

UNIONISATION IN THE BALTIC COUNTRIES

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INTRODUCTION

In both international and Finnish research on labour relations, issues of unionisation and relations between the social partners have been approached largely from the standpoint of the institutions involved in them. This article brings a complementary and, at the same time, critical perspective to the study of unionisation and labour market relations. The various aspects are examined from the point of view of ordinary working wage earners. The topic of the study is the development of unionisation in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania during the years 1996 – 2002.

The labour market system in the Baltic countries has not yet developed into its final form; the question here is to examine the process by which that system is taking shape. The article is based on empirical interview data about changes in the quality of working life, gathered in 1996, 1998 and 2002. The 1996 material concerns Estonia and the St. Petersburg area. The last two sets of data include all three Baltic countries. Regarding changes in Estonia's unionisation, therefore, the information available for use dates from three points in time rather than two. Otherwise, the sets of data are fully comparable between the countries.

The results reveal that the reform has been a slow and difficult one. The process of unionisation has in fact had to go through a rock-bottom phase and start almost from scratch: it has been more a question of building on a completely new foundation, rather than a reforming of old organisations. Estonia is the only Baltic country where the rock-bottom stage is over and something new is developing. There are many obstacles to such development and, despite efforts made, an increase in unionisation and the establishment of a functional labour market system may still take years. Besides unionisation, the article examines agreement practices at the workplaces and wage earners' views on trade unions.

Perspectives on the study of labour relations

The main emphasis in research on unionisation in recent years has been to examine the activities of the institutions and organisations involved. A popular approach both in Finland and elsewhere has been to study the system of relations in working life as a whole, or the labour market models in different countries (e.g. Huemer et al. 1999, Kauppinen 1992). Of course, research on the significance and activities of labour market institutions and organisations includes also their membership. The realisation of such organisations' objectives depends on the weight carried by those organisations and, at the same time, on the acceptance and support that the members give to the activities concerned.

Although many still see the central task of labour market organisations as being the formation of their members' interests into collective goals or objectives, this is only one of the components involved. The organisations have to take into account not only the interests of their membership, but also the activities of the whole society. (Cf. Huemer et al. 1999, Traxler 2001, Streeck 1997.) Increasingly often, the participants in labour relations include not only the employer and employee organisations but also the state, and - in recent years - the EU as well.

In the last few years, a lot of prominence has been given to a research approach which deals with the interaction between the various social partners and the level of that interaction, examining these aspects from the perspective of corporatism. Timo Kauppinen (1996), for example, has identified various phases of corporatism in the Finnish labour markets. These

include the phases of company corporatism, union corporatism and even eurocorporatism. The corporatistic approach applies well to a situation where the various interest organisations make mutual agreements in co-operation with the state - agreements that take into account not only the interests and benefits of the social partners, but also requirements that concern the entire national economy. Such agreements have often been called tripartite agreements. In the Baltic countries, there have been efforts in this direction; but in practice, the fact that the labour market systems are not firmly established is an inherent hindrance to the development of a tripartite negotiation system. This being so, then neither are the corporatism theories viable in themselves in the situation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

In Finland, there are also recently published research studies that approach unionisation purely from the wage earners' point of view. Examples of these are a study by Kaj Ilmonen and Kimmo Kevätsalo (1995) analysing the terms of legitimacy of those involved, or an analysis by Pertti Jokivuori (2002) of wage earners' 'dual commitment' in the trade unions and in their workplace. Several trade unions in Finland regularly gather information from their own members.

The research traditions focusing on labour relations systems are not very applicable to the study of labour market activities in the Baltic nations. The main reason is that in these countries, formerly part of Eastern Europe, functional labour market relations are still 'under construction'. Furthermore, this construction work is still in its beginning stages compared with that in most Western European countries, whose labour market relations have a background tradition that is decades long and, in many cases, has undergone many stages of transition. In Western debate concerning the parties involved in the labour market, there is in addition at least one crucial shortcoming when speaking of the countries that regained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The debate does not take into account the fact that these nations have strong, but completely different (socialist) trade union traditions.

The tradition of socialist trade unions

In 1996, Riitta Lavikka (1996, 125-137) wrote about her experiences related to the research co-operation of that time. One thing that she noted was how really difficult it was for Finns - whose conceptual framework included strong trade unions - to realise that Estonian workers lacked nearly all forms of co-operation of a kind that could help them defend their interests. In most respects, Lavikka's observation is still valid.

In the Baltic nations, too, as in all the former socialist countries, trade unions have long (socialist) traditions. What is involved here is not, however, a simple process of change during which the former organisations are adapting to the new conditions. This is because the structures of the socialist era represented an entirely different model in comparison with Western trade unions.

The trade unions of socialist times had a completely different status and role compared with those of Western countries. The socialist unions were called 'schools of communism'. This title was not a mere nickname given by the people. It dated right back to the early years of the socialist revolution. For example, in a party conference document published in 1921, whose title when translated is 'On the Role and Tasks of Trade Unions', the most important task of the trade unions was stated as being the very one just implied. It was stipulated that everyone should be accepted as members irrespective of political or other background (just as they were after the earlier capitalist system).

The socialist trade unions had to attend to matters relating to the workers' life and everyday routine - regularly and to a wide extent, both at the workplaces and outside of them. The aim was to take as good care as possible of the material and mental needs of the working masses, so that, at the same time, the millions who did not belong to the communist party would be brought around to the party's point of view. (Op. cit. p. 2-3.)

At the workaday level, however, 'looking after the fulfilment of the workers' interests' was a more problematic affair. The trade unions had specific tasks - for example, to distribute various goods and other commodities to the workers. The spectrum was broad, from hygiene products to holidays or new-year gifts for people who had retired from the workplace. In the Baltic countries, though, unlike certain others, seeing to the distribution of foodstuffs was not one of the trade unions' tasks. On the other hand, the distribution of (a few) cars or colour televisions, for instance, was their responsibility.¹ Taken as a whole, the tasks of the trade union organisations at the workplaces brought to mind Western social policy, supplemented with the obligations relating to product distribution to workers.

In practice, the trade unions were part of the management of the workplaces, and they functioned as channels from the top downwards. As a general rule, their clerical staff were chosen by the party; and this being so, it can be said - with only a slight risk of exaggeration - that they were not at all dependent on their members. The trade unions' task was to endeavour to integrate the workers into 'socialist industrial collectives'. The conception of the unions as a top-down channel and their status as part of the management is a very strong one, which appears to have still remained after the collapse of the Soviet Union, despite the quite rapid disintegration of the old trade union movement. Zabrodin (1996, 8-9) describes the change in Russia as one in which - alongside the democratisation requirements that applied to the whole society - ideas of democracy in production operations, too, spread into working life. On this basis, for example, councils and other similar bodies were established in the work collectives. At first, especially at large workplaces, the manager of the workplace or company was often chosen to lead such councils.

The rapid spread of the market economy and the privatisation of companies led quickly to atrophy in the position of the old trade unions, both economically and operationally. This article takes a look at the years 1996 – 2002. What took the place of the socialist trade unions, and how did unionisation change?

There are two key questions to be asked in connection with such a change. In the first place, the trade unions undergoing reform must gain both the confidence of the membership and a legitimate status in society as a whole. The problem is: can the old system can still change - in other words, is metamorphosis possible - or is it necessary to start again completely from scratch? Another important question is: what kind of conception do people have of the trade union movement? This issue, too, is linked to a drastic change. It is clear that the idea, held for decades, of the trade unions as 'communism schools' managed from the top down no longer applies today. In the market economy, there is no basis for the former role of the trade unions and nearly all their former accustomed ways of operating have lost their significance. For many people, at the everyday level, the question of what the present-day trade unions are, in actual fact, remains an open one. What are their tasks, what use are they, and why should one join them? In any case, it is evident that what has been involved is a complete break

¹ We thank Malle Kindel from the Ministry of Social Affairs of Estonia for valuable comments made.

rather than a transformation, because the socialist trade unions constituted a separate model of their own, which differed very considerably from that of the Western trade union organisations and their role in the system of labour market relations (cf. Alanen 2003, 221).

What do the labour market organisations need members for?

A discussion of unionisation and relations in working life from the perspective of ordinary wage earners presupposes that the idea of ordinary workers' privileges and interests being mediated through the trade unions is accepted, at least in part (for more detail on mediation of interests, see e.g. Korpi 1983, 102 - 222). This is not, however, something that can be taken for granted. The history of labour market systems in various countries reveals numerous examples of how the union members have only been a hindrance, or have even prevented the organisations from operating. Underlying this has often been a situation that has come to a head politically, one in which there has been an attempt to harness unionisation for the purpose of attaining other goals. (See Haataja 1993, 54-102.) Other examples of breakdown between the wage earners' interests and the organisations are the violation of agreements made; their interpretation in a way that is unfavourable to the members; or the fact that agreements remain on paper only, with no-one caring about or taking responsibility for their implementation.

The viability of a functional collective system of negotiation and agreement presupposes a certain representativeness and legitimacy of the institutions involved, as they attempt to reach agreement about issues on behalf of, and in the name of, a large group of wage earners. According to Ilmonen and Kevätsalo (1995, 13-14), three factors are required for the success of trade unions' agreement objectives: 1) a sufficiently large membership and sectoral coverage, 2) sufficient activity on the part of the members, and satisfactory relations between the members and the formal organisation of the trade union movement, 3) the fact that others besides the members (in other words, the ordinary citizens) see the trade union activities as justified. In the situation of the Baltic nations, all these conditions are problematic. This article presents a factual examination as to what kind of justification and members' support those countries' nascent system of working life relations has gained, and how it has changed during the years 1996 – 2002.

Some of the presentations at the International Industrial Relations Association (IIRA) conference, held in 1997, dealt with labour relations in the Eastern European countries. In a book published on the basis of the seminar, Casale (1997, 3-14) summarises the central message of the presentations. He notes that the labour relations situation has not become stabilised as yet. In spite of that, many organisations set up by employees' representatives and by employers have been very active politically - in putting forward law proposals, for instance. They have also had a substantial influence on the general politics of their countries, and even on the regaining of independence. Many of them have been involved for years in the work of international co-operation organisations. As a consequence of such activities, numerous direct linkages have also been formed between the trade unions and political parties. In Estonia, for instance, two chairpersons of one of the two central trade union federations, EAKL, have been elected as members of parliament from the lists of the party called *Möödukad*. At the moment (in summer 2003), the current chairperson of EAKL is acting until the autumn both as chairperson of the central federation and as a member of parliament. Direct mutual linkage of a trade union and one political party, with other parties' possible consequent loss of supporters, has not been seen as a problem.

Nevertheless, the main problem has been, almost without exception: who do these organisations really represent? Both the employer and wage earner organisations lack the kind of structures that would ensure their representativeness and would support the daily handling of labour relations. The result has been that issues of working life have either been negotiated and decided in a centralised manner at an upper level via legislation, or they have remained subject purely to individual agreements at the workplace level. This being so, the social dialogue between representative organisations that the EU among others is aiming at, is not practically materialising at all.

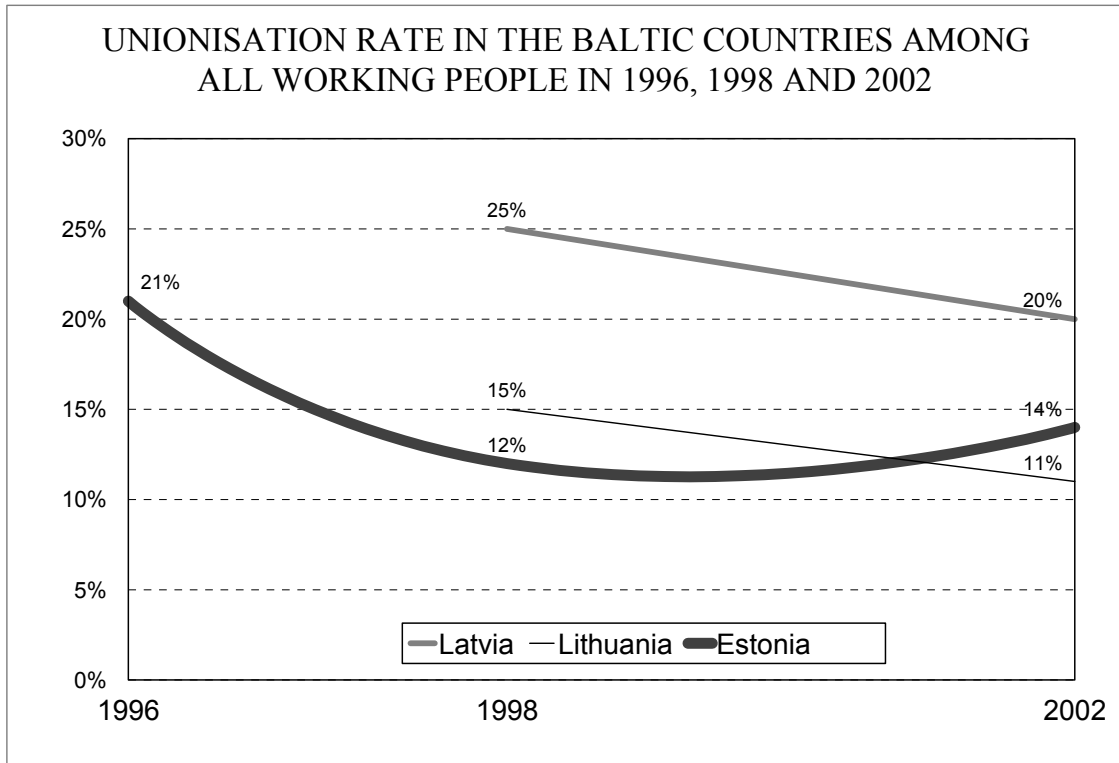
EMPIRICAL SECTION: UNIONISATION IN THE BALTIC COUNTRIES DURING 1996 - 2002

In this section, we will first look at changes in the unionisation rate, as well as the membership profile of the trade unions, in the Baltic countries in the latter half of the 1990s and the initial years of the current decade. We will then examine how and at what level agreements have been made at the workplaces concerning matters relating to wages, holidays, the content of employment contracts, occupational safety aspects, and working hours. To conclude the empirical section, we will consider wage earners' views on the trade unions.

Research material on unionisation was gathered in Estonia in 1996, 1998 and 2002 as part of sets of data on changes in the quality of working life. For Estonia, representative and mutually comparable cross-sectional data from all these three years are available for use. As to Latvia and Lithuania, corresponding information is available only for the years 1998 and 2002. In each of the years concerned, local market research institutions interviewed working wage earners at the respondents' homes, using a questionnaire form. The form was prepared by working groups which included local experts on working life as well as Finnish researchers (for more detail, see Rahikainen & Ylöstalo 1997, Antila & Ylöstalo 1999 and 2003). The languages used in the interviewing were Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Russian.

Unionisation rate and trade union membership profile

In both Latvia and Lithuania, the number of members in the trade union movement has further decreased. Of the countries compared, membership of a union is still the most typical in Latvia. There, nevertheless, only one in five wage earners stated that they belonged to a union. In the other two countries, Lithuania and Estonia, membership is still rarer. Now, only about one in ten wage earners in Lithuania is a union member. Estonia is the only Baltic country where trade union activity appears to have reached its lowest level already, because the rate of unionisation had risen slightly during the three-year period 1999-2001. Despite the change in the Estonian trend, the number of members is still a long way from the 1996 level, for example: then, over one-fifth of the wage earners belonged to a trade union.



Estonia: N=911 (1998), N=900 (2002)

Latvia: N=921 (1998), N=904 (2002)

Lithuania: N=901 (1998), N=909 (2002)

An examination according to age groups sheds additional light on the unionisation issue. In Latvia, the fall in membership has involved all the age groups. The greatest relative decrease has been among young people, whose rate of unionisation (8 %) is about half that of the previous survey. It is still true in Latvia that the older the age group in question, the greater the likelihood of belonging to a trade union.

In Lithuania, no significant changes have taken place in unionisation among the under-50s in recent years. By contrast, in the case of workers who are 50 years old or older, the change has been really dramatic. In three years, the rate of unionisation among the oldest age group in Lithuania has dropped from 20 % to 8 %. Ageing workers' mass resignation from Lithuania's trade union movement is an interesting phenomenon, and the reasons influencing it should be studied in more detail. It is also possible that there has been no real mass exodus of ageing employees from the trade unions in Lithuania, but rather that ageing union members have merely exited from working life - into either retirement or unemployment. According to the Lithuanian statistics centre (<http://www.std.lt/STATISTIKA>), the rate of employment among 16-64 year olds in 1998 was 62.3 % and three years later (in 2001) 57.7 %, in other words there has been a clear decrease. In this survey, the data were gathered only from persons involved in working life. It is thus entirely possible that ageing trade union members could have exited from working life more generally than other ageing persons. If this is so, it would be interesting to investigate the phenomenon further. What cause or causes have led to this? Whatever the reasons for the change, it is clear that working ageing employees do not belong to the trade union movement as commonly as three years ago.

In Estonia, as in Lithuania, there have been no changes in unionisation of the under-50s. One detail worthy of especial note is that in the 30 year old and 30-49 year old age groups, the rates of unionisation were precisely the same as three years earlier (7 and 15 per cent). On the other hand, the trend among the ageing workers has been completely opposite to that in Lithuania, because the unionisation rate for employees aged 50 years and over has risen clearly in recent years and is now 19 %.

The entirely opposite trend in trade union membership of ageing workers in Lithuania compared with Estonia has affected the average age of members, too. Because unionisation amongst the oldest age group in Lithuania has clearly decreased, also the average age of members has fallen by two years and is now 40. The increased rate of unionisation in Estonia has been due only to wage earners in the oldest age group joining the trade unions, and this has had an ageing effect on the membership profile. The average age of the members in Estonia is the highest in the Baltic countries: 45 years. In Latvia, change has not taken place in specific age groups to the same extent as in the other two countries, and so the average age of the members is exactly the same as in the previous survey (43 years).

Of the countries compared, trade union membership is the most typical in Latvia. This is also the only Baltic country where there are no differences in membership generality between the national citizens and other nationalities. Seen from the nationality perspective, the trade union movement represents the whole of the working population to the same extent, 20 %. One-fifth of both the Latvians and the Russians living in Latvia belong to a trade union. In both groups, unionisation has been on the decline in recent years.

In Lithuania, too, the rate of unionisation among both the Lithuanian wage earners and those of other nationalities has been falling. There, however, it has been a little greater among the "other nationalities" (that is, the Russians, Poles and Belorussians) to belong to a trade union than among the Lithuanians. The unionisation of "other nationalities" in Lithuania is nevertheless clearly less common than in Latvia and Estonia. Regarding the question of nationality,² it must be remembered that other nationalities form a considerably smaller proportion of the population in Lithuania than in the other two Baltic countries.

The Estonian situation differs from the rest in that at the beginning of 2002, as stated above, a greater proportion of the workers belonged to a trade union than at the end of 1998. The membership increase consisted mainly of ageing Russian employees. The unionisation rate among the Estonians was only 10 %, and the increase compared with the previous barometer was a mere one per cent. Of the different nationalities in the Baltic countries, the Russians in Estonia are the most widely unionised. Almost a quarter of them belong to a trade union.

There has been a general drop in membership in Latvia and Lithuania, since the unionisation rates among both the national citizens and the representatives of "other nationalities", and among both the men and the women, have decreased. Although about one-quarter of the women do still belong to the trade union movement in Latvia, the proportion has clearly fallen - by eight per cent in three years. The increased extent of membership in Estonia applies to both the men and the women.

² In Lithuania, 791 Lithuanians and 118 representatives of other nationalities were interviewed for the study. In Latvia, 522 Latvians and 382 workers of other nationalities were interviewed. In Estonia, 595 Estonians and 305 employees of other nationalities responded to the survey.

In all the Baltic countries, trade union membership is clearly more usual among public-sector employees than those in the private sector. It can be said that the trade union movement has not been able to legitimate itself in the eyes of private-sector wage earners. While eight per cent of the private-sector workers in Latvia and Estonia are members, the corresponding percentage in Lithuania has dropped sharply to five per cent. In Latvia and Lithuania, the membership decrease has affected both the private and the public sector. In Estonia, by contrast, no change has taken place in the rate of unionisation in the private sector; the growth is due solely to increased involvement on the part of public-sector employees. Thus, the new members in Estonia are typically ageing workers in the public sector, and they are more frequently of Russian nationality than Estonian.

AGREEMENT PRACTICES

The working people interviewed were asked whether they negotiated principally on an individual or a collective level concerning matters connected with wages, holidays, the duration of the employment contract, occupational safety, and daily/weekly working hours. It is possible for both individual and collective negotiations to be conducted on some or several of these matters. If this was the case, the respondent had to select which of the negotiation practices was more important. The agreement practices are not examined here from a juridical perspective. Instead, the aim is to convey a picture of how the working people interpret agreement negotiations concerning themselves as taking place. In addition, to the above, the working people were asked what agreement practice (level of agreement) they considered desirable when dealing with the aforementioned aspects.

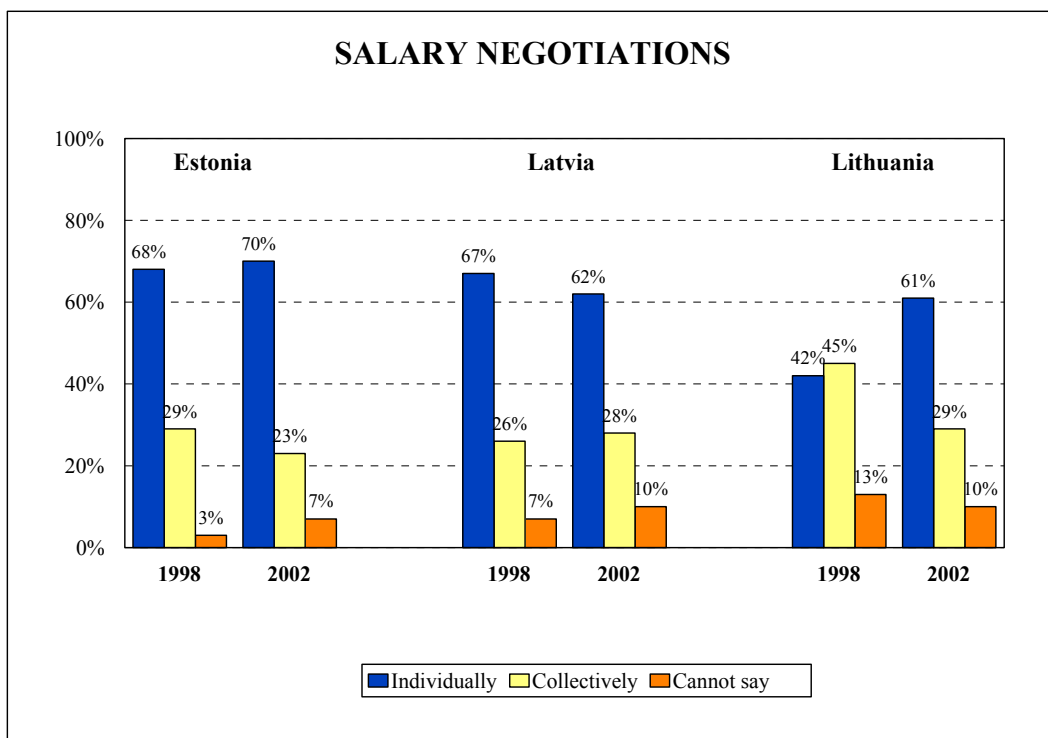
Wage and salary issues

In all the countries, wage negotiations are generally taken care of individually. Well over half of the respondents said that as a general rule they negotiated alone about matters concerning their wages. In Lithuania, there has been a very strong trend towards more individual methods of negotiation. At the end of 1998, more employees in Lithuania stated that they usually negotiated their wages collectively, rather than individually. At the beginning of 2002, there has been a very strong shift in emphasis towards individual agreement on wages. This trend in Lithuania is probably linked to the increased difficulties in paying wages, as well as the growing incidence of unregistered work and other negative phenomena. The shift in the direction of individual wage agreement is an interesting phenomenon from the research standpoint, because at the end of 1998 over half the Lithuanians hoped that wages would be negotiated more collectively than was the case at that time, and only one per cent hoped for more individuality in the agreement practices³. The actual trend in Lithuania has been quite the opposite of what the employees had, on the whole, wished for. It can therefore be assumed that the wage earners have more or less *ended up having to* agree on their wage matters individually. In the event that one does not trust in collective bargaining and its currently prevailing possibilities or procedures, then it may be wisest to rely on one's own negotiation skills. Perhaps for this reason, the Lithuanian answers reflect a subtle contradiction: despite the hopes of collective bargaining, about half the employees nevertheless believe that it is wisest to negotiate wages oneself as a general rule.

³ At the end of 1998, 56 % of Lithuania's wage earners were hoping for more collective bargaining negotiations on wage issues. In Latvia, 50 % of the wage earners took a similar view; and in Estonia, 46 %. More individual negotiations were desired by 1 % of Lithuania's, 4 % of Latvia's and 4 % of Estonia's workers. The rest of the respondents were either unable to answer the question, or were satisfied with the prevailing practice.

In Estonia, too, there has been a slight increase in individual wage negotiations. These concern 70 % of the working people, which is a higher percentage than elsewhere in the Baltic countries. Individuality in the agreement culture is also esteemed more highly in Estonia than in the others. Of Estonians 61 % consider personal agreement negotiations as the best way to resolve wage issues.

In Latvia, on the other hand, there has been a slight decrease in individuality, but almost two-thirds (62 %) of its working people still agree on their wage matters personally as a general rule. There, belief in the efficacy of national agreements on wage issues is a little more common than it is in Estonia and Lithuania. However, only 15 % of Latvia's working people see national agreements as the best way of deciding with regard to wages.



Wage and salary issues should be negotiated predominantly...

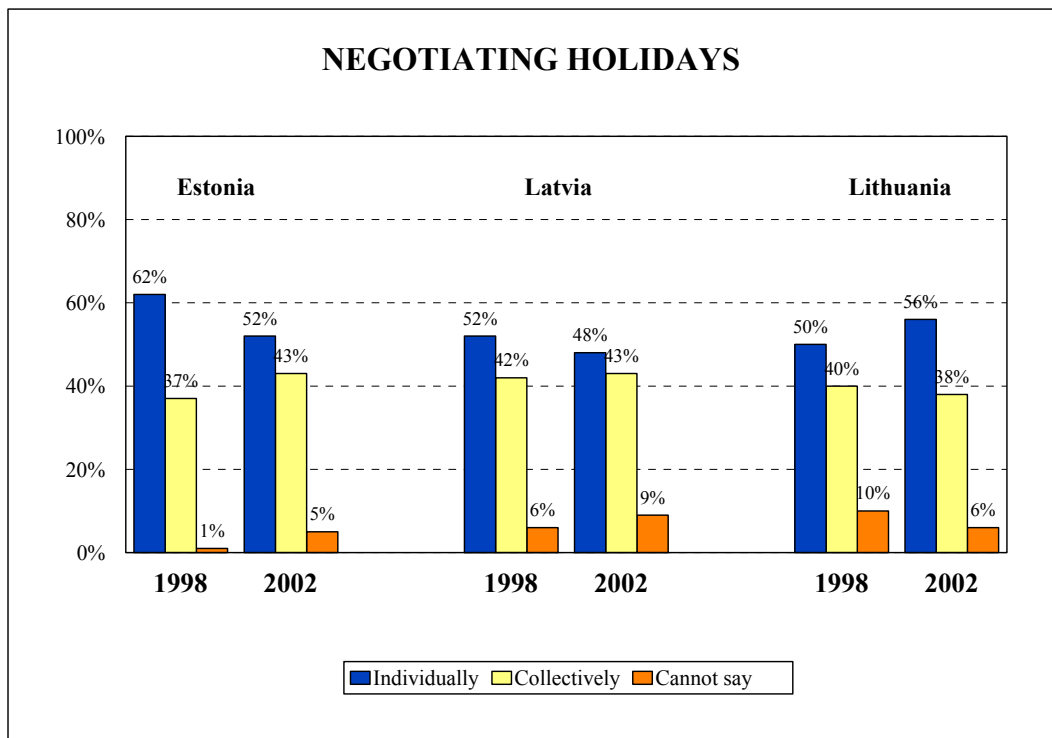
	ESTONIA	LATVIA	LITHUANIA
...individually	61 %	52 %	53 %
...at the workplace together with co-workers	19 %	21 %	23 %
...at the workplace by shop stewards	7 %	7 %	5 %
...at national level by labour market organisations	8 %	15 %	12 %
No opinion	5 %	5 %	7 %
<i>Total</i>	100 % (N=900)	100 % (N=904)	100 % (N=909)

Holidays

Holidays are negotiated collectively considerably more often than are wages. In Estonia and Latvia, the trend has been away from individual holiday agreements and towards collectively agreed solutions. Nevertheless, in both countries, where holidays are concerned, individual agreement is still more common than collective bargaining. In Estonia slightly over half

(52 %) and in Latvia slightly under half (48 %) of the working people arrange their holidays by individual negotiation. A majority of the employees in both countries would like some level of collective holiday agreements - most often at workplace level.

In this aspect, Lithuania differs markedly from the other countries under comparison. In recent years in Lithuania (unlike Estonia and Latvia), individual agreement on holiday matters has increased and collective bargaining on the subject has decreased. Individual holiday agreements are also seen as more desirable in Lithuania than in the other Baltic countries. In none of the countries is there any significant degree of support for national-level holiday agreements made by the social partners. Only 7 % of the Latvians and Lithuanians considered such centralised national solutions to be the best. In Estonia, still fewer (4 %) thought that way.



Holidays should be negotiated predominantly...

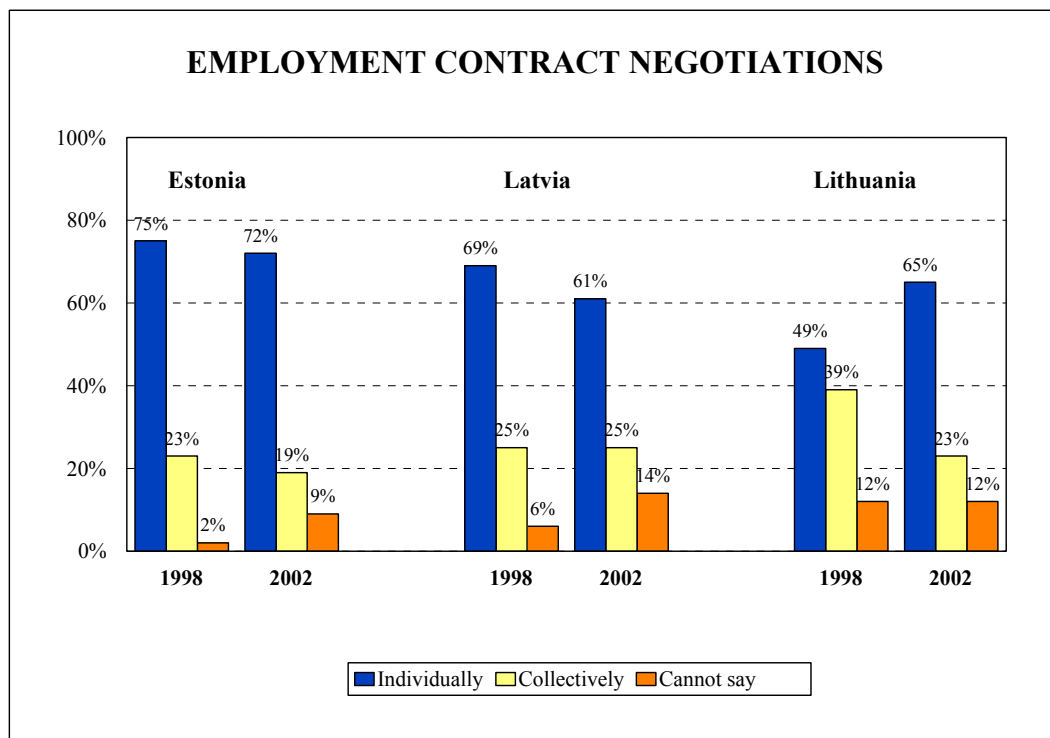
	ESTONIA	LATVIA	LITHUANIA
...individually	42 %	39 %	49 %
...at the workplace together with co-workers	44 %	42 %	34 %
...at the workplace by shop stewards	5 %	7 %	4 %
...at national level by labour market organisations	4 %	7 %	7 %
No opinion	5 %	5 %	6 %
<i>Total</i>	<i>100 %</i> <i>(N=900)</i>	<i>100 %</i> <i>(N=904)</i>	<i>100 %</i> <i>(N=909)</i>

Content and duration of employment contract

Concerning the content and duration of their employment contract, a majority of the working people in all three countries negotiate a personal agreement with their employer. However, in Estonia and Latvia, individual agreement on the subject shows a slight decline. In this, too,

the Lithuanian trend differs from that of the other countries under comparison: individual agreement in Lithuania has clearly increased in recent years.

Clearly, in all the Baltic countries, individual agreement activity regarding employment contracts takes place more than would be desired. In other words, a considerable number of workers feel that they end up having to agree themselves on the contracts, even though they would like to have collective solutions at some level. The same was also apparent in the case of wages and holiday arrangements. Lacking or limited opportunities for agreement evidently force many wage earners to make individual agreements. In Latvia, for example, out of those who had negotiated the content of their employment contract individually, 30 % considered some degree of collective negotiations to be a better solution.



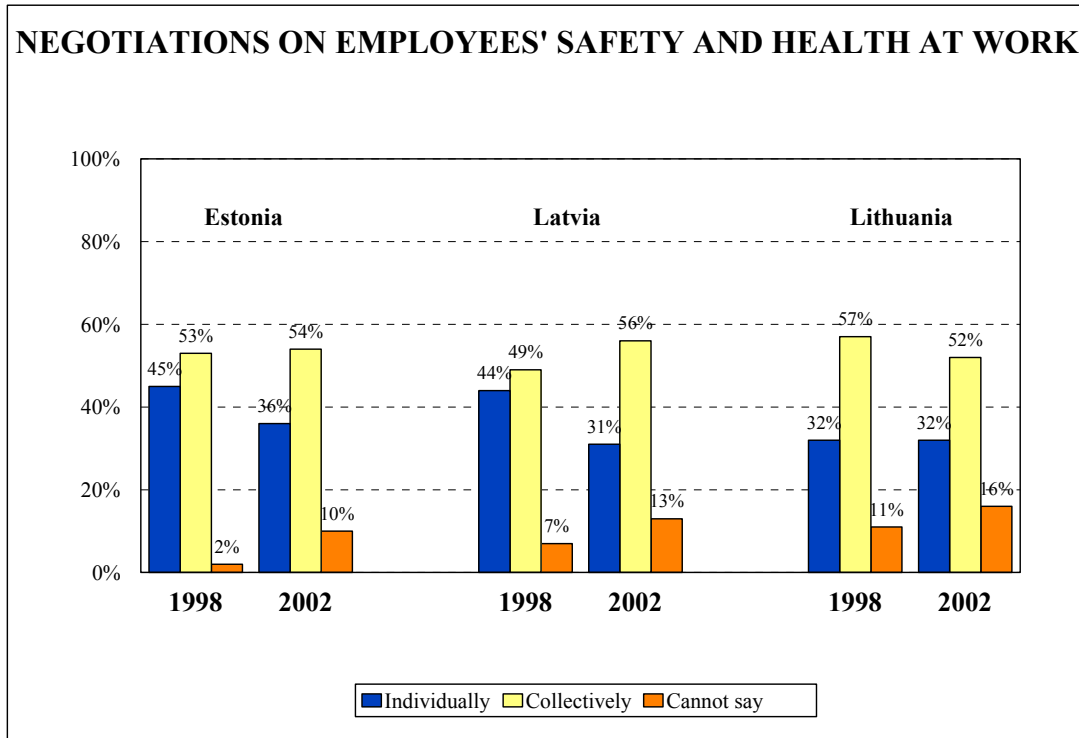
Employment contracts should be negotiated predominantly...

	ESTONIA	LATVIA	LITHUANIA
...individually	63 %	47 %	54 %
...at the workplace together with co-workers	17 %	25 %	22 %
...at the workplace by shop stewards	9 %	13 %	5 %
...at national level by labour market organisations	5 %	6 %	10 %
No opinion	6 %	9 %	9 %
<i>Total</i>	100 % (N=900)	100 % (N=904)	100 % (N=909)

Safety and health issues

Of the aspects under study, individual agreement is the least frequent of all in those connected with employees' safety and health at work. In all the Baltic countries, these matters are agreed on collectively more than individually. This was the case also during the previous survey in

1998. In Estonia and Latvia in recent years, collective bargaining on issues of safety and health at work has increased and individual agreement decreased. However, in this respect again, individual agreement takes place more than the employees would like. For example, only one in five working people in Estonia sees individual agreement negotiations on such questions as the best solution. More than one in three nevertheless agrees individually on matters of safety and health at work.



Employees' safety and health issues should be negotiated predominantly...

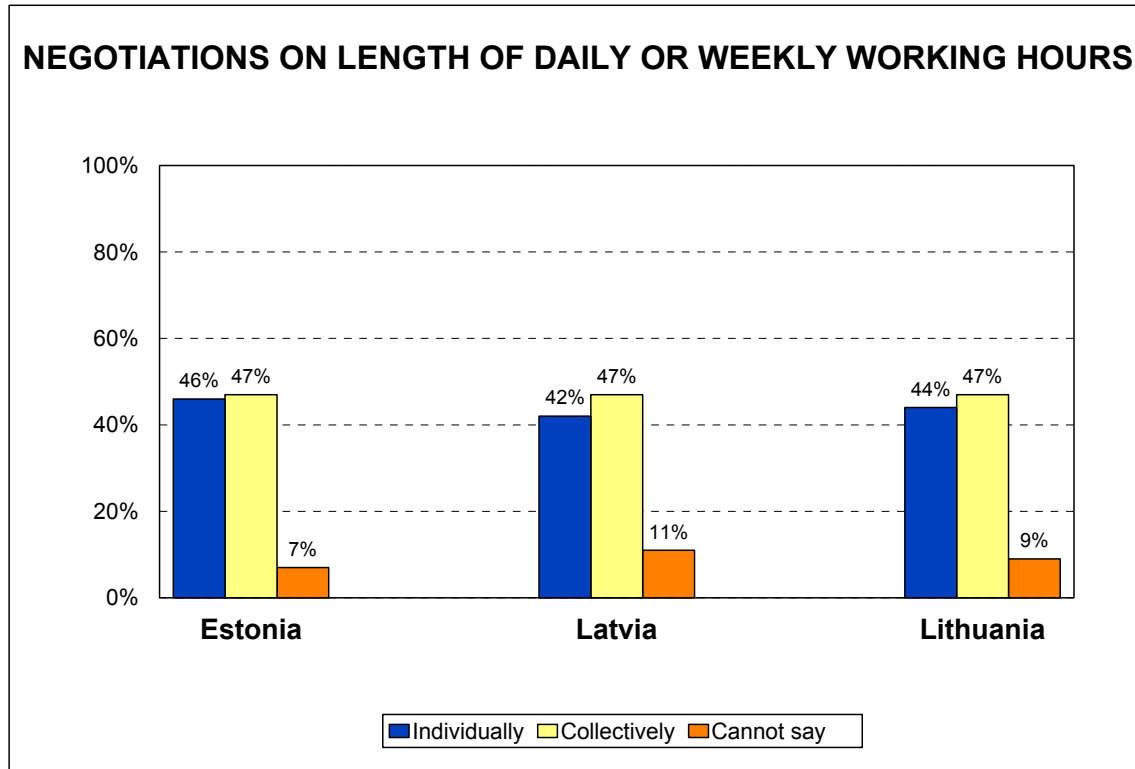
	ESTONIA	LATVIA	LITHUANIA
...individually	20 %	19 %	23 %
...at the workplace together with co-workers	48 %	43 %	41 %
...at the workplace by shop stewards	14 %	14 %	7 %
...at national level by labour market organisations	11 %	17 %	20 %
No opinion	7 %	7 %	9 %
<i>Total</i>	<i>100 %</i> <i>(N=900)</i>	<i>100 %</i> <i>(N=904)</i>	<i>100 %</i> <i>(N=909)</i>

The desire for collective bargaining is often related to workplace-level agreement. In all the countries, a little under half the wage earners would like to agree on work safety and health issues within the workplace, together with co-workers. On the other hand, among the issues compared, as far as safety and health at work is concerned there is in fact some degree of support also for centralised, national-level agreements - in other words, in the opinion of wage earners, there would clearly be room for more active effort by the trade unions in this respect.

Working hours

Working people negotiate their daily and weekly working hours collectively a little more often than individually. The differences in generality between these practices are nevertheless

small. On the whole, the employees would like more collectivity in negotiation procedures concerning working hours. Somewhat over one-third (36 %) of the workers in Lithuania, under one-third (31 %) in Estonia and a little more than one-quarter (27 %) in Latvia saw individual negotiations as the best solution - in other words, a clear majority would like some level of collective bargaining. Also in questions of working hours, many have to negotiate alone, against their will, since in all the Baltic countries almost half the wage earners negotiate their working hours themselves as a general rule.



Length of daily or weekly working hours should be negotiated predominantly...

	ESTONIA	LATVIA	LITHUANIA
...individually	31 %	27 %	36 %
...at the workplace together with co-workers	39 %	37 %	36 %
...at the workplace by shop stewards	12 %	11 %	6 %
...at national level by labour market organisations	12 %	18 %	15 %
No opinion	6 %	7 %	7 %
<i>Total</i>	<i>100 %</i> <i>(N=900)</i>	<i>100 %</i> <i>(N=904)</i>	<i>100 %</i> <i>(N=909)</i>

WAGE EARNERS' CONCEPTION OF TRADE UNIONS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

After the collapse of the old socialist trade unions, wage earners clearly have difficulties in forming a mental picture of the present-day trade unions and their activities. The old system has disintegrated, and workers are unable to properly visualise the new one slowly emerging in its place. Another reason for these difficulties is certainly that the position of the trade

unions is, on the whole, rather weak. This is seen in the fact that only those belonging to the unions have a relatively clear picture of them. Of the non-members, who are in the majority, a large proportion have no opinion on the unions, or at least they have not wanted to express it.

Table: Percentage of trade union members and of other wage earners who have no opinion on certain aspects related to unionisation

<i>No opinion on the following statements:</i>	% of members			% of others			% of all		
	Est	Ltv	Lth	Est	Ltv	Lth	Est	Ltv	Lth
Trade unions are able to control conformity to agreements	15	12	5	53	58	49	47	48	43
Trade unions know problems of ordinary employees	5	3	0	25	28	32	22	23	28
One can trust trade union leaders	5	4	0	27	30	35	24	24	31
Co-workers think that it is important to be a trade union member	5	6	5	41	40	40	36	32	35
Trade union activity is backward-looking	5	6	0	27	28	38	23	24	33
In the present situation, being a trade union member brings no advantages	5	3	2	25	27	32	22	22	28
My employer is against belonging to trade unions	10	10	10	48	50	56	43	42	50
I know well the way trade unions work	5	5	5	26	30	46	23	25	41
Assessment of the general reputation of trade unions	8	4	6	27	27	27	25	22	25

Estonia (Est) N=811 Latvia (Ltv) N=817 Lithuania (Lth) N=777

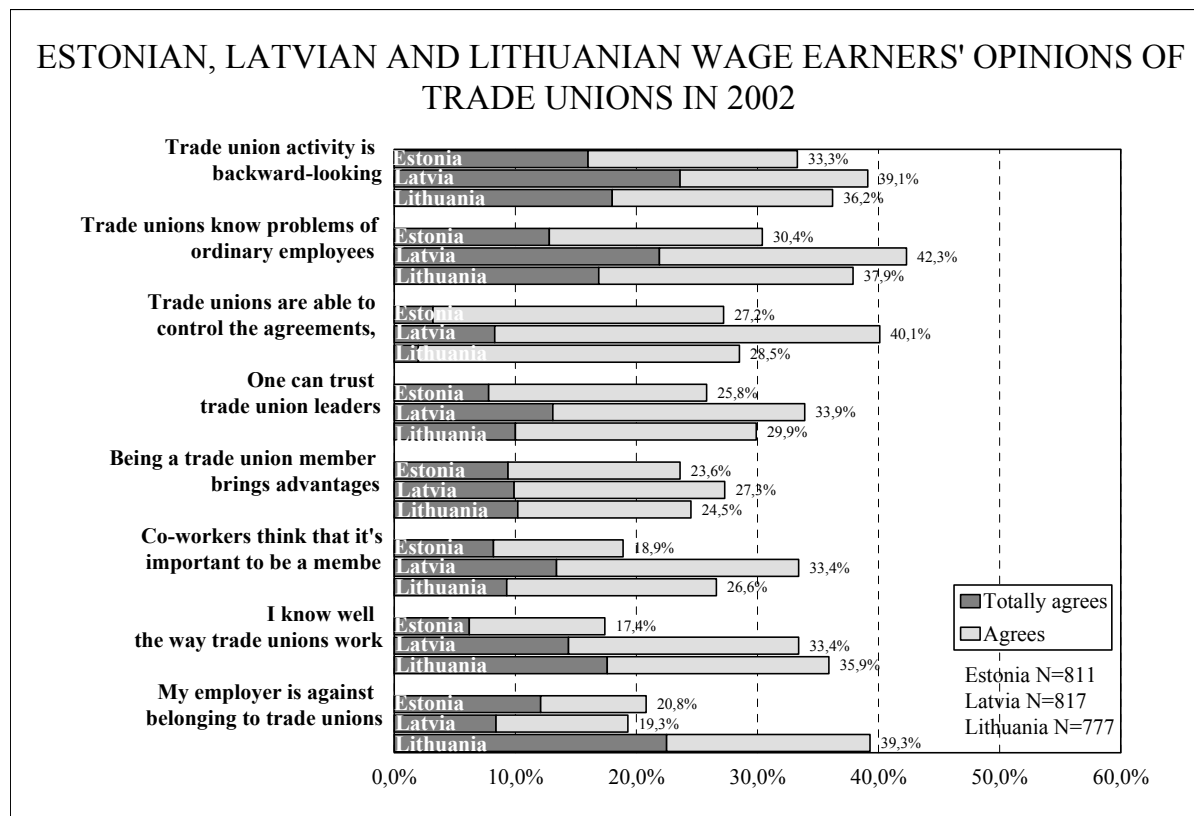
Interest in trade unions is weak particularly among those wage earners who do not belong to trade unions, and it is also obvious that in their view the unions have little significance. Over half the non-members in Estonia and Latvia, and nearly half of them in Lithuania, were unable to say whether the unions could control conformity to agreements. Almost as many have not wanted - or been able - to state an opinion on whether their employer is against belonging to trade unions, or whether co-workers consider union membership important. At the very least, the proportion of non-members expressing no opinion on the statements presented is one-quarter.

Those belonging to the trade unions naturally have a clearer picture of them than others do. Nevertheless, even of those, a fairly large proportion could not say whether the unions were able to control conformity to agreements; and one in ten had no opinion on whether their employer was against belonging to the unions. An underlying factor in the latter case may also be a fear of expressing one's opinion on the matter.

Those having the vaguest picture of all concerning the trade unions and their activity were the Lithuanian wage earners. There, more than half could not or dared not say whether their employer was opposed to trade union membership. The same applied to knowledge of unions'

activities, and to the assessment of their ability to control conformity to agreements. In Latvia and Estonia, too, the greatest uncertainty concerned these very two things.

On the whole, in Estonia, those with no opinion on aspects of trade unions are slightly fewer than in Latvia, and considerably fewer than in Lithuania especially. Nevertheless, in Estonia too, the proportion of 'no opinion' responses is high. It can be said, with only a slight risk of exaggeration, that many people do not seem to be familiar with the present trade unions and, what is more, the subject does not really interest them.



In all the Baltic nations, those who have expressed their opinions have a rather negative conception of the present-day trade unions. However, there are also clear differences between the countries. Taken generally, the assessments made by Latvian wage earners are a little more positive than the others. The Estonians, for their part, are the most critical of all.

In Estonia, many agree with the statement that the trade union activity is backward-looking. On the other hand, not very many of the country's wage earners know the ways in which the present-day unions operate. In this respect, the difference between the Estonians and the other two nations is great. There is not so much pressure from co-workers in Estonia to join the trade unions, and it is not generally felt there that employers oppose belonging to unions.

In Latvia, the greatest agreement has been on the statement that the trade unions know the problems of ordinary employees. Latvia differs clearly from the other two Baltic nations in many of the aspects evaluated. Trust in trade unions is more emphasised in Latvia than in the other two countries, and also co-workers in Latvia see unionisation as important more often than do those in Estonia or Lithuania. A surprising number, on the other hand, consider the unions to be backward-looking.

In Lithuania, very clear weight is given to the statement that the employer is against belonging to trade unions. The difference compared with the other two countries is marked. It is interesting to note that only the Lithuanian wage earners lay a lot of emphasis on the employer's opposition. The unions in Lithuania, too, are rather often seen as backward-looking. On the other hand, however, the working methods of the present trade unions are known there more than in Estonia.

The assessments made by trade union members are more positive than those of others. It is clear, for example, that the members know the unions' ways of working better than others do. Furthermore, employer opposition to membership is rarer in the members' view than in the opinion of others.

The difference between members and others comes to the fore also in assessments of the trade unions' reputation. Very many non-members conceive the reputation of the unions negatively. Nonetheless, a large proportion of members also hold the same view.

Table: Opinion on the general reputation of trade unions in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 2002

	MEMBERS			OTHERS			ALL		
	Est	Ltv	Lth	Est	Ltv	Lth	Est	Ltv	Lth
Positive	58%	67%	68%	49%	46%	55%	51%	52%	57%
Negative	42%	33%	32%	51%	54%	45%	49%	48%	43%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(117)	(170)	(96)	(498)	(470)	(485)	(615)	(640)	(581)
No opinion	6%	4%	8%	27%	27%	27%	24%	22%	24%

Est = Estonia Ltv=Latvia Lth = Lithuania

All in all, nearly half of those who expressed their opinion see the general reputation of the trade unions as negative. Further, about one-quarter have no opinion at all on the matter. Of the members, around one-third consider the unions' reputation to be negative. As to non-members, the corresponding proportion is about half.

Generally speaking, the Estonians' view of the trade unions' reputation is the most negative, and the Lithuanians' opinion the most positive. Of the members, the most critical of all have been the Estonians; and the most critical non-members have been the Latvians. To sum up, it can be said that in all three countries, both members and non-members see the unions' reputation in a rather critical light. For very many, the image of the present trade unions remains vague and, in broad outline, negative.

CHANGES AND CHALLENGES FOR UNIONISATION IN THE BALTIC COUNTRIES

In the 1990s, unionisation in the Baltic nations faced a completely new situation. All the tasks of the old socialist trade unions, as well as all their operating methods, had lost their significance. The end result has been that the old structures have had to be dismantled almost entirely, and a problem has arisen as to how something new can be built in their place. It has not been a question of change in the old unions, but rather a real break between the two eras. Viewed from the outside, it appears a mere historical coincidence that the same term, 'trade union', is used to describe both the old and the new organisations. It is very difficult to find any connecting factors between them, let alone any corresponding modes of operation. Seen

from the standpoint of the ordinary worker, the trade unions of the socialist era were welfare institutions. The trade unions of the present day, by contrast, do not have any concrete commodities or other material benefits to offer.

Traditions, however, are not broken in one year or two. This is seen also in unionisation. In these nations that have regained their independence, the existing trade unions endeavour in many ways to participate in societal activities. One such area of operation is state politics. In addition, several international organisations need wage earners' 'representatives', and the unions take an active role in such undertakings. What is a problem is the question of representativeness and support by the membership. If members are lacking, the union ends up in a situation where the attempt to influence issues is made mainly at the upper level – or else, alternatively, the matters remain the responsibility of individual wage earners at the workplace level. There are no functional organisations in between these two levels; and yet, if the subject is examined in the light of tradition, this is the principal area of trade union activity.

In the case of Estonia, unionisation has evidently passed through the rock-bottom phase already and is now being built on a new foundation. It has been necessary to start from scratch. It could even be said that the Estonians have had to set out even before the starting line, because the old mental pictures and traditions still persist while the new is being built. The membership rate in Estonia is definitely lower than that of Latvia. Seen in terms of trends, however, the situation there is more positive than in Latvia and Lithuania, where 'rock bottom' has perhaps not yet been reached. The Estonian situation is still problematic nevertheless.

Particularly in Estonia, but also to a large extent in Latvia and Lithuania, wage earners are not familiar with the present trade unions' ways of working. This applies especially to the great majority, who do not belong to the unions. A partial reason for this is certainly the weight of the old traditions. On the other hand, the status of the emerging new unions is rather weak from the wage earners' standpoint, and people find it difficult to perceive what the unions are and why they are needed. Very many – even members – think that trade unions are a thing of the past. This is obviously a question of contradictory mental images in which old and new are mixed.

In Latvia and Lithuania, the membership rate has gone down. In Estonia it has risen slightly, but even there, unionisation has not increased at all among young Estonians or ones working in the private sector. The new members have mainly been persons over 50 years old, and more often Russians than Estonian nationals. The membership increase is made up of persons who have a strong mental image of the old socialist trade union activity. On the other hand, it may also be a question of groups for which uncertainty has grown and therefore the support of the trade unions is sought.

A central problem of the trade unions from the standpoint of their members is a lack of legitimacy. They do not, generally speaking, inspire a great deal of confidence in the eyes of the wage earners. In the Western countries, trade union movements have traditionally endeavoured to promote the interests of working people by agreeing on rules and terms for the labour markets. This naturally presupposes a sufficiently great legitimacy of the agreeing parties in the eyes of the constituencies that they represent. The number of members must be great enough in each sector, and the trade union activity must be seen as justified also among those who are not members. With an eye to the future, the main goal and task for the trade

union movements in the Baltic nations is certainly to strengthen the legitimacy foundation. Only then will it be possible to speak confidently about social dialogue and its functionality there.

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