



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

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Contents

Introduction	1
Political context	2
Governments and social partners response to cushion the effects.....	3
Adapting to the pandemic and the return to work: Policies and debates	5
New occupational health and safety rules	5
New working arrangement policies	7
Labour shortages.....	8
Wages and wage-setting	11
Impacts on the social dialogue and collective bargaining.....	13
Labour disputes in the context of the pandemic.....	14
Commentary and outlook	15
References.....	17

Introduction

In 2021 the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was important. The second wave of pandemic started after 1 September 2020 and expanded in 2021, the third wave started in end of July 2021. In the second and the third waves, the economic development was declared as a most important issue – protection of people was provided by maintenance of stable epidemiological situation.

The capacity of hospitals was exhausted to the level that non-COVID-19 hospital services were abolished or delayed. The state of emergency was declared first in several hospitals, then, in the whole health care sector. Thus, the capacity of hospitals became an important anti-COVID-19 policy driver, and vaccination - the most important anti-COVID-19 measure.

Vaccination started in December 2020 with vaccination of healthcare workers, people over 70 years old, then people over 65 years old and then all others. Vaccination of children in age 5-11 years old started on 15 December 2021. (TVNet/LETA, 2022a). The vaccination rate changed day by day. On 22 January 2022 about 80% of adult population in Latvia had finished vaccination (had received two doses of vaccines), while about 27% were revaccinated. (TVNet/LETA, 2022b). In August 2021 the government declared that restrictions, including access to workplace, will be tightened for those who are not vaccinated.

The emergency period was declared from 9 November 2020 to 6 April 2021. On 29 December 2020, the government introduced a curfew for the weekend following Orthodox Christmas on January 8 and 9, 2021.

The next state of emergency was declared from 11 October 2021 to 28 February 2022 and the lockdown period was declared from 21 October 2021 to 15 November 2021. It was declared, that after 15 November 2021 all measures regarding epidemiological safety will remain valid. This included working in “green” (all staff and visitors must be vaccinated, recovered, or have a negative test) or “red” (universal availability of services) regime.

Full data on the development of economy in 2021 is not yet available. Despite restrictions in some sectors, GDP figures became positive – GDP decreased by 1.3% in the first quarter, but grew by 11.1% and 5.1% in the second and third quarters of 2021. (Official, 2021). Unemployment levels also were not critical: in December 2021 it was 7.6% (8.6% for men and 6.6% for women). In annual terms the lowest unemployment level was in September – October 2021 (6.7% for men and 6% for women), the highest was in February – March 2021 – 8.1% on average (Public, 2022). Data about the employment level and short time work is not yet available.

COVID-19 is regulated by:

- 1) Law on the Management of the Spread of COVID-19 Infection, adopted on 5 June 2020, valid from 10 June 2020.
- 2) Cabinet of Ministers Order No. 720, adopted on 9 October 2021 “Regarding Declaration of the Emergency Situation”, valid from 9 October 2021.
- 3) Cabinet of Ministers Order No. 662, adopted on 28 September 2021 “Epidemiological Safety Measures for the Containment of the Spread of COVID-19 Infection”, valid from 11 October 2021.

Political context

The government in power was approved by Latvian Saeima (Parliament) on 23 January 2019, three months after Saeima's elections in October 2018. The current government is composed from the coalition of four parties: liberal conservative party Jaunā konservatīvā partija (New Conservative Party), liberal political alliance Attīstībai/Par! (Development/For!) , centre-right political alliance Jaunā Vienotība (New Unity) and a right-wing national-conservative political party Nacionālā apvienība "Visu Latvijai!"—"Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK" (National Alliance "All For Latvia!" – "For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK"), Previously a right-wing populist political party KPV LV (Who owns the state?) also was in the coalition, but the party rapidly lost its members and partners decided on 2 June 2021 to exclude KPV LV from the coalition and to replace its ministers from 3 June 2021.

Several changes of ministers occurred: Minister of economics Jānis Vitenbergs was replaced by acting minister Kaspars Gerhards but returned in the post of minister of economics on 3 June 2021; minister of internal affairs Sandis Girģens was replaced by Marija Golubeva; minister of education and science Ilga Šuplinska - by Anita Muižniece; minister of welfare Ramona Petraviča - by Gatis Eglītis (all replacements on 3 June 2021); minister of healthcare Ilze Viņķele - by Daniels Pauļuts on 7 January 2021.

Elections were not held in 2021.

The government's efforts were on one hand eased by good access to the financial resources, but, on other hand, made more difficult by additional problems: difficult vaccination process, activities of opponents of vaccination, social tension, increase of energy prices.

Governments and social partners response to cushion the effects

In line with restrictions, the government reintroduced several support measures and created new ones, based on previous experience.

Idle-time allowances for employeesⁱ were reintroduced on 28 November 2020, and prolonged until 30 June 2021. The allowance for the idle time for employees is intended as an assistance measure for companies affected by the crisis – to cover the costs of retaining employees.

Similarly, as an assistance measure for self-employed operating in normal tax regimes, micro enterprise tax regime and patent fee payers tax regime, idle-time allowances for self-employedⁱⁱ were reintroduced on 28 November 2020, and prolonged until 30 June 2021.

An assistance measure for companies to cover costs of retaining employees who work for a lower number of hours - wage subsidy for short time employeesⁱⁱⁱ – was introduced on 28 November 2020, and prolonged until 30 June 2021. Later, with the autumn wave of COVID-19 the support measure was modified and made available again.^{iv}

Grant for working capital flow,^v the support measure for companies affected by the COVID-19 crisis to ensure the flow of working capital, similarly as other measures was introduced late in 2020, and then adapted and prolonged in the beginning of 2021.

Several sector related support measures were introduced mid-year. A one-time grant scheme to support shopping centres to overcome the effects of the COVID-19 crisis,^{vi} and to support COVID-19 crisis-affected sports centres^{vii} were introduced in April. A one-time grant to support cultural, recreational and leisure venues affected by the COVID-19 crisis^{viii} were introduced in December.

Several general measures were introduced to protect vulnerable groups. To reduce the negative consequences of the spread of COVID-19 infection and mitigate the tension, the state paid a one-time support of €500 per child to one of the parents or the person raising the child.^{ix}

The one-time benefit in the amount of €200 was also paid to pensioners.^x

The government's policy was aimed at improving economic development of the sectors by introducing several support schemes. Lot of money was given to building industry. This promoted economic activity in manufacturing. Almost all of the existing state support measures remained and were complemented by new measures (see part on "Governments and social partners' response").

In November 2021 by amendments to the Law on maternity and sickness benefits it was established that from 17 January 2022 to 28 February 2022 (end of state of emergency) for vaccinated people suffering from coronavirus, a sickness benefit will be paid from the state social budget starting from the first sickness day (normally sickness benefit for the first to tenth day should be paid by employer). From 1 April 2022 an employer should pay sickness benefit for the first to ninth day.

ⁱ Eurofound (2020), [Idle-time allowance for employees \(re-introduced\)](#), case LV-2020-45/1708 (measures in Latvia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

- ⁱⁱ Eurofound (2020), [Idle-time allowance for self-employed \(re-introduced\)](#), case LV-2020-48/1712 (measures in Latvia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Eurofound (2020), [Wage subsidy for short time employees](#), case LV-2020-46/1715 (measures in Latvia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- ^{iv} Eurofound (2021), [Wage subsidy for employees](#), case LV-2021-40/2111 (measures in Latvia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- ^v Eurofound (2020), [Grant for working capital flow](#), case LV-2020-45/1716 (measures in Latvia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- ^{vi} Eurofound (2020), [Support for shopping centres to overcome the effects of the COVID-19 crisis](#), case LV-LV-2020-49/1992 (measures in Latvia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- ^{vii} Eurofound (2020), [Support for COVID-19 crisis-affected sports centres](#), case LV-2020-49/1991 (measures in Latvia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- ^{viii} Eurofound (2021), [Support for cultural, recreational and leisure venues affected by the COVID-19 crisis](#), case LV-2021-40/2154 (measures in Latvia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- ^{ix} Eurofound (2021), [One time benefit for each child](#), case LV-2021-14/1890 (measures in Latvia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.
- ^x Eurofound (2021), [One time benefit for pensioners and people with disabilities](#), case LV-2021-11/1892 (measures in Latvia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

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

New occupational health and safety rules

In the main health and safety normative regulation new rules were not adopted.

However, large number of special pandemic aimed health and safety rules were adopted in order to control and improve epidemiological safety. These rules should be applied also to protect people at work.

New rules to improve epidemiological safety can be distinguished in two groups: general rules, that should be observed by anyone to protect a person and others around them, and special rules, applied to specific groups of employees (healthcare workers, education workers, other public sector workers, service providers). The remedies of health and safety protection in both groups are testing, masks, distancing, isolation and quarantine, and vaccination.

From the beginning of the pandemic, healthcare workers in hospitals had to wear masks and protecting clothes because coronavirus disease was infectious disease. Beauty industry workers were asked to wear masks when serving a client. More comprehensive using of masks and testing was required by Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 662 and No. 720.

From September 2021 all students in the general education should be tested and wear face masks. The government provided for schools tests and masks free of charge. In the beginning of the year children were tested at schools, while in the end of the year they could present self-tests, done at home. Masks should be used in schools.

Lecturers and students in higher education institutions had to be tested or they could not participate in lectures in persons. Some universities have introduced requirement that in the 2021/2022 school year only vaccinated people may participate in lectures in person. In this regard the Ombudsmen's office received a complaint from students at Riga Stradins' University. In June 2021 the Ombudsmen answered that the vaccination requirement is not only supported but even encouraged (TVNet/LETA, 2021a).

Vaccination started with healthcare workers (on 28 December 2020) because they had high risk of infection. The next priority group was seniors over 70, then seniors over 65. From 3 May 2021 everyone at least 16 years old could be vaccinated. Teachers were not given priority for vaccination, despite the high risk of transfer of infection to children. Special conditions for employers who request their workforce to be vaccinated or to be regularly tested were not established.

From the second part of 2021 the government gradually introduced stronger restrictions for non-vaccinated workers. On 28 September, the government decided that from 11 October nearly all services and activities will have to be organized in the "green" regime (all staff and visitors must be vaccinated, recovered, or have a negative test). It also adopted new regulation that determined mandatory vaccination for all workers in education institutions, students in colleges and higher education institutions, healthcare workers, including workers in pharmacies, and social care workers. For those education workers who did not fulfil this requirement even remote work was prohibited.

In the public sector, only those who have vaccination certificate, have been recently recovered from coronavirus disease or have negative test could work. The purpose of this measure was not only to protect workers from the cross-contamination, but also to speed up vaccination process.

Unvaccinated employees in categories where vaccination was mandatory, were fired. From 15 December 2021 vaccination certificate became mandatory for all categories of workers in public and local government sectors regardless if they work in office or remotely. In private sector it was mandatory for those who work face-to-face. For those who did not have vaccination certificate, employer is eligible to take one of three decisions: non-compliance with the position and performance of duties and suspension (Section 58 part 3 of the Labour law), downtime detection (Section 74 of the Labour law) and, as a last step, dismissal by employer (because it is prohibited by the Labour law to suspend an employee or to set downtime for more than three months). In private sector employer is eligible to employ non-vaccinated worker remotely.

Non-vaccinated workers may return to work when they have vaccination certificate. Above mentioned normative regulation is supplemented by large number of exceptions.

On 12 November, Latvia's parliament voted to ban unvaccinated lawmakers from voting on legislature or participating in discussions in person or remotely, and to suspend their pay if they cannot work at the parliament.

In the private sector, an employer could decide if a person that does not provide proof of vaccination, recovery or a negative test, may work in employers' premises, at home or work at all. On 4 November, the Latvian Parliament authorized businesses to suspend and subsequently fire workers who refuse vaccination or a transfer to remote work. The rules took effect on 15 November. There were exceptions for those with medical reasons not to vaccinate. Fired non-vaccinated employees are eligible for benefit in the amount of one monthly wage.

From 15 December all private sector workers who worked in employers' premises had to be vaccinated or to provide a recovery certificate. Such requirement did not apply to private sector workers teleworking (Public, 2021a).

As media reports, even before this decision many employers, including large shops, have voluntarily implemented "green" regime, where all employees have certificates about vaccination or recovery.

Pressure on the vaccination caused severe consequences. First, many workers did not like being forced to be vaccinated. Even four Latvian Saeima deputy members were not allowed to attend meetings because they were not vaccinated. Problems appeared in the education and healthcare sectors.

Only one court ruling concerning vaccination status and access to the workplace was publicly reported. In November 2021 a civil servant from the Ministry of Welfare, her husband and daughter submitted claim to the Regional Administrative court. They disputed application of the article 5.3 of the Cabinet of Ministers order No 720 that requires vaccination against COVID-19 if a person wants to continue work in the state institution. She motivated her application by concerns about side effects after receiving the vaccine and lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the vaccine. The claim was rejected. (Jurista, 2021)

According to previous practice, private right cases may be ruled also by the Constitutional Court. According to media information, from spring 2020 when the first emergency situation was introduced to 21 January 2022 Latvia's Constitutional Court (Satversmes tiesa) has received 90

applications connected with COVID-19 restrictions, 89 of these were constitutional complaints. Three cases concerned regulation that restricts operation of large retail trade centres, one concerns normative regulation that required to continue remote learning when emergency situation was already closed. Applications concerned also wearing of masks, mandatory requirement to use certified face masks, assembly restrictions (impossibility to establish a political party), granting of idle time benefits, restrictions on gambling, and other. 72 proposals were rejected, mainly because they did not justified relevance to indicated articles of Latvian Satversme (Constitution), or the case was in competence of Administrative Court (nra.lv, 2022).

New working arrangement policies

New working arrangement policy was not introduced, but three amendments and additions to existing norms were introduced in the Labour law. However, working arrangements changed significantly. Changes on working arrangement developed according to the temporary anti-pandemic normative regulation for the period of pandemic.

The first novelty in working arrangements was the expansion of telework. For epidemiological reasons, the government introduced stronger requirements for those working the state management, valid from 16 March 2021 (TVNet/LETA, 2021b). This regulation required that only industry workers and those who cannot telework due to the nature of work, are allowed to work at their workplaces. During the first wave of pandemic there was only invitation to organise remote work, while after 16 March 2021 it became mandatory. For those working in employers' premises in the state and local government institutions, an employer had to provide individual protection means, such as masks.

During the very short period of time remote work became a usual practice. Employers understood that remote work (where possible) solves many material (office costs) and social (work-life balance, security at work) problems. Especially young workers appreciated the working-time flexibility. In 2021 a EY survey revealed that workers want flexible choice of working time (88% of respondents), place of work (87%) (Financenet.lv, 2021).

The procedure of organising of telework was not changed – the details of the telework should be described in written in the employment contract.

New legislation regarding the right to disconnect, work life balance and similar issues was not adopted. By large, these issues are regulated by existing normative regulations.

From 1 August 2021 amendments to Labour law are valid regarding employers' responsibilities in case of telework. Section 76 determines, that if the employee and the employer have agreed on the performance of telework, the expenses of the employee which are related to the performance of work should be covered by the employer, unless otherwise provided for by the employment contract or the collective agreement entered into with the employee trade union and provided that the overall level of protection of employees is not reduced by such a collective agreement. Before adoption of the abovementioned amendments definition of the telework was formulated only in the labour protection normative regulation.

Social partners appreciated adoption of this norm. They think, that this norm will increase conclusion of collective agreements.

The second novelty was working arrangements for those who receive idle time benefits. For the first in the history of independent Latvia people were paid for not working while being employed. In this regard there was discussion whether workers who receive idle time benefits should not work at all, or they might be employed in periods when an employer needs more workforce.

Amendments to Labour law (Section 109, part 2 of the Labour law) adopted on 27 May 2021 excluded the norm that an employer is prohibited from giving a notice of termination of an employment contract to a person with disability in three situations (Section 101 of the Labour law) :

- if an employee who previously performed the respective work has been reinstated at work;
- or if the number of employees is being reduced;
- or if the employee does not perform work due to temporary incapacity
 - a) for more than six months, if the incapacity is uninterrupted,
 - b) or for one year within a three-year period, if the incapacity recurs with interruptions, excluding a prenatal and maternity leave in such period, as well as a period of incapacity, if the reason of incapacity is an accident at work, the cause being related to the exposure to the environment factors or an occupational disease.

Before amendments, an employer was prohibited to give notice of termination to a person with disability, except some cases when such an employee was not able to fulfil his or her duties at work. This norm should facilitate the employment of people with disabilities (LV Portāls, 2021b).

Simultaneously with introduction of this norm, amendments prescribe that also disabled persons may claim part time work (Section 134 of the Labour law). Before adoption of amendments an employer had to determine part-time work if it was requested by a pregnant woman, a woman during the period following childbirth up to one year, but if the woman was breastfeeding - in the whole period of breastfeeding, and also by an employee who has a child in the age of up to 14 years or a child with a disability in the age of up to 18 years.

Labour shortages

Latvian statistics does not provide data on labour shortages, most of the information comes from the media. According to this information, labour shortages were acute in health and social care and education sectors, that suffered from labour shortage before pandemic, and even more during the pandemic because of increasing workload, and building industry, ICT, and others where the pandemic facilitated an increase in the economic activity.

Labour shortage is a long-term problem. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem rather than caused it. The main reason for current shortages is the small number of people able and willing to work, and low wages in some very important public sectors such as healthcare, social care, education. In the second half of 2021, the morbidity indicators were high – this also reduced availability of workforce. Large amount of support money from the EU enables private sector employers to work, while lack of workers hinders implementation of their plans.

In the public sector, restrictions for non-vaccinated workers reduced the number of available employees. This norm hit hard in healthcare and education sectors. For instance, the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees (LIZDA) informed that due to the requirement for vaccination from 15 November to mid-December workers were fired, 575 in general education

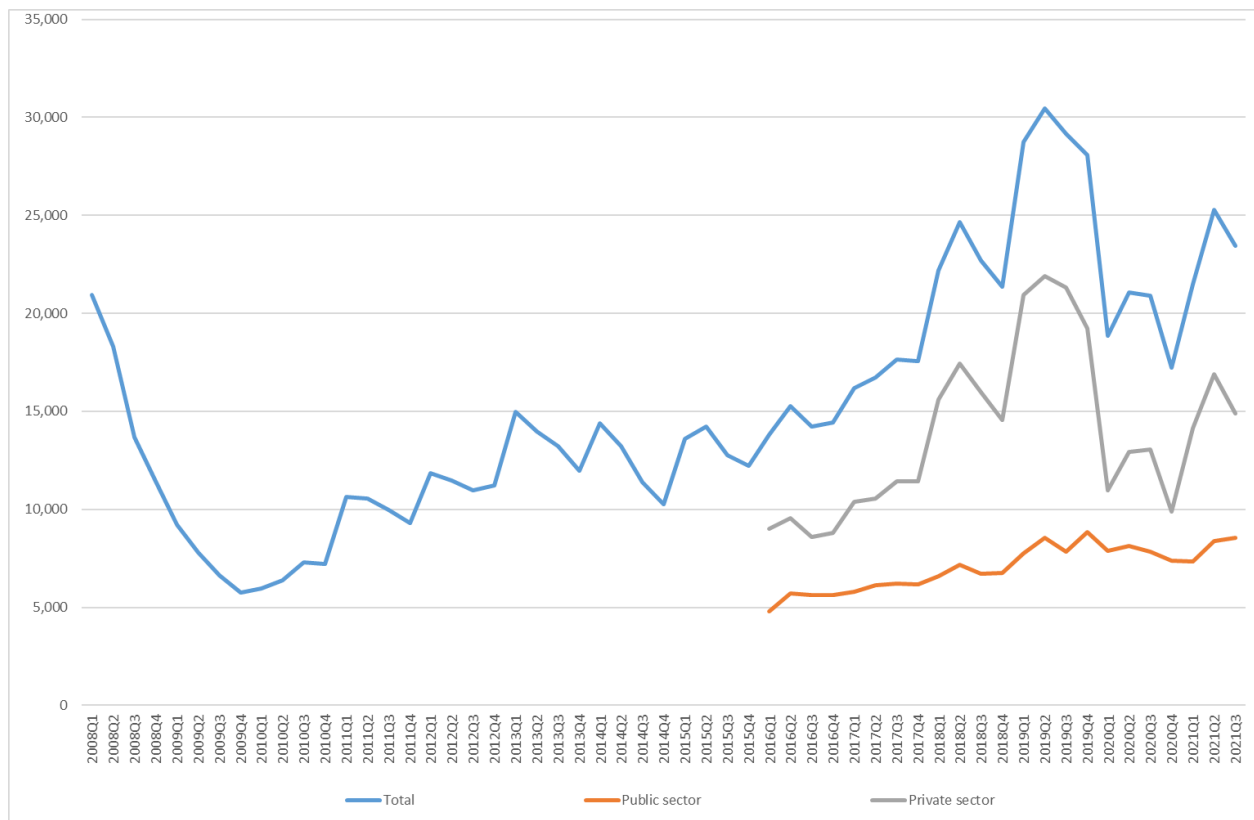
schools, 480 pedagogical workers and 221 technical workers, 230 in pre-school education institutions.

Moreover, morbidity increased after appearing of delta and omicron variants of coronavirus. The Ministry of Health informed that as of 17 January 2022, 321 hospital workers were sick with coronavirus infection, and 366 had been in contact with a positive case.

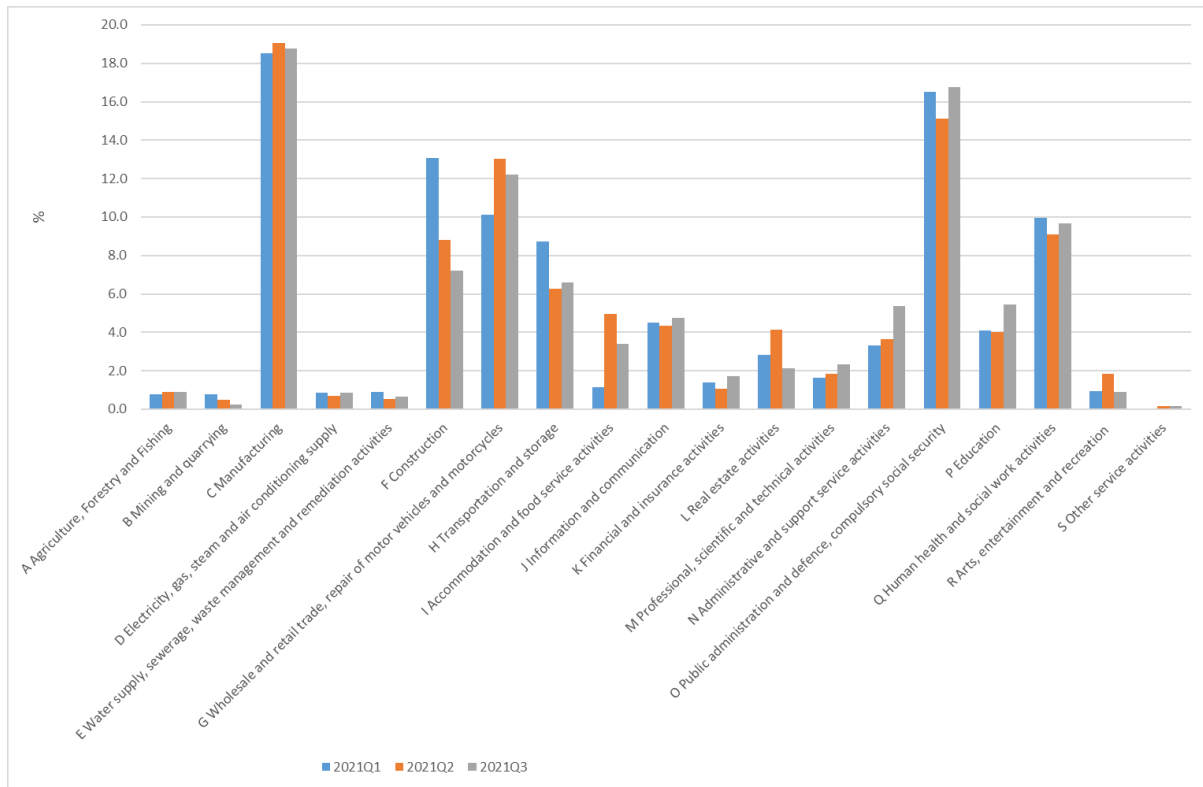
From December 2021 more children got sick with coronavirus, and this increase caused tension in schools. The President of the Association of Latvian Education Leaders (LIVA) informed in media, that teachers in schools are “rather burned out” not only because of double teaching process (part of students are in classes, part at home because they are sick or in quarantine), but also because their own children became ill and teachers should stay at home. There are no lessons in many subjects because of lack of relevant teachers. (TVNet/LETA, 2022c)

Statistical data about vacancies provides some impressions on labour shortages. The number of vacancies increased in 2021, the highest level was in 2020, as seen in Figure 1. Most vacancies are in the private sector.

Figure 1: Number of job vacancies in total, public and private sectors in end of quarters in 2008 – 2021



Source: Central Statistical bureau of Latvia

Figure 2: Number of job vacancies by sector in 2021, in percent of the total number of job vacancies

Source: Central Statistical bureau of Latvia

The number of vacancies have increased in the course of 2021 – by 14% in the first quarter, 20.1% in the second quarter and 12.3% in the third quarter.

In order to solve problem of labour shortage, the government tried to make employment conditions easier and more flexible and to provide some intangible benefits. Some of these measures will be in place in 2022.

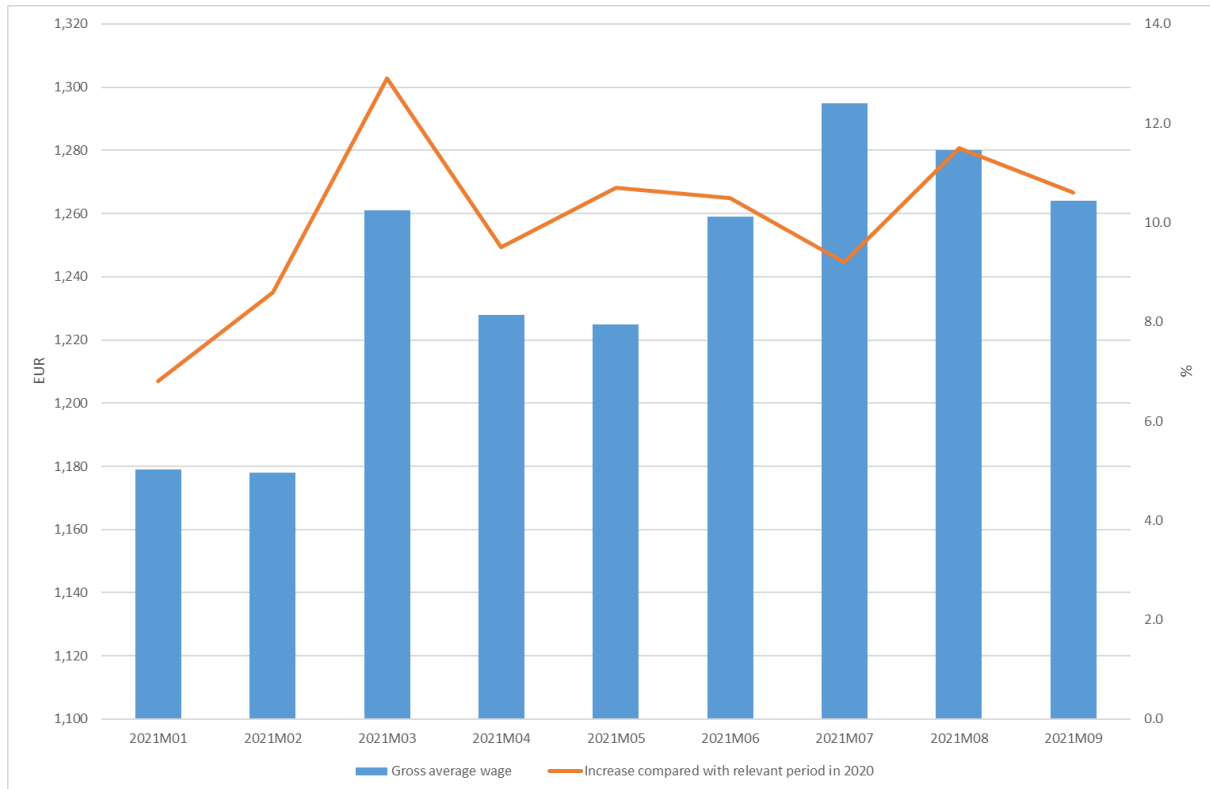
The government decided that from 20 January 2022, the time workers spent in isolation or quarantine should be reduced in the critically important sectors for vaccinated workers. In the workplace, they must be tested and wear FFP2 respirators. (TVNet/LETA, 2022d). Amendments envisage other forms of work organisation to replace quarantine for people who have had contact with an infected person or were infected. (TVNet/LETA, 2022e, Regulation of Cabinet of Ministers No.37 (2022)) Regulations set forth particular (different) norms for seven categories of workers and students: infected employee (official) and assistant of a student, employee (official) and assistant of a student who has contacted with an infected person, essential employee (official) who is involved in implementation of functions that are important for society, workers and volunteers with service contracts, worker who has not undergone a medical examination in good time, infected student (in selected education programs), a student who has contact with an infected person (in selected education programs).

Measures based on social partners' agreements are not known. Labour shortage is an old problem that exacerbates year by year due to emigration.

Wages and wage-setting

In general, wages were not a critical issue in 2021 (see Figure 3). Wages increased faster than GDP. From January to September 2021 the average wage grew by 7.2%, while from the first to third quarter GDP grew by 3,1%. From March 2021 wage growth rates are very high.

Figure 2: Average gross wage of employees (euros, left axis) and its increase compared to the relevant period of the previous year (% , right axis) in January – September 2021



Source: Central Statistical bureau of Latvia, Average gross wage of employees, in euros. [Statistics portal](#).

The wage setting has not been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. On 27 May 2021 the Latvian Saeima adopted amendments to the Labour law (valid from 1 August 2021) prescribing that “A minimum wage determined by the general agreement entered into in accordance with Section 18, Paragraph four of this Law shall have the same legal consequences within the scope of employment relationship as a minimum wage determined by the State.” Section 18, Paragraph four of this Law establishes the procedure of conclusion of the general agreement. General agreement in Latvia is sector level agreement.

Contrary to other years, the level of national minimum wage was modestly discussed. As usual, wage level in public services sectors was discussed. Wages increased in the healthcare sector.

In some sectors the government paid additional benefits for those who had additional duties caused by COVID-19 pandemic. Additional payments were allocated to workers in education institutions who from September 2021 were involved in testing of children and providing a secure epidemiological environment (Public, 2021b).

Local governments contributed with benefits for people who were more involved in the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, in October and December 2021 additional pay for work in pandemic was granted for Riga's local government police workers.

Collectively agreed pay is valid only in one sector – as minimum wage in the building industry.

Data on company level collective agreements on wages is not available for analysis.

Impacts on the social dialogue and collective bargaining

The institutional basis (actors, institutions and processes) of the social dialogue and collective bargaining did not change. Social partners had right to participate in the decision-making process, and to express their opinions. However, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the process of the social dialogue, mainly because of restrictions on gathering. The communication with partners and the government was via internet platforms or by phone. Social dialogue suffered less, because in Latvia the system is simple with only one partner on both sides, the Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia (LBAS) on employees' side and the Latvian Employers' Confederation (LDDK) on employers' side. Distance communication is effective, nevertheless it makes difficult to see all angles and to feel nuances. In policy making, this is a significant deficiency. Like in previous years, the government expanded the scope of institutions in its consultation events, so that social partners lost their special position as consultants – they became “ones of several”.

The documentation for the social dialogue (comments and opinion papers) had to be prepared in written, because in a large group it was impossible to explain and motivate their proposals. This creates an additional burden on the social partners whose capacity was already almost exhausted.

Nevertheless, social partners reacted on new decisions. Decisions on the state support measures were discussed in working groups where social partners participate.

In the first half of 2021 LDDK and LBAS actively participated in planning of Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). They approached in written not only the Latvian government but also European Commission (EC) and deputies of the European Parliament (EP) from Latvia.

LDDK supported the implementation of vaccination requirements in enterprise - together with the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LTKR) claimed, that employers should have the right to be sure that an employee has a certificate.

There were also other activities of social partners.

Labour disputes in the context of the pandemic

In November 2020 workers in the beauty industry in which the provision of services was completely prohibited protested near Latvian Saeima (Parliament) claiming a right to work. Number of protestants was not announced, but it is known that more than 10,000 signatures were collected asking abolishing of introduced restrictions. In January 2021 the government extended state support to the sector by introducing special additional benefits in parallel to the idle time benefits (LV Portāls, 2021a). Workers of beauty industry were divided in two groups – Group A – workers who on October or November or December 2020 were employed with an employer, and Group B – workers who in the same period were self - employed. The support was calculated separately for both groups of workers and included several components – idle time benefit, additional payment for a child and in case if the applied tax regime was changed (available regimes were general tax regime, or microenterprise tax regime or receiver of patent fee).

Other labour disputes in the context of the pandemic did not occur.

Individual claims in the context of the pandemic were submitted to Constitutional Court, Administrative Court and Ombudsmen.

Only one court ruling concerning vaccination status and access to the workplace was publicly reported. In November 2021 a civil servant from the Ministry of Welfare, her husband and daughter submitted claim to the Regional Administrative court. They disputed application of the article 5.3 of the Cabinet of Ministers order No 720 that requires vaccination against COVID-19 if a person wants to continue work in the state institution. She motivated her application by concerns about side effects after receiving the vaccine and lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the vaccine. The claim was rejected. (Jurista, 2021)

According to media information, from spring 2020, when the first emergency situation was introduced, to 21 January 2022 Latvia's Constitutional Court (Satversmes tiesa) had received 90 applications connected with COVID-19 restrictions, of which 89 applications were constitutional complaints. The applications concerned restrictions on operation of large retail trade centres, continuation of remote learning when emergency situation was already closed, wearing of masks, mandatory requirement to use certified face masks, assembly restrictions, granting of idle time benefits, restrictions on gambling, and other. Of all applications 72 complaints were rejected, mainly because they were not relevant to indicated articles of Latvian Satversme (Constitution), or the case was in competence of Administrative Court (nra.lv, 2022).

Commentary and outlook

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was serious in 2021. The state of emergency declared late in 2020 continued until 6 April 2021. The next state of emergency was declared from 11 October 2021 to 28 February 2022, including a four-week lockdown.

In the first wave of the pandemic, the focus was on the protection of people's health. The focus slightly changed in the second and third waves, the protection of the economy was also taken as a priority as well as the protection of the healthcare system. In the education sector Trade unions and Ministry of Education, as well as parents considered that remote education was a mistake, and the goal was to maintain schools opened in the 2021/2022 school year.

In line with restrictions, the government reintroduced several support measures: Idle-time allowance for employees, Idle-time allowance for self-employed, grant for working capital flow and others. The government also introduced new specific measures, such as support for COVID-19 crisis-affected sports centres, support for shopping centres to overcome the effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

In the second, and especially in the third wave the government was often criticised by experts and society for delayed decisions, wrongdoing and other flaws. The Minister of healthcare was replaced on 7 January 2021 because Prime minister Krišjānis Kariņš expressed distrust in her work due to the lack of a vaccination plan and requested her demission. Several other ministers changed because of the collapse of one of the coalition parties. Elections were not held in 2021.

Despite restrictions in some sectors, GDP figures became positive in the second and third quarters of 2021, with increases of 11.1% and 5.1%, respectively. Unemployment levels also were not critical, reaching an average unemployment rate of 7.6% in December 2021, down from the highest level of 8.1% in February - March 2021.

The institutional basis (actors, institutions, and processes) of the social dialogue and collective bargaining did not change. Both peak level organisations the Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia (LBAS) on employees' side and the Latvian Employers' Confederation (LDDK) on employers' side actively communicated with the Government. In the first half of 2021 LDDK and LBAS participated in planning of Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). They approached in written not only Latvian government but also European Commission (EC) and deputies of the European Parliament (EP) from Latvia.

Labour shortage is a long-term problem exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The main reason for current shortages is the small number of people able and willing to work, and low wages in some very important public sectors such as healthcare, social care, education. Other sectors faced labour shortages due to an increase in activity during the pandemic, such as construction and ICT.

Vaccination started in December 2020 and continued during the following year. From the second part of 2021 the government gradually introduced stronger restrictions for non-vaccinated people regarding the ability to work, attend cultural and sports facilities, and large shops, division increased toward the end of the year, increasing social tension. On 22 January 2022 about 80% of the adult population in Latvia had received two doses of the vaccines, while about 27% had received booster.

Forced vaccination has caused silent protest in the society. People became divided in two groups – these who are vaccinated and these who are not. That caused several public demonstrations. Even having into account positive impact of vaccination, the impact of adopted facilitation measures

should be carefully weighted, evaluated from the long-term perspective. In a small country division of society is not helpful for a better life.

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