

EMPLOYMENT IN THE AGE GROUP 50+ IN THE BALTIC STATES AND ITS CHANGES IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

 **Olga Rajevska**¹, Dr. sc. admin.;  **Agnese Reine**², Mag.iur. and **Diana Baltmane**³, B.A.

^{1, 2, 3} Riga Stradins University

Abstract. The objective of the study is to examine the patterns of the employment of older people in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania over the recent decade and the changes brought about by the first wave coronavirus pandemic in spring 2020.

The study is based on the Eurostat statistical data as well as the microdata from the recent wave of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement (SHARE). Particular attention is paid to the data collected in SHARE Wave 8 COVID-19 Survey conducted in June-August 2020 in 26 European countries and Israel via computer-assisted telephone interviews. Questions examined how people aged 50 years and older coped with socioeconomic and health-related impact of COVID-19.

During the last decade, participation of older age groups in labour market is gradually growing with the increase of the statutory retirement age and life expectancy. Employment rates in the pre-retirement and post-retirement age groups are comparatively high in Latvia and other Baltic States as contrasted to the EU averages, especially among women. Despite of relatively worse health status, people in the Baltic countries also demonstrate the highest share of respondents with willingness to work even upon reaching pension age. In 2020, the COVID-19 had relatively mild impact on it. The branches with traditionally high share of workers aged 50+ (education, healthcare, agriculture, administrative services) were least affected by lockdown measures.

Key words: employment, COVID-19, Baltic States, retirement, elderly, remote work.

JEL code: I15, J14, J21

Introduction

As a result of ageing process in the Baltic countries and Europe, elderly workers have become an important part of labour market. Moreover, reports published by the European Commission have highlighted the significance of older people remaining in employment and the necessity for policies in Member States to adapt their reformed pension systems and ensure incentives to postpone the age at which people withdraw from labour force (European Commission, 2019).

To support employment of the elderly, all Baltic States implement vocational and lifelong learning activities to provide possibility for older people to adapt to labour market and enhance their skills. Labour laws in these countries also oblige employers to prevent the age-based discrimination ensuring longer employability of the elderly. However, elderly people might encounter difficulties in finding a new job or keeping the current one as employers tend to have a prejudice that older workers might not be as productive as younger employees; they are less flexible for changes and it is more problematic for them to expand their skills to different sectors (Bussolo et al., 2015). Nevertheless, prolonged employment will improve for most people their well-being and will be beneficial (Calvo, 2006).

During last years, there have been projects in all three Baltic States emphasizing employability and healthy ageing of elderly people, such as 'Development of Comprehensive Active Ageing Strategy for Longer and Better Working Lives' in Latvia and 'Increasing Employment for 2014-2020' in Lithuania. These programmes include the measures aimed at enabling older workers to remain longer in the labour market. In Estonia, 50+ employment has been one of the priorities on public policy agenda for a long time already, represented in such policy documents as 'Welfare development plan' and 'Lifelong learning', in addition, particular parts of the 'Strategy 2035' emphasize the engagement of elderly people in labour market.

1 olga.rajevska@rsu.lv

2 agnese.reine@rsu.lv

3 diana.baltmane@rsu.lv

Furthermore, there have been developed a special scheme for retraining 50+ people in labour employment. It is important to assess changes in employment as one of the solutions for the consequences of aging population is engagement of elderly workers in the labour market (Maestas and Zissimopoulo, 2010).

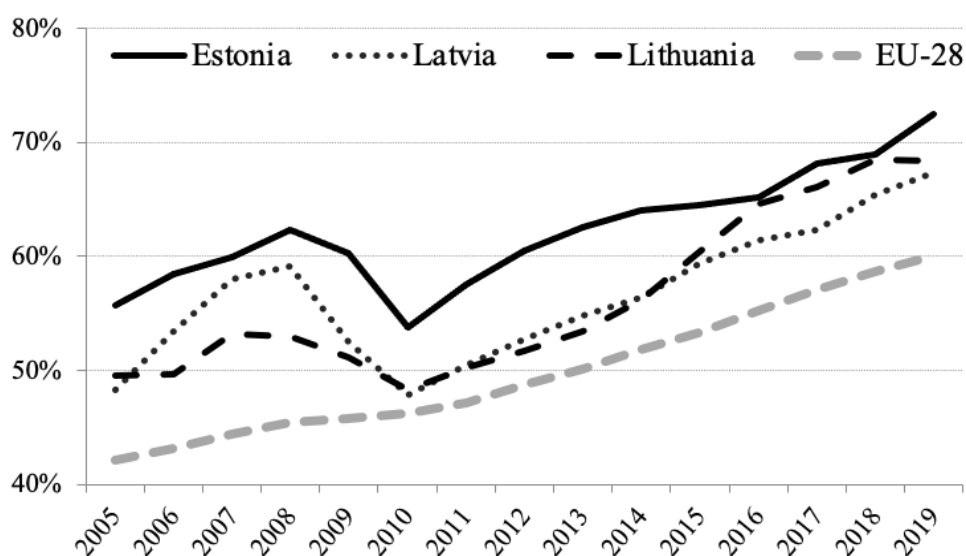
The quantitative analysis in the study is based on the Eurostat database indicators and SHARE Wave 8 COVID-19 Survey conducted in June-August 2020 in 26 European countries and Israel via computer-assisted telephone interviews (Börsch-Supan, 2020). Questions examined how people aged 50 years and older coped with socioeconomic and health-related impact of COVID-19. The methods of descriptive statistics were applied in order to compare the influence of the first coronavirus wave on employment in older age groups in Latvia and across Europe.

Research results and discussion

The first part of this section is focused on the analysis of employment trends over the last decade among the older population in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania against the background of the EU averages. The second part deals closer with the health indicators in the age group 50+ and studies the relationship between health status and employment rates. And, finally, the third part looks at the impact of the first wave of COVID-19 (in spring 2020) on employment in the Baltic states, comparing them to other countries that participated in the SHARE survey.

1. Employment rates

The employment rates in the older age groups of population have been steadily increasing over the last decades. In the pre-retirement ages (i.e. in the age group 55-64 years) they were constantly growing with the exception for the economic crisis years 2009 and 2010, when employment rates dropped drastically in all age groups (Fig. 1). The deepest fall and the slowest recovery were observed in Latvia. The pre-crisis levels were restored in 2013 in Estonia and Lithuania, and in 2015 in Latvia and the rates continued their raise. The employment rates referred to in this paper are the percentages from total population in respective age groups (and not from the active population) in order to make the numbers compatible with other sources.

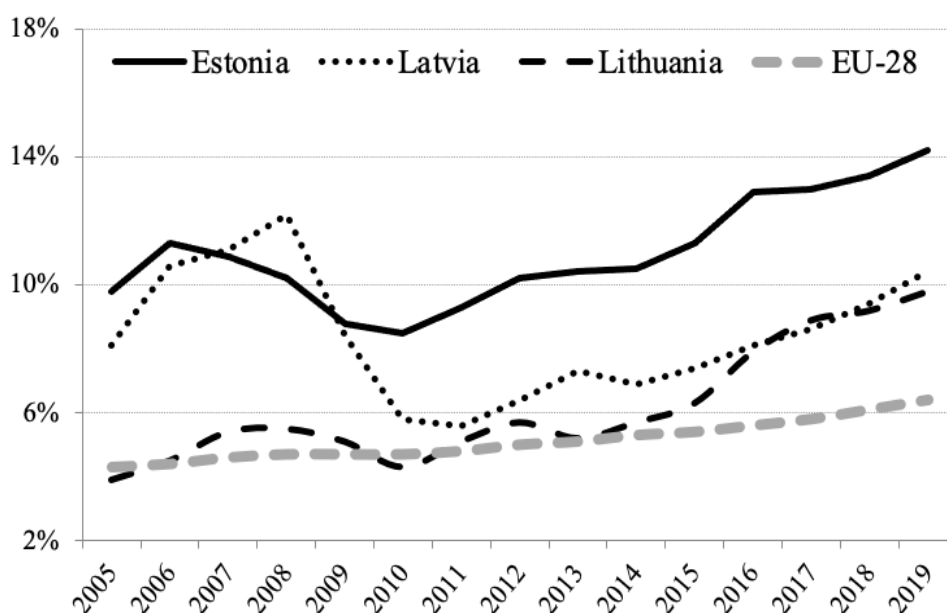


Source: Eurostat [lfsa_ergan]

Fig. 1. Employment rates in age group 55-64 in the Baltic States and EU-28 in 2005-2019

Overall, over the 15-year period the employment rates augmented by 17 percentage points (p.p.) in Estonia, and by 19 p.p. in Latvia and Lithuania. It can be seen from the figure, that the pace of the growth is in line with the EU average (which raised by 18 p.p.), however, all the time being above the average EU-28 values. To a great extent, the constant increase is due to gradual increase of the statutory old-age retirement age that took place in all three Baltic countries and that is not yet completed (Rajevska, 2020). On the other hand, Baltic populations are ageing faster than most of European nations and labour supply in younger age groups is limited. Therefore, older workers face less competitive pressure from younger generations, and employers are also hiring them for positions that are held by younger workers in other countries.

However, labour participation rates were also increasing in the age group that was not mandated to work, i.e. those aged 65 years and older (Fig. 2). Naturally, the rates are much lower than in the pre-retirement group, but, again, are considerably exceeding the EU averages (more than twice in Estonia and almost twice in Latvia and Lithuania). The most impressive increase is seen in Lithuania – 6 p.p. in 15 years, followed by 4 p.p. in Estonia and 2 p.p. in Latvia (which is close to the average EU-28 ratio). In Latvia, after the sharp decline in 2009-2010, the pre-crisis high rates have not been restored still.



Source: Eurostat [lfsa_ergan]

Fig. 1. Employment rates in age group 65+ in the Baltic States and EU-28 in 2005-2019

Thus, one has to conclude that Baltic people work more intensively in their old years than most of their same-age peers from other European countries and their involvement into labour market steadily increases.

2. Healthy life years

Different approaches can be applied to characterise and compare health condition of elderly population in different countries. One of the most commonly used is the Eurostat indicator called Healthy Life Years (HLY). It measures the number of years that a person of a certain age is still expected to live in a healthy condition, it can be also expressed as a share (percentage) of the total remaining life expectancy. HLY is a health expectancy indicator which combines information on mortality and morbidity. The data required are the age-specific prevalence (proportions) of the population in healthy and unhealthy conditions and

age-specific mortality information. A healthy condition is defined by the absence of limitations in functioning/disability. The indicator is calculated separately for men and women. The indicator is also called disability-free life expectancy (DFLE).

As can be seen from the Table 1, the healthy life indicators in all three Baltic States were considerably below the EU average and, contrary to the European trend, did not demonstrate any signs of improvement, as practically all values in 2018 were lower than in 2009. Lithuania performed better than the other two countries, while Latvia lagged behind in respect of both men's and women's health expectancy. In the oldest age group, Latvian numbers did not even reach halves of the EU averages.

Table 1

Healthy life years at 50 and at 65 among men and women in the Baltic States and EU-28 in 2009-2018

			2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
HLY at 50	men	EU28	17.3	17.6	17.5	17.4	17.5	17.4	18.4	19.1	19.2	19.2
		Estonia	12.8	12.4	12.2	12.0	12.0	11.5	12.1	12.7	12.8	12.1
		Latvia	11.4	11.9	12.0	12.9	10.9	10.3	10.6	10.7	10.0	10.5
		Lithuania	14.0	14.2	14.1	13.4	13.9	14.3	12.4	13.1	13.6	13.7
	women	EU28	17.6	18.3	17.9	17.9	17.8	17.8	19.0	19.9	19.9	19.8
		Estonia	14.4	14.4	14.0	13.5	13.6	13.9	13.3	15.9	14.5	13.9
		Latvia	13.2	13.5	13.0	15.2	11.5	11.9	11.2	12.0	11.0	11.9
		Lithuania	16.0	16.5	16.4	15.8	16.0	16.0	14.5	14.9	15.2	15.4
HLY at 65	men	EU28	8.4	8.7	8.5	8.5	8.5	8.6	9.4	9.8	9.8	9.9
		Estonia	5.6	5.3	5.6	5.4	5.1	4.9	5.3	5.5	5.7	5.6
		Latvia	4.7	4.8	4.7	5.3	4.0	4.0	4.1	4.4	4.1	4.2
		Lithuania	6.1	6.4	6.2	5.6	5.9	6.1	5.0	5.6	5.7	5.6
	women	EU28	8.4	8.8	8.6	8.5	8.6	8.6	9.4	10.1	10.1	10.0
		Estonia	5.4	5.5	5.7	5.5	5.7	6.0	5.3	7.0	6.1	5.8
		Latvia	5.7	5.5	5.0	6.4	4.2	4.6	4.0	4.5	4.2	4.7
		Lithuania	6.8	6.7	6.7	6.1	6.3	6.1	5.5	5.6	5.6	6.3

Source: Eurostat [hlht_hlye]

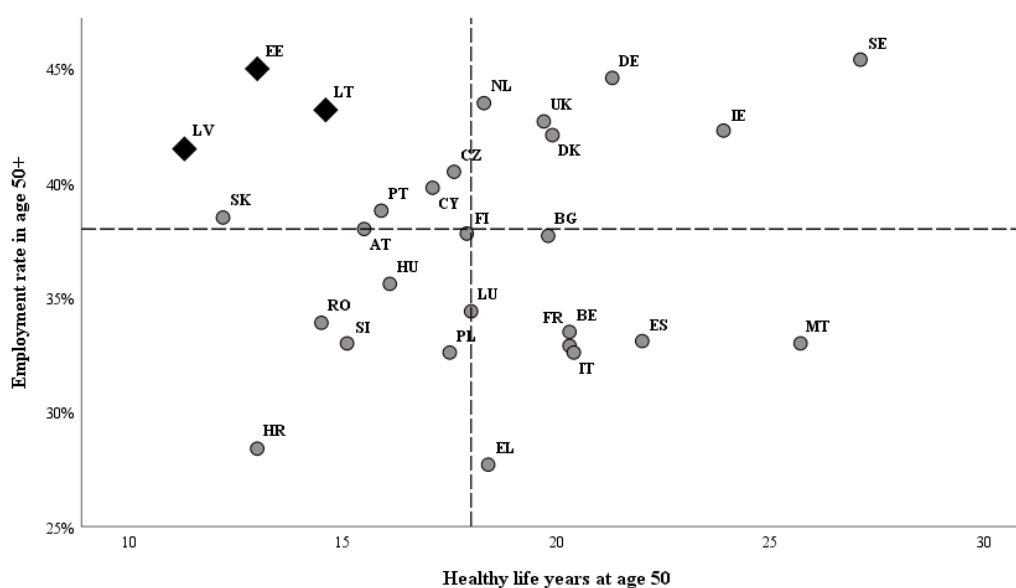
Looking at these numbers from a somewhat different perspective, as to what share of the remaining life is expected to be disability-free, one has to state with regret, that the Baltic States are at the bottom of the European list, as well. In 2018, Latvia had the lowest HLY at the age of 50 years as a percentage of total life expectancy – 43.4 % for men and 37.6 % for women. In Estonia, these indicators equalled 45.4 % (men) and 41.1 % (women) and in Lithuania – 54.7 % (men) and 47.4 % (women). It was also quite below the EU-28 average: 63.1 % (men) and 56.9 % (women). The best performer is Sweden with 83.9 % of HLY among men and 76.7 % among women.

Even wider gap between the Baltic people and most of the Europeans can be observed in the oldest age group: less than one quarter (24.9 %) of the remaining life of an average Latvian woman who turned 65 was expected to be healthy; the respective proportion was somewhat higher (29.5 %) for an average

Latvian man of the same age, but in absolute years his remaining life was considerably shorter (14.1 year compared to 19.0). The HLY percentage of the total life expectancy in Estonia constituted 28.1 % (women) and 35.7 % (men), and in Lithuania – 32.2 % (women) and 38.9 % (men). EU averages were 46.7 % (women) and 54.3 % (men), with Sweden having the highest rates of 73 % (women) and 81.4 % (men).

It should be expected that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the complications caused by the infection will worsen HLY indicators in the Baltic states, as well as in all of Europe.

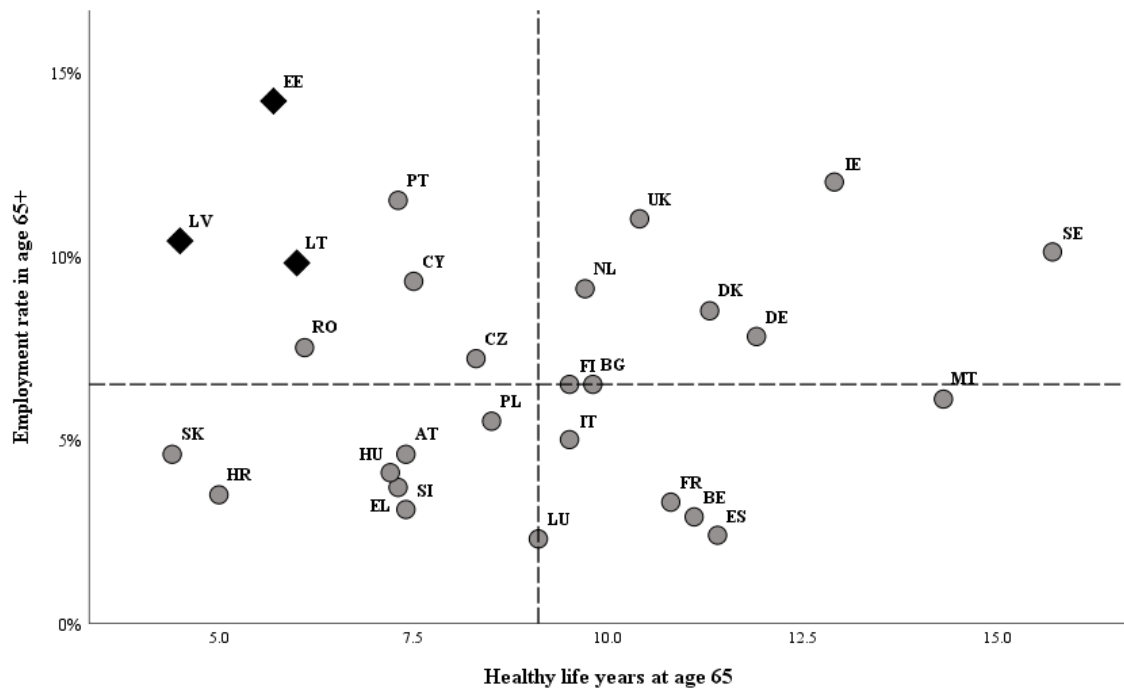
At the macro level - the level of countries - there is no correlation between the level of health of the elderly population and the degree of their involvement in the labor market, both before and after reaching the statutory retirement age. This is demonstrated in Figures 2 and 3. The graphs are divided into four quadrants by median values on both axes: the vertical line corresponds to the median value of the healthy life years indicator at ages 50 (Fig. 3) and 65 (Fig 4), and the horizontal line corresponds to the median value of the employment rate among the population of this age and older.



Source: Eurostat [lfsa_ergan for 2019, hlth_hlye for 2018]

Fig. 3. Employment rates in age group 50+ and health expectancy at 50 in EU countries

On both plots, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are located in the most upper-left corner of the plot as the countries where health characteristics of the elderly populations are below the median, while employment rates are above the median. Except for the Baltic States, for both age groups this quadrant includes Portugal, Cyprus and Czech Republic. The opposite combination, namely, long healthy lives accompanied by low employment rate, can be find in Spain, France, Malta, Belgium and Italy. Nordic countries, such as Sweden and Denmark, are characterized by long healthy lives and high employment rates among the elderly. The Netherlands, United Kingdom, Germany and Ireland are in this sector also. Finally, the quadrant with poor health and low employment is represented by Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia and Poland.



Source: Eurostat [lfsa_ergan for 2019, hlth_hlye for 2018]

Fig. 4. Employment rates in age group 65+ and health expectancy at 65 in EU countries

On the micro-level, however, the relationship between the health condition and employment is pronounced. Using the SHARE developed questionnaires, on individual level, health status can be evaluated by respondents' self-assessment (an ordinal five-point scale from "poor" to "excellent", the variable "caph003_") and its relationship with being in employment (the variable "caep805_") can be analysed. According to the data from the most recent SHARE survey (8th wave, data collected in 2020), practically all countries demonstrate statistically significant positive correlation between employment and health status. The strength of the relationship, however, was quite weak, in some countries even close to negligible. The Baltic States had the highest correlation (point-biserial non-parametric Spearman's correlation coefficient were calculated): Latvia – 0.402 (and it was the only country where the coefficient exceeded 0.4), Estonia – 0.394 (the second highest value), and Lithuania – 0.348. There were only two other countries with coefficients above 0.3: Slovakia (0.387) and Israel (0.314). Most of the participating states had the respective coefficient between 0.2 and 0.3, and seven countries (the Netherlands, Spain, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Malta and Portugal) even between 0.1 and 0.2. Thus, it seems that for the elderly in the Baltic States physical ability to work is closer related to their employment than it is in other parts of Europe. On the one hand, it may indicate an insufficient number of inclusive job places for people with health problems. On the other hand, it may be caused by a stronger need in work as a means of making ends meet in the absence of satisfactory social protection for the elderly (Rajevska, 2016).

In the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) in 2015, the respondents were asked about their "ideal" retirement age. On average, slightly less than 20 % of all workers (both among men and women) in the EU-28 answered that they would like to work until 'as late as possible' (Eurofound, 2017). There was, however, considerable variation in the share of such workers across the EU, ranging from less than 3 % of women in Malta to 43 % of men in Estonia and Latvia. Estonian and Latvian women also demonstrated twice higher willingness to work than average female workers in the EU. Lithuanian respondents also returned considerably higher rates than the EU averages. On the opposite side of the

scale, there were countries with less than 10 % of workers disposed to continue their careers as long as possible – Malta, France, Sweden, Luxembourg, Greece, Spain and Finland. People in these countries enjoy long healthy life expectancy and generous old-age pensions and prefer not to remain in employment upon reaching the official retirement age.

A closer link between employment and health in the Baltic countries may also mean more pronounced effects of COVID-19 on employment rates in older age groups in the future. The long-term effects of the new coronavirus (as well as the long-term stress caused by the restrictions imposed) on health and work capacity of the elderly are not yet known, but in the light of the statistics reviewed, such an outcome is not unlikely.

3. COVID-19 and employment among the older population

When COVID-19 broke out, 37.1 % of all Latvian respondents aged 50+ were employed or self-employed. Similar proportions are observed in other two Baltic States (38.0 % in Lithuania and 41.8 % in Estonia). When comparing these numbers with the corresponding Eurostat indicators based on the EU Labour Force Survey (LFS) one can note that Eurostat returns higher employment rates in the age group 50+ for 2019: Latvia – 41.5 %, Lithuania – 43.2 % and Estonia – 45.0 %. This is also true for many other countries: Germany has 44.6 % in Eurostat compared to 40.1 % in SHARE, Poland – 32.6 % in Eurostat and 30.7 % in SHARE, France – 32.4 % in Eurostat and 31.1 % in SHARE, etc. Fewer countries have a difference in the opposite direction (e.g., Sweden, Denmark and Finland). This can be explained by dissimilar methods of selecting the respondents into national samples as well as discrepant weighting algorithms. Looks like the Eurostat data is more representative in terms of employment rates, because the LFS is particularly focused on the labour market processes which is not the case with SHARE. However, we believe that SHARE data can be safely used analysing how the respondents' employment situation was affected by the Covid outbreak.

By the time of the survey (July-August 2020), due to the first wave of COVID-19, only 6 % of Latvian respondents who were employed or self-employed before the outbreak reported that they experienced "unemployment, laid off or business closed". The other two Baltic countries returned higher rates: 10 % in Estonia and 18 % in Lithuania (due to considerably stricter lockdown conditions than in Latvia). The strongest impact was suffered by older workers in France (39 %), Greece (36 %) and Cyprus (35 %).

As concerns the work place since outbreak, for the absolute majority of Latvians (75 %) there were no changes, and they continued to work at their usual work place. This is the second highest ratio after Bulgaria, where 80 % of respondents remained at their usual work places. The respective proportions were equal to 62 % in both Estonia and Lithuania. Overall, in 16 countries more than half of the respondents kept working at the usual work place, while in 11 countries there were less than 50 % of such workers. The smallest shares of unchanged workplaces were observed in Luxemburg (27.2 %), France (30.7 %) and Italy (36 %).

Meanwhile 9.8 % of participants in Latvia, 14.9 % in Lithuania and 17.1 % in Estonia started to work from home only. Respective proportions ranged from 5.6 % in Bulgaria to 29.9 % in Luxembourg. Combining working from home with usual work place was less frequent in the Baltic States: 9.2 % of the employed respondents in Latvia, 8.6 % in Lithuania and 11.7 % in Estonia.

Most of the employed experienced neither a reduced nor increased number of working hours: only 6.6 % of Latvian participants had their working hours reduced which is the smallest proportion in all participating countries, and 7.6 % faced an increased work load. The share of people with reduced working hours was higher in Estonia (17.5 %) and Lithuania (13.7 %); the highest levels across the countries was in

Switzerland (39.1 %), France (37.0 %) and Spain (32.0 %). Quite surprisingly, the highest rates of people whose working hours not decreased, but increased were observed in the same countries: the highest in France (24.7 %), followed by Spain (23.8%) and Switzerland (20.5 %). The smallest share of such workers was in Romania (3 %). In Estonia, increased working hours were reported by 7.1 %, while in Lithuania – 10.6 %.

Despite the fact, that in Latvia only a small part of the respondents started to work remotely, they were forced to change everyday habits. Companies that made changes in their daily routines and whose employees started working remotely needed to analyse not only the technical aspects, but also the aspects of being able to ensure all labour protection requirements. It is important to define in legal acts what a remote work is and what conditions must be ensured in case if the employee is working remotely, but it is also particularly important to ensure compliance with the safety and ergonomic working environment requirements, especially for employees in the age group 50+. The employer has an obligation to provide an appropriate working environment if the employee performs work at the employer's premises, but the employer must also comply with the same requirements if the employee performs the work remotely. It is particularly important to ensure the compliance with the labour protection requirements during the remote work, since an inappropriate working environment may cause serious health damage to people in the age group 50+.

During the first wave of the COVID-19, the legal framework for employment relationships did not include definition of the remote work, except the general possibility for the employer to agree with the employee on the place where the work is carried out.

On July 1st, 2020, the amendments to the Labour Protection Law came into force and, together with these amendments, the legal clarification of the concept of "remote work" was also included. Moreover, these amendments determined, that an employee who works remotely, in a cooperation with the employer is assessing the risks of the work environment. However, these amendments do not fully resolve all legal issues related to remote work. Currently, the legislator is developing amendments to the Labour Law on the coverage of employee costs of remote work, also including clarification and a common understanding of the concept of remote work within the meaning of the Labour Law. In the current situation with the spread of the virus of COVID-19 and in a proactive assessment of future prospects, the legislator must continue to modernise the legal framework, specifically by considering how to effectively ensure the enforcement of labour protection requirements.

Speaking on purely quantitative indicators of employment, in general, the first wave of the infection outbreak affected the employment of older population in the Baltic states to a lesser degree than in many other European countries. An ongoing, more severe and prolonged second wave of the infection with stricter lockdown measures in all three Baltic countries will undoubtedly have a more devastating immediate impact on employment in all age groups. And the long-term effects of the disease and the stressful situation will worsen the health of workers, in particular, the oldest ones, which will also have an impact on their working careers in the future.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

- 1) Promoting active and healthy ageing has become a prominent part of political agenda in the Baltic States in the recent decade, as evidenced by the adoption of special programs and the allocation of funds. The employment rates among the population of pre-retirement and retirement age are steadily increasing in all three countries. Compared to their peers from other European countries, older people in the Baltics are indeed more active, but less healthy.

2) While at the micro level within the studied countries, the association between health status of individuals and their involvement into employment is statistically confirmed, and in the Baltic States the association is the strongest in Europe, comparing countries to each other at the macro level this correlation disappears.

3) High participation of older age groups in labour market in Baltic States was almost unaffected by the first wave of COVID-19 in spring-summer 2020. The proportions of those workers who experienced unemployment, laid off or closure of business were considerably lower than in the countries most hit by the infection; the same is true also for less expressed changes in the number of working hours. The branches with traditionally high share of workers aged 50+ (education, healthcare, agriculture, administrative services) were least affected by lockdown measures in the Baltic countries.

4) Although the prevalence of remote work from home in Latvia was lower than the European average, this issue requires more regulation as the existing legislation lacks provisions on remote work and does not therefore ensure protection of workers' rights and health. When employees are working remotely, it is the obligation of the employer to ensure that the environment of employee is compliant with all requirements set out in the legal acts, which is particularly important for employees in the age group 50+ who are much more vulnerable to disabilities.

5) In the current situation of the continuing spread of the COVID-19 and in order to ensure proactive assessment of potential bottle-necks in the future, legislators must make every endeavour to modernize legal framework to effectively ensure the enforcement of labour protection requirements.

6) The close link between employment and health in the Baltic countries means more pronounced effects of COVID-19 on employment rates in older age groups in the future. The long-term consequences of the infection and prolonged stress caused by the restrictions imposed on the health and work capacity of the older populations should be carefully monitored and investigated.

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