



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

New working hours in South Korea - Would you work 69 hours a week?



The fact that many developed economies have been working to shorten the weekly working hours does not interest South Korea much. It is moving in the opposite direction, towards lengthening weekly working hours.

The Korean experiment has a different logic from some large Western economies, which, by shortening the working week to four instead of five days, tend to increase employee productivity, to motivate them and give them more time to rest and spend with their families.

The conservative government in Seoul has launched a proposal to increase the maximum weekly working hours from the current 52 to 69.

This does not mean that every worker in Korea will have to work 14 hours a day, because that would be plenty even for a country where work is considered a supreme social value.

In South Korea, people work more than in most of the world. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), employees in South Korea work an average of 1,915 hours a year, which is 200 hours more than the average OECD level: that is, 130 hours more than in the US or even 400 hours more than in France.

Searching for a more flexible working week model

The new government proposal wants to arrange employees' working hours differently, not only during the week, but over a longer period of time - monthly, quarterly and annually.

The previous limit of a maximum of 52 working hours per week meant the traditional 40 regular working hours plus 12 (allowed) hours of overtime.

The government is convinced that by raising the working week limit, it will create a more flexible model, which will enable employees to

organise their work better, and free time and to dedicate themselves to rest and family more efficiently than before. However, many are sceptical.

Labour Minister Lee Jung-sik, one of the authors of the new proposal, said that the previous regulation of 52 working hours per week had negative effects, because it penalised companies whose employees exceeded that limit.

He adds that due to this, companies put pressure on employees not to register overtime over the limit of 52 hours per week.

This might mean that the administration of President Yoon Suk Yeol wants to legalise a longer working week by increasing the limit to 69 hours per week, which de facto already exists. But there are other reasons as well.

Workers will actually have a shorter workday

The government offered employers and workers to agree on overtime during different periods - weekly, monthly, quarterly, semi-annually or annually, with the total average not exceeding the weekly limit of 69 working hours, regular and overtime.

Also, the draft government decision provides that between two working cycles, workers must have at least 11 hours for rest and the possibility to use a larger number of overtime hours at once, for example for a longer vacation or trip.

“The plan will benefit workers with various working hour systems, such as a four-day work week and a sabbatical month, while helping companies in managing their workforce”, said minister Lee according to The Korea Herald.

Officials are convinced that with this model, workers will actually work less, when observing a longer period, because they will be able to adjust their working hours to the scope

of work, in agreement with employers.

“If you are working at ice cream factories for example, you can work overtime seasonally, then save the hours of work and use later to go on a longer holiday”, was one of the statements from the Ministry of Labour.

Political protection of workers in the parliament

Not everyone is enthusiastic about the government's project, even in a country with a work culture like South Korea. However, it seems that the resistance to this model is not as strong as we might expect somewhere in Europe.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, one of the two umbrella labour unions, said that the proposed revision will allow employees to work from 9am to midnight.

The Confederation criticised the plan for lacking measures for workers' health and rest while it only benefits employers. The influence of trade unions in Korea is not particularly strong, as only 14% of employees are members, which greatly limits their potential for negotiations. Those dissatisfied will be able to rely more on political protection, since the law must pass a vote in parliament, where the opposition has a majority. It is against it for the time being, and have announced that the government's proposal is a "shortcut to population extinction". This suggests that the main argument against the new labour regulations will be population policy, also a very sensitive topic in Korea, which is the world leader in low fertility rates.

Can the Korean model be used in Europe?

The Korean model follows the opposite logic to Western trends regarding the reorganisation of working hours. Last year's six-month pilot programme in which more than 70

companies and around 3,300 employees participated in the UK, showed very positive effects of the four-day work week. Most of the companies that participated in the project said that productivity was equal or even higher than in a five-day work week, according to a survey conducted by the 4 Day Week Global initiative.

“We certainly all love the extra day out of the office and do come back refreshed. It's been great for our wellbeing and we're definitely more productive already”, said an employee in a company that relies on remote work.

Western economies will not be able to transfer directly to Seoul's model, largely due to cultural differences regarding work and free time.

But, if applied in Korea, and if its effects are positive, the transfer to the West is not out of the question, primarily because of its basic idea of transposing the ratio of regular and overtime working hours from a weekly basis to a longer period, up to a year.