

MINIMUM WAGE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE JOB MARKET IN GERMANY

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Abstract

The introduction of the national minimum wage in Germany in 2015 is an important yet controversial instrument of labour market policy. This paper represents an attempt to define the scope of influence it has on companies and employees in respective branches of economy (accommodation and food services business, retail trade, manufacture of food products, transportation and warehouse management). In order to accomplish it the method of analysis and criticism of literature has been applied. It allowed to conduct an evaluation of the discussed dependence. The preliminary findings indicate that interference is especially high in the low wages sector. To show the consequences the national minimum wage has on the job market, positive changes in employment and unemployment levels in the given period (the increase in the first and the drop in the second one) were presented. This meant that the fears concerning a few thousand job losses, as a result of introducing the minimum wage, were unjustified. In this paper articles and analyses published by German research institutes were used. The statistical data comes from the databases of these institutes and of the Federal Employment Agency. The research period considers the years 2014–2015, specifically one year before and half a year after the introduction of the minimum wage in Germany with the aim of highlighting the changes in the employment size caused by the minimum wage.

PLACA MINIMALNA I JEJ WPŁYW NA RYNEK PRACY W NIEMCZECH

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Słowa kluczowe: płaca minimalna, branża, zatrudnienie, Niemcy.

A b s t r a k t

Wprowadzona w 2015 roku ogólnokrajowa płaca minimalna w Niemczech stanowi ważny, choć kontrowersyjny instrument polityki rynku pracy. W artykule podjęto próbę określenia zakresu jej wpływu na przedsiębiorstwa i pracobiorców w poszczególnych branżach gospodarki (zakwaterowanie i usługi gastronomiczne, handel zagraniczny, produkcja artykułów spożywczych, transport i gospodarka magazynowa). Aby zrealizować ten cel, zastosowano metodę analizy i krytyki piśmiennictwa, która umożliwiła ocenę omawianej zależności. Ze wstępnych ustaleń wynika, że wpływ płacy minimalnej jest szczególnie duży w sektorach niskopłatnych. Aby ukazać konsekwencje jej oddziaływania na rynek pracy, zaprezentowano zmiany w poziomie zatrudnienia i bezrobocia w badanym okresie, których efekty wypadły pozytywnie – wzrosło zatrudnienie i zmniejszyło się bezrobocie. Tym samym nie zostały potwierdzone obawy sformułowane na podstawie wcześniejszych prognoz co do utraty kilkuset tysięcy miejsc pracy w następstwie wdrożenia płacy minimalnej. W tym opracowaniu wykorzystano artykuły i analizy opublikowane przez niemieckie instytuty badawcze. Dane statystyczne zaczerpnięto z baz tych instytutów i Federalnej Agencji Pracy. Okres badania obejmował lata 2014–2015, a konkretnie rok przed i pół roku po wprowadzeniu płacy minimalnej w Niemczech, aby lepiej ukazać zmiany jakie spowodowała płaca minimalna w wielkości zatrudnienia.

Introduction

The statutory minimum wage in Germany, which was implemented on 1 January 2015 finished a long-standing political dispute between trade unions, confederations of employers and political parties concerning the issues of “whether” and if so “how” the law should be introduced. From the trade unions’ viewpoint it was perceived to be “a historical social reform”, while according to many employers’ representatives it infringed the tariff autonomy¹. On the other hand, in the scientific debate the main question is still the issue of the effects of the minimum wage may have on the employment, as many economists predict a few thousand job losses².

The aim of this publication is to present on one hand the political, economic and social circumstances in which the minimum wage in Germany was introduced and on the other hand the scope of companies and employees that were affected by the minimum wage, mainly in cross-section of industries.

¹ The term “tariff autonomy” is used to describe the right to agree on conditions of employment contracts. The right is not being affected by third parties, particularly by the state. In the Federal Republic of Germany the legal structure of the tariff autonomy is being formalized in the Collective Agreement Act (Tarifvertragsgesetz). Based on this law the entitled parties for bargaining are trade unions, not individual employees, on one side and employer organisations and individual employers on the other side (FRANZ 2009, p. 39, 40).

² The change of the moods in Germany lasted so long due to the attitudes of the majority of economists (not as in many other countries) as well as due to German Council of Economic Experts (Sachverständigenrat) which in its annual report for the year 2013/2014 presented the minimum wage as a “devil’s tool” (Teufelszeug) and was constantly warning against job losses to a greater or lesser extent (BOSCH, WEINKOPF 2014, p.12). In its forecasts concerning development of employment, the Council assumed that the minimum wage would prevent creating about 140 thousand jobs (Sachverständigenrat... 2015, p. 249).

From this perspective the companies can be identified that are referred to as the low-paid employment sector. In this context it was relevant to establish the transitory results of the introduced uniform national minimum wage for both employment and unemployment, that were elaborated based on the statistical data published by the top German research institutes and Federal Employment Agency. These results were the base for an initial verification of the earlier forecasted consequences of the uniform national minimum wage.

The circumstances accompanying the introduction of statutory minimum wage in Germany

Principles governing the operation of German labour market have changed from the mid- 1990s. Traditional connections between economic efficacy and social solidarity have become highly erodible or broken. There was a growth in insecure and low-paid employment and the low-wage sector reached the level which was considered to be high in international comparisons³. There were no positive effects which were expected to appear, neither the chances to employ the worst qualified workers increased, nor the precarious work became the “pipeline” to regular employment (BOSCH, WEINKOPF 2014, p. 12).

As the introduction of the minimum wage in Germany raised justified concerns, it was advised to be done with great caution treating the project itself as “an experiment conducted under naturalistic conditions” (Feldexperiment). From a research perspective, the initial level should not be established too high and its influence should be attentively observed. If it turned out to be harmless for the employment, it could be increased. However, it would have to be ensured that the regulations, while introducing the minimum wage, could not be easily circumvented, for example by unpaid overtime work (BRENKE, MÜLLER 2013, p. 3).

Those in favour of overall minimum wage want to avoid wage dumping, ensure fair wage, decrease the household poverty with their low earning

³ While high income brackets showed a slight increase of real wages between 1995 and 2006, the average wages (time rate) positioned in the lower quartile of income and without inflation have declined. Even during the period of economic recovery in 2004 there was an increase in low-paid employment. The fact that there was an increase in the proportion of the employees receiving low wages, which comprise less than 50% or even 1/3 of the median of wages, rises various concerns. As a result, more and more people in Germany work for the wage which is not enough to make a good living even for working full time single people (BOSCH and others. 2009, p. 1). The low wages rate, determined based on the hourly wage, indicates for Germany the highest value (24.1%) among comparative countries, except Lithuania (27.5%). It indicates an advanced level of wage equality in Germany. Cyprus, Bulgaria, Great Britain and Poland follow Germany with low wages rates between 21.5% and 18%. Relatively low values of the low wages rate can be found in France, Italy, Belgium and the Scandinavian countries (12–10%) (RHEIN 2013, p. 3).

members, replace unemployment benefit with earned income, reduce existing wage inequality, generate additional state fiscal revenue and facilitate purchasing power of consumers. However, the opponents of the minimum wage perceive it as a regulation which inevitably leads to job losses and makes simple work too expensive⁴ (BRENKE, MÜLLER 2013, p. 3, 4).

For many years, the minimum wage was thought to be unnecessary as in Germany there were regulations concerning respective minimum wages in given sectors which, thanks to high percentage of companies subject to pay wages according to collective bargaining agreement, ensured (in the main branches of industry and public services) a lower earnings limit⁵. However, for the last two decades there has been a slow erosion of the German system of collective agreement, which is highly developed in the sector of private services, and has both social and economic consequences. Over these years the German low wage sector has developed to one of the biggest sectors of low wages in the European scale. Currently almost one of four people employed works in the German low wage sector while in 1998 it was one in five people (KALINA, WEINKOPF 2013, p. 1). The developing sector of low wages had a huge impact on the changes of the level of overall wages which were the lowest in the whole Euro zone. Low domestic demand and untapped growth potential were its consequences. Furthermore, low wage growth had an impact inside the Euro zone as it caused the process of lowering the value of money, which missed the target concerning the policy of pan-European price stabilisation. There was a surplus in balance of trade flow which shares the responsibility for the European crisis. (SCHULTEN, HORN 2014, p. 396).

The level of interference of the minimum wage into the employment structure was reduced by so called special regulation (*Ausnahmeregelung*) which consists in identifying groups of employees who have difficulties integrating into the labour market. One of those groups are the long-term unemployed, who are excluded from the minimum wage law for the period of six months so as to make reintegrating into the employment easier. Wage below the reference value of minimum wage is supposed to be a strong encouragement for the employers as it minimises the costs of work (LESCH et al. 2014, p. 401). What is more, long-term unemployed are not able to replace other

⁴ Various political parties' views on this matter are especially interesting. CDU/CSU coalition made the minimum wage secondary to the effects of negotiations between trade unions and employers' confederations. On the other hand SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, German Trade Union Centre and a few individual trade unions advocated the level of wage rate of 8.50 euro, but Die Linke demanded 10 euro per hour (BRENKE, MÜLLER 2013, p. 3).

⁵ In the early 1990s slightly more than 80% of the employees were employed on the basis of a collective agreement but in 2014 it constituted less than a half of employees. In the typical branches of low wage sector collective agreement was in decline. In the lowest quintile of all workers only one in three is employed in a company on the basis of collective agreement (SCHULTEN, HORN 2014, p. 395, 396).

employees and as a result they are less competitive. However, there is still a danger that employers would employ the workers for the transitional period and then the employees would be replaced by other unemployed (Mitnahmeeffekt).

Another group excluded from the minimum wage law are apprentices and people under the age of 18 who have not finished vocational education. The intention of the legislator in this case was to encourage them to earn professional qualifications and not to take up a job. It is fully justified as young people while taking their life decisions are not always guided by economic rationality and do not compare with each other the expected value of their potential income arising from vocational training with the one without any education (LESCH et al. 2014, p. 401).

The third group excluded from the minimum wage law are teenagers taking part in internships and vocational practice taken into account in vocational education syllabus or plans of studies. Also people taking part in vocational courses lasting at least 6 months or courses allowing to take up studies and the participants of induction trainings aimed at choosing most suitable vocational education profile are not entitled to benefit from the new statutory regulation concerning the minimum wage (ARNI et al. 2014, p. 404).

Another exception in the minimum wage act was establishing the transitional period to adjust branch-specific minimum wages to the statutory, generally applicable pay. During this time the sides of collective agreement can agree on the way to increase those wages which are below minimum wage reference value. It can be done till the end of 2016⁶.

Companies and employees covered by national minimum wage (branch approach)

Research concerning the influence of the minimum wage on the employment size and structure started in Germany long before the legislative framework was introduced. At this point in time consequences of the formal introduction of minimum wage were very hard to anticipate, therefore it has been thought that its real effects would be visible only in the future. Currently, it can only be examined how many companies and employees come within the purview of the minimum wage act⁷.

⁶ Supply-side policy pursued by Germany had and still has negative effects on European economy as it caused real reduction of the value of money against member countries of the eurozone. Slight wage growth in Germany which appeared as a result of the policy did not lead to the increase in employment in comparison with other countries (HERZOG-STEIN et al. 2013, p. 10, 19).

⁷ It is also important what the determinant factors at the time of employing new workers are as employment effects of the introduced minimum wage are determined not only by redundancies (job losses) but also by the changes accompanying new recruitment (KUBIS et al. 2015, p. 1).

The following analysis is based on the valid results of panel based research made by the Institute for Employment Research in Nürnberg. The perspective of companies is of crucial importance here as finally they decide about the employment strategies. The extent of the minimum wage impact is measured on the basis of the number of people who, before its introduction, earned less than 8.50 euro gross per hour. It is a clear indicator in which economy sectors more or less extensive adaptive actions on their part should be expected.

According to the results of the research, about 12% of the surveyed companies in Germany had at least one employee who earned less than the minimum wage rate, while about 7% of them responded they have already adapted their wages to the new law. German companies were affected by the above mentioned regulations with different and changing intensity depending on the economy branch. This intensity is measured by the share of employees earning below the minimum wage. That is why, the implementation reference for the IAB research are the companies and their workforce included in this perspective. Firstly, the interest of companies in which at least one employee earned less than 8.50 euro per hour and at least one was covered with compulsory social security was established (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The percentage of companies in which at least one employee earned less than 8,50 euro per hour before the introduction of the minimum wage and at least one of them was covered with compulsory social security (according to economy branches, in %)

Source: BELLMANN et al. (2015, p. 5).

Relatively minor percentage of companies was observed in such branches as construction, public administration or financial and insurance activities. However, comparatively high percentage was observed in accommodation and food services business, retail, manufacture of food products, other services, transportation and warehouse management. While in agriculture, forestry and fishing there were also many companies covered with the minimum wage, but the current collective agreement allows transitory wage rate lower than the statutorily guaranteed. On the other hand, in construction, where in 1997 a higher minimum branch wage was introduced, the share of companies paying wage rates lower than statutorily guaranteed was minor (BELLMANN et al. 2015, p. 5).

Subsequently, the employees' share in companies covered with new regulations, who before the introduction of the minimum wage earned less than 8.50 euro per hour, has been investigated. In branches shown in Figure 2 almost three quarters of companies employed over 30% of people earning below the reference value of minimum wage. There was also their high share in all branches amounting as much as 45%. In-depth analysis have shown that this

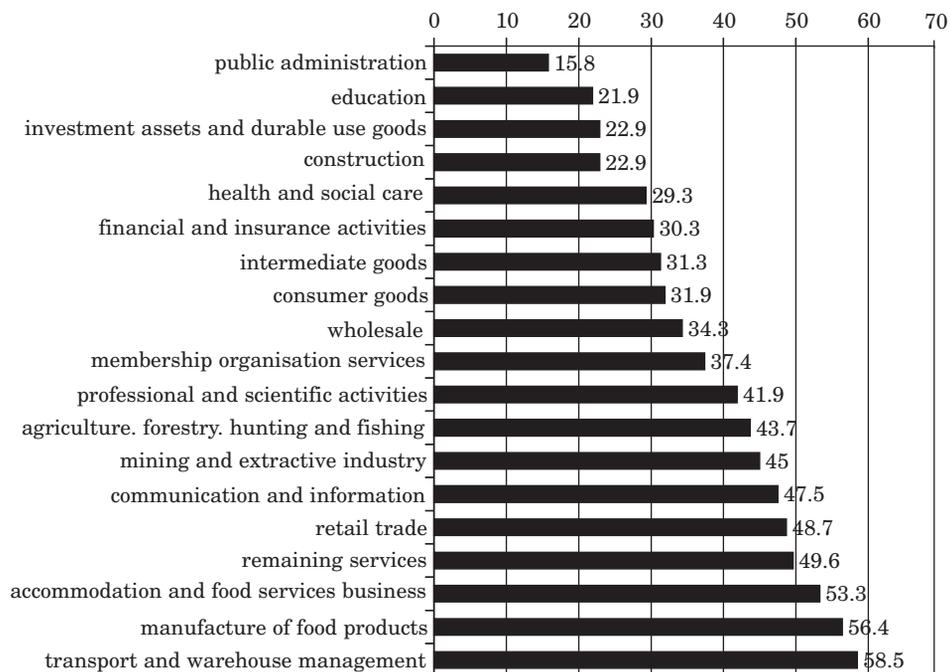


Fig. 2. Percentage share of employees earning less than 8,50 euro per hour in companies employing at least one such worker and in which at least one was covered with compulsory social security (according to economy branches, in %)

Source: BELLMANN et al. (2015, p. 6).

high share is not caused by small enterprises but rather by medium-sized and large enterprises and this is where special adjustment measures (pay rise or redundancies) should be expected. It means that the respective companies would either have to rise the wages or lay employees off, if they will adjust their wages to the statutory minimum wage (BELLMANN et al. 2015, p. 6).

The third stage of the research aimed at determining the percentage of employees who were covered by the minimum wage. In this regard some substantial differences between them were also identified (Fig. 3).

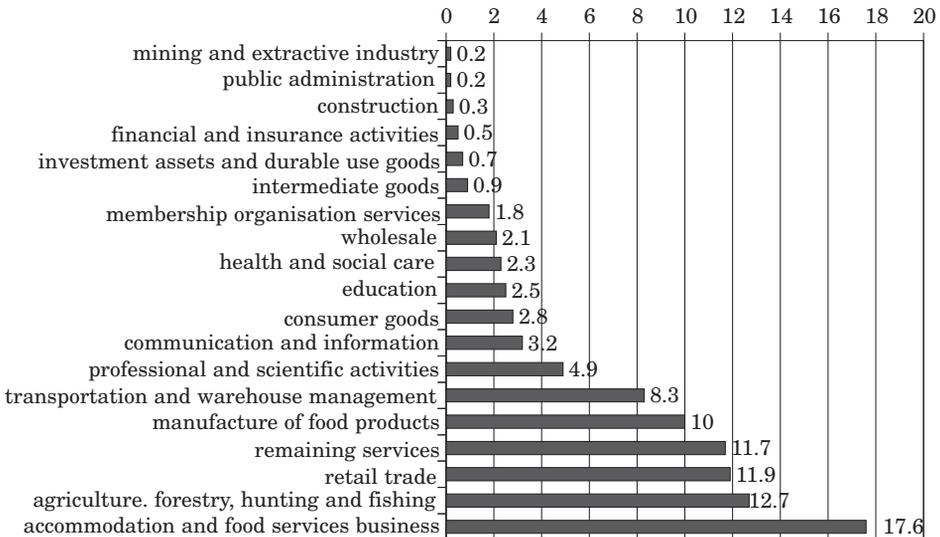


Fig. 3. The percentage of workers employed in various branches who earned less than 8,50 euro per hour before the introduction of the minimum wage and at least one of them was covered with compulsory social security (according to economy branches, in %)

Source: BELLMANN et al. (2015, p. 7).

If the criteria is the number of employees earning less than the minimum wage the branches enlisted above can be divided into three groups. The first group consists of those branches in which the mentioned share amounted 10% and more. In the second one the share varied between less than 10% and more than 1% and the third group includes those branches in which the share of the workers earning less than the minimum wage is lower than 1%. The analysis of the current evaluation of the IAB Establishment Panel from 2014 shows that overall 4.4% of the employed people in Germany are affected by the minimum wage.

Estimated and ad-hoc employment effects of introducing the minimum wage

Employment in Germany has been continually rising since 2012 and the trend is towards increase even after introducing the minimum wage. Research concerning this topic carried out to date showed the temporary nature and fragmentation of the available data for the researchers⁸. They cannot replace broad evaluation of the employment effects of the minimum wage especially in medium and long period (BERGE et al. 2016, p. 7).

The main issue mentioned in the scientific debate about the minimum wage is its influence on employment. German scientific communities, unlike international research, agree on the fact that the minimum wage can have negative repercussions on the employment size and structure. Numerous research conducted immediately before the introduction of the minimum wage in which researchers “outdid with calculating its allegedly negative effects” (SCHULTEN, WEINKOPF 2015, p. 79) confirm this thesis. The following Table 1 shows the employment results estimated in the research.

Table 1
The results of the research concerning forecast employment effects of the minimum wage of 8.50 euro gross per hour in Germany

| Researcher | Forecast employment effects |
|--|--|
| SCHNEIDER (2013) (Deutsche Bank Research) | from 450 thousand to 1 million job losses |
| ARNI et al. (2014) (IZA) | 570 thousand job losses |
| HENZEL/ENGELHARDT (2014) (Ifo-Institut) | from 56 thousand to 470 thousand full time job losses, 38 thousand to 306 thousand part time job losses and 863 thousand minor jobs |
| KNABE et al. (2014) (Ifo-Institut) | from 425 thousand to 910 thousand job losses including 270 thousand to 490 thousand within marginal employment |
| KNABE/SCHÖB (2014) (Ifo-Institut) for The Initiative New Social Market Economy (Initiative NeueSozialeMarktwirtschaft) | from 250 thousand to 570 thousand job losses including 150 thousand to 300 thousand within marginal employment |
| German Council of Economic Experts (2014) (Sachverständigenrat) | in 2015 there will be 100 thousand work places less within minor jobs and about 40 thousand work places covered with social security |
| PETERS (2015) (Deutsche Bank Research) | 800 thousand medium term job losses |

Source: SCHULTEN, WEINKOPF (2015, p. 80).

⁸ In Germany many research papers referring to the influence of minimum wage on the employment size were published. The focus of these papers was mainly on sector-specific minimum wages. Either individual industries or regions (eastern and western federal states), where the minimum wage was introduced, were researched. Not only the research approach, but also the research periods were differing. Thus the elaborated research results were often enough contradictory and they were evaluated as not sufficient. In order to draw a more detailed picture on minimum wage more research efforts are necessary (BELLMANN et al. 2015, p. 3).

Information presented in the table leads to the conclusion that Munich Ifo-Institut was particularly active when it comes to projections. It presented a very broad spectrum of redundancies as a result of introducing the minimum wage, between 250 and 1600 thousand. Deutsche Bank Research was placed second. The company estimated that the number of redundancies accounts for about 450 thousand to one million (in 2013), in the medium term 800 thousand (in 2015). In this context the forecast of German Council of Economic Experts appears to be a conservative estimate. According to them, the number of redundancies will amount only about 140 thousand, 100 thousand of which will be minor jobs and the rest will be those which are covered by compulsory social security.

The fact that in spite of the introduction of the minimum wage there was a growth in employment on the German labour market confirms the statistical

Table 2
Changes in employment covered with obligatory social security in Germany in April 2015 in comparison with April and December 2014 (in absolute terms and in %, seasonally adjusted data)

| Specification | Compared to December 2014 | | Compared to the previous year – April 2014 | |
|--|---------------------------|------|--|------|
| | in absolute numbers | in % | in absolute numbers | in % |
| Accommodation and food services business | 26,000 | 2.8 | 50,000 | 5.5 |
| Temporary job | 20,000 | 2.6 | 34,000 | 4.4 |
| Remaining business services | 25,000 | 1.9 | 61,000 | 4.8 |
| Nursing homes and social welfare | 29,000 | 1.4 | 69,000 | 3.4 |
| Transportation and warehouse management | 21,000 | 1.3 | 39,000 | 2.5 |
| Real estate, liberal profession, scientific and technical services | 25,000 | 1.1 | 89,000 | 4.2 |
| Remaining services, private households | 9,000 | 0.8 | 14,000 | 1.3 |
| Trade, conservation repair of vehicles | 29,000 | 0.7 | 59,000 | 1.4 |
| Communication and information | 6,000 | 0.6 | 18,000 | 2 |
| Health care | 11,000 | 0.5 | 38,000 | 1.7 |
| Agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing | 1,000 | 0.4 | 3,000 | 1.3 |
| Education | 3,000 | 0.3 | 12,000 | 1 |
| Processing industry | 18,000 | 0.3 | 57,000 | 0.9 |
| Construction | 4,000 | 0.2 | 9,000 | 0.5 |
| Financial and insurance activities | -2,000 | -0.2 | -4,000 | -0.4 |
| Public administration, defence, social security | -9,000 | -0.5 | -16,000 | -0.9 |
| Mining and extractive industry, Electricity and water supply, waste management | -3,000 | -0.6 | -9,000 | -1.6 |
| In total | 216,000 | 0.7 | 517,000 | -1.7 |

Source: SCHULTEN, WEINKOPF (2015, p. 82).

data of the Federal Employment Agency. According to it, in the first four months of 2015, 216 thousand jobs covered by compulsory social security appeared, which is the equivalent of 0.7% (Tab. 2). Compared to the previous year in March 2015 there were more than 500 thousand additional positions and the highest increase in employment occurred in typical low income jobs, namely in accommodation and food services business, temporary employment and other business services while redundancies were recognised in water and electricity supply, public administration, defence, social insurance and in financial and insurance activities, where the minimum wage plays a subordinate role. Summing up, in respect of increasing employment covered with obligatory social security there were not any negative tendencies in the given period (SCHULTEN, WEINKOPF 2015, p. 4).

The analysis of the data concerning the unemployment level also provides information on the effects of the minimum wage on employment. Since its introduction, the level of unemployment has decreased (Tab. 3). According to Federal Employment Agency the number of unemployed in June 2015 when compared to December 2014 has decreased by 55 thousand, an equivalent to a decline by around 2%. On the other hand, according to data from June 2014 the decrease was even higher than 4%. Taking into consideration the division of Germany into western and eastern federal states quite a diverse picture of both parts can be seen.

Table 3

The number of unemployed in Germany between 2014–2015 (seasonally adjusted data)

| Specification | Germany in total | Western federal states | Eastern federal states |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 06.2015 | 2,786 | 2,016 | 770 |
| 12.2014 | 2,841 | 2,044 | 793 |
| 06.2014 | 2,912 | 2,083 | 829 |
| The change in 2015 in thousand | | | |
| 12.2014 | -5,5 | -28 | -27 |
| 06.2014 | -126 | -68 | -59 |
| The change in 2015 in % | | | |
| 12.2014 | -1.9 | -1.4 | -3.4 |
| 06.2014 | -4.3 | -3.2 | -7.1 |

Source: SCHULTEN, WEINKOPF (2015, p. 81).

In the east, where due to high number of employees in low-pay sector the influence of the minimum wage was stronger, the level of unemployment has fallen since the beginning of 2015 by 3.4%, which is almost twice as much as in the west, as there it has fallen only by 1.4% (in total in Germany 1.9%). In comparison with June 2014 the numbers look even more expressive as in all the analysed aspects the decreases in unemployment were almost twice as high.

Conclusion

The introduction of the minimum wage in Germany is one of the most important reforms of the labour market policy in the recent decades which required far-reaching consensus on the part of political parties, confederation of employers and trade unions. The act enjoys the support of employees but it is a matter of particular concern to employers and economists. Many of them would like to maintain the status quo, pointing to already existing nominal branch wages. However, the long lasting process of erosion of German collective bargaining agreement system causes their considerable decrease. As a consequence, one of the biggest low wage sectors on a European scale appears. Regulations in the area of the minimum wage are expected to prevent the spread of the low wage sector and even contribute towards its decrease. The legislator also envisaged exceptional situations in which on the one hand teenagers/young people are protected from taking haphazard, irrational decisions concerning taking up work too early, on the other those regulations are supposed to facilitate the unemployed the start on the labour market.

The scope of the minimum wage interference is visible in the number of employees earning less than the reference value before the introduction of minimum wage. According to the results of the research conducted by IAB, this scope is best visible in the particular branches of German economy, particularly in the low wage sector. This aspect determines the direction of the scientific studies, especially while assessing the situation of employers and employees at the time of the minimum wage introduction. Three key indicators were taken into account. The first one was the share of companies in which at least one worker earned less than 8.50 euro per hour. The second one was the share of those workers in the companies covered by the regulations and finally the percentage of employees impaired by the minimum wage in individual branches. Those indicators had the highest values in such branches as: accommodation and food services business, retail trade, manufacture of food products, transportation and warehouse management and other services. In those branches there was an urgent need to take appropriate adaptive activities.

The employment effects of the minimum wage in Germany can undergo ex-ante and ex-post evaluation. In the first case there were many studies conducted before the act was in effect. The results showed huge disproportions concerning the number of redundancies caused by its introduction. On the one hand, there are references about loss of about 1 million jobs. On the other hand, the number was estimated to be about 140 thousand. However, quite an unequivocal picture emerges from the ex-post evaluation. During the period from December 2014 to April 2015 over 200 thousand workplaces appeared

with an unemployment decline by 55 thousand people (which constitutes about 2%) during the period from December 2014 to June 2015. This data is in contradiction with the forecasted negative effects of the introduction of the minimum wage. However, it should be pointed out that this positive trend can, but not necessarily has to persist in a long term.

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