



European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

# National Working Conditions Survey, Bulgaria

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This report is available in electronic format only.

*Fieldwork for a nationwide representative survey in Bulgaria was completed in June 2005. The survey findings indicate that working conditions are improving, with a number of indicators - from overall fatigue to the proportion of fixed-term contracts - revealing a better quality of work. However, some factors were found to have deteriorated since 2001. Nonetheless, three out of four Bulgarian workers report that they are satisfied with their working conditions.*

## **Introduction**

The first survey on [working conditions in Bulgaria](#) was carried out in 2001 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. Bulgaria was one of the countries featured in this first survey on working conditions in 12 candidate countries that were at the time planning to join the European Union. The same survey had been carried out the previous year in the existing 15 EU Member States (EU15). In 2004, 10 of the 12 candidate countries acceded to the EU and, for comparative purposes, are currently referred to as the new Member States (NMS). The other two countries, Bulgaria and Romania, are now termed acceding countries, aiming to join the EU in 2007.

In 2005, a research team conducted a second survey in Bulgaria - independent of the Foundation - but largely faithful to its approach in terms of using the same indicators. The survey was commissioned by the [Ministry of Labour and Social Policy](#) and the Working Conditions Fund. This second survey was entitled the Quality of Life and Working Conditions survey, and enhanced the original quantitative methodology of the Foundation with the use of focus groups as a complementary tool. By combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, the team attempted to achieve national coverage, on the one hand, and an in-depth analysis of motives, attitudes and explanatory scenarios, on the other. The June 2005 survey covered nine thematic areas, which are reviewed in greater detail below.

## **General characteristics of working population**

### **Work experience**

The Bulgarian survey respondents have spent, on average, 9.2 years in their present organisation, which is slightly lower than the group average for the NMS, Bulgaria and Romania (9.7 in 2001) and the EU15 (10.5 in 2000). The largest proportion of employees (34%) has two to five years of work experience at the company. The highest concentration of employees with less than one year of work experience in an organisation is observed in the construction, food and drink, textile and clothing, and transport sectors. By contrast, the following sectors have a high proportion of staff with long-term work experience in the company: pharmaceutical (33% with 21-30 years' experience), telecommunications (27%) and chemicals (24%).

### **Types of employment contract**

Bulgarian employees prefer permanent employment contracts: some 81% of workers hold permanent employment contracts, whereas only 10% are employed on a fixed-term contract. The remainder of the working population (9%) is composed of self-employed people (with or without employees). In recent years, the country's government institutions and social partners have taken measures aimed at reducing the spread of fixed-term contracts, which were held by 25% of the workforce in 2001. It is important to note that these contracts were often very short term (one to three months) and subject to regular renewal. In other words, they were short term on paper, while in reality they were often long-term contracts.

Fixed-term contracts are most widespread among young employees in services, including public administration. The type of employment contract correlates strongly with age (and also with length of service), but not with sex: both young men and women with short work experience are more likely to work on a fixed-term contract. Thus, younger employees experience higher levels of job insecurity.

## **Age profile**

The average age of the Bulgarian labour force is 42 years, suggesting an ageing worker profile. This is most apparent in the chemicals industry, metallurgy, electricity sector and telecommunications. The majority of young people work in services, e.g. in tourism and finance. Employment in the textile and clothing sector is predominant among young women, whereas construction and transport are mainly reserved for young men.

## **Managerial positions**

About 20% of respondents report being in managerial positions (defined as persons having at least one subordinate), which is higher than reported in the NMS (6%). A gender breakdown shows that managerial positions are more likely to be held by men (25% for males and 15% for females). In addition, more responsible positions are assigned to men. Women are appointed to manage relatively small teams of about two to five persons, while organisational units composed of 10+ persons are headed by men in 83% of cases.

## **Family status**

Some 72% of the working population are married, 6% are divorced and 3% are widowed. However, a growing number of people are living alone (20% in 2005). The rising proportion of people who are single in the 26-35 age group may be explained by the current economic and social insecurity, which can cause individuals to defer engagement with a partner.

## **Sectoral trends**

One of the peculiarities of the country's economic structure is the considerable proportion of activities accounted for by the textile and clothing sector (NACE sector category: D18 and partly D17). This sector is the fastest growing in the country in terms of export and employment (along with tourism), comprising about 10% of total (official) employment. As the scale of the unofficial economy in this sector is higher (estimated at about 25-30%) than the country average, the actual employment may be even higher. This growth is largely due to other countries (mainly from Italy, Greece, the US and Turkey) outsourcing particular activities, which increases the overall share of labour-intensive, monotonous and low-wage jobs. As already noted, employment in this sector is predominantly female (about 85%), and involves working to high numerical production targets. However, client orders and deliveries are irregular, which contributes to the level of stress caused by high work pace combined with irregular employment and payment. It should be mentioned that payment levels in this sector are below the national average.

## ***Nature of work***

### **Computerisation of work**

On the whole, information and communication technology (ICT) is deployed to a lesser degree in Bulgaria than in other European countries, with 33% of workers reporting use of a computer for work. This includes an advanced group of 18% of the total workforce, who work all of the time, or around three quarters of the time, on a computer; a further 15% use computers between half and a quarter of their working time. The remaining 67% of the workforce either perform work which does not require using a computer, or employees are not provided with such a tool. The highest density of computerisation is reported by employees in the pharmaceutical sector (67%); the lowest is observed in the textile sector (5%).

Of those working all of the time with computers, a significant majority are women (74%). This may be explained by the nature of work typically performed by women - routine computer operations aimed at serving clients. About half of men and women (53% and 47% respectively) state that they never work with computers.

Age and education/qualification significantly influence computer use. The majority of those working with computers are 18-25 years old; moreover, 27% of highly educated employees work on a computer all the time.

## Dealing directly with clients/patients

Surprisingly, in this respect, the Bulgarian labour force is closer to the EU15 than to the NMS averages: 45.5% of employed people in Bulgaria deal directly with clients (39.7% do so all of the time, and 5.8% do so three quarters of the time). The two Bulgarian surveys (2001 and 2005) reveal similar proportions, at 45% in 2001 and 45.5% in 2005. This relatively high proportion of workers dealing directly with clients correlates with the ranking of factors influencing work pace; i.e. direct demands from individuals external to the workplace (e.g. clients, patients, students, customers, etc) rank first at 62%.

This situation seems atypical for an economic structure not dominated by services, and calls for more research and analysis, especially in view of the fact that the 2005 figures confirm earlier 2001 data from the Foundation survey.

## Teleworking

This form of work organisation is not yet widespread and remains at an early stage of development. Teleworking is embraced by only about 3% of the working population. This small proportion comprises mostly women (80%), generally working in the so-called liberal professions - analysts, self-employed architects, translators, journalists and editors.

## Physical working conditions

The two most widespread physical stressors in the workplace are noise and breathing dangerous substances, each of which is reported by 36% of workers. Vibrations come next at 27%.

In general, middle-aged employees (36-45 years) are more exposed to all kinds of physical stressors (33%). By comparison, only 19% of those in the youngest age group (18-25 years) report being exposed to such factors. The age profile of those exposed to physical stressors in Bulgaria diverges from the situation in the NMS, in that young people in Bulgaria are less affected.

**Table 1: Exposure to physical risks (%)**

| Element of physical environment and duration of exposure:                                | All of the time | Around 3/4 of the time | Around half of the time | Around 1/4 of the time | Never |
|--|-----------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------|
| Vibrations   | 12.0            | 3.9                    | 4.8                     | 6.2                    | 73.0  |
| Noise  | 15.0            | 5.5                    | 6.4                     | 9.6                    | 63.4  |
| High temperatures  | 6.5             | 2.0                    | 4.5                     | 4.3                    | 82.7  |
| Low temperatures   | 2.2             | 0.9                    | 4.5                     | 4.3                    | 88.1  |
| Vapours, smoke, dust, fumes or dangerous substances like chemicals, infectious materials | 15.7            | 5.0                    | 6.0                     | 10.0                   | 63.3  |
| Touching or handling dangerous   | 6.2             | 2.7                    | 3.4                     | 5.2                    | 82.4  |

|                        |     |     |     |     |      |
|------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|
| products or substances |     |     |     |     |      |
| Radiation              | 2.8 | 1.1 | 1.2 | 3.2 | 91.6 |

### **Painful working postures and heavy loads**

Painful working positions are reported by 42% of the working population. Most affected are employees in textile and clothing (25%), transport (21%), manufacturing (18%) and construction (15%). Men are more exposed to painful working postures than women are.

Gender differences are also evident in terms of moving heavy loads, with 44% of men and 19% of women being exposed to this risk factor. A sectoral breakdown reveals that this risk is concentrated in manufacturing (23%), construction (19%) and transportation (15%).

### **Work organisation**

One in five workers feels that their working time is insufficient for them to complete assigned tasks. This suggests that the volume or complexity of tasks is rather demanding, although inefficient work organisation may also be a contributing factor.

### **Repetitive movements and monotonous work**

Just over half (54%) of respondents state that their work includes monotonous tasks. The distribution of monotonous tasks by sector shows an extreme concentration of such tasks (50% of all respondents) in manufacturing, light industry and transport. The remaining proportion (4% of all respondents) represents monotonous tasks in other sectors. It is noteworthy that monotonous work is most widespread among workers on permanent contracts (25%). This may be explained by the 'Fordist' division of labour and related employment status (permanent contracts), characteristic of traditional industrial sectors.

Two indicators are used to measure the level of monotony at work - repetitive hand movements (Table 2) and short repetitive operations (Table 3).

**Table 2: Repetitive hand movements (%)**

| Risk factor/<br>duration     | All of the time | Around 3/4 of<br>the time | Around half of<br>the time | Around 1/4 of<br>the time | Never |
|------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-------|
| Repetitive hand<br>movements | 32.1            | 10.4                      | 9.8                        | 9.1                       | 38.5  |

Repetitive hand movements prevail in the textile and clothing sector (74% of respondents), the pharmaceutical sector (67%) and in manufacturing (59%).

**Table 3: Short repetitive operations (%)**

| Length of<br>repetitive<br>operations | Yes  | No   | Don't know | Total |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|------------|-------|
| Less than five<br>seconds             | 7.6  | 89.2 | 3.2        | 100   |
| Less than 30 seconds                  | 11.4 | 85.7 | 2.9        | 100   |
| Less than one<br>minute               | 15.0 | 81.5 | 3.4        | 100   |

|                        |      |      |     |     |
|------------------------|------|------|-----|-----|
| Less than five minutes | 23.5 | 73.0 | 3.5 | 100 |
| Less than 10 minutes   | 28.6 | 68.1 | 3.3 | 100 |

### Autonomy

On the whole, employees report a low level of autonomy or job control. A majority, 58%, are not able to choose their work methods and 54% cannot change their order of tasks. Greater autonomy regarding order of tasks is found in the health care, construction and transport sectors. Those employed on a permanent contract report the lowest levels of autonomy, followed by workers on a fixed-term contract. Unsurprisingly, self-employed people enjoy high levels of autonomy - 98% claim that they are able to decide when and how to carry out work tasks.

Nearly 70% of workers are not able to change their volume of work, and this dimension of autonomy appears least flexible. Even self-employed people are quite limited in this respect: about 20% report having no influence over their volume of work.

### Work pace

Some 41% of respondents report having no control over their work pace.

**Table 4: Factors influencing work pace**

| Factors  | %    |
|--|------|
| Direct demands by individuals external to the workplace (clients, patients, students, passengers, etc) | 62.2 |
| Work performed by colleagues   | 54.5 |
| Direct control of supervisor   | 52.2 |
| Volume of work   | 26.7 |
| Automated systems with high pace of operation  | 13.6 |

### Qualifications and training

More than four out of five respondents (87%) claim that their professional skills match the demands of the job. Only 7% find the requirements to be higher than their skills, and nearly the same proportion (6%) estimate that the demands are much lower than their capability.

A relatively small share of employees received some training within the last 12 months (17%). The cost of training is covered by the employer in 80% of cases.

### Working time

#### Length of working hours

Although the average length of working hours is 43.09 hours per week, the most frequently reported duration is exactly 40 hours (53%). Another 27% of respondents work between 45 and 60 hours per week, and 4% of respondents devote more than 60 hours per week to their job. Only 8% of the workforce typically work less than 39 hours per week.

**Table 5: Length of working hours per week**

| Length of working hours | Men % | Women % |
|-------------------------|-------|---------|
| Up to 20 hours          | 1.7   | 3.6     |
| From 21 to 29 hours     | 0     | 1.3     |
| From 30 to 39 hours     | 6.2   | 8.8     |
| From 40 to 44 hours     | 54.2  | 60.2    |
| From 45 to 60 hours     | 31.5  | 23.4    |
| More than 60 hours      | 6.4   | 2.7     |
| Total                   | 100   | 100     |

There is a strong correlation between duration of working hours and employment status. Permanent contracts usually provide a standard length of 40-44 hours per week, but one in four employees work up to 60 hours within this group. Fixed-term contracts are associated with more flexible working time arrangements, tending to offer less working hours; the most typical arrangement in this case is a working week of 30-39 hours. Nonetheless, within this category, one in three people work 45-60 hours per week. The longest working hours are reported by self-employed people without employees: 33% work more than 60 hours per week and another 47% work between 45 and 60 hours per week.

Age also appears to be an influential factor in that the youngest age group (18-25 years) tends to work longer hours. For example, 32% of young employees work 45-60 hours per week and 8% work more than 60 hours, compared with 28% and 6% respectively in the 36-45 year age group. Lower educated people in all age groups also tend to work longer hours. These trends may be explained by lower hourly wages due to: a) lack of experience and qualifications among younger people; and b) non-qualified jobs being performed by lower educated people. As a result, both groups have to compensate for poor remuneration with longer hours in order to make ends meet.

### **Part-time work**

This form of flexible working time arrangement is not widespread in Bulgaria, and only 6% of the workforce make use of this option. Part-time work is preferred by women and people aged 46-55 years. Women comprise nearly 60% of part-time employment.

There are mixed reports regarding the level of satisfaction with this form of work. Exactly 50% are satisfied with it, while 37.5% would like to work more hours, and 12.5% would prefer to reduce their working hours. For more than one third of part-time workers, this arrangement is not voluntary but imposed by a lack of full-time options.

### **Working at weekends**

One in five workers works every Saturday. Another 20% work three Saturdays a month, and about 10% work two Saturdays a month. This means that half of the overall workforce regularly works on Saturdays. Work on this day is typical for self-employed people (87%) as well as those employed on fixed-term contracts (75%).

Sunday work is less common on the whole, but it depends on age and is a frequent option for young people in general and for young men, in particular.

Some 42% of employees never work at weekends.

### **Shift work**

Shift work is carried out by 25% of the workforce in Bulgaria. Employees report a high level of satisfaction with this form of work arrangement (74% are satisfied), because they believe it gives opportunities to better reconcile working and non-working life. Only 6% of respondents report being extremely dissatisfied with their shift schedules.

## **Psychosocial factors**

All the percentages regarding discrimination, intimidation and violence in the workplace remain below 1%, except age discrimination (2.1%) and physical violence from individuals external to the workplace (clients, patients, etc: 1.8%). Both the oldest and the youngest employees complain about age discrimination and about having poor relationships with colleagues or bosses.

Overall, psychological manifestations of violence are more prevalent than physical ones, and they are attributed to the relationships with colleagues and bosses (9%). However, Bulgarians seem to be most sensitive to a lack of respectful treatment; at 7%, this is the highest percentage reported for any single psychosocial factor. The profiles of people suffering this type of degrading treatment include women aged 46-55 years, working in textile and clothing, healthcare or services, or men aged 36-45 years working in transport, telecommunications and manufacturing.

By applying more precise research tools to measure these factors (i.e. surveys specifically targeting these problems), it may be possible to isolate the influence of some interrelated factors.

## **Work and health**

About one third of respondents find that their job adversely affects their health and personal safety. In total, 22.5% of employees experience direct and permanent physical or psychological stressors. Regarding work-related health problems, overall fatigue was the most common complaint (22%), followed by backache (15.5%), vision problems (13%) and headaches (10%). Overall fatigue is reported by twice as many men as women. Women report higher levels of psychological symptoms: 75% of those suffering from anxiety, insomnia, irritability etc are female (usually aged 36-45 years). Trauma/injuries are more typical among men; they are affected three times more than women are by this type of risk.

Fortunately, 14% of workers state that their work has a positive influence, and even improves their health.

**Table 6: Rate of overall satisfaction with working conditions (%)**

| Degree of satisfaction | %    |
|------------------------|------|
| Completely satisfied   | 29.3 |
| Fairly satisfied       | 43.5 |
| Not very satisfied     | 17.6 |
| Not at all satisfied   | 7.8  |
| Don't know             | 1.8  |
| Total                  | 100  |

## **Participation, information and consultation**

About 83% of workers feel informed about health risks, availability of protective equipment, and disciplinary matters. Working conditions appear to be subject to ongoing discussions among the majority of the working population (being reported by 71%), but:

- discussions involve only salaried employees and rarely involve medium- and top-company management;
- the dialogue is more intensive with direct supervisors than with upper management;
- discussions mostly take place informally and spontaneously;
- external expert help is sought only in 11% of cases.

Working Conditions Committees do not play a role at this stage, since discussions over working conditions are



seldom initiated by them. Indeed, discussions often take place outside the formal structures without the Committees even being informed.

In conclusion, workers are currently only able to comment about inadequacies in their working environment. However, according to 53% of respondents, their opinion is taken into account. Nevertheless, employees believe that the situation does not represent a genuine participation by workers in decision-making.

## **Work-life balance**

According to 63% of those employed, their job does not cause problems for family members or friends. Another 31% feel that their job sometimes causes some problems, while 13% have constant difficulties trying to reconcile working and non-working life (in this latter group, there are twice as many men as women). The main factors are long working hours and incompatibility of partners' work schedules, as well as overall fatigue and the need for more rest. In the opinion of 43.5% of employed people, the reconciliation of working and non-working life requires additional personal effort and thus leads to greater stress.

In general, the problems of work-life balance correlate more with age than with sex; the 36-45 year age group is particularly affected.

## **Commentary**

There is a four year interval between the 2001 and 2005 surveys, which enables some interesting comparisons.

### **Significant changes (5% or more)**

#### **Positive**

- Reported levels of overall fatigue decreased from 51% in 2001 to 22% in 2005.
- Fixed-term contracts decreased from 25% to 10%.
- Overall satisfaction with working conditions increased from 64% to 73%.
- The amount of night work undertaken decreased by nine percentage points.
- Reported levels of backache decreased by eight percentage points.
- The proportion of workers on employment contracts increased by eight percentage points.
- The share of involuntary self-employment decreased by seven percentage points.
- The proportion of workers receiving training increased by seven percentage points.
- The proportion of workers reporting that their work pace was controlled by machine operations fell by seven percentage points.
- The proportion of respondents reporting health risks in their workplace decreased by six percentage points.
- The proportion of people working with a computer (all of the time and three quarters of the time) increased by six percentage points (though this change may also cause some negative effects).
- The proportion of workers reporting painful working postures decreased by five percentage points.

#### **Negative**

- The proportion of respondents reporting lack of control over work methods increased by 12 percentage points.
- The proportion of workers having no control over work pace increased by 11 percentage points.
- The proportion of individuals reporting having to perform repetitive hand movements as part of their jobs increased by seven percentage points.
- The proportion of those reporting exposure to noise increased by five percentage points.

### **Moderate changes (2-4%)**

- The amount of shift work decreased by three percentage points.
- Health risks related to touching/handling dangerous substances increased by 2.6 percentage points.

- The proportion of respondents reporting having to perform monotonous work increased by two percentage points.

**No changes in:**

- The proportion of people working long hours.
- The proportion of people working on Saturdays.
- The proportion of people dealing directly with clients.
- The efficiency of the work organisation (the 'not enough time' syndrome).
- Almost all risk factors, except those cited above, as having changed significantly for better or worse.

Although the recent Bulgarian survey shows some negative developments and a lack of desired positive developments compared with 2001, the majority of indicators show positive trends. In general, working conditions in Bulgaria appear to be improving. The subjective perception of respondents surveyed in 2005 confirms this overall conclusion, with a nine percentage point increase in the proportion of respondents reporting higher levels of satisfaction with working conditions than in 2001.

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## **Annex: Methodology**

**Survey name:** Quality of Life and Working Conditions Survey

**Institution:** 1) Ministry of Labour and Social Policy; 2) Working Conditions Fund

**Type of organisation:** Governmental

**Editions:** 2005 (but a similar survey was carried out in 2001 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions)

**Next forecasted edition:** Not forecasted

**Objectives:** To collect data in order to outline:

- labour force structure by sector, forms of employment, and demographic indicators;
- impact of key elements of nature of work - technologies, location of work, link between working and external environment;
- exposure to physical risks;
- work organisation;
- length of working hours;
- employees' participation, information and consultation;
- discrimination and violence at work;
- impact of work on health status, duration of sick leave;
- reconciliation of working and non-working life.

**Territorial scope:** National

**Population:** 7,761,049 as of 31 December 2004

**Sample:** Sampling strategy - representative two-stage cluster sample. The first stage involved the selection of the number and location of clusters proportionally to population size in all 28 regions of the country (100 clusters). In the second stage, individual respondents were selected by the 'Leslie Kish' method, providing equal chances of representing the population by sex and age.

Register used: Voting sheets, updated by the government administration for the purposes of the June 2005 parliamentary elections

**Sample size:** 1,002 people of working population, aged 18+ years (i.e. students, retired and unemployed people)

are excluded)

Group discussions: 32 persons (three focus groups comprising heterogeneous respondents)

**Response rate:** 95%; refusals were replaced by people selected through the 'Leslie Kish' method until the full size of the planned sample was reached (i.e. 100%)

**Interviews:** Face-to-face standardised interview

**Location of interviews:** At home

**Subjects considered in the questionnaire:** Working conditions and quality of life

**Bibliographical references:** Not available yet, but a publication in Bulgarian is envisaged

**Website:** <http://www.mlsp.government.bg/en/>

**Information and raw data accessible to the public:** Upon legitimate request

**Questionnaire:** Available on request (in Bulgarian, adapted version of Foundation questionnaire)

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