



Industrial relations and social dialogue
**Estonia: Developments in
working life 2022**

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Contents

Introduction	1
Political context	2
Actors, institutions and processes	3
Social partners.....	3
Social dialogue bodies or frameworks	3
Other working life related institutions.....	3
Governmental responses to inflation.....	4
Collective bargaining and inflation	6
How inflation features in wage negotiations	6
Examples of recent responses.....	6
Developments in working time.....	8
Changes to legislation	8
Bargaining outcomes	9
Debates on duration and organisation	9
Labour market shortages and social partners.....	10
Other important policy developments	10
Labour market shortages	10
Employment status and contracts	10
Gender pay gap	12
Health and safety	12
Work–life balance	14
Life-long learning and skills development.....	14
Working life of Ukrainian refugees	15
Employment and working conditions	15
Social partner initiatives to support Ukrainian refugees	16
Commentary and outlook	17
References.....	18

Introduction

The invasion of Ukraine and subsequent war has had a strong effect on Estonian social and economic life. The economic impacts have been notable in inflation. According to Eurostat (2023), the annual inflation rate for Estonia was one of the highest (17.5%) in the euro area. The change in consumer price index compared to 2021 is 19.4%, with the biggest impact on the consumer price index coming from housing-related price increases, which accounted for two fifths of the total rise (Statistics Estonia, 2023a). Therefore, inflation has had a considerable effect on Estonia in 2022. According to Eurostat (2020a), the energy dependency rate was 10.5% for Estonia in 2020 compared to EU average of 57.5%, however, the dependence on Russia for natural gas is quite large, as Estonia imported 93% of its natural gas from the Russian Federation (Eurostat, 2020b).

The social impacts of the war are highlighted by the 121,404 refugees from Ukraine who have entered Estonia since February 2022 (17 January 2023 figures), of whom 66,108 (54%) have remained in Estonia (Estonian Social Insurance Board, 2023). When considering only working-age population of refugees, the employment among men is slightly higher (68%) compared to women (34%) (Lees et al, 2023). As of 15 January 2023, 6,243 refugees are registered as unemployed in the Unemployment Insurance Fund (Unemployment Insurance Fund, 2023). This is almost 12% of all registered unemployed which indicates that a considerable share of the resources of the Unemployment Insurance Fund is currently dedicated to recipients of international protection. This puts a considerable strain on different parts of our welfare system at national as well as local level. In January 2023, the Ministry of Interior reported that Estonia is reaching its limits in accepting new refugees as it is becoming increasingly difficult to offer them the necessary support services. As a result, some of the new refugees coming to Estonia are offered an opportunity to go to Finland for temporary protection (Ministry of Interior, 2023).

Political context

Two separate governments were in power within 2022. The first coalition, which included the Estonian Reform Party and the Estonian Centre Party, governed between January 2021 and July 2022. The Centre Party departed the government on 3 June 2022, which left only the Reform Party to govern the country for a month and a half (Government of Estonia, 2022a). The second coalition commenced on 18 July 2022 and it includes the Reform Party, Isamaa and the Social Democratic Party (Government of Estonia, 2022b). Both coalitions are led by Kaja Kallas, head of the Reform Party. There were no considerable delays during the ongoing negotiations with regards to the measures for alleviating the effects of inflation. There were no major elections in 2022. However, there will be elections for parliament in March 2023, which might somewhat affect the decisions made, i.e., not raising taxes, increasing benefits, etc.

With regards to the increasing living expenses, there was also some unrest in 2022. Over the summer, the Estonian Trade Union Confederation carried out an extensive campaign to extraordinarily increase the minimum wage level from €654 to €700 and to increase the basic exemption level from €500 to €700, due to rapid increase of living expenses (EAKL, 2022a). In July, a proposal with more than 5,000 signatures from workers were handed to the Parliament to discuss the increase in basic exemption (EAKL, 2022d). Instead, the basic exemption was increased to €654 (to match the minimum wage level), but on the basis of the coalition agreement. The change was adopted by the Parliament in November 2022 (Riigikogu, 2022). Additionally, the cultural workers of Tartu protested against the disparity in wages between cultural workers in city-owned institutions and those of their state-run counterparts (Punamäe, 2022). Furthermore, the Artists Association started a campaign in August 2022, which advocates for free health insurance for all and more access to social guarantees for people working in non-standard forms of employment (Estonian Artists' Association, 2022). The campaign was created due to increasing wage poverty and new forms of employment, such as platform work, which offer little access to social protection.

Actors, institutions and processes

Social partners

There were no significant changes in relation to social partner organisations, e.g., there have not been any (de)merges nor establishment of new organisations. However, recently, a major change took place, affecting collective bargaining. In November 2021, changes in the Collective Agreements Act entered into force, establishing criteria to extend collective agreements. The new criteria are more restrictive than the previous situation. Extension of a working time, rest or wage conditions of a collective agreement may be agreed upon by:

- 1) a federation of trade unions or an industry trade union whose members account for 15% of the employees in that industry or who have at least 500 members; and
- 2) an association or federation of employers whose members employ at least 40% of the corresponding industry's employees covered by the extended condition of the collective agreement (including those companies, who are not members, but wish to implement the contract in their companies).

Prior to the law change, there were altogether three sectoral (extended) collective agreements in two sectors: one in health care and two in transport (one covering freight transport, the other covering passenger transport). Due to the established criteria, the freight transport agreement was no longer valid as the members of the sectoral employers' association (the Union of Estonian Automobile Enterprises) employ around 5% of the sub-sectoral workforce (Riigikogu, 2021). Thus, the Estonian Transport and Road Workers Trade Union must opt for company level collective agreements.

Social dialogue bodies or frameworks

There were no significant changes in the social dialogue bodies or frameworks in Estonia in 2022.

Other working life related institutions

Since January 2022, the previous Enterprise Estonia and Kredex are combined into a new organisation called Estonian Business and Innovation Agency (Kredex 2022). The new foundation is initiated by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications. Regarding working life, the foundation will focus on supporting research and development and innovation in companies, supporting entrepreneurship and exports. To some extent, these activities also reveal in working conditions in companies and the level of skills and knowledge needed in companies to implement innovation and support exports.

Governmental responses to inflation

In 2022, there were several measures introduced to combat the increasing inflation. Some measures target excessive energy prices. There are energy cost compensations for households,ⁱ in addition, there is the universal electricity service,ⁱⁱ which is one of the main courses of action by the government to alleviate the high prices. The amendment to the law obliged the state energy provider to sell electricity to households and electricity distributors as a universal service at the price determined by the Competition Authority. It took effect in October 2022 and will be in force until 30 April 2026. Until November 2022, only private citizens could join the service. However, since then the law was changed to permit some businesses to join the universal electricity service as well. These businesses include micro and small businesses, sole proprietors, foundations and non-profit organisations (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, 2022). There is no information on whether social partners were involved in designing this measure.

The feedback on the universal electricity service has varied. The Estonian Employers' Confederation stated that the decision to offer the service only to some businesses is unfair to medium and large companies and it is economically illogical since these businesses hire the most employees and the survival of a large portion of small businesses also depends on the success of larger companies. Furthermore, they claim that with this decision, the government is discouraging foreign investors from bringing large labour- and energy-intensive investments to Estonia (ETKL, 2022a). The Estonian Association of SME's is thankful for the new law giving access to the option of buying electricity at a regulated price for micro and small enterprises, although they state, that there are several issues with the law, making it inaccessible for many of these companies. They call to attention, that the businesses buying electricity through a landlord are unable to join the service. Additionally, they ask that there would be a ban of penal fines when switching to the universal service (EVEA, 2022).

Excise duty rates for special-purpose diesel fuel were also cut for some businessesⁱⁱⁱ to alleviate the effects of inflation and the war in Ukraine. Additionally, several changes were made to the legislature concerning some benefits. Among those, the most important changes were a) an increase of the subsistence level;^{iv} b) a substantial increase of several family benefits (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2022a); c) the indexation of the benefit for families with many children starting from April 2024 (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2022a). Other than pensions, benefits are generally not indexed to inflation in Estonia. Some benefits depend on the size of the minimum wage, such as the minimum rate for unemployment benefit. In turn, the minimum wage is set by the collective agreement between the Estonian Trade Union Association and the Estonian Employers' Confederation. The wages for parliament members and various other senior government officials are indexed with the highest salary rate index, the value of which is dependent 20% on the annual increase in the consumer price index and 80% on the annual increase in the receipt of the pension insurance part of social tax. Altogether, the mean wage of senior government officials grew 14.06% compared to the previous year (ERR, 2022). There was not a lot of debate concerning the wage increases or the indexation of the senior officials' wages in general. There were also no institutions set up to deal with inflation by the government.

ⁱ Eurofound (2022), [Energy cost compensations for households](#), case EE-2022-40/2906 (measures in Estonia), EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

ⁱⁱ Eurofound (2022), [Universal electricity service: Price caps on electricity for households](#), case EE-2022-40/2905 (measures in Estonia), EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

ⁱⁱⁱ Eurofound (2022), [Cut in excise duty rates of special purpose diesel fuel](#), case EE-2022-19/2911 (measures in Estonia), EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

^{iv} Eurofound (2022), [Support for vulnerable groups to cope with increasing costs](#), case EE-2022-23/2335 (measures in Estonia), EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

Collective bargaining and inflation

How inflation features in wage negotiations

There is no information available about how inflation features in negotiations over company level collective agreements. It can be expected that company level agreements largely do not include inflation-related clauses.

At sectoral level, extended collective agreements have been concluded only in health care and in transport. The agreements in force do not directly contain any inflation related clauses. The transport sector collective agreement is in force until March 2023 and no information regarding the negotiations over a new agreement is available (e.g., whether inflation will be a key point to consider in the agreement). In health care, the agreement was in force until the end of 2022. Negotiations over a new agreement have been in process since the beginning of 2022. While no details are available, the Estonian Nurses Union has stated that wage increase is necessary in the context of a very high inflation rate.

At the national level, the peak-level social partners have and continue to take into account a variety of indicators when negotiating the national minimum wage. These include labour productivity, economic growth, poverty levels, companies' economic indicators as well as the financial coping and work motivation and competitiveness of the employees. Inflation is one indicator among many that they look at. However, until the latest negotiations in summer-autumn 2022, inflation in Estonia has been lower than the general increase in Estonian wage levels, thus general wage level has been more prominent indicator for the parties than inflation. The trade unions have considered important that the minimum wage increase would be faster than the national average wage increase. However, during the negotiations in 2022, the inflation was more important than before. Both parties mentioned considering inflation – trade unions stressed that due to inflation an increase in minimum wage is especially important, while the employers stressed that it must be ensured that the wage increase would not harm employer's competitiveness and in turn create higher inflation. Trade unions also pointed out that they followed the suggestion by ETUC that in this difficult economic situation, core inflation rate instead of consumer price index should be used.

Examples of recent responses

There are no significant examples to describe as the company level agreements are not discussed publicly and there is also no information available about the sectoral level negotiation processes. In the case of the national level minimum wage agreement, the peak-level trade union wanted to extraordinarily increase the minimum wage in May 2022 due to the rapid increase of food and housing costs and energy prices (EAKL, 2022a). This proposal was turned down by the peak-level employers' association, saying that the forecast of the Ministry of Financial Affairs expected the annual inflation rate of 2022 to be equal to the increase in the minimum wage that already took place as of 2022 (12%) (EAKL, 2022b). Thus, the national minimum wage level setting took the standard approach – negotiations started in late-August 2022 and the final level was agreed on 5 September. The final agreement to increase the wage level from €654 to €725 (by 10.9%) was, according to the Estonian Employers' Confederation, a compromise considering both the high inflation level as well as the cooling economy (Ärileht, 2022). The Estonian Trade Union Confederation stated that the increase in minimum wage and the increase in basic exemption in

combination increase the income of low-income-earners by €100 per month and they see it is a significant increase (Ärileht, 2022).

Developments in working time

Changes to legislation

Variable hours agreement in retail

According to the variable hours' agreement, in addition to the agreed working time, a part-time employee may perform up to eight hours of work over a period of seven days (variable hours). The agreed working time and variable hours combined may not exceed full working time. Usually, individual part-time employees who wish to work additional hours would need to sign additional contracts, namely Contract under the Law of Obligations. As the retail industry experiences a lot of seasonal variation due to promotions, holidays or vacation periods, labour force needs in this sector can be volatile. The change was aimed to reduce the need to use Contract under the Law of Obligations and allow Employment Contracts to be used by employees with flexible hours, as employment contract provides more social protection and is therefore favourable for workers (ETKL, undated).

Changes in Employment Contracts Act to make working time more flexible have been on the table for a few years now. In May 2020, the flexibility topic was again raised, motivated by the COVID-19 crisis to allow employers flexible arrangements to deal with crisis-related difficult economic situation. Instead of going the route of changing the law, the social partners planned to follow a sectoral approach and agree on more flexible solutions regarding working time in the commerce sector. However, no agreements were reached then. In 2021, a Goodwill Agreement between social partners and Ministry of Social Affairs was signed to pilot the variable hours agreement in the retail sector and the change in Employment Contracts Act were enforced in the end of December 2021. According to the head of Employers' Confederation statement in May 2022, the negotiations of variable hours agreements were "painstakingly difficult", took a long time and due to all the demands and restrictions of trade unions, the variable hour agreement has since been used very little. The statement expresses criticism of the representativeness of the trade unions involved in the negotiations in various sectors.

The Estonian Chamber of Commerce (a business organisation) sees this as a positive and welcome update but expressed criticism of the conditions for applying the variable hours agreement. The current legislation states that no more than 17.5% employees of a company can be covered, thus excluding all small companies with less than 6 workers.

Change in on-call working time legislation in Employment Contracts Act

A change in the Employment Contracts Act regarding on-call working time entered into force in the end of December 2022. Now, daily and weekly rest time requirements no longer apply to full-time employees whose duties are to ensure the continuous functioning of information and communication technology services, infrastructure and information security. The rest time requirements do not apply in the condition that the employee can perform duties that require responding during on-call time without having to go to their place of work. This change in legislation was first proposed by Estonian Employers' Confederation in April 2022 with the aim to introduce flexibility to Employment Contracts to better accommodate to the specificities of workers in information and communication technology in public as well as private services. As the demand for critical information services in fields such as public administration and energy has increased in the

light of the recent international security situation, it is important for ICT workers to be reachable outside of the workplace. According to the Employers Union proposal, flexible contracts that allow workers to be on-call longer but not have to be physically present in the workplace help ensure public access to critical ICT services (ETKL, 2022b). The change to on-call working time legislation was also discussed in a tripartite meeting, including the Estonian Employers Confederation, the Trade Union Confederation and the Ministry of Social Affairs, in the wider context of debates regarding updating employment contracts to be more flexible (EAKL, 2022).

In addition to that, individuals registered as unemployed can now use Employment Contracts for unlimited short-term employment relations, so-called workbits. Individuals registered as unemployed can now enter short-term Employment Contracts (up to 8 days) for an unlimited number of times within the period of six months, instead of having to work under Contract under the Law of Obligations or under an Authorisation Agreement, thus enabling better social security for the worker (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2022c).

Bargaining outcomes

No information is available about collective bargaining outcomes in relation to working time. Collective bargaining has been centred around making employment contracts more flexible. A Goodwill Agreement was signed by the Employers' Confederation and the Trade Union Confederation which resulted in a change to Employment Contracts Act, allowing variable hours agreement contracts to be used in retail sector (see above for more detail). Another outcome is the change in on-call working time regulations (also see above for more detail).

A collective agreement in the healthcare sector was updated in 2021, which resulted in changes in working conditions in 2022, such as an increase in minimum wages, an increase in remuneration of night work and weekend shifts, and additional vacation days for medical personnel who are vaccinated against COVID-19.

Debates on duration and organisation

There are currently no major ongoing debates.

Labour market shortages and social partners

Social partners are participating in the tripartite Coordination Council that oversees implementation of the labour market and skills forecast OSKA. The Coordination Council submits an overview of the state of play regarding labour market and skills and its proposals to the Government. Hence, social partners have a direct role in overseeing the analysis of labour market shortages in Estonia.

In health care, social partners took a step towards resolving labour market shortages with a consensus agreement to increase the number of nursing students and remunerate supervision responsibilities for nurses currently employed (see also chapter on labour market shortages below) to reduce shortage of nurses in Estonian hospitals.

Other important policy developments

Labour market shortages

In a survey by CV-keskus and Palgainfo Agentuur conducted in September 2022, 34% of respondents reported their workload to have increased due to labour market shortages. Workload increase was most significant in accommodation and food services (+42%), public administration and local government (+42%), social work (+42%) and healthcare (+36%).

Shortage of nurses in Estonian healthcare has been a longstanding issue exasperated by the recent COVID-crisis. In 2022, a consensus statement was signed by higher education institutions, organisations in the field, Ministry of Education and Research and Ministry of Social Affairs to increase the number of available spots for nurses and other healthcare professionals in education and to improve the quality of internship training. The consensus agreement for the years 2022-2026 sets the goal of increasing admission to the basic education of nurses to 700 students per year.

Estonian Nurses Trade Union has for years emphasised the importance of remuneration of nurses who supervise the internships in increasing quality and magnitude of training. The previous consensus agreement (2017-2021) did not offer any solutions regarding their remuneration and the remuneration of internship supervisors was the responsibility of individual hospitals (Kivi, 2017). The updated consensus agreement of 2022-2026 includes financing for nurse internships, including a goal to develop a system for remuneration of nurses who supervise internships (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2022b).

In addition, in order to target the shortage of qualified medical professionals, some residency programmes are extended in length and developed further to include additional trainings. This includes rehabilitation (from 3 to 4 years), obstetrics and gynaecology (from 4 to 5 years to include training in interpersonal skills and human-centred approach), and radiology (additional training in nuclear medicine).

Employment status and contracts

In August, The European Union Directive on transparent and predictable working conditions was transposed into The Employment Contracts Act and several amendments were adopted. In general, according to the changes the employee must now be provided with more information about their working conditions than they were previously. The information that has to be provided to the

employee includes 1) details of training provided by the employer (both compulsory, and additional opportunities); 2) the duration of the probation period; 3) leave that is compensated by the employer 4) information about the procedure for overtime work and compensation; 5) information about the formal requirements of termination and about the obligation to state reasons; 6) information about the institution the taxes and payments are paid to and what protection the employee receives when they are paid.

In addition, employees must now be notified of changes in working conditions no later than on the day the changes take effect, while previously it was within one month from the date of making the changes. Employers must preserve the working conditions document during the validity of the employment contract and for ten years after the termination of the contract.

Furthermore, with the amendment, the principle of the directive is transposed that an employee must not be treated adversely for relying on their rights, drawing attention to infringements of these rights, or supporting another employee in protecting their rights (including trustees and working environment representatives).

Also, the employee now has the right to request suitable working conditions (e.g., an underemployed person may request a higher workload or a fixed-term employee an indefinite contract). Now, the employer has the obligation to consider the request and in case of rejection justify in writing the reasons for the rejection. This allows workers more opportunities to secure their employment relations as well as turn to Labour Inspectorate in case their requests are not met for reasons that are unclear.

According to the amendment the employer cannot prohibit the employee from being employed elsewhere outside of their working hours. The employee cannot be discriminated against if they have another employer, for example, the employer cannot prohibit the worker to participate in training provided by the other employer. This allows workers the opportunity to combine workplaces for full-time employment and prevent underemployment.

The obligation to provide information also applies to workers posted to Estonia. Written information on working conditions must also be submitted to workers posted to Estonia. If an employee is posted to Estonia for a longer period than one month, they must be provided with information on the duration of the posting, wages (amount and currency), information on benefits associated with the posting and the procedure for reimbursement of travel, meals, and accommodation expenses. Furthermore, the posted worker must be provided with a link to the website of the Labour Inspectorate, where they can find information about the working conditions of an employee posted to Estonia (Labour Inspectorate, 2022).

The wording of the amendments was criticised by the Estonian Trade Union Confederation on the grounds that it de-prioritises written agreements and contracts, giving more weight to one-sided notifications from the side of the employer. This leaves employers in a more flexible position and is unfavourable for employees. The Estonian Employers Confederation has criticised the amendment that the employer cannot prohibit the employee from being employed elsewhere outside of their working hours, arguing that prohibiting should be allowed on the grounds of health and safety concerns and in the case of conflict of interest (Riigikogu, 2022b).

Another amendment is the introduction of the concept of an employee with independent decision-making capacity. The aim of the amendment is to make working conditions more flexible for workers who due to the nature of work have significant independence in organizing their working time, for

example, certain high-level managers, researchers, translators, lawyers or accountants. For employees with independent decision-making capacity, whose wage in one month is at least the Estonian average gross monthly wage, some regulations of the Employment Contracts Act do not apply, such as organisations of working time, restriction on night work, regulations of on-call work, as well as requirements for daily and weekly rest time. This amendment was a result of a tripartite meeting including Employers Confederation, Trade Union Confederation and Minister of Health and Labour (EAKL, 2022c).

In addition, individuals registered as unemployed can now enter short-term Employment Contracts (up to 8 days) for an unlimited number of times within the period of six months, instead of having to work under Contract under the Law of Obligations or under an Authorisation Agreement, thus enabling better social security for the worker (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2022c).

Another important change concerns the unemployment insurance benefit. The duration of unemployment insurance benefit for the registered unemployed was changed to reflect the general economic climate in Estonian economy (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2022d). This means that benefits are paid for a longer duration in case the situation of the labour market is unfavourable, and unemployment is increasing and for a shorter duration if unemployment rates are low. This fundamental change in unemployment benefits system was also approved by the Trade Union Confederation as well as Employers Confederation.

Gender pay gap

Some progress was made for education personnel as a result of collective bargaining. Estonian teachers are predominantly women (around 80%), at the same time men working as teachers have higher hourly wages than women working in the same position (Taimalu et al., 2020). In 2022, as a result of negotiations initiated by Estonian Educational Personnel Union, a regulation was signed setting the minimum wage of teachers to be at least 120% of national medium wage. The regulation became enforceable 1 January 2023.

Health and safety

There have been various developments in the field of health and safety. There was a tripartite agreement between the Estonian Trade Union Confederation, the Estonian Employers' Confederation, and the Ministry of Social Affairs with the goal of reforming the superannuated pension system and eventually terminating superannuated pensions (EAKL, 2022e). According to the Ministry of Social Affairs, the current system for superannuated pensions is from several decades ago and does not account for changes in the labour market or improvements in working conditions. The Ministry of Social Affairs also claims that the current rules regarding superannuated pensions reduce the age of leaving the labour market, causing healthy people of working-age to depart (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2022e).

Initially, the Estonian Trade Union did not approve the notion of terminating superannuated pensions, pointing to there being no current benefit system for occupational diseases/work accidents and no other measures to support the competitiveness of the discussed employees in the labour market long-term (EAKL, 2022f). The Estonian Employers' Confederation, however, approved of reforming the current system, justifying this with the improvement of working conditions and large costs of superannuated pensions (ETKL, 2022c).

The agreement required the partners to devise a policy package of labour market measures which aim to support the career changes of people affected by the reform. Additionally, the three parties were to discuss the changes to the compensation scheme for occupational diseases. To prevent employees from abandoning the labour market due to health reasons, the social partners were to construct applicable measures, which would be implemented starting from 1 April 2024. (EAKL, 2022e) In November 2022, the draft passed its first reading. According to the draft, the change in legislature will not affect the people already receiving superannuated pensions. The draft states, that it will only be possible to collect the years of service necessary to receive the pension up until either 2030 (for occupations requiring 10-12.5 years of service to receive the superannuated pension), 2036 (for those requiring 15-25 years of service) or 2049 (only for the oil shale sector). The law will enter into force on 1 January 2024 (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2022f).

In addition to the formerly described measure, there was a joint proposal by 16 organisations advocating for updating the legislature regarding health promotion. The initiative proposes to make investing in employees' health more flexible and affordable for employers. The proposal was led by the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and called for doubling the tax-free limit of health-promoting expenses made by employers from €400 to €800 per year. Additionally, the initiative appealed for a wider selection of health services to be covered by the exemption. According to the proposal, the previously mentioned two steps will affect the employees' health and the healthcare system in general in a positive way (ETKL, 2022d).

Since the beginning of the COVID crisis, there has been a temporary measure in place, according to which, instead of three days, only the first day of sick leave will remain uncompensated. The employer will compensate for days 2-5 and as of the 6th sick day, EHIF will compensate for the leave.^v The duration of the measure has been extended multiple times in previous years. The latest draft concerning the measure was initiated by the Centre Party. The original draft would have changed the measure to be indefinite. The coalition, however, drafted an amendment to lengthen the measure for another six months, instead of making it indefinite. Eventually, the draft was approved on 28 December 2022 and the measure will continue to be in place until the end of June 2023 (Riigikogu, 2022c).

The Estonian Employers' Confederation maintains that the effects caused by the measure should be analysed more thoroughly before making the indefinite change in the law. The head of the Confederation claims the biggest risk tied to the measure to be the potential abuse of the system (ETKL, 2022e). A parliament member Siret Kotka noted that although the Centre Party is in favour of turning the measure indefinite, the long-term solution will ultimately be decided upon by the government formed after March 2023 elections (Delfi, 2022).

In addition to the previously mentioned measures, there have been a few smaller scale, although significant changes in laws regarding health and safety. The Ministry of Social Affairs has added mental health disorders originating from the work environment to the list of occupational diseases. An employee has the right to compensation from the employer if the health problem is caused by an unmitigated psychosocial risk factor present in the work environment (Tööelu, 2022). Additionally, there were some changes to the legislature concerning remote work. As of November 2022, an employee working remotely has an obligation to ensure the safety of their work environment, based on the instructions given by the employer (Riigikogu, 2022d).

Work–life balance

Changes introduced to legislation regarding working time as well as health and safety potentially impact work-life balance. These amendments, such as employee with independent decision making capacity and psychosocial risks are described in detail in sections above.

Lifelong learning and skills development

In 2022 the tripartite labour force and skills forecast system OSKA continued with several additions to sectoral skills forecasts. Also, the need for digital, green skills and general skills were analysed.

Training courses in vocational and higher education institutions with the financing of the Ministry of Education and Research and European Social Fund were continued in 2022 as 566 courses were offered in 41 different thematic fields to around 8600 people (Postimees 2022). The courses are selected based on current skills needs and, for a second year in a row, to address skills needs in sectors most hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, including tourism and health care.

In health care, a tripartite consensus agreement was signed in 2022 to increase the number of nursing students, remunerate supervision for nurses and analyse additional training needs in the sector (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2021; more information in sections above). One year later the initiative is criticised by the Estonian Nurses Union as implementation has been slow (ENU 2023). As a second initiative, in October 2022, the first group of 23 nurses from Ukraine started their training in the Tallinn Health Care College, combined with language training in Estonian (Ministry of Education and Research 2022a). The aim is to provide additional training to reduce the differences in nurses' training in Ukraine and Estonia.

In education, a teacher academy was initiated in 2022 to support flexible learning pathways for teachers. New study places are opened for teacher training in several fields and a conceptual framework for the continuing training of teachers and school leaders is developed.

Since June 2022 the Unemployment Insurance Fund covers the costs of training of Ukrainian refugees for employers. This includes a one-time mentorship payment, reimbursement of training costs, translation services and obtaining qualifications (Unemployment Insurance Fund, 2022).

A reform of vocational education system was initiated at the end of 2022 and will go on up to 2029. The aim is to bring education and the labour market closer together by introducing a single system of describing skills. The main output will be the individual digital skills profile of skills acquired in the education system as well as at work or individually (Ministry of Education and Research 2022b).

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

Working life of Ukrainian refugees

Employment and working conditions

According to the Ministry of Social Affairs (2022g), 64,500 Ukrainian refugees currently reside in Estonia and temporary protection is granted to 41,000 people. All the refugees have access to basic necessities and housing. Forty percent of 20 to 64 year-olds work and pay taxes and 60% pay for their housing themselves or with the help of friends and family.

Statistics Estonia (2023b) has data on 27,117 refugees in Estonia, who have applied for temporary protection and are aged 15 to 75 (as of 15 January 2023). In this group, refugees are mostly women (71%). According to Statistics Estonia (2023b), employment among refugees aged 15 to 75 is higher among men (43%) compared to women (34%). A profiling review which has just been published (on 20 January 2023), drawing on a questionnaire-based study, refers to slightly higher employment levels when only considering working-age population of refugees (68% among men and 50% among women) (Lees et al. 2023). While a considerable number of refugees have found a job, many of them do not have an income from employment or are not working-aged (mostly children). At the same time, refugees are mostly highly educated younger women as 51% of women have higher education and 25% vocational education. This puts a strain on the social insurance system as highly educated refugees mostly cannot realise their education potential in Estonia due to poor language skills. Also, a lot of refugees work on low-paid jobs, as 26% work in jobs that do not require special skills and 25% in agriculture. As a comparison, 25% of refugees previously worked in Ukraine in jobs that require professional qualifications (Lees et al 2023).

Overall, 61% of refugees have income from work, 29% receive some sort of social support (e.g., minimum income scheme, childcare etc.), 24% have unemployment benefits/ allowances, 13% receive pensions and 9% have their own savings to use (Lees et al 2023).

As of 15 January 2023, 6,243 refugees are registered as unemployed in the Unemployment Insurance Fund (Unemployment Insurance Fund, 2023). This is almost 12% of all registered unemployed which indicates that a considerable share of the resources of the Unemployment Insurance Fund is currently dedicated to recipients of international protection. The share varies among regions, being the highest in Läänemaa (15%) and the capital region Harjumaa (14%).

According to the Unemployment Insurance Fund (2023), 69% of the registered unemployed refugees receive some sort of unemployment support. Considering the lack of insurance contributions, this is mainly unemployment allowance. Still, around a third of refugees do not qualify for any financial support from the unemployment policy system.

In addition to financial support, the Unemployment Insurance Fund also provides active labour market measures to refugees to support their employment. The active measures include mostly labour market training (the majority of which is Estonian language training), covering mentoring fees for the employers of refugees, supporting job search and career counselling.

Media articles reporting the experiences and opinions of local government social workers also highlight issues regarding the barriers in employment of refugees. For example, in Saaremaa County the barrier in addition to language is also lack of available employment opportunities. Most of the companies operating in Saaremaa work seasonally (hotels, restaurants, spas, etc) and there are not enough job postings. Another issue is mismatch between the available employment opportunities

and the skills and experience of Ukrainian refugees (Ibrus, 2022). Since June 2022 the Unemployment Insurance Fund covers the costs of training of Ukrainian refugees for employers. This includes a one-time mentorship payment, reimbursement of training costs, translation services and obtaining qualifications (Unemployment Insurance Fund, 2022).

In May 2022 changes were introduced to the Aliens Act, which facilitate the participation in the labour market and clarify regulations for education migration. In addition to that, the employer is obliged to pay an alien whose short-term employment in Estonia has been registered, a remuneration in the amount at least equal to the annual average gross monthly salary and wages last published by Statistics Estonia, multiplied by a coefficient of 1.5 (Eesmaa, 2022).

Social partner initiatives to support Ukrainian refugees

There have not been any significant social partner initiatives, however social partners have been vocal about equal treatment of Ukrainian refugees. A tripartite declaration was published in March encouraging all employers, trade unions and employees to treat Ukrainian refugees equally as well as calling for additional emergency support for Labour Inspectorate. A job matching platform was developed by Unemployment Insurance Fund where social partners are included as members in the advisory board.

Commentary and outlook

The war in Ukraine and subsequent inflation have impacted the social and economic life in Estonia. Increase in living expenses have prompted reactions from trade unions and resulted in an increase in minimum wage. While Estonia had two different coalitions in 2022, there were no considerable delays during the ongoing negotiations with regards to the measures for alleviating the effects of inflation.

Overall, Estonian working life in 2022 saw major developments in two main directions. Firstly, there was a significant number of tripartite initiatives and negotiations. This is a noteworthy development in Estonia, where tripartite collaboration has previously been modest. Not only did tripartite collaboration include collective pleas for equal treatment of Ukrainian refugees, workers' health, but several amendments to the Employment Contracts Act were the result of tripartite negotiations and agreements (as opposed to the initiative of the Ministry of Social Affairs as usual). This includes the introduction of the variable hours' agreement in retail and employee with independent decision-making capacity, and changes to on-call regulations for ICT workers. Therefore, it can be said that tripartite collaboration has been strong. Given the EU directive on minimum wages, it is likely that the role of collective bargaining in Estonia will continue to advance. The importance of strengthening the role of social partners and collective bargaining has been emphasised by both social partners and Ministry of Social Affairs.

Estonian labour legislation changed significantly in 2009 when the new Employment Contracts Act entered into force. Since then, the legislations have been occasionally updated and tweaked, and 2022 stands out as a period with a significant number of amendments introduced to labour legislation. The Employment Contracts Act has been criticised for outdated rigidity that does not match the need of contemporary employers and employees. In 2009, the aim of the Employment Contracts Act was to introduce the concept of flexible security and in 2022, this concept has again been brought to the centre of debates and amendments. On one hand, the amendments introduced security, such as the additional requirements for transparency of working conditions and contracts as well as the notion that duration of unemployment benefits reflects the state of the economy. On the other hand, flexibility was introduced in the form of variable hours agreements, employee with independent decision-making capacity etc.

In the future it is likely that focus will be on the healthcare insurance system, as according to the Employers Confederation and Ministry of Social Affairs, some tripartite meetings have already taken place to discuss the question of ensuring access to healthcare insurance for all forms of employment relations.

Finally, in 2023 Estonia will hold Parliamentary elections. The results and consequent impact on the future developments in working life remain to be seen.

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