

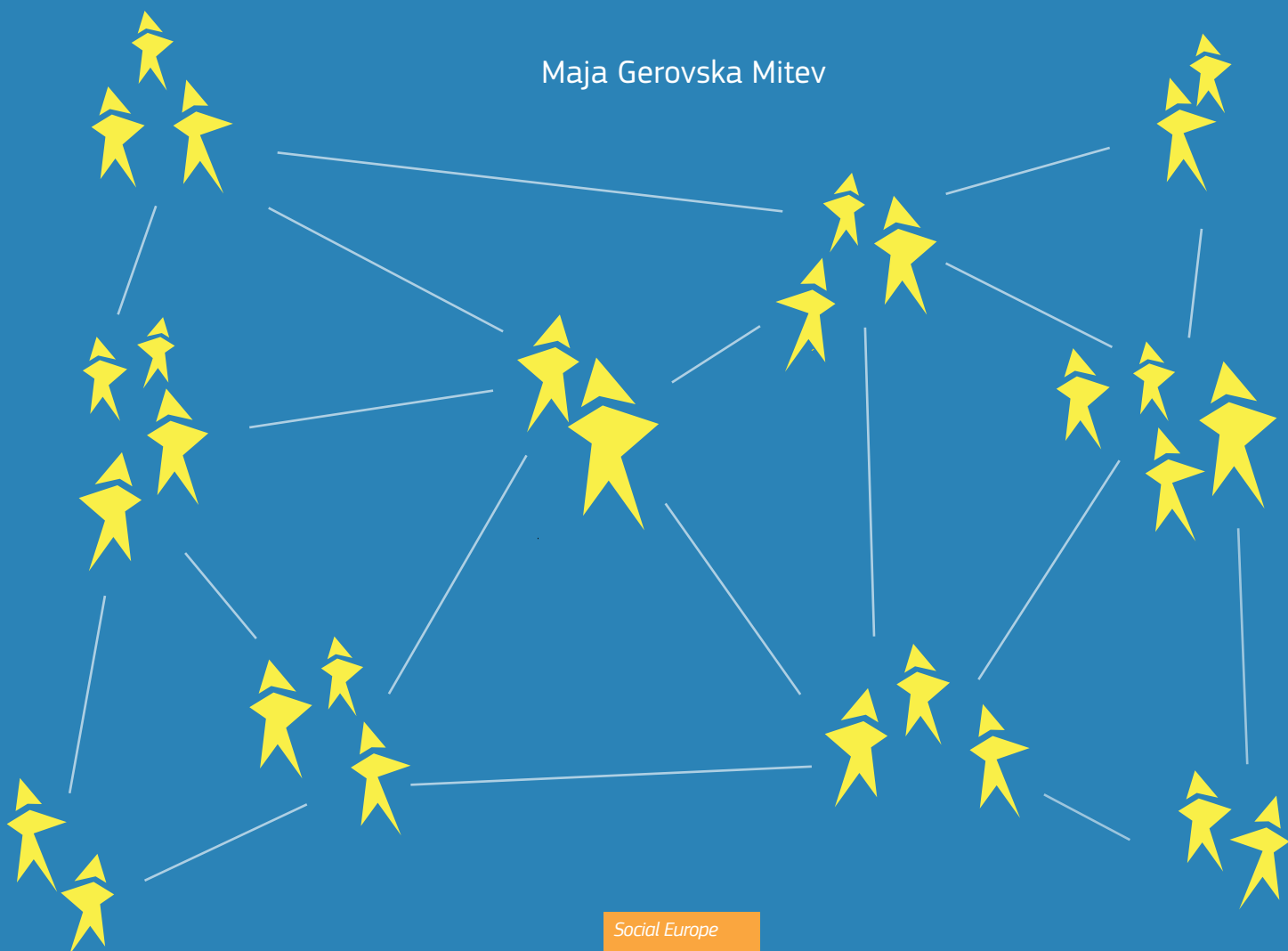


EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK (ESPN)

Social protection and inclusion policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis

North Macedonia

Maja Gerovska Mitev



Social Europe

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
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European Social Policy Network (ESPN)

**ESPN Thematic Report:
Social protection and inclusion
policy responses to the
COVID-19 crisis**

North Macedonia

2021

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The European Social Policy Network (ESPN) was established in July 2014 on the initiative of the European Commission to provide high-quality and timely independent information, advice, analysis and expertise on social policy issues in the European Union and neighbouring countries.

The ESPN brings together into a single network the work that used to be carried out by the European Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion, the Network for the Analytical Support on the Socio-Economic Impact of Social Protection Reforms (ASISP) and the MISSOC (Mutual Information Systems on Social Protection) secretariat.

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SUMMARY

Between Monday 3 February 2020 and Sunday 18 April 2021, the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people was 6,740 for the EU-27 as a whole; in North Macedonia, it was 7,228. The total number of deaths per 100,000 people was 151 for the EU-27, versus 224 in North Macedonia.

As a result of the huge impact of COVID-19, the government of North Macedonia, as of mid-April 2021, had adopted six packages of economic measures. The measures included: unemployment compensation for all people who were unemployed due to COVID-19 (including self-employed people) for the months of April and May 2020; a wage subsidy for people employed in private companies affected by the crisis for a total of six months in 2020 (April-June and October-December) and three months in 2021 (February-April, albeit the wage subsidy for April was only for people employed in sectors that were closed, such as restaurants and hotels); a 50% waiver of social security contributions (provided that companies satisfy stipulated criteria); and modification of the eligibility criteria for some social and child protection benefits (including expanded coverage and duration; waiving of conditions; and simplification of administrative requirements for access).

Despite significant economic support to citizens and companies during 2020 and early 2021, costing an estimated 43.4 billion MKD (€704 million) or approximately 6.5% of the country's GDP, data and estimates indicate a 34.9% increase in the number of registered unemployed people during the period March 2020 to March 2021. In addition, COVID-19 undoubtedly increased the number of people at risk of poverty. According to initial assessments in relation to the first wave of COVID-19 (March-June 2020), which compared average disposable income before COVID-19 (provided by EU-SILC 2018¹) and after (inclusive of new income support measures), the average disposable income per adult household member fell by 6.4%. The same study found that COVID-19 strongly affected relative child poverty, and estimated an increase of 4 percentage points (p.p.) in the number of children in North Macedonia below the relative poverty threshold – an additional 16,000 children.

According to data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, up to July 2020 around 7,000 new households had applied for guaranteed minimum assistance (GMA). This represented 35% of the initial estimates for new applicants for GMA. According to the 2021 programme for social protection (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2021), 5,500 new households acquired the right to GMA during April-December 2020, which represented 27.5% of the initial estimated number of beneficiaries of this measure. Lack of more effective coverage was probably a result of combination of factors, such as a lack of awareness of enhanced access to the social and child protection system among vulnerable people, and the reduced efficiency of social work centres due to working in shifts during the pandemic. The short-term measure of enhanced access to social protection was made permanent with the legislative changes in December 2020 (albeit only in emergency conditions).

Social protection and inclusion measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the 2019 social protection reform, were able to mitigate some of the pandemic's effects. However, the more straightforward response in the first wave of COVID-19 was not followed up in the second wave. Hence, a number of weaknesses still remain in the social protection system, which hinder a more comprehensive coverage of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Several recommendations are thus suggested, including: adjustments to the law on employment and unemployment insurance to remove "type of contract termination" as a criterion for unemployment compensation; providing enhanced access to the child protection system by introducing the same means-testing criteria in relation to income and property as those for the GMA; and increasing current expenditure on social protection to bring it in line with the EU27 average.

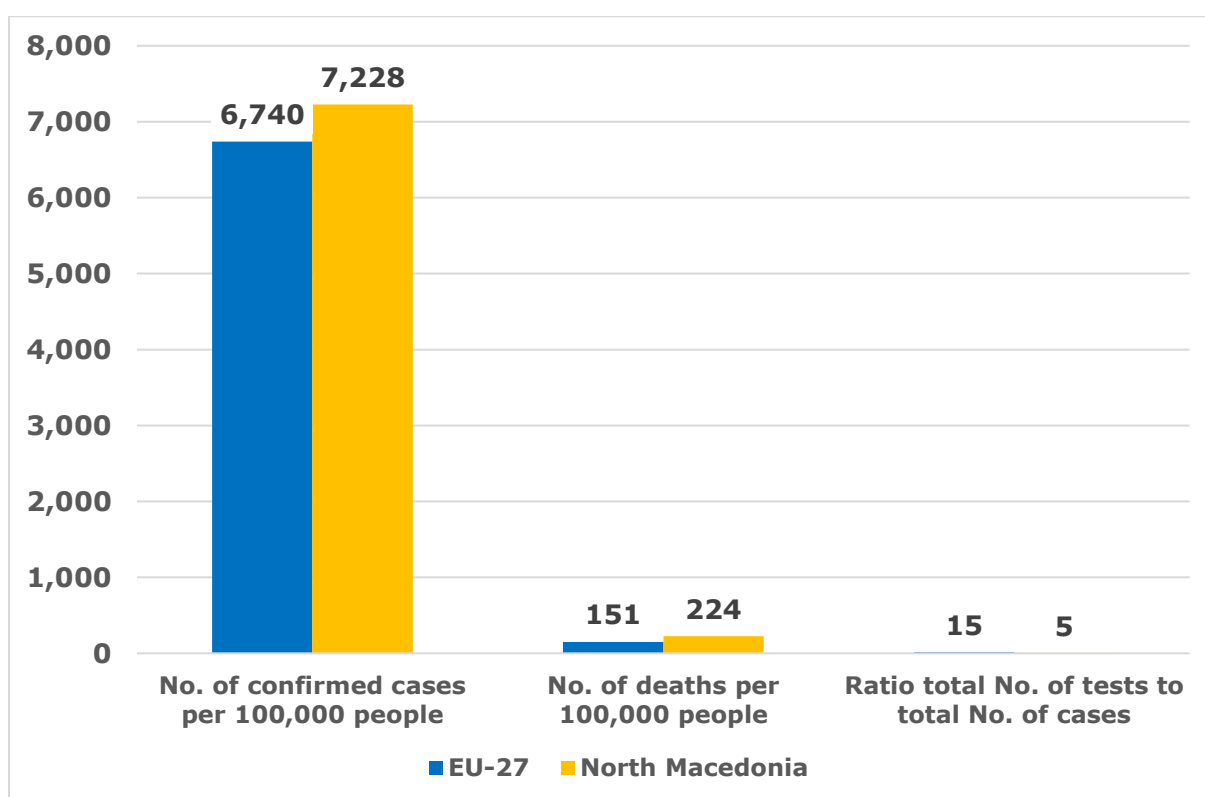
¹ European Union statistics on income and living conditions.

1 TRENDS OF THE PANDEMIC AND SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT²

1.1 Epidemiological situation

During the 63 weeks considered for these three indicators (from Monday 3 February 2020 to Sunday 18 April 2021), the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people was 6,740 for the EU-27 as a whole; in North Macedonia, it was 7,228. The total number of deaths per 100,000 people was 151 for the EU-27 versus 224 in North Macedonia. The ratio of the total number of COVID-19 tests conducted to the total number of confirmed cases was 15.3 for the EU-27 and 4.6 for North Macedonia.

Figure 1: Total number of COVID-19 cases and deaths per 100,000 people & ratio of total number of COVID-19 tests to total number of cases, 3 February 2020 to 18 April 2021 (EU-27 and North Macedonia)

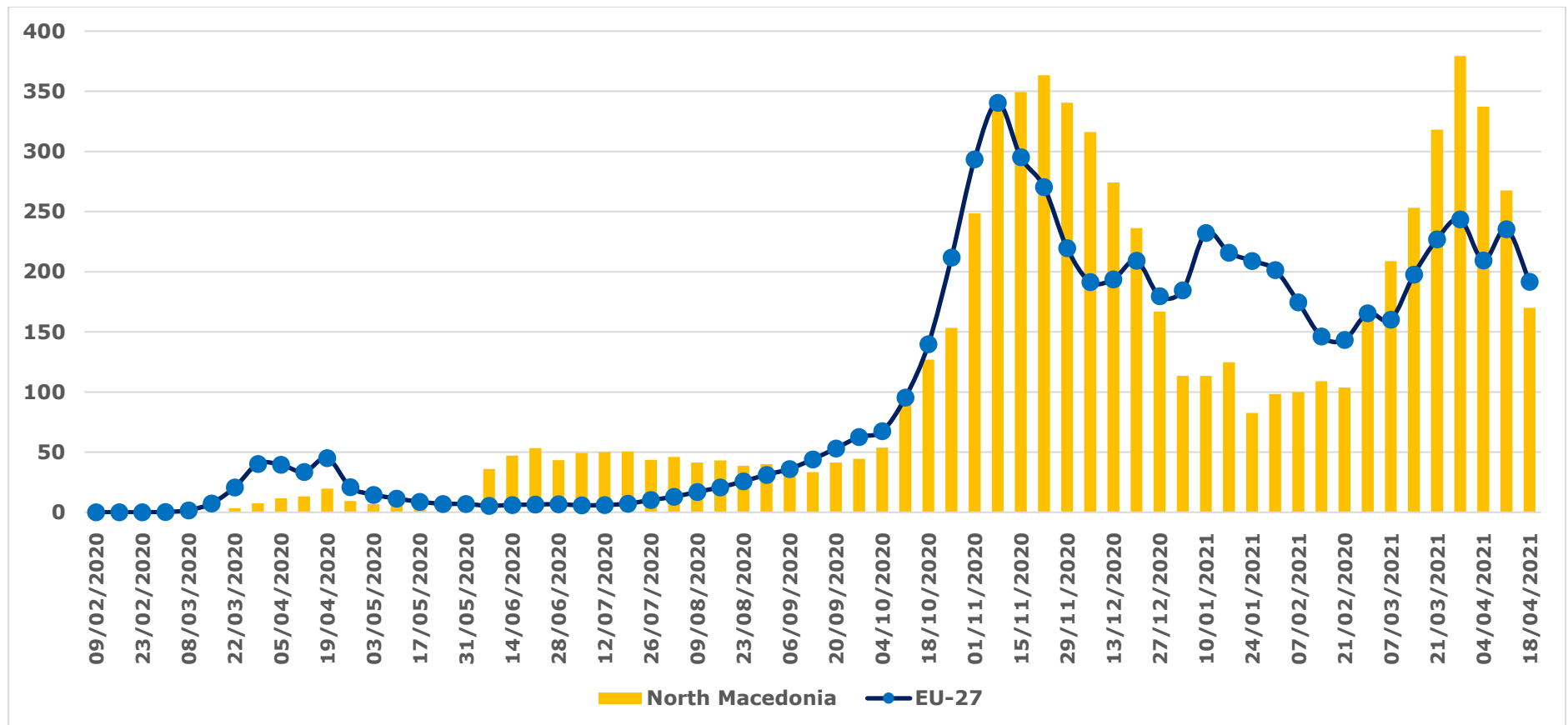


Source: Our World in Data (OWID) online database on COVID-19 - downloaded 26 April 2021

² Except if otherwise specified, the indicators presented in Sections 1.1 and 1.2 were calculated by the ESPN Network Core Team on the basis of data coming from two data sources: Our World in Data (OWID: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-source-data>) and the statistical office of the European Union (Eurostat: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>). These indicators were calculated for all the 35 ESPN countries for which data were available. All of them are presented in Annex B of the following report: Isabel Baptista, Eric Marlier, Slavina Spasova, Ramón Peña-Casas, Boris Fronteddu, Dalila Ghailani, Sebastiano Sabato and Pietro Regazzoni (2021), *Social protection and inclusion policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis. An analysis of policies in 35 countries*, European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. This report also provides additional explanations on the data sources used and the calculation of the indicators. In addition, Annex B of the report provides the country results related to all ESPN countries included in the two international data sources used (see Tables B1.1, B2.1 and B3.1 for Figure 1, Table B1.2 for Figure 2, Table B2.2 for Figure 3, Table B3.2 for Figure 4, Tables B4.1, B4.2 and B4.3 for Figure 5, Table B5 for Figure 6, Tables B6.1-3 for Figures 7a-c, and Tables B7.1-3 for Figures 8a-c). The full report and its various annexes can be downloaded [here](#).

In the last week of observations (from Monday 12 April 2021 to Sunday 18 April 2021), the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people reached 191.8 for the EU-27. In North Macedonia, it was 170.0.

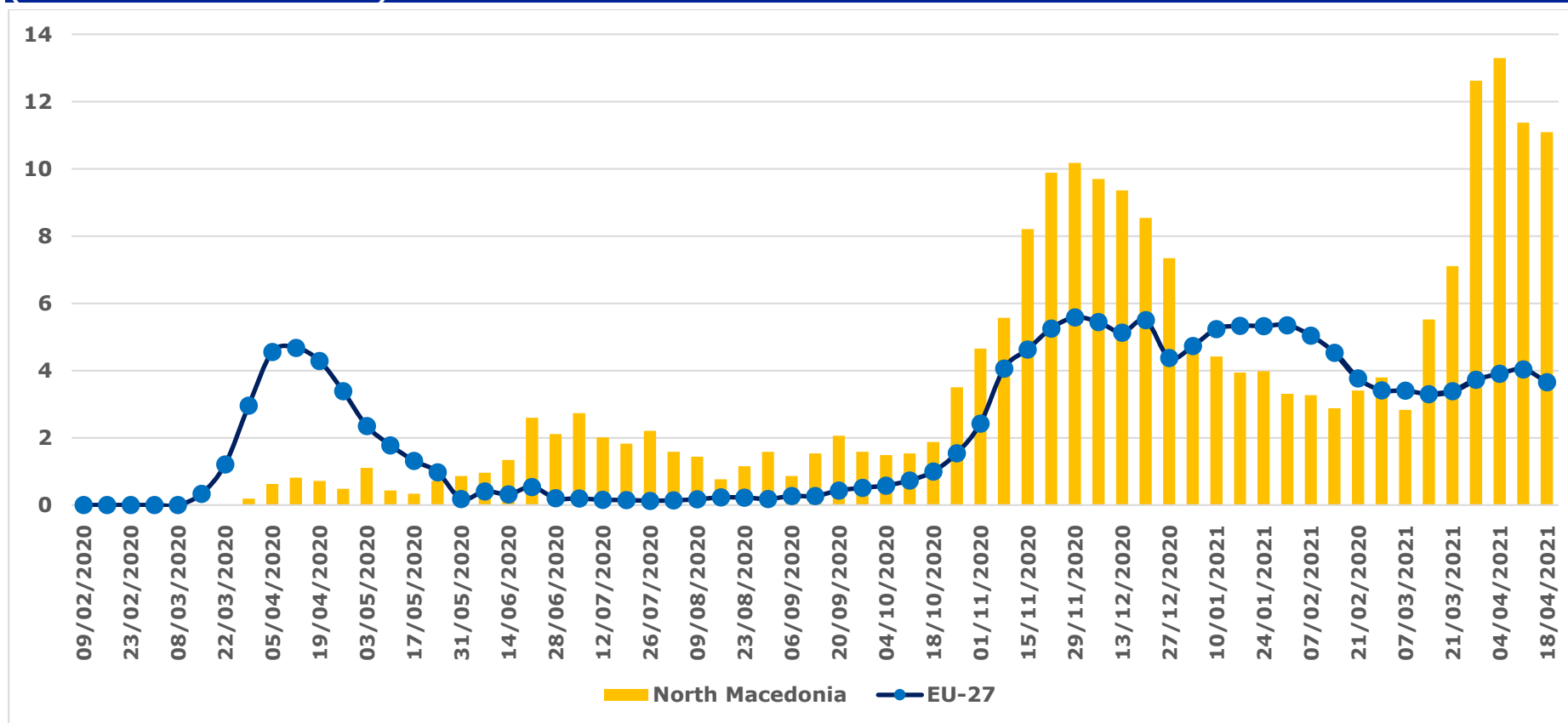
Figure 2: Weekly evolution - Number of confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people from 3 February 2020 to 18 April 2021 (EU-27 and North Macedonia)



Source: Our World in Data (OWID) online database on COVID-19 - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the last week of observations (from Monday 12 April 2021 to Sunday 18 April 2021), the number of COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 people reached 3.66 for the EU-27 as a whole. In North Macedonia, it was 11.09.

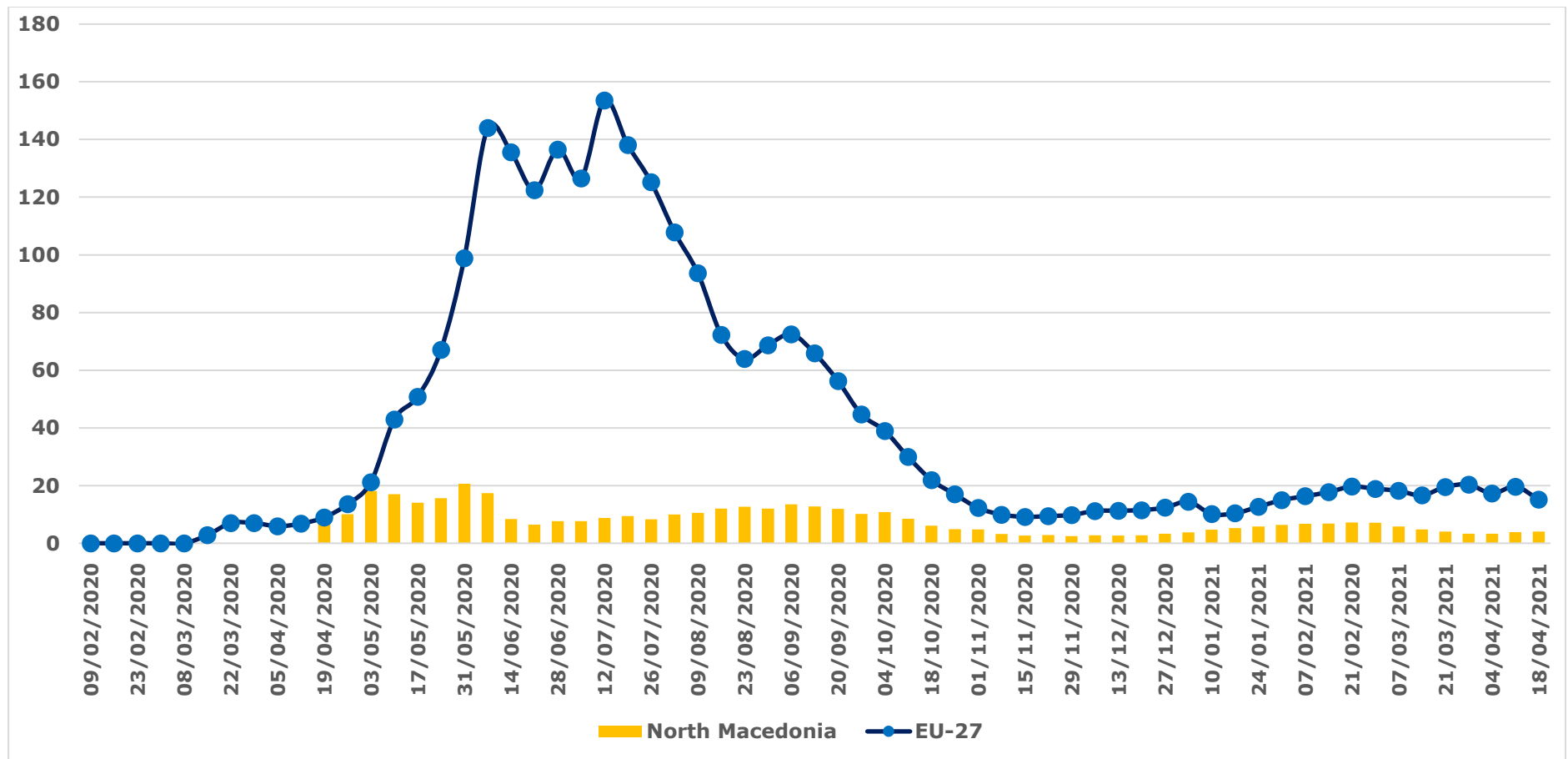
Figure 3: Weekly evolution - Number of COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 people, 3 February 2020 to 18 April 2021 (EU-27 and North Macedonia)



Source: Our World in Data (OWID) online database on COVID-19 - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the last week of observations (from Monday 12 April 2021 to Sunday 18 April 2021), the number of COVID-19 tests per new confirmed COVID-19 cases was 15.2 for the EU-27. In North Macedonia, it was 4.1.

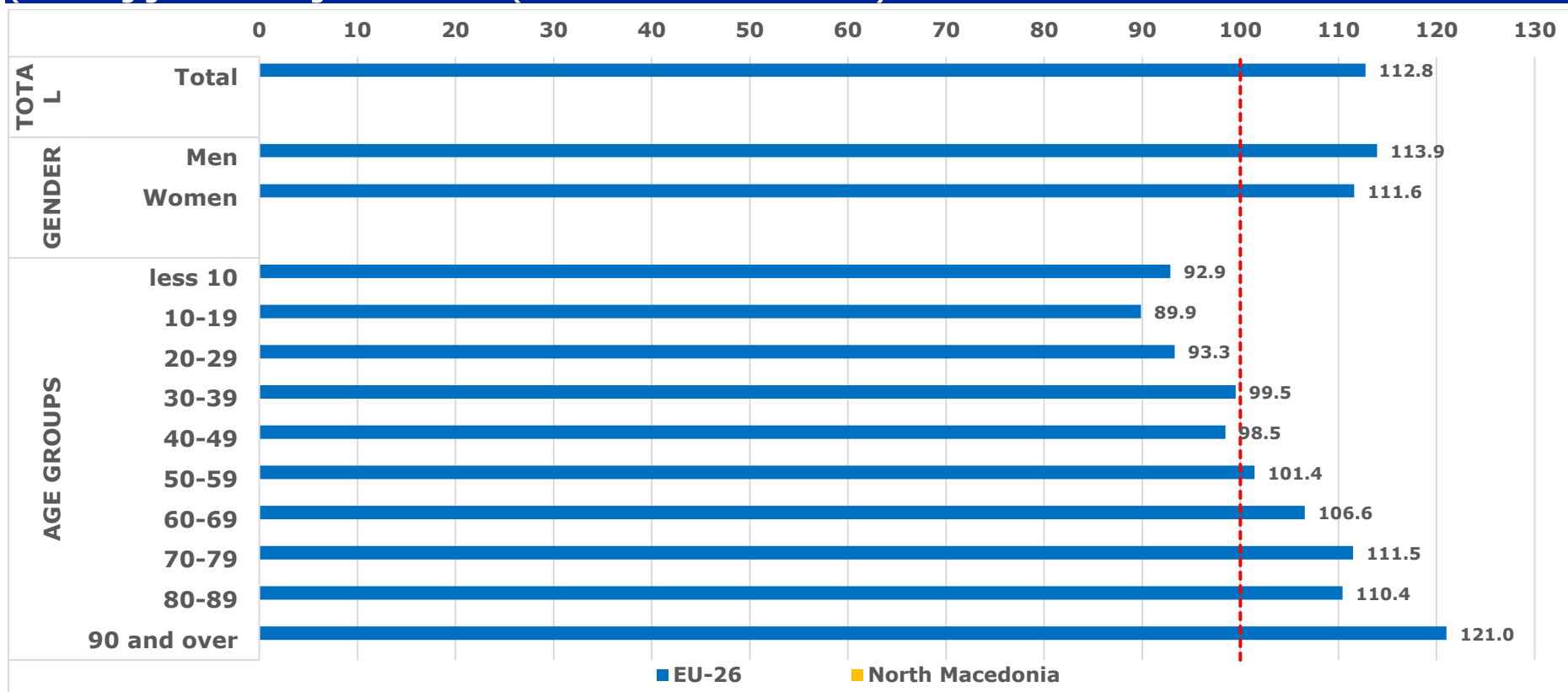
Figure 4: Weekly evolution - Number of COVID-19 tests per new confirmed COVID-19 case, 3 February 2020 to 18 April 2021 (EU-27 and North Macedonia)



Source: Our World in Data (OWID) online database on COVID-19 - downloaded 26 April 2021. Full quote for these testing data: Hasell, J., Mathieu, E., Beltekian, D. et al. (2020). "A cross-country database of COVID-19 testing". *Sci Data* 7, 345 (2020) (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41597-020-00688-8>).

The excess mortality ratio for 2020 is the total number of deaths (without distinction of causes) in the year 2020 expressed as a percentage of the previous 4-year (2016-2019) annual average of the total number of deaths. For the EU-26 average (no data for Ireland), the ratio of the total population is 112.8% while it is not available in North Macedonia. For the EU-26, it is 113.9% for men and 111.6% for women. In North Macedonia, these gendered ratios are not available. Excess mortality is higher among older age groups. For those aged 90 years and more it reaches 121.0% for EU-26 and it is not available for North Macedonia.

Figure 5: Excess mortality - Total number of all deaths in 2020 as percentage of the 2016-2019 annual average (including gender and age breakdowns (EU-26 and North Macedonia))

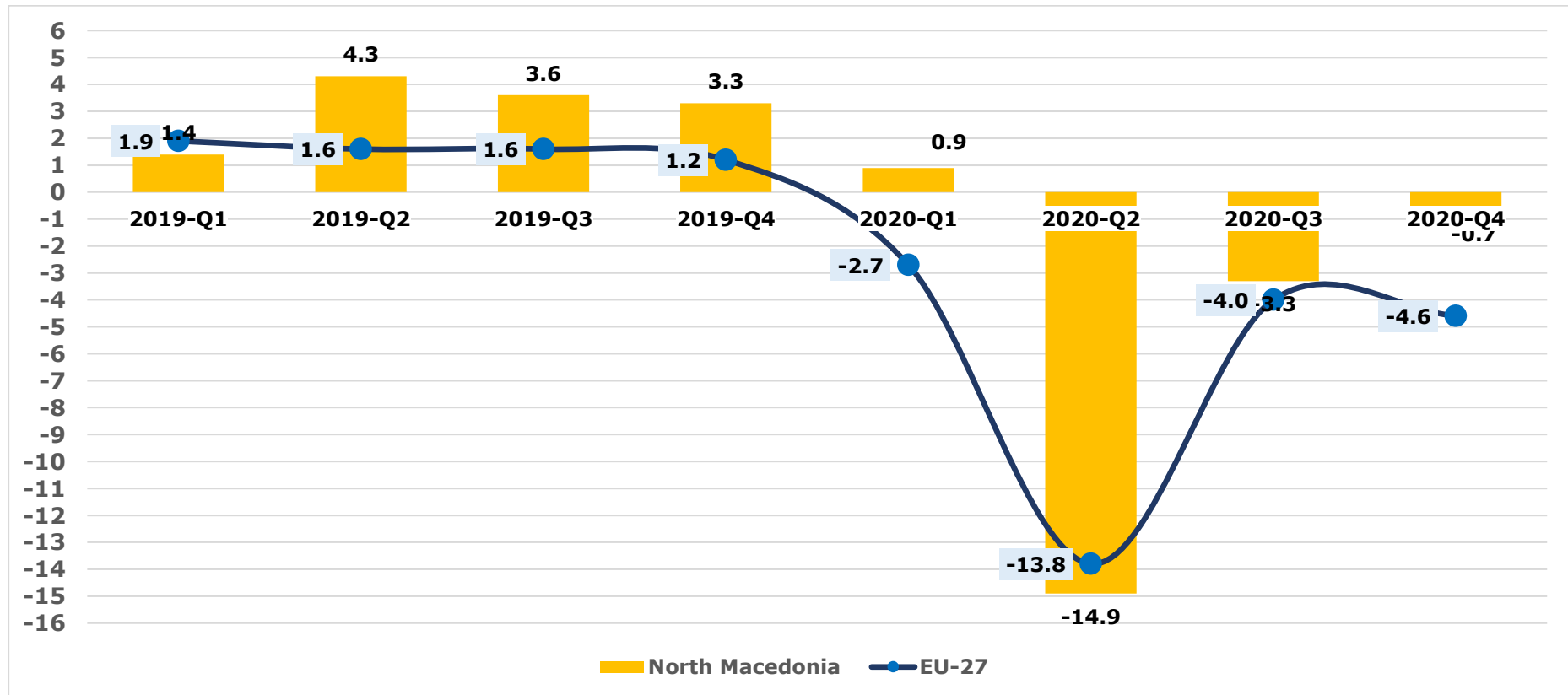


Source: Eurostat - indicator [DEMO_R_MWK_10__custom_560457] Deaths by week, sex and 10-year age groups - downloaded 26 April 2021. For Bosnia and Herzegovina: Agency for statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina (data received upon request on 19 April 2021).

1.2 Economic and (un)employment situation

In the EU-27, GDP in the fourth quarter (2020-Q4) of 2020 fell by 4.6% compared to the fourth quarter of 2019 (2019-Q4). In North Macedonia, the decrease was 0.7% for the same period.

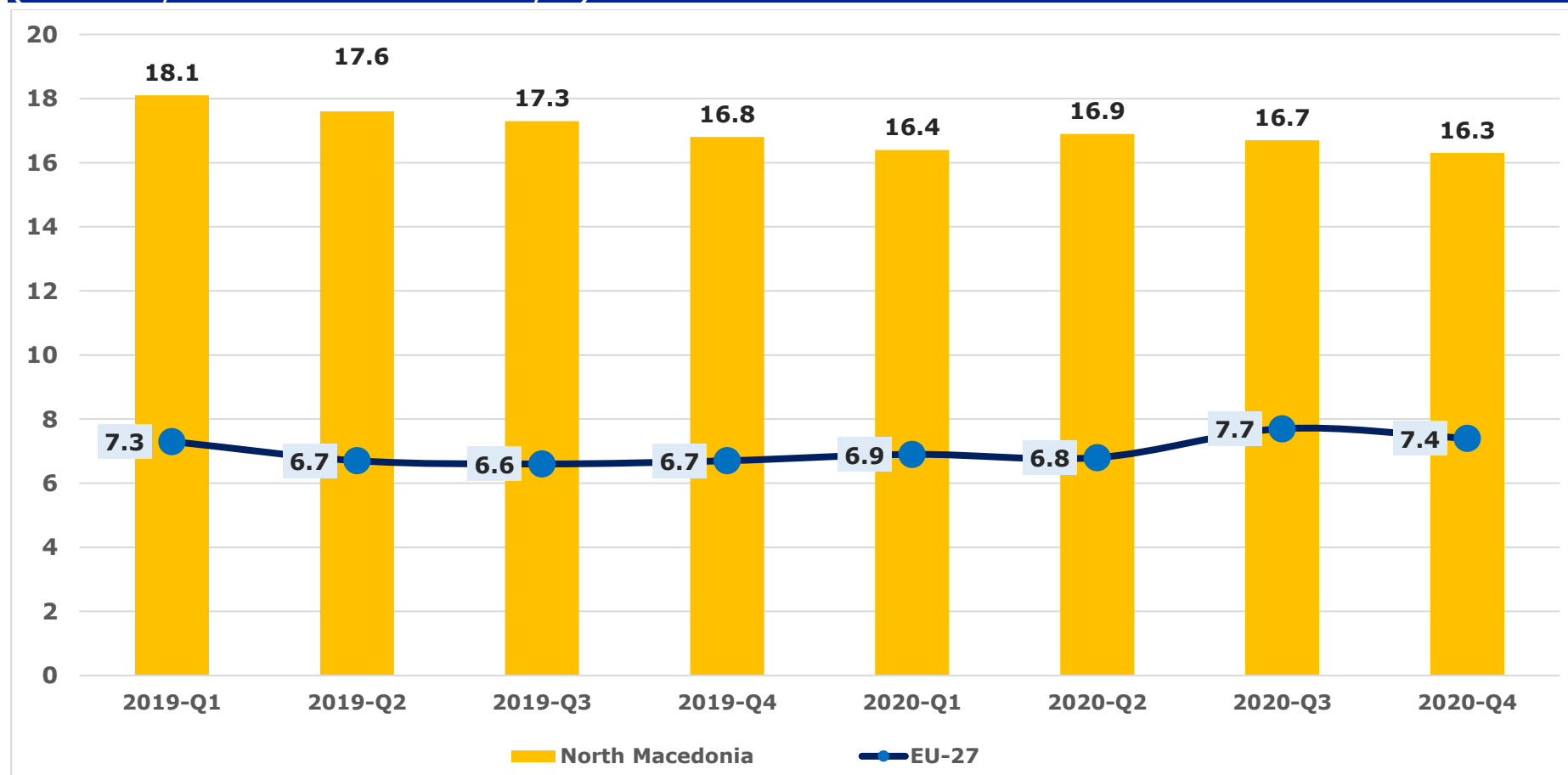
Figure 6: Gross domestic product at market prices, chain-linked volumes prices adjusted, percentage changes in quarter compared with same quarter in previous year (2019-2020, EU-27 and North Macedonia, %)



Source: Eurostat -GDP and main components (output, expenditure and income) - indicator [NAMQ_10_GDP__custom_507806] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the fourth quarter of 2020 (2020-Q4), the unemployment rate in the EU-27 for people aged 15-64 years is 7.4%. In North Macedonia, it is 16.3%.

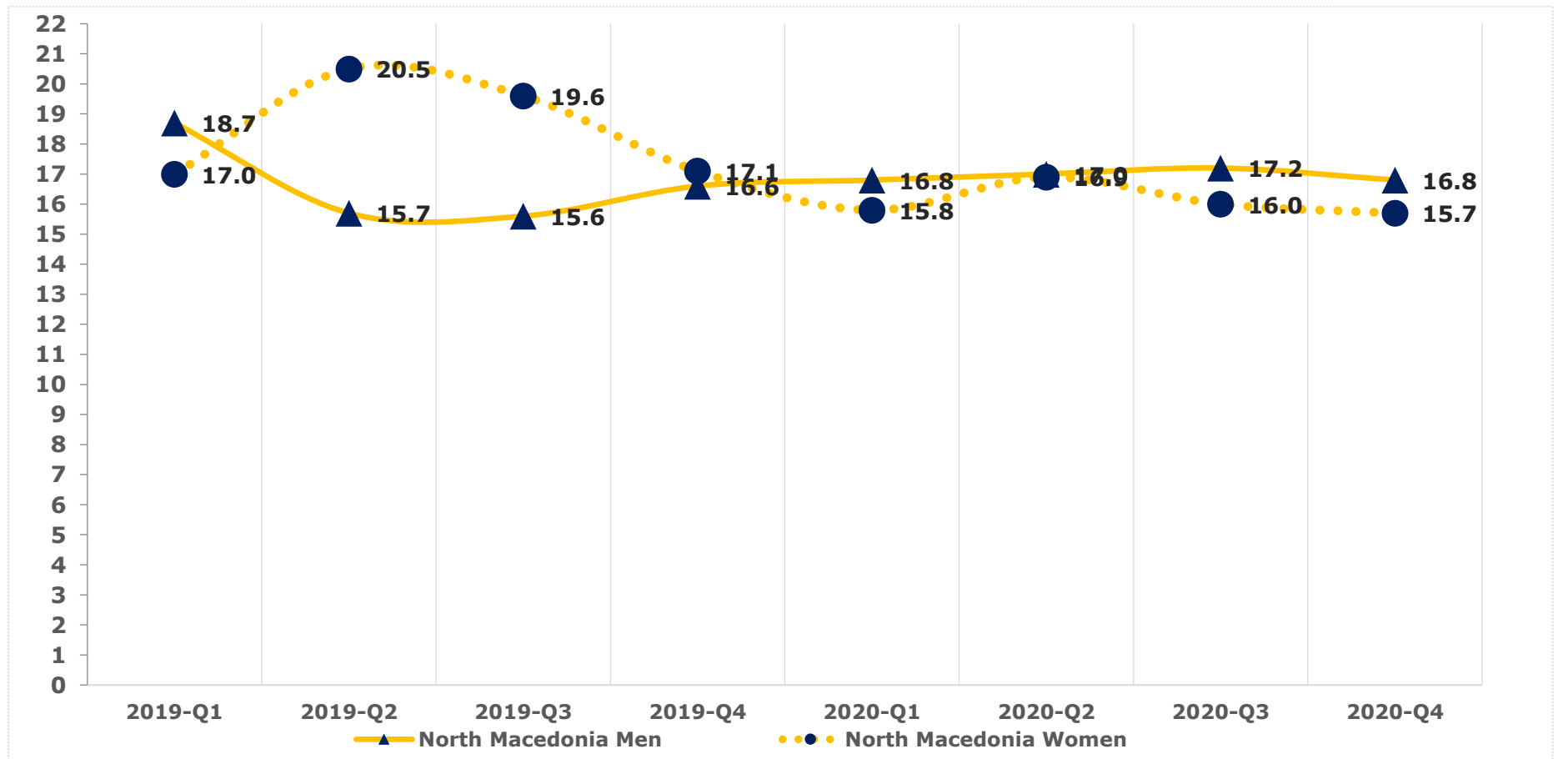
Figure 7a: Seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 (2019-2020, EU-27 and North Macedonia, %)



Source: Eurostat LFS - indicator [lfsq_urgan] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the fourth quarter of 2020 (2020-Q4), the unemployment rate in the EU-27 for people aged 15-64 years is 7.1% for men and 7.7% for women. In North Macedonia, these figures are 16.8% and 15.7% respectively.

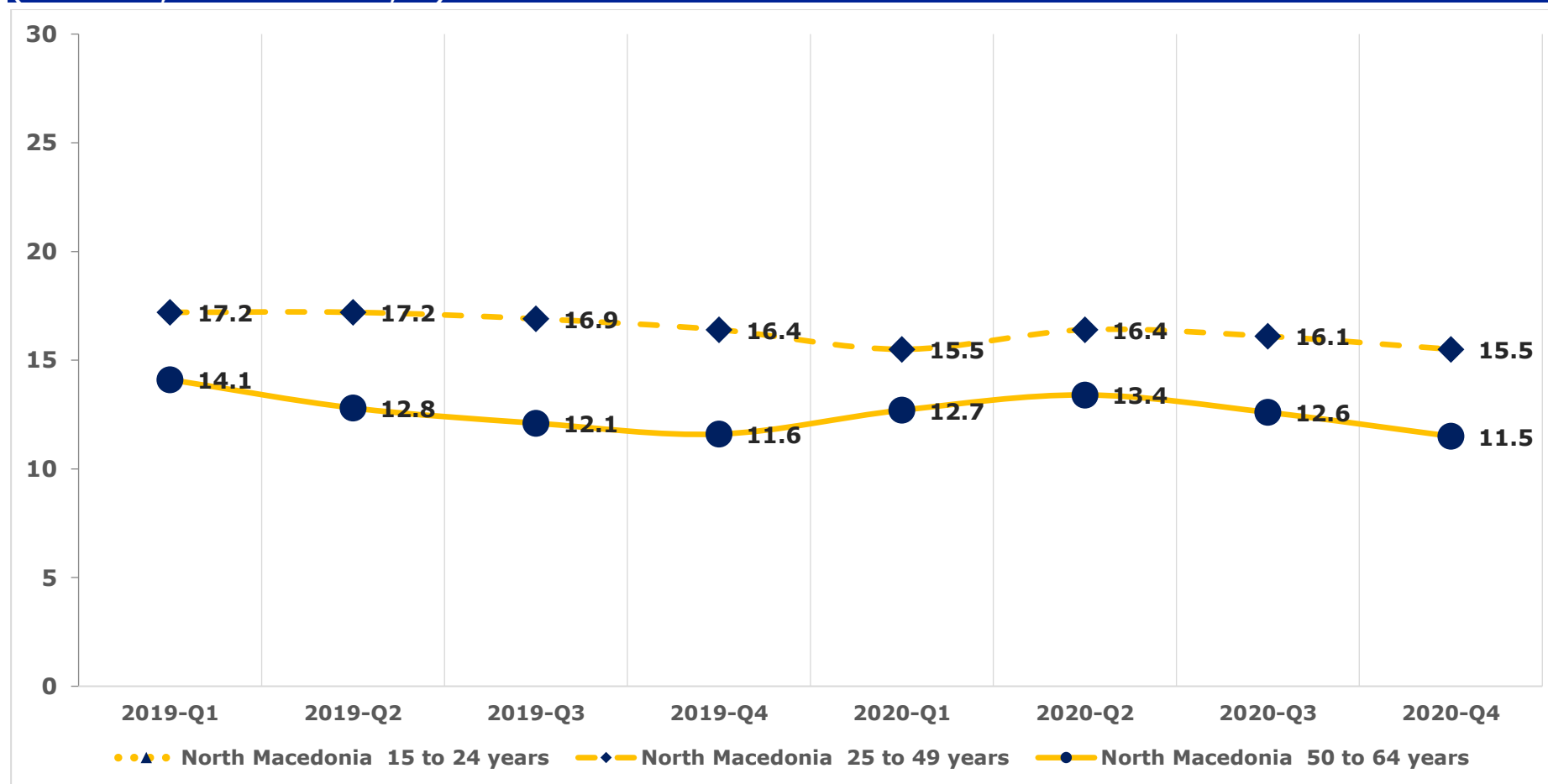
Figure 7b: Seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 – by gender (2019-2020, North Macedonia, %)



Source: Eurostat LFS - indicator [lfsq_organ] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the fourth quarter of 2020 (2020-Q4), the unemployment rate in the EU-27 is 16.9% for the 15-24 age group. In North Macedonia, it is 39.2%.

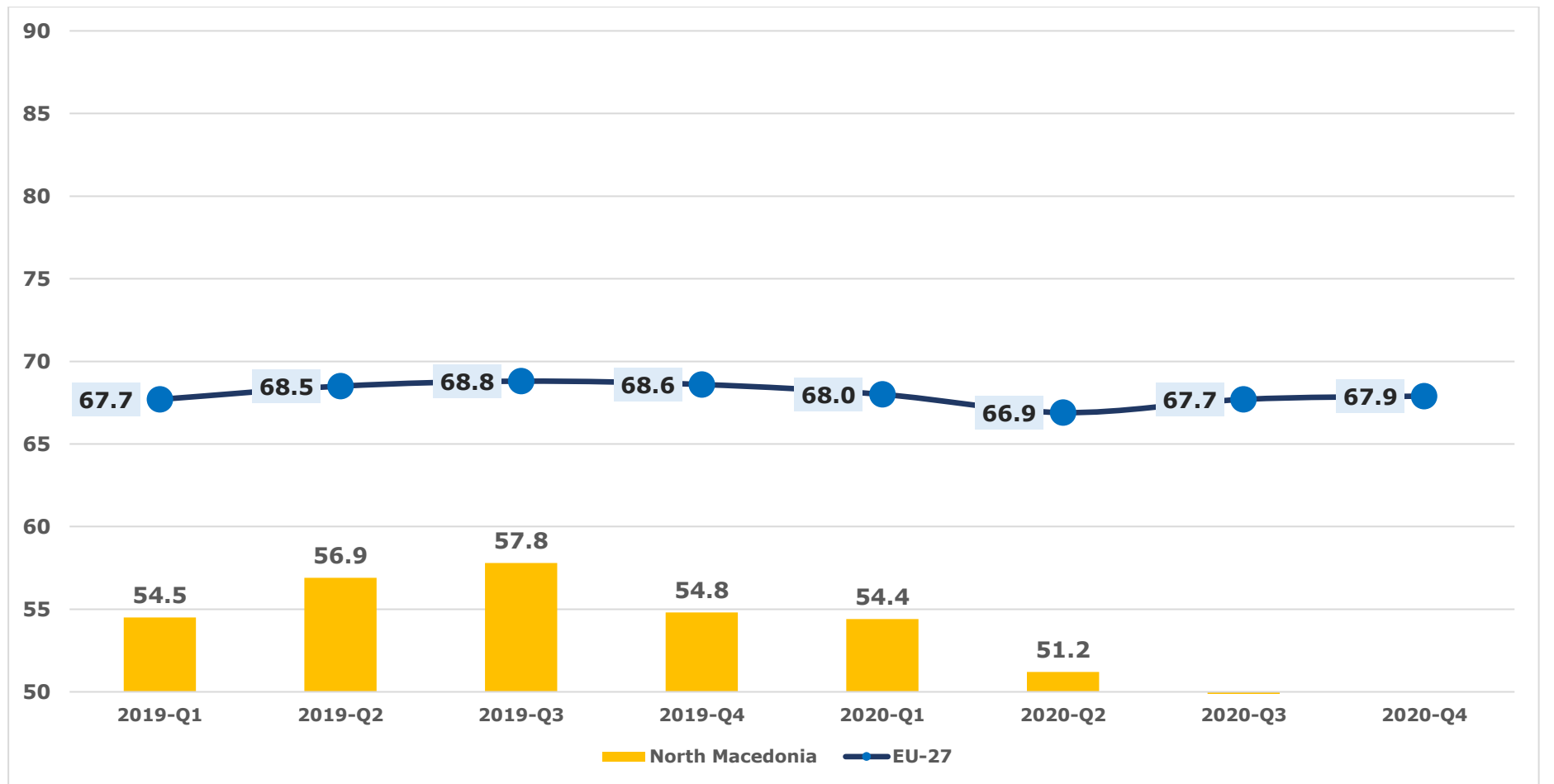
Figure 7c: Seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 – by age group (2019-2020, North Macedonia, %)



Source: Eurostat LFS - indicator [lfsq_urgan] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the fourth quarter of 2020 (2020-Q4), the employment rate for people aged 15-64 in the EU-27 is 67.9%. In North Macedonia, the data are not (yet) available.

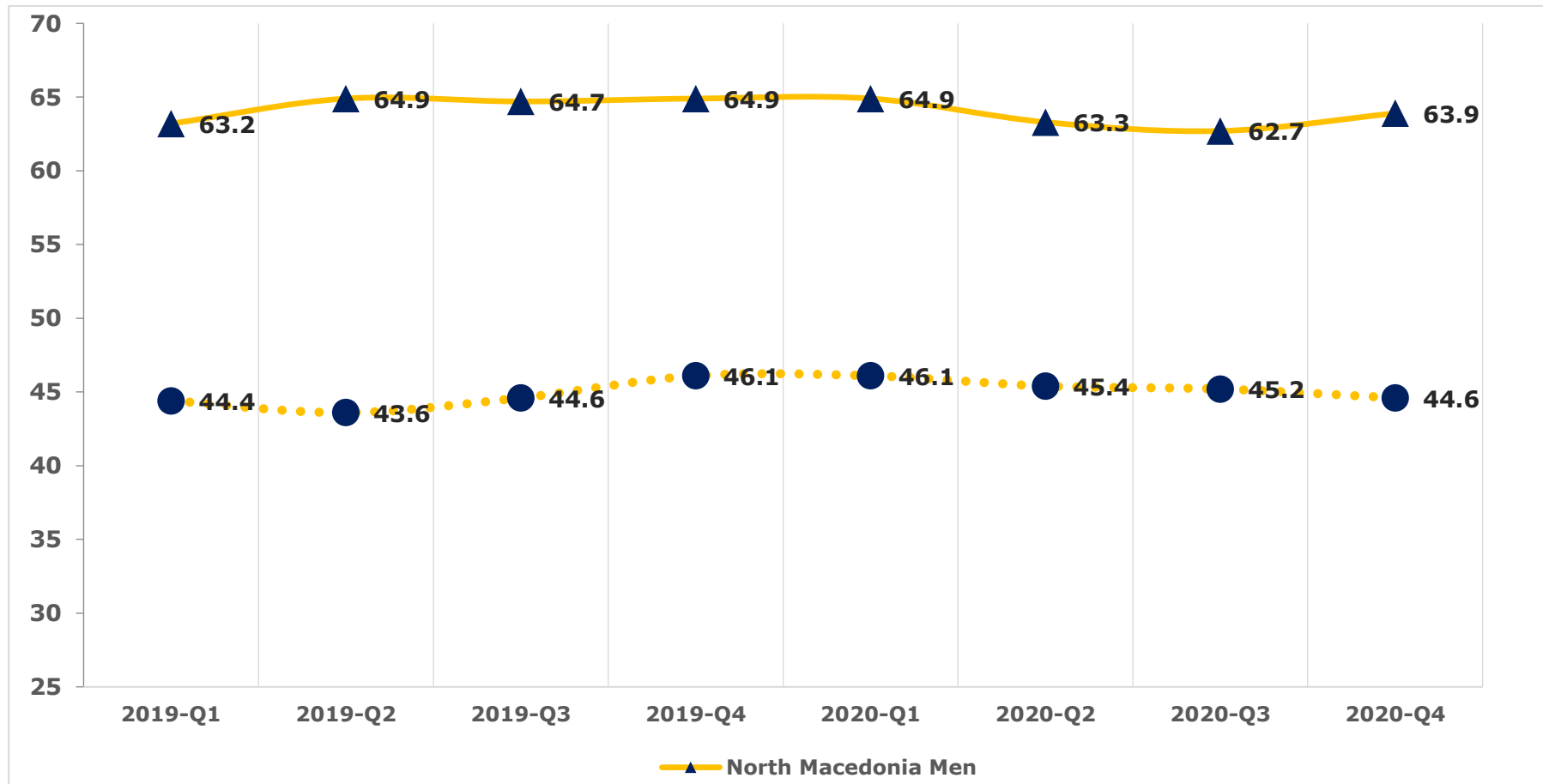
Figure 8a: Seasonally-adjusted employment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 (2019-2020, EU-27 and North Macedonia, %)



Source: Eurostat LFS - indicator [lfsq_ergan] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the fourth quarter of 2020 (2020-Q4), the employment rate in the EU-27 is 73.0% for men and 62.8% for women. In North Macedonia, these figures are 63.9% and 44.6% respectively.

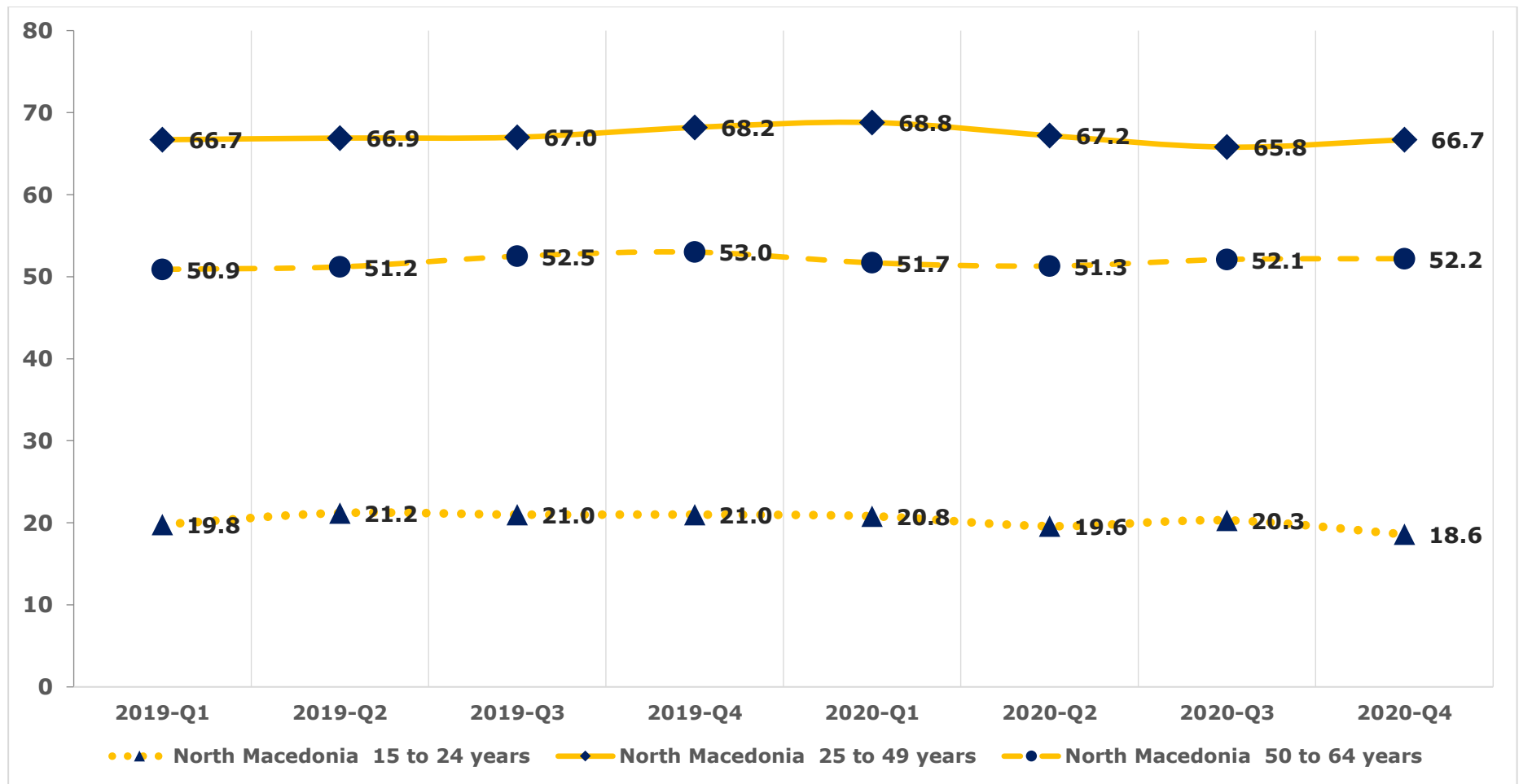
Figure 8b: Seasonally-adjusted employment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 – by gender (2019-2020, North Macedonia, %)



Source: Eurostat LFS - indicator [lfsq_ergan] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the fourth quarter of 2020 (2020-Q4), the employment rate in the EU-27 is 31.1% for the 15-24 age group. In North Macedonia, it is 18.6%.

Figure 8c: Seasonally-adjusted employment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 – by age group (2019-2020, North Macedonia, %)



Source: Eurostat LFS - indicator [lfsq_ergan] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

1.3 Poverty, inequality and social exclusion situation

There are currently no official data on the at-risk-of-poverty rate for 2020 for North Macedonia. According to an initial assessment (Petreski et al., 2020) of the first wave of COVID-19 (March-June 2020), the average disposable income per adult household member fell by 6.4%. The study compared average disposable income before COVID-19 (provided by EU-SILC 2018) and after (inclusive of new income support measures); it used the MK-MOD tax and benefit microsimulation model for North Macedonia, which is part of the EUROMOD model for the EU. The same study found that the COVID-19 pandemic strongly affected relative child poverty, and estimated an increase of 4 p.p. in the number of children in North Macedonia below the relative poverty threshold (or an additional 16,000 children).

2 SOCIAL PROTECTION AND INCLUSION MEASURES IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC³

The measures related to social protection and social inclusion adopted in North Macedonia during the pandemic, especially in the first wave of COVID-19 (March-May 2020), reflected the emergency need to provide swift access to the social protection system for citizens who had lost jobs or regular incomes. In this respect, the main goal of these measures was the removal of administrative barriers and conditions related to access, as well as extending the duration of social protection benefits.

Based on the relevant public data, as well as limited studies undertaken during 2020 to assess the impact of the COVID-19 measures in North Macedonia, it may be estimated that the measures taken contributed to some degree to protecting people from job loss and income loss, as well as making social protection more accessible.

This section provides a brief description of the main measures related to social protection and social inclusion that have been put in place to help mitigate the financial and social distress produced by the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. It is based on readily available data and evidence. For each measure, it provides the following information.

- a) Short description of the measure.
- b) Category: Is it a flat benefit, a conditional benefit, both a flat and a conditional benefit, or neither a flat nor a conditional benefit?
- c) Timing: When did the measure start/end? Has it been extended?
- d) Depending on the category:
 - amount and duration (for flat measures); and
 - range (minimum-maximum), duration and conditionality (thresholds) (for conditional measures).

If the measure is neither flat nor conditional, this is indicated by "Not applicable".
- e) Targeted population: what is/are the target(s)? – that is to say, which parts of the population or of the labour force. Where data and evidence are readily available, estimated number of people targeted and/or applicants.
- f) Beneficiaries: What is the number of recipients of the measure (if relevant and available)?
- g) Novelty: Was the measure new or an already existing one that was adjusted?

2.1 Measures related to unemployment benefits

Despite measures aimed at job and income protection during the COVID-19 pandemic, data from the Employment Agency for the period March 2020 to March 2021⁴ show a 34.9% increase in the number of registered unemployed people. In the year before the pandemic (March 2019 to March 2020), registered unemployment had risen by only 1.4%. According to information from the Employment Agency, the overall number of people who lost their job (and who had previously been registered as being in formal employment) during COVID-19 (11 March to 31 December 2020) was 17,026, or 10.8% of all registered unemployed people in December 2020. This suggests that the majority of those registered as unemployed in 2020 were people who were either in the informal economy or newly unemployed (first-time job-seekers).

³ The temporary measures mentioned in this report refer to the situation as of 15 April 2021. Their duration may have been extended since then.

⁴ Agency for Employment of North Macedonia, Number of registered unemployed people: http://av.gov.mk/content/Statisticki%20podatoci/Mapr%202021/Nevraboteni_lica032021.xls.pdf.

2.1.1 Олеснет пристап до паричен надоместок за граѓаните што останеле без работа поради кризата (Enhanced access to financial compensation for citizens who lost their job due to the crisis)

- a) Short description of the measure: The government adopted a decree for implementing the law on employment and unemployment insurance during a state of emergency (Official Gazette No 136 from 27 May 2020), in order to loosen the eligibility conditions for unemployment insurance. The measure enabled all workers who had lost their job due to COVID-19, during March-April 2020, to be entitled to unemployment compensation (from the unemployment insurance system) – regardless of the employment duration and the way the employment contract had been terminated.
- b) Category: Conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure was valid for the period 11 March 2020 to 30 April 2020.
- d) Range, duration and conditionality: The amount of financial compensation was 50% of the worker's monthly net wage paid in the previous month, but not more than 80% of the average monthly net wage per employer paid in the country. The duration of the measure was two months, for workers who had lost their job during the period from 11 March 2020 to 30 April 2020. The deadline for application for this benefit was 26 June 2020. A condition of access was a record of registered employment, but regardless of the duration of the employment.
- e) Targeted population: The measure was targeted at all unemployed people with a record of registered employment, including the self-employed⁵.
- f) Beneficiaries: According to the available data from the Employment Agency, 3,796 applications were made under the new loosened conditions for access to unemployment compensation, out of which 2,957 (78%) were approved, while others were still being processed at that time (July 2020). The total numbers of beneficiaries of unemployment compensation in April 2020 (4,254) and May 2020 (5,308) were 41.8% and 76% higher (respectively) than in February 2020 (3,000). A comparison between the total number of registered unemployed people in June 2020 and the number of "new" beneficiaries of unemployment compensation up to the end of that month, shows that only 2.22% of the registered unemployed were beneficiaries of the new measure for unemployment compensation.
- g) Novelty: One novelty of the measure was the loosening of the eligibility conditions in regard to previous employment duration. According to Article 65 of the Law on Employment and Unemployment Compensation (Official Gazette No 112/2014), unemployed people were entitled to unemployment compensation if they had a record of at least nine months of continuous work, or 12 months of non-continuous work, in the previous 18 months. Under the new measure, even unemployed people with a record of only one day of work were entitled to unemployment compensation. Another novelty was the granting of unemployment compensation regardless of the way the employment contract had been terminated: previously⁶ people were not eligible for unemployment compensation if they left their employment voluntarily or by mutual agreement.

⁵ Only excluding workers in the informal market.

⁶ As per Art. 67 of the Law of Employment and Unemployment Compensation (Official Gazette No 112/2014).

2.2 Measures of job protection provided through support to employers, employees and the self-employed

2.2.1 Финансиска поддршка на работодавачите од приватниот сектор погодени од здравствено-економската криза предизвикана од Ковид-19, заради исплата на платите (Financial support for private sector employers hit by the health/economic crisis triggered by COVID-19, for wage payments)

- a) Short description of the measure: The measure was introduced by emergency decree (Official Gazette Nos 111/20, 113/20 and 154/20), to provide financial support to employers affected by the health and economic crisis caused by COVID-19, for the purpose of paying workers' wages. The amount of support was the same as the level of the minimum wage in the country. When the measure was later extended (Official Gazette No 267/20) it was provided as a scaled amount, depending on the percentage of company income losses.
- b) Category: Flat benefit.
- c) Timing: Initially, the measure was introduced for April-June 2020. There were three updates of this measure. The first continued the measure for October-December 2020. The second (introduced in February 2021) continued it for February-March 2021. The third continued it for April 2021, but only for people employed in the companies that were closed due to COVID-19 protocols during that month.
- d) Amount and duration: The amount of the financial compensation was 14,500 MKD (€235). This amount was paid for the months of April, May and June 2020. The measure was extended to cover October-December 2020, as well as February-April 2021, but with a scaled amount related to the percentage of company income losses, ranging from 14,500 MKD (€235) to 21,776 MKD (€353).
- e) Targeted population: The measure was targeted at all economically active people, where an enterprise had suffered a loss of at least 30% of its income compared with the same month/period in the previous year. Apart from this initial targeting criterion, other conditions included: no payment of bonuses after the measure was published; net wages per employee no higher than 39,900 MKD (€644); and no use of other government subsidies. The measure also covered self-employed people, farmers and craftsmen. In the first period (April-June 2020) the measure was also targeted at individual artists and professional athletes. There was no estimate of the number of people targeted by the April-June 2020 measure when it was announced, but the estimated number for the October-December 2020 measure was 83,000 – 10.7% of employed people in the country, according to Eurostat employment data for 2020⁷.
- f) Beneficiaries: According to government sources, the April-June 2020 measure was used by approximately 120,000 employed people (15.3% of the total) and around 20,000 companies.
- g) Novelty: The measure itself was not a novelty, as similar measures had previously been introduced to support employers – for example, support for companies in the textile industry to complement the payment of minimum wages. The novelty of the measure was its scope, as its coverage was not related to a particular industry, but covered all employers who met the qualifying criteria.

2.2.2 Субвенционирање на исплата на придонеси од задолжително социјално осигурување за време на вонредна состојба (Subsidies for

⁷ Eurostat, Employment and activity by sex and age – quarterly data:
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsi_emp_q/default/table?lang=en

payment of compulsory social insurance contributions during a state of emergency)

- a) Short description of the measure: The measure was aimed at subsidising 50% of the compulsory social insurance contributions for wages paid by companies that had suffered a profit loss of at least 30% compared with the same month in the previous year (Official Gazette Nos 92/2020 and 116/220).
- b) Category: Conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure was valid for the period April-June 2020.
- d) Range, duration and conditionality: The amount of the subsidy was 50% of the compulsory social insurance contributions for wages paid by companies that had suffered a profit loss of at least 30% compared with the same month in the previous year. The measure could not be combined with the (previously described) wage subsidy measure, with the exception of employers in the tourism, transport and catering sectors.
- e) Targeted population: The measure was aimed at employers and all insured people working in the private sector. However, the use of this measure was conditional on employers not having used the wage subsidy measure. This condition did not apply to employers in the tourism, transport and catering sectors (including self-employed people in these sectors).
- f) Beneficiaries: The number of companies that used this measure in the period March-June 2020 was approximately 2,500 per month.
- g) Novelty: The measure was not a novelty, as subsidies for compulsory social insurance are frequently used as part of active labour market programmes, as a measure to support employment.

2.3 Measures related to sickness benefits and sick pay

2.3.1 Остварување право на боледување и исплата на надоместок на плата (The right to sick leave and payment of salary compensation)

- a) Short description of the measure: The right to sick leave is established electronically without having to go through an assessment of temporary incapacity for work due to illness or injury.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure is valid for as long as measures announced by the Ministry of Health to prevent the spread of COVID-19 remain in force.
- d) Targeted population: Employed and self-employed people who have paid health insurance contributions.
- e) Beneficiaries: No publicly available data.
- f) Novelty: It is a novel measure in two respects: (i) the electronic process for establishing the right to sick leave, without the procedures for assessing temporary incapacity for work due to illness or injury; and (ii) the timeframe for applying for sick leave changed and people had 15 days to apply, whereas before it was 7 days.

2.4 Measures related to health insurance

Funding for the healthcare sector was improved, with the aim of improving access to good-quality public healthcare for all citizens in 2020, mainly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry of Finance reallocated funds in order to provide additional resources to the health system. The Ministry of Health and the Health Insurance Fund reallocated funds that were at their disposal within current budgets. Within the Ministry of Health there

was a transfer of funds from other preventive programmes to the response to COVID-19, to enable an unhindered procurement of medical materials and equipment. The Health Insurance Fund allocated €1.3 million, up to November 2020, to the most affected public health institutions (including the Clinic for Infectious Diseases, the Institute for Public Health, the centres for public health, and the Skopje City General Hospital). One of the main obstacles to the effectiveness of anti-COVID-19 measures was the limited capacity of the public health sector. For example, despite free COVID-19 testing offered in (some) public healthcare facilities, due to long waiting periods many people suspected of having COVID-19 opted for a (costly) test in private health laboratories. According to data from the Public Health Institute⁸, in the period 15 February 2020 to 2 May 2021, almost half of all COVID-19 testing was conducted in private health facilities.

2.4.1 *Право на здравствена заштита за дијагностицирање и лекување од Коронавирус и ослободување од партиципација (Right to healthcare for diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19 and exemption from co-payment)*

- a) Short description of the measure: The government adopted a decree with legal force (Official Gazette 92/2020) allowing the use of healthcare diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19 for specific uninsured categories, as well as exemption from co-payment for all (Official Gazette No 140/20) until the coronavirus pandemic has been overcome.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure is valid as long as the measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are in force.
- d) Amount and duration/range, duration and conditionality: Not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: People insured with the Health Insurance Fund who owe unpaid contributions for compulsory health insurance; people who are not insured on any grounds; and citizens of neighbouring countries with which North Macedonia has not concluded a social security agreement, who live in North Macedonia. Co-payment exemption is aimed at all insured people.
- f) Beneficiaries: There are no publicly available data.
- g) Novelty: Although health insurance in the country is almost universal, this measure also provides free healthcare, diagnosis and treatment related to COVID-19 to uninsured citizens, as well as citizens from neighbouring countries. Co-payment exemption for all insured and uninsured people is also a novelty.

2.4.2 *Признавање на расходите за тестирање од КОВИД-19 како признаен расход (Recognition of the costs of testing for COVID-19 as a recognised expense)*

- a) Short description of the measure: The cost of COVID-19 laboratory tests for employees, of up to 9,000 MKD (€145) per year per employee, can be deducted from income in tax declarations (enabled by the Law on Amendments to the Law on Profit Tax: Official Gazette No 290/20).
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure is valid in 2020 and 2021.
- d) Amount and duration/range, duration and conditionality: Not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: Employees, taxpayers (including the self-employed).

⁸ Public Health Institute "Situation with COVID-19 in North Macedonia and the world 26.04-02.05.2021": <http://iph.mk/состојба-со-covid-19-во-северна-македонија-и-19>.

- f) Beneficiaries: There are no publicly available data.
- g) Novelty: This is a new measure.

2.5 Measures related to minimum-income schemes and other forms of social assistance

2.5.1 Олеснет пристап до правото на гарантирана минимална помош (Enhanced access to guaranteed minimum assistance)

- a) Short description of the measure: The measure was introduced to ensure swifter access to the social protection system. As indicated in the ESPN Flash report 2020/40, the government has adopted a decree for implementing the law on social protection during a state of emergency (Official Gazette Nos 89/2020 and 108/20). This decree: modifies the GMA income test for all new applicants, by reducing the period for which family incomes are taken into consideration from the last three months to one month; limits means-testing (property is no longer taken into account); and removes the requirement for GMA beneficiaries to register with the Employment Agency on a regular basis and provide proof of job-search activity.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure initially applied to April-May 2020, and was then continued until December 2020. At the end of December 2020, an amendment to the law on social protection (Official Gazette No 302/20) was adopted, which extends swift access to social protection to states of emergency, epidemics/pandemics and natural disasters.
- d) Amount and duration/range, duration and conditionality: Not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: The measure was aimed at people who had lost their sources of income during the pandemic, including seasonal workers and informal workers. The estimated number of newly eligible beneficiaries as indicated in the initial government projections⁹ was 20,000 households, which represents 3.54% of the estimated number of households in the country.
- f) Beneficiaries: According to data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, up to July 2020 around 7,000 new households had applied for GMA. This represented 35% of the initial estimates for new applicants for GMA. According to the 2021 programme for social protection (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2021), 5,500 new households acquired the right to GMA in the period April-December 2020, which represented 27.5% of the initial estimated number of beneficiaries of this measure.
- g) Novelty: The novelty lies in the relaxation of means-testing and the removal of job-search requirements, which together provide for swifter access to support from the social protection system.

2.5.2 Продолжување на паричниот додаток заради покривање на дел од трошоците за потрошувачка на енергенс во домаќинството (Extended duration of the energy subsidy)

- a) Short description of the measure: The measure extended the duration of the "energy subsidy" top-up payment, made to all household beneficiaries of GMA, from six winter months (October to March) to all year round.
- b) Category: Flat benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure initially applied during April-May 2020, and was then continued until December 2020. An amendment to the law on social protection (Official Gazette

No 302/20) then extended its use on a permanent basis to states of emergency, epidemics/pandemics and natural disasters.

- d) Amount and duration: The amount of this monthly top-up measure is 1,000 MKD (€16). Its duration has been extended by six additional months, effectively making this a transfer paid throughout the whole year.
- e) Targeted population: Households that are GMA beneficiaries. The estimated number of new eligible beneficiaries is 20,000 households, which represents 3.54% of the estimated number of households in the country.
- f) Beneficiaries: According to data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 5,500 new households acquired the right to the energy subsidy in April-December 2020, which represented 27.5% of the initial estimated number of beneficiaries of this measure.
- g) Novelty: The novelty is the extended duration of the payment from six to 12 months, which effectively increases the annual incomes of GMA beneficiaries.

2.5.3 Продолжување и модификација на дел од правата утврдени во Законот за заштита на децата (Extension and modification of some rights under child protection law)

- a) Short description of the measure: The measure extended the expired child protection benefits, namely the newborn allowance and the parental allowance for the third and fourth child, for up to three months after the end of the state of emergency. In addition, the educational allowance criteria related to regular school attendance were waived until the end of the 2019/2020 school year.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: March-September 2020.
- d) Amount and duration/range, duration and conditionality: Not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: Beneficiaries of newborn allowance, parental allowance for the third and fourth child, and educational allowance.
- f) Beneficiaries: There are no publicly available data.
- g) Novelty: This was not a new measure, but a modification of existing measures.

2.6 Measures related to housing support

2.6.1 Одложено плаќање закуп за корисниците на социјални станovi (Rent payment deferral for beneficiaries of social housing)

- a) Short description of the measure: The measure extended the period for payment of monthly rent by certain households living in social housing. The rent payment deferral was applied only for the months of April and May 2020.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: April-May 2020.
- d) Amount and duration/range, duration and conditionality: Not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: People over 18 who, prior to reaching 18, had been without parental care; GMA beneficiaries; people affected by natural disasters regardless of the legal status of their existing (primary) dwellings; people with disabilities, and their families; people belonging to the Roma community; and single parents with minor children.
- f) Beneficiaries: There are no publicly available data.

- g) Novelty: This was a new measure.

2.6.2 Одложување на кредитите кај банките (Deferred mortgage payment)

- a) Short description of the measure: Based on a decree relating to the law on financial companies during a state of emergency (Official Gazette No 90/20), the measure enabled citizens with loan agreements concluded as of 31 March 2020 to have their monthly annuity obligations reduced by at least 70% of the regular monthly annuity. Financial companies were not allowed to charge fees, costs, commissions and/or interest penalties. Additionally, the deadline for payment of monthly annuities under the loan agreements was extended by at least 90 days.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure applied during two periods: April-June 2020; and October 2020 to March 2021.
- d) Amount and duration/range, duration and conditionality: Not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: Citizens with active loan agreements.
- f) Beneficiaries: There are no publicly available data.
- g) Novelty: This was a new measure.

2.7 Leave for parents whose children are unable to attend school or a pre-school service by reason of COVID-19

2.7.1 Ослободување од работни обврски на еден од родителите на деца до 10 годишна возраст или активно 4 одделение (Work exemption of one of the parents of children up to age 10 or active fourth grade)

- a) Short description of the measure: The measure enabled one of the employed parents of children up to age 10 to be absent from work during the period of school closures. A certificate was issued by kindergartens and schools as confirmation that the parent had a child registered at that facility. As all public and private kindergartens and schools were closed during the period concerned (see below), parents were allowed to be absent from work as long as educational facilities were closed; they continued to receive their full salaries.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The work exemption lasted from 10 March to 23 September 2020.
- d) Amount and duration/range, duration and conditionality: Not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: One of the employed parents of children up to age 10, including self-employed and part-time workers (subject to providing a certificate from the pre-school or school facility).
- f) Beneficiaries: There are no publicly available data.
- g) Novelty: This was a new measure.

2.7.2 Продолжување на породилното отсуство (Extension of maternity leave)

- a) Short description of the measure: The government issued a decree with legal force (Official Gazette No 90/20) extending the right to paid maternity leave for the employed parents of children (including self-employed people, as long as they had a record of paying social contributions) who were on maternity leave during the temporary preventive measures triggered by COVID-19. The duration of the measure was stipulated as valid "throughout the duration of the temporary measures for

protection and prevention from COVID-19". The extended maternity leave was fully paid.

- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure was valid from 10 March to 23 September 2020 (until the kindergartens reopened).
- d) Amount and duration/range, duration and conditionality: Not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: Employed mothers on maternity leave.
- f) Beneficiaries: According to the latest government estimates, there were 2,200 individuals who had used the measure up to July 2020. The extended maternity leave was paid (in full) during the period 10 March to 23 September 2020 (the period when this measure was active).
- g) Novelty: This was an extension of an existing measure.

2.8 Other important temporary social protection/inclusion measures adopted in the context of the pandemic, which do not fall in any of the categories listed in the previous sections

2.8.1 *Платежни картички за граѓаните за поголема потрошувачка и за развој на домашните економски дејности (Payment cards for citizens to promote higher consumption and develop domestic economic activities)*

- a) Short description of the measure: The measure took the form of payment cards designed to increase consumption among certain categories of the population, and similarly to increase the demand for domestic products and services (in particular, food).
- b) Category: Flat benefit.
- c) Timing: It was provided twice, in June and December 2020. The cards could be used until the end of December 2020.
- d) Amount and duration: The payment card provided in June 2020 was worth 9,000 MKD (€146), and the card provided in December 2020 was worth 6,000 MKD (€97).
- e) Targeted population: Citizens with low incomes; pension beneficiaries; beneficiaries of social security for older people; young people; single parents; children without parents and parental care; artists and other people active in the culture sector; film workers; and pop artists.
- f) Beneficiaries: The estimated number of beneficiaries of the payment card in June 2020 was approximately 100,000 – all unemployed people, people looking for a job whose monthly gross income was not above 15,000 MKD (€243), and GMA beneficiaries. The estimated number of beneficiaries in December 2020 was 283,000, including: 5,726 single parents, 182,271 pensioners with monthly pensions up to 15,000 MKD (€243), 85,108 unemployed people, and 520 people working in the culture sector.
- g) Novelty: Similar measures had been introduced in the past (i.e. during the global economic crisis in 2009), so the measure was new, but not novel per se.

3 SOCIAL PROTECTION AND INCLUSION RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS: OVERALL ASSESSMENT AND POSSIBLE GAPS

Social protection and inclusion policies already in place in North Macedonia, and particularly the 2019 social protection reform, were able to mitigate some of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. But the more straightforward response in the first wave of COVID-19 (March-June 2020) was not followed up in the second wave (September-December 2020). Hence, a number of weaknesses still remain in the social protection system, which hinders a more comprehensive coverage of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

This third section briefly considers three aspects: the expected cost of the social protection and inclusion measures put in place by the country (Section 3.1), the impact of these measures on the social protection system and on social inclusion policies (Section 3.2), and the possible remaining gaps in the social protection system and in social inclusion policies (Section 3.3). It concludes with Section 3.4 on debates and recommendations.

3.1 Expected cost of social protection and inclusion measures

There are no disaggregated government data regarding the cost of each social protection/inclusion measure undertaken as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The cost of wage subsidy support amounted to 0.3% of 2019 GDP (Table 1). According to the available government data and estimates¹⁰, the total fiscal cost of the packages of economic measures implemented in response to COVID-19 during 2020 and early 2021, is 43.4 billion MKD (€704 million) or approximately 6.5% of the country's GDP. The aggregate expenditure on all economic measures includes the expenditure related to the new social protection and inclusion measures, but data do not allow their disaggregation.

Table 1: Wage subsidy support during 2020 and early 2021, in MKD

	Wage subsidy	Wage subsidy for sportspeople and artists	Wage subsidy for workers in tourism sectors (guides – self-employed)	TOTAL
First package	83,700,000	507,700	/	84,207,700
Second package	/	/	/	
Third package	/	/	/	
Fourth package	54,400,000	/	82,439	54,482,439
Fifth package	1,900,000,000	/	/	1,900,000,000*
TOTAL	2,038,100,000	507,700	82,439	2,038,690,139

* Projected.

Source: Government of North Macedonia, Report with status of implemented economic measures to tackle COVID-19 crisis – https://koronavirus.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/30_03_2021Извештај-со-статус-на-реализација-на-економски-мерки-за-справување-со-криза-од-КОВИД-19.pdf; Ministry of Finance, Fifth package of measures – <https://finance.gov.mk/2021/02/16/петти-пакет-антикризни-мерки-за-ревит>.

Based on the latest available data from ESPROSS¹¹, the overall expenditure on social protection in North Macedonia for 2017 was 14.5% of GDP. This figure does not take into account the 2019 social protection reform, which has increased the amount and coverage of social protection benefits. But even with that increase, the overall expenditure on social

¹⁰ Government of North Macedonia, Realisation of the economic measures for tackling Covid-19: <https://vlada.mk/node/24854>.

¹¹ European System of integrated Social PROtection Statistics, Eurostat, Expenditure on social protection: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=spr_exp_sum&lang=en

protection in North Macedonia should be expanded to reflect the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

3.2 Impact on the social protection system and on social inclusion policies

The amendments to the law on social protection that were adopted at the end of 2020 have already reshaped some of the main social protection mechanisms, namely GMA. These changes allow for swifter access to the social protection system, as well as the extension of the energy subsidy throughout the year (albeit only in states of emergency, epidemics/pandemics and natural disasters). There are currently no debates regarding the possibility of extending these measures to non-emergency conditions.

3.3 Remaining gaps in the social protection system and social inclusion policies

The pandemic has demonstrated the limited capacity of the public healthcare sector in terms of accessibility and the quality of care. Despite its universal coverage, persistent limits on funding lead to underfunded and inadequate resources, especially in relation to the public health infrastructure.

The most obvious remaining gap in the social protection system is the restrictive eligibility conditions for access to unemployment compensation (from the social insurance system). These concern the way an employment contract was terminated, as well as the duration of previous employment. These eligibility criteria prohibit most unemployed people from accessing compensation. The measure adopted during the pandemic, easing these restrictions, unfortunately lasted only two months and was discontinued after July 2020.

The groups excluded from unemployment insurance include all workers whose contract was terminated at their own instigation, and farmers.

3.4 Debates and recommendations

One of the most debated economic measures was the implementation of the wage subsidy for those employed in the private sector. Because the wage subsidy was paid directly to employers and not employees (because of the requirement to prove company losses), some employers have not paid the wage subsidy in a timely way. According to data from the Public Revenue Office, as of 31 December 2020, 1.86% of employers (245 employers) who received financial support have not fulfilled their obligation to pay salaries (wage subsidy) for the month of November 2020 to 1.19% of the total number employees receiving this support (782 employees)¹². The Union of Trade Unions has asked for the direct payment of wage subsidies to employees' bank accounts¹³.

The main criticism of the economic support measures from the Association of Chambers of Commerce of North Macedonia (ACC) was that the timing of the measures did not allow for predictability and risk annulment. The ACC¹⁴ also demanded that the support be continued, to enable the preservation of jobs and the survival of companies. It said that priority measures in the next proposed package should include: extension of the measure for monthly financial assistance until April 2021, directly and non-selectively; the extension of assistance in the form of interest-free loans; and the possibility of rescheduling liabilities from active credit claims.

¹² Public Revenue Office, Analysis of the implementation of the wage subsidy measure: <http://www.ujp.gov.mk/mk/javnost/soopstenija/pogledni/839>.

¹³ The Union of Trade Unions requested subsidies for the June salary to be paid directly to employees: <https://ssm.org.mk/mk/morashe-da-se-sprechi-so-drzhavni-pari-da-se-zbogatat-gazdite-na-grbot-i-makata-na-rabotnicite>.

¹⁴ The Association of Chambers of Commerce of North Macedonia proposed 15 measures for the survival of jobs and companies: <https://chamber.mk/ssk-isporacha-15-merki-za-opstanok-na-rabotnite-mesta-i-pretpriyatijata>.

On the basis of the data and analysis provided in the report, and with the aim of strengthening social protection and social inclusion in North Macedonia, it is recommended that:

- a) the law on employment and unemployment insurance should be amended, so that the way an employment contract was terminated is no longer a criterion for receiving unemployment compensation;
- b) an impact assessment (i.e. the effect on poverty reduction) should be provided of enhanced access to GMA during emergencies, leading to the possibility of removing "emergency" as a criterion, and making enhanced access criteria permanent;
- c) consideration should be given to introducing enhanced access to the child protection system, involving the same means-testing criteria in relation to income and property as those introduced in relation to GMA;
- d) consideration should be given to increasing the social contribution for compulsory health insurance (currently 7.5% of the gross wage); and
- e) current expenditure on social protection (14.5% of GDP in 2017) should be increased to bring it in line with the EU-27 average.

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