# Hours of work and absences from work - quarterly statistics

Statistics Explained

*Data extracted in February 2022*
*Planned article update: February 2023*

**"In the third quarter of 2021, in the EU, the average number of actual working hours per week for full-time workers aged 20-64 was highest in Greece (43.3 hours) and lowest in Slovakia (38.3 hours)."**

**"At EU level, the volume of actual hours worked decreased by 2 index points between Q3 2019 and Q3 2021."**

**"Own-account workers recorded a decrease in their total number of actual working hours between Q3 2019 and Q3 2021 (-6 index points) while employees and employers reverted in Q3 2021 close to their Q3 2019 level."**

**"Among EU Member States, Bulgaria and Romania recorded the lowest share of absences from work in the first three quarters of 2021, never exceeding 4 % of employed people."**

**Index of total actual hours worked in the main job by professional status, EU, Q1 2019 - Q3 2021**
(2019 = 100, age group 20-64, not seasonally adjusted)


ec.europa.eu/eurostat

This article is about the quarterly change in hours actually worked by employed people in their main job in the first three quarters of 2021 in the European Union (EU) as a whole, for all EU Member States individually, as well as for three EFTA countries (Iceland, Norway and Switzerland) and one candidate country (Serbia).

Statistics on the volume of working hours provide an economic perspective to employment as it represents an estimate for the labour input to production. Reporting on quarterly data allows for a short-term assessment of changes in working life and the economy.

Results presented in this article come from the EU Labour Force Survey (LFS) . Since 2021, all countries participating in the survey have harmonised their questionnaire regarding the measurement of actual working hours, absences from work and labour status (i.e. being employed, unemployed or outside the labour force) due to the implementation of Regulation (EU) 2019/1700. A break in the data series can then be found between the fourth quarter 2020 and the first quarter of 2021, with an enhanced comparability and quality of the results since the first quarter of 2021.

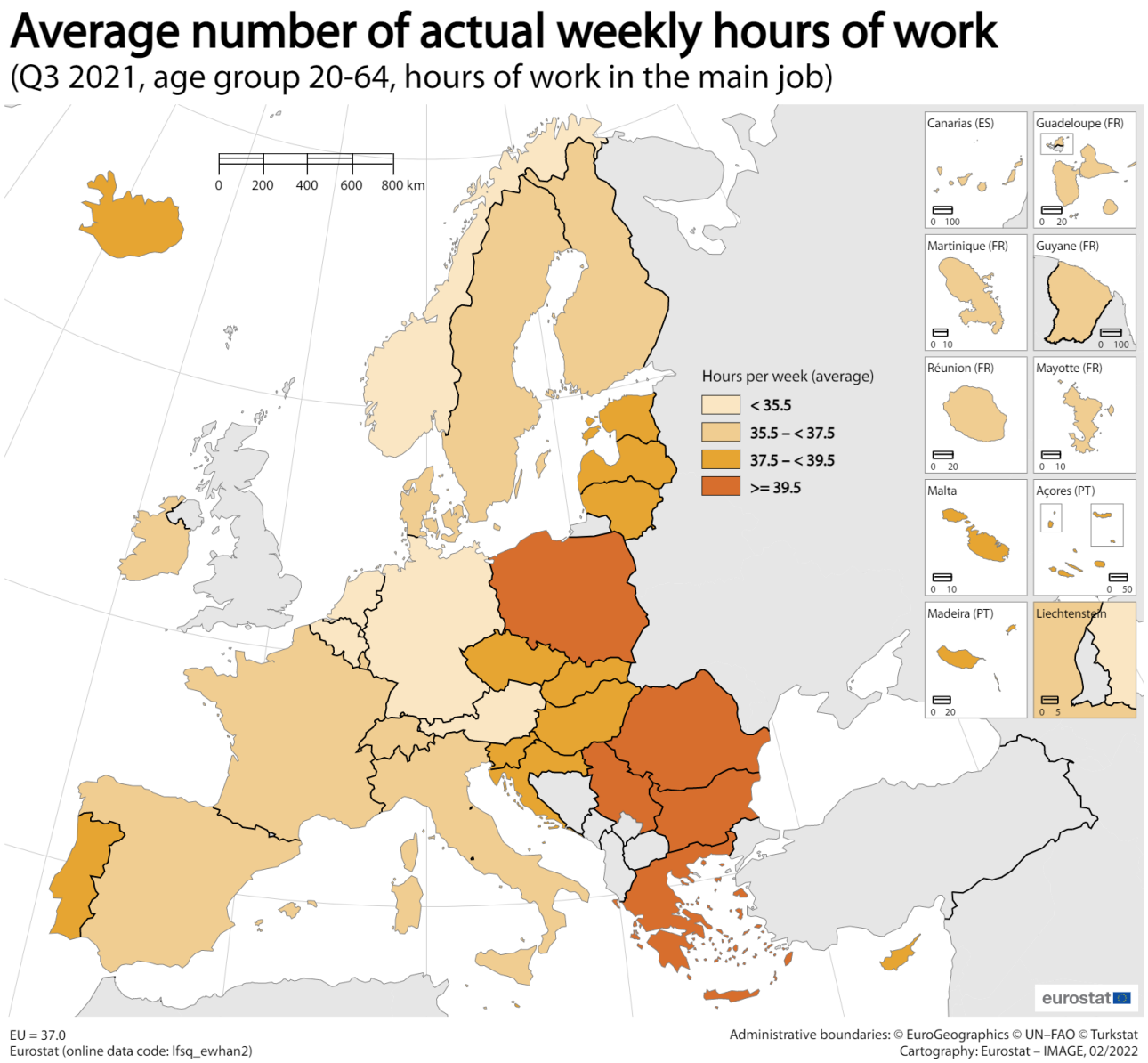
This article is part of the online publication Labour market in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic - quarterly statistics .

## Length of the actual working week

In the EU, during the third quarter of 2021, employed people aged 20-64 worked 37.0 hours on average per week. This number refers to the hours people have "actually" spent in work activities in their main job during the reference

week (see methodological notes for the difference between the actual and usual working hours).

The EU average of actual working hours per week hides many differences among countries (see Map 1) with the longest working weeks observed in Greece (41.6 hours), Poland (40.8 hours), Romania (40.2 hours) and Bulgaria (39.9 hours) and the shortest in the Netherlands (32.6 hours), Austria (34.7 hours), Germany (35.0 hours) and Belgium (35.1 hours). Note that the EFTA country Norway (34.9 hours) also stands out with a short working week.




**Map 1: Average number of actual weekly hours of work Source: Eurostat (lfsq_ewhan2)**

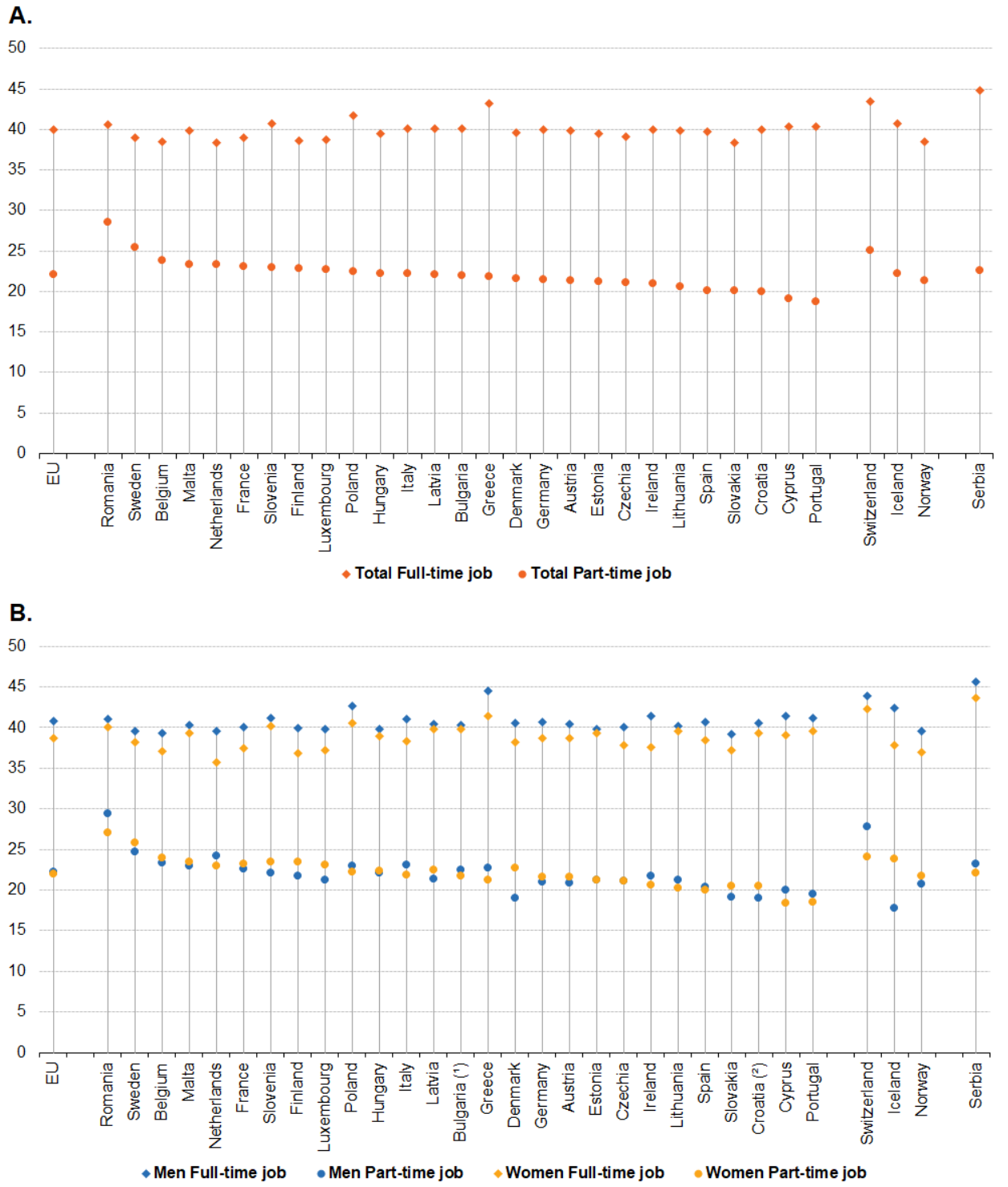
The average is computed as the total number of actual hours of work divided by the number of employed people having actually worked. The denominator only takes into account those people present at work (excluding people absent from work for holidays, sickness, temporary lay-off, etc.). If people absent from work were also to be taken into account, the denominator would be higher while the numerator would remain the same, leading to a considerably lower average when numerous people are absent from work. This is particularly true for Q2 2020, when the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market was at its most severe, as well as for the third quarter of other years, when most people took their summer holidays, as is the case for Q3 2021 which is the focus of this article.

It is also worth noting that the average working hours presented here includes both people working full and part-time. The different shares of part-time workers across countries consequently influence the results, in addition to the different legal and usual length of the working week. Countries with a high share of part-time workers report a shorter average working week for the total employed population. Indeed, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany and Belgium had the shortest average working week in the third quarter of 2021 while having the highest shares of part-time workers in the EU. More information on part-time workers can be found in the article on employment . Seasonal work can also affect the results, which is particularly true for the third quarter, which corresponds to the summer period. Finally, the number of hours part-time workers actually work in each country (not necessarily half the time of a regular full-time) also plays a role. The next section tackles this point presenting the average number of working hours by country for the full and part-timers separately.

**Perspective on full and part-time workers**

The length of the average working week of full-time workers in the EU ranged from 43.3 hours in Greece to 38.3 hours in Slovakia (see Figure 1 A.). However, both the candidate country Serbia (44.8 hours) and the EFTA country Switzerland (43.4 hours), exceeded Greece with even longer working weeks for full-time workers. The longest working week for part-time workers was recorded in Romania, with 28.6 hours, while the shortest was recorded in Portugal, with 18.8 hours. Note that in the vast majority of countries, the length of the average working week of part-time workers was around half the length of the working week of full-time workers. The most obvious exception can be seen in Romania, where the average working week of part-timers was particularly long and the average for full- and part-timers relatively close (40.6 hours compared with 28.6 hours).

**Average number of actual weekly hours of work in the main job by sex and full-time/part-time, age group 20-64, Q3 2021**




(1) Data for men on part-time job with low reliability.
(2) Data for men and women on part-time job with low reliability.
*Source:* Eurostat (online data code: lfsq_ewhan2)

eurostat

**Figure 1: Average number of actual weekly hours of work in the main job by sex and full-time part-time**
**Source: Eurostat (lfsq_ewhan2)**

Looking at the gender differences (Figure 1 B.), in all countries, male full-time workers had longer working weeks than their female counterparts. The most significant difference among the EU Member States was recorded in Ireland, with an average working week for full-timers of 41.5 hours for men and 37.5 hours for women. The gender pattern is not the same regarding part-time workers: in some countries, women had longer working weeks, in other

countries, it was the opposite. Denmark stood out with the largest difference in the length of the average working week between men and women working part-time - 19.1 versus 22.8 hours.

**How does the average working week vary across economic activities and occupations?**

After having looked at the average number of working hours by country for the full- and part-timers*separately* , the working hours are analysed by sector of economic activities and group of occupations at EU level for the full- and part-time workers*together* . The length of the average working week measured in actual hours of work varies across different sectors of the economic activities ( NACE Rev. 2 ) (see Figure 2). In Q3 2021, people employed in the sector "agriculture, forestry and fishing" spent the largest number of hours at work, with 43.6 hours on average per week, followed by people working in the sectors "mining and quarrying" (40.3 hours), "construction" (40.0 hours) and "transportation and storage" (39.0 hours). In contrast, workers in "administrative and support service activities" (33.9 hours), "education" (32.5 hours) and "activities of households as employers" (26.8 hours) had the shortest average working weeks.

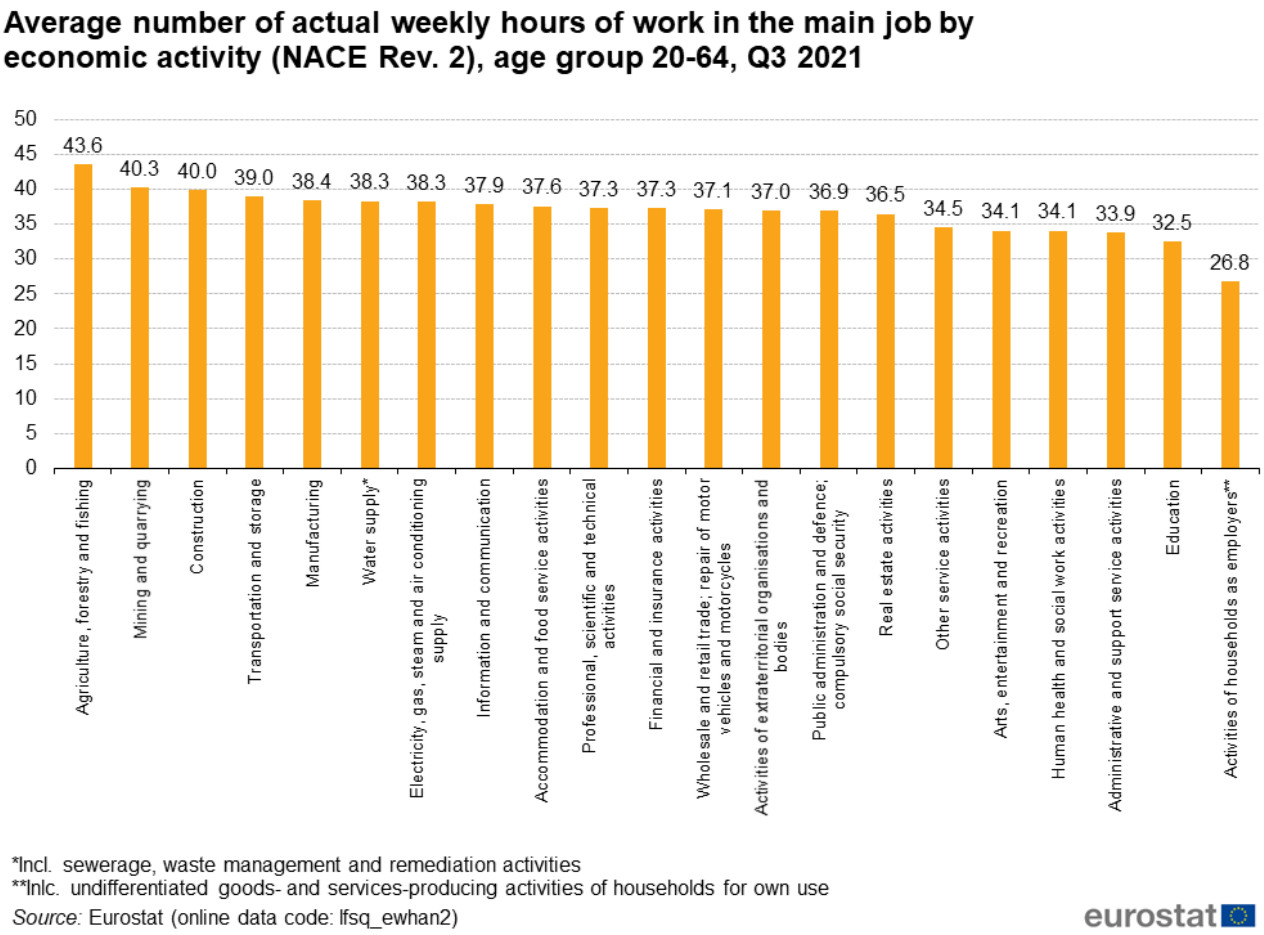



**Figure 2: Average number of actual weekly hours of work in the main job by economic activity (NACE Rev. 2) Source: Eurostat (lfsq_ewhan2)**

When looking at different groups of occupations ( ISCO-08 ), skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers (44.7 hours) and managers (42.4 hours) had the longest average working weeks in the EU during Q3 2021 (see Figure 3). In contrast, clerical
support workers (34.6 hours) and workers with elementary occupations (32.4 hours) had the shortest working weeks.

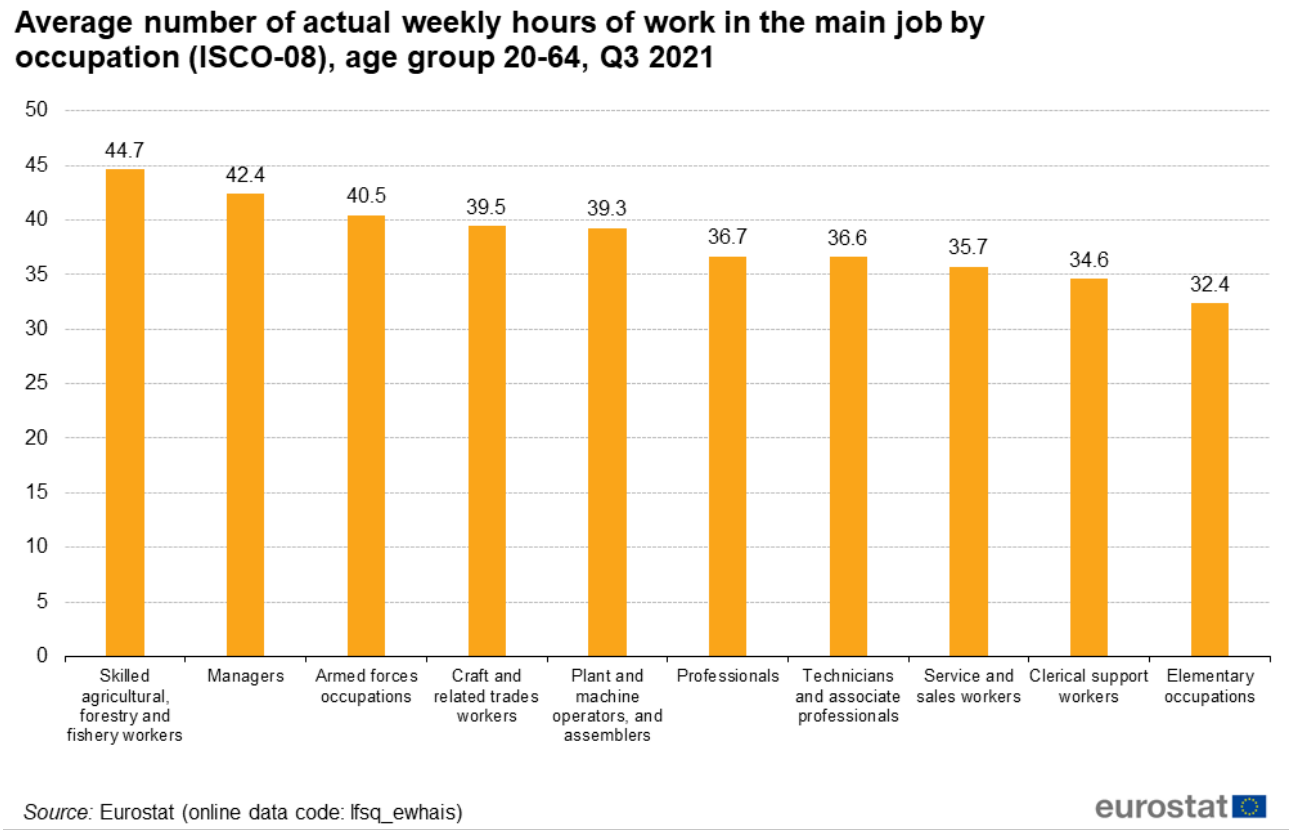



**Figure 3: Average number of actual weekly hours of work in the main job by occupation (ISCO-08) Source: Eurostat (lfsq_ewhais)**

## Impact of COVID-19 pandemic and potential recovery

This section focuses on the development of the*total number* (volume) of actual working hours per week in the main job, i.e. the sum of hours each group of workers devoted per week to labour in their main job. This complements the previous section which explored the number of hours each group of employed persons had spent in work on*average* per week.

An index of the volume of actual working hours has been created taking as reference (index=100) the average of the four quarters of the pre-pandemic year 2019. In this way, the evolution of the volume from Q1 2019 to Q3 2021 can be assessed more easily and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic better seen. Indeed, the volume of working hours follows a seasonal pattern, and the created index allows to link the changes observed in 2020 and 2021 with the changes observed in the pre-pandemic year 2019. As mentioned at the top of this article, a break in the series exists between Q4 2020 and Q1 2021 due to a change of regulation for data collection. However, most changes relate to the classification, as employed or not employed, of people absent from work, who are not producing any working hours. The impact of the break on the volume of working hours can then be assumed as mild.

At EU level, the total number of actual working hours decreased by 5 index points (henceforth referred to as points) from Q4 2019 to Q1 2020 (reaching 97 points, see Figure 4). The change from Q1 to Q2 2020 was more drastic, amounting to an 11 point decrease (against a decrease of only 1 point between the corresponding quarters the year before). The volume of actual working hours in Q2 2020, with 86 points, was the lowest for the observed period (Q1 2019 - Q3 2021).

Then, the index of working hours began an upward trend. Despite the start of the summer period, the index rose by 7 points from Q2 to Q3 2020 and continued to grow afterwards, only stabilising between Q4 2020 and Q1 2021. It finally decreased by 6 points between Q2 and Q3 2021 for the summer period, the same decrease as observed in 2019.

With respect to the year-on-year development, the volume of actual working hours in Q1 2021 was 1 point below its level in Q1 2020 and 6 points below the level recorded in Q1 2019. In Q2 2021, the volume was 13 points above Q2

2020, but still 2 points below Q2 2019. Finally, the volume of working hours in Q3 2021 was at the same level as in Q3 2020, but 2 points below Q3 2019.

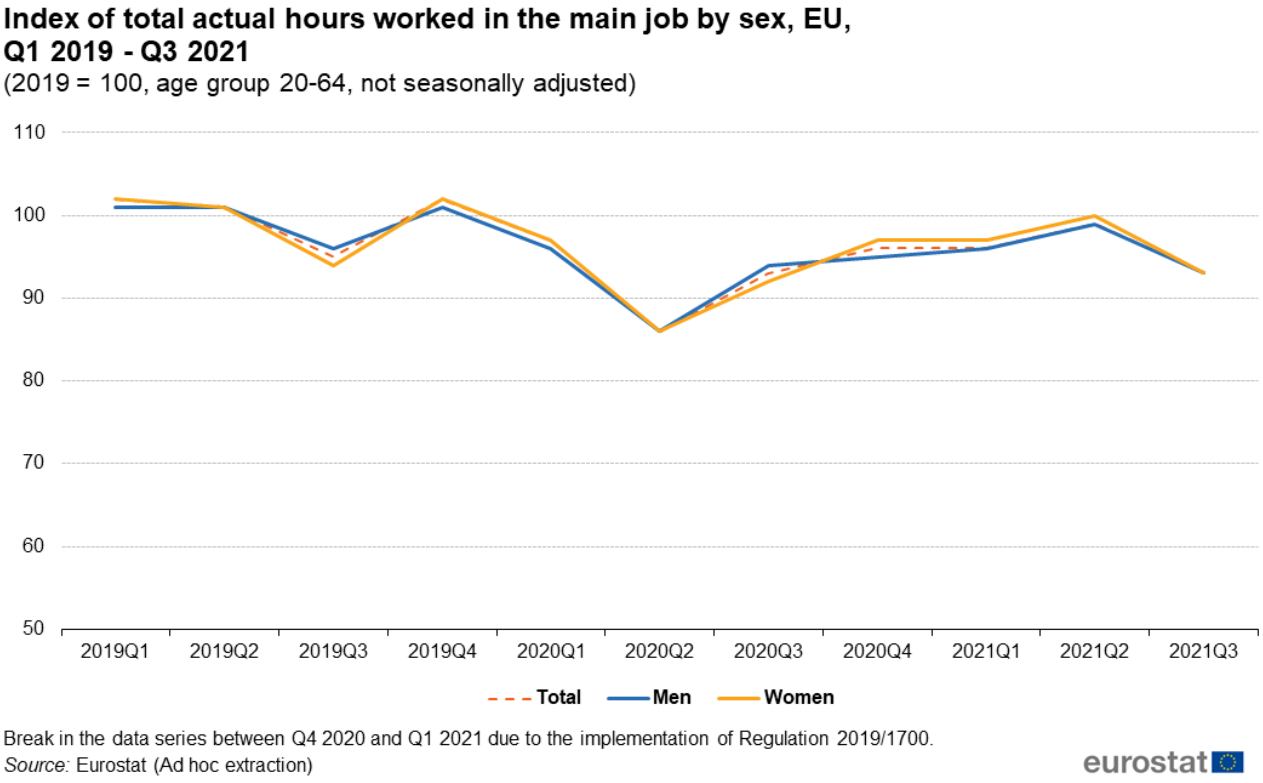



**Figure 4: Index of total actual hours worked in the main job by sex, EU, Q1 2019 - Q3 2021 Source: Eurostat (Ad hoc extraction)**

The comparison between men and women in terms of the development of the total number of working hours does not show any substantial difference. However, it appears that in 2021 the index of working hours reached its base value of 100 (fixed separately for each of the two genders, using the average over the four quarters of 2019) only for women (in Q2 2021), mainly due to a stronger increase for women than for men between Q3 and Q4 2020.

**Employees less affected than self-employed**

Differences are more striking between professional statuses than between the genders. Indeed, self-employed with employees (employers) and self-employed without employees (own-account workers) experienced a much stronger decrease in the total number of hours worked during 2020 and 2021 in comparison with employees (see Figure 5). In Q2 2020, the quarter most severely affected by the pandemic, the index of working hours for employees dropped to 87 points, whereas it decreased to 80 points for own-account workers and to 79 points for employers. After Q2 2020, the index of working hours for employees grew steadily until Q2 2021 when it reached its base value of 100, while at the same time the development for both groups of self-employed people was marked by a decrease in some of the quarters. From Q2 2021 to Q3 2021, corresponding to the start of the summer period, the index of working hours decreased to
94 points for employees and to 92 points for own-account workers, while it remained stable at 96 points for employers.

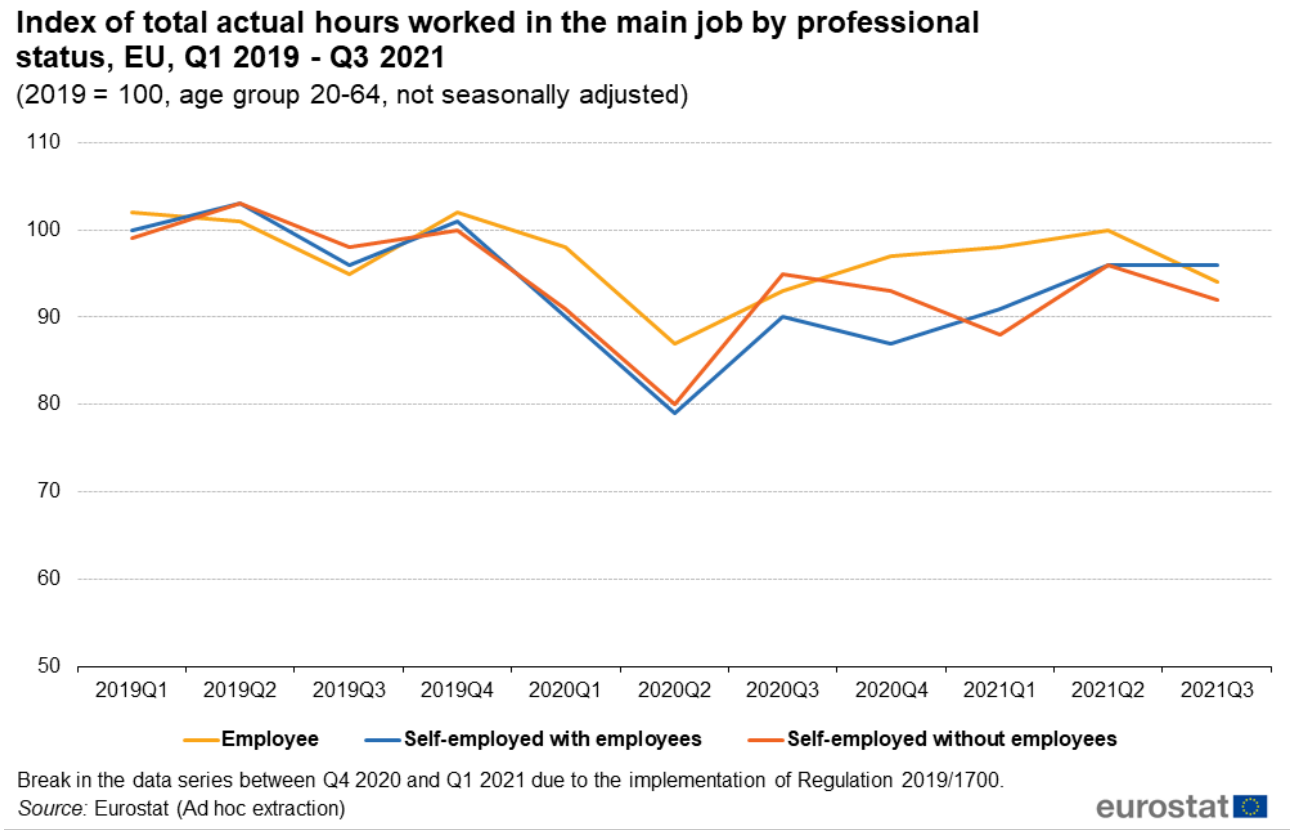



**Figure 5: Index of total actual hours worked in the main job by professional status, EU, Q1 2019 - Q3 2021**
**Source: Eurostat (Ad hoc extraction)**

Comparing the third quarter of 2021 with the same quarter of 2020 and 2019, it appears that the volume of working hours for employees was around the same level in Q3 2021 as in Q3 2019 and Q3 2020 (no more than a 1-point difference of the index). For employers, the index value in Q3 2021 was the same as in Q3 2019, but 6 points higher than in Q3 2020. In contrast, own-account workers recorded a decrease of 6 points between Q3 2019 and Q3 2021, with an intermediate decrease of 3 points between Q3 2020 and Q3 2021.

**People aged 55-64 less affected than younger age groups**

As for professional status, age plays a more significant role in working hours than gender. Young people aged 15-24 experienced a sharper cut in their total number of working hours in 2020 and 2021 than people aged 25-54 and people in the senior age group 55-64 (see Figure 6). One of the most pronounced differences between age groups was in Q2 2020, when the index of working hours for young people dropped to 78 points, while it only decreased to 86 points for people aged 25-54, and to 90 points for people in the age category 55-64. After Q2 2020, which was the quarter with the lowest volume of working hours for the three age groups, the recovery was more stable for people aged 25-54 and 55-64 than for young people. Indeed, the increase in the number of working hours was uninterrupted until Q2 2021 for people aged 25-54 and 55-64, while there were some fluctuations in the index for young people (namely a decrease from Q3 2020 to Q4 2020).

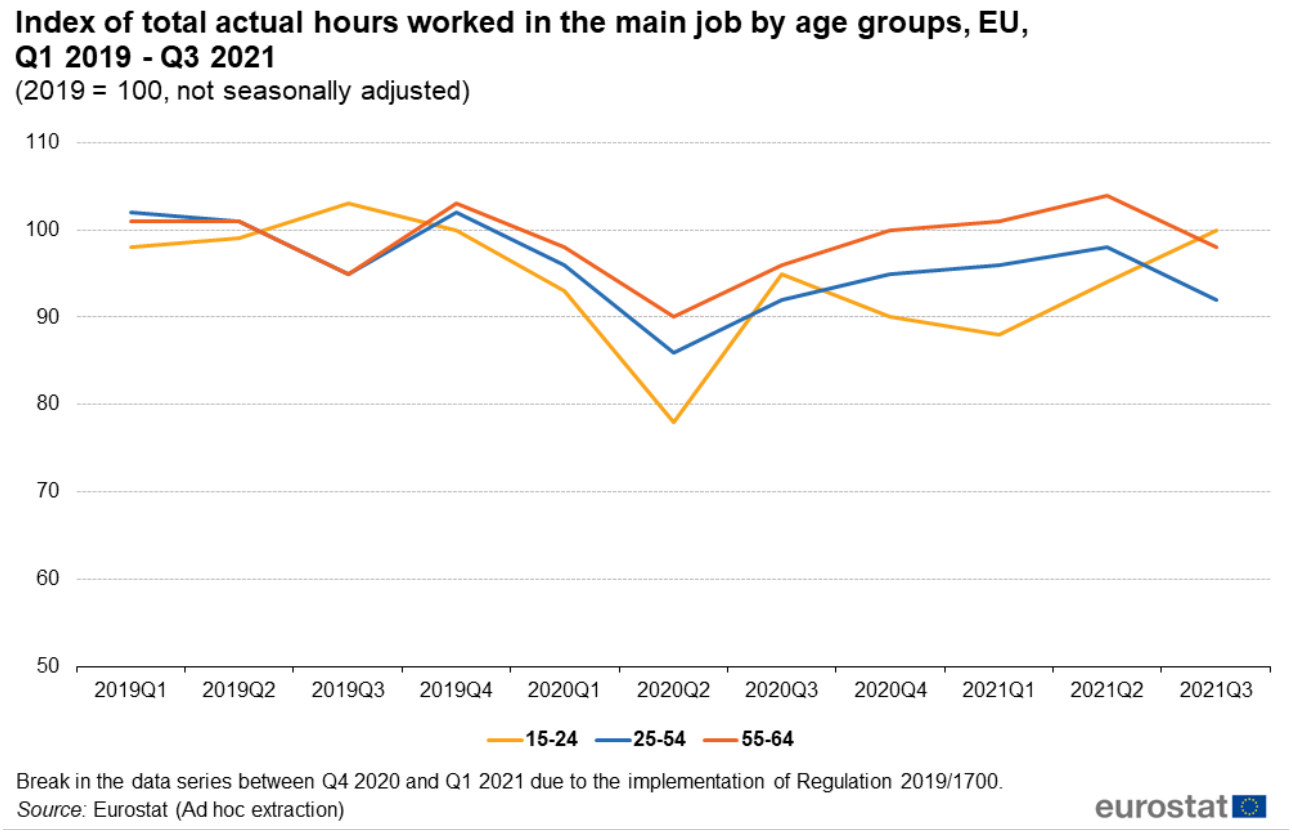



**Figure 6: Index of total actual hours worked in the main job by age groups, EU, Q1 2019 - Q3 2021 Source: Eurostat (Ad hoc extraction)**

Seasonal pattern can be detected when comparing the three age groups: from the second to the third quarter of 2019 and 2021, young people saw an increase in the volume of working hours while the other age groups experienced a decrease. One possible explanation might be the increase of seasonal work for young people during the summer months while people aged 25-64 are expected to take holidays. A similar pattern can be observed in 2020: the volume of working hours increased from Q2 to Q3 2020 for the three age groups but more for young people.

In Q3 2021, the volume of working hours for young people was 5 points above the level of Q3 2020, but 3 points below the level of Q3 2019. For people aged 25-54, the index in Q3 2021 was at the same level as in Q3 2020, and still 3 points below the level of Q3 2019 (as for young people). By contrast, seniors (aged 55-64) had a higher volume of working hours in Q3 2021 than in Q3 2020 (+2 points) and Q3 2019 (+3 points).

**Six EU countries recorded more working hours in Q3 2021 than in Q3 2019**

Looking at results by country for people aged 20-64 (see Figure 7), 15 EU Member States registered an increase in the total number of working hours from Q3 2020 to Q3 2021 (a break in the data series can be found for some countries but this break can be assumed as mild with regard to the working hours, see methodological notes). However, only six of them also registered an increase when comparing Q3 2021 with Q3 2019, namely Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Slovenia and Poland. No EU country other than the aforementioned six registered an increase from Q3 2019 to Q3 2021. Belgium stood out with the highest increases, amounting to +6 % between Q3 2019 and Q3 2021 and +7 % between Q3 2020 and Q3 2021. Please note that Figure 7 presents percentage change differences.

In contrast, the volume of working hours was lower in Q3 2021 than in Q3 2020 in 11 EU countries; in all of them, the volume was also lower in Q3 2021 than in Q3 2019. Among these countries, the largest cuts were found in Estonia (-8 % compared with Q3 2019 and Q3 2020) and Luxembourg (-7 % compared with Q3 2019 and -8 % compared with Q3 2020). Latvia and Romania also experienced relatively large decreases in the volume of working hours (-9 % compared with Q3 2019 and -5 % compared with Q3 2020 for both countries).

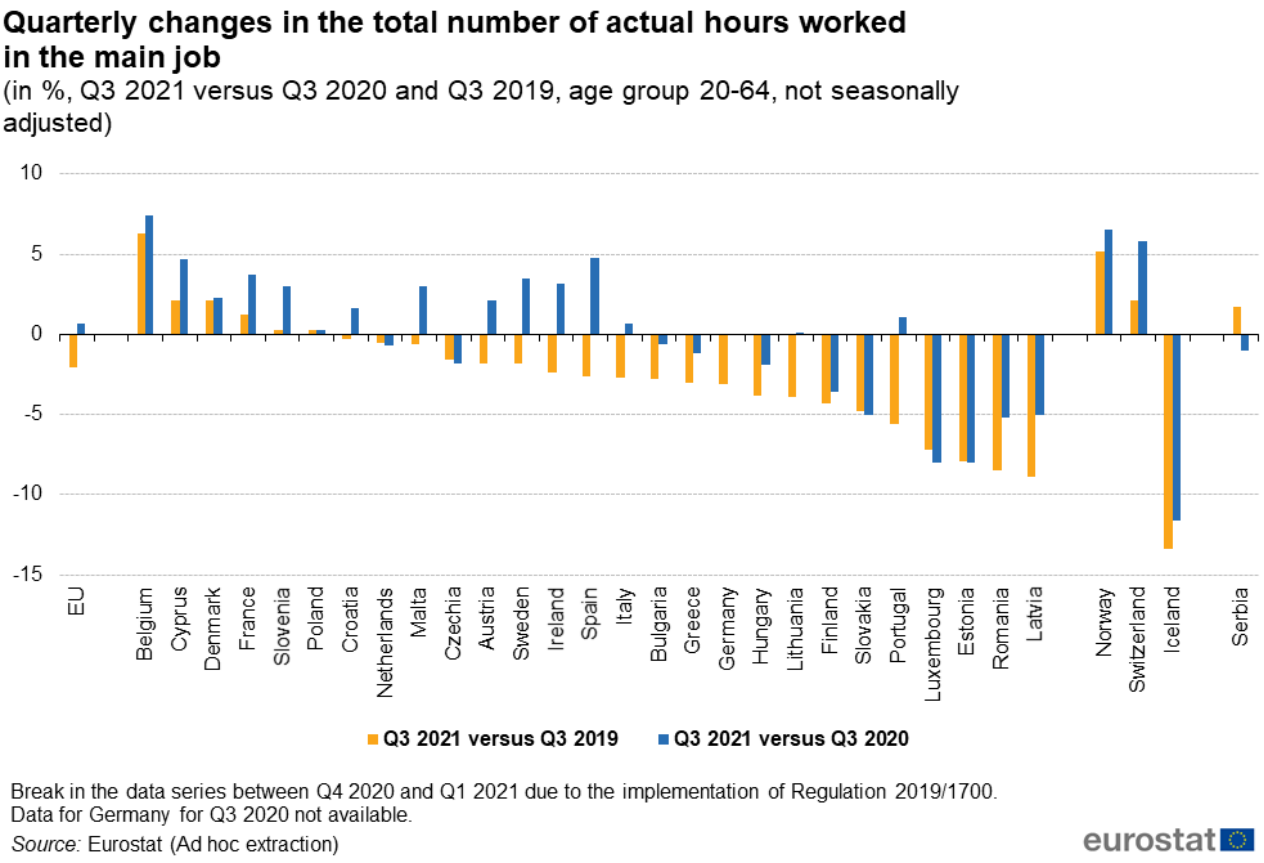



**Figure 7: Quarterly changes in the total number of actual hours worked in the main job Source: Eurostat (Ad hoc extraction)**

## Impact of absences from work

One of the key determinants of the total volume of hours worked is the level of absences from work. As can be seen in Figure 8, the number of absences in weeks 11 to 26 during 2020 (end of Q1 2020 and entire Q2 2020) was substantially higher than the average number of absences in the respective weeks over the period 2015-2019. During these weeks, the volume of working hours had its most significant decline (see above).

In addition to the level of absences from work, the level of employment also influences the volume of working hours. For the analysis of the quarterly evolution of the employment level since 2019 and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment, please refer to the articles employment , employment in details and employed people and job starters .

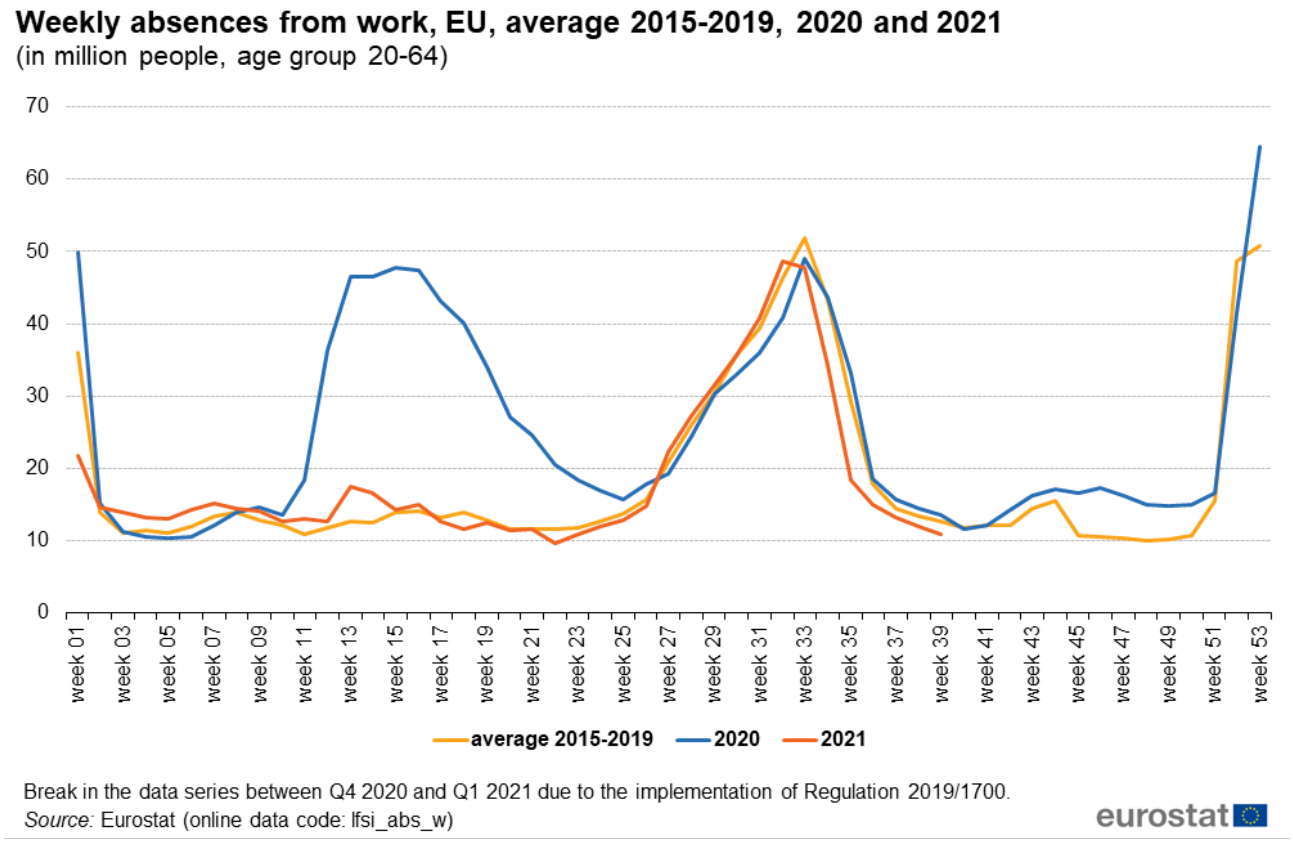



**Figure 8: Weekly absences from work, EU, average 2015-2019, 2020 and 2021 Source: Eurostat (lfsi_abs_w)**

The number of weekly absences from work registered in 2021 follows a pattern which is closer to that of the average computed over the years 2015-2019 than the one for the year 2020. While the lockdown and sanitary measures taken by EU Member States had a major impact on the number of absences from work in 2020, especially in Q2 2020, the impact was substantially lower in 2021 (partly due to arrangements for remote work).

Differences in the number of absences from work between 2021 and the average for 2015-2019 were still due to restrictive measures linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to school holidays (Easter celebrations not being in the same week each year) and the change in the LFS regulations between 2020 and 2021 having an impact on the measurement of absences (see methodological notes). The number of absences from week 2 to week 16 in 2021 exceeds the average over 2015-2019; this difference is expected to be mainly due to the COVID restrictive measures while the peak in weeks 13 and 14 also corresponded to the 2021 Easter holidays in most EU Member States.

The last figure of this article (Figure 9) shows a country overview of the absences from work on a quarterly basis for the three first quarters of 2021. To facilitate the comparison across countries, the number of people absent from work is expressed as a percentage of the employed population in each country.

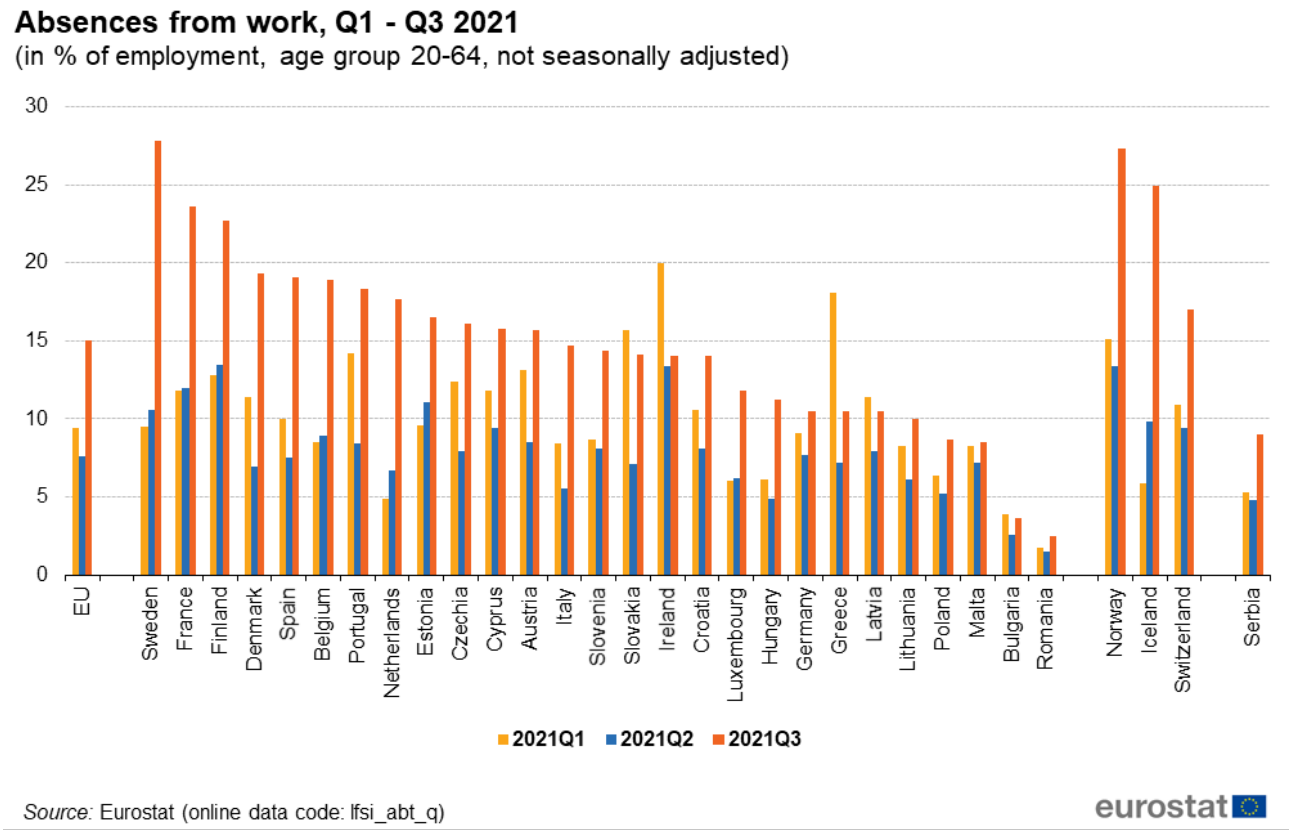



**Figure 9: Absences from work, Q1 - Q3 2021 Source: Eurostat (lfsi_abt_q)**

While the share of employed people absent from work increased from Q1 to Q2 2021 in 7 EU Member States (the Netherlands, Estonia, Sweden, Finland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France) it decreased in the remaining 20 EU countries. Then, between Q2 and Q3 2021, the share of absences from work increased in all countries. In 2021, the highest share of absences was recorded in the third quarter for 22 Member States. Only in Bulgaria, Latvia, Ireland, Slovakia and Greece, people absent from work represented a higher percentage of employment in the first quarter than in the following two quarters of 2021.

Despite the variations in their share of absences from work in the first three quarters of 2021, Bulgaria and Romania always recorded the lowest shares in the EU (never exceeding 4 %). There was also a certain stability over the three quarters of 2021 for the countries with the highest rates of absences from work: these were Ireland (20.0 %), Greece (18.1 %) and Slovakia (15.7 %) in Q1 2021, Finland (13.5 %), Ireland (13.4 %) and France (12.0 %) in Q2 2021, and Sweden (27.8 %), France (23.6 %) and Finland (22.7 %) in Q3 2021. Sweden is also worth mentioning for the sharpest quarter-on-quarter increase of the share of absences, amounting to a +17.2 percentage point jump between Q2 and Q3 2021.

## Source data for tables and graphs

Figures Hours of work and absences from work - update February 2022

## Data sources

All figures in this article are based on quarterly results from the European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) .

**Source:** The European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) is the largest European household sample survey providing mostly quarterly and annual results on labour participation of people aged 15 and over as well as on persons outside the labour force. It covers residents in private households. Conscripts in military or community service are not included in the results. The EU-LFS is based on the same target populations and uses the same

definitions in all countries, which means that the results are comparable between countries.

**European aggregates:** EU refers to the sum of the EU-27 Member States. If data is unavailable for a country, the calculation of the corresponding aggregates is computed with estimates. Such cases are indicated.

**Country notes** : (1) Spain and France have assessed the attachment to the job and included in employment those who have an unknown duration of absence but expect to return to the same job once the COVID-19 measures in place are lifted. (2) In the Netherlands, the 2021 quarterly LFS data remains collected using a rolling reference week instead of a fixed reference week, i.e. interviewed persons are asked about the situation of the week before the interview rather than a pre-selected week.

**Definitions:** The concepts and definitions used in the EU-LFS follow the guidelines of the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Employment covers persons living in private households, who during the reference week performed work, even for just one hour, for pay, profit or family gain, or were not at work but had a job or business from which they were temporarily absent, for example because of illness, holidays, industrial dispute or education and training. The EU-LFS employment concept differs from national accounts domestic employment, as the latter sets no limit on age or type of household, and also includes the non-resident population contributing to GDP and conscripts in military or community service.

The employees are defined as those who work for a public or private employer and who receive compensation in the form of wages, salaries, payment by results, or payment in kind; non-conscript members of the armed forces are also included.

The self-employed persons work in their own business, farm or professional practice. A self-employed person is considered to be working during the reference week if she/he meets one of the following criteria: works for the purpose of earning profit; spends time on the operation of a business; or is currently establishing a business.

The "actual working hours" are the hours people have actually spent in work activities during the reference week.

The "usual working hours" are the modal value of the actual hours worked per week over a long reference period (one to three months), excluding weeks when an absence from work occurs (e.g. holidays, leaves, strikes, etc.).

For more information on the definitions of actual and usual working hours and reasons for hours actually worked during the reference week being different from the person's usual hours, please consult pages 59-63 and 67-68 from EU Labour Force Survey Explanatory Notes

Please note that the index of actual working hours presented in this article has been fixed to 100 separately for each breakdown (for each gender, each professional status, each age group, etc.) using the average of the actual working hours for the considered breakdown computed over the four quarters of 2019.

**Main methodological changes introduced in 2021 by Regulation (EU) 2019/1700:**

- persons on parental leave, and who are either receiving job-related income or benefits, or whose parental leave is expected to last 3 months or less, are counted as employed;
- persons raising agricultural products for own-consumption are excluded from employment;
- seasonal workers outside the season are classified as employed if they still regularly perform tasks and duties for the job or business during the off-season;
- people with a job or business who were temporarily not at work during the reference week but with strong attachment to their job are still considered as employed. In the particular context of the COVID-19 crisis and the measures applied to combat it, national specificities exist in the assessment of the job attachment;
- not employed people are considered searching for a job only if they use an active search method;
- questions to collect information on the actual working hours have been harmonised across countries through the use of a common model questionnaire;
- further harmonisation in the implementation of questions on different topics;
- modernisation of the survey at national level.

Most of these changes are related to the classification, as employed or not employed, of people who are absent from work, who are not producing any hours of work. The impact of these methodological changes on the volume of working hours can then be assumed as mild.

More information on this point can be found via the online publication EU Labour Force Survey , which includes eight articles on the technical and methodological aspects of the survey. The EU-LFS methodology in force from the 2021 data collection onwards is described in methodology from 2021 onwards while the one applicable until the 2020 data collection is presented in methodology until 2020 . Detailed information on coding lists, explanatory notes and classifications used over time can be found under documentation .

## Context

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe in January and February 2020, with the first cases confirmed in Spain, France and Italy. COVID-19 infections have been diagnosed since then in all European Union (EU) Member States. To fight the pandemic, EU Member States have taken a wide variety of measures. From the second week of March 2020, most countries closed retail shops, with the exception of supermarkets, pharmacies and banks. Bars, restaurants and hotels were also closed. In Italy and Spain, non-essential production was stopped and several countries imposed regional or even national lock-down measures which further stifled economic activities in many areas. In addition, schools were closed, public events were cancelled and private gatherings (with numbers of persons varying from 2 to over 50) banned in most EU Member States.

The majority of the preventive measures were initially introduced during mid-March 2020. Consequently, the first quarter of 2020 was the first quarter in which the labour market across the EU was affected by COVID-19 measures taken by the Member States.

In the following quarters of 2020 and 2021, the preventive measures against the pandemic were continuously lightened and re-enforced in accordance with the number of new cases of the disease. New waves of the pandemic began to appear regularly (e.g. peaks in October-November 2020 and March-April 2021). Furthermore, new strains of the virus with increased transmissibility emerged in late 2020, which further alarmed the health authorities. Nonetheless, as massive vaccination campaigns started all around the world in 2021, people began to anticipate improvement of the situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Statistics on the hours of work add a new dimension to employment. The “average number of actual weekly hours of work in the main job” is an indicator aiming to give a perspective to the social conditions of labour, while the volume of hours worked adds an economic perspective, insofar as it serves as a proxy for the labour input to production. The quarterly data on hours of work allows for regular reporting on the impact of the crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic on the working life and economy.

Please note that in this exceptional context of the COVID-19 pandemic, employment and unemployment as defined by the International Labour Organisation ( ILO ) might not be sufficient to describe the developments taking place in the labour market. In the first phase of the crisis, active measures to contain employment losses led to absences from work rather than dismissals, and individuals could not look for work or were not available due to the containment measures, thus not counting as unemployed. Only referring to unemployment might consequently underestimate the entire unmet demand for employment, also called the labour market slack, which is further analysed, with namely the evolution of the employment and the recent job starters, in the publication Labour market in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic .

## See also

- Hours of work - annual statistics
- All articles on the labour market
- Labour market in the light of the COVID 19 pandemic - quarterly statistics

- Employment - annual statistics
- Employment in detail - quarterly statistics
- Employed people and job starters by economic activity and occupation

## Main tables

- Employment and unemployment (LFS)

## Database

- Employment and unemployment (LFS)

## Dedicated section

- Labour market including Labour force Survey (LFS)

## Publications

- Labour force survey in the EU, EFTA and candidate countries — Main characteristics of national surveys, 2020 , 2022 edition
- Quality report of the European Union Labour Force Survey 2019 , 2021 edition
- Labour market in the light of the COVID 19 pandemic — online publication
- EU labour force survey — online publication
- European Union Labour force survey - selection of articles (Statistics Explained)

## Methodology

**Publications**

- EU labour force survey — online publication
- Labour force survey in the EU, EFTA and candidate countries — Main characteristics of national surveys, 2020 , 2022 edition
- Quality report of the European Union Labour Force Survey 2019 , 2021 edition

**ESMS metadata files and EU-LFS methodology**

- Employment and unemployment (Labour Force Survey) (ESMS metadata file — employ_esms)
- LFS series - detailed quarterly survey results (from 1998 onwards) (ESMS metadata file — lfsq_esms)
- LFS series - detailed annual survey results (ESMS metadata file — lfsa_esms)
- LFS ad-hoc modules (ESMS metadata file — lfso_esms)
- LFS main indicators (ESMS metadata file — lfsi_esms)
- LFS regional series (ESMS metadata file — reg_lmk)