainful purposes and obligations undertaken in leisure time due to having a family, contacts with the environment, activities serving education, self-improvement, regeneration of psychophysical forces. It is difficult to find any disadvantages in its nature. Let's suppose that employers do not perceive any obstacles related to their activity (organisational, production, economic). In that case, they can freely apply various solutions, as they are not imposed, except for certain protective provisions concerning the permanence of employment, regulation of working time and leaves for maternity and parenthood. On the other hand, any beneficial change to employees, confirming their privileged position, may at most be insufficient. Thus, the idea itself is right, doubts may concern its practical aspects, depending on the will of the parties negotiating the content of individual or collective agreements or the approach of the legislator guided by its national policy or by international, European guidelines, which may obligatorily introduce provisions that do not necessarily satisfy employers. An example is Directive 2019/1158 of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for

parents and carers (O.J. EU L 188/79), which the Member States should implement by 2 August 2022. It establishes minimum requirements to ensure equality between women and men regarding labour market opportunities and facilitates the reconciliation of work and family roles. Regulations related to the extension of paternity, parental and caring leave entitlements, exemption from work due to force majeure, increased flexibility of work organisation, stronger protection against unfavourable treatment, information on and easier access to training, guarantee of parallel employment, entitlement to request a form of work provision with more predictable or safer conditions are expected to contribute to the achievement of this objective.

Referring to the WLB concept, almost all respondents from the five countries of research agreed that work-life balance facilities are beneficial for both sides of employment, regardless of the legal basis of the cooperation and whether they belong to the public or private sector. As specific advantages for the employer, they mentioned the first place greater productivity at work (GR – 78%, ES – 80%, PL – 70%, PT – 34%, RS – 85%). They then cited fewer disputes and claimant attitudes among the workforce (GR – 35%, ES – 62%, PL – 52%, PT – 20%, RS – 67%). A significant benefit was motivation, discipline and commitment to work, reduced turnover and greater employee loyalty, and a better employer image. The respondents associated several positives with the employee side, primarily higher productivity (GR – 78%, ES – 75%, PL – 36%, PT – 14%, RS – 45%). It was also noticed that there was an increase in satisfaction from work, better health, stress reduction, sufficient rest deprived of negative emotions that accompany work, greater freedom in planning a day and stopping neglecting daily duties, limiting stimulants, lower risk of psychophysical exhaustion or professional burnout, personal and intellectual development, elimination of many problems or domestic conflicts, establishing or strengthening relationships with relatives.

WLB solutions were not sufficiently used, despite their indisputable benefits. When asked about the reasons for omitting the facilitation of reconciling the professional and private areas, the respondents explained the nature of the public services sector as a place of work performing servant functions towards the society to satisfy its needs, burdened with a wide range of responsibilities and having at its disposal the means of coercion, characterised by a high discipline of public finance and quality of operation based on the legal regime, hierarchical organisation and a system of control. Its characteristics differ from the rules governing private entities operating in the commercial market, which translates into employment matters. On the one hand, a public employer performs its duties towards employees and determines working conditions, not excluding WLB issues. At the same time, it acts as a state apparatus equipped with universal sovereign skills to conduct social and economic policy for the benefit of society. In the face of formal and legal barriers, centralisation, bureaucracy, strict dependence on procedures (decision-making process), rationalisation of budget management as well as subjectively perceived lack of goodwill of the management, the concept of combining professional and private life was not justified in some sectors (e.g. law enforcement, judiciary, administration).

The gender aspect of public sector anti-discrimination policies was perceived positively. In the countries surveyed, respondents highlighted initiatives to find effective and adequate WLB solutions that would satisfy women, given their dominance in many job groups and, at the same time, their disadvantaged position in the labour market. Referring to the diversity of employment structures and the inherent differentiation of legal regulations, they acknowledged that given the rapidly changing reality and growing expectations of the society, the topic of reconciling work with the private sphere cannot be limited only to family or women's issues, but must be broadly perceived by taking into account many characteristics (age, marital status, health, nationality, religion), which influence employees' behaviour and at the same time generate new management methods by employers. Hence, it must be assumed that pursuing life harmony within WLB is not a one-dimensional phenomenon.

Remote (online) working, widely adopted during the spreading COVID-19 pandemic, owes many of its benefits to employees. As a flexible form of employment in terms of time, place and manner of providing work, it proved to be a good link between the fulfilment of professional aspirations and the requirements (will) of the employee to satisfy his/her personal and family needs. At the same time, it has been criticised for interfering with home life and causing difficulties in separating work from non-work duties. As a result of the poor organisation of tasks and the lack of certain predispositions (determination, responsibility, regularity), private matters often prevented tasks from being carried out properly (delays, lower quality) or had the side effect of aggravating workaholic tendencies (being constantly online). In both cases, the imbalance is detrimental, and the parties feel more frustrated by the various omissions. That is why it is so important to have a rational approach to the definition of mutual rights and obligations in the common law, which has not worked so far, as it was emphasised by the Polish respondents, as well as to understand the necessity of their standardisation in the Serbian legislation, because there is a lack of many regulations favouring decent work in the still ongoing process of political transformation in the country.

Rationality can also be fostered by collective bargaining, which is highly recognised in the Spanish system. They are conducted by social partners interested in arranging labour relations as they see fit to improve and develop WLB measures to make them more useful. Examples are the telework agreements adopted by the central administration and the autonomous communities. In Portugal, public sector legislation governs flexible work organisation, and teleworking was already included in the first collective agreement. However, it has not become a good practice due to trade unions' management resistance and disparaging treatment. The less enthusiastic attitude towards teleworking was explained by the need to ensure direct contact with citizens in many industries. Teleworking may lead to the dismantling of the professionalisation of public services, the passing of costs on to employees, isolation and the distortion of the idea of disconnection. In the opinion of all respondents from the five countries, abandoning this form of work and squandering its achievements does not seem to be a good solution, because, although it will not solve all the problems, it contributes to a consensus in making labour

relations more flexible and achieving a work-life balance. A rather attractive and more relevant solution could be a hybrid (two or three times a week) or occasional (a designated pool of days per year) teleworking.

Special attention was paid to flexible working hours. The respondents were favourably disposed towards the task-based system, which does not require a constant presence in the workplace, but only accounts for the performed activities; flexible working time, which determines any hours of taking up work; shortened working week, which provides for less than five days of being at the employer's disposal with a simultaneous extension of daily working hours; the possibility of leaving work during the day and working off the outstanding work later. At the same time, they were aware of the limitations resulting from the way the workplace operates (health care, municipal services, cleaning services, cultural institutions), which require availability (shift work, night work, Sundays and holidays). The nature of the tasks performed excludes atypical work organisation to ensure the comfort of private life.

Some respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the rigid hours of performing tasks and strict dependence on the office of public institutions, mainly central ones, or the inconvenience of working time when there is a need to continuously meet the needs of the people and perform activities on a 24-hour basis or be on standby for work (on-call, in delegation), as well as criticised the management for not taking initiatives to change management methods. Sometimes a different approach to applying rules, speeding up procedures, and introducing technological innovations is enough. It is certainly helpful, although expensive, to increase the number of employees in workplaces. Staff shortages are an important factor hampering simpler and more flexible working time management. For the Serbian respondents, interpersonal relations are understood as informal solutions within the company. In case of urgent problems, solutions (such as giving extra days off or substituting each other during the work) are accepted on *ad hoc* basis with the approval of co-workers.

The challenge is to maintain a balance and respect the division of the day into three parts: work, private activities and rest, to see holidays as a right and not a privilege, to use weekend days for personal or family purposes and not for overtime work, which, if it happens, should be fairly remunerated. Therefore, the right thing for employers to comply with standards and not abuse their advantage in employment relationships. There is still a certain discrepancy between regulations and practice, which is confirmed by the persistent fears of employees to keep their jobs, who consciously give up their rights to win the employer's favour, because the most important thing for them is a guarantee of employment and securing material existence as essential determinants of the WLB concept.

Conclusions

Respondents from the surveyed countries confirmed that the WLB concept has a multidimensional character, influenced by the transformations of the contemporary

world, including the growing demands of society, competition, globalisation, and changes in employment relations. By harmonising employers' (business) interests with working people who simultaneously play various non-working roles, WLB becomes a basic tool for human resources management and, at the same time, a source of social responsibility due to equal opportunities for men and women in employment. It contributes to strengthening employees' potential, because creating a friendly working environment facilitates the performance of private duties. As a result, it reduces psychological discomfort (stress, depression) and increases satisfaction from the possibility of reconciling both spheres of life, which motivates greater involvement in work. Ultimately, the WLB concept is profitable for employers, because it ensures them loyal and responsible employees.

The interviewees unanimously emphasised the attractiveness of employment in the public services sector and, at the same time, problems with the possibility of making it more flexible due to the specific character of work provided based on serving the society. According to them, the limitation of measures allowing to maintain the balance between the professional and private sphere makes it difficult to retain or recruit employees, especially young people, for whom the organisational freedom in the workplace plays an increasingly important role. A change in attitude towards the way some industries operate is needed to address the barriers that undermine the value of work, which include: the rigidity of legal standards, bureaucracy, unattractive salaries, overloading due to staff shortages, insufficient physical resources (equipment), hierarchy and conservative management attitudes, as well as emerging job insecurity due to increasing public debt caused by the negative effects of COVID-19 pandemic that has disrupted economic stability in Europe.

A problem that emerged with varying degrees of intensity in the countries of research was a lack of mutual understanding between the partners, looking through the prism of vested interests, accusing each other of passivity, inconsistency, and hiding behind legislation as the most important tool for steering the public sector, as well as the narrowing of discussions to wage issues as a priority for the trade union side as a representative of the workforce, whose positions were not always free of politics, as was particularly pointed out in Portugal. Incentive systems based on fair and transparent employee appraisals, modern management strategies incorporating the WLB concept, equality policies and decent pay are needed, as requested by Greek respondents dissatisfied with anachronistic regulations and the hermetic nature of certain industries.

Economic issues and the undervaluing of feminised professions were issues highlighted by Polish respondents, who felt that pay systems should be changed to reflect market levels of remuneration and to raise the profile and quality of public services offered. Subjection to the state budget gives a certain guarantee of payment and social stability. Still, it is also discredited, because it does not allow the partners to adopt freely the level of salaries, which is important. After all, managing monetary benefits and setting effective salaries must achieve a competitive advantage to attract competent employees. The well-developed bargaining system in Spain, which has had a positive impact on regulating all terms and conditions of employment in collective agreements,

has been significant in this respect but needs to be further improved and involve all categories of workers in balancing their interests. Several differences were shown by Serbian respondents, for whom the challenge in the context of the WLB concept is to adapt national legislation to the requirements of the European Union in the face of integration aspirations.

In conclusion, the value of the research is an attempt to demonstrate similarities and differences created by the situation in the analysed countries, which may serve to popularise the topic of work-life balance and provide a basis for further empirical work. Although the obtained results do not have statistical power, they outline a certain fragment of reality that seems to coincide with the conclusions found more broadly in the literature on the subject.

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Grażyna Spytek-Bandurska – doktor habilitowana nauk o polityce (2015), politolog i prawnik; pracownik naukowo-dydaktyczny Wydziału Nauk Politycznych i Studiów Międzynarodowych Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego. Specjalizuje się w prawie pracy i ustawodawstwie społecznym, prowadzi badania związane z elastycznymi formami zatrudnienia, przemianami pracy, dialogiem społecznym, rynkiem pracy. Zainteresowania naukowe łączy z praktyką. Ekspert Federacji Przedsiębiorców Polskich oraz Centrum Analiz Legislacyjnych i Polityki Ekonomicznej, członkini Rady Dialogu Społecznego oraz Rady Rynku Pracy. Ostatnio opublikowane monografie: *Zatrudnianie pracowników tymczasowych* (Warszawa 2018), *Telepraca jako nietypowa forma zatrudnienia w Polsce. Aspekty prawne i społeczne* (Warszawa 2015).

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