

RESEARCH

**REPORTS**

RECOMMENDATIONS

MACIEJ PAŃKÓW

# THE CARE SECTOR IN POLAND

## CHALLENGES OF ORGANISING AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

INSTITUTE OF  
PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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# **THE WASTE SECTOR IN ESTONIA**

CHALLENGES OF  
ORGANISING AND  
COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
Social Policy Programme

This report is one in a series presenting the findings of research carried out in Bulgaria, Czechia, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia as part of the project CEE CAW ‘Challenges for Organising and Collective Bargaining in Care, Administration and Waste collection sectors in Central and Eastern European Countries’, which was led by the Institute of Public Affairs (Warsaw). The other partners were the: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Sofia), Central European Labour Studies Institute (Bratislava), Lithuanian Centre of Social Sciences (Vilnius), and Centre for Democracy Foundation (Belgrade).



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## 1. Methodological preface

The methods used were documentary analysis of public sources and interviews with industry representatives. The documentary analysis included a review of publicly available databases, publications, legislation relevant to the sector, and strategic documents.

In seeking out sector representatives for interviews, we took into account the fact that the trade union movement is weakly developed in Estonia and therefore it is not possible to find a sufficient number of trade unionists from all sectors. People active in the field who are in one way or another involved in employee representation or otherwise well acquainted with the specificities of the field were interviewed. Interviews were conducted with one representative of the Estonian Trade Union Confederation, one representative of a waste management company and one representative of the transportation field trade union.

## 2. General characteristics of the sector

The task of the Government of the Republic of Estonia and the Ministry of the Environment is to coordinate the implementation of a unified waste management policy in cooperation with local governments, waste management companies (private companies), their associations and the third sector. An important link in the organisation of waste at the state level is filled by the Environmental Board (state organisation responsible for environmental protection) whose task is to help implement the state's waste policy and control compliance with the laws and norms established for the protection of the natural environment.

The situation regarding waste management (in particular, the management of municipal waste) largely depends on the activities of local governments. The local government plays a leading role in the development of waste management in its administrative territory. The local government unit organises the separate collection of waste to enable it to be prepared for reuse, recycling or other treatment as far as possible.

At a company level, waste management is regulated not only by legislation but also by environmental protection permits (integrated permit and environmental permit) and the implementation of the principle of extended

producer responsibility. Enterprises, including waste management operators, perform the following functions:

- collection of non-hazardous waste (incl. municipal waste, construction and demolition waste, etc.) and further referral to treatment (recovery)
- organised waste shipments in accordance with the tender specifications
- collection and further handling of hazardous waste (excluding hazardous waste generated in the oil shale sector)
- companies with independent waste management systems (Enefit Power AS, Viru Keemia Grupp AS, Kiviõli Keemiatööstus OÜ, etc.)
- participating and making a positive contribution to the waste recovery process (also in preparing waste for re-use)
- improving technology and, in this context, reducing waste generation (e.g. using the waste generated by the production process and thus avoiding the generation of waste)
- creating opportunities for recycling.<sup>1</sup>

In 2022, 22.85 million tonnes of waste was generated in Estonia, of which 14.93 million tonnes were recycled<sup>2</sup>. Several privately held companies in Estonia are engaged in waste treatment and the circular economy. Although accurate employee data is not always publicly available, some notable companies should still be mentioned:

**Eesti Keskkonnateenused AS:** is engaged in the collection, sorting and recycling of waste. They provide services to both private and corporate clients.

**Ragn-Sells:** is one of the largest waste management companies in Estonia. They are engaged in the collection, sorting, recovery and disposal of waste.

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1 Estonian State Waste Management Plan 2022 — 2028, Ministry of the Environment.

2 Data from Statistics Estonia

**Eesti Pandipakend:** is responsible for collecting and recycling pledge packaging. They are mainly engaged in plastic, glass and metal packaging.

The number of people employed in the waste sector has increased in recent years although the workforce is older than the Estonian average. Almost three-quarters of the workforce is male, with the majority of employees having a vocational education level, while a significant share of people have a general education (including basic education). The combined average gross monthly wage is similar to the average wage in Estonia. In total, there are about 2,100 workers in the waste sector in Estonia.

### 3. Major problems and challenges in the sector

In the waste sector, a number of labour-related problems were mentioned:

**Shortage of skilled labour:** Waste management requires specific skills and knowledge, especially when it comes to waste sorting, recycling or hazardous waste management. If there are few specialists, this can limit the ability to effectively and safely treat waste. It would also be possible to use foreign labour here, but the stream of foreign labour into Estonia is not very large. It has increased in recent years due to political events, but the participation of foreign labour is partly insignificant due to language barriers.

**Difficulty of physical work:** Waste management can be a physically demanding job, especially when it comes to sorting, lifting and handling waste. Such conditions can lead to faster fatigue of workers, injuries or accidents at work.

**Low wages and unstable working conditions:** In some waste management companies, workers' wages may be low or irregular working conditions may occur, which may affect employee motivation and job satisfaction.

**Safety and health of workers:** Waste management can be associated with a number of health and safety risks, including exposure to hazardous chemicals, biosecurity requirements, and possible injuries during work with heavy machinery or waste. If workers do not receive adequate protection or training to cope with these risks, these problems can worsen. It is not possible to compile separate statistics on accidents at work in the waste sector, as this sector overlaps with transport and storage. So far, Estonia has not made any changes to the working environment requirements concerning climate

warming, as it is a northern country with a rather cool climate, but such changes may be necessary in the future.

**Staff turnover:** Waste management companies might experience high staff turnover as workers may look for better working conditions or wage levels elsewhere. This, in turn, can affect the stability and productivity of the enterprise.

To solve these problems, it may be necessary to invest in training, better working conditions and occupational safety, and to consider offering employees motivating salary packages. In addition, the use of technology in automation and waste management can reduce the need for a large physical workforce and improve the efficiency and safety of processes.

## 4. Characteristics of social dialogue organisations in the sector

In Estonia, workers in the field of waste management have not formed a trade union. However, there are some organisations that also indirectly protect the interests of employees in this field:

**Estonian Environmental Services Association (EKÜ):** This organisation unites companies and specialists in the field of waste and is engaged in the development, cooperation and representation of the field of environmental services.

**Confederation of Estonian Trade Unions (EAKL):** EAKL is one of the largest trade union organisations in Estonia, representing the interests of workers in various fields, including employees in the field of waste. People working in the waste sector do not have a trade union, but about 20 people are members of the trade union of transportation workers.

**Estonian Employers' Confederation (ETSC):** Although this organisation mainly represents the interests of employers, it can be an important partner in negotiations and improving working conditions also in the field of waste.

**Estonian Chamber of Environmental Associations (EKO):** Even though this organisation rather represents environmental organisations and interests, it can also participate in discussions and initiatives related to waste issues.

**Estonian Circular Economy Industries Association (ECEIA):** The mission of ECEIA is to stand for the common interests of waste management companies and to develop waste management in Estonia directed by the general principles of sustainable development. It participates in discussions but doesn't represent workers.

These organisations can provide support to employees in the field of waste, representing their interests in negotiations with employers, participating in the resolution of legal issues and providing training and other support to employees.

Some employees of the company “Ragn-Sells” and some employees of the company “Keskkonnateenused” belong to the Estonian Transport Trade Union, but their number is very small, with only a few dozen people, resulting in their influence being insufficient to have a say in larger decisions.

#### 4.1. Challenges of organising employees

The challenges described in terms of uniting workers and protecting their interests also describe the situation of trade unions in Estonia in general: trade unions are not popular, probably partly because they are related to the Soviet era for people. Workers' interest in participating in organisations that unite workers is low, and since trade unions are not popular, it is also difficult for them to campaign to recruit more members. From the interviews, it was also understood that employees in the field of waste management can have better remuneration due to the large shortage of labour in this area and companies' willingness to pay, and therefore they do not have the motivation to stand up for their interests.

The representative of the Estonian Transport Trade Union talked about the fact that if a collective agreement is made, it would also extend to those workers in the sector who are not in the trade union. Therefore, individuals often do not understand that trade union membership is important and do not understand that representation is important. For example, there are about 4,000 bus drivers in Estonia with about 1,200 of them in the trade union, and consequently, there are collective agreements in this sector.

Trade union representatives consider it an important aspect that trade union activities also have an impact on the labour market through the conclusion of important agreements in the sector. They pointed out that the organisation



of employees and collective agreements are also beneficial for employers, for example in the procurement process, because competitors cannot then make under-bids at the expense of workers' wages or working conditions. The organisation of workers is beneficial for the state, as it helps to reduce the shadow economy and taxes on workers' wages reach the state. It can be said that the organisation of workers in a certain sector organises the market in that sector. But it was emphasised that in this case cooperation with the state is also needed — the state must be responsible for supervision, and the state must control companies that still pay less than the collective agreement. People must feel that the trade union is protecting their interests. It was suggested that through legislation, the trade union could negotiate only on behalf of trade union members, could only conclude an agreement with its members, and the benefits achieved would extend only to trade union members. In this way, workers would see more clearly the benefits of the trade union.

While trade union representatives explain to people that the number of trade union members is important and influences the results of their work, recruiting members is still difficult. There are certain requirements for negotiating at the sector level, for example, at least 500 people must belong to a trade union, and achieving this number is not easy in Estonia.

People allegedly do not want to join a trade union because there is a financial cost associated with it and a person does not know what he will receive in return. Talk of possible future negotiations is not a strong selling point.

#### 4.2. Good practices for organising employees

No practices currently exist; some employee representatives in some organisations, but it is very formal (altogether about 25 people).

#### 4.3. Characteristics of employer representation

The level of employee representation is very low, mainly consisting of formally selected employee representatives and working environment commissioners.

## 5. Collective bargaining and other forms of social dialogue in the sector – characteristics

In the field of waste management, no collective agreements have been concluded in Estonia.

At a national level, Estonia is happy to contribute to the debate on the circular economy and pollution reduction in Europe, but these discussions are unfortunately held at a national level or, if business representatives are involved, they defend the interests of businesses. There is no link here with the organisation of workers and the protection of workers' rights. This is certainly influenced by workers' lack of awareness of social dialogue in Europe. There are no practical opportunities for workers to learn enough about good practices in other European countries that they could follow. One of the solutions may therefore be to increase the impact of social dialogue in Europe, which has been very limited so far, by raising awareness of it.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

One recommendation is to promote the trade union movement and worker representation more intensively among the sector's employees. It might be possible to give examples from the transport sector where the trade union movement is working better and to show the real benefits of membership for workers. The more active local workers' representatives would also certainly benefit from learning from the experience of their foreign counterparts. The ETUC, in cooperation with the government, could explain to employers that the participation of workers in trade union activities is also good for the employer in the long term, by harmonising the market and taking unfair competition advantages away from companies that offer workers worse conditions or save on safety.

## About the Author

Sabina Trankmann is a social researcher and thematic leader for the labour market and social policy at the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS), the University of Tartu. Her research interests focus on labour market policies and measures, the impact of measures in social and health areas, and the behaviour of target groups. She has participated in many research projects in the field of labour market, social services and health, and also has experience in policymaking from her work as an adviser in the employment department of the Ministry of Social Affairs.