



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

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**Eurofound reference number:** WPEF22025

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## Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Political context .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Governments and social partners response to cushion the effects.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Adapting to the pandemic and the return to work: Policies and debates .....</b>	<b>6</b>
New occupational health and safety rules.....	6
New working arrangement policies .....	7
Labour shortages.....	8
Wages and wage-setting .....	9
<b>Impacts on the social dialogue and collective bargaining.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Labour disputes in the context of the pandemic.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Commentary and outlook .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>14</b>

# Introduction

2021 was a period full of challenges in the world of labour, Not only has the pandemic radically changed the way we live and work, but its extension in the second year has required companies to develop mechanisms and tools to profoundly change the business environment and the work model. The digital transformation of the business, the development of economic resilience and the initiation of measures for robust recovery required changes in approach and behaviour for the workforce changes, in work-life balance, but also increased social responsibility. of employers. Companies have looked for ways and tools to build their own resilience, based mainly on digitalization, but also on the flexibility of work and management methods, in many cases also meaning business model's innovation and employees' re-skilling.

To restrict the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the state of alert was extended throughout 2021 and remains in place also in the first months of 2022. While variations in the measures correlated with the dynamics of pandemic waves, the trend was towards lifting restrictions until September 2021, when they were tightened again because of the fourth wave of the pandemic (Decisions of the National Committee for Emergency Situations 32/26.07.2021, 36/03.06.2021, 50/26.07.2021). For Romania, it was the most difficult period since the beginning of the pandemic, with numbers reaching tens of thousands of new infection cases per day (over 990 cases per million inhabitants), and hundreds of deaths (7-day moving average up to 473) (Worldometer, 2022). The fourth wave brought forward debates about the way the pandemic was managed, based on elements such as the low vaccination rate, the inefficient vaccination campaign, and the introduction of the Green-Pass obligation on the public spaces but not on the workplace.

The pandemic negatively impacted the Romanian economy as a whole as well as the labour market. However, in the second year of the pandemic, the economy made some progress compared to the first year. According to the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), while in the first quarter of 2021 GDP decreased by 0.4% compared to the same quarter of 2020, in the next three quarters of 2021, the GDP exceeded the levels of the previous year by 13.4%, 7.6% and 2.7%, respectively (NIS, 2022a - seasonally adjusted series). The estimates for the whole year 2021 compared to 2020 indicate a 5.6% increase in the GDP, compared to the previous year, thus exceeding the year 2019 by about 1.7% (NIS, 2022a – unadjusted series).

In the second year of the pandemic (2021), Romania's employed population continued to decline, both compared to 2020 and to the pre-pandemic year 2019. Thus, while in the first quarter of 2021 the employed population decreased by 867,000 people compared to the same quarter of 2020 (- 10.25%, the sharpest decrease), in the second and third quarters of 2021 the decrease was lessened, with decreases of 7.45% and 6.94% respectively. In the second quarter of 2021, part-time employment decreased by 44% as compared to the same period in the previous year (EUROSTAT, 2021).

In 2021, some positive developments could be observed in terms of unemployment. In the first quarter of 2021 the number of unemployed people increased by 113,670 ( or 29.73%) compared to the same quarter of the previous year, but in the second and third quarters of 2021 the unemployment decreased by 13.28%) and 7.72% compared to the same quarters of 2020. In the third quarter of 2021 436,000 people were unemployed, representing an unemployment rate of 5.3%, a decrease of 0.1 percentage points compared to the same quarter 2020. (NIS, 2021b). The

high level of the unemployment rate among young people (15-24 years old) of 20.3% is still noteworthy (NIS 2022b).

## Political context

The Romanian political context was dominated by chaos throughout 2021. The results of the 2020 elections, local elections took place in September and general parliamentary elections in December, were dominated by a change in status. National Liberal Party (PNL), Alliance USR-PLUS (Save Romania Union - USR and Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party - PLUS) and Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) became the governing coalition, relegating the largest political party, PSD, to the opposition. The ministerial positions were divided between the three dominating political partners, under a Prime Minister coming from PNL. Major public disputes within the coalition began in April when the Prime Minister (PNL) fired the Minister of Health (USR-PLUS) without any discussion with the coalition partners. USR-PLUS threatened to leave the coalition over this decision but agreed to remain in the government coalition as long as the situation does not happen again. In September the Minister of Justice was dismissed and USR-PLUS left the coalition as a result. In October, the motion against the PNL Government passed and a new Government was installed at the end of November, with of a coalition between PNL, PSD, UDMR and minorities' representatives. The pandemic proved to be a good justification for the changes in the Ministry of Health, but it also contributed to the awareness that the Romanian health system is in difficulty, the whole year 2021 being dominated by tragic fires (eleven fires in less than a year in Romanian hospitals, most in intensive care units that treat patients with severe COVID) (Milonean, 2021). The return of PSD to the Government was achieved with promises to bring more socially oriented measures concerning income and social benefits, to be implemented in 2022.

## Governments and social partners response to cushion the effects

Most of the measures adopted by the Romanian authorities to cushion the effects of the pandemic on the economy were designed, announced, and implemented in 2020, and some of them have been extended to 2021. Some examples of measures designed to help businesses stay afloat are the measures for small and medium enterprises, either as microgrants<sup>i</sup> or as grants for working capital<sup>ii</sup> granting temporary aid with limited value to those SMEs that are facing a deficit or unavailability of liquidity. The HORECA sector, probably the most severely hit by the pandemic, was the beneficiary of measure granting aid covering 20% of turnover loss.<sup>iii</sup> However, its implementation was sometimes deemed faulty, as it was dominated by delays that made things difficult for the affected enterprises (Barbulescu, 2021).

While the financial measures were mainly for businesses, there were also a series of measures for workers, centred on work organization: simplifying teleworking regulations, flexibilization of labour relations for small companies, and financial support for teleworkers. As far as the flexibility and organization of labour are concerned, the emphasis on telework has caused changes on the labour market that are expected to outlast the pandemic and become the new normal. Major employers on the Romanian labour market (eMag, Endava, BRD - Groupe Société Générale) announced that they will allow employees to blend working from home and in the office (Romania Insider, 2021; Bursa, 2021; Jurnalul, 2021). The percentage of employees who want to work exclusively from home was 17.9% at beginning of 2021 (Eurofound 2020) but by October 2021, only 10% of employees wanted to work exclusively from home (Cushman & Wakefield Echinox, 2021). According to the same study, in the first half of 2021, 43% of respondents said that they worked mainly from the office, compared to 36% between May and December 2020, and 29% during the lockdown period from March to May 2020. The need to go to the office, to socialize, remains high, employees preferring a hybrid program. Over a quarter of respondents would like to work 3 days from the office and 2 days from home, while 17% want to work only from the office.

The Government improved the existing legislation regulating teleworking by adopting GEO no. 36/May, 2021.<sup>iv</sup> But the trade unions and the employers' organisations were in different positions regarding this regulation. Following the debates that took place in the Economic and Social Council (ESC), employers' associations and NGOs gave a favourable opinion to this project. While trade unions gave a negative opinion, objecting the elimination of the minimum 1 day per month from definition of telework, highlighting confusions and misinterpretations regarding the place where telework can be performed, the reduction of the possibility for the teleworker to carry out work at the employer's headquarters, thus reducing flexibility. With all the objections of the unions and since the Economic and Social Council has only an advisory role, the ordinance was approved (CES, 2021).

The increase of teleworking due to COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an increase of expenditure for many employees working from home, who use their private space for work. Often, this brings additional costs for utilities. On the other hand, several companies have closed their offices to make savings. In these conditions, Law no. 296/2020<sup>v</sup> introduces the possibility (from 1 January, 2021) for the employer to support utilities expenses (electricity, heating, water and mobile data subscription, purchase of furniture and office equipment) at the place where teleworkers carry out activities

within a monthly ceiling of RON 400 (€80), corresponding to the number of telework days in the month and without the need to present supporting documents. The amount is paid in addition to the wages, is exempted from any tax and is deductible from the company's annual profit. However, the measure is optional, as the companies are not obliged to pay the financial support, by October 2021, only 5% of multinationals granted this benefit to employees (RFI Romania, 2021). From October, at the beginning of fifth COVID wave, employers must have at least 50% of employees teleworking, if the specific activity allows it, otherwise the work will be carried out in shifts (Decision 91 of the National Committee for Emergency Situations).

Another measure centred on work organisation is the Emergency Ordinance no. 37/2021 for the amendment and completion of Law no. 53/2003 - Labour Code<sup>vi</sup> that allows the waiver of the obligation of companies with up to 9 employees to have the internal regulations and the job description in written form. The obligations of the employees at the workplace are transmitted verbally and only at the request of the employee it can be in written form. This provision was intended to be a form of flexibility in labour relations but may lead to a higher vulnerability of employment and an increased risk of the number of labour disputes (Legislatia muncii, 2021).

Starting with 2020, European funds were used for implementing measures for small and medium enterprises whose activity was impacted by the pandemic (Zamfir, 2020), but also for strengthening the healthcare system. Hospitals were eligible to apply for European funding, and funds were especially directed towards them (Euractiv, 2021), as well as for the emergency response units. An example is the Department for Emergency Situations, whose infrastructure was improved with money coming from the European Union, and managed by central authorities (Digi24, 2021b).

Especially given the harsh conditions triggered by the pandemic, the implication of different social partners and their effective communication should have a positive effect on limiting the negative impacts of this crisis (Europa Libera Romania, 2021a). According to social partners, the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 put an end to social dialogue, labour disputes and negotiations, but in 2021 the situation was less restricted and trade unions regained one of their most important bargaining mechanisms – strikes.

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<sup>i</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Microgrant with fixed amount for SMEs](#), case RO-2021-27/2032 (measures in Romania), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

<sup>ii</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Grant for working capital for SMEs](#), case RO-2021-27/2033 (measures in Romania), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

<sup>iii</sup> Eurofound (2021), [State aid scheme for HORECA sector](#), case RO-2021-1/1713 (measures in Romania), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

<sup>iv</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Measures for simplifying conduct of teleworking](#), case RO-2021-19/1935 (measures in Romania), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

<sup>v</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Financial support for teleworkers](#), case RO-2021-1/1700 (measures in Romania), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

<sup>vi</sup> Eurofound (2021), [Flexibilisation of labour relations for small companies](#), case RO-2021-19/1934 (measures in Romania), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.



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

## New occupational health and safety rules

Following the state of emergency that took place between March and May 2020, the state of alert was established, period in which economic activities resumed and many employees returned to work. The employers applied a series of measures during the state of alert - still in existence as of January 2022 - meant to prevent the spread of the pandemic and to ensure the activity at work in safety and health conditions (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and Labour Inspectorate, 2020):

- **Hygiene conditions:** provision of disinfectants for personal hygiene and disinfection of surfaces, provision of personal protective equipment such as gloves and protective masks. Depending on the specifics of the activity, disinfection of common areas and work spaces, triage and checking the temperature of the employees at the beginning of the work schedule, monitoring employee health.
- **Employee training:** in the field of safety and health at work.
- **Work-space organization:** arrangement of individual work and common spaces to maintain a distance of at least 1.5 meters. Establishing special traffic lanes for employees to avoid congestion. Creation of spaces for employees in vulnerable groups, such as people with chronic diseases or people over the age of 65.
- **Work arrangements:** flexibility in work schedule to avoid overcrowding without affecting the duration of the normal work schedule. Limiting travel outside the company / institution. Encouraging communication more by electronic means and less by physical ones.

These measures have given people confidence that by complying with them they can resume their activities safely for themselves and their families, even in pandemic conditions and in the next few months there has been no significant escalation in the number of COVID-19 cases. The resumption of economic activity in compliance with the above conditions had positive effects on the evolution of GDP, which - after a decrease in the second quarter of 2020 by 12.3% compared to the previous quarter of 2020 - resumed its growth (5.6% in the third quarter of 2020 and 5.3 % in the fourth quarter of 2020)

The vaccination campaign in Romania started in December 2020, with workers in the health and social fields (in the first stage), followed by the population at risk and workers in key, essential areas (in the second stage). While not legally required in the workplace, some employers have recommended their employees to vaccinate and test to prevent the spread of COVID-19, especially where their activity involves working with the public, for example in the hospitality industry, food delivery services, aviation, education or health. However, there were no suspensions or termination of employment relations for those who do not comply with the recommendations. Some companies have collaborated with state institutions to organise vaccination or periodic testing campaigns for their own employees with employers covering the costs of testing.

In the second half of 2021, there were efforts to introduce the obligation to present a "green certificate" at work, it certifies that a person has been fully vaccinated with an EU-recognized COVID-19 vaccine, has recently recovered from COVID-19 or has been recently tested negative by an RT-PCR

or rapid antigen test. The former governing coalition submitted a draft to parliament, requiring a green certificate in the health system, at residential care centres, administration and police, during the state alert under risk of suspension or contract termination in case of non-compliance.

The change in governing coalition blocked the process, the new coalition submitting a new project extending the “green certificate” to people vaccinated with at least one dose and temporarily covering tests for unvaccinated employees. The green certificate will be mandatory for all employees, except for teleworking employees and for private sector employers with 10 employees or less, who do not interact directly with customers.

Citizens, trade unions, political parties or institutions have expressed dissatisfaction with these restrictions, blocking their adoption. For instance, the People's Advocate, an autonomous and independent public authority that aims to defend the rights and freedoms of individuals in their relations with public authorities, argues that conditioning the employees' right to work to vaccination or testing at the employees' expense), under the risk of suspension or contract termination is unconstitutional. On the other hand, the National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD) considers that the submitted draft law follows patterns already adopted in EU countries, such as France, Italy or Hungary, and that such measures can also be adopted in Romania if the legislator justifies a legitimate purpose – which, in this case, would be to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in one activity-field (health), where the degree of exposure to infection is much higher than in other domains. Unions in administration, education and health are also challenging the government's proposals, insisting on regular testing of staff rather than imposing vaccinations (Europa Libera Romania, 2021b). As the danger of the pandemic decreased, the issue of compulsory COVID-19 certification was finally abandoned.

Romania currently has one of the lowest COVID-19 vaccination rates in Europe. As of 16 December 2021, only 46.5% of the population aged 12 and over was vaccinated (Romanian Government, 2021). As for the vaccination campaign, the authorities have failed to convince the public - to a large extent - of the benefits of vaccination. On December 31, 2021, 7.82 million people were vaccinated with the complete scheme and just over 2 million people with a booster dose.<sup>1</sup>

## New working arrangement policies

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of telework contracts has exploded, increasing almost 8 times between March 2020 to March 2021, from 50,577 to 394,415 labour contracts. Most telework contracts concluded between March 2020 and December 2021 were in the ICT industry, consulting firms and in the banking field. As the pandemic demonstrated the need to make work more flexible, Romania improved the existing legislation regulating telework (Law no. 81/2018) by adopting GEO no. 36/May, 2021, which regulates the use of electronic signatures in labour relations and provides various aspects to simplify the development of telework. The condition that the minimum duration of teleworking is at least one day per month has been removed. The law no longer specifies how many days per month the work must be carried out remotely. It is essential that telework should be specified in the individual labour contract, otherwise the employer may be sanctioned by the Labour Inspectorate, and the employee must agree to telework, the refusal

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vaccinare-covid.gov.ro/actualizare-zilnica-31-12-evidenta-persoanelor-vaccinate-impotriva-covid-19-2/>

cannot be a reason for sanctions. The employee can choose any place to telework, which can be modified at any time, without notifying the employer.

The employer must provide the means related to ICT and / or secure work equipment, necessary to telework and the parties may agree to use the employee's own equipment. Full-time teleworkers may provide overtime, but only with their written consent and at the employer's request. In addition, the employer's right to verify teleworker's activity has been introduced. Such verification can mainly be done using ICT means and must be specified in the labour contract. The teleworker benefits from all the rights recognized by law, by the internal regulations and the collective labour contracts applicable to the employees who have the job at the employer's headquarters.

Also, the GEO 36/2021 provides that the parties to an individual labour contract or addendum may choose to use the advanced electronic signature accompanied by an electronic time stamp when signing the documents. Such documents may be electronically archived by the employer and shall be made available to the competent control bodies at their request (Ghinea, 2021).

To maintain employment during the pandemic period, the Government reintroduced the granting of technical unemployment (GEO 111/2021, applicable until December 31, 2021). According to this regulation, employees whose individual employment contract has been temporarily suspended at the employer's initiative, during the state of alert, benefit from an indemnity of 75% of the basic salary. This allowance is supported by the unemployment insurance budget and cannot exceed 75% of the average gross earnings provided by the Law on the State Social Insurance Budget for 2021. The employer can supplement the amount of the allowance, if his budget allows it.

## Labour shortages

The labour market during the COVID 19 pandemic period was marked by numerous tensions that deepened the existing labour force deficit, there is a large number of vacancies, as well as mismatches between workers' qualifications and openings.

In the first three quarters of 2021, the highest rates of job vacancies were found in O – Public administration and defence; Compulsory social security (~2%), R – Arts, entertainment and recreation (~1.7%) and Q - Human health and social work activities (1.6%).

In absolute values, the vacancies in sectors C - Manufacturing, O - Public administration and defence; Compulsory social security and Q - Human health and social work activities account for about a half of total vacancies at national level. There are also some specificities at regional level. For example, about 60% of all vacancies in sector C- Manufacturing were in Western, North-Western and Central regions, and 64% of all vacancies in sector Q - Human health and social work activities sector were in South East, South Muntenia and Bucharest regions. About 40% of all vacancies in sectors O - Public administration and defence; Compulsory social security and R – Arts, entertainment and recreation were in the Bucharest region. In the fourth quarter of 2021, compared to the same quarter of 2020, the vacancy rate increased by 0.19 percentage points, and the number of vacancies increased by 10.0 thousand. (NIS, 2022c)

The massive migration of Romanian workers to Western Europe, the aging population, the inadequate educational program and low internal mobility are the main drivers that led to the current imbalances on the labour market.

Police shortages are caused by retirements and the small number of places in police schools, three measures were implemented in 2021 (Digi, 2021c):

- Organizing competitions for the promotion of non-commissioned officers to the status of officers.
- Increasing the number of places for admission to schools for police, gendarmes and firefighters and to the Police Academy.
- Employment from an external source for positions where no specialized school is needed.

To cover the chronic shortage of medical staff health public institutions were allowed to fill vacancies without competition and to employ short-term medical staff for Intensive Care Units (ICU) specializations and infectious diseases. The Emergency Ordinance 20/2021 art.19.- allows doctors to provide medical care outside their specialty, to people diagnosed with COVID-19. These measures gave a necessary "breath of fresh air" to hospitals in urgent need of doctors, nurses, and support staff, especially in ICU departments, COVID-19, and county ambulance services.

Social partners considered that there is no national strategy regarding the problem of the shortages on the labour market. They suggest making a pact between all the involved parties – government, trade unions, employer organizations to establish a set of measures needed to close the gap between supply and demand on the labour market.

## Wages and wage-setting

The pandemic had a negative effect on wages. According to the National Institute of Statistics, in the first 10 months of 2021 the average gross monthly earnings at country level have increased compared to the same months of the previous year, reaching RON 5,773 (~€1,155) in October 2021. But salary increases are counteracted by the inflation, especially since the third quarter, when inflation jumped sharply compared to the previous quarter (reaching 8.19% at the end of 2021, one of the highest level in the EU). By activity sectors, the highest values of the average gross monthly earnings in October 2021 were registered in IT (RON 11,321, ~€2,264), while the lowest ones were recorded in hotels and restaurants (RON 3,159, ~€632) (NIS, 2021a).

The gross minimum wage level for 2021 was established after months of sporadic debates and negotiations between the trade unions and the employers' organizations, arbitrated by the central authorities, made difficult by the pandemic restrictions and mostly conducted online (GD 4/2021<sup>2</sup>). It was set through a government decision (Government Decision no. 4/2021) to RON 2,300 (~€460), for the period 13<sup>th</sup> of January – 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2021 (RON 100 higher than the previous level). In addition to the general gross minimum wage, there are two other minimum wages applicable to certain categories of employees: RON 2,350 (~€470) for employees with tertiary education and RON 3,000 (~€600) for workers in constructions (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2021).

For 2022, negotiations on minimum wage level began in September (Mihai, 2021a) and were rather smooth, as the propositions of trade unions and of employers' organizations were similar – 10%, respectively 8% increases (Mihai, 2021b). Finally, by GD no. 1071 of 2021 was decided for an increase of the minimum gross salary in the economy by 10.86% (RON 2,550 per month, respectively

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<sup>2</sup> DECISION no. 4 of January 13, 2021 to establish the minimum gross basic salary in the country guaranteed in payment available at <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/236118>

~€510) and is applied starting with January 1, 2022. About 1.97 million employees will benefit from this increase, which represents about 1/3 of the total number of employees.

In the private sector, significant wage increases were implemented in some domains, like ICT, where the gross monthly average salary was about 40% higher than in the public sector (National Institute of Statistics). According to the PayWell 2021 study, conducted by PwC Romania, private companies had an 8.9% increase in the basic salaries in 2021, twice as high as that anticipated by respondents in a period of economic uncertainty. This was due to the lifting of restrictions that led to the mitigation of the negative effects of the pandemic, allowing private companies to grant salary increases above the initially estimated levels. The highest average wage increase in 2021, of 13.66%, was recorded by industry, followed by the pharmaceutical sector with 10.51%, retail with 8.2% and the banking sector with 8.01%. The study also reveals that the most common types of bonuses are meal vouchers, free coffee and beverages at the office or days off work (PwC Romania, 2021).

## Impacts on the social dialogue and collective bargaining

The quality of social dialogue in relation to the government and the Economic and Social Council has been relatively weak during all the COVID-19 pandemic period.

Formal consultations of the social partners at the level of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and the Romanian Government were carried out within the framework of meetings of the Social Dialogue Committees, the Economic and Social Council and the Tripartite National Council for Social Dialogue. The public statements and positions taken by trade unions in 2021 suggest that there is a gap between the government and social partners' positions (Cartel Alfa, 2021a). Trade unions claim that the government does not respect the principles of social dialogue, not respecting the functioning of the Economic and Social Council. Another claim is that, while neglecting to consult social partners, the government introduces measures that fail to address the core problems faced by Romanian workers. For example, measures for companies with less than 9 employees, for whom electronic signature will become usable and the job description will no longer be a requirement, are seen by trade unions representatives as leading to possible abuses on workers (Cartel Alfa, 2021-b,c).

The law of social dialogue (law 62/2011) that regulates social dialogue in Romania, has often been deemed obsolete by trade union representatives, as it does not foster social dialogue due to the complicated requirements for representativity in the main relevant entity ensuring social dialogue, the Economic and Social Council (established within the framework of law 248/2013). As a result, the legal framework for social dialogue is under revision. Some issues with the current situation are presented in a report by the Concordia Employers Organization, including the lack of trust between social partners, their relatively low organizational capacity, the fact that trade unions mainly represent employers working in the public sector, whereas employers' organizations represent the private sector (Concordia, 2021). However, at the end of the year, the draft law aimed at amending and supplementing the Law on Social Dialogue received a negative report from the specialized commissions of the Chamber of Deputies, which will in principle be rejected by the parliament. Another similar project was submitted three years ago, also remaining for discussion in parliament (Niculescu, 2021).

## Labour disputes in the context of the pandemic

The year 2021 was marked by numerous labour disputes at national level, arising because of the crisis generated by COVID-19 pandemic and by national political instability. The protests were related to wage levels, layoffs due to business restructuring, lack of social measures, lack of social dialogue and working conditions.

One of the most important protests organised in 2021 was The Caravan of Social Justice, in July. The Cartel Alfa trade union confederation organised this nationwide protest to draw attention to the lack of social dialogue in Romania, and the absence of policies designed and implemented to increase life quality.

Protests in the two vital domains of healthcare and education were provoked by the Emergency Ordinance no. 130/17.12.2021. The causes of discontent were the low wage increases for 2022, low allocation from GDP for education (below 6%), other benefits to be received by healthcare workers. The trade unions from education organized protests in front of the government building in Bucharest, on 20-22 December, and those from healthcare organized protests to draw attention to their demands, while avoiding to disrupt activities in hospitals and other medical units.

Another important work dispute was in the construction sector, at the Damen Shipyard Mangalia from June 2021, against the dismissals of 228 employees by the new management of the shipyard acquired by a Dutch investor. The protesters claimed that this decision goes against the recurrent promises made by the government, accusing the continuous regression of the company, to the detriment of the national interest (BNS, 2021).

In the transportation sector, a major work conflict took place in December 2021. The employees from the national railway transport company protested the low wages and the postponement of increases as required by the law 195/2020, regarding the statute railway workers. As part of the protest, 109 trains stopped running and the activity was halted in 54 railway stations early in the morning, and it was resumed in the late afternoon, after negotiations with state officials (Observator, 2021).

## Commentary and outlook

The Romanian labour market was characterised in 2021 by the partial resumption of economic and social, cultural and sports activities during the relaxed periods between pandemic waves. But 2021 was characterised by the changing political context, a transfer of power between political parties. The measures adopted to manage the pandemic and its effects on the economy were a matter of political dispute during the whole year. Moreover, politics and the media have sent confusing, often contradictory messages, the sanctions of noncompliance were modest, discouraging vaccination and the compliance of the population and businesses with protection measures.

The measures adopted to help businesses to stay afloat in the pandemic were mainly of a financial nature, consisting of micro-grants or working capital grants to SMEs that had difficulties carrying out their activities in the pandemic. Another category of measures concerned employees and work organization, especially by adapting legislation on flexible work forms (such as teleworking), in order to simplify it and introduce the possibility of providing financial support for teleworkers. However, the current legislative framework in Romania does not support the training of employers or employees for the new post-covid work model, including the adaption to telework.

The pandemic accentuated the labour shortage, the highest vacancy rates in the first three quarters of 2021 being registered in: Public administration and defence, Compulsory social security, Arts, entertainment and recreation and Human health and social work activities.

The measures for ensuring health and safety at work in 2020 were maintained in 2021, during the state of alert. Employers have tried to keep their businesses open and limit the spread of coronavirus infections, especially under the condition of a slow vaccination campaign that has not been very successful among the population. There were attempts to impose the obligation to present the COVID-19 certificate at the workplace but in the end this measure was abandoned.

Although in the first 10 months of 2021 the average gross monthly earnings at country level have increased compared to the same months of the previous year, these increases were offset by inflation, which recorded significant increases especially in the second half of the year. There were, however, some areas of activity - such as IT - in which wages increased significantly. In the private sector, the gross monthly average salary was about 40% higher than in the public sector. Regarding the gross minimum wage level, it has registered an increase with 100 RON, compared to the previous level.

The social dialogue activity was quite restricted and sporadic in 2021, taking the form of some formal consultations of the social partners within the meetings of the Social Dialogue Committees, the Economic and Social Council and the Tripartite National Council for Social Dialogue, at the level of Ministry of Labour and Social Protection or the Government. There is still dissatisfaction expressed by trade unions regarding the current form of the Social Dialogue Law, which is currently under revision.

The recovery of the Romanian economy is associated with a growing foreign trade deficit, rising external debt and cost inflation. The trap of low incomes associated with rising inflation has put pressure on the business environment to maintain the purchasing power of earnings from work.

One of the most worrying realities is that after 2 years of pandemic, the Romanian labour market has not developed tools for recovery and adaptation to post-COVID working conditions.



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WPEF22025

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