

Slovenia's anti-harassment policies in the EU context

Research note

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The present research note offers a basic overview of central anti-harassment and anti-maltreatment programs implemented by the Slovene government in the policy area for the promotion of a safe and healthy workplace. Here, I will briefly introduce anti-harassment campaigns and programs that have been adopted mainly through the European Union (EU) policy platform. Slovenia as a member state of the EU has been actively cooperating in several EU sponsored programs and campaigns that have been introduced through the past decade. One of the purposes of this overview is also to clarify how concepts, such as harassment and workers maltreatment are understood in Slovenia and what kind of policy initiatives have been developed in order to improve the safety and health conditions of the Slovene working environment.

The government of Slovenia treats anti-harassment policies as an important pillar of its efforts to promote a healthy and safe working environment. According to the Republic of Slovenia Ministry for Labor, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, a healthy work place is indispensable for sustaining any kind of productive and prospering (public or private) social organization.¹ In this regard, harassment and workers' maltreatment are perceived as serious health and safety issues that endanger any kind of productive and healthy work environment. They are conceptualized as psychosocial risks and recent studies conducted in the EU, especially among women, have shown mental health issues due to a problematic working environment having been on the rise.² Among key factors that have been proven to deteriorate mental health, all forms of harassment and workers' maltreatment tend to be predominant. Other factors include physical and verbal violence, threats with violence and discrimination. This can further lead to more serious organizational issues. If a company or institution does not deal with psychosocial risks timely and effectively, workers' health tends to deteriorate, leading to absenteeism, higher stress levels and lower productivity (and profitability) of the organization.³ Harassment of all kinds has been recognized as a serious health threat in Europe.

The Slovene government defines harassment as any form of unwanted behavior, related to any kind of personal circumstances, that is meant to hurt the dignity of a person, or to establish a threatening, hostile, shaming, humiliating or insulting work environment.⁴ Compared to this, the EU social partners in the *Framework Agreement on Harassment and Violence at Work* (2007) argues more concretely that "harassment occurs when one or more workers or

managers are repeatedly and deliberately abused, threatened and/or humiliated in circumstances relating to work.”⁵

Recently, sexual harassment as a subcategory has been receiving considerable publicity, mostly due to the US originated #Me-too Movement that gradually spread globally. In defining sexual harassment, the Slovene government has followed the EU standard as is expressed in the European Directive 2002/73/EC.⁶ Slovene government identifies sexual harassment in the workplace as any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. Although, maltreatment is a psychosocial risk factor closely tied to harassment, it is defined differently. According to the Slovene authorities, maltreatment in the workplace is constituted by any repetitive or systematically targeted negative, insulting, treatment of an individual worker and his/her work performance.⁷

It is interesting to note that the Slovenian ministry of labor conceptualizes harassment and worker maltreatment issues by citing the famous study on mobbing and psychological terror at the workplace conducted by Dr. Heinz Leymann in the 1990s.⁸ Other representative studies referred by the ministry include, for example, research on workers' participation in the management of occupational safety by Xabier Irastorza,⁹ the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EUROFOUND) and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) report on psychosocial risks in Europe¹⁰ and the EU-OSHA study on workplace violence and harassment.¹¹ Especially, this last study claims that violence, harassment, and maltreatment became a prevalent feature of the European workplace. According to a rough estimate, between 5% to 20% of European workers have at a certain time been exposed to violence or harassment at work. Another study by EUROFOUND is even more alarming. It claims that teachers and other professionals working in the educational sector tend to be exposed to the highest levels of (physical and nonphysical) violence in the workplace. The report argues that more than 20% teachers in Austria, Belgium, France, Luxembourg, UK, Denmark and Ireland have been exposed to various levels of threats of violence. The report further claims that “both the levels and the variation of exposure to violence by gender and age group are greater for those working in the education sector than for the labor force as a whole.”¹²

Based on EU guidelines and programs, Slovenia has been actively cooperating with European agencies and implementing several European initiatives in the area of anti-harassment policies aimed at improving the working conditions. With financial support from the EU, the Slovene Clinical Center has been running a national project “*Vital for Work*” that also covers harassment and maltreatment in the workplace.¹³ Among other things in 2008, the Clinical Center conducted the first nationwide survey on the predominance of harassment in various industrial sectors. The processing industry scored the highest levels (28%) of maltreatment among all industries.¹⁴

In 2012, a special EUROFOUND report entitled *Psychosocial Risks in the Workplace in Slovenia* analyzed “several aspects of working conditions, including physical environment, workplace design, working hours, work organization and social relationships in the workplace, and on a Slovenian special module exploring experiences of mobbing, harassment and bullying at the workplace.”¹⁵ The findings of the report suggested that Slovenian companies could do more for the improvement of the working environment.

In 2014-2015, Slovenia participated in the European campaign *Healthy Workplaces*, which included a special module on the posttraumatic stress related to harassment and maltreatment at the workplace. The campaign's main aim has been to educate employers and workers on the psychosocial risks, including harassment, and their impact on the workers' health. The campaign also offered tools and strategies to employers to help them improve the workplace environment and reduce the before mentioned risks.¹⁶

Dissemination of information and relevant EU publications related to anti-harassment and maltreatment at work has been another important activity of the Slovene labor authorities. Expert labor agencies, such as the Labor Inspectorate of Slovenia organized a special conference on harassment that was focused on the legal aspects of the issue. Additionally, several EU-OSHA bulletins have been published among which a special factsheet on intimidation at work¹⁷ and an expert opinion sheet on the link between psychosocial risk and health¹⁸ deserve special mentioning.

As we can see, harassment as a psychosocial risk has been gradually given more and more attention by the Slovenian labor authorities. This has been partly linked to the growing importance of the anti-harassment policies and initiatives originating on the EU level. Harassment as a form of (psychological) violence threatens the wellbeing not just of the targeted person but of the entire organization. As such, it has been identified as a major threat in the workplace. This brief research note was first of all an attempt to document the overall policy framework of the anti-harassment programs implemented by the Slovene labor authorities. Second, it offers a general overview of concepts and anti-harassment programs implemented in Slovenia through the past decade. It also identifies new issues that could be of interests for more focused research. For example, the high prevalence of harassment and other types of violence in the European educational sector could offer an interesting starting point for a wider international comparison of the same problem in other regions and sectors around the globe.

Notes

- 1 Republika Slovenija MDDSZ, “Nadlegovanje in Trpinčenje Na Delovnem Mestu | Portal Za Varnost in Zdravje Pri Delu,” accessed January 4, 2019, <http://www.osha.mddsz.gov.si/varnost-in-zdravje-pri-delu/informacije-po-temah/psihosocialna-tveganja/nadlegovanje-in-trpincenje-na-delovnem-mestu>.
- 2 For example, see European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, “Violence against Women: An EU-Wide Survey. Main Results Report,” accessed January 4, 2019, <https://fra>

- europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report.
- 3 Republika Slovenija MDDSZ, "Splošno o Psihosocialnih Tveganjih | Portal Za Varnost in Zdravje Pri Delu," accessed January 4, 2019, <http://www.osha.mddsz.gov.si/varnost-in-zdravje-pri-delu/informacije-po-temah/psihosocialna-tveganja/splosno-o-psihosocialnih-tveganjih>.
 - 4 Republika Slovenija MDDSZ, "Nadlegovanje in Trpinčenje Na Delovnem Mestu | Portal Za Varnost in Zdravje Pri Delu."
 - 5 EU-OSHA, "Framework Agreement on Harassment and Violence at Work — Safety and Health at Work — EU-OSHA," 2007, <https://osha.europa.eu/en/legislation/guidelines/framework-agreement-on-harassment-and-violence-at-work>.
 - 6 Directive 2002/73/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 September 2002 amending Council Directive 76/207/EEC on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion, and working conditions.
 - 7 Republika Slovenija MDDSZ, "Nadlegovanje in Trpinčenje Na Delovnem Mestu | Portal Za Varnost in Zdravje Pri Delu."
 - 8 Heinz Leymann, "Mobbing and Psychological Terror at Workplaces," *Violence and Victims*, vol. 5, 1990, [http://www.mobbingportal.com/LeymannV&V1990\(3\).pdf](http://www.mobbingportal.com/LeymannV&V1990(3).pdf).
 - 9 Xavier Irastorza, "Worker Participation in the Management of Occupational Safety and Health in Europe-Evidence from ESENER-2," accessed January 4, 2019, www.esener.eu.
 - 10 EUROFOUND, "Psychosocial Risks in Europe: Prevalence and Strategies for Prevention," accessed January 4, 2019, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2014/eu-member-states/working-conditions/psychosocial-risks-in-europe-prevalence-and-strategies-for-prevention>.
 - 11 EU-OSHA, "Workplace Violence and Harassment: A European Picture," 2010, doi:10.2802/12198.
 - 12 EUROFOUND, "Violence in the Education Sector," accessed January 4, 2019, <http://www.ewco.eurofound.europa.eu>.
 - 13 UKC Ljubljana, "Čili Za Delo," accessed January 4, 2019, <http://www.cilizadelo.si/>.
 - 14 UKC Ljubljana, "Razširjenost Trpinčenja Na Delovnem Mestu v Sloveniji 2008 | Čili Za Delo," accessed January 4, 2019, <http://www.cilizadelo.si/razsirjenost-trpincenja-na-delovnem-mestu-v-sloveniji-2008.html>.
 - 15 EUROFOUND, "Psychosocial Risks in the Workplace in Slovenia," 2012, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2012/slovenia/working-conditions/psychosocial-risks-in-the-workplace-in-slovenia>.
 - 16 Republika Slovenija MDDSZ, "Evropska Kampanja Zdravo Delovno Okolje 2014-2015 | Portal Za Varnost in Zdravje Pri Delu," accessed January 4, 2019, <http://www.osha.mddsz.gov.si/kampanje/evropska-kampanja-zdravo-delovno-okolje-2014-2015>.
 - 17 Evropska agencija za varnost in zdravje pri delu, "Ustrahovanje Na Delovnem Mestu," accessed January 5, 2019, http://www.osha.mddsz.gov.si/resources/files/pdf/Factsheet_23_-_Ustrahovanje_na_delovnem_mestu.pdf.

- 18 Evropska agencija za varnost in zdravje pri delu, "Predvidevanje Strokovnjakov o Nastajajočih Psihosocialnih Tveganjih, Ki so Povezana z Varnostjo in Zdravjem Pri Delu," accessed January 5, 2019, http://www.osha.mddsz.gov.si/resources/files/pdf/Factsheet_74_-_Predvidevanje_strokovnjakov_o_nastajajocih_psihosocialnih_tveganjih_ki_so_povezana_z_arnostjo_in_zdravjem_pri_delu.pdf.

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