



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

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Introduction

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the trends on the labour market in Croatia in 2021 were quite positive with further decrease in the number of unemployed people. At the end of October 2021, there were 123,445 people in the register of unemployed people there, 30,723 less than in October 2020 (Hrvatski zavod za zapošljavanje, 2021a). Consequently, in October 2021 unemployment decreased by 19.9% as compared to the same month of 2020. Out of the total number of unemployed people in October 2021, 44.4% were men and 55.6% were women. The number of unemployed men decreased by 21.0% while the number of unemployed women decreased by 19.1% in comparison to the same month 2020. The share of men in registered unemployment decreased, whereas the share of women increased by 0.6 percentage points in the reference period. Compared to the same month of 2020, there was a decrease of unemployment in all age groups. The sharpest decrease was evident within the age group from 20 to 24 (by 29.7%), and the smallest decrease was evident within the age group over 60 (by 6.7%). People with at least 4-year secondary school and grammar school background had the largest share in the educational structure of the unemployed (30.0%), followed by people with 1 to 3-year vocational secondary school background (9.9%). According to the Labour Force Survey (LFS), unemployment rate in Croatia for the second quarter of 2021 was 8.0%, which is still higher than the LFS average unemployment rate for EU27 (7.2%).

The positive trend of the labour market was primarily caused by the significant increase in the GDP. After a slight decrease (-0.7%) in the first quarter of 2021, in the second quarter of 2021, the quarterly GDP in real terms increased by 16.1%, as compared to the same quarter of 2020 (The Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Such increase was mostly caused by the increase in personal consumption and in exports of goods and services. For example, the real growth rate of gross value added in the second quarter of 2021 was 37.5% as compared with the same period 2020, for the sectors wholesale and retail trade, transportation, storage, accommodation and food service activities. The growth rate for manufacturing industry is also very high (13.3%). Therefore, with such high GDP growth rate, Croatia is with Spain, France, Hungary, Italy and Portugal, among the EU member states with the highest GDP increases (Hrvatska udruga poslodavaca, 2021a).

In the 2021 there were almost no lockdowns, but a significant part of employees worked from home. All levels of education took place online during the spring semester of 2021, but the fall semester of the school year 2021/2022 was mostly presential. However, some classes were in self-isolation due to COVID-19 cases. On 4 December 2021, the vaccination rate was 56.5% (koronavirus.hr, 2021).

Political context

The government's efforts to balance measures for public health protection and the economic sector have proven effective. The government's job-keeping policy, by keeping a stable labour market, and the tax reform, which has enabled a further growth of the average wage, have contributed to the economic recovery and a large increase in personal consumption. Substantial EU funds are available for recovery. Croatia has prepared a National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) for absorbing €6.5 billion worth of grants, focusing on the green and digital transition. The NRRP has a strong focus on increasing competitiveness, mainly through financial instruments for internationalisation, innovation and human capital reforms. Although the government expressed its commitment to reforms and investments envisaged by the NRRP as well as to the reconstruction of earthquake-struck areas, activities in have not yet started.

The first round of the 2021 Croatian local elections was held on 16 May and the second round, where necessary, on 30 May. All seats of the county prefects, city and municipal mayors and members of county, municipal and city councils were up for election (Državno izborno povjerenstvo, 2021). In total, there were 8,216 open seats to be contested by 38,223 candidates. Voters elected 20 county prefects, 128 city mayors, 428 municipal mayors and 7,640 others for positions of deputy county prefects and county, city and municipal councillors. In the biggest cities like the capital Zagreb, Split and Rijeka, new mayors were elected.

Governments and social partners response to cushion the effects

One should not forget, that next to the COVID-19 pandemic, Croatia experienced two serious earthquakes in 2020 which had very adverse consequences. The compounded effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the earthquakes had a significant impact on vulnerable and the total population. The earthquake - in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic - is expected to increase poverty in several ways, including the sudden loss of assets (houses) and capital, the reduction of income due to damaged infrastructure and loss of employment, the closing of schools, and so on. Out of the 70,000 people affected by the earthquakes, 13,000 are children. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that in such conditions, many children and young people in Croatia also suffer from various health and mental problems. The results of a study on the mental health of children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Zagreb earthquake, which included 22,020 children and young people, show that 9% of them had significantly increased anxiety and depression, and 15% had symptoms of post-traumatic stress (plivazdravlje, 2021).

The government applied particular support measures for lessening the consequences of both events, primarily by extended COVID-related fiscal measures from 2020 to 2021. The crucial measures (costing an estimated 8% of GDP) include the Support for preservation of jobs in sectors affected by coronavirusⁱ and Co-financing of wages for reduced working hours.ⁱⁱ These measures were merged in the Support for preservation of jobs in sectors affected by coronavirus.ⁱⁱⁱ The amount of support has stayed the same during 2021: HRK 4,000 (€534) monthly per worker for full-time job or HRK 2,000 (€267) for part-time job. The government also covered payment of social contributions, which amounts to HRK 1,460 (€194) for the net wage of HRK 4,000. Therefore, the government has paid in total HRK 5,460 (€728) per full-time employee. The Croatian Employment Service (CES) co-finances wages for working time reductions between 10% to 50% (amounting between HRK 3,250 and HRK 1,625) according to the decision of the Civil Protection Directorate. The government extended the measures monthly and adjusted their content and features according to the changes of pandemic circumstances.

For all measures, there are no official data on the number of jobs saved in the short and medium term (and workers return to exactly the same employment situation), nor on the number of companies saved. However, the views of the social partners on the measures were positive and they deemed that implementation of measures was successful in preventing numerous bankruptcies and increase in unemployment. The representative of the Trade union deems that there is a need for stricter control of employers for adequate use of received funds. Since August 2021, the condition for obtaining the subsidy was an obligation to have 70% of vaccinated employees, this condition faced serious critiques by trade unions as well as by the Croatian Employers' Association (CEA). They deem that the employer cannot force his or her employees to vaccinate.

The government and the social partners disagree on whether social partners have been sufficiently included in the design and implementation of the COVID-19 pandemic measures. The government always stresses that due to the urgency of situation, most of the measures were prepared in a short period and that social partners were informed of their content and expected impacts. However, social partners claim that they were not included in the process of design, implementation, and

administration, monitoring and evaluation of all measures. The *Nezavisni hrvatski sindikati* (Independent Trade Union of Croatia) made a similar statement that underlined that their inclusion was only symbolic and that they obtained needed information only from mass media. Similar dissatisfaction was expressed by the Trade Union Federation (*Matica*). However, social partners have their representatives in the Governing Board of the Croatian Employment Service (CES), which is responsible for the implementation of the measure. The CES underlines that due to the urgent situation, all measures had to be prepared in a relatively short period and that they informed social partners according to available possibilities and time. According to social partners, journalists and experts in the field, although relatively generous, one of the problems with the measures is that they are often prone to significant changes regarding the conditions and implementation. The measures should be adjusted to changing circumstances, but in doing so one should aim at their stability, predictability and longevity so that potential beneficiaries and the CES staff are not faced with various problems in their implementation.

The Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts (Hrvatska obrtnička komora, 2021) complained that with changes of conditions for eligibility in July 2021, the micro employers (with less than 10 employees) were left out of the support for preservation of jobs in sectors affected by COVID-19.^{iv} This problem has been solved by the decision of the Governing Board of the Croatian Employment Service (CES), which extended the support for preservation of the jobs affected by the COVID-19 also to the micro employers. Some trade union representatives accused certain employers of misusing the job protection support, while some employers complained that the government support was paid with a significant delay. However, these were rare cases.

ⁱ Eurofound (2020), [Support for preservation of jobs in sectors affected by COVID-19](#), case HR-2020-12/361 (measures in Croatia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

ⁱⁱ Eurofound (2020), [Co-financing of wages for reduced working hours \(SURE implementation\)](#), case HR-2020-27/893 (measures in Croatia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eurofound (2020), [Support for preservation of jobs in sectors affected by COVID-19](#), case HR-2020-12/361 (measures in Croatia), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

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

New occupational health and safety rules

In Croatia, harmful jobs are types of work where the employer cannot protect the worker from harmful effects despite taking all the health and safety precautions (e.g., managing certain heavy machinery, firefighters, working with radiation, some chemicals gases, etc.). Such positions are stipulated by a special regulation and generally do not allow for full-time work. In cases of telework, employers should fulfil the same health and safety at work obligations as in case of work being performed at the employer's premises. According to *Zakon o zaštiti na radu* (the Health and Safety Act – OG 71/14, 118/14, 94/18 and 96/18) and its related new *Pravilnik o zaštiti na radu za mjesta rada* (The Ordinance on the H&S – OG 105/20), prepared by the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social policy (2020), employers are not obliged to prepare a risk assessment anymore if the work is performed remotely (telework).

A new web platform named OIRA (Online Interactive Risk Assessment) is now available to help small and medium size companies ensure a proper health and safety conditions for their employees.

The platform work has been broadening quickly in Croatia, particularly in relation to delivery and transport. As in many countries, a serious problem is health insurance of people doing platform work, particularly if they are self-employed. However, in Croatia, the self-employed have the same entitlements to healthcare as other citizens, and like most of them (except for children under the age of 18 and people suffering from certain diseases) they are subject to compulsory co-payments. Croatian citizens are required to partially participate in health care expenditures through compulsory contributions, and this requirement is applicable to the self-employed. The position of platform workers in Croatia should improve soon because the *Sindikata radnika digitalnih platformi Hrvatske - SRDP* (Digital Platform Workers' Union of Croatia) was founded in June 2021, which has affiliated to the Union of the Autonomous Trade Union of Croatia (Miličević, 2021).

To prevent the spread of the infection, the National Civil Protection Headquarters states it is necessary to act in three directions: to achieve a high vaccination rate, to limit gatherings and to have as much security as possible when conducting business that cannot be limited. The National Civil Protection Headquarters announced on 5 November 2021 that the use of the COVID certificates will be mandatory for users and employees of public and state services from 15 November 2021. A certificate of vaccination, recovery, or a negative test are now mandatory for all employees of state and public services, as well as for citizens who will use their services and come to their premises. Members of the relatively strong and persistent unofficial anti-vaccine movement deem that this measure is an attack on personal freedom and therefore it is not acceptable, which has led to a national debate. Furthermore, it is difficult to control the implementation of the measure, particularly having in mind that Croatia is mostly not a law-abiding society. Thousands of people marched through centre of many Croatian cities, particularly the Capital of Zagreb on 27 November 2021, to protest tightened COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the National Civil Protection Headquarters government to counter the latest spike in coronavirus cases.

New working arrangement policies

Croatia is witnessing a major societal transformation. After overcoming the pandemic, it will probably not return to a pre-crisis state. One of the most important issues is a wide acceptance of new working arrangements, primarily telework. According to the estimation in the Project *Developing of teleworking future - DEVOTE*, around 11% of employees in Croatia work from home, although such form of work can be practiced by 34% of employees (HINA, 2021), according to the types of work they practice. For trade unions and employees, the most important advantages of teleworking are flexible time management and to save time and money needed for traveling to and from the office. Furthermore, they emphasize better opportunities to balance work and private life, as well as a possibility of independent organization of work tasks. For the trade unions and employees, the biggest problems of telework are the possibility that it will last longer than the legally prescribed 40 hours weekly and the impossibility to separate business and private life. Finally, some employees deem that they do not have adequate working conditions at home and/or they are not able to focus enough on work due to having children at home and household obligations (Rožman, 2020). For the members of the Croatian Employers' Association (CEA), positive features of telework are the opportunity of flexible organization of time and working obligations, better work-life balance, employees independently organizing their work obligations, and finally, significant reduction on costs for business premises. However, the representatives of the CEA state that in some cases, they have problems due to inadequate and/or insufficient communication with the employees. Relatively few employers deem that employees without systematic control will not be dedicated enough to their working obligations (Hrvatska udruga poslodavaca, 2021b; Hrvatska radio televizija, 2021).

Current labour legislation in Croatia does not clearly define what remote work or telework is and does not recognize work from home. Furthermore, there are no collective agreements which stipulate telework. In the most cases, telework is allowed by annexes to employment contracts. However, current legislation is under review and it should be amended by August 2022, so telework would be better defined and stipulated. Currently there are formal and informal negotiations regarding the new solutions for working from home. The aim is to reduce costs and continue doing business for entrepreneurs and employees.

In general, trade unions and the CEA believe that such work should be better regulated by the Labour Act, but their expectations of the Act are somewhat different. While trade unions believe that future amendments to the legal framework should improve regulation of the rights to disconnect during rest periods, employers hope that the future Act would specify which of the costs of the telework should be covered by employer as well as the obligation of employees to return to the regular working premises, once when the pandemic ends.

Up until now in Croatia, there have been no comprehensive representative studies on the intention of employers to keep working from home in the post-pandemic period nor an analysis of employees' attitude on the future of such work. However, there were some journal articles praising telework as a possibility for a better adjustment of business obligations and private life, reduction of stress, easier fulfilment of duties and so on (Ivanović, 2020). If telework is organized appropriately, it should not have to be a problem for either the employer or the employees (Rožman, 2020). Moreover, perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a way of flexible work that will be increasingly prevalent.

Croatia does not have regulation on employees' right to disconnect outside working time (Moslavac, 2021). Surprisingly, there is also no analysis of the extent to which workers experience difficulties in disconnecting from work, whether they feel forced by their employers to be available for work outside working hours and on workers' and employers' attitudes on the right to be disconnected. In the absence of empirical findings, it is hard to assess if this is a real problem in Croatia. One can assess that there are taciturn agreement that employers mostly do not disturb their employees out of working time. They do contact employees only for significant and urgent reasons because they are fully aware of importance of the work-life balance of their employees (Rožman, 2020). Trade unions, particularly Oil Economy Trade Union (Sindikata naftnog gospodarstva, 2021), believe that the practice of contacting workers out of working time is quite present and that it should be banned by law. Psychologists state that the right to be disconnected is an important precondition for mental health and precondition for successful work life balance between work obligation and private life (Oršulić, 2020). The daily journal Jutarnji list (2021) reports that new Labour Law which should be accepted by the summer 2022, would also incorporate a right of employees to disconnect outside of working time.

Labour shortages

Bottleneck occupations in Croatia have been identified using an employers' survey conducted in 2020 by the Croatian Employment Services (CES) (Hrvatski zavod za zapošljavanje, 2021b). The employers' survey is an instrument for collecting labour market assessments based on employers' statements. The survey sample was selected from economically active employers – based on the internal employers' database of the Croatian Employment Service and data obtained from the Croatian Pension Insurance Institute (CPII) and the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), which comprised 161,421 employers with a total of 1,455,651 employed persons. The sample consists of 5,344 employers from all economic sectors, all types of companies (micro, SMEs, and big) and from all counties in Croatia. In the sample, 1,829 employers reported a shortage of 4,210 workers. By projecting this number to the total economy, in Croatia there is a labour shortages or around 137,000 employees. The employment of around 34,000 foreigners partially filled the shortage of domestic workers. The occupations with the most in labour shortages have not changed over time. Within primary health care, Croatia is experiencing severe shortages in specialist medical practitioners as well as medical doctors and general practitioners. Furthermore, specialist nurses are in high demand. In Croatia as a whole and particularly in remote and isolated areas, pharmacists are needed. Before the economic crisis, there was a significant shortage of construction workers; currently, graduate civil engineers are still in high demand, more specifically in the construction, electrical, and mechanical fields. Moreover, the tourist sector is experiencing growing recruitment problems. Waiters, chefs, cleaners, and helpers in offices, hotels, and other establishments are needed, but due to the work's seasonal nature and limited employment possibilities out of season, young people are not willing to enrol in educational programmes for these occupations. Furthermore, there is a widespread lack of bakers, pastry-cooks, and confectionery makers. A few non-high skilled jobs are also classified as bottleneck occupations, notably within the metal processing industry (such as blacksmiths, hammersmiths, and metal working machine tool setters and operators). There are many interrelated reasons for bottleneck occupations, but the most frequent are skill mismatches and shortages due to unfavourable working conditions and unsatisfactory wages. The situation also differs according to the level of occupation and type of jobs.

For bottlenecks within high-skilled occupations, the main reason stated is a lack of qualified workforce, in particular, experienced workforce with specific knowledge (specialist doctors, nurses, graduated civil engineers, etc.).

Wages and wage-setting

After consultations with all social partners, the government adopted a Regulation on the minimum wage on 28 October 2021. Croatia's minimum net monthly wage for 2022 will be HRK 3,750 (€500), rising by 10.3%. The net minimum wage concerns 51,000 workers. Over the last five years, the minimum wage has risen by HRK 1,254 (€166). The gross minimum wage in 2022 will be HRK 4,687.50 (€627).

The Croatian Employers' Association (CEA) states that such a significant increase in minimum wage is not in line with the current COVID-19 economic situation and it could endanger employers in low accumulative sectors, like textile and leather industry. The CEA conducted a survey among its members according to which 83% of respondents from the manufacturing industry, which employs almost a quarter of all employees in Croatia, face increases in wages, raw material prices and in energy prices, especially electricity and gas. Such wage and total production cost increase could lead to unemployment growth and to an increase in the undeclared unofficial economy. The CEA expected the government to recognize these circumstances and to wait for more stable economic opportunities for a significant increase in the minimum wage (Grund, 2021).

Regarding the potential poverty impact, the minimum wage protects low-wage workers against poverty, because the net minimum wage is above the poverty threshold for one-person households. However, a problem occurs when a worker on the minimum wage is the only earner in a household with dependent children. In that case, the risk of poverty rises, although a combination of the minimum wage and social benefits could potentially reduce the risk. Nestić and Blažević Burić (2018) made a simulation of the impact of a 10% increase in the minimum wage on poverty reduction, and their results suggest that the poverty rate of those employed on the minimum wage would be diminished by only 2 percentage points (from 17.2% to 15.0%). Their results suggest that the potential of the minimum wage as a tool to fight poverty among the employed is very modest, due to the relatively low proportion of workers who are paid the minimum wage (between 5% and 8%).

The government accepted to pay overtime work of hospitals' employees by considering the responsibilities and working conditions. The Act was published in the Official Gazette 69/21. Before this Act the government regularly paid overtime work of hospital employees but representative Trade Unions in the health sector demanded (from 2017 until 2020) that the workers in public hospitals should be paid for their overtime work also according to the responsibilities and working conditions.

Trade Unions in the healthcare sector demanded a COVID-19 supplement of 28% of the basic salary for all employees in public hospitals. The government decided to allow a supplement of 10% of basic salary for employees - doctors, nurses, and medical assistants - which are directly exposed to people infected by the virus. Other hospital employees are not covered by the pay supplement in spite of also being in danger of being infected with COVID-19.

Impacts on the social dialogue and collective bargaining

Regardless of the pandemic, there were no significant changes in terms of actors, institutions, and processes in industrial relations, nor in social dialogue and collective bargaining. There were no changes of the rules of tripartite consultations, while the only practical change was that in some companies, as of 2020, meetings had to take place online.

In Zagreb, the *Sindikat radnika digitalnih platformi Hrvatske - SRDP* (Digital Platform Workers' Union of Croatia) has been established and it is affiliated to the Union of the Autonomous Trade Union of Croatia. The *Sindikat zaposlenih u poljoprivredi, prehrambenoj i duhanskoj industriji i vodoprivredi Hrvatske - PPDIV* (the Trade Union of Croatian Agriculture, Food and Tobacco and Water Management Employees) and the Autonomous Trade Union of Croatia (UATUC) signed an Agreement of association that came into force on 1 September 2021. Both sides committed to cooperate on public policies, industrial actions, and other forms of public pressure. This agreement is an example of good cooperation and a demonstration of the need to consolidate the trade union scene. Both partners hope that this is an important step for successful strengthening of their union efforts and interests in improvement of improve workers' rights (Savez samostalnih sindikata Hrvatske, 2021).

The National Economic and Social Council held six meetings in 2021, to discuss issues including the National of Recovery and Resilience Plan (9 April), reports of its activities in previous years (17 May), the Yearly Report by the Croatian Employment Service (31 May), the increase of prices of raw materials and its potential economic and social consequences (15 June) and the role of social partners in raising workers' and employers' awareness on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public health and the economy.

Labour disputes in the context of the pandemic

In Croatia, labour disputes are primarily tried by ordinary courts. No special labour courts exist outside of Zagreb, while some matters may be referred to special authorities (e.g., the Administrative Court). Arbitration is another possible way of resolving labour disputes, but it is only available where the parties have agreed to this in either the employment contract or in a collective bargaining agreement. Disputes which could result in a strike have to be resolved before a conciliation committee (“peace council”) unless the parties agree to an alternative method of dispute resolution. The conciliation procedure is conducted by a person chosen with the consent of both parties from a list established by the Economic and Social Council. There are no national statistics available on the number of working days lost due to industrial action. Except for the mentioned issues related to remuneration for overtime work of employees in hospitals and the COVID-19 supplement, there were no serious and important labour disputes in 2021.

Commentary and outlook

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy recorded a significant increase in the GDP, particularly in the second quarter of 2021. Such increase was mostly caused by the increase in personal consumption and in exports of goods and services. It enabled the substantial decline in the number of unemployed people, so in October 2021 unemployment decreased by almost 20% compared to the same month of 2020.

The government applied particular support measures for lessening the consequences of both the COVID-19 pandemic and earthquakes from 2020, primarily by extended COVID-related fiscal measures from 2020 to 2021. The crucial measures (costing an estimated 8% of GDP) include the Support for preservation of jobs in sectors affected by coronavirus and Co-financing of wages for reduced working hours. For all measures, there are no official data on the number of jobs saved in the short and medium term (and workers return to exactly the same employment situation), nor on the number of companies saved. However, the views of the social partners on the measures were positive and they deemed that implementation of measures was successful in preventing numerous bankruptcies and increase in unemployment.

Although the government expressed its commitment to reforms and investments envisaged by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan as well as to the reconstruction of earthquake-struck areas, activities in have not yet started.

The platform work has been broadening quickly in Croatia, particularly in relation to delivery and transport. As in many countries, a serious problem is health insurance of people doing platform work, particularly if they are self-employed. However, in Croatia, the self-employed have the same entitlements to healthcare as other citizens, and like most of them (except for children under the age of 18 and people suffering from certain diseases) they are subject to compulsory co-payments. The position of platform workers in Croatia should improve soon because the Digital Platform Workers' Union of Croatia) was founded in June 2021, which has affiliated to the Union of the Autonomous Trade Union of Croatia.

To prevent the spread of the infection, the National Civil Protection Headquarters states it is necessary to act in three directions: to achieve a high vaccination rate, to limit gatherings and to have as much security as possible when conducting business that cannot be limited. As in 2020, a significant number of activities – particularly in education – have been successfully moved online during the crisis.

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