ECONOMICS
& Sociology

ENSURING SUSTAINABLE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF LITHUANIAN CATERING ORGANISATIONS

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ABSTRACT. The COVID-19 pandemic-induced work challenges have hit the catering organisations particularly hard worldwide. Lockdown suspended business activities, and uncertainty about the future alarmed both catering companies and their employees. The principles of sustainable human resource management (HRM) declared by the organisations have been put to test in critical conditions. The aim of the paper was to reveal the challenges faced by the catering organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of sustainable HRM and the way they were addressed. Qualitative in-depth interviews with the representatives of Lithuania's catering service sector responsible for human resource management were carried out in order to explore how sustainable HRM has been ensured in their organisations. The research showed that state support played a critical role, which, especially when faced with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, was crucial in helping to preserve businesses and to retain employees by ensuring the conditions for continuous sustainable HRM development in the future.

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching implications for the labour market outcomes. Beyond the urgent concerns about the health of workers and their families, the virus and the subsequent economic shocks impacted the world of work across three key dimensions: 1) the number of jobs (both unemployment and underemployment); 2) the quality of work (e.g. wages and access to social security); and 3) effects on specific groups who are more vulnerable to adverse labour market outcomes (ILO, 2020). According to ILO (2021), in 2020, 8.8 per cent of working hours worldwide were lost relative to Q4 of 2019. The catering service sector was one of those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown, only businesses classified as essential were open. The stay-at-home rule was applied to all other businesses. Being able to work from home sheltered some from job and earnings losses (Adams-Prassl et al, 2020), however, due to the specifics of the activity, work from home was not a solution for the catering service sector. According to Statista (2022), the year-over-year decline of seated diners in restaurants worldwide was staggering and lowest (-100.00 %) in June 23–April 30, 2020. In Europe, the largest decline in turnover of accommodation and food services was recorded in the first quarter of 2020 (-58.3%); in Lithuania the number was -36.8% (Eurostat, 2021). Although in Q2 of 2021, the turnover of accommodation and food services in the EU increased by 28.4% compared to the first quarter of the same year, the turnover level of these services was only 54.7% compared to Q1 of 2020 (Eurostat, 2021). In Lithuania, this growth was even more significant (+ 54.1%) (Eurostat, 2021). Thus, the coronavirus has been causing increasing damage to the global hospitality industry. This drew the attention of scholars and led to research in the hospitality sector. Czarniecka-Skubina et al. (2021) stated that gastronomy and hotel industry in Poland suffered the most because of the introduced restrictions. Similar findings have been recorded by researchers who have analysed the situation in other countries (Abhari et al., 2021; Darskovic et al., 2022; Allaberganov et al., 2021; Jafari et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2020; Švagždienė et al., 2020).

According to Kowalski & Loretto (2017), the financial crisis of 2008 posed a significant number of challenges for the HRM in terms of impact on employee well-being. However, the losses in 2020 were approximately four times greater than during the global financial crisis in 2008 (ILO, 2021). Hence, understanding the situation of workforce in 2020 should be reflected in the HRM system, including its overarching HRM philosophies, formal HRM policies, and actual HRM practices (Liu, 2020). Moreover, most studies and reports have highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on changes in organisational practices where teleworking was possible due to the nature of the organisation's activities (e.g. IT companies, consulting companies, public authorities, educational institutions, etc.). In this context, the focus is on social sustainability both from the employer's (organising teleworking, maintaining teamwork, communication, etc.) and from employees' perspective (reconciling work with children care, work-life balance, etc.). However, less attention has been paid to the challenges employers faced in ensuring sustainable HRM when teleworking was not possible due to the nature of the organisation's activities.

After Lithuania announced the lockdown in March 2020, banned the activities of catering service sector organisations and tightened the procedure for taking away/delivering food, catering establishments faced significantly greater challenges in ensuring sustainable HRM – significant loss of income, fear of the future, need for retraining, etc. HR strategies that have the potential to lead to firm competitive advantage by creating unique and valuable employee-based resources (Collins, 2020) during the pandemic had an extremely difficult task – not only to ensure the survival of the organisation, but also to take care of its employees. Sustainable HRM, being characterised by long-term orientation, care of employees, employee development, compliance with labour regulations, partnership between employee and

employees, and equity and equality, without affecting profitability (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2018a) has been put under testing in these critical conditions. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and its positive impact on society have become a priority alongside profit maximisation (Koutoupis et al., 2021). The importance of sustainable HRM during the pandemic was rethought by many researchers and practitioners (Davidescu, et al., 2020; Eklund, 2021; Shan &Tang, 2020; Lopez-Cabrales & Valle-Cabrera, 2020; Lopez-Cabrales & DeNisi, 2021).

The aim of the paper is to reveal the challenges faced in the field of sustainable HRM and how they were addressed by the catering organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic: a) in economic terms (redundancies, retention, wage expectations), b) in social terms (work organisation, care of the children, employee relations and communication, etc.), c) ecological aspect (reorganisation/adaptation of business processes to new hygiene requirements, etc.).

The paper is organised in the following sections. The introduction highlights the relevance of the topic and the main aim of our research. Literature review presents an overview of the most relevant studies regarding sustainable HRM, emphasising the key issues of sustainable HRM during the COVID-19 pandemic. The materials and methods section presents the data sample and collection, survey design, and the data. The next section is dedicated to empirical results, and it is divided into six sub-sections according to sub-topics. The paper ends with the discussion of empirical results and main conclusions.

1. Literature review

Sustainable HRM extends the strategic HRM content by integrating economic, social and ecological aspects and emphasising long-term orientation, employee recovery, and elimination of harmful effect of work. According to Kramar (2014), interrelationship between HRM practices and financial organisational performance is at the heart of strategic HRM. Meanwhile, sustainable management, without denying this interrelationship, nevertheless emphasises the need to avoid the negative impacts of HRM practices (Kramar, 2014; Mariappanadar, 2014; Mariappanadar & Kramar, 2014). Balance between orientation to financial performance of the organisation and sustainable human resource management may allow to meet current and future organisational performance demands without underestimating economic organisational goals and harming the employees' mental health on and off the job (Kossek et al. 2014; Rozsa et al., 2022b) and predict and reduce the tensions in working environment. Moreover, this would prevent the social harm of work seeing that overworked employees often suffer from emotional exhaustion, stress, and burnout (Mariappanadar & Aust, 2017; Haque & Aston, 2016).

Due to the broad coverage of different aspects in sustainable HRM, scholars focus on different issues in this emerging field of research. De Prins et al. (2014, p. 267) emphasised the social aspect and offered the 'Respect Openness Continuity' (ROC) model of Sustainable HRM where "searching for the Human in HRM" refers to Respect, "HRM from the outside in" responds to Openness, and "long-term HRM orientation" supposes Continuity. These insights are being developed through the introduction of "human dignity" term (Bal & de Jong, 2017) as a key word in HRM in organisations based on the respect, protection, and promotion of human dignity.

Ybema et al. (2020) highlight a sustainable employability thus emphasising both the financial and self-realisation goals of employees. This can only be achieved through a dialogue between the organisation and employees, which leads to customised careers and sustainable value for both parties (De Prins, et al., 2014, 2015). Kossek et al. (2014) argue that a sustainable workforce is created and nurtured via employment practices that link employee work–life balance and well-being to employment experiences over the course of employees' working

lives, enabling them to perform well over time while also thriving in their personal and family lives. Sustainable careers as a new track of sustainable HRM analyses career as a dynamic interplay between individuals, their contexts, and changes over time (de Vos et al., 2020) and describes sustainable career in terms of happiness (psychological dimension), health (physical dimension), and productivity (economical dimension) (De Vos et al., 2018). Valcour (2015) mentions the need to recover from work and adds such features of sustainable career as continuous learning, security that comes from employability, and a harmonious fit with one's skills, interests, and values. According to Newman (2011), to be sustainable throughout life, careers must have three features. They must include renewal opportunities, times when employees pause briefly to reinvigorate themselves. They must be flexible and adaptable. Half of what we think we know now will be obsolete in a few years. Individuals and firms need to be continuous and flexible learners, ready to travel new roads as conditions dictate. Finally, sustainable careers must include opportunities for integration across life spheres and experiences that lead to wholeness, completeness, and meaning (Newman, 2011).

Another sustainable HRM research stream, called green HRM, emphasises the environmental sustainability aspect (Yusliza et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2011; Haddock-Millar et al., 2016; Ren et al., 2018). Green HRM provides the linkage between environmental management and specific HRM functions (Renwick et al., 2016), and stimulates the green behaviour of employers and employees in order to develop an environmentally sensitive, and socially responsible organisation**.** In this context, Rozsa et al. (2022a) emphasize the moral and ethical consequences of the firm owner and manager decisions.

In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, sustainable HRM faced new challenges and the need for rapid solutions without losing the core value orientations that implied sustainability. Taking responsibility to develop mutually beneficial and regenerative relationships between internal and external resource providers (Ehnert et al, 2016), especially between employer and employees, has become the evidence of the company's sustainable HRM.

For many employees, the COVID-19 pandemic came as a career shock (Akkermans et al., 2020) in many respects. Perceived vulnerability of job loss (Singh et al., 2021), lost revenues and increased costs (Abston & Bryan, 2021) are related to the economic aspects of sustainable HRM. This, in turn, posed social challenges. Redundancies, declining incomes, even in objective circumstances, violate human dignity. Negative emotions reflect immediate problems or objective danger (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, so it is very important not only to choose the right HRM practices but also to communicate them correctly so that the negative emotions do not override the positive ones. Therefore, HRM based on respect, protection, and promotion of human dignity in organisations (Bal & de Jong, 2017) is becoming increasingly relevant in pandemic conditions.

2. Methodological approach

2.1. Data sample and collection

A qualitative study was conducted with a small sample of experts selected according to the following target selection criteria: a) application of socially responsible business principles, b) business activity for at least 3 (three) years, c) leading positions in their segment, d) catering establishment type sensitivity to COVID-19. As an additional criterion, priority was given to catering establishments (networks) operating more than one catering establishment. This was achieved in 7 cases.

The study involved representatives of the catering service sector responsible for human resource management. At the beginning of the participant selection process, co-operation was

established with the Association of Lithuanian Restaurant Chefs and Confectioners (LRVVKA): an application was sent to the Executive Director presenting the purpose of the research, topic, and criteria for selecting respondents. After receiving the approval of the ongoing study, the Executive Director disseminated information about the planned study to the LRVVKA community and selected targeted catering establishments which were to be contacted directly (one of the specified establishments could not be contacted). In the course of the research, 10 representatives of the leading companies in the Lithuanian catering market were interviewed.

The study involved representatives of the catering service sector responsible for human resource management decisions. Table 1 outlines the characteristics of organisations and respondents. Many respondents were themselves business owners responsible for human resource management.

Table 1. Characteristics of organisations and respondents

Respondents	Restaurant type	Restaurant size (number of branches)	Respondents
R1	Quick-service	7	Business owner (responsible for HRM)
R2	Casual dining	16	HRM manager
R3	Quick-service	2	Business owner (responsible for HRM)
R4	Casual dining	2	Business owner (responsible for HRM)
R5	Fine dining	1	Business owner (responsible for HRM)
R6	Quick-service	35	HRM manager
R7	Casual dining with accommodation	1	Business owner (responsible for HRM)
R8	Quick-service	2	Business owner (responsible for HRM)
R9	Casual dining	1	Business owner (responsible for HRM)
R10	Quick-service	2	Business owner (responsible for HRM)

Source: own compilation

2.2. Research design

The research was conducted in two stages: (1) during the first COVID-19 pandemic wave in April-June 2020 when Lithuania was under lockdown; (2) during the third COVID-19 pandemic wave in October-November 2021.

In the first stage, the study examined the challenges faced by the catering service sector organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they were addressed in the context of sustainable HRM. An interview instrument was chosen for data collection. Interview technique –individual semi-structured interview. Interviews were scheduled at a pre-arranged location and time (DiCicco - Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). A key feature of a semi-structured interview in qualitative research is that the researcher has a very clear list of questions before starting the interview, but is always ready to improvise.

In total, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted on average for about 40 minutes. Prior to the interview, all study participants were informed about the recording of the interviews in audio format that were transcribed later on. Interviews were conducted in the Lithuanian language. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were ensured during the study.

Information was collected during the interviews according to a pre-approved list of questions. The interview questions consisted of the following main components: 1) introductory

questions related to the company represented by the respondent, its history and social responsibility activities and the respondent's place in it – these questions are intended to win the respondent's trust; 2) questions aimed at understanding the HRM challenges faced by the respondent company in the last 3 years; 3) questions about the main challenges in the field of human resource management that arose during the COVID-19 crisis and ways to solve them, paying a lot of attention to the way the situation affected the employees (decisions made by the company etc.); 4) questions aimed at revealing the respondents' evaluation of the role and decisions of government in solving business problems during the COVID–19 pandemic; 5) questions intended to find out the opinion of the respondent, the way they assess the company's business prospects. During the interviews, the conversation with the respondents was not strictly formalised, i.e. the procedure for asking questions was adapted to the respondent, context, and circumstances.

The STAR methodology was used to formulate the questions of cognition of HRM challenges during the COVID-19 crisis: a) Situation – What was the situation like? b) Task – What was the task? c) Action – what were the actions and behaviour? d) Results – What was the outcome and the consequences? This methodology focuses on the respondent's experience and enables a better understanding of the phenomenon, focusing on specific events in the past, but not on opinion or reflection.

In the second stage of the survey, the same respondents were contacted, asking them to answer two questions: 1) to tell briefly about the business situation; 2) to provide retrospective insights regarding the decisions made during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3. Data analysis

Interview data were processed using a descriptive-interpretive analysis by data categorisation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Elo et al., 2014). Data analysis was implemented in several stages. The first stage involved the transcription of the data obtained during the interviews. In this step, audio transcripts were analysed by writing down the interview transcripts. The second stage included the definition of the unit of analysis, construction of the categories and construction of the coding scheme. One sentence was chosen as the unit of analysis for the interview texts. A category was selected at the highest level of coding and a subcategory as the lowest level of coding. Subcategories were obtained by heuristic reading of the sentence of the respondent, abstracting the information contained therein and creating a subcategory for it. Subcategories, based on the same idea, have been grouped into one category and defined by the wording of the category. Multiple categories merged into the topics that related to the key questions of the interview. The final stage involved the encoding of the whole text.

Interpretation of research results, coding, analysis and visualisation of the semi-structured interview transcripts obtained during the research were performed using Maxqda Analysis Pro 2020 version of the qualitative data analysis software package.

One-case models were developed to determine the priorities of each topic. The figures show the codes corresponding to the topics and their specific components (the thicker the line, the more times the experts mentioned these topic's features). The single-case models present the most significant quotes illustrating the sub-code describing each topic. In order to refine the similarities and differences between the challenges of HRM three years ago and during the COVID-19 pandemic, a two-case model was developed. Moreover, the two-case model was used to show the distribution of respondents' opinions on state support during the COVID-19 pandemic. The two-case model shows which sub-codes reflecting the topic features of the comparative challenges overlap and which are assigned to only one of them. The numbers

above the lines show the strength of the resolution of these sub-codes, allowing for a more detailed and in-depth analysis of the HRM challenges.

A recurrence frequency of categorised features was summarised. The distribution matrix of categories and sub-categories visually presents the distribution of topics and their descriptive features by respondents in the transcripts analysed *(Appendix A)*. A list of the 10 most frequently mentioned topics and their features is provided in *Table 2*.

Table 2. 10 most frequently mentioned topics and their features that relate to sustainable HRM during COVID-19

Topics/ features	Frequency	Percentage
HRM practice during COVID-19 / Economic issues	16	100
Impact of COVID-19 on HRM / Social Issues	14	88
HRM challenges over the last three years / Economic issues	14	88
Impact of COVID-19 on HRM / Economic Issues	13	81
Impact of the government on solving business problems during COVID-19 / Approach to state financial support	9	56
Impact of the government impact on solving business problems during COVID-19 / Obstacles to the implementation of state support	9	56
Impact of the government impact on solving business problems during COVID-19 / Financial support for business	7	44
HRM practices during COVID-19 / Ecological issues	7	44
Business prospects / Optimistic attitude	6	38

Source: own compilation

The identification of most significant features of the transcripts allowed to highlight the most important issues in general. The four most common recurrences were as follows: economic issues related to the HRM practices during COVID-19 were mentioned 16 times; social issues linked to the impact of COVID-19 on HRM, and economic issues related to the HRM challenges over the last three years –14 times; economic issues associated with the impact of COVID-19 on HRM – 13 times. It is noteworthy that three of the most frequently mentioned features belong to economic issues. Respondents considered economic issues to be crucial, both in relation to the emerging challenges three years ago and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and when examining HRM practices during COVID-19. Social issues were mentioned as the most important challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic for HRM. A total of 55 features were found in the transcripts, with the frequency of all of them in the transcripts being 152 times *(Appendix A)*.

3. Results

3.1. General HRM policy

HRM policy and employee relations depend primarily on the organisation's top management attitudes and the role of the HRM department. Nevertheless, only two of the organisations surveyed had a person responsible for human resource management. *Graph 1* presents the map of the focus of general HRM policy on employee relations' sub-categories. Overall, general HRM policy covers 7 topics (sub-categories). Five of them (social responsibility, personal attention of managers, orientation to problem solving, relations based on partnership, financial incentives) are related to attitudes of organisation to employees. The

remaining 2 topics (teamwork and employee loyalty) describe the attitudes of employees to the organisation.

Graph 1. Key topics related to general HRM policy
Source: own data

As it was mentioned before, application of socially responsible business principles was one of the target criteria in the selection of the companies involved in the study. Thus, the respondents' comments only confirmed this fact: *"The owner has been implementing the social responsibility policy since the times when I probably had not heard of such a concept" [*R2]. Nevertheless, when asked about social responsibility, respondents most often mentioned the responsibility towards consumers, emphasising healthy products [R3]; or environmental friendliness: *"<...> about seven months ago, we decided to say goodbye to plastic – we changed [plastic] straws to paper ones"* [R1]. Quick-service organisations have placed a particular emphasis on sorting. However, in terms of social responsibility, greater emphasis was placed on responsibility towards external stakeholders – consumers and society, while social responsibility towards employees was not mentioned. In fact, only one respondent's [R1] response demonstrated a clear attitude of the organisation to employees based on sustainable HRM principles (*Table 3*).

Table 3. An example of an organisation's attitude to employees based on sustainable HRM principles

R	Sustainable HRM principles	Statements
[R1]	Personal attention of managers to employees	*"<...> we have a very good relationship because I - as director - spend time with everyone, I meet everyone at least once a week, I talk for 10-15 minutes about how they are doing, how things are going.*"
[R1]	Relations based on partnership highlighting equality	*"We try to avoid the hierarchy. Everyone is more or less equal. <...> they all address me informally and we share some jokes."*
[R1]	Orientation to problem solving	*"<...> we pay a lot of attention to the very aura that is in the workplace. If there are any problems at some point, we get to solving them."*
[R1]	Orientation to results: financial motivation	*"On the financial side, we motivate them. We see that an employee makes an effort ... we look at their results and then raise the salary <...>"*

Source: own compilation

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A few respondents [R5, R7] also indicated partnership-based relationships. However, there were other statements that showed a distance between the employer and the employees, negative attitude towards employees: *"<…>I daresay there has never been a generation like this – very much self-oriented princes and princesses, they know everything, they are able to do everything. They start as a salesperson for the first time in their life, and they request the top salary. People simply do not understand. I believe (perhaps I will not say this nicely) that this is the supermommy effect [to blame], convincing the children that they are perfect and do not have to do anything."* [R4].

Paradoxically, even though only one company's respondent provided many examples of employer orientation to partnership-based relationships, nevertheless in terms of attitudes of employees to the organisation, respondents presented numerous manifestations of teamwork and employee loyalty. Teamwork: *"Before the pandemic, I had a team who were fun, strong, and really fighting every day for the guests, for the taste, for the story"* [R5]. Employee loyalty: *"<…>on the weekend [he/she] passes [the cafe], sees the "huddle", rushes to the cash register, works for an hour and does not even ask to pay for it <…>"* [R7].

4.2. HRM challenges in the last three years and during the COVID-19 pandemic (1st wave)

The study revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic posed radically new HRM challenges. The two-case model, shown in Figure 2, provides a comparison of HRM challenges before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (1st wave). It seems that the old HRM challenges have faded in the face of new ones. However, this is a false impression, created by the pandemic and especially lockdown posing a number of new challenges for the catering service sector in particular that organisations could not have imagined before.
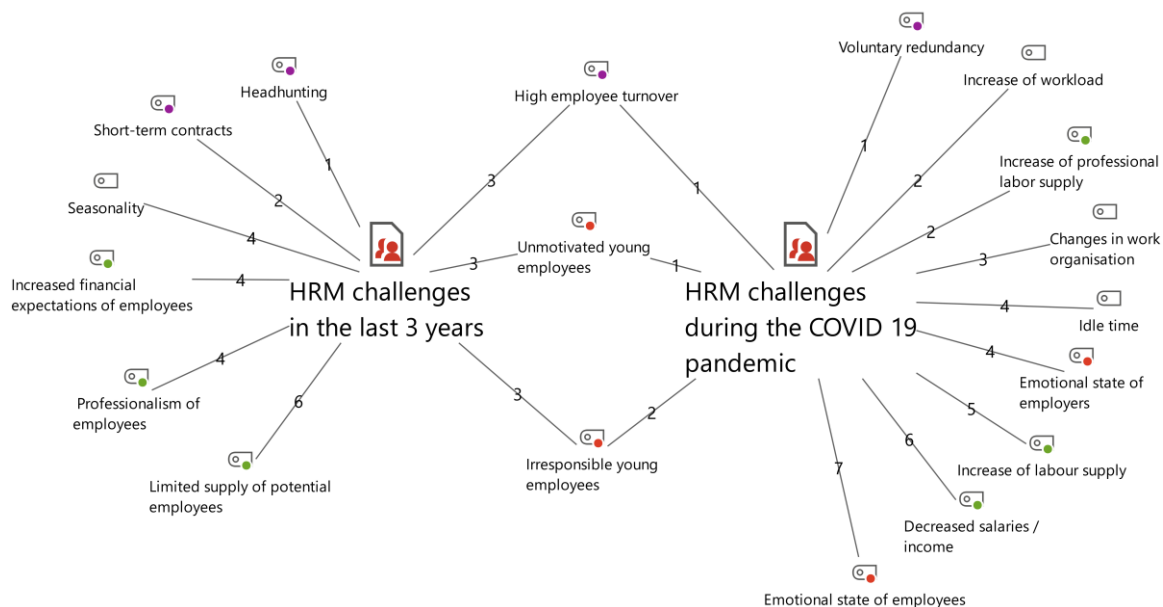
Graph 2. HRM challenges before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (1st wave)
Source: *own data*

HRM challenges encountered by the catering service sector organisations both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic included unmotivated and irresponsible young employees: *"<…>those young people under the age of 25... they are so irresponsible, they run away, they have no responsibility. Older people, over 30, they are sedentary, steady <…>"* [R9].

Incidentally, it should not be forgotten that this sector often employs young people, for whom it is *"first (work), but not in the first place. Often in the second – after studies, or third – after studies and leisure"* [R6]. High employee turnover is partly due to the specifics of the sector: *"<…>casual dining, quick service – students, ... usually a short stop <...>"* [R4].

In the last three years, financial expectations of employees have risen significantly, making the COVID-19 pandemic hit them particularly hard: *"There were a few more (employees) left in the team <...> everyone expected to earn as much as they did before the pandemic, and for the most part, wages have already fallen, restaurants no longer pay as much as they did"* [R5]. However, labour supply increased at the same time: *"Before lockdown queries via social networks "maybe you're looking for employees" – this happened at best once a month. Now we get probably 5 such applications a week"* [R6]. It shows the confusion that has arisen among workers in the catering service sector, the desperate attempt to find work, the fear of the future. Many of the respondents pointed to the consequent deterioration of employees' mental health [R1, R2, R3 etc.]. This anxiety has passed on to employers as well: anxiety about business prospects [R4], financial challenges [R8], and responsibility for employees [R1, R10].

However, even in this stressful situation, when catering establishments were closed indefinitely, staff were put on furlough and future prospects were very vague, some respondents mentioned that they had internal reserves – *"a pillow"* [R8, R9, R10], which alleviated the situation somewhat. In addition, they looked at the problem as an opportunity: *"I am even partially glad that everything was stopped, because there was no time to make repairs or change the air conditioner, it was bought last summer. Let's call it a break, which provided an opportunity to tidy up ...We started setting up the garden, there will be a fountain and benches"* [R8].

### 4.3. Governmental impact in solving business problems during the COVID 19 pandemic

Following the announcement of the lockdown during the 1st wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has foreseen a range of measures to support business. The one-case model in *Graph 3* depicts governmental measures and evaluation of their usefulness from a business perspective.

The governmental measures to support business during the 1st wave of the COVID-19 pandemic could be divided into two groups. The first group of the governmental measures focused on financial support for business directly: co-financing of furlough, rental allowance, personal income tax subsidies, and soft loans were mentioned by respondents. In the meantime, the second group of the governmental measures supported business indirectly and its direct beneficiaries were employees: wage subsidies, paid childcare leave. Presumably the respondents mentioned the first set of measures the most often because the direct beneficiaries in that case were businesses. Moreover, business representatives rated the governmental measures for business very positively. The governmental measures for employees, in particular childcare leave, were also welcomed, as they were in line with the business interests. Nevertheless, the respondents noted both positive and negative aspects, and characterised some issues as controversial (*Graph 4*).
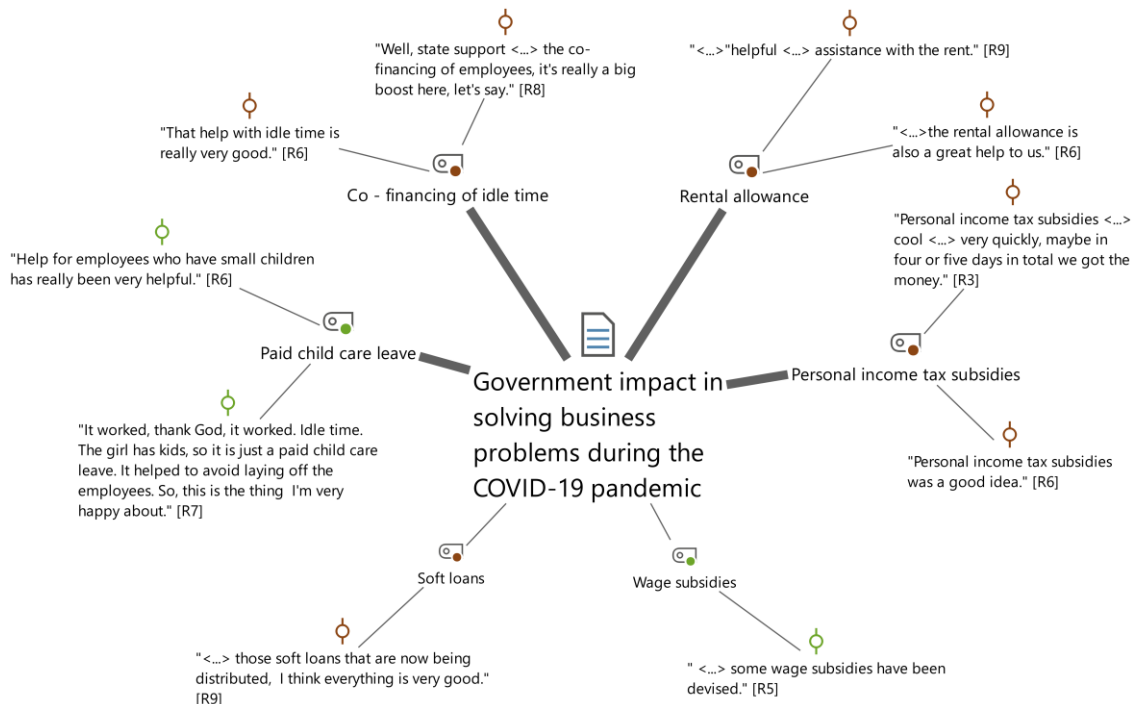
Graph 3. Governmental measures to support business during the 1st wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.
Source: *own data*
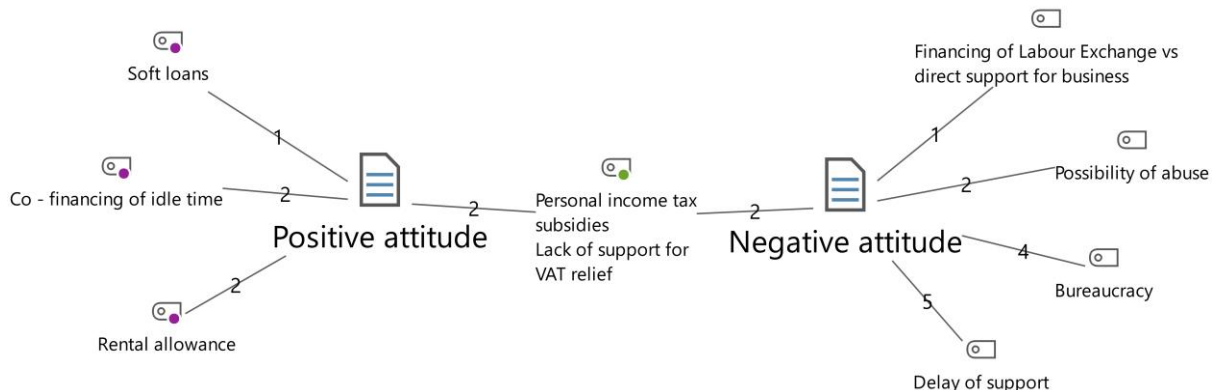
Graph 4. Evaluation of state support during the 1st wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.
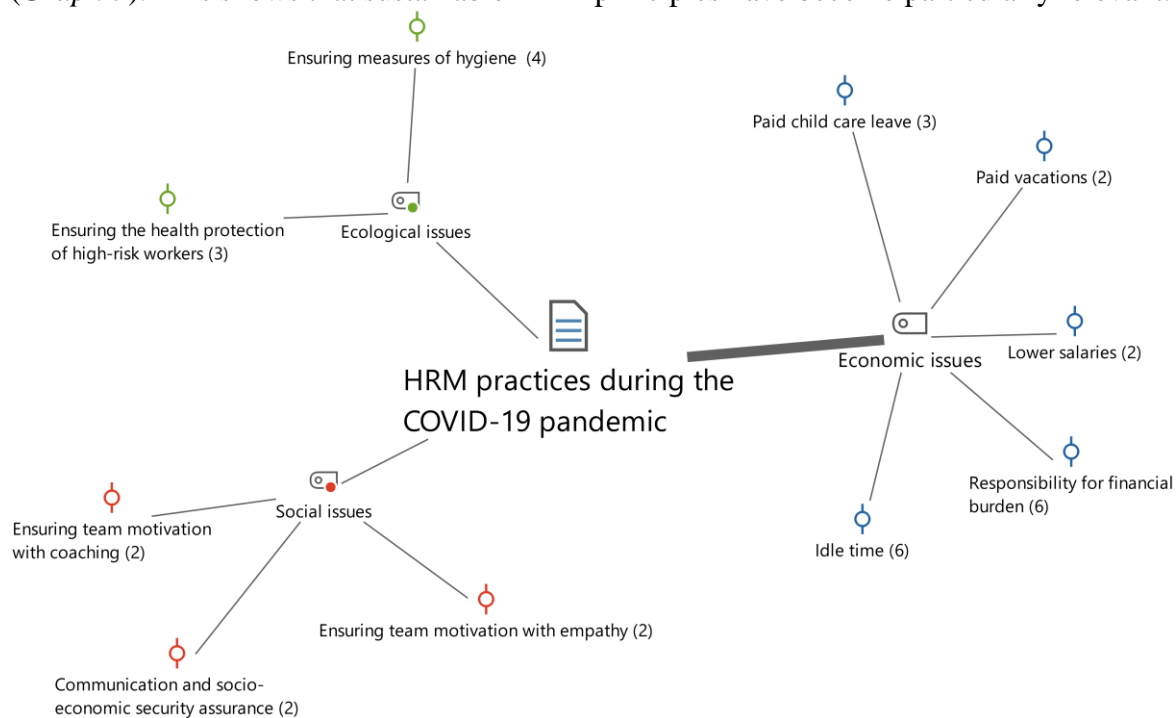Source: *own data*

Respondents rated co-financing of furlough, rental allowance, and soft loans as timely and very helpful support. However, respondents also noted an imbalance in governmental measures. According to the respondents, *"The furlough simply frightened many employees <...> many opted for the Employment Service <...>. Because they got money and didn't want to go back anymore, because you received money there, and you did not have to go to work <...>"* [R5]. Moreover, employees received almost twice more when they left the job and registered at the Employment Service compared to being on furlough [R5]. Thus, from a financial point of view, governmental measures have stimulated employees to leave their jobs. Employees had to choose: quit work and claim financial benefits at least in the short term or remain loyal to the company and suffer financial losses in the short term. In terms of employability, the demand for employees in this sector exceeded the supply, so decisions were

often obvious. However, financing of the Employment Service versus direct support for business was critically assessed by the respondents.

Despite the fact that many of the respondents were generally very positive about the state support for business: *"I am quite positive, I am not used to getting (support)<...>. This is very fine for me, although it was difficult for us to get it (support)"* [R3], it was nonetheless a *"disappointment due to the attitude of state bodies towards restaurants and business in general. That's one thing. And inattention to detail. Because they now should work 24/7, as we say, to help us understand all those details, – now is their time"* [R4]. Moreover, respondents mentioned that "*promises were nice but implementation was delayed*" [R2]. Thus, summarising the answers of the respondents, it can be stated that the business was inclined to cooperate and expected the same from the state: *"You can look for the guilty. But we all need to make the decisions together. The government should talk to business about possibilities for everyone to survive. That communication is much needed"* [R5].

4.4. HRM practices during the COVID- 19 pandemic

Summarising the respondents' statements about HRM practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, they can be divided into three groups: economic, social, and ecological issues (*Graph 5*). This shows that sustainable HRM principles have become particularly relevant.

Graph 5. HRM practices during the COVID-19 pandemic
Source: *own data*

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a particularly large number of economic issues. The first of them deals with a decrease in employee income. Due to the lockdown, catering service organisations suspended their activities. Hence, there were several options to choose from: furlough, redundancy of employees, or paid leave. It should be noted that none of the respondents mentioned redundancies. The statement below expresses the social responsibility of employers towards their employees: *"There were no redundancies in our company. Saying this, the idea to lay them all off was there. I thought it would be very unfair to take advantage*

of their emotional state. Because if they had had to come back after that, I don't know, in what emotional state they would have returned. Or maybe they wouldn't come back, maybe they'd be mad at me for treating them like this" [R3]. Many respondents used furlough: *"I opted for furlough; initially it was not 90 [percent paid by the state] and 10 [percent paid by business)]"* [R3]. Nevertheless, some workers themselves quit their jobs and registered at the Employment Service for better financial support [R5, R8]. None of the respondents mentioned unpaid leave. To the contrary, respondents stated that this was not a way out (R9). As the catering service sector employs a large enough number of young people with children, one of the best solutions has become paid childcare leave. Although the state took care of this, the respondents emphasised that this had been one of the best ways for both stakeholders – employees and employers – to survive in this difficult situation. Nevertheless, 6 of 8 respondents mentioned that they felt responsibility for the financial burden during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The financial issues inevitably led to a worsening emotional state of employees. Uncertainty about the future also contributed to this. Therefore, ensuring team motivation using empathy was especially important: *"For the team... maybe it was the saddest thing for them. Well, for me also. But I know that one day everything will end and one day everything will be fine again. Well, we (business) weren't in a situation where we were sitting and didn't have a cent in our pocket, <...>. It was the hardest and scariest for them [employees], I think. <....> What to do? In the beginning, we placed all the employees on leave so that their income would be higher... Well, we really worked hard for the staff <...>. The most important thing was to make it easier for them"* [R7]. Even more important was motivating not to lose hope, to preserve the team. It was necessary to think about what to do, how to adapt to new conditions, how to retain the employees and business simultaneously. Taking food home became a means of survival for many, but workers had to be persuaded to stay, not change their vocation [R1, R10]. Moreover, the dynamics of information in the formal and informal social media, according to the respondents, made them mediators in explaining the possible consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and future forecasts [R6, R10].

Ecological issues became especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensuring measures of hygiene in line with the tightened requirements has become commonplace, although according to respondents, it was in the case of the 1st wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that this caused many problems: *"<...> the problem is the lack of protection items. I was lucky, I bought gloves much earlier before the quarantine, however then I paid a cosmic price for the masks"* [R3]. Moreover, the need for social distance was conditioned not only by the formal requirements, but also by fears about the safety of oneself and their loved ones. Thus, employers tried to ensure health protection for high-risk workers: *"It was necessary to reorganise. We only offered food to take away, so I was very scared about my health and that of the employees. I was even afraid to let [customers] go in ... That's why we installed a new door to keep contact to the minimum"* [R7].

4.5. Business prospects

Despite lockdown restrictions and future uncertainty, the respondents were quite optimistic towards business prospects (*Graph 6*).
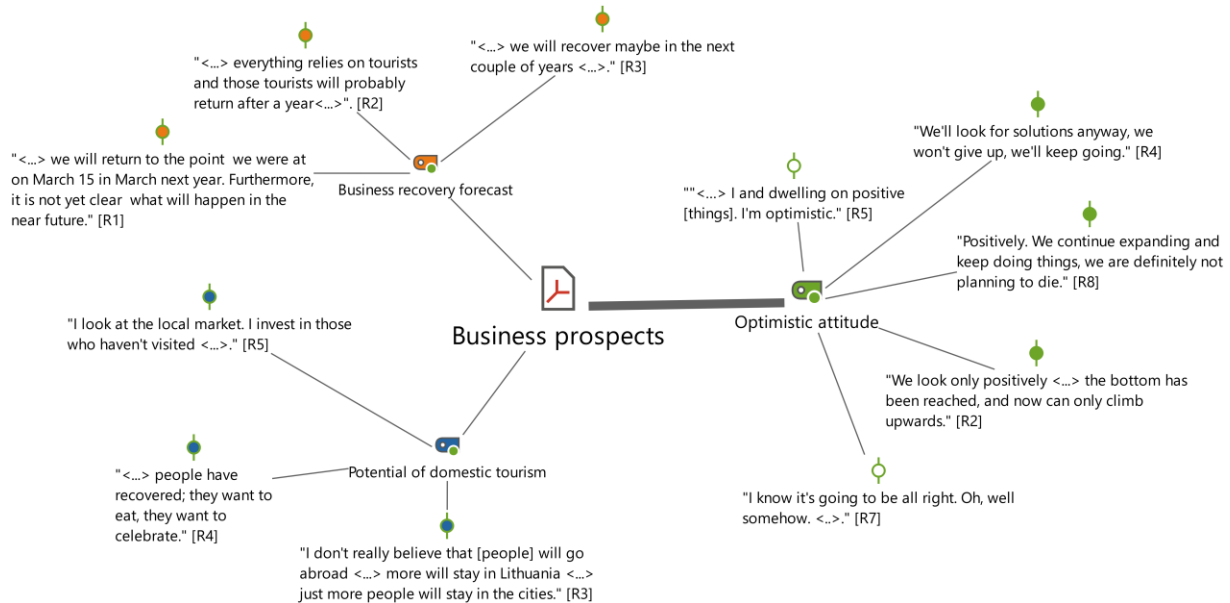
Graph 6. Business prospects
Source: *own data*

One of the most pessimistic statements *We don't know how it will end, we do everything we can, but we don't really know*" [R4] nonetheless expresses the determination to cope with the challenges. After experiencing the first loss and fear of the uncertainty, the business gradually began to focus on the situation and think positively: *"<…> I know it's going to be all right. Oh, well, somehow. From the beginning, I was kind of paranoid, but now..."* [R7], *"We look only positively. Only positively. Maybe the logic of the business itself is such an optimistic attempt to move forward. Somehow we think the bottom has been already reached and now we are just climbing upwards"* [R2].

The respondents put high hopes into the summer season, hoping the restrictions would be lifted or at least eased, hoping for the revival of local tourism as early as summer 2020 and for greater recovery next year with the opening of borders to foreign tourists as well.

4.6. Retrospective view

In the second stage of the survey in October–November 2021, the same respondents were contacted, asking them to describe the business situation briefly and to provide retrospective insights regarding the decisions made during the 1st wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the growing number of infections, leaving only the necessary security measures in place, the organisations of the catering service sector recovered, and respondents were optimistic about both the way forward and the difficult stage that was already behind them. Respondents noted that state support was a key factor in surviving the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most important impact of governmental support was on keeping the employees. Without this support, people would have had to be laid off sooner or later. Secondly, it has kept people in the profession, especially since there is now a huge demand for employees, especially in the catering service sector. Respondents also emphasised the benefits of learning from the past experience. The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have forced a new look at their business, testing different business development alternatives. New activities such as home delivery of food [R3]; renovation of premises [R8, R10]; and review of assortments [R3, R9] were what made it possible to make bigger or smaller breakthroughs. Moreover, none

of the surveyed businesses went bankrupt, three [R3, R6, R10] of 8 respondents stated that they expanded their activities, for instance: *"Great, we opened four more cafes, launched an e-shop, strengthened marketing"* [R6].

5. Discussion

The aim of the paper was to reveal the challenges faced in the field of sustainable HRM and the way they were addressed by the catering service organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing this, a qualitative research with the representatives of the Lithuania's catering service sector responsible for human resource management were carried out in two stages: (1) during the 1st wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in April-June 2020 when Lithuania was under lockdown; (2) during the 3rd wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in October-November 2021.

The study revealed that the lockdown had a crucial impact on catering service organisations. Major decisions had to be made on what to do, both for employers and employees: laying the people off or placing them on furlough, staying in the sector waiting for better times, or taking up the new activities and entering new areas. HRM practices pursued during the 1st wave of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the extent to which sustainable HRM principles have been implemented. Despite the key role of HRM managers by enabling sustainable HRM (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2018 b), the study revealed that companies did not have a clearly defined HRM policy. The sustainability in the researched organisations was more related to responsibility towards consumers, emphasises on healthy products or environmental friendliness, while social responsibility towards employees was not mentioned. Nevertheless, challenges faced by employers during the 1st wave of the COVID-19 pandemic indicated the orientation of the surveyed organisations towards sustainable HRM.

According to Bal & de Jong (2017) in critical circumstances layoffs should still be avoided if possible, as they may lead to violated dignity of employees and later could affect organisational outcomes. Respondents demonstrated the understanding that making employees redundant might solve financial problems in the short term; however, in the long term, it would have a negative effect by breaking down the team and undermining the employee trust in the employer. Thus, the results of the study fully support the insight of Bal & de Jong (2017) that firing employees is a traumatic experience, adding that it has negative consequences for both the employer and the employee.

The 1st wave of the COVID-19 pandemic not only resulted in lost income for the employees and uncertainty about the future, but also implied a set of job demands that required the employees to adapt (Miner & Akinsanmi, 2016) associated with physical and psychological costs (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). In the case of COVID-19, particular emphasis was placed on psychological costs in terms of emotional state or mental health of employees. Chaturvedi (2021) emphasised the mental health problems, which have become evident due to the economic and social vulnerability of employees. Moreover, the study of Singh et al. (2021) highlighted the significance of emotional and financial well-being of employees in the crisis. Our study revealed a high level of concern among the HRM practitioners about the emotional state of employees and their effort to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in using the least painful solutions for employees. Manifestations of concern for employees in order to reduce the effects of the crisis and ensure their well-being are in line with the empirical findings of Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė (2019) demonstrating that when the care of employees is more clearly expressed, they feel less job stress. Turning to the expression of sustainable HRM principles, the study revealed the empathy of the surveyed HRM practitioners, seeing that the keyword "emotional state of employees" was used more than 15 times, and statements illustrating employers' behaviour focused on improving their emotional

state (for instance "we did everything we could", "we tried very hard", "we took care" etc.) – more than 19 times. Thus, the study results correspond to the findings of Savaneviciene & Girdauskiene (2020) arguing that leaders have a crucial role in this stressful working environment. They can both predict and reduce the feeling of vulnerability of employees and boost their self-confidence. Leaders can motivate the employees, or conversely, make them unsatisfied.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that ensuring of sustainable HRM has been greatly facilitated by governmental measures. Despite criticisms from respondents regarding the overlapping of some measures and bureaucratic triggers, HRM practitioners were still very positive about the state support for business. The study revealed yet another very important role of the person in charge of staff during the crisis. For both lockdown restrictions and support measures, employees expected explanations and answers from employers. According to Nyberg (2021), lessons from a pandemic lead to an understanding that organisational communication practices should be continuous, and two-way in nature. This was confirmed by our study, where respondents emphasised that the dynamics of information in the formal and informal social media made them act as mediators in explaining the possible consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and future forecasts.

Moreover, results of the study revealed that the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have forced the owners to take a new look at their business, rethinking different business development alternatives. According to Czarniecka-Skubina et al. (2021) COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on consumers' use of food services, both on-site and take-aways. This was also observed in our study, with respondents emphasising new activities such as home delivery of food; review of assortments to adapt to new conditions and new customer expectations.

This could imply that having long-term sustainable strategies could positively impact long-term financial performance, lowering the negative impact during a crisis such as COVID-19 (Materra et al, 2021). The results of the study carried out during the pandemic already partially support these findings, in the hope that the most difficult challenges have already been overcome during the 3rd wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in October–November 2021.

Conclusion

The research showed that the state support played a vital role, which, especially in the face of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, was crucial in helping to preserve both businesses and retain employees by ensuring the conditions for continuous sustainable HRM development in the future. Meanwhile, in the later stages of the pandemic, the flexibility of both businesses and employees themselves to adapt to new business conditions played a greater role.

There are a number of limitations in this empirical study, some of which provide considerations for further research. One of the selection criteria was the application of socially responsible business principles. This presumes a preconceived notion of sustainable HRM; thus, it is appropriate to expand the sample, especially since the 10-respondent study is a pilot. The study has been conducted only in a national context, in Lithuania. Based on the assumption that different countries have implemented restrictions to different extent and for different periods, it should be appropriate to conduct comparative studies in different countries. Moreover, seeing that sustainable HRM assurance has been examined from an employer perspective, it would be appropriate to examine the employee perception as well.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic is going to have a long-term impact on the catering service sector organisations. Consequently, further research would help understand how

sustainable HRM could be achieved and support both employees and employers in dealing with the consequences of this COVID-19 pandemic.

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Appendix A. Categories and sub-categories that relate to sustainable HRM during COVID-19

Code System	R10	R9	R8	R7	R6	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1	SUM
⌄ General HRM policy/Employee relations											0
› Organisational approach to employees									▪	▪	5
› Attitude of employee to organisation				▪		▪				▪	5
⌄ HRM challenges in the last three years											0
› Work organisation	▪			▪		▪		▪			4
› Employee turnover		▪		▪		▪		▪		▪	6
› Economic issues	▪		▪	▪	▪		▪	▪	▪		14
› Social Issues		▪	▪		▪		▪				6
⌄ HRM challenges during the COVID 19 pandemic											0
› Work organisation			▪	▪	▪		▪		▪		9
› Employee turnover						▪					2
› Economic issues			▪		▪	▪		▪			13
› Social issues		▪	▪		▪	▪		▪		▪	14
⌄ Government impact in solving business problems during the COVID-											0
› Financial support for business		▪			▪		▪				7
› Financial support for employees				▪		▪					3
› Approach to state financial support		▪		▪		▪				▪	9
› Contraversial issues of state support				▪		▪				▪	5
› Obstacles for implementation of state support	▪					▪		▪		▪	9
⌄ HRM practices during the COVID-19 pandemic											0
› Economic issues		▪	▪	▪		▪		▪			16
› Social issues		▪		▪				▪			6
› Ecological issues		▪		▪	▪		▪		▪		7
⌄ Business prospects											0
Business recovery forecast							▪		▪	▪	3
Potential of domestic tourism							▪	▪		▪	3
Optimistic attitude				▪		▪		▪	▪	▪	6
Σ SUM	3	16	10	18	23	17	11	18	14	22	152