



Industrial relations and social dialogue
**Estonia: Working life in the
COVID-19 pandemic 2020**

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Introduction

The first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed in Estonia in the end of February 2020 and the emergency situation was declared on 12 March 2020. Until 17 May 2020, the country was in lock-down, schools, restaurants and hotels were closed, and public events forbidden. As a response to this, the first measures to alleviate the difficult situation of the employees and companies were introduced in April. The second wave of the pandemic hit Estonia in the beginning of Autumn, but instead of total lock-down, the containment measures took a regional and sectoral dimension with the idea of avoiding the disruption of the economic activity of the entire country. These containment measures were accompanied with specific alleviation measures in form of direct financial support. The sectors most affected include restaurants and accommodation, tourism, and culture. Overall, however, the economy and working life were less affected than initially feared, especially compared to the previous economic recession. The Estonian Bank has brought out that the economy (GDP) declined by -2.5%, which was much less than anticipated, and if everything goes well, the economy will start to recover soon with a forecasted economic growth of 2.9% by the end of 2021. The average annual unemployment rate was 7.3% in 2020. For comparison, it was 12.2% in 2010 (when the economic recession hit) and stood between 4.4% and 5% since 2014. It is estimated that the measures that supported employees and companies have an important role to play in those results as without those measures the overall situation would be considerably worse.

Impacts of the pandemic on working life

Several studies related to COVID-19 impacts on working life and related topics (e.g. mental health) are in progress at the beginning of 2021. For example, the Estonian Research Council has commissioned a study which analyses the economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, including aspects related to labour market. The study includes mapping international experience, developing macro-models and using micro-simulations (EUROMOD). University of Tartu is carrying out several COVID-19 related research projects. It can also be expected that the ministries will commission studies in the future.

Several studies were published as well. Firstly, during the emergency situation in Estonia (between 12 March and 18 May 2020), a representative survey (1,255 respondents) was carried out by Turu-Uuringute AS (commissioned by the government) each week, which was later continued with an approximately three-week interval, covering persons aged 15 and older. It covers aspects such as the feeling of threat by the COVID-19 spread and attitudes towards the prevention and containment measures, but also the situation regarding working life related aspects. Overall, the results have shown that during summer, most of the people felt that while the worst had passed, precaution was still necessary, while in autumn that the situation was again critical. Between 40% and 68% of the respondents have felt that the containment measures have been suitable and appropriate; still during spring and autumn around a third felt that the measures should be somewhat stricter, while during summer around quarter felt that the measures should be eased. This has thus followed the overall perception of the situation. Around half of respondents have faced reduced income. The crisis increased the share of those working remotely. For example, a way to avoid COVID-19, the share of people who worked at home if possible (not specified whether the whole working time or partially) for this purpose increased from 16-18% in summer to 23% in December. Specific telework related questions were asked since October 2020 and the situation since then has been quite stable: for half of respondents teleworking is not an option as neither their tasks nor their employer would allow it, for around 30% of respondents telework is allowed by the tasks and the employer, and for 2% teleworking is prohibited by the employer although their tasks could be completed outside of the office. Those who can work remotely, around half can do it during the whole working time, while 11-15% can do it during a small share of working time. Job related stress factors include worries due to having no savings and it would be difficult to survive if they or their close one would lose job (a third of respondents), 3-4% are stressed due to telework, while for 11-12% too high work load is a stress factor (Turu-uuringute AS, 2020a, 2020b).

The Estonian Qualifications Authority published an analysis of the COVID-19 impact on changes in skills and labour needs in the future, which was carried out between June and November 2020. The study showed rapid increase in need for additional training for employees, especially in relation to ICT, risk management and analysis, product development, communication and management skills. Also, the knowledge regarding health and safety of work environment and mental health say increased in importance. The study also revealed that despite an increased unemployment rate, there are still sectors and fields of activities with substantial labour shortage, these include ICT, agriculture, the social field, healthcare and education. Also, the main trends that were forecasted prior to the crisis, are still valid, because the main development directions and goals in the EU have not changed (e.g. digitalisation and automation, green economies, population ageing) and the lack of those skills persist (Rosenblad et al, 2020).

A survey among companies (1,798 respondents) was carried out by County Development Centres in March and in June. The survey was carried out among managers of companies registered in the business register based on a random sample. The sample included 60.6% of companies whose activities were partially or entirely stopped in June and 63.3% in March. While in spring, half of the surveyed entrepreneurs thought they would have to dismiss employees during the coming months, the results of the survey conducted in June showed that actually 8.4% of companies had indeed dismissed employees and 5.3% thought they would have to do it in near future. The most important result of the crisis for companies was the lack of new orders, stopped service provision and cancelled orders. Paying wages and state taxes was problematic for a fifth of entrepreneurs. Compared to spring, the share of entrepreneurs who estimated they are not capable of paying wages and fixed costs the next month decreased by summer. In June, slightly more than half of the respondents said they would not use any support measures provided by the state due to different reasons (e.g. not eligible, confusing conditions, not enough information) (Maakondlike Arendukeskuste Võrgustik, 2020).

Political context

The most recent parliament elections took place in spring 2019, after which a coalition was formed, which did not include the winner of the elections. This means that the government has had time to get to know each other and it has been somewhat easier to deal with such crisis. The coalition was formed between the Estonian Centre Party (centrist party), the Estonian Conservative People's Party (far right party), and Isamaa (direct translation *fatherland*) (right party). Overall, there have not been any major political crashes or extreme difficulties that could have had an impact on dealing with the COVID-19 situation, at least most of the year 2020. However, there have been constant overall frictions in the government as the coalition partners tended to not to agree with each other's decision and views. This has caused tensions and has somewhat reduced the ability of the government to move forward with developments. Yet, despite these difficulties, the COVID-19 crisis has been managed and decisions have been made. The government has relied on scientific knowledge which has been provided by the scientific council. However, the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 has suffered from an escalating parliamentary tension over non-COVID related matters and the beginning of 2021 brought additional troubles, which resulted in the resign of the Prime Minister on 13 January 2021.

Governments and social partners response to cushion the effects

The first measure introduced since the beginning of the crisis was the wage subsidy for employeesⁱ to compensate their income during the period when the employers were not able to provide them work. It was developed in the cooperation of the government and the public employment service (PES), the social partners and all of the parties were strongly supportive towards the measure and agreements were formed quickly and easily. Another directly employees targeted measure is related to sick leave compensationⁱⁱ, which reduced the employees' own contribution in sickness benefits.

Regarding employers, in the very beginning of the crisis, the companies' situation was temporarily eased with tax-related measures, such as reduced and suspended interests on tax arrearsⁱⁱⁱ and social tax payments for solo self-employed^{iv}. To support employers and entrepreneurs, several support packages have also been launched. Some of these are directed towards all companies, e.g. providing loan and loan guarantees^v to companies who had difficulties dealing with already taken loans to relax the repayment schedules and to companies who would have turned down by banks. Other measures for companies have been available on the basis of the field of activities. These include support packages for education and youth^{vi} field to support private and hobby schools; tourism, accommodation and service sector^{vii} (e.g. hotels, restaurants, travel companies); and creative industry which includes culture activities^{viii} and freelance creative persons^{ix}. Shipping companies as an important part of the economy were eligible for specific measures^x. Regarding those measures, social partners and sectoral business partners have overall criticised the measures as being too bureaucratic, developed too late or having too strict eligibility conditions, but overall the measures were used and welcomed.

In summer, a specific issue occurred regarding berry growers, who heavily rely on a foreign workforce to harvest their fields. The government did not allow the foreign workers to enter Estonia and the berry growers did not find additional workforce from Estonia. The government then released a support measure to motivate the matching of unemployed and the berry growers by providing a temporary wage subsidy in the amount of 50% of the wage when hiring an unemployed to work in the berry field. According to stakeholders, this measure was released too late and was overall not helpful, as the unemployed were not motivated to work on the fields.

With the start of the second wave of the crisis in late 2020, additional resources were allocated to the sectors and fields of activities most affected by the crisis and a regional dimension^{xi} was added. In December 2020, two regions suffered the most as stricter containment measures were introduced there. To relief the situation, the government allocated more resources to companies in the specific fields (culture, sport activities, restaurants) in those specific regions compared to other parts of Estonia. Still, resources were also allocated to the specific field of activities all over Estonia and overall followed the same path as in Spring. The social partners have stated that compared to spring, when there could have been better decisions made, they are more worried when thinking about the second wave in autumn, because no specific plans were put in place during summer. The most common criticism from stakeholders towards the government is that the decisions were lagging, and the process was not been transparent. Moreover, the employers called on the government to contribute to finding solutions that create more added value in the long term, e.g. innovation, digitalisation,

green economy. The trade unions were overall satisfied with the cooperation between the government and social partners but called on the government to develop a clear recovery plan for the economy, which should be a result of tripartite negotiations. In June, the peak-level trade union emphasised the importance of continuing with several social reforms, e.g. sick leave compensation, extending the eligibility criteria for unemployment insurance benefit and extending the period of paying the benefit. By the end of 2020, these discussions were held and decisions were made or are soon coming.

The COVID-19 impacts have also been taken into account already in future policy decisions. For example, the new Employment Programme 2021-2023^{xii} takes those impacts strongly into account by introducing new measures and directing the main focus of the programme away from labour shortages to unemployment. The programme is a convenient way to mitigate acute labour market situations as it is established based on the Labour Market Services and Benefits Act usually for three years. The COVID-19 impacts are also being considered in the new youth strategy which is being developed by the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund. Although the pre-crisis plans for the strategy included stronger cooperation between stakeholders and strengthening the work to reduce youth unemployment, the COVID-19 crisis strengthened the needs and gave also new perspectives.

ⁱ Eurofound (2020), [Temporary subsidy programme](#), case EE-2020-10/325 (measures in Estonia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

ⁱⁱ Eurofound (2020), [Sick leave amendments](#), case EE-2020-11/375 (measures in Estonia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eurofound (2020), [Interests on tax arrears suspended/reduced](#), case EE-2020-10/341 (measures in Estonia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^{iv} Eurofound (2020), [Social tax payments for solo self-employed](#), case EE-2020-12/337 (measures in Estonia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^v Eurofound (2020), [Emergency loan and loan guarantee](#), case EE-2020-13/347 (measures in Estonia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^{vi} Eurofound (2020), [Support in the field of education and youth](#), case EE-2020-18/977 (measures in Estonia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^{vii} Eurofound (2020), [Grants for SMEs and entrepreneurs in tourism, accommodation, catering, travel and commerce sectors](#), case EE-2020-20/962 (measures in Estonia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^{viii} Eurofound (2020), [Support package for culture field](#), case EE-2020-17/362 (measures in Estonia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^{ix} Eurofound (2020), [Subsistence support for freelancers in creative industries](#), case EE-2020-17/355 (measures in Estonia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^x Eurofound (2020), [Measures to support shipping companies](#), case EE-2020-1/384 (measures in Estonia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^{xi} Eurofound (2020), [Compensation of employment costs in the Ida-Virumaa region](#), case EE-2020-53/1645 (measures in Estonia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^{xii} Eurofound (2020), [New employment programme 2021-2023](#), case EE-2021-1/1635 (measures in Estonia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

How COVID-19 accelerated and disrupted working life policies and impacted social dialogue

Accelerated developments

At the beginning of 2020, the Ministry of Social Affairs notified its intention to draft a law to improve the unemployment protection system. The proposed changes also included increasing the unemployment allowance and unemployment insurance benefit and possibility to work temporarily during unemployment. According to this document, the changes were to take effect in 2022 at the earliest. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 and increasing unemployment, it was decided to accelerate the unemployment protection reform plan to improve the situation of the unemployed. In June 2020, the Parliament approved an increase in the unemployment benefits rates. Since August 2020, the unemployment insurance benefit is 60% of the previous earnings (previously 50%). The insurance benefit is paid for 6 to 12 months for those who have paid the unemployment insurance premiums prior unemployment. In addition, since January 2021, the unemployment allowance (paid after the insurance benefit and for those who have not sufficient insurance tenure) is €292 per month (€189 in 2020). As from September 2020, it is also possible to take on temporary work while being registered as unemployed (up to 8 days per month).

COVID-19 has also prioritised the discussions on sick leave compensation. Sickness benefit is usually paid by the employer from day four to day eight and from day nine onwards, the benefit is paid by the Health Insurance Fund (EHIF). The first three days of sick leave are usually not compensated. Already in the past, trade unions have wanted to reduce employee's own responsibility for compensating sick leave and have proposed compensation for sick leave from the first day. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the EHIF started to pay sickness benefit temporarily also on the first three days between 13 March to 17 May 2020. In December 2020, it was decided that temporarily the employer will compensate days two to five and from day 6 onwards the leave is compensated by the EHIF (between January and April 2021).

Disrupted developments

It can be expected that the COVID-19 crisis had an impact on policies and the priorities changed. However, there is no public evidence available that any substantial developments were disrupted due to the COVID-19 crisis. However, not enough information is available to claim that on full certainty.

Impacts on the social dialogue and collective bargaining

Overall, there were not any substantial changes in social dialogue and collective bargaining in 2020. The tripartite meetings between the government and social partners continued despite the crisis. In addition, social partners are members of the councils of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund and the Estonian Health Insurance Fund, and via those councils the cooperation was very strong in relation to developing support measures and managing the crisis. Already planned sectoral collective bargaining took place as usual, e.g. in health care the negotiations over the collective agreement for 2021-2022 started in September, and in public sector culture field the wage agreement for 2021 was signed in December.

Other important policy developments

One of the most influencing developments in terms of collective bargaining occurred in summer 2020, which brought again into attention the topic of extending collective agreements. In 2018, the social partners concluded a good practice agreement on the extension of collective agreements which for the first time set a representativeness criterion for social partners. However, this was a non-binding agreement. In 2020, it became obvious that an official, binding solution should be found. The Supreme Court of Estonia made a resolution in June stating that the current law does not allow for signatory parties to extend a collective agreement to the entire sector, i.e. to those employers who are not signatory parties or who are not members of the employers' associations who have signed the agreement (Riigikohus, 2020). According to the current law, a collective agreement can be extended if the agreement is signed by an employers' association/confederation and employees' association/confederation; the scope of the extension should be agreed by the parties. This provision has been used in Estonia for years to extend agreements in health care and transport sectors. As a response to the court resolution, the Ministry of Social Affairs developed changes to the law and establish an official representativeness criterion, according to which an agreement could be extended in case the members of the employers' association employ altogether at least 20% of employees in the sector concerned. No criteria for trade unions were initially foreseen. The Estonian Employers' Confederation and the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry proposed that the share of employers in association signing the agreement should be 50%, instead of 20% as initially proposed in order to protect the entrepreneurial freedom. Moreover, they proposed to set eligibility criteria for trade union as well. Trade unions have not published their feedback.

In November, a new Employment Programme for 2021-2023 was enforced. The Employment Programme allows to establish additional measures and measures on more favourable conditions, than provided for in the Labour Market Services and Benefits Act. The programme is a flexible way to address the current labour market trends and is usually a three-year programme. The new programme took into account the COVID-19 crisis and the main aim of the programme was therefore shifted. The previous programme concentrated more on labour shortage, skills developments and on unemployment prevention, while the new programme still holds these principles in focus, but the main aim is to reduce unemployment.

In the beginning of the year, prior to the COVID-19 crisis, changes regarding the foreign workforce were approved. There have been fraudulences in regard to temporary agency work taxation, especially regarding income tax. For example, in case the employee is from third country, is employed by a EU country temporary agency and is working as temporary agency worker in Estonia, there have been cases of unpaid income tax and the information flow between the tax authorities of different countries has been difficult. To avoid the loss of tax revenue and avoid fraudulent work forms, the foreign temporary work agency is now obligated to register themselves and their temporary agency workers in the Estonian Tax and Customs Board and to withhold the income tax from the wages earned in Estonia. In addition, a reverse burden of proof regulation was added to the Aliens Act which stipulates that in conducting supervision regarding the circumstances surrounding a foreigner's stay, residence and employment in Estonia, the employer, user company, receiving unit and foreigner will be obligated to prove that the foreigner's factual activity in working in Estonia corresponds with the content and purpose of the legal basis for working in Estonia. Previously, the sending company or the

temporary agency was responsible for such obligation. Employers' organisations in principle supported the idea of reducing the abuse of regulations regarding foreign workforce in Estonia. However, they saw the proposed measure as unreasonable, unclear, too rushed and without proper analysis or testing and would increase administrative burden of employers.

Labour disputes in the context of the pandemic

There were no distinctive labour disputes which resulted in the disruption of work in Estonia during 2020. The number of disputes has always been rather low in Estonia and it seems that the pandemic has decreased it even more. There were some frictions related to the COVID-19 crisis, though. In September, the Estonian largest shipping company Tallink Group announced the need to dismiss 1,500 employees in Tallink and its subsidiaries. 1,000 employees were supposed to be dismissed from OÜ Hansaliin (Eurofound, 2020), although the collective agreement, signed in August, stated that no dismissals could be carried out until May 2021. As the parties could not agree, the Estonian Seamen's Independent Union looked for help from the Government to seek tripartite solutions to such a massive dismissal. No further information is available about the dispute, except that the Tallink Group has continued with the dismissals.

Teachers' salaries were also a topic of conflict. Namely, it turned out in October, that on the basis of the consultations between the government, the Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities and the Estonian Educational Personnel Union, the teachers' wage will not be increased in 2021. In addition, a state budget strategy was approved according to which the salaries would be frozen until 2024. Teacher threatened to start a strike in the beginning of 2021 if their salaries will be frozen. The decision was not welcomed by the Estonian Employers Association, neither, as they support the long-standing plan of the government to prioritise the increase in teachers' wages. However, according to the Ministry of Education and Research, the state budget strategy is a fluid document, which is looked over two times a year and thus the teachers have nothing to worry about.

Major developments in working time regulation as a result of the pandemic

Legislation on working time

There were no temporary nor permanent legislative developments concerning working time duration and/or organisation in 2020.

Collective bargaining on working time

There were no collective bargaining outcomes concerning working time duration and/or working time organisation in 2020 according to available public information.

Ongoing debates on working time

Some years ago, there were changes to the Employment Contracts Act on the table, which would have provided more flexibility in terms of working time, for example, by allowing to conclude employment contracts which would set a range for working time instead of a fixed work-load as currently set by law (e.g. 30-40 hours per week instead of fixed 40 hours per week). No agreement was then concluded between the social partners. In May 2020, the flexibility topic was again raised, motivated by the COVID-19 crisis in order to allow employers flexible arrangements to deal with crisis-related difficult economic situation. Instead of going the route of changing the law, the social partners plan to follow a sectoral approach and agree on more flexible solutions regarding working time in the commerce sector. This is favoured by the trade unions, as they support the sector-based approach to regulate working conditions, given that all sectors are inherently different, and it would be difficult to agree on one law that would satisfy all. The current plan is to allow the commerce sector employers to conclude employment contracts with part-time employees so that the workload would be defined as a range of hours on the condition that such agreement could cover a certain percentage of employees in a company. By the end of 2020, the main agreements have been reached, but no details have been published. The Minister of Social Affairs has stated that such measure could be temporarily piloted in the sector and if it is appropriate and suitable, they would be open to discuss its extension to other sectors or to change the employment law.

Impacts of the crisis on wages and wage setting

According to Statistics Estonia, the national quarterly wage growth compared to previous year's same quarter has been between 6.3% and 8.9% during the past couple of years. In 2020, the wage growth rate decreased, but still continued. In the first quarter, the average gross monthly wage increased by 4.8% compared to 2019, in the second quarter by 1% and in third quarter by 3.2%. The first wave of the COVID-19 crisis, thus, hit the wages strongly, but still the growth continued. In the second quarter, roughly half of the sectors encountered decreases in average gross wages, while in the third quarter only two sectors saw a decline – commerce (-8.9%) and accommodation and catering (-4.3%). The largest increase was recorded in the ICT sector (7.8%), finance and insurance (5.8%) and in the energy sector (6.4%). These are also the sectors with the highest gross wages overall. Estonian Bank elaborated that the changes in the labour market structure have also played a role in the overall increase in the wage level, especially in the second quarter. Most job losses occurred in the service sector, where the wage level is lower than the national average. Thus, if the employment structure would have been stable, the wage level would not have increased. Also, without the wage subsidy, which was provided during the crisis, the wage levels would have decreased.

In relation to collectively agreed pay a tendency of freezing can be seen, although there is no information available about the company level. The peak-level social partners' negotiations over the national minimum wage for 2021 did not take long and resulted in a decision to keep the wage level on the 2020 level (€584 per month). For employees engaged in cultural activities, who receive remuneration from the state budget, the decision was the same as the Ministry of Culture and the Estonian Employees' Unions' Confederation agreed to keep the level of minimum wage at the established level. The consultations between the Ministry of Education and Research, the Estonian Education Personnel Union and the Association of Cities and Municipalities also ended in a decision not to raise the wages, although the teachers are not satisfied with the decision at all. Collective bargaining for 2021-2022 started in the health care sector, with the aim of the employees to see a wage rise; by the beginning of 2021 no decisions have been published.

What is new in working life in the country?

One of the main aspects that changed during the COVID-19 crisis is the use of telework. Telework is not well regulated in Estonia and somewhat uncomfortable for employers in terms of regulations. The Employment Contracts Act only states that it is allowed to perform telework on the agreement of both parties, while according to the Occupational Health and Safety Act the responsibility of ensuring safe and healthy workplace even in case of teleworking at employee's own home, is on the employer. Still, in recent years, a soft-law approach has been taken and both the social partners together as well as the state have released guiding agreements and guidelines to promote the use of telework and to ease the confusion of labour market parties. The share of teleworkers is not very high in Estonia, but it exceeded expectations during 2020. According to Statistics Estonia, the share of teleworkers (doing telework at least some share of working time during the past four weeks) has more rapidly increased since 2015, when the share was 9.2% and it reached 18.4% in 2019. In the second quarter of 2020, the share of teleworkers increased to 30.9%. Although by third quarter the share again decreased down to 20.8%, it can be expected that during the fourth quarter the increase occur again due to the second wave of the COVID-19. The year has probably shown for several employers that telework can be managed and thus it can be expected that to some extent the telework will see further increase in use during the coming years. In the beginning of 2021, the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry turned to the Ministry of Social Affairs calling for changes in the occupational safety regulations to ease the employers' burden as teleworking has become more and more popular. They ask for the employer to be responsible only for those aspects that they can control and influence, which do not include the employees' home offices or other places where the employee decides to work (e.g. cafeteria, public transport, park). While the employers have the possibility to not to allow the employees to work remotely, the Chamber emphasised that the current situation has shown that there are times where the will of the employer does not matter, and thus the regulations should be reasonable.

Regarding platform work, although there is no data available, it can be expected that the use of platform work increased. Firstly, due to the COVID-19 containment measures it was not possible to use services as usual, for example dining in restaurants or shop, thus food couriers (e.g. Bolt) were an important part of satisfying the essential needs. Secondly, in addition to increased demand for already established platform services, the platforms used the opportunity to launch new services, which, it can be expected, increased the number of platform workers as well. For example, Bolt came out with two new services: delivery from food stores and parcel delivery for companies. Those new services are established as permanent services. Overall, the COVID-19 crisis showed that platform work is here to stay.

Mental health become an important topic as well. This field covers public and private life, all age groups and all activities in life. Although mental health has received increasing amount of attention for the past couple of years, e.g. burning out and preventing mental health issues at work have been discussed and studies, the attention was even stronger due to the COVID-19 crisis as it brought along rapid changes, isolation and a lot of confusion. Awareness raising activities were the most important activities in terms of mental health. For example, in April 2020 the Mental Health and Wellbeing Coalition published an expert-document on COVID-crisis psychosocial impacts and intervention options, which includes guidance and knowledge for several different target groups (e.g. older,

younger, essential workers etc) (Akkermann et al 2020). This also includes guidelines for employers – where to find information on mental health issues at workplace and some specific recommendations how to support the employees. In addition to employers, the recommendations also target occupational health specialists and the Ministry. In July 2020, the Ministry of Social Affairs published the Green Book on Mental Health (Sotsiaalministeerium 2020), which goals include preventing, ensuring early discovery and provision of sufficient help in case of mental health issues. This includes the situation of working-age people, bringing out the main risks and the most vulnerable groups. It can be expected that as mental health found a lot of attention, the public awareness has increased and the topic will find more and more attention in the future. With the green book, the state has taken the responsibility to put effort into the topic.

The crisis also brought again into discussions the compensation of sick leave days. Three first days of the leave are covered with the employees' own contribution. Trade unions have proposed in the past to decrease the share of the own contribution in order to protect the health of the employees and ensure their income. So far, the closest they have reached, is a decision which allows employers to compensate the employees' own contribution part themselves without it being taxed with fringe tax. During the crisis, however, it was most important to stay at home when sick and such demand put a lot of employees in very difficult financial situation. Therefore, as described above, the compensation regulation was changed temporarily so that the employees' own contribution is reduced. While these steps are temporary, it might lead to additional discussions between the social partners and the government to perhaps find ways to keep it up later as well, as it is strongly supported by the trade unions.

Finally, the crisis brought again into attention, not as a new topic but as a reminder, the issue of access to social protection of non-standard workers and undeclared work. Non-standard workers are oftentimes not employees working on the basis of an employment contract, but on the basis of civil law contracts. These, however, do not provide the same benefits and protection in case of job-loss, which the COVID-19 crisis again showed, as the support was provided either for employees or companies. Similarly, undeclared work, fraudulences and tax-obligation avoidance prior to the crisis brought along non-eligibility for support or lower benefits.

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All cases related to Eurofound's COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database can be found at

<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/covid-19-eu-policywatch>

All Eurofound publications are available at www.eurofound.europa.eu

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