



Industrial relations and social dialogue  
**Greece: Working life in the  
COVID-19 pandemic 2021**

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# Introduction

Greece's strategy during the first phase of COVID-19 was successful, acting swiftly and effectively in adopting containment policies before any casualties and targeted support measures to alleviate the pandemic's dire effects on economy and society. The continuation of the crisis, however, highlighted limitations to formulate a resilient medium- and long-term strategy; most importantly, economic concerns became prominent, overriding decisions on lockdown. Thus, a further pressured National Health System (ESY), vaccination rates below the EU average, mortality upsurge, labour market fragmentation, degradation of workers' living standards and the quality of work. The COVID-19 Resilience Ranking Index (Bloomberg, 2021) ranked Greece 39th among 53 countries worldwide and third from the bottom in Europe. As COVID-19 cases increased in late January 2021, the region of Attica was placed in lockdown (February 2021) with the closure of kindergartens and primary schools (high schools had already been closed since early November 2020) and retail outlets; with approximately half of the prefectures being in the 'dark red' level (classified as 'of very high-risk' due to increased COVID-19 cases), local lockdowns were also imposed, and schools and retail stores closed (March 2021); on 12 March 2021, the closure of schools applied to all grades nationwide; on 3 May 2021, lockdowns and measures gradually eased, and on 14 May 2021, Greece lifted all travel restrictions. By the end of 2021, there have been 1.2 million COVID-19 cases and nearly 21,000 deaths in Greece. The available seasonally adjusted data indicate that in Q3 2021 the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), in volume terms, increased by 2.7% compared to the previous quarter and by 13.4% compared to Q3 2020. The labour market aided by the lifting of restrictive measures, and the seasonality of tourism activity, showed signs of stabilization towards the end of 2021. In Q3 2021, the number of persons employed increased by 5.2% compared to the previous quarter and by 4.9% compared to Q3 2020; the number of unemployed persons decreased by -16% compared to the previous quarter and by -18.6% compared to Q3 2020. The highest percentage of the labour force was recorded among men (60.1% compared to 44.9% for women), persons aged 30–44 years (86.7%), in the Region of Southern Aegean (57.7%), persons that have completed post-secondary education (78.9%), and persons of foreign citizenship (67.2%); the highest unemployment rates were recorded among women (17.2% compared to 9.2% for men), persons aged up to 24 years (65%), in the Region of Western Macedonia (19.8%), and persons that have completed less than primary education (37.6%). Part-time employment in Q3 2021 amounted to 8.2%, while the share of persons with temporary jobs was 8.0%. As of 4 December 2021, 68.7% of people in Greece have received at least one vaccine dose, 64.3% both vaccine doses and 16% a booster shot. In a government attempt to boost vaccination rates the 'Freedom Pass', a pre-paid card worth €150 for the purchase of products and services, and the 'Freedom Pass/Data', 50GB of free data, were offered to young people aged 18–26 and teenagers aged 15–17 respectively, only to be followed by the imposition of a fine – the first one in Europe – on the unvaccinated, with those above 60 years of age who refuse to be vaccinated having to pay a €100 monthly fine as of the beginning of 2022. The unvaccinated are also being banned from indoor restaurants, bars, theatres and gyms, and have to present a PCR or antigen rapid test to enter banks, government buildings, and non-essential shops. Throughout 2021 policies to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 on enterprises and employees continued, however, to a lesser extent compared to 2020.

## Political context

The centre-right New Democracy (ND) government was elected, with a majority (39.85% of the votes and 158 seats in the Greek Parliament) on 26 May 2019, and with a four-year mandate. The Coalition of the Radical Left–Progressive Alliance (SYRIZA) received 31.53% of the votes and was the second largest party in the Parliament with 86 seats. The President of the Hellenic Republic was elected by the Greek Parliament on 22 January 2020, supported by ND, SYRIZA, and the Movement for Change (KINAL) votes. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the following year, found Greece under political stability.

## Governments and social partners response to cushion the effects

As the COVID-19 virus continued to spread and mutate throughout 2021, the Greek government implemented policies, with loosening intervals in between, to mitigate its effects on businesses and employees. The country's digital transformation, in the midst of the pandemic, from simplifying government processes to a single point of delivery for all of its digital services through gov.gr platform, of benefit to citizens and businesses, is a significant accomplishment. The government, most of the times, bypassed social dialogue mechanisms in adopting several regulations, while the role of social partners remained limited to informative session(s). For businesses that have been financially affected as per their Activity Code Numbers (ACN, a code issued by the Ministry of Finance indicating a company's sector of economic activity) or their operation had been suspended under a state order, legislation concerned policy measures such as the 'GEFYRA II' ('BRIDGE II') state subsidy program for corporate loans of freelancers, sole proprietors and small-medium-sized enterprises, ranging from 60% to 90% of the loan's tranche;<sup>i</sup> a 'fixed cost subsidy' in support of non-covered fixed costs of businesses affected financially by the emergence and spread of COVID-19 that is tax-free, not subject to seizure and cannot be offset against any debt;<sup>ii</sup> direct financial support for theatres, music stages, dance theatres, concert and performance venues, through the subsidy of spectator/ticket seats from the effects of the restrictive measures imposed for the protection of public health;<sup>iii</sup> provision of working capital to catering companies that experienced a turnover decline of more than 30% in 2020 to purchase raw materials for the first months of restarting their operation;<sup>iv</sup> a liquidity grant, tax exempted and not subject to seizure, to all tourism enterprises amounting to 5% of turnover for tourism accommodation companies and 2.5% for the rest of the sector, with a €400,000 ceiling;<sup>v</sup> subsidies to gyms and playgrounds without the criteria of reduced turnover as all these companies have incurred a reduction of more than 30% due to COVID-19;<sup>vi</sup> a subsidy for food and beverage services companies, regardless of their legal form, for the supply of outdoor radiators to avoid overcrowding and allow businesses to operate in legally used outdoor areas, where the better ventilation helps to protect public health;<sup>vii</sup> start-ups' funding for working capital in the form of non-repayable grants, open to very small, small or medium-sized businesses that are among COVID-19 affected activities (ACN);<sup>viii</sup> working capital or compensation to companies active in the aquaculture sector that were affected by the pandemic;<sup>ix</sup> e-retail action for the subsidisation of SMEs to create or upgrade an e-shop to support their operation during the COVID-19 pandemic;<sup>x</sup> suspension of employment contracts and granting of a special state benefit of €534 to employees;<sup>xi</sup> employers' ability to unilaterally decide for employees to work remotely at a rate of 50% (decreased to 20% from July to September 2021) of total personnel.<sup>xii</sup> The special labour support mechanism 'SYN-ERGASIA' in operation for a second consecutive year, enables employers to reduce the weekly working hours of all, or part of the employees up to 50%, without their employment contract being converted to a part-time one; dismissing employees is prohibited, and any dismissals taking place will be considered null and void;<sup>xiii</sup> employees included in the mechanism are entitled to receive support from the Greek state amounting to 60% of their net salary.<sup>xiv</sup> All parents working in private and public sector became eligible for a special purpose paid leave in case of suspension of operation of educational or child care units.<sup>xv</sup> <sup>xvi</sup> A special state benefit and/or an exceptional financial support ranging from €400 to €534 are granted to:

- freelancers, self-employed (for example, to lawyers for upgrading their firm's digital infrastructure),<sup>xvii</sup> sole proprietors, and legal entities (apart from S.A.s) employing 0–20 employees, subject to certain conditions;<sup>xviii</sup>
- specific employees' categories – artists, dockers, active members of cooperatives, football and basketball coaches, forest workers/resin collectors, lottery salespersons, outdoor traders whose activity was suspended by public order.<sup>xix</sup>

Additional measures include the extension of the unemployment benefit for unemployed and long-term unemployed people,<sup>xx</sup> the payment of social security contributions by the state for employees with suspended employment contracts,<sup>xxi</sup> and the suspension of deadlines for the payment of social security contributions for freelancers, self-employed and sole proprietors.<sup>xxii</sup>

For the trade unions, the policies implemented by the government have deconstructed public services in terms of permanent staff and means; underfunding in health, education, and public administration services is a combination of anti-labour upheavals and the generalization of flexible forms of employment (Supreme Administration of Greek Civil Servants' Trade Unions (ADEDY)). For the Greek General Confederation of Labour (GSEE), the rapid promotion and adoption of measures on labour and social security amid the health crisis, instead of supporting the work, lead to its further deregulation and rank the government's social policy low. In addition, the Confederation pinpoints the loss of purchasing power of the minimum wage and of the average wage of part-time workers (10.4% and 13.7% respectively) as commodity prices soar in 2021. The Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV) positively assesses the government's measures to safeguard the economy. Some 53.7% of Greek enterprises find horizontal business support measures in 2021 effective. However, this percentage reverses on sector-specific measures, with 54.2% deeming them ineffective and expressing dissatisfaction. The Primary Sector and Transport and Storage show high rates of positive evaluation (92% and 65% respectively), while Manufacturing (11%) and Hotels and Catering (32%) sectors record a very low degree of positive valuation. It is noted that, regarding the evaluation of specific measures, large- and medium-sized enterprises have a more positive rating (as opposed to the total) (SEV, 2021a). According to the Hellenic Confederation of Commerce and Entrepreneurship (ESEE) (2021), there is a need to take measures to further support small-and- micro-enterprises in an economic environment which, given the intensity of the pandemic, creates uncertain prospects. The Hellenic Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen & Merchants (GSEVEE) (2021), describes the governmental announcements on the compulsory presentation of a vaccination certificate even in outdoor areas as disastrous for the catering sector, and a source of unfair competition, especially for the small retail enterprises, since they further restrict the customer base of the industry, especially at a time when all business support measures have been withdrawn. Yet, besides criticism, the social partners engaged in initiatives to reduce the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on businesses, workers, and people's lives. National partners' COVID-19 websites launched in 2020 (Eurofound, 2021) for guidance on employment rights (GSEE) and advice to member enterprises (SEV, GSEVEE, ESEE, Greek Tourism Confederation (SETE)) continued to provide services throughout 2021. On 8 January 2021, the Hellenic Consumer Workers' Union of GSEE, in collaboration with the GSEVEE and the radio station Alpha 98.9 took an initiative to support socially vulnerable groups afflicted by the pandemic and invited companies to participate in the action 'Alliance against COVID-19' offering discounts on the prices of products and services they offer, to those consumers who have an unemployment card, large families, students, people with disabilities, and those under suspension of employment.<sup>xxiii</sup>

- <sup>i</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Gefyra II \(Bridge II\) - State contribution to the tranches for the payment of business or professional debts of all types](#), case GR-2021-15/1835 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>ii</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Programme for subsidising fixed business costs](#), case GR-2021-6/1881 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>iii</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Government's financial support to theaters, music scenes and performance venues](#), case GR-2021-7/1863 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>iv</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Grant of working capital to catering companies for the supply of raw materials - Restart of catering](#), case GR-2021-20/1908 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>v</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Working capital subsidy for companies affected by the pandemic in the tourism and hospitality sector – Restart Tourism](#), case GR-2021-25/1993 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>vi</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Subsidy to Existing Businesses of Gyms, Playgrounds](#), case GR-2021-23/1994 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>vii</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Subsidy for catering companies to purchase heating equipment for outdoor services](#), case GR-2021-2/1997 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>viii</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Support for start-ups of the National Register 'Elevate Greece'](#), case GR-2021-12/1998 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>ix</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Financial support for aquaculture companies](#), case GR-2021-28/2010 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>x</sup> Eurofound (2021), [SME subsidy for the development of online e-retail](#), case GR-2021-9/1996 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>xi</sup> Eurofound (2020), [Financial support for suspended and dismissed employees](#), case GR-2020-12/695 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>xii</sup> Eurofound (2020), [Employers authorised to unilaterally switch to teleworking](#), case GR-2020-11/668 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Eurofound (2020), [Suspension of employment contracts](#), case GR-2020-12/667 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Eurofound (2020), ['SYNERGASIA': Income support for employees working fewer hours](#), case GR-2020-25/957 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>xv</sup> Eurofound (2020), [Special purpose leave for working parents](#), case GR-2020-11/691 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Eurofound (2020), [Organisation of work in the public sector](#), case GR-2020-12/690 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Subsidy for Self-Employed Lawyers](#), case GR-2021-25/1995 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Eurofound (2020), [State income benefit to support freelancers, self-employed and sole proprietors](#), case GR-2020-12/670 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>xix</sup> Eurofound (2020), [Financial support for suspended and dismissed employees](#), case GR-2020-12/695 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- <sup>xx</sup> Eurofound (2020), [Extension of expired or expiring unemployment benefit payments](#), case GR-2020-12/694 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

<sup>xxi</sup> Eurofound (2020), [‘SYNERGASIA’: Income support for employees working fewer hours](#), case GR-2020-25/957 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

<sup>xxii</sup> Eurofound (2020), [State income benefit to support freelancers, self-employed and sole proprietors](#), case GR-2020-12/670 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Alliance against COVID: Joint action by the social partners GSEE and GSEVVEE and the radio station ALPHA 989](#), case GR-2021-2/1767 (measures in Greece), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

# Adapting to the pandemic and the return to work: Policies and debates

## New occupational health and safety rules

To curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic for a second consecutive year, the Greek government continued the practice of applying restrictions on movement and/or night curfews, physical distancing, social gathering(s), mandatory use of a mask and compulsory vaccination. Similarly to the previous year, given the urgent nature of the need to address the pandemic, the role of social partners was limited to informative session(s). However, the Hellenic Institute of Occupational Health and Safety (ELINYAE) as the official body of the social partners – employers’ and employees’ representatives – retained its active role and involvement such as: issuing, among others, guidelines on health and safety at work during the pandemic; assisting the Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs in the issuing of COVID-19 prevention measures at work places; teleconference(s), between the prime minister, and/or the competent ministries and ELINYAE’s members/social partners on health and safety at work measures, on the new reality of working from home, and the protection of in-house staff in the economically vital production sector from the COVID-19 pandemic. Social partners in Greece continued, throughout 2021, individually and collectively, to form proposals on risk prevention and risk response, on improving the implemented anti-COVID-19 measures, for safer and healthier workplaces. The employers’ representative’s analysis (SEV, 2020b) on the certification of enterprises was further elaborated as inextricably linked to health & safety and quality since, the process leading to its acquisition, ensures compliance with specific requirements and specifications defined by a specific standard. The employees’ representative’s submission of proposals (GSEE, 2021a), among others, for the development of the National System for Health and Safety at Work, in accordance with the 187 International Labour Convention of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and which is also a reference to the text of the National Strategy for Health and Safety at Work 2016–2020 drafted with the contribution of the social partners' organizations. The occupational health and safety rules in 2021 apply, but are not limited, to public and private sector workplaces.

**Mandatory vaccination:** Under article 206, Law 4820/23.07.2021, compulsory vaccination against COVID-19 is introduced to Greek legislation. The measure applies to all private, public, and municipal health care facilities’ employees and employees in facilities involved with the care of the older people and people with disabilities. Public sector employees that do not comply are suspended from their duties without remuneration and social security coverage, while for private sector employees, employers are obliged to refuse their work and are exempted from the obligation to pay remuneration for the period of non-work due to the application of the measure. Under articles 24 & 25, Law 4865/03.12.2021, compulsory vaccination against COVID-19 is also legislated for all natural persons born until 31.12.1961. In case of non-compliance, an administrative fine of €100 per month is imposed as of 1 February 2022.

**Mandatory diagnostic test:** Joint Ministerial Decision 24525/19.04.2021 extends the measure of COVID-19 self-testing to several categories of public and private sector employees; employees in retail, food, financial and insurance services, transport, cleaning services, driving schools, barbershops, hairdressing and beauty salons, gambling and betting services, and public sector employees in Citizens’ Service Centres (KEP), Local Administration, Courts, and in the ‘Help at Home’

programme are required to undergo weekly a COVID-19 self-testing as a prerequisite to provide their services physically at the workplace. Self-tests are distributed free of charge through pharmacies, and failure to comply results in a fine. Subsequent, Joint Ministerial Decision 55400/12.09.2021 stipulates that unvaccinated employees, in both the private and the public sector, providing their services physically at the workplace, must undergo a COVID-19 diagnostic PCR or rapid antigen test per week, at a private health unit, at their own cost. The Decision provides for two mandatory diagnostic tests per week for teachers, academics, and employees in tourism, catering, and television, film, theatre, music, and dance productions. A diagnostic test is obligatory, twice a week, for unvaccinated employees in transport. Employees are subject to a fine of €300 for each violation, while for part-time employees the fine is set at €150 per violation. Employers are also subject to fines ranging from €1,500 to €10,000 depending on the gravity of the infringement. Joint Ministerial Decision 69136/05.11.2021 sets forth stricter rules for the unvaccinated public and private sector employees who must undergo a diagnostic PCR or rapid antigen test twice a week.

**Mandatory use of a mask:** Joint Ministerial Decision 1293/08.01.2021 establishes the use of a non-medical mask as obligatory, throughout the country, in all indoor and outdoor areas, including workplaces, for all activities, except for those working in a private space without the presence of any other person. As of Christmas Eve, the use of a double mask or a mask of high protection (KN95) is mandatory in supermarkets and public transport, as well as for catering staff. Non-compliance results in significant fines and/or suspension of companies that do not adhere to the protocols (JMD 6214/23.12.2021).

**Other OSH measures:** Since April 2021, Joint Ministerial Decisions on the spatial organization of public and private sectors' workplaces (26390/24.04.2021 & 32209/24.05.2021 respectively) specify that keeping a minimum distance of 1.5 meters between employees (one person per 2 sq.m.) is obligatory. A subsequent amendment (JMD 69136/05.11.2021) provides that a physical distance of 1.5 meters must be kept indoors and outdoors. Additionally, the placement and use of an alcoholic solution containing more than 70% of hand antiseptic is obligatory in all workplaces.

**Employees' representatives oppose to mandatory vaccination – National & European Court rulings:** The Plenary Session of the Council of State (CoS) ruled (December 2021) that compulsory vaccination against COVID-19 is constitutional in these crucial circumstances, it serves social solidarity and, at the same time, protects employees who happen to be at greater risk of infection and dispersion. Therefore, it rejected all the appeals submitted (August 2021) for the annulment of the provision, by employees and representatives of the firefighters of Special Disaster Management Units (EMAK), doctors, nursing staff, National Centre for Emergency Care (EKAB) staff, and the Pan-Hellenic Federation of Public Hospital Employees (POEDIN), as violating the constitutional rights of human dignity, the free development of the individual's personality, and the right to work.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rejected (September 2021) the petitions for interim suspension of Greek Law on compulsory COVID-19 vaccination measures, filed (September 2021) by 30 health professionals in Greece. According to the petitioners such provisions breach the European Convention on Human Rights (among others the right to life, to liberty and security, to a fair trial), and as such they requested that the Court apply interim measures and immediately suspend the Law's application. In its decision the ECHR noted that, interim measures are granted only on an exceptional basis when the petitioners would otherwise face a real risk of irreversible harm and

concluded that, in the case at hand, the requested suspension lay outside the scope of Rule 39 of the Rules of Court.

## New working arrangement policies

One stark impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the related lockdown measures, has been the growing numbers of individuals working from home in Greece. The most extensive application of telework, at a rate of 50% of total personnel, took place from November 2020 (second lockdown) to May 2021. From June 2021, the rate dropped to 20% as its obligatory character was gradually suspended. In November 2021, while teleworking was still optional, 10% of the country's employees were declared as working remotely, with most teleworkers (88%) located in the region of Attica (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, ERGANI National Employment Registry (2021)). Aiming to intercept the COVID-19 pandemic and the Omicron variant, compulsory telework in the public and the private sector returned from 30 December 2021, at a rate of up to 50% of total employees.

The new labour market developments are reflected, as early as the first months of 2021, in the content of collective employment agreements. In the company level agreement of the Independent Power Transmission Operator (ADMIE) (2021), the employees may voluntarily opt for teleworking, provided exclusively from the employee's home, with agreed-upon working hours during which the employee will be under the responsibility, monitoring, and control of the Line Manager. Teleworkers enjoy the same remuneration and work rights, while they refrain from unnecessary trips since safety cannot be guaranteed. The company is responsible for ensuring the protection of data (personal and corporate), while providing the teleworker with the required equipment and undertaking the maintenance, technical support, and the expenses of unintentional loss or malfunction.

Recognizing the new conditions that have emerged in the labour market, the 'Institutional framework for teleworking on public sector' introduces the institution of telework in the Greek State for permanent civil servants and employees under private law, open-ended or fixed-term contracts, employees on a paid basis, as well as teachers who are seconded in the exercise of administrative work. Part A (articles 1-19), Law 4807/11.06.2021 defines the concept and basic principles of teleworking, set for the first time in the public sector, such as its voluntary nature, the principle of equal treatment, the protection of personal data, and the respect for privacy. Teleworking regime is defined as optional; the time limit may not exceed 44 days per calendar year; a maximum of 25% of employees per Directorate of the public agency is allowed to telework; teleworking hours correspond to the operating hours of the agency in which the teleworker serves; the place from which the employee can be in teleworking status is regulated; the Teleworking Station is defined as the technological and telecommunication equipment necessary for teleworking provided by the agency, unless the employee wishes to use their own; the use of a camera is prohibited, unless the agency so requires for the operational needs of the work provided and such use is limited to the intended purpose; the teleworker enjoys the same rights and has the same obligations as employees with a physical presence; upon completing the working hours, the teleworker disconnects from the IT and communication media used to perform duties; teleworking is terminated upon the employee's request.

Law 4808/16.06.2021 transposes the requirements of the EU Directive on Work–Life Balance and two International Labour Organisation conventions on Prevention of Harassment, and Health and Safety at workplaces. Article 67 of the Law introduces rules regarding telework, telework costs, a fee

for using the employee's home, the right to disconnect, and respect for the employee's private life and personal data. Telework is voluntary, however, the article provides that it can be applied unilaterally either on the grounds of protecting public health (by the employer), or due to a well-documented health risk (by the employee); the right of the employee to disconnect, namely the right to abstain from work entirely and especially to not communicate digitally, not answer calls, messages, or emails outside the working hours and during holidays, is explicitly established; for the first time, the Law provides compensation to teleworkers for the costs incurred, at a minimum of €28 per month. These are borne by the employer including, but not limited to, providing, installing and maintaining the necessary equipment, telecommunication or service costs, and even a fee for the use of the employee's home; the use of a camera to monitor the employee's performance is prohibited – the employer may monitor the employee's performance only by means that respect the employee's private life and personal data. Law 4808/2021 caused intense political and social debate. Trade unions expressed strong disagreement to several of the Law's controversial provisions; however, there were no particular reactions on the teleworking provisions beyond the request for improving regulation of some clauses. It should be noted that the majority of private sector employees are extremely anxious and judge teleworking negatively, considering it mainly as a vehicle that will ultimately lead to a greater loss of rights, wages and working time (Goulas, 2021).

Based on the Labour Force Survey data (ELSTAT, 2021a), work from home in Greece in Q4 2020 increased to 15% compared to 9.3% in Q3, and 5.4% in Q4 2019. The percentage of work from home increased in all sectors of economic activity mainly in the financial, real estate and business activities (31.3%), and the other service activities (25.6%). For 2021, ELSTAT's annual data on teleworking are to be published in April 2022. They will include more specialised information (gender, age, educational level, sectors of economic activity, professions, etc.).

In August 2021, the ERGANI system registered 122,082 teleworkers in the prefecture of Attica – a percentage of 5.2% of the total workforce – while in the rest of the country the total number of teleworkers amounted to just 14,002.

The 2021 draft Law(s) were subject to online public consultation(s) on the OpenGov.gr platform with the Greek government inviting the social partners to comment in writing, and to give statements in Parliament. The majority of employers' and employees' representatives were critical of their role in the legislative process; it was deemed that, their contribution was merely formal and their opinions were not properly taken account of, when shaping the legislation. The new Labour Law 4808/16.06.2021, for example, raised serious objections from SEV, GSEVEE, GSEE, ADEDY as, not taking into account modern European practices, the real operational needs of companies and modern organizational models, but also the needs of the employees themselves; containing too many ambiguities; not being a springboard for growth. As for the post-COVID-19 labour market, social partners seem to agree that there are three key issues that have emerged as a consequence of the health crisis and should be addressed in the near future. Halting the extremely negative effects of the pandemic on economic activity and employment; measures should be adopted to support business liquidity and their debt settlement created during the health crisis (especially for the very small-and-small sized enterprises), in addition with policies and implementation measures that will contribute to the development of companies (large sized), by utilizing their digital transformation, and the corresponding organization of work (including teleworking), and improving the country's position in the global distribution of production and labour. The digitisation of labour relations and distance work appear to be characteristics of a hybrid work model worldwide; the aim will be to

prepare human resources and companies to seize the opportunities and meet the challenges of digital transformation in the world of work. Continuous development and improvement of the employees acquire even greater importance in the post-COVID-19 period; the focus should be on quality improvement and redesign of the continuing vocational training system and its certification to update and upgrade the skills of employees and the unemployed people, emphasizing compatibility with labour market needs.

## Labour shortages

A five-year record rate in the country's job vacancies was recorded in September 2021. Specifically, in Q3 2021, data on job vacancies for the whole economy, excluding Primary Sector and Activities of Households, recorded an increase of 56.2% compared to Q3 2020 (15,125 and 9,685 job vacancies respectively), while the corresponding number of job vacancies in Q3 2020 had recorded a decrease of 24.9% compared to Q3 2019 (ELSTAT, 2021b). The sectors that showed the most labour shortages were accommodation and food service activities, construction, IT, manufacturing, retail.

**Shortage of land workers:** The increased health measures applied due to COVID-19 also as regards citizens of other countries entering Greece have made it almost impossible for workers from neighboring countries to work in rural areas. In addition, bureaucracy in legalizing immigrants has been further heightened. A large percentage of foreign land workers do not have the necessary legal documents for their stay in Greece. This fact implies the imposition of fines on farmers-employers in case of inspections by the Labour Inspectorate. However, the time-consuming process for issuing a six-month waiver of the expulsion of foreigners prevents anyone interested from attempting it. As a result, many foreign land workers go directly to other EU countries, where the issuance of the relevant documents is processed more quickly. As a response, the competent ministries issued (March & November 2021) the extension of the application period for the invitation of third-country nationals for employment in agricultural works, lasting 30 to 90 days, as well as the extension of their short stay for an additional 90 days.

**Shortage of healthcare personnel in public hospitals:** The lack of staff in hospitals and health centres is a permanent problem in the Greek health system, and despite the government's commitments, these gaps were not filled even amid a pandemic. On the contrary, public health's understaffing (and underfunding) continues in 2021. The notice (2020) for the recruitment of 5,000 permanent medical, nursing, and other staff, as well as seasonal one, has not been placed so far. Public hospitals face significant shortages in special units (ICUs) and specialized staff and shortages in nursing staff. At the same time, 7,000 work suspensions for unvaccinated employees in hospitals, the National Centre for Emergency Care (EKAB), and Primary Health Services have been activated, dozens of health personnel have fallen ill, and 2,000 resignations for retirement have been submitted by the Hellenic Federation of Public Hospitals Employees (POEDIN, 2021).

**Shortage of personnel in the catering and the tourism industry:** One of the significant problems that Greek tourism, particularly the catering and the hotel industry, was called upon to manage in 2021, was finding staff. Tourism usually represents one-fifth of the economic production of Greece, but in 2021 it struggled to cope with the demands of the summer season. Traditionally, seasonality is considered a deterrent for attracting employees in tourism. The intense insecurity created by the COVID-19 pandemic over the opening of hotels, and the catering industry, given that many units did not operate at all, or operated under severe restriction rules in 2020, led many employees out of

these sectors. Prospective workers postponed their decision to seek employment, fearing that either the company to which they are applying for a position may not open, or re-close due to a lockdown. The specialties with the most significant labour shortages in the hotel industry were maids, waiters (service), and receptionists. In the catering sector, there were shortages of waiters and cooks. Social partners such as, the Pan-Hellenic Federation of Hotel Managers (PODIX) proposed to the Ministry of Tourism the hiring of retirees who wish to work, as well as of legal immigrants who, nevertheless, must undergo rapid training. Similarly, the Hellenic Hoteliers Federation (HHF) proposed for refugees and asylum seekers, who are already in Greece, and are interested in working in the hotel industry, to have the opportunity to receive, within the accommodation structures in which they reside, the relevant education in specialties with emphasis on those where the greatest needs – shortcomings are noted and which have already been identified based on relevant studies.

## Wages and wage-setting

From 1 February 2019 to 31 December 2021, the statutory minimum wage for white-collar and blue-collar workers across the country, without any age discrimination, stood at €650 (gross monthly pay) and €29.04 (gross daily pay), respectively. It is forbidden to set, under individual contracts and collective agreements of any kind, regular monthly salaries, or daily wages for full-time work below the aforementioned statutory minimum wage and daily wage. In 2021, the most important development in terms of wages regarded the minimum wage as the outbreak of the COVID-19 postponed the consultations for setting the minimum wage in the previous year – March, September, and November 2020. In 2021, the minimum wage-setting mechanism was convened properly and, after a four-month consultation, the government announced the increase of the minimum wage by 2%, effective as of 1 January 2022. The minimum wage level is crucial for the labour market in Greece.

- Approximately 28% of salaried employees are paid up to this amount (2020).
- Those paid based on sectoral or occupational collective agreements represent a low percentage – approximately 18% in 2016, per the International Labour Office (ILO).

An additional change that led to a 1.4% increase in employee income in 2021 was the reduction in their insurance contributions.

The role of the pandemic was crucial in shaping minimum wage and earnings in general. The main findings of a Report (INE/GSEE, 2021a) showed that in 2020, a period of outbreak of the pandemic, there was a decrease in the average salary by about 2.5%. This fact has added to the sharp decline in wages due to the economic crisis of the last decade. Greece is one of the few EU Member States in which the net average wage decreased in 2020, and it is the only Member State in which the net average wage is lower than in 2010. For 2021, there is no official data on whether wages were affected by the pandemic. However, during the minimum wage consultation (from March to July 2021), according to reports and studies by participating social partners and research institutes, it was widely acknowledged that the pandemic crisis had created an uncertain environment in the labour market. In this environment, according to most participants, any change in the minimum wage could pose risks to business viability and job retention. This was the main argument for the decision to freeze the minimum wage in 2021 and increase by 2% from 2022, although, according to the forecast of the Bank of Greece (BoG) (2021), GDP growth was expected to increase by 4.2% in 2021. The same report predicted that total wage earnings would increase modestly by 2021,

reflecting the slight increase in both paid employment and wages per employee. During the consultation, the INE/GSEE proposal (2021b), by way of exception, emphasizing the increase in inflation, the reduction of the workers' purchasing power, and the need for a decent minimum wage, proposed the increase of both the minimum wage to €751 and the wage provided under sectoral or occupational agreements through the conclusion of corresponding collective agreements. The continued economic impact of the pandemic and the high increases on prices in products and services (energy, food, and other essential consumer goods) throughout 2021 have caused significant pressures on the incomes, stirring a public debate on the need for further increase in the minimum wage and employees' remuneration in general. For this reason, the prime minister and the minister of Labour and Social Affairs announced a new second increase of minimum wage for 2022, applied from 1 May 2022.

In Greece the minimum wage, has since 2012 been regulated by the government, following public consultation, and not through collective bargaining. This is still in force in 2021 during which the main characteristic is wage freeze, both at sectoral and company level, due to the pandemic. As for the decentralisation of bargaining, the number of collective agreements remains approximately the same in 2021 with the majority of (the few) sectoral agreements applying wage freeze at current levels.

The views of social partners differ: Employers' Associations and the government emphasize the reduction of social contributions and the remaining of wages at the same levels, because of the pandemic and the economic recession of 2020.

On the other hand, employees' representatives (GSEE) insist on the immediate increase of minimum wage to €751, and the restoration of its determination via the National General Collective Employment Agreement, within the framework of consultation between the social partners.

# Impacts on the social dialogue and collective bargaining

Social dialogue and collective bargaining are key tools for employers and trade unions to establish fair wages and working conditions. Strong collective bargaining systems make member states more resilient in times of economic crisis (European Parliament, 2021). However, in Greece, for a second consecutive year, social dialogue is sidelined or operated with constraints in terms of time, deliberation, and broader social consensus. The positions of social partners are still not sufficiently considered, despite their intention to ‘keep alive’ the social dialogue (bilateral and tripartite). In the first year of the pandemic, the quality of legislation has been deficient (51/100), with phenomena of multiplicity and malignancy persisting – every 3.2 calendar days, one law is passed. Inadequate consultation is one of the parameters related to low scoring, with one in five Laws never being put to public consultation (KEFiM, 2021). This seems to be repeated in 2021, with the Greek Parliament voting a total of 112 bills and international conventions. The bill on auxiliary insurance and its transformation into a capitalization system to which all new insured persons will be subject from the beginning of next year was submitted to the Parliament, in the middle of summer, one week before the closing of its proceedings (2021). Trade unions and social actors reacted, criticising the government for adopting, in the midst of the pandemic, summary procedures to legislate, leaving almost no space and without prior exhaustive dialogue with all stakeholders. For GSEVEE representing professionals, craftsmen, and merchants, the proposed Law in the midst of the pandemic, cannot not be considered as of urgent priority, and there was no substantial and systematic consultation with the social actors. Instead, the employers’ representatives SEV and SETE were particularly positive to this legislative development as they consider it imperative to strengthen the capitalization pillars through the transformation of the current, purely distributive, auxiliary insurance into a modern one that will operate on a capital basis. A slight increase in the signing of new collective employment agreements was recorded in 2021; **15** sectoral/occupational and **10** local/occupational agreements are signed (compared to 14 and 3 respectively in 2020).

In a webinar (Goulas, INE/GSEE, 2021) emphasized that all the institutional tools for negotiating and determining, to a decent degree, the working conditions and the employees’ minimum wages have been removed, depriving (social partners) of free collective bargaining, of negotiating with the state, and of the opportunity to form a social dialogue that could shape all these issues institutionally.

In this environment, the National General Collective Employment Agreement (EGSSE) was negotiated and signed among the national partners (2021) – the Federation of Industries of Greece (SBE) co-signs for the first time as a national social partner – adopting, among others, the European Framework Agreement on digitization of work signed by the European social partners (2020) and the establishment of a joint working group on digital skills and employment to address, among others, challenges such as connection-disconnection terms, and the compliance with the rules governing working hours, teleworking, and mobile work.

## Labour disputes in the context of the pandemic

Protests and strikes upsurge during 2021 despite a movement permit on specific reasons applied, and a highly criticized, by opposition parties, human rights groups, employees' representatives, and several social groups, Law (2020) that mandates restrictions on demonstrations, and reserves the right of authorities to ban protests if they are deemed a threat to public security. Social upheaval is mostly related to the government's controversial bills (for example, reforms on the Labour Law, the privatisation of auxiliary social insurance, compulsory vaccination), and to demands of specific sectors of economic activity for an increase in public expenditure and the tackling of labour shortages (healthcare professionals in public hospitals, employees in Citizens' Service Centres (KEP)); the restoration of collective agreements (seamen's unions); inclusion in difficult and hazardous occupations (couriers and food delivery workers' associations); renewed financial relief from the government due to the effects of COVID-19 pandemic (associations representing restaurants and catering businesses).

February–May and September–October 2021: Teacher associations, accompanied by university students' unions, proceed to rallies, work stoppages, and strikes opposing, among others, to the creation of a special university police force empowered to guard campuses, as well as to a 'Disciplinary Council' able to suspend or expel students. Also, to the mandatory assessments of both teachers' and school units' performance at regular intervals, without prior and extensive consultation, and by arguing that such a policy turns schools into 'business facilities' and stigmatises pupils from a young age by separating schools into 'good' and 'bad.' The standing requests of educators include the recruitment of additional teachers, a supportive framework of schools for students with special needs, the application of measures to dilute the student population in these, the adequacy in disinfection materials, free, massive, and repeated COVID-19 testing in schools for teachers and students.

May–June 2021: Mass protests, and nationwide strikes organized by employees' representatives in both the public and the private sector over the government's disputed Labour Reforms bill. Among others, the Greek General Confederation of Labour (GSEE), the Supreme Administration of Greek Civil Servants' Trade Unions (ADEDY), Labour Centres, bank employee unions, seamen's unions, healthcare professional and personnel unions, associations in the field of press and media, in railways, trolleybuses and in the electric urban railway, the Air Traffic Controllers, teachers in primary and secondary education, court clerks. The government's bill has been severely criticised by Unions and opposition parties as an anti-labour, anti-union bill that undermines collective bargaining, disrupts employees' personal lives, and formalises overtime work. They argue that it leads to the circumvention of the eight-hour workday and paves the way for a ten-hour workday, as well as for 'outlawing' trade union action; it stipulates stricter rules on how to take industrial action, makes unions liable for fines over disruption caused by walkouts which consequently limits the right to strike and, as such, it violates principles that are globally recognised as essential to the functioning of a social model.

August–December 2021: Series of mobilizations put forward by health professionals and administrative staff in public hospitals (the Pan-Hellenic Federation of Public Hospital Employees (POEDIN), the Federation of Hospital Doctors of Greece (OENGE)) demanding the strengthening of the public health sector, the withdrawal of the suspension of contracts for health workers who did

not vaccinate; the hiring of staff under permanent contracts; to be classified as exercising difficult and hazardous occupations, and their wages to be increased to the levels before the Economic Adjustment Programmes were signed. Professionals in public hospitals accuse the government of taking advantage of the pandemic to reinforce the privatization of the healthcare sector by promoting public-private partnerships, contractual agreements, and the merging of healthcare units. POEDIN estimates that approximately 8–12% of the total number of healthcare professionals was suspended in the first ten days following the implementation of the decision for unvaccinated employees, and by arguing that obligation will dissolve public health, the Federation petitioned to the CoS for its cancellation.

## Commentary and outlook

COVID-19 revealed significant gaps in the preparedness and vulnerabilities of national health systems. Greece is not an exception; and the 2021 pandemic crisis management further afflicted society, the National Health System, and the economy. Despite the European Commission's immediate response to allocate funds in support of Greek citizens and companies and in mitigation of the pandemic's economic impact. In 2021 the government maintained emergency support measures for both businesses and employees amounting to €15.6 billion (8.8% of 2021 GDP); most of these prolonged or adjusted 2020 measures. Amendments in the labour legislation brought substantial changes on the working environment and industrial relations. The Labour Law extensively changed the country's employment landscape, such as increasing the maximum overtime limit, supporting flexible work hours, regulating teleworkers' right to disconnect, preventing violence and harassment in the workplace, and reforming collective labour law regarding the right to strike, the ability to conclude a collective agreement, etc. The procedure for updating the statutory minimum wage was completed in 2021 leading to a 2% increase as of 1 January 2022 (from €650 to €663 per month). As COVID-19 infections and deaths are above most other OECD countries since July 2021, and vaccination rate lags, the government has legislated mandatory vaccination and testing at the workplace.

The labour market showed signs of stabilization towards the end of 2021 while, based on economic forecasts, the Greek economy will recover in 2021 – compared to the 9% decline of GDP in 2020. However, the accumulated uncertainty blurs the sustainability of this momentum in 2022. The pandemic's third and fourth waves, combined with the negative impact of the high cost of living on the households' purchasing power, trigger countervailing forces in the expansion of domestic demand and, through it, economic activity. In October 2021 increases in housing, transport, food, and non-alcoholic beverages reduced the purchasing power of the minimum wage by 7.4%. The ongoing increases in energy prices (November 2021) further undercut purchasing power by 10%. The effects on the labour market were more complex. The number of unemployed people remained relatively stable in Q3 2021, decreasing in Q4 2021; the suspension of employment contracts prevented an increase in the unemployment rate. However, the labour market situation is better reflected in the considerable decline in the number of employees.

The pandemic management and its subsequent outcomes highlighted the challenges and critical issues for public debate.

The need for strengthening the public health system – recruitment of permanent health personnel with emphasis on the staffing of Internal Care Units (ICUs), the involvement of Primary Health Care (PHC), and the participation of the private sector – is a forthcoming challenge.

The prevention and effective operation of combined and complementary mechanisms for the protection of work, income, and businesses emerge as a permanent need to deal with future crises. Among post-COVID-19 challenges are preparing human resources and businesses on digital transformation in the world of work, improving the vocational training system and its certification, upgrading and matching skills and labour market needs, the urgency for resilience, innovation, and adaptability of the industry, and supporting and transferring know-how to small and medium enterprises' digital transition.

The strengthening and full use of social dialogue, and the development and utilization of collaborations remain crucial for effective crisis management. Social dialogue between all social partners, along with decision-making through processes of a wider dialogue, are necessary to listen to the workers' and businesses' needs, to respond effectively and fairly to the crisis for all parties, and to ensure wages and income support for the people, and adequate capital for the enterprises.

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