



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

# NATIONAL ANALYTICAL REPORT



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## Introduction

This report summarizes the key findings of the implementation of the project Posting of workers during the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovakia. It will be a summary of the results of the online survey, an overview of the findings from the conducted focus groups and an in-depth interview. The results of these activities point to the need for more detailed activities to increase the level of feedback from various actors in the sector.

The main added value was brought mainly by focus groups, which took place in a very positive atmosphere and it was possible to extract the greatest amount of necessary information from them. The method of gathering information through an online survey suffered from several problems, which are developed below. At the same time, only one in-depth interview was conducted. This implies the need for further activities to deal with this topic as comprehensively as possible and to obtain substantial inputs for a better understanding of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on posted workers.

## Evaluation of inputs

### Online Survey

Overall, the weakest input in terms of the quality of the documents was obtained through a questionnaire survey. In this respect, it was a significant amount of effort, which is supported by the following overview of addressing contacts. On July 20, 2023, 112 people were contacted through the RÚZ (Republican Union of Employers) secretariat with a request to complete a questionnaire implemented as part of the Posting of Workers project during the COVID-19 pandemic, current challenges, and future prospects. The RÚZ sent a questionnaire to all member organizations in a Blind carbon copy (BBC). The questionnaire was sent simultaneously by one e-mail to 112 members from partner organizations from the database of contacts of RÚZ members. The members of the RÚZ are small enterprises with a few employees, but also the largest industrial enterprises in the country, which create hundreds of thousands of jobs. The questionnaire was sent to employers from all areas of the economy, including industry, construction, energy, trade, services, tourism, banking and insurance, IT sector and pharmacy. Due to the very weak feedback when completing the questionnaires, one completed questionnaire, on 12 August 2023, we distributed the questionnaire again to representatives of selected companies, who were to further distribute the questionnaire to employees in their organizations. We contacted seven representatives of the Sectoral Council of Metallurgy, Mining and Foundry and on September 7, 2023, we sent the questionnaire to 13 members of the Sectoral Council for Administration, Economics and Management.



There may be several reasons for this low response rate. One of the factors may be conducting a survey within the summer months, i.e. during holidays. The second factor may also be the less experience of the addressed employees with posting. However, we perceive the high complexity of the submitted survey as a significant factor, which could have discouraged several potential respondents from completing this survey.

The results of the four respondents indicate a mixed experience with posting abroad. Respondents came from the following four sectors: manufacturing, insurance, metallurgy and food. All four had completed academic studies in the form of higher education. In three cases, the respondents had an employment contract for an indefinite period, while in one case the respondent was without a contract. Compared to working at home, three respondents in the country of posting had the same working conditions, only in one case there was a deterioration in working conditions due to posting. Nevertheless, all four respondents noted that the posting contributed to their career advancement and in three out of four cases there was an increase in the employee's salary after the posting.

In terms of experience with trade unions as employee representatives, half of the respondents reported having a positive view of trade unions / works councils, while the other half reported a negative view of these institutions. At the same time, only two out of four respondents were posted before the Covid-19 pandemic. The main changes during the pandemic were an increased proportion of home offices, restrictions on travel to customers, the introduction of inspections and testing, but also impaired communication channels and limited freedom.

The following areas were identified by respondents as the main impacts resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic: predominance of work in the country of origin, work from home, as well as a greater amount of work compared to the situation before the pandemic. Only one respondent mentioned the impact of the increase in income. The following were identified as problematic aspects or difficulties faced by the respondents during the posting: housing, language, local community, transport as well as work / employment itself. As many as three out of four respondents considered returning to their country of origin, the main reasons being better background and family reasons. On the contrary, one respondent stated that he was not considering returning due to quick adaptation in the country of posting.

## Results of focus groups

The focus groups took place within two sectors. Their results are summarized separately according to the key units that were discussed in the interviews.

The impact of Covid-19 on the process of posting workers in the administration sector

In terms of the experience of representatives of the administrative sector, the process of posting workers abroad was completely suspended. Employers could not send their employees to other countries until the pandemic was over. The situation is slowly getting better as it was before the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, the employment of agency workers from Serbia or other countries was suspended. At the beginning of the pandemic, these employees were the first to be dismissed, with the new employees not being hired at all. Thus, not only the process of posting workers from Slovakia or to Slovakia was addressed

At the same time, representatives from the scientific field enriched the discussion. According to them, it is necessary to differentiate between the different phases of the pandemic in terms of the effects on the posting of employees according to the phases of the pandemic. Scientific cooperation resumed after the release of travel conditions in cooperation with the use of online platforms. The university environment in this area had a similar experience that, after the start of the pandemic, there was a complete interruption of international cooperation and posting of workers between workplaces. Mobility of students and employees was stopped in both directions, both to Slovakia and from Slovakia. The situation returned to normal after the end of the pandemic. In terms of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Erasmus program, the interest of students in the possibility of posting to study abroad increased after the end of the pandemic. Pupils seem eager to travel again.

*The impact of Covid-19 on posted workers' conditions*

In the area of the conditions of posted workers, the key was the existing and adopted legislation and all the decrees that were gradually adopted. In the beginning, it was possible for workers to travel abroad and the problem was mainly with returning to Slovakia. At the same time, it was easier for workers to return from a work assignment than it was possible for people who travelled for non-work reasons to return. People returning from vacation had to return to quarantine, while workers were not required to quarantine unless it was a business trip.

In the first wave, there was also a wave of concerns on the part of employers about the pandemic, which ended the posting of workers due to concerns. During the second wave, these employees were allowed to work even longer during the posting. At the same time, the employees themselves carefully considered whether to return to Slovakia or, for example, just come on vacation, when they might subsequently have problems returning to the country of posting.



### *Changes in the conditions of posted workers in the administration sector during the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic*

According to the respondents, no changes were made in terms of employment conditions or differentiation of conditions between posted workers and domestic workers in third countries. If there were compensations based on the interruption of work, these compensations applied equally across the board to all workers, regardless of whether they were domestic or foreign. Thus, the conditions were respected and there were no changes that would harm posted workers abroad due to the pandemic.

### *Changes due to the pandemic for posted workers and companies from sending and receiving countries*

In three years, despite the pandemic, the situation has reached a standard / normal mode. During the pandemic, the changes were mainly based on legal regulations or directives or laws. Therefore, the conditions changed mainly due to state regulations / interventions, both those accepted in Slovakia and those accepted in the host countries. It was mainly Covid passports or mandatory testing 24 or 48 hours before the trip. Therefore, a person could have trouble getting to the Czech Republic unless they had a permit or an exemption from the ministry.

Thus, the conditions in this period were influenced by individual regulations. By ending of the pandemic, all these regulations were abandoned and the conditions returned to the state they were before and no significant restrictions remained.

Often, the posting itself was preceded by the obligation to fill in pre-accession forms, which was the responsibility of the employees. For example, when entering the Czech Republic, it was necessary to fill in a form with information about when the worker will arrive, which border crossing he will cross, which hotel he will stay in (with the hotel address), and how long he will stay. There was an e-border portal in Slovakia and similar portals also operated abroad during this period. Thus, the conditions changed frequently, but it was confirmed that the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic or the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic tried to provide online information (sometimes with a day's delay) regarding the conditions of entry or arrival from different countries.

### *Employers' plans to mitigate future risks arising from the pandemic and post-pandemic*

A survey was conducted among entrepreneurs and it emerged that entrepreneurs do not even perceive such threats. According to the survey, these threats are very little perceived by entrepreneurs. Respondents confirmed that such a crisis is something they cannot be very prepared for. They have a pandemic behind them, in which they were able to adapt, and therefore do not perceive it as a threat to the future.



Businesses are partially already equipped with devices, such as temperature scanners, that businesses purchased during the pandemic. So in the future, if there was a similar pandemic, they would already be equipped.

*The degree of assumption of employers regarding the future development of the posting process and expectations from enterprises with posted workers*

Immediately after the end of the pandemic, they moved to the period when the war in Ukraine began. Thus, the turning point was that another influx of employees was expected from Ukraine, where Slovakia has the largest number of workers. This all came to a halt, especially in the case of men. In the case of women, this influx continued, but there were changes. At first, these women were looking for a place to stay, then they were looking for a job.

Also in this respect, it can be seen on the labour market that there is a lack of thousands of employees who would be able to find a job in Slovakia. The turning point was that immediately after the pandemic, the war in Ukraine began.

The impact of Covid-19 on the process of posting workers in the sector

According to representatives of the largest companies in Slovakia, the process of posting workers in the manufacturing sector was significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, as it significantly changed and prolonged the preparatory phase, especially in the early stages of the pandemic. Companies have experience mainly with posting workers on business trips, not with long-term posting, and their approach had to be significantly changed due to the posting conditions at the time of the pandemic. Company representatives confirmed that, in particular, all business trips were suspended in the first year of the pandemic (2020) and it was necessary to conduct as many discussions online as possible. Gradually, as the process was legislated in terms of travel conditions, business trips began to be possible, but the process of handling them was limiting. The representative of the industry confirmed that the work of business travellers, negotiations with business partners all were performed into electronic form, with the fact that the only areas where the necessary posting of workers remained were maintenance and service. The other reasons for the posting of workers have all were resolved electronically.

It was necessary to deal with the exemption through one or two ministries to obtain permission to carry out the posting of workers from foreign countries to Slovakia in the areas of critical supplies or infrastructure management. Permits covered both entry and length of stay. The bureaucracy lasted several weeks to months, which meant a significant extension of the processes. All other areas have been moved to electronic form.



### *The impact of Covid-19 on posted workers' conditions*

Respondents had experience with business trips. One example was with trips to the US headquarters (Pittsburgh), where there was a significant factor that conditions and ordinances varied between continents. At the same time, companies often had their own pandemic team, their own crisis staff and their own doctor within the company, who provided employees with overall support. Communication with the headquarters was also ongoing in this respect, but the process was generally demanding and exhausting. If they were not a strong enough company that could afford such people, according to him, it would be much more difficult and the employees would go into the unknown.

### *Changes in the conditions of posted workers in the manufacturing sector during the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic*

In addition to the entry conditions, the changes, for example during the posting, mainly concerned the obligation to wear a mask, for example in operation or during meetings with other people. The changed conditions also applied during leisure time, when there were obligations to use masks, tests for Covid-19. Test intervals varied, sometimes once a week, sometimes once a day. The results came in electronic form, the system was managed very well.

The rules in Slovakia were set stricter than in other countries, such as the surrounding countries. Employees who went on business trips in 2021, when the situation began to ease, saw that the conditions in force in Slovakia were not required abroad, such as the obligation to wear a mask in public. Thus, employees were surprised by free access in other countries. Subsequently, they were disappointed why such strict rules were still observed in Slovakia in the form of masks or distances, social distancing, which were no longer required abroad at this time.

### *Changes due to the pandemic for posted workers and companies from sending and hosting countries*

Regarding work for employers in terms of duties when posting employees, one of the respondents commented, as he was part of the crisis staff, that at the beginning it was terrible, especially in terms of time-consuming but also organizing meetings, setting the rules was unclear or chaotic. Especially the first wave was very difficult for the employer. There was an effort to prevent outbreaks in Slovakia. There were various plans that were prepared. Every day, 30 people were involved in the pandemic management process at the employer level. The information was late, chaotic and often contradictory between ministries.

Another respondent noted that the workers who were posted after the first wave and returned to Slovakia were so disappointed. Despite the fact that there is and is processed from the employer's point of view a directive on how to proceed when posting

workers in the event of a pandemic, but there is a significant reluctance to travel if it can be resolved in another way.

*Employers' plans to mitigate future risks arising from the pandemic and post-pandemic*

According to the respondents, they can be relaxed mainly by what companies have gone through so far and thanks to which they have set and revised internal guidelines and rules for posting, including what must ever happen, especially before the departure of posted workers. That is why one of the respondents no longer perceives Covid-19 as a threat to broadcasting and especially long-term broadcasting. The company has come to terms with this risk and incorporated it into internal processes. Of course, the respondent is aware that these processes slightly prolong the overall procedure when posting employees, but it is possible to live with this. Another respondent confirmed these words, stating that the posting process must also have a substitute in the case of a positive Covid-19 test in order for the company to be ready. According to him, the company had learned to live and with regard to continuous work in the company, the company was not subject to restrictions on night work. During continuous operation, a system of substitutes for individual shifts was created at work. Currently, no attention is paid to these processes.

*The degree of assumption of employers regarding the future development of the posting process and expectations from enterprises with posted workers*


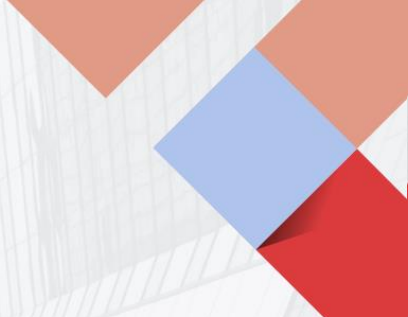
Respondents pointed to the need to move into history beyond the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. That is, as far as the long-term posting of workers for two, three or four years for the purpose of performing work is concerned, the peak of activity in this area was achieved between 2001 and 2009, and after the 2009 crisis this has already begun to change. Another important factor was the findings of the posted employees themselves that companies often did not have a retention plan (i.e. a plan for retaining employees after returning home).

They then passed on their experiences and subsequently the attractiveness of posting employees decreased significantly from 2010 until today. In other words, the decline in interest mainly concerned the period before the pandemic, and in recent years this interest has stabilized.



## Summary of the in-depth interview

As part of the discussion with the respondents, one more detailed interview was conducted with a representative of the company. He said that despite the fact that his company itself did not have any posted workers, he observed that other companies had to make a quick decision whether to immediately withdraw employees or leave them abroad for an unknown period without the possibility of returning. The risk of dismissal meant that the company would lose representatives in the host country for a long period of time. At the same time, information was provided regarding the experience of posting workers to China, which required not only preparatory measures – the need for multiple testing within a few days before departure to allow access to the plane, but also a mandatory two-week quarantine upon arrival in this country. At the same time, it was noted that support for this process was not provided by the state, but by the parent company from Germany.



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