



Posting of workers during
the COVID-19 pandemic,
current challenges,
and future prospects

NATIONAL LEVEL REPORT

BULGARIA



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Executive Summary

Overview of the Study:

The in-depth study, titled "Posting of Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bulgaria," was conceived to provide a thorough examination of the multifaceted repercussions of the global health crisis on workers dispatched abroad from Bulgaria. The research, meticulously conducted through a combination of telephone interviews and focus groups, sought to delve into the nuanced dynamics of the posting processes. It aimed to capture the intricacies of the challenges experienced by both workers and employers, delineate the shifts in working conditions wrought by the pandemic, and discern the far-reaching implications for future regulatory frameworks.

Key Findings:

The study found a complex set of findings, shedding light on the diverse and nuanced impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the posting of workers. From the challenges faced by workers adjusting to new norms abroad to the intricate dynamics faced by employers in navigating unprecedented disruptions, the research offers a comprehensive view of the landscape. The findings emphasize the profound need for improved data collection mechanisms, collaborative strategies to streamline posting processes during health crises, and regulations that exhibit adaptability to address challenges posed by future pandemics or similar global disruptions.

The impact of the pandemic is palpable in the changes to working conditions, with workers grappling with increased health risks, travel disruptions, and emotional stress. Companies, in turn, faced delays in projects, increased operational costs, and challenges in ensuring the safety and well-being of posted employees. The study highlights the intricate challenges in implementing the Posting of Workers Directive during the pandemic, revealing reduced oversight and administrative hurdles.

As the world grapples with the evolving landscape of a post-pandemic era, these key findings serve as a vital compass, guiding future policies and strategies. They underscore the importance of prioritizing employee welfare, adopting collaborative approaches, and cultivating regulatory frameworks that can adapt to unforeseen challenges, ensuring the safety and well-being of posted workers remain at the forefront of future aspirations.

Introduction

Amidst the unprecedented challenges brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the study behind this report stands as a thorough exploration into the multilevel impacts on individuals dispatched abroad for work from Bulgaria. Initiated with a commitment to reveal the complex dynamics of posting processes, this research combines the insights derived from telephone interviews and focus groups, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by workers and employers alike. The research sought to illuminate the changes in working conditions precipitated by the pandemic and discern the implications these changes bear on the future regulatory frameworks governing international postings.

Against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving global landscape, the experiences of posted workers during the pandemic become a critical lens through which to examine the resilience of existing structures and the imperative for adaptability in the face of unforeseen challenges. As the world grapples with the complexities of a post-pandemic era, this report seeks to present the key findings, offering valuable insights that can inform future policies, strategies, and collaborative efforts to enhance the safety, well-being, and resilience of posted workers in Bulgaria and the whole European Union. Through an exploration of the challenges, changes, and lessons learned, this report contributes to the ongoing dialogue on the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the posting of workers and points the way toward a more resilient and responsive future.

Methodology

Methodological Adaptation

Shift from Online Survey to Telephone Interviews:

Recognizing the challenges encountered during the initial attempts to gather information through online surveys, the research team made a strategic decision to pivot towards a more effective methodology – telephone interviews. This shift was prompted by the limitations of the online survey approach, mainly a lack of sufficient participant response. The adjustment aimed to ensure a more active and engaged participation from respondents, thereby enhancing the collection of valuable insights related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers posted abroad from Bulgaria.

Duration and Demographics of the Study Participants:

The adapted methodology was implemented during an extensive study conducted from November 14 to 28, 2023. Approximately 30 workers from Bulgaria, deployed to different countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, were actively involved in the telephone interviews. This diverse group of participants represented various professional sectors, age groups, and educational backgrounds, ensuring a broad spectrum of perspectives and experiences. The extended duration of the study allowed for a thorough exploration of the nuanced impacts of the pandemic on working conditions, social aspects, and career development.

Findings from Telephone Interviews

Social-Demographic Diversity:

The telephone interviews uncovered a rich tapestry of social-demographic diversity among the study participants. Representing various professional sectors, age groups, and educational backgrounds, the 30 workers from Bulgaria offered a nuanced cross-section of experiences. This diversity enriched the findings, providing insights into the unique challenges faced by workers across different contexts.

Working Conditions and Career Development:

The study revealed a high level of diversification in employment contracts, with a significant proportion of respondents holding fixed-term agreements. Notably, a considerable number of participants reported that their working conditions during deployment were either the same or worse than those in their home country. The most prevalent difficulties included excessive working hours, salary reductions, and challenges related to health and safety at the workplace.

Impact of COVID-19 on Working Realities:

The pandemic's imprint on the working realities of respondents was unmistakable. Layoffs, salary reductions, and overall difficulties in the workplace were reported by many participants. These changes resulted in heightened stress levels and posed challenges in balancing professional and personal commitments, reflecting the pervasive impact of the global health crisis on the employment landscape.

Collective Representation and Social Issues:

Opinions regarding the role of unions and employee councils were diverse among participants. While some expressed belief in their supportive and protective functions, others remained uncertain about their effectiveness. This divergence highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of collective representation and the varied perspectives held by workers engaged in postings.

Social and Health Challenges:

Respondents articulated a range of social and health challenges associated with their postings. Travel problems, changes in workplaces, income losses, and uncertainties regarding social and health guarantees were prevalent. Notably, instances of discrimination and accommodation issues underscored the social challenges faced by workers in their host countries.

Economic Impact and Changes in Work Organization:

The economic repercussions of the pandemic were evident, with job loss and reduced incomes affecting many deployed workers. Changes in work organization, including the introduction of remote working and increased telecommuting, were reported, impacting workers across diverse professional sectors.

Travel Restrictions and Health and Safety at Work:

The closure of borders and travel restrictions exacerbated mobility challenges for deployed workers. Those who continued to work abroad faced the need for additional health and safety measures, including frequent COVID-19 testing, disinfection of workspaces, and other preventive measures.

Changes in the Labor Market Structure:

A notable trend emerged where workers, uncertain about their postings abroad due to the pandemic, turned to employment opportunities in their home countries. This shift in the labor market structure was particularly pronounced among lower-skilled workers seeking better working conditions.

Social and Psychological Impacts:

The study brought attention to the social and psychological impacts of the pandemic on workers. Isolation and stress were prevalent, especially for those separated from their families due to travel restrictions. The positive and negative impacts of family accompaniment were noted, emphasizing the complex interplay of family dynamics in the context of international postings.

Challenges for Families and Solutions:

Families accompanying workers faced challenges in social integration, particularly when language barriers were present. Concerns about the educational opportunities for children in the new country and their adaptation to the learning environment were also expressed. Some companies offered support through initiatives providing information and assistance to families, while workers sought local resources such as schools, family consultations, and language courses to enhance family life.

Challenges for the Future and Return Plans:

Many workers, especially those in lower-skilled positions, opted to return to their home country due to improved working conditions. The study highlighted the need for additional support and security, particularly in the realms of social and health insurance, as workers navigated the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic.

The findings from the telephone interviews present a nuanced understanding of the diverse challenges and impacts experienced by workers posted abroad from Bulgaria during the COVID-19 pandemic. These insights serve as a valuable foundation for informed policymaking and strategic initiatives aimed at addressing the evolving needs of posted workers in a post-pandemic landscape.

Findings from Focus Groups with Trade Unions and Employers

The focus groups conducted with trade unions and employers provided illuminating insights into the prevailing conditions related to posting processes in Bulgaria. Participants demonstrated a general understanding of posting flows to and from Bulgaria. However, a notable gap was identified in the availability of comprehensive and up-to-date data, signaling the necessity for improved data collection mechanisms. The profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on posting processes became apparent. Implementation of health protocols, travel restrictions, and quarantine requirements emerged as significant challenges, leading to delays and increased costs. Both workers and companies experienced a range of changes due to the pandemic. Workers faced increased health risks, travel disruptions, and emotional stress, while companies grappled with operational costs and ensuring the safety of workers. The effectiveness of the Posting of Workers Directive in Bulgaria was hindered by the pandemic. Reduced oversight and administrative challenges impeded its implementation.

Future Mitigation Strategies (Trade Unions):

Enhanced Collaboration: Participants suggested strengthening collaboration between countries as a key mitigation strategy. Improved communication and coordination were seen as essential for smoother posting processes during health crises.

Strengthened Regulations: Calls were made for enhanced regulations to navigate challenges posed by future pandemics. A robust regulatory framework, adaptable to unforeseen disruptions, was identified as crucial.

Future Mitigation Strategies (Employers):

Stringent Health Protocols: Employers expressed intentions to implement and maintain stringent health and safety protocols. Prioritizing the well-being of posted workers through health measures was emphasized.

Digital Transformation: The adoption of digital transformation emerged as a strategic approach. Technology was seen as instrumental in facilitating remote work, monitoring, and communication during and after the pandemic.

The focus groups concluded with a collective emphasis on the urgent need for:

Improved Data Collection. Participants highlighted the need for more comprehensive and up-to-date data on posting flows, advocating for robust mechanisms to monitor and track these processes effectively.

Collaborative Strategies. Enhanced collaboration between countries and stakeholders was deemed essential to streamline posting processes during health crises.

Adaptive Regulations. There was a consensus on the importance of adapting and strengthening regulations to better address challenges posed by future pandemics or similar global disruptions.

Stakeholders Q&A (Trade Unions):

The dialogue during the Q&A session with trade unions shed light on:

Impact of COVID-19. Agreement prevailed on the significant disruptions caused by the pandemic, leading to delays, increased costs, and deteriorated working conditions.

Changes Due to Pandemic. Participants detailed changes experienced by workers and companies, including health risks, travel disruptions, and operational challenges.

Posting of Workers Directive. The pandemic posed challenges to the effective implementation of the directive, including difficulties in monitoring.

Stakeholders Q&A (Employers):

Present Situation: Employers had detailed pre-pandemic data on posting flows, but the pandemic disrupted data collection.

Impact of COVID-19: Significant disruptions in posting processes were highlighted, affecting both workers and companies.

Changes Due to Pandemic: Delays in projects, increased operational costs, and challenges in ensuring worker safety were identified.

The findings from focus groups with trade unions and employers underscore the complexities and challenges inherent in the posting processes, especially exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The

recommendations put forth by both groups highlight the importance of improved data collection, collaborative strategies, adaptive regulations, and prioritizing employee welfare to navigate the evolving landscape of international postings effectively. These insights serve as crucial signposts for policymakers, stakeholders, and employers as they endeavor to create resilient and responsive frameworks for the posting of workers in a post-pandemic world.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Synthesis of Key Findings:

The report brings everything together and shows a clear picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected posting workers from Bulgaria. It looks at how working conditions changed and the difficulties both workers and employers faced. The conclusion shows the different experiences and outcomes brought about by the pandemic.

Implications for Policy and Regulation:

The implications drawn from the study underscore the pressing need for a reassessment of existing policies and regulations governing the posting of workers. The pandemic has revealed vulnerabilities that necessitate a more adaptive and responsive regulatory framework. Addressing issues related to health and safety, working conditions, and the efficacy of the Posting of Workers Directive emerges as imperative in the wake of the pandemic's disruptions.

Recommendations for Stakeholders:

Stakeholders across various sectors must collaborate to mitigate the challenges identified in the report. A concerted effort is needed to enhance data collection mechanisms, foster collaborative strategies during health crises, and adapt regulations to address unforeseen challenges. Stakeholders should prioritize the well-being of posted workers, ensuring that measures are in place to protect their safety and rights.

Future Directions for Research:

The research lays the groundwork for future research investigation by highlighting areas that warrant further investigation. Future research should delve deeper into specific sectors, regional variations, and the long-term impacts on posted workers' careers and well-being. Additionally, exploring the effectiveness of new policies and strategies implemented in response to the pandemic will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the evolving landscape.

As the world navigates the complexities of a post-pandemic era, these conclusions and recommendations serve as a compass, guiding stakeholders and policymakers towards a more resilient and responsive framework for the posting of workers, ensuring their safety, well-being, and rights are prioritized in the face of global disruptions.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Enhancing Data Collection Mechanisms:

A pressing necessity compels us to undertake a thorough overhaul and augmentation of our approaches to information gathering. The current deficiency in detailed data about workers sent from Bulgaria stands as a formidable obstacle in our quest for understanding and addressing the intricacies of international postings. To navigate this challenge effectively and pave the way for informed decision-making and policy formulation, a strategic investment in robust data collection systems becomes imperative. These systems should not merely fill the existing information gaps but should also be designed to offer comprehensive insights into the multifaceted dynamics of worker postings. By doing so, we can lay the groundwork for a more informed, adaptive, and effective approach to managing the challenges inherent in the posting of workers, ensuring a more nuanced understanding of the factors at play and fostering the development of targeted evidence-based policies.

Fostering Collaborative Strategies for Streamlined Posting Processes:

A strategic and cohesive approach involving active collaboration among companies, governmental bodies, and workers is essential for optimizing the complexities inherent in posting processes. This collaboration transcends mere cooperation, emphasizing strategic alignment, shared responsibility, and the creation of a mutually beneficial environment.

Key to this approach is the establishment of strategic synergies, where the interests and objectives of companies, governmental bodies, and workers are harmoniously aligned. This involves cultivating a shared vision that fosters a cooperative and mutually supportive atmosphere, ensuring a holistic understanding of the goals involved in posting processes.

Open communication channels play a vital role in the success of this collaborative framework. Transparent and continuous dialogue facilitates the seamless flow of information between stakeholders, reducing misunderstandings and creating an environment conducive to effective problem-solving and innovation.

Adapting Regulations to Dynamic Global Challenges:

In reevaluating the regulatory landscape governing the posting of workers, a critical imperative emerges – the need for a paradigm shift towards adaptability. The rigidity of current regulations, laid bare by the unforeseen challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlights inherent limitations. This necessitates a profound transformation in regulatory paradigms to address the dynamic nature of global disruptions effectively.

The pandemic, acting as a litmus test, has revealed that existing regulations struggle to provide adequate solutions in the face of unprecedented challenges. From health crises to disruptions in global mobility, the inflexibility of regulations has underscored the demand for a more responsive and adaptable approach.

At its core, regulatory reform should focus on instilling regulations with the crucial attribute of agility. Regulations must possess the capacity for swift adjustments and responsive measures to meet the evolving needs and challenges posed by global disruptions. This, in turn, ensures the continued protection of the rights and well-being of posted workers.

Developing and implementing regulations characterized by agility requires a proactive approach. The regulatory system should be capable of identifying potential challenges in advance and facilitating timely adjustments. A framework with built-in mechanisms for adaptation enables regulations to respond to emerging disruptions without compromising the fundamental rights of posted workers.

The imperative lies in the swift response to emerging global disruptions, necessitating continuous monitoring, scenario planning, and regular assessments to identify potential challenges in advance. An adaptable regulatory landscape should not only respond reactively but also proactively anticipate and mitigate potential risks, ensuring a robust framework for the fair treatment, safety, and overall welfare of workers engaged in international postings.

Elevating the Priority of Employee Welfare in Posting Processes:

A fundamental shift in focus is warranted, placing the welfare of workers at the forefront of decision-making processes. Companies and governments should prioritize the safety, fair treatment, and rights of workers sent abroad. This entails a comprehensive approach that considers

the physical, mental, and social well-being of workers, ensuring that policies and decisions align with the overarching goal of promoting a secure and supportive environment for posted workers.



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