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INTRODUCTION OF PERFORMANCE EVALUATION FOR EMPLOYEES IN CROATIAN PUBLIC SECTOR AND PROFESSIONAL SOLIDARITY

Newly adopted Croatian Law on salaries for employees in the civil service and public sector, which entered into force at the beginning of 2024, introduced salary bonuses linked to performance evaluation for both sectors. While civil service employees already had regular performance evaluation in place, public employees did not have such evaluation. In addition to legal provisions, in October 2024 the Government introduced Regulation on Procedure, Criteria and Method of Performance Evaluation which is to enter into force at the beginning of 2026 and caused significant public outcry, particularly in certain sectors like high education.

The primary research question of this paper is whether professional solidarity can be put to the test by introducing performance evaluation fully dependent on the internal mechanisms of performance evaluation and without a proper discourse of external appeal mechanism. Further, we will explore if proposed evaluation in institutions of higher education where work tasks are mainly independent and difficult to assess has the potential to further disintegrate professional solidarity, which is already vulnerable to ongoing weakening of the collective bargaining and professional associations.

Keywords: solidarity, performance evaluation, public employees, Croatian legislation, high education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Newly adopted Croatian *Law on Salaries for Employees in the Civil Service and Public Sector* from 2024 introduced salary bonuses linked to performance evaluations for both sectors. The same year, the Government introduced *Regulation on Procedure, Criteria and Method of Performance Evaluation*, which should enter into force in 2026 and has already caused significant public outcry, particularly in certain sectors like high education.

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The proposal defines that the immediate supervisor is obliged to continuously monitor the work and work attitude of the employee, to encourage quality and efficient performance of work tasks and work attitude, and to indicate in writing the omissions and irregularities of the employee. The most concerning provision of the Regulation is that negative performance evaluation would lead to immediate dismissal.

While introduction of performance evaluation in the public sector should increase professionalism, high-quality performance and accountability in the public sector, its regulation should be as comprehensive as possible and in line with labour law standards to minimise possibility of violation of workers' rights in two crucial areas of labour law – protection of fair working conditions and protection against unfair dismissal. Procedure for performance evaluation dismissal needs to be very well legally elaborated and needs to contain all safeguards protecting, on one side, the rights of workers and on the other side, the interests of the employer, in this case, the state. Insufficiently regulated performance evaluation can easily jeopardise the International Labour Organisation (ILO) standards, the European Union (EU) standards enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and other applicable legal instruments.

In the first chapter, we analyse theoretical foundations for performance evaluation in public service and links with performance-related pay. Second chapter focuses on theoretical foundations of performance evaluation, third on provisions of proposed new Croatian legislation applicable to introduction of performance evaluation and the fourth chapter applicability of newly proposed legal provisions to administrative and technical employees of high education and science institutions, In the fifth chapter, we provide labour law analysis of performance evaluation for teaching and research employees. In chapter six, we explore how the introduction of performance evaluation can be a test of the solidarity principle in labour law.

Research in this paper is based on qualitative legal research methods, combining the methods of analysis and synthesis, inductive and deductive methods, and descriptive methods.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF PERFORMANCE EVALUATION IN PUBLIC SERVICE AND LINK TO PERFORMANCE RELATED PAY

Introduction of performance evaluation and the performance-related pay in civil and public services has important implications, such as increasing public administration efficiency by increasing the work performance of its employees and better motivating public officials to perform well, invest in their professional development, and get financially rewarded for high-quality work. Further, it might affect talent attraction to public administration and merit-based remuneration, as well as a decrease in public administration costs by cutting down seniority promotions (Marcetic & Manojlovic-Toman, 2019, p. 136). Other benefits include improvement of skills and competencies of public servants, which are again linked to better functioning administration. Performance evaluation is closely linked to merit-based recruitment in public service, particularly at the managerial positions where performance and pay decisions should be made impartially, objectively and professionally.

Manojlovic (2016, pp. 289–297) emphasised crucial importance of continued monitoring, assessment and evaluation of a work of public employees, but under the precondition it is clearly pre-defined, objective, measurable, and linked to organisational priorities and strategic goals, which requires specifying of expected results which all leads to the second phase which is the use of collected information to conduct performance evaluation.

The shortcomings of linking pay to performance are primarily the non-existence of a clear description and analysis of work processes and procedures on who does what, i.e., which public service employee does a certain work task while holding a certain position (Buric & Kuzir, 2019, p. 260). Additionally, we have a lot of potential obstacles on the side of supervisors, starting from several types of bias, subjectivity, and partiality. Another issue of concern is the notion that only a depoliticised public service can be fully efficient and professional because, in a politicised public service, we have a lack of interest and specific skills to conduct proper performance evaluation. Unless we approach performance evaluation from the highest possible standards of professionalism, coupled by the pre-determined and clear evaluation criteria, the actual goal of introducing such a method will not be achieved.

OECD (2005, pp. 75–82) considers that the introduction of payment-related pay requires fundamental adjustments or changes in methods of work and work ethic, a clear goal and results-oriented approach, including the ability to measure them and accountability for results. It also outlines two main models of performance-related pay: the first with the merit-based permanent basic remuneration increase, and the second is payment of lump sum bonuses, which are not part of the regular salary and depend on the performance evaluation (OECD, 2005, pp. 55-56).

3. LEGAL BASIS OF PERFORMANCE EVALUATION OF CIVIL AND PUBLIC SERVANTS IN CROATIA

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026 of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, approved by the European Union, as part of the reform measures “New models of salaries and work in the civil service and public services”, planned to integrate work efficiency and performance with remuneration and job promotions of all employees in public administration (i.e., both civil servants and employees of public services). The standardisation and reform of the remuneration in public administration should implement the principle of equal pay for equal work, and introduce equal opportunities for rewarding employees who have excellent work results within the public administration.

The newly adopted Law on Salaries of Employees in Civil and Public Services (*Official Gazette* No. 155/2023) (further: Law on Salaries) introduced the evaluation of the work efficiency of civil servants and employees in public services, and for the first time a single regulation applies to all public services in the Republic of Croatia. The procedure, criteria, and methods of evaluating the performance of public service employees are regulated by the Law on Salaries of Employees in Civil and Public Services (*Official Gazette*, No. 127/2024) (further: Regulation).

Article 10, paragraph 13 of the Law on Salaries stipulates that, besides the general criteria for assessing the efficiency of work, because of the specificity of the work of specific public

services, special criteria for the efficiency of the work of civil servants and employees will be established by by-laws. The general criteria for assessing the efficiency of work of employees shall apply to all public services, and they are: efficiency in work performance, reliability, and punctuality (Article 19 of the Regulation). Special criteria are innovation, creativity, written communication, communication skills, and teamwork. The criteria for assessing the work attitude are: attitude towards work obligations, attitude towards clients of service users, attitude towards supervisors, attitude towards subordinates and attitude towards their peers (Article 21 of the Regulation), while managerial criteria: organisation and management of work, decision-making ability, ability to motivate employees, ability to establish work procedures and supervise their execution, and work efficiency (Article 23 of the Regulation).

Under Article 4 of the Regulation, the proposal for the performance evaluation of an employee is made by the employee's immediate supervisor, along with the employee's self-assessment for the previous year. The immediate supervisor is obliged to monitor the work and conduct of the employee during the year and keep records with comments on work, recommendations, and exceptional achievements, under the provisions of Article 6 of the Regulation. The proposed evaluation should be shared with the employee, who has the right to make a complaint within three days.

The Regulation stipulates the obligation of the head of the public service to establish a Committee for Proposing the Final Assessment (Article 7) and more committees depending on the number of employees and the number of separate organisational units. The primary task of the Committee is to review the self-assessment, the report, and the evaluation proposal and determine the final proposal for the employee's performance evaluation by a majority vote of its members. The composition of the Committee has been pre-determined, consisting of an odd number of at least five members, with one member being a representative of the Workers' Council or a representative of the trade union in the event that a Workers' Council has not been established.

In accordance with Article 9 of the Regulation, the final proposal for the employee's performance evaluation is determined by the Commission and submitted to the head of the public service (or an authorised person). If the final proposal for the performance evaluation of the Commission differs from the proposal of the employee's supervisor, the proposal shall be accompanied by the proposal of the employee's supervisor, as well as the employee's statement if the employee has provided a statement. When the final proposal for the employee's evaluation is "excellent," the Commission shall submit it to the Evaluation Proposal Review Committee before submitting it to the head within the stipulated deadline. The reasoned decision should be shared with the employee, but there is no external appeal body to which the employee being assessed can submit a complaint or appeal against the grade. Performance evaluation needs to be recorded in the Register of Public Sector Employees for the purpose of awarding points in accordance with the provisions of the law and regulations.

The Regulation by the Article 14 stipulates that an employee may receive a rating "unsatisfactory" only if he/she was, no later than three months before the end of the year for which the evaluation is being performed, warned in writing of the possibility of receiving a negative rating and was also warned of the need to improve the work performance. The report must contain information on when the written warning was issued, and whether

the employee eliminated irregularities and omissions at work, i.e., justified a rating higher than “unsatisfactory” by subsequent work performance. If the performance of a civil servant or public service employee is assessed as “unsatisfactory,” his/her employment contract shall be terminated and he/she would be dismissed in accordance with the Labour Law.

The Law on Salaries regulates what constitutes the basic salary, how the basis for calculating the salary and the coefficient for calculating the salary are determined, and what the basic salary supplements are. It also establishes a work efficiency supplement that is paid based on the employee’s work efficiency performance evaluation, and it is calculated as surplus paid on the basic salary, increased depending on the length of work experience. Depending on the grade with which the civil servant or employee was assessed for the previous calendar year, he/she acquire a certain number of points (Article 19 of the Act). Article 29 of the Law establishes limits on salary promotions during one calendar year, of a maximum of 5% of the total number of employees can receive the grade “excellent”, and a maximum of 15% can receive the grade “particularly successful”. It is the obligation of the head of the institution to establish a Committee for Reviewing Evaluation Proposals, responsible for reviewing the “excellent” and “particularly successful” evaluations. The Law also stipulates a onetime cash payment to reward employees for their work results.

The Regulation in Article 17 lists exceptions when assessing periods of maternity/paternity, parental or adoption leave or leave that is equal to the right to paternity leave, half-time work, half-time work for increased child care, leave for pregnant women, leave for an employee who has given birth or an employee who is breastfeeding a child, and leave or work half-time for the care and nurturing of a child with severe disabilities, in accordance with the regulation on maternity and parental benefits, which are considered a full-time work. Also, for periods of absence from work that lasted longer than 6 months in the calendar year, the employee will be assessed as “successful.”

In the above-mentioned provisions, we can notice the introduction of performance-related pay into the Croatian legal system. Marcetic & Majnolovic-Toman (2019, p. 130) outlined the main contested issues related to such remuneration approach being difficulties in determining what is considered a high-quality performance, how to measure it, how to prevent abuses at performance evaluation, whether performance related pay would indeed increase work efficiency and quality of a work of public employees, and the impact it has to the motivation of employees and ethics of the public service. All these questions are fully valid and currently inadequately addressed in the ongoing introduction of overall performance evaluation in civil and public services in Croatia.

4. CHALLENGES IN PERFORMANCE EVALUATION OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND TECHNICAL EMPLOYEES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENCE IN CROATIA

The assessment of the work of administrative and technical employees in higher education and science is necessary for improving and ensuring the quality of the functioning of the entire higher education system. In order for the performance evaluation system for administrative officials and employees of public services to achieve its purpose, it is

essential to establish a fair, objective and motivating system for employees. For this reason, it is necessary to objectively determine all special evaluation criteria, their impact and the system for assessing special criteria and general criteria for performance assessment, i.e. assessment of work efficiency and attitude towards work. It is therefore to be expected that separate regulations will have to be adopted to establish high-quality, precise, clear and unambiguous specific performance criteria, adapted to the specificities of each individual public service as a prerequisite for ensuring an objective system of performance evaluation of public service employees, including administrative and technical employees in the high education and science system.

As the work of administrative and technical employees in higher education and science institutions is very complex, changing, and dependent on external circumstances such as working with students and teaching and research staff, there are numerous challenges in the performance evaluation.

First, administrative employees perform different and very diverse tasks, depending on the particular institution, so it might prove difficult to establish specific criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of their work. Their institutions are different in size and have different job divisions. In smaller institutions, administrative and technical employees have multiple functions and, as such, could have multiple supervisors under various managerial structures. For example, one secretary of a small faculty can be simultaneously tasked by the Dean, Vice-Deans, and Professors, depending on her roles. If this is the case, it will be difficult to establish clear supervisory lines and subsequently, to make a high-quality performance evaluation.

Further, each higher education and science institution has different organizational priorities and strategic goals, which might be challenging for the establishment of clear assessment criteria. The absence of criteria and the lack of general guidelines can lead to uneven performance evaluation and a subjective approach by the supervisors. Therefore, it is necessary to establish clear and measurable specific performance assessment criteria, considering the specificities of administrative positions within the higher education system.

In order for administrative officials and employees to achieve satisfactory results in performing their jobs, it is necessary to enable professional development and improve competence within the scope of the job they perform, which the employer should previously determine in an annual training plan. This is closely linked to the need to establish competency gaps of administrative employees, followed by a personalized development plan with competencies each employee should possess for better work performance and aligned with that, individual training plan should be elaborated (Vukojdzic Tomic & Lopizic, 2019, p.77). In certain administrative and technical professions within the education system, opportunities for professional development are often limited or unavailable. Therefore, it is necessary to enable administrative and technical employees to attend further education, lifelong learning programs, and specialist and postgraduate studies in order to gain additional expertise would improve the performance and skills of employees.

Another important point is a very high possibility of favoritism and power influence of the head of a public institution, so that the highest grades are given only to privileged employees, or this can be used against workers who are active in workers' organizations

and trade unions. In order to completely exclude the possibility of arbitrariness, legislators should have established a competent committee within the relevant Ministry for Education and Science to review the final evaluation of public service employees for each category of public service for which special performance evaluation criteria will be established.

5. CHALLENGES IN EVALUATING THE PERFORMANCE OF TEACHING AND RESEARCH EMPLOYEES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENCE SYSTEM IN CROATIA

In the higher education system in Croatia, teaching and research employees' work is evaluated through the assessment of teaching, scientific, research, and institutional contribution within a time period of five years. This evaluation is legally required in order to fulfill criteria and get promoted to a higher position or reappointed to an existing position. Taking into consideration that work of public service employees at public Universities in Croatia - teaching and research employees – is being carefully and regularly assessed and evaluated by the national expert committee, we can reasonably expect that the introduction of a parallel system of performance evaluation will be highly contestable.

We outline the main obstacles to the proper implementation of performance evaluation for the academic public employees in Croatia:

5.1. Labour Law Challenges in Implementation of Performance Evaluation for Teachers and Research Employees in the Higher Education and Science System

5.1.1. Predictability and transparency of working conditions

One of the basic principles of labour law and fair labour relations is predictability and transparency of employment. In that regard, when performance evaluation is introduced, we need to develop a comprehensive, transparent and predictable scheme for assessing worker's performance to avoid discrimination and violation of fundamental labour rights. Therefore, it is of particular importance to set clear strategic goals of the institution, followed by clear job descriptions and individual, yearly, and easily measurable performance goals and personal achievements for each employee. Then it is of crucial importance to train supervisors very well on the proper monitoring of performance and skills required to provide meaningful performance feedback. Once supervisors are trained and employees are fully aware of the expected results they are supposed to achieve within a certain timeframe – usually annually – we can proceed with the delivery of established performance goals and periodic review of performance against agreed standards and results. If the employee failed to deliver the initially agreed results, and if the employer provides a negative performance rating, firstly, the venue for informal resolution must be established, followed by the establishment of a formal internal mechanism for challenging a negative performance evaluation if and when informal resolution is unsuccessful. Besides that, an organisation must have a transparent and legal performance improvement plan with clearly stipulated areas where improvements are required, which would be activated within a certain period, either

six months or one year. If all the mentioned steps prove unsuccessful, an employee with inadequate performance should be informed in writing about exhausted possibilities to resolve the matter with a performance improvement plan, informally and formally, and subsequently, that his/her employment contract is to be terminated within the legally stipulated notice period.

Unless above mentioned steps of performance evaluation are all implemented, we cannot speak about fair and transparent working conditions as they are stipulated in the EU Directive 2019/1152 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on transparent and predictable working conditions and all applicable ILO standards on fair and predictable working conditions.

In the current proposal for regulation of the performance evaluation impact on labour status of public employees, including academic staff, one gap is very evident, and that is lack of legal recourse and internal avenues of redress. Disciplinary actions in labour law should firstly have internal procedures and possibility to settle the matters informally and formally within the organisation or through alternative methods of dispute resolution, i.e. mediation or arbitration. Appeal to the negative performance evaluation must be introduced as otherwise, we can easily violate articles 8 and 9 of Convention 158, dealing with the right of appeal, which is an essential element of a worker's protection against unjustified dismissal. The reasoned decision of the head of the institution and the Evaluation Proposal Review Committee should be communicated to the employee. However, there is no external body to which the employee being assessed can submit a complaint or appeal regarding the grade.

5.1.2. Violation of international standards applicable to dismissal

Proposed changes to the employment of the public employees in Croatia, including an academic staff of four public Universities, contravene international labour standards as guaranteed by the ILO protection against dismissal recognised by the ILO Conventions, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the EU Treaty, and EU Directives. The primary ILO applicable convention violated is Convention C158 on Termination of Employment from 1982 (No. 158) and Termination of Employment Recommendation, 1982 (No. 166). In Article 7 of Convention No 158 it is clearly stipulated that:

'The employment of a worker shall not be terminated for reasons related to the worker's conduct or performance before he is provided an opportunity to defend himself against the allegations made, unless the employer cannot reasonably be expected to provide this opportunity.'

Croatian Labour Law follows the Convention and in Art. 119. p. 2. sets a procedure that needs to be undertaken prior to dismissal, outlining that the employer has a duty to allow the worker to defend himself. In the proposal for legal regulation of dismissal due to negative performance evaluation, we do not find sufficiently convincing provision related to the 'opportunity (of worker) to defend himself against the allegations' and this might pose a serious issue to both employers and labour tribunals which will have to interpret national legal provisions in light of the ILO Conventions.

Another labour issue might be a period of notice, which is set to three months in the proposed new legislation. This is not aligned with Croatian Labour Law provisions, which in Art. 122 stipulates several notice periods for dismissal for misconduct, depending on the length of service.

5.2 Harmonization between current performance evaluation and newly introduced performance evaluation for teaching staff

Taking into consideration that teaching, scientific, research and institutional contribution of teaching staff at Croatian Universities is already being assessed regularly, introduction of another layer of performance evaluation might be repetitive if all four criteria will be re-assessed or focused on administrative side of the job, leaving out substantial content of the performance. If public service employee level of performance evaluation will be conducted on a yearly basis, there is a question whether data collected through such an assessment could be used further in a five-years cycle of performance evaluation by the National Scientific Committee or vice versa, if positive evaluation of promotion by the Committee should be a basis for annual review in next years.

5.3. Heavily diverse tasks of teaching staff

Formal job descriptions of teaching staff at Croatian Universities are very generic and give freedom to choose certain tasks over others. For example, while the minimum and maximum number of teaching hours are legally set, there is no repercussion if someone refuses to take on any additional teaching classes beyond the minimum. Very often, the amount of teaching hours does not depend on the teacher, but rather on external circumstances, such as the number of enrolled students, topic, elective courses, etc. At the same time, teachers can choose to work on additional tasks, such as mentoring, project work, or working with guest students, and those additional tasks are not reflected in remuneration, bonuses, additional leave days, or any other applicable employment benefits. Their access to certain activities beyond compulsory work tasks depends on highly diverse scientific interests, skills, and areas of interest, so subsequently, it might be very difficult to establish assessment criteria for performance evaluation.

5.4. Highly independent work of academic staff with minimum supervision

The work of Professors at the Croatian Universities is highly independent, with minimum supervision, even in areas where supervision would be expected and assumed, such as supervision or at least feedback regarding the quality of lecturing. Current practice is that University Professors only have one initial lecture when they formally start teaching, attended by a more senior colleague who provides assessment of that class. Apart from that, professors are free to organise the content of all of their future lectures and deliver them fully unsupervised. This poses a problem when we try to assess the quality of teaching because the ongoing practice of independence is not compatible with the performance evaluation in this area. For research part of academic work, the situation is easier because it is relatively easy to quantify published research papers or book chapters, and it is regularly done, but even here we have an issue of unequal access to prestigious

international publishers which are more interested in certain scientific fields, but less so in other (this particularly applies for social sciences and more specifically for law). For teaching, the only quantifiable data is a yearly survey by students, which is not fully reliable, considering that students can give higher ratings to more entertaining teachers, as well as to those who have low expectations for them. In addition, it is difficult to quantify external activities of teaching staff, such as involvement in public events, media, or cooperation with business enterprises. Finally, formally, supervisors of Professors are Deans who have very limited interaction with Professors and do not and cannot supervise them on a daily basis. In the human resources area, one important point is to try to avoid so-called proximity bias, by which managerial staff place unfairly higher value and impact on work they actually see or are directly aware of. In addition, staff members and his/her supervisor can and usually are in different scientific fields, so even on that front, supervision is not feasible. Therefore, the objective knowledge of Deans on the performance of teaching staff is very limited, if any, so it would be extremely difficult to make a proper, merit-based performance evaluation.

5. INTRODUCTION OF PERFORMANCE EVALUATION AS A TEST OF SOLIDARITY

The principle of solidarity is one of the prominent principles of labour law, particularly collective labour law, but also individual labour law, where we can link solidarity with protection from the arbitrariness of employers, protection from discrimination, protection of fair and transparent working conditions, and protection against unfair dismissal. By applying solidarity in labour law, we actually protect the weaker part of the labour relation and that is workers, while by guaranteeing solidarity in labour law implementation, we ensure human rights are respected, protected, and promoted, as outlined in all international human rights instruments.

The EU considers protection against unfair dismissal as part of the solidarity principle, and leaves the regulation of enforceability and accountability to Member States because of the subsidiarity principle by which diversity in the content's definition exists (Lopez, 2022, p. 11). Lopez also notes that protections against unfair dismissal, as defined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, are a matter of solidarity, as well as part of the EU-promoted "flex-security" (Lopez, 202, p.11).

If we look into protecting labour rights as a solidarity principle, then every inadequately substantiated and well-elaborated proposal for the introduction of performance evaluation and performance-related pay could possibly jeopardise fair labour conditions and protection against unfair dismissal and, subsequently, labour solidarity. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to regulate performance evaluation in a way that regulation contains procedural and rights safeguards and full implementation of the ILO standards.

6. CONCLUSION

In Croatia, the performance evaluation of civil servants, which has been ongoing for many years now, was purely formalistic and included unrealistic over-rating of the performance of civil servants. This was supposed to be changed by the latest proposal for reform of performance evaluation in public services through links between performance evaluation and bonus payments to the base salary, and the possibility of termination of the employment contract because of unsatisfactory performance.

The primary research question of this paper was whether solidarity can be put to the test by introducing performance evaluation for public employees. By providing an analysis of the applicable proposal for legal regulation of performance evaluation, we established that the current proposal is inadequate and contains gaps that might and definitely should be addressed in the bylaws. The main concern is that proposed performance evaluation procedure is currently not promoting predictable and transparent working conditions because it is insufficiently regulated in areas like organisational goals and strategic areas, clear job descriptions, proper training of supervisory and managerial staff in performance evaluations and human resources feedback, defining setting of individual goals and achievements, possibility of performance improvement, internal informal and formal redress mechanisms and external amicable resolution of possible disputes related to the negative performance evaluation. These are essential if performance evaluation is to be linked to the additional payment of bonuses, and could lead to the termination of the employment contract. Without detailed regulation of all the above, the introduction of performance evaluation can undermine solidarity in labour relations and can jeopardise fundamental labour rights.

In the performance evaluation of academic public employees – both administrative and academic staff – the paper outlined areas where potential obstacles to fair and objective assessment of performance could happen, which might also serve as proposals for how to better regulate that area.

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