

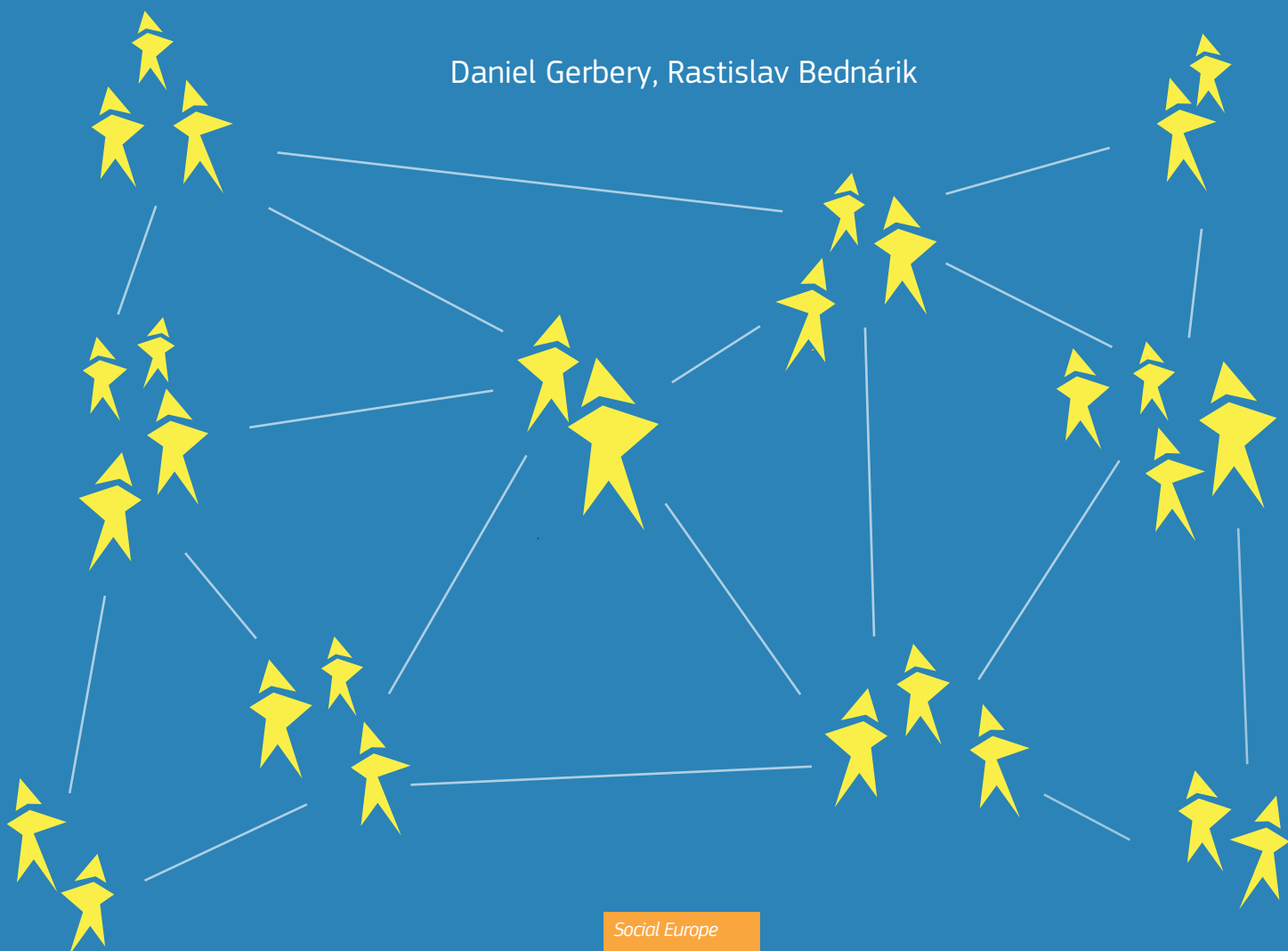


EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK (ESPN)

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

Slovakia

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EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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European Social Policy Network (ESPN)

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

Slovakia

2021

Daniel Gerbery – Rastislav Bednárík

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.

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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 Slovakia, it was 6,959. The total number of deaths per 100,000 people was 151 for the EU-27 versus 211 in Slovakia.

The Slovak government implemented a number of measures that focused on maintaining jobs and the stability of living conditions for persons affected by the pandemic, on strict regulations and on the provision of social services.

The repeated extension of the period of entitlement to unemployment benefit – by 1 month each time – contributed to the stabilisation of the income situation and the future prospects for the registered unemployed, at a time when it was very difficult to enter the labour market.

The SOS subsidy has targeted people who had lost income from work and found themselves without any income. The measure has strengthened the last-resort component of the social protection system and reduced the likelihood of being left without resources. However, there is some evidence that the level of the support is insufficient to cover living needs and that there are delays in its delivery.

One of the most important instruments – in terms of the size of the targeted population and the volume of financial resources – consists of the aid packages 'First aid', approved in March 2020, and 'First aid plus', which replaced the former package in October 2020. The packages contained several financial measures aimed at job retention and at supporting self-employed persons and people without any income.

The 'First aid' package introduced the short-time working scheme (known in Slovakia as *Kurzarbeit*, borrowing the German word) into the Slovak employment policy toolkit. It is designed for employers who have not been forced to shut down by decision of the Slovak Public Health Authority, but who are negatively affected (drop in revenues of at least 20%). It is the most frequently used measure within the 'First aid' and 'First aid plus' packages. Of all social inclusion and social protection measures implemented during the pandemic, short-time working might contribute to reshaping the social protection system and social policies. The government plans to establish it as a permanent instrument.

Employers (and indirectly their employees) can also benefit from other measures, including support for employers who have been forced to shut down, and the deferral and waiver of social contributions paid by employers.

Some social benefits have been adjusted, in order to tackle the new conditions during the pandemic.

Attention has also been paid to the protection of tenants who have built up arrears as a result of the pandemic, and of homeless people, who are likely to have benefited from increased support for social services providers who focus on this vulnerable group. Increased support has also been granted to social services facilities.

It is supposed that almost all of the measures represent temporary solutions that will be cancelled once the crisis ends. Consequently, some of the weaknesses of the social protection system and social inclusion policies will remain: short duration of unemployment benefit, inadequate minimum income scheme, the low enrolment rate of poor children in pre-school education and their poor results once they start compulsory schooling.

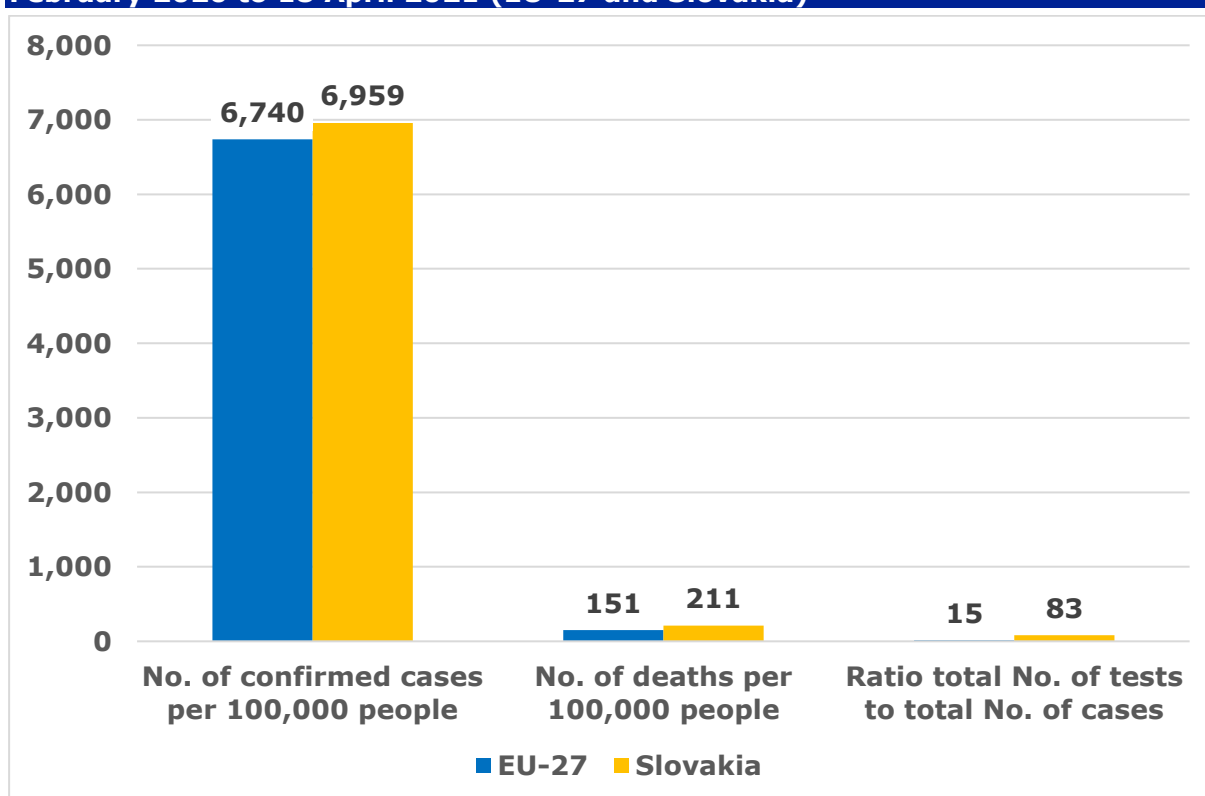
Since the onset of the pandemic, experts and social partners have questioned two aspects of the measures: the overall low volume of the financial resources devoted to the support and the lack of coverage of certain categories of employees/employers/self-employed at risk. These two problems remained subjects for criticism throughout the period.

1 Trends of the pandemic and social and economic impact¹

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 Slovakia, it was 6,959. The total number of deaths per 100,000 people was 151 for the EU-27 versus 211 in Slovakia. 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 82.8 for Slovakia.

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

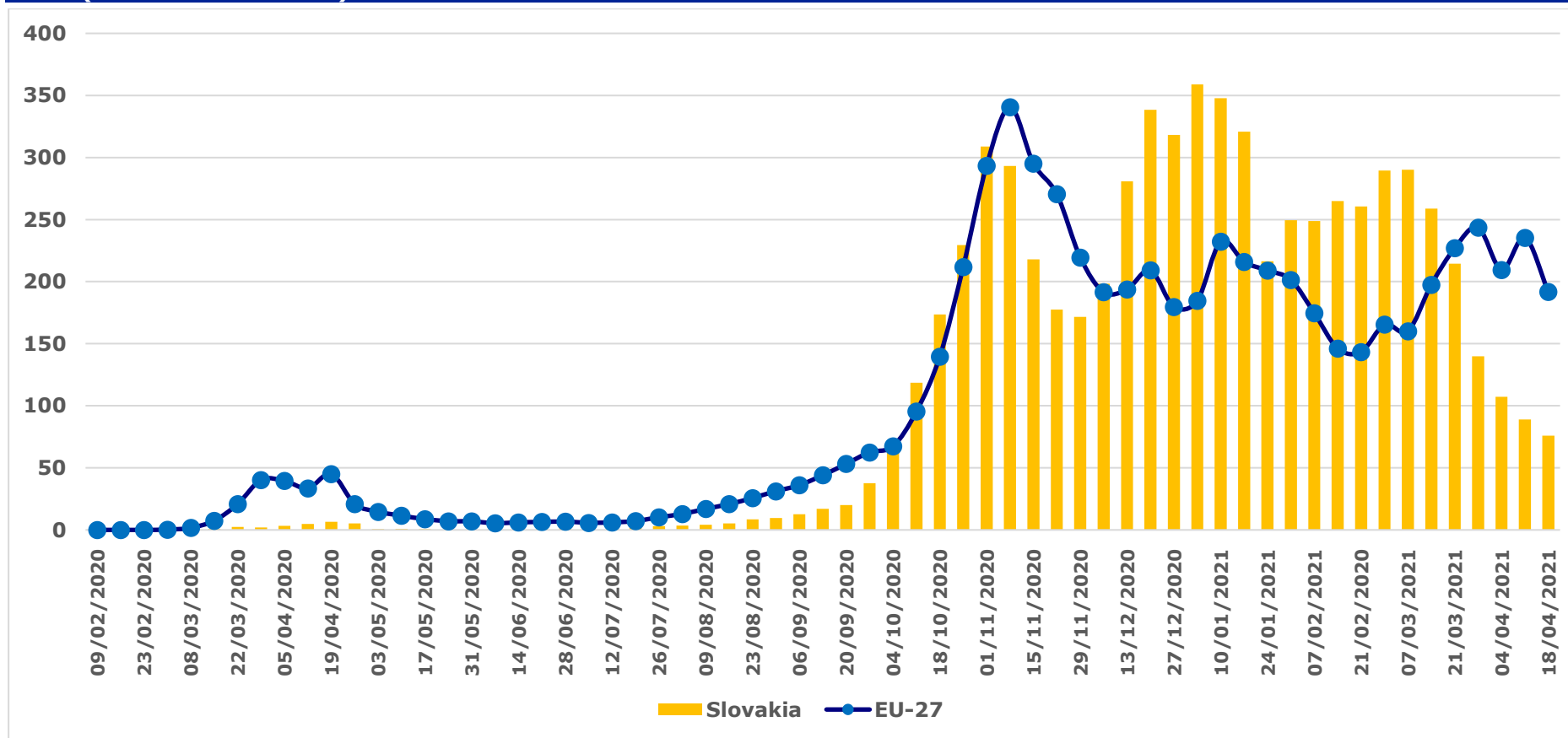


Source: Our World in Data (OWID) online database on COVID-19 - downloaded 26 April 2021

¹ 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 Slovakia, it was 75.8.

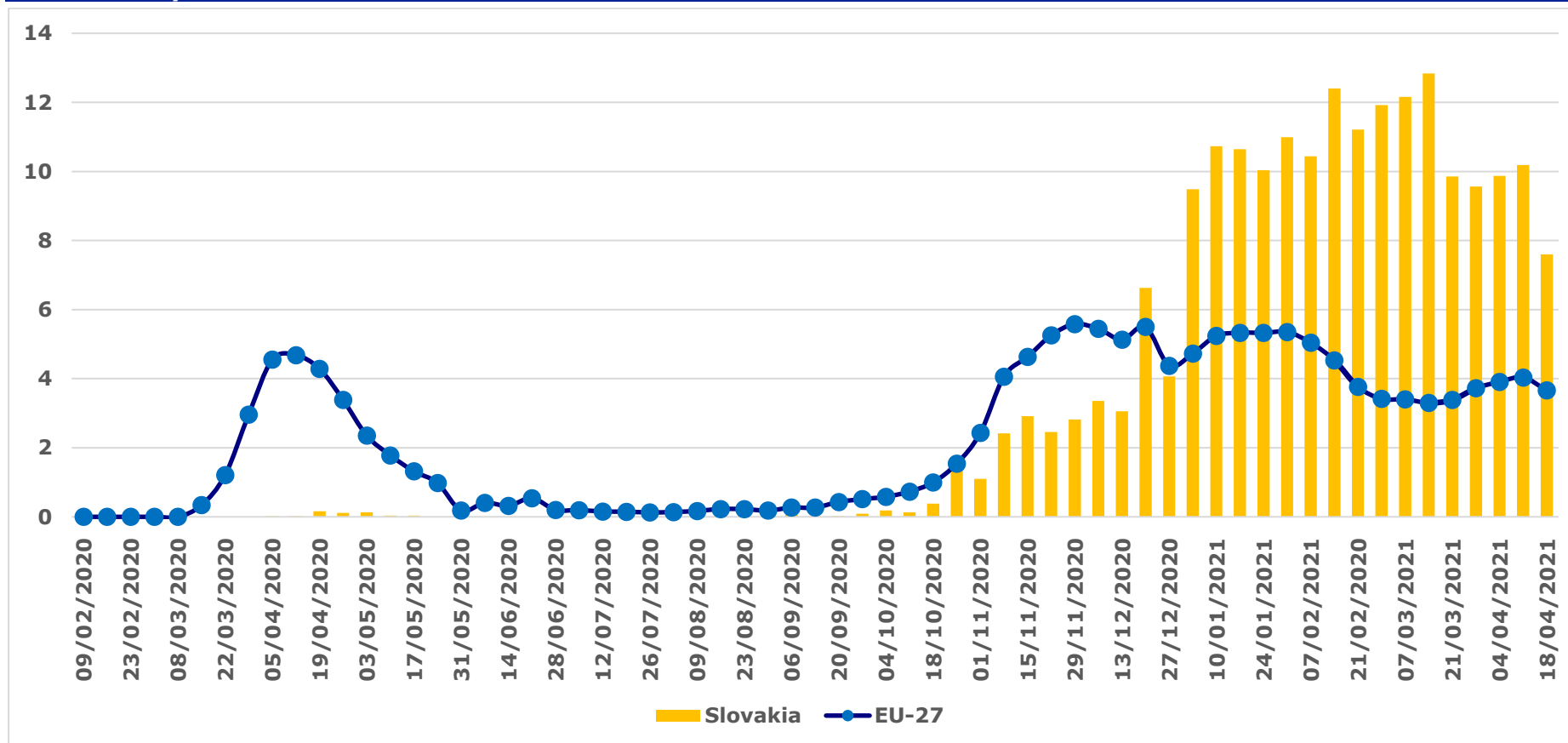
Figure 2: Weekly evolution - Number of confirmed COVID-19 cases for 100,000 people from 3 February 2020 to 18 April 2021 (EU-27 and Slovakia)



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 Slovakia, it was 7.60.

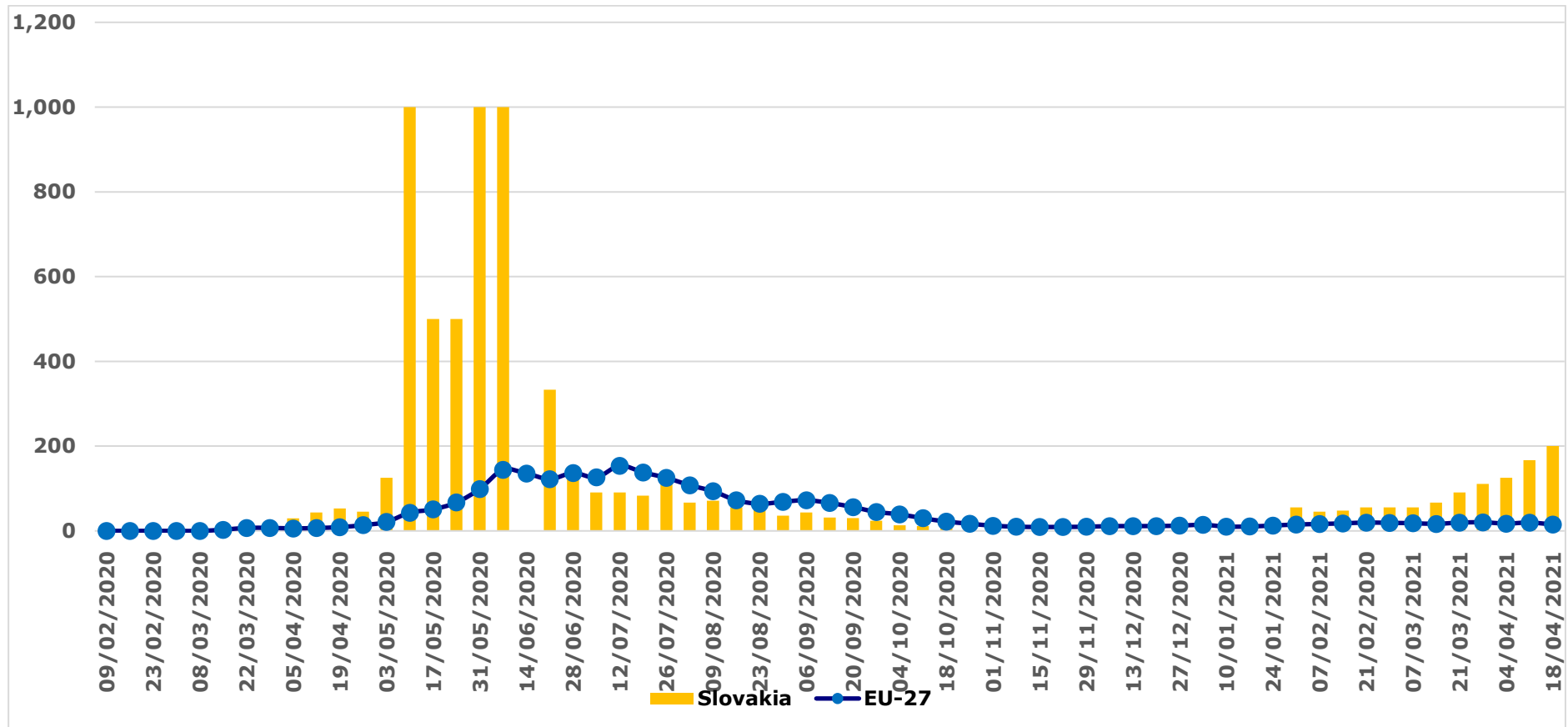
Figure 3: Weekly evolution - Number of COVID-19 deaths for 100,000 people from 3 February 2020 to 18 April 2021 (EU-27 and Slovakia)



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 Slovakia, it was 200.0.

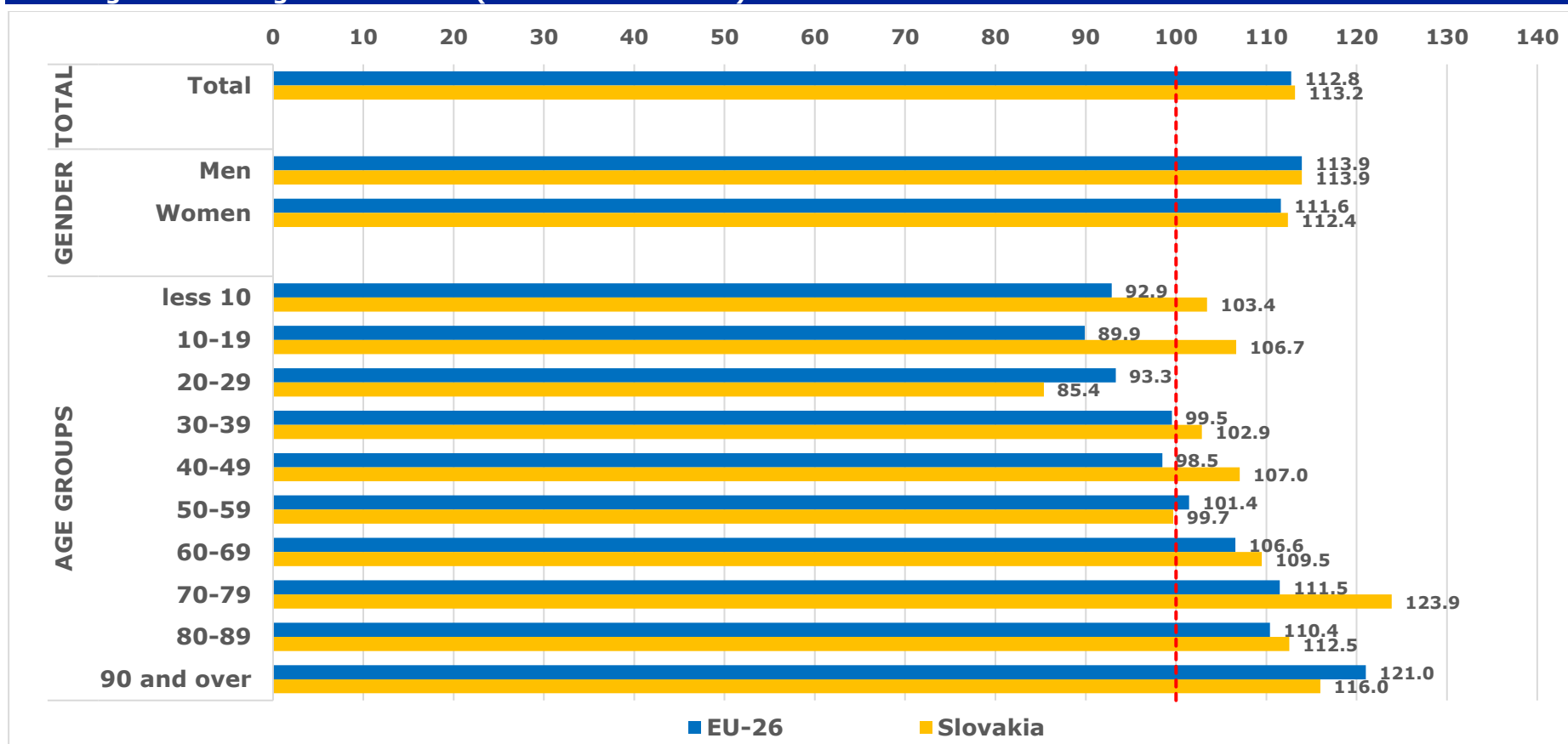
Figure 4: Weekly evolution - Number of COVID-19 tests per new confirmed COVID-19 case from 3 February 2020 to 18 April 2021 (EU-27 and Slovakia)



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 113.2% in Slovakia. For the EU-26, it is 113.9% for men and 111.6% for women. In Slovakia, these gendered ratios are 113.9% and 112.4% respectively. Excess mortality is higher among older age groups. For those aged 90 years and more it reaches 121.0% for EU-26 and 116.0% for Slovakia.

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

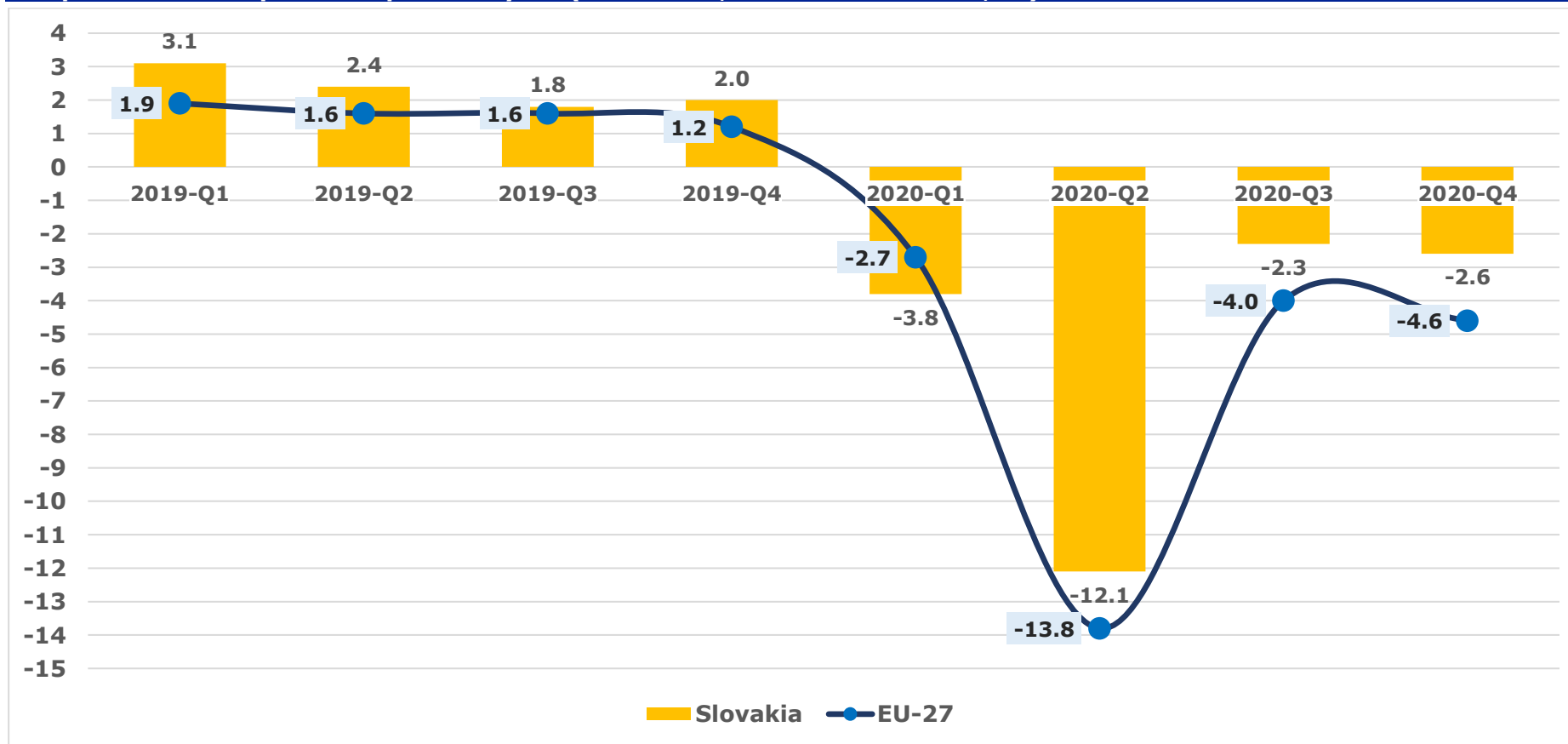


Source: Eurostat - indicator [DEMO_R_MWK_10__custom_560457] Deaths by week, sex and 10-year age groups - downloaded 26 April 2021. For Bosnia and Herzegovina: Agency for statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina (data received upon request on 19 April 2021).

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 Slovakia, the decrease was 2.6% for the same period.

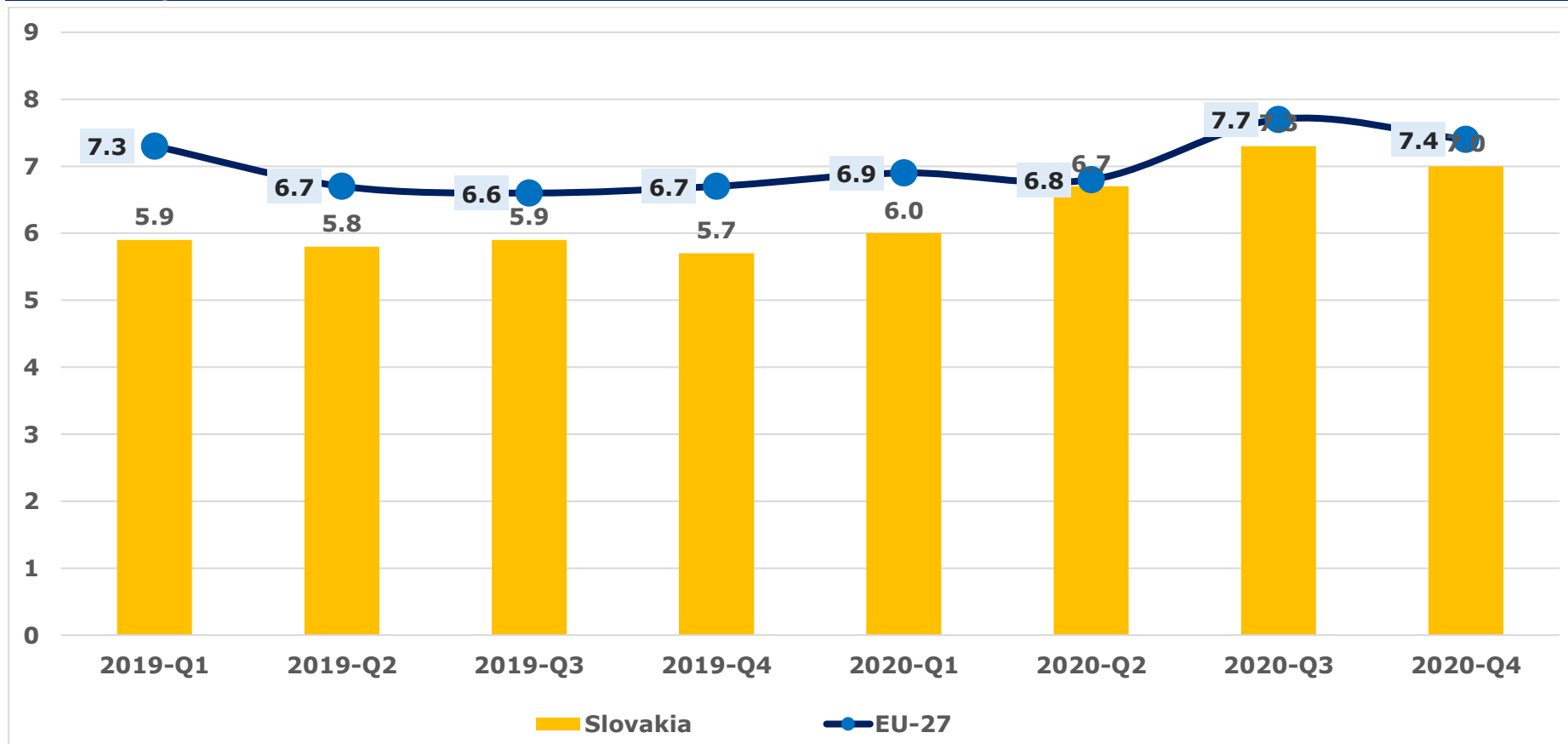
Figure 6: Gross Domestic Product at market prices, Chain-linked volumes prices adjusted, Percentage changes in quarter compared to same quarter in previous year (2019-2020, EU-27 and Slovakia, %)



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 Slovakia, it is 7.0%.

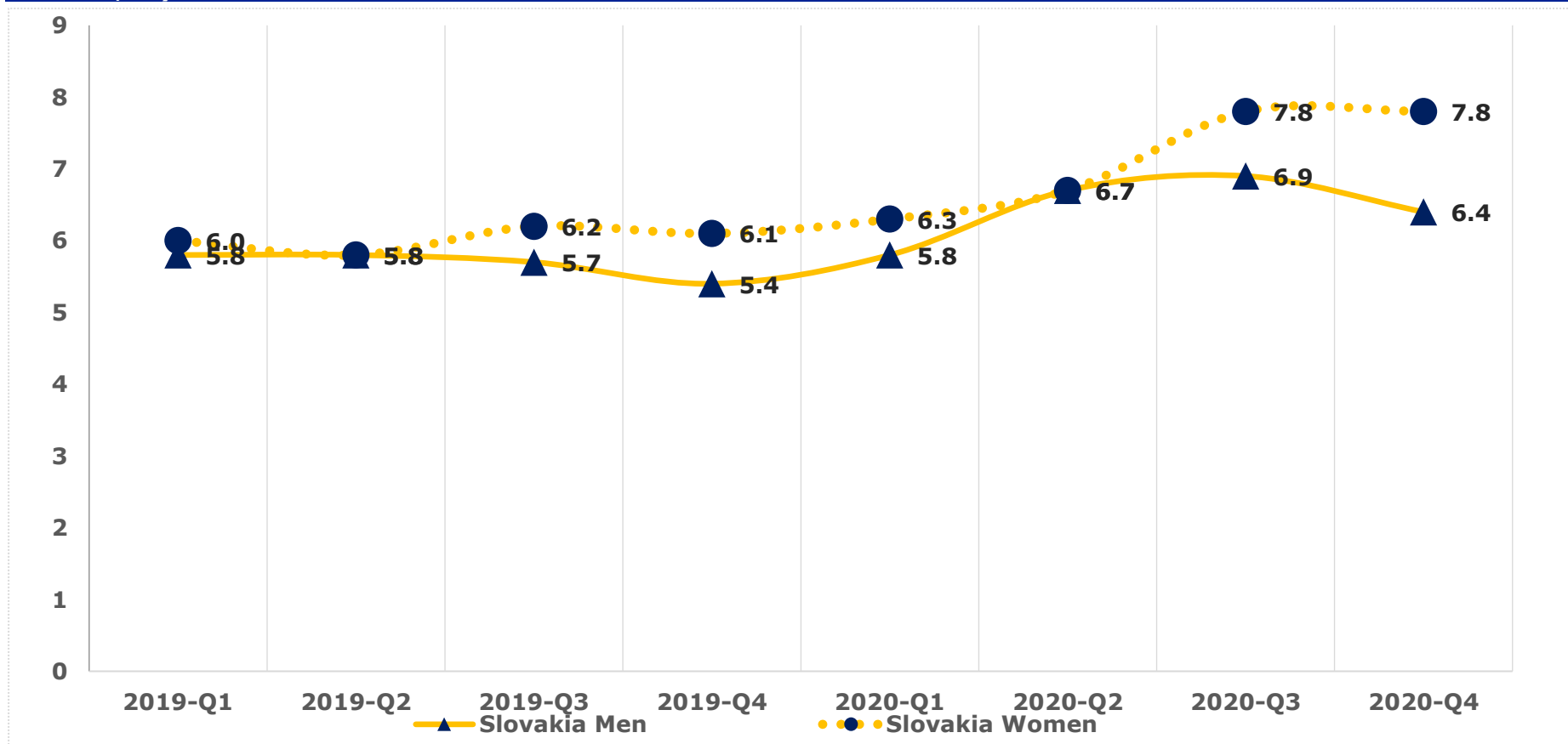
Figure 7a: Seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 (2019-2020, EU-27 and Slovakia, %)



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 Slovakia, these figures are 6.4% and 7.8% respectively.

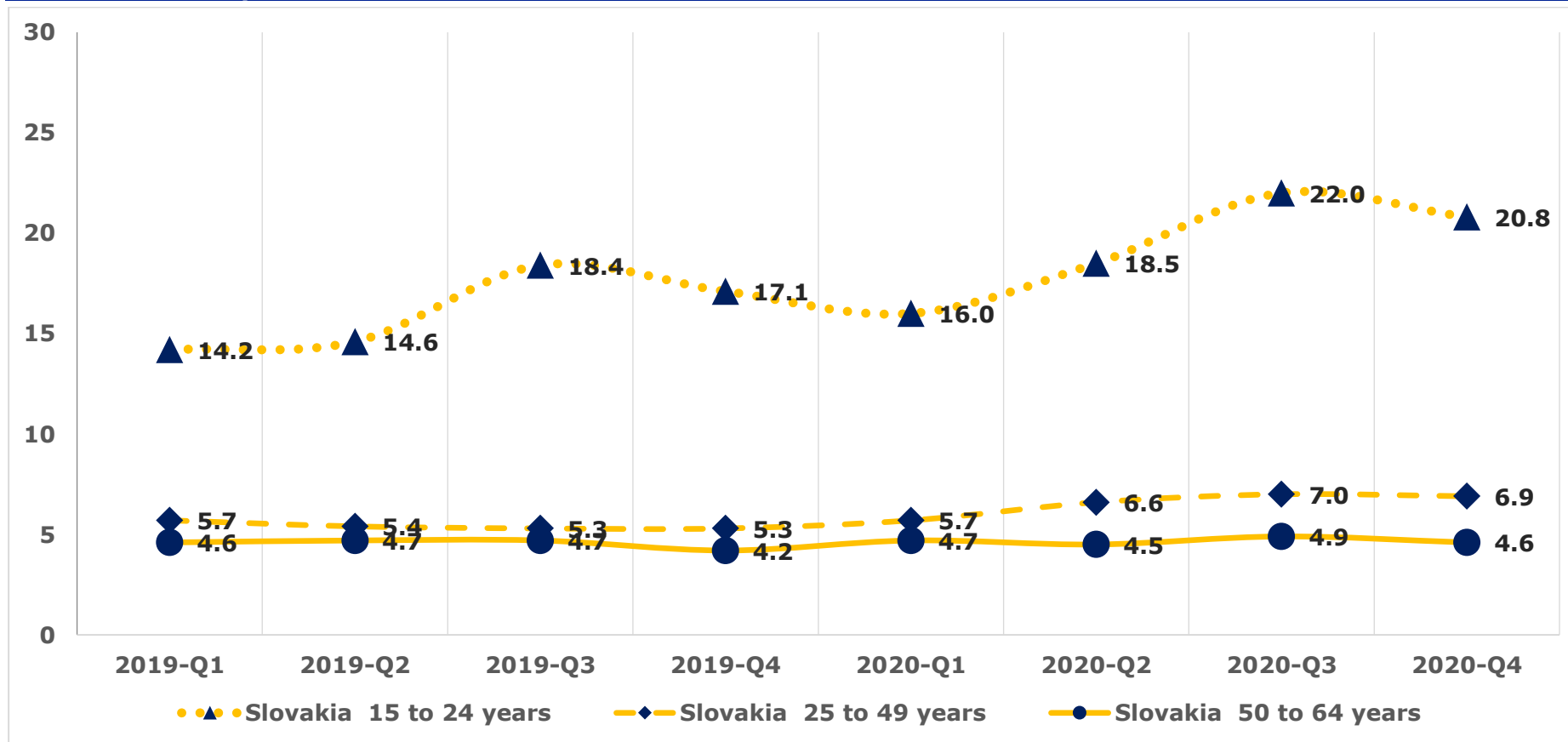
Figure 7b: Seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 – by gender (2019-2020, Slovakia, %)



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 is 16.9% for the 15-24 age group. In Slovakia, it is 20.8%.

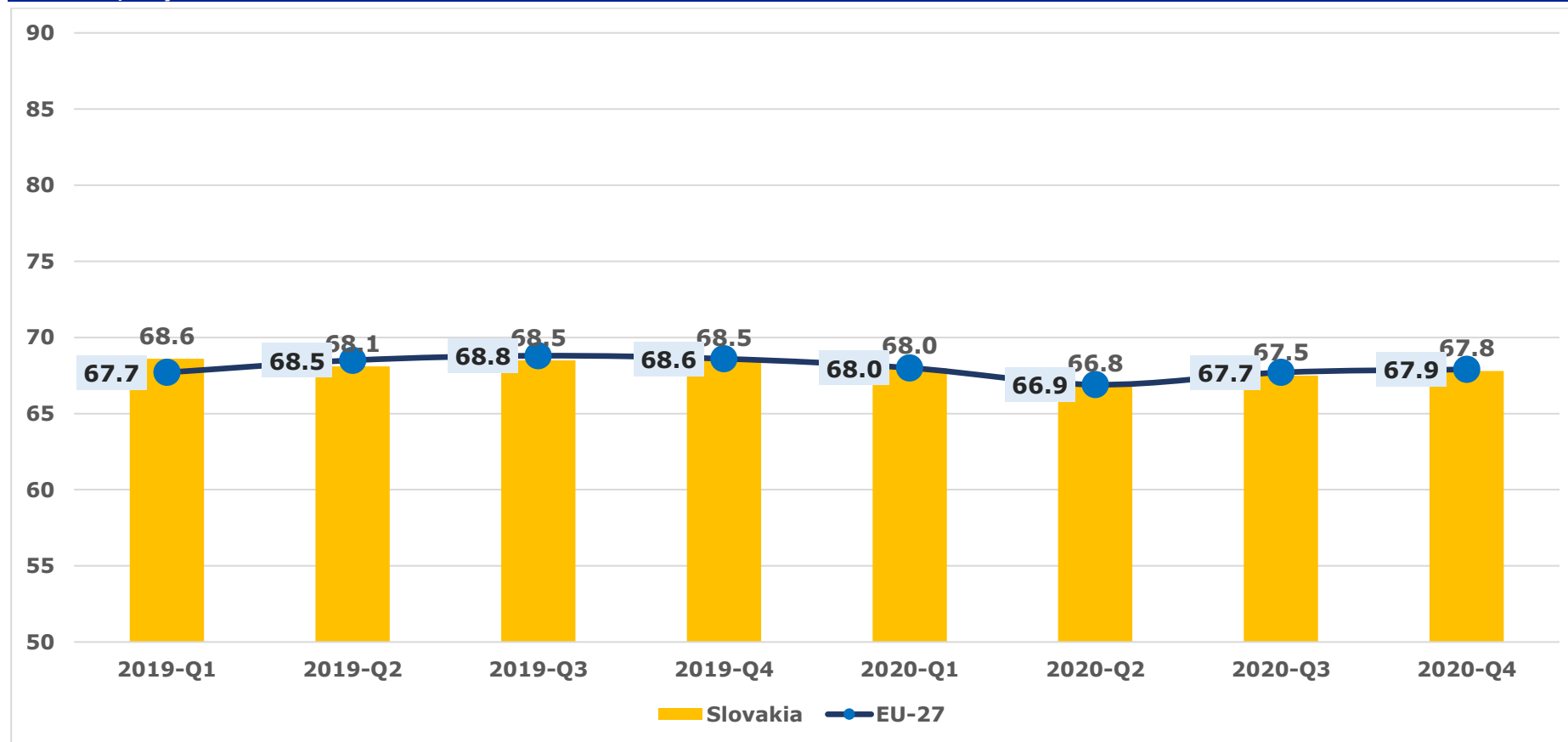
Figure 7c: Seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 – by age group (2019-2020, Slovakia, %)



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 Slovakia, it is 67.8%.

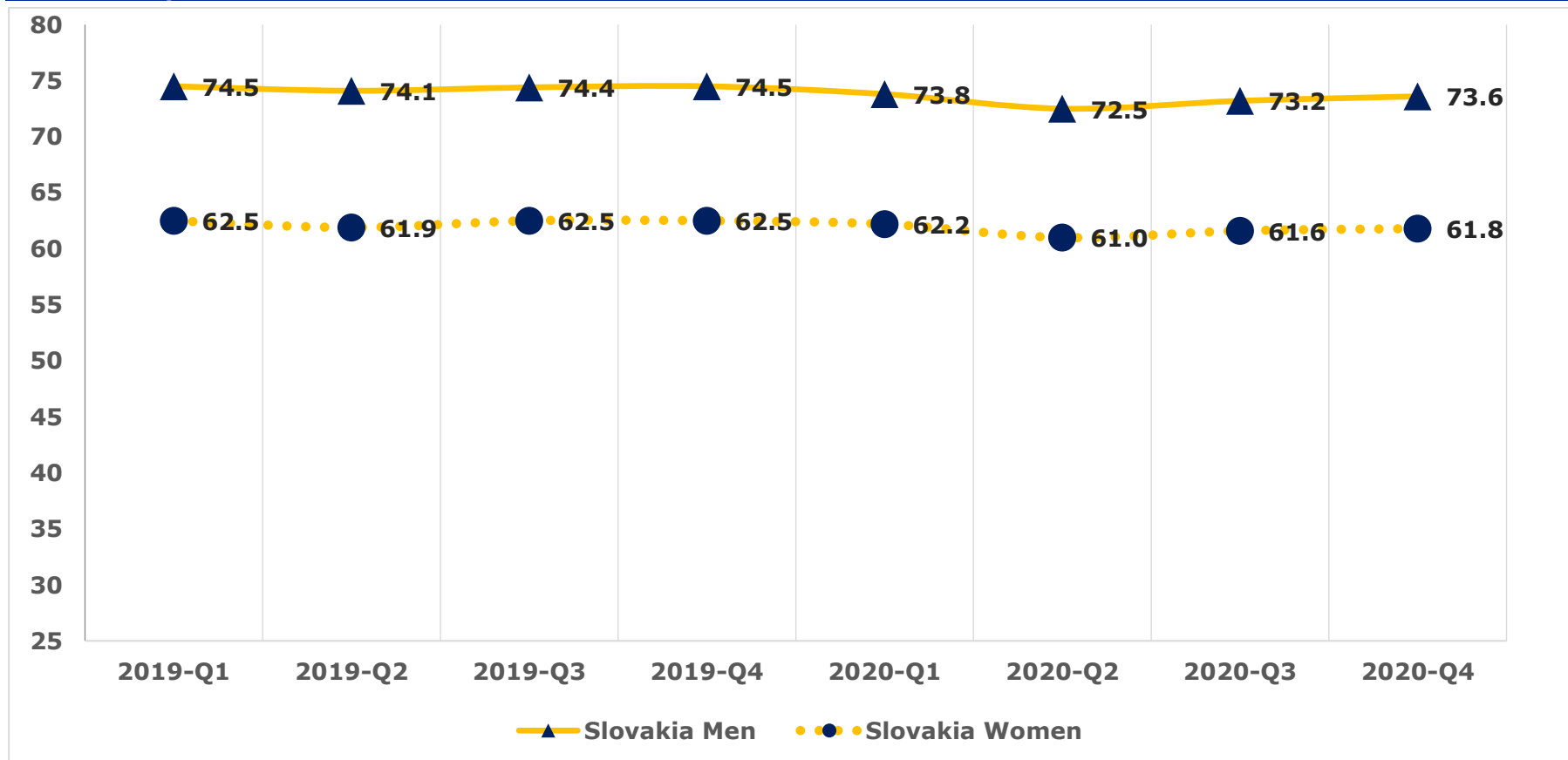
Figure 8a: Seasonally-adjusted employment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 (2019-2020, EU-27 and Slovakia, %)



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 Slovakia, these figures are 73.6% and 61.8% respectively.

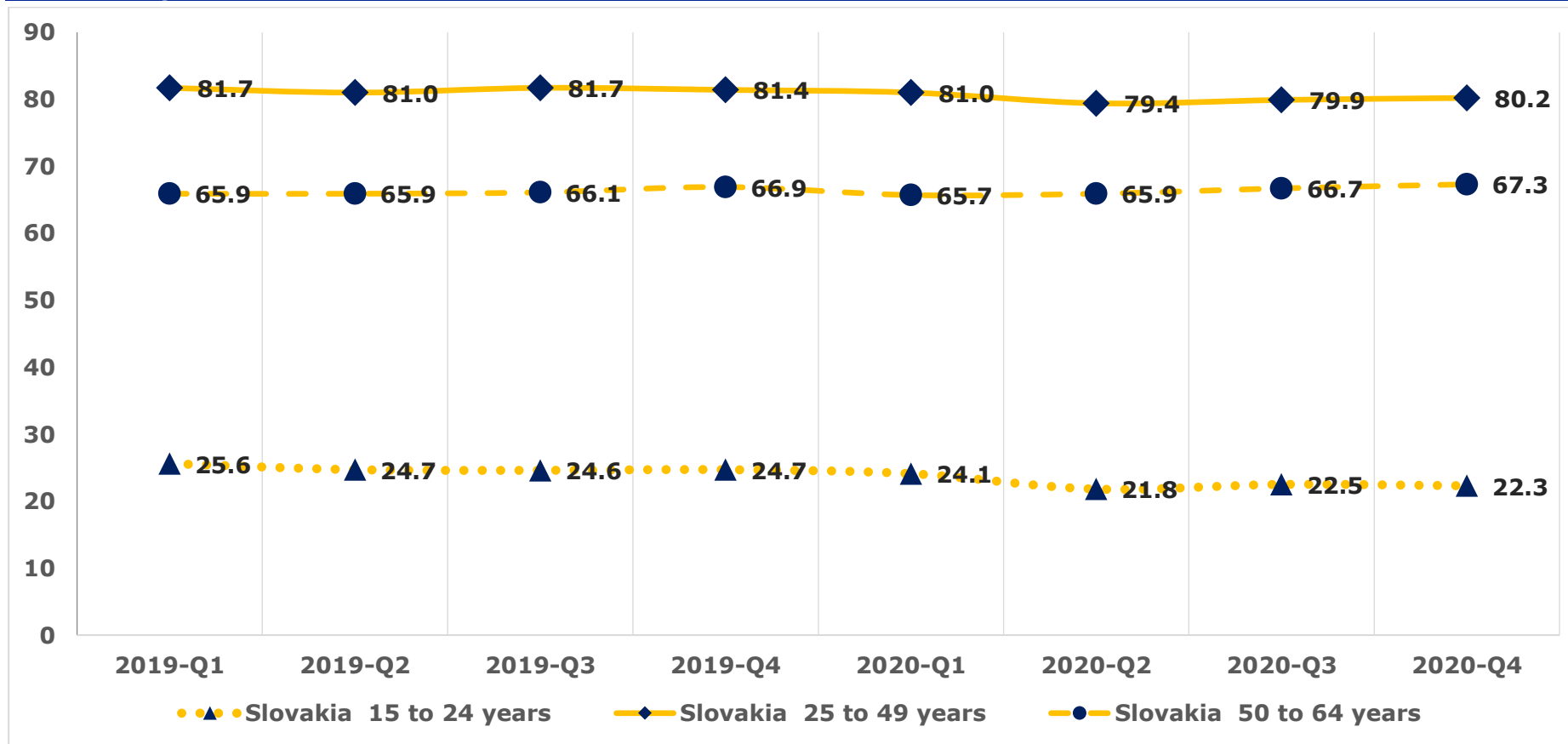
Figure 8b: Seasonally-adjusted employment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 – by gender (2019-2020, Slovakia, %)



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 Slovakia, it is 22.3%.

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



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

1.3 Poverty, inequality and social exclusion situation

While the pandemic's impact on income poverty or inequality has not yet been estimated, certain other aspects of poverty and social exclusion have been the subject of analysis and estimation by experts. Access to education during the pandemic has been one of the most widely discussed issues in Slovakia. The Educational Policy Institute, the analytical unit of the Ministry of Education, has estimated that almost 52,000 children have had no access to distance learning during the pandemic, representing 7.5% of all children at primary and secondary school.² Schools with a high presence of socially disadvantaged children, including children living in marginalised Roma communities, and specialised schools for children with disability have been those most affected. 18.1% of children attending primary specialised schools have not participated in distance learning at all (degree of participation varies according to type of disability). Among pupils attending primary schools with a high presence of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, 23.8% did not have access to distance learning (compared to 3.1% of children in schools with a low presence of vulnerable children). When it comes to secondary schools with a high presence of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, the proportion of children without access to distance learning has been 13.9% (compared to 2.9% in schools with a low presence of vulnerable children).

It is estimated that 128,000 children (18.6%) have not been involved in internet-based learning and have relied on the distribution of printed teaching materials. The situation was at its worst again in primary specialised schools, where 63.6% of students did not participate in this form of distance learning.

² Educational Policy Institute (2020).

2 Social protection and inclusion measures in response to the pandemic³

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:

- 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);
 - Range (minimum-maximum), duration and conditionality (thresholds) (for conditional measures).

If the measure is neither flat nor conditional, this is 'Not applicable'.
- e) Targeted population: what is/are the target(s), i.e. the parts of the population/labour force/sectors targeted by the measure? If data and evidence are readily available, estimated number of people targeted and/or applicants.
- f) Beneficiaries: How many recipients of the measure are there (if relevant and available)?
- g) Novelty: Was the measure new or an already existing one that was adapted?

2.1 Measures related to unemployment benefits

2.1.1 *Predĺženie podporného obdobia v nezamestnanosti (Extension of the period of receipt of unemployment benefit)*

- a) Short description of the measure: Unemployment benefit is an insurance-based, earnings-related transfer provided within the insurance scheme that is financed by compulsory contributions from employers, employees and voluntarily insured persons. It is provided for a period of 6 months. In order to stabilise the income of jobseekers who were having increasing difficulty in finding a job, the period during which unemployment benefit is paid (6 months) was repeatedly extended by 1 month for those jobseekers whose entitlements were about to run out during the crisis. The period was extended four times during 2020 (i.e. the total maximum period was 10 months in 2020). In March 2021, the measure was reactivated: the period during which unemployment benefit is paid was extended by 2 months. The extension expired on 31 May 2021.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The period of provision of unemployment benefit was extended for the first time in April 2020. Since then, the measure was repeated in May, June and July 2020. The last extension expired on 31 August 2020. Between March and May 2021, the period of the provision of unemployment benefit was extended by 2 months.
- d) Amount and duration/Range, duration and conditionality: not applicable.

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.

- e) Targeted population: Jobseekers registered at labour offices who were entitled to unemployment benefit.⁴
- f) Beneficiaries: No information available.
- g) Novelty: The measure represented an adjustment of the existing benefit, i.e. the duration of the receipt of unemployment benefit was extended.

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

In late March 2020, the government approved an aid package 'First aid for employees, entrepreneurs and the self-employed', which contained several financial measures to maintain jobs that were co-financed by the European Social Fund. In October 2020, the package was replaced by an extended set of measures under 'First aid plus'.

2.2.1 Podpora zamestnávateľov, ktorí na základe opatrenia ÚVZ uzatvorili prevádzky (Support for employers who are forced to shut down – employers with furloughed employees)

- a) Short description of the measure: Employers and self-employed persons with employees, who, despite being forced to shut down their operations by decision of the Slovak Public Health Authority (SPHA), preserve jobs for at least 2 months can claim reimbursement of employees' wages. Employees in standard employment relationships are covered by the measure. Employees are protected against dismissal, as maintaining jobs is one of the conditions of the measure.
- b) Category: Conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure was launched in April 2020 and, after amendments, is still in force at the time of writing (March 2021).
- d) Range, duration and conditionality: Employers can claim reimbursement of 80% of an employee's monthly average gross salary, capped at EUR 1,100 per employee per month. The measure was initially part of the 'First aid' package, approved in March 2020. The package 'First aid plus', passed in October 2020, has changed the support's level. Reimbursement is now set at 80% of monthly labour costs (instead of the employee's monthly average gross salary). As a result, the level of support has increased. Furthermore, the required period for job retention was reduced to 1 month.
- e) Targeted population: Employers and self-employed persons with employees in standard employment relationships. The target group also includes employees, as they are direct beneficiaries of the measure.
- f) Beneficiaries: In March 2020 – the month in which the measure was launched – 65,583 employees benefited from the support,⁵ representing 3.3% of all employees and almost 18% of everyone who received support from the 'First aid' package (see Table 1). Taking into account only employees covered by the scheme, the number of beneficiaries was approximately 21% of all employees who benefited from the package (i.e. all employees who benefited from the support to employers, mentioned in the first three rows of the table).
In November 2020 – the last month for which data are available, 1,638 employees received support from the measure. That represented almost 2% of all persons

⁴ To be entitled to unemployment benefit, a person must have paid unemployment insurance contributions for at least 2 of the previous 4 years and must be registered as a jobseeker with the labour office. Persons with shorter or less continuous employment histories are not covered by the scheme. Unemployed persons without entitlement to unemployment benefit are entitled to minimum income benefit and allowances.

⁵ Social Policy Institute (2020).

supported by the 'First aid plus' package and 1% of all employees who benefited from the scheme.

Between March and November 2020, the number of beneficiaries decreased by approximately 97% following a relaxation of the strict measures imposed by the SPHA during the summer.

g) Novelty: This is a new measure.

Table 1: Beneficiaries of the measures offered by the 'First aid' and 'First aid plus' packages (March and November 2020)

| Measure | March 2020 (First aid) | | | November 2020 (First aid plus) | | |
|--|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| | Absolute number | % of all beneficiaries | % of all employees | Absolute number | % of all beneficiaries | % of all employees |
| Support to employers who were forced to shut down | 65,583 | 17.7 | 3.3 | 1,638 | 1.6 | Not available |
| Support to employers who were negatively affected – 1 st option | 68,195 | 18.4 | 3.4 | 21,217 | 21.1 | Not available |
| Support to employers who were negatively affected – 2 nd option | 186,130 | 50.2 | 9.2 | 48,802 | 48.6 | Not available |
| Support to self-employed persons who recorded a drop in revenue* | 39,555 | 10.7 | Not applicable | 24,001 | 24.0 | Not applicable |
| Support to self-employed persons without any income* | 11,453 | 3.1 | Not applicable | 4,689 | 4.7 | Not applicable |
| Total number of package's beneficiaries | 370,916 | 100.0 | - | 100,347 | 100.0 | - |

*This measure is not described in the report, because it does not target employees, but only the self-employed.

Source: Inštitút sociálnej politiky (2021), authors' calculations. Data on the number of employees were retrieved from the website of the Social Insurance Agency.⁶

⁶ <https://www.socpoist.sk/aktuality-koronakriz-a-okresala-pocty-zamestnancov--zamestnavatelov--dohodarov-i-szco/48411s68739c>

2.2.2 Podpora zamestnávateľov, ktorí udržia pracovné miesta aj v prípade prerušenia alebo obmedzenia činnosti – Kurzarbeit (Support to employers who preserve jobs in spite of being adversely affected – Kurzarbeit)

- a) Short description of the measure: This form of support is designed for employers who have been adversely affected by the extraordinary situation or state of emergency,⁷ but have not been forced to shut down. Being adversely affected means that they recorded a drop in revenue of at least 20%. The drop in revenue could be determined on the basis of comparison with the same month of the previous year, or with the average revenue in the previous year. For claimants who performed their business only part of the year, there are some other specific options. Employers can choose to claim wage compensation in two forms – as a percentage of an employee's average gross salary or as a fixed sum, based on the reduction in their revenue. They may cover the remaining part of the salary, if they want to supplement the state support in order to increase the salaries of workers who cannot work.
- b) Category: Conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure was first approved in April 2020 and its validity has been repeatedly extended. It is still in force at the time of writing.
- d) Range, duration and conditionality: **First option:** Initially, wage compensation of up to 80% of an employee's average gross salary (with a cap of EUR 880 per month) for each employee who could not work. The design changed in October 2020, so that wage compensation was set at 80% of monthly labour costs (with a cap of EUR 1,100 per month). **Second option:** A fixed sum based on the reduction in the employer's revenue, ranging from EUR 180 (for a drop in revenue of 20–39.99%) up to 80% of an employee's average gross salary. The design changed in October 2020, and the fixed sums increased.
- e) Targeted population: Employers, self-employed persons and their employees. The measure applies only to employees in a regular employment relationship. That means that the measure does not cover workers on work agreements (outside of an employment relationship).
- f) Beneficiaries: Within the scheme, there are two measures/options for employers and self-employed persons with employees.
First option: Wage compensation of up to 80% of an employee's average gross salary (since October 2020, 80% of monthly labour costs). This was applied to 68,195 employees in March 2020. It represented 3.4% of all employees in a given month. If we look at the package as a whole, beneficiaries represented 18% of all persons who benefited from the 'First aid' package and 21% of employees covered by the scheme. In November 2020, the size of the category decreased in absolute numbers. In relative terms, it represented 21% of all beneficiaries and 30% of beneficiary-employees.
Second option: A fixed sum, based on the reduction in revenue. This was the more frequently used option within the 'First aid' package. In March 2020, 9% of employees in Slovakia received the fixed sum. It represented half of everybody who benefited from the package and 58% of employees covered by the package. In November, this option was applied to 68% of all employees included in the package 'First aid plus'.
- g) Novelty: This is a new measure.

⁷ An extraordinary situation was declared in Slovakia on 11 March 2020. A state of emergency was declared in October 2020 and then repeatedly extended. Before October 2020, the state of emergency applied only to the health sector.

2.2.3 Odklad a odpustenie odvodov zamestnávateľom (Deferral and waiver of social contributions paid by employers)

- a) Short description of the measure: Employers and self-employed persons with mandatory sickness and pension insurance are allowed to defer payment of social contributions, provided they are faced with a fall-off in revenue of more than 40%. Employers who were forced to shut down by decision of the SPHA for more than 15 days did not have to pay any social contributions in April 2020.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: Employers and self-employed persons could defer payment from March 2020 to December 2020. The period was later extended to 30 June 2021. Waiver of social contribution payments was possible only in April 2020.
- d) Amount and duration/Range, duration and conditionality: not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: Employers (including public sector organisations) and self-employed persons.
- f) Beneficiaries: Data on the use of the measures cover the period between March 2020 and July 2020 (Table 2). The share of employers who claimed for deferral of social contributions ranged from 3.7% in March 2020 to 0.5% in July 2020. Among self-employed persons, the percentage ranged from 2.8% in March 2020 to 0.4% in July 2020.
In April 2020, 12% of employers and 8% of self-employed persons applied for waiver of social contributions.
- g) Novelty: New measures.

Table 2: Employers and self-employed persons (without employees) who benefited from deferral and waiver of social contributions (March–July 2020)

| | Employers | | Self-employed persons (without employees) | |
|-----------------------|-----------|---------------------|---|--------------------------|
| | Number | % of all employers* | Number | % of all self-employed** |
| March 2020 (deferral) | 6,918 | 3.7 | 6,010 | 2.8 |
| April 2020 (waiver) | 21,901 | 11.7 | 17,049 | 8.0 |
| May 2020 (deferral) | 3,690 | 2.0 | 2,891 | 1.4 |
| June 2020 (deferral) | 1,449 | 0.8 | 1,309 | 0.6 |
| July 2020 (deferral) | 952 | 0.5 | 983 | 0.4 |

*Authors' calculations. Total number of employers is estimated by the monthly average number for the first 10 months of 2020.⁸

**Authors' calculations. Total number of self-employed persons refers to self-employed persons registered with the Social Insurance Agency.

Source: Inštitút sociálnej politiky (2021).

2.3 Measures related to sickness benefits and sick pay

2.3.1 Pandemické nemocenské (Pandemic sickness benefit)

- a) Short description of the measure: *Pandemic sickness benefit* is granted to working persons who are unable to work due to COVID-19 and who have to quarantine. The benefit amounts to 55% of gross daily earnings, representing approximately 70% of

⁸ <https://www.opoistenie.sk/legislativa/slovenska-legislativa/pocet-zamestnavatelov-i-zamestnancov-mierne-stupol-aj-v-oktobri/c:19766/>

the net wage. It is paid during the period of work incapacity due to COVID-19, confirmed by a physician.⁹ It is paid by the Social Insurance Agency, following an electronic application submitted by the physician (persons with a diagnosis of COVID-19 have to contact their physician by phone or email).

Pandemic sickness benefit builds on standard sickness benefit, in the sense that it provides wage compensation during the sickness. However, the standard *sickness benefit* is granted on sickness-related grounds other than COVID-19, and its role differs from that of the pandemic sickness benefit. Working persons who are unable to work due to sickness are entitled to sick leave, which is paid by their employer for the first 10 days at two different levels (25% of the gross wage for the first 3 days and 55% of the gross wage for the remaining 7 days). The standard sickness benefit is granted after 10 days of sick leave at the level of 55% of the gross wage, and is paid by the Social Insurance Agency.

- b) Category: Conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure was introduced at beginning of the pandemic crisis (March 2020) and is still in force at the time of writing.
- d) Range, duration and conditionality: Pandemic sickness benefit amounts to 55% of gross daily earnings, representing approximately 70% of the net wage. It is paid during the period of work incapacity due to COVID-19, confirmed by a physician.
- e) Targeted population: Working persons, the self-employed and voluntarily insured persons covered by sickness insurance. To be entitled to pandemic sickness benefit, a person has to have made sickness insurance contributions for at least 270 days in the previous 2 years.
- f) Beneficiaries: Based on the data available, the evolution of pandemic sickness benefit payments is captured by comparing the number of standard sickness benefits paid in 2019 and pandemic sickness benefit in 2020 (see Table 3, second column). Since April 2020,¹⁰ there has been a significant year-on-year increase in the number of pandemic benefits paid. In the summer and autumn months the growth slowed.
- g) Novelty: Pandemic sickness benefit represents an adjustment of an existing measure. Unlike standard sickness benefit, it is granted by the Social Insurance Agency from the first day of temporary work incapacity caused by COVID-19 and confirmed by a physician.

Table 3: Year-on-year change (2019–2020) in the number of pandemic benefits paid (%)

| | Pandemic sickness benefit (2019–2020 change) | Pandemic benefit for care of a sick relative (2019–2020 change) |
|--------|---|---|
| March | -7.5% | -1.8% |
| April | 34.8% | 412.5% |
| May | 61.3% | 976.7% |
| June | 27.4% | 878.3% |
| July | 9.4% | 332.3% |
| August | 14.0% | 153.3% |

⁹ The benefit applies only to workers confirmed as COVID-19 positive. It is not open to workers unable to work because of mandatory quarantine related to COVID-19, but who have not (yet) tested positive for the virus.

¹⁰ The first COVID-19 case in Slovakia was confirmed in February 2020.

| | | |
|-----------|-------|--------|
| September | 12.5% | 136.6% |
| October | 8.6% | 23.9% |
| November | 44.0% | 43.6% |
| December | 91.2% | 39.9% |

Source: *Inštitút sociálnej politiky (2021)*.

2.3.2 Odpustenie platby náhrady mzdy chorým zamestnancom zo strany zamestnávateľa (Waving of employers' obligation to pay wage compensation during an employee's sick leave)

- a) Short description of the measure: This measure is directly associated with the previous one (Section 2.3.1). Taking into account the worsening economic situation, an employer's obligation to pay for sick leave related to COVID-19 was abolished and replaced by payments from the Social Insurance Agency. As mentioned in Section 2.3.1, working persons with a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19 have been entitled to pandemic sickness benefit since March 2020, paid from the public sickness insurance scheme.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure was introduced at beginning of the pandemic crisis (March 2020) and is still in force at the time of writing.
- d) Amount and duration/Range, duration and conditionality
- e) Targeted population: Employers represent the target population.
- f) Beneficiaries: Data not available.
- g) Novelty: This is a new measure.

2.4 Measures related to health insurance

2.4.1 Rozšírenie rozsahu zdravotnej starostlivosti (Extension of the scope of healthcare)

- a) Short description of the measure: At the onset of the crisis, diagnostic tests for COVID-19 became available for people covered by health insurance, with funding from health insurance. In addition to the PCR tests, rapid antibody tests were employed for mass testing in autumn 2020 and January 2021. As of February 2021, only two PCR tests per month are covered by health insurance. Antibody tests are available free of charge without any limit.

Vaccination of the population started in December 2020. As of the end of February 2021, 315,779 persons had had their first vaccination, representing approximately 5.8% of the total population.

- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The diagnostic tests have been provided since March 2020.
- d) Amount and duration/Range, duration and conditionality: not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: People covered by health insurance. Slovakia has near-universal coverage of healthcare costs for a core set of services (approximately 95% of the population).¹¹
- f) Beneficiaries: The number of PCR tests conducted varies significantly from month to month and day to day. Furthermore, it is not possible to identify the exact number of

¹¹ OECD (2020).

beneficiaries of PCR tests funded from health insurance, since official statistics only provide aggregate numbers, without drawing a distinction between PCR tests funded by health insurance and PCR tests paid by clients themselves.

- g) Novelty: The extension of the scope of healthcare is a novel measure.

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

2.5.1 SOS dotácia (SOS subsidy)

- a) Short description of the measure: The SOS subsidy was introduced in April 2020, in order to provide support to people who find themselves without income during the pandemic. The subsidy is intended for persons who have ceased to perform a job or to run a business during the pandemic,¹² and who find themselves without any income and without entitlement to any other benefits. It is also granted to individuals with non-standard work arrangements (not in a regular employment relationship) who cannot do their jobs because of the measures adopted by the government. To be entitled to the SOS subsidy, a person must have no entitlement to social benefits, including old-age and disability pension, sickness benefit, nursing benefit, parental benefit, unemployment benefit or minimum income benefit. He or she cannot receive support from the 'First aid' package (Section 2.2).
- b) Category: Flat benefit.
- c) Timing: The SOS subsidy was launched in April 2020 and is still in force at the time of writing.
- d) Amount and duration of benefit/support measure: The monthly subsidy of EUR 210 was provided between March and September 2020.¹³ Since October 2020, the subsidy has been increased to EUR 300 per month.
- e) Targeted population: The subsidy is targeted at employees and the self-employed. All work contracts are included in the scheme.
- f) Beneficiaries: Between March 2020 and January 2021, almost 80,000 persons were supported through this scheme.¹⁴
- g) Novelty: The SOS subsidy represents an extraordinary support. It is the result of an adjustment to the existing scheme (i.e. adjustment of the standard subsidy for support of humanitarian aid) and a novel approach (the repeated provision of a subsidy that was originally designed as a one-off measure).

2.6 Measures related to housing support

2.6.1 Ochrana nájomcov (Protection of tenants)

- a) Short description of the measure: Protection of tenants was enhanced by introducing a ban on terminating a tenancy agreement due to arrears caused by the pandemic. The measure was aimed at natural persons, as well as legal persons (self-employed/entrepreneurs). Tenants had to declare that the arrears were related to the pandemic. Those arrears that could be taken into account included arrears on rent,

¹² The subsidy is provided within the MOLSAF subsidy scheme aimed at support for humanitarian aid during the declared extraordinary situation or state of emergency.

¹³ The measure was launched in April 2020 (see Section 2.5.1), but the benefit was provided retrospectively for March 2020.

¹⁴ <https://www.teraz.sk/najnovsie/mpsvr-v-ramci-projektu-prva-pomoc-bol/527568-clanok.html>

utility bills, waste management, payments for public media services and other related services. The measure does not suspend people's duty to pay their financial obligations.

- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: This measure was applied to arrears that arose during the period between April and June 2020. The ban on terminating tenancy agreements was valid until the end of 2020.
- d) Amount and duration/Range, duration and conditionality: not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: The target population included physical persons/households and entrepreneurs.
- f) Beneficiaries: Data not available.
- g) Novelty: This was a novel measure in the social protection system, but limited in time.

2.6.2 Zvýšená podpora služieb pre ľudí bez domova (Increased support to social services for homeless people)

- a) Short description of the measure: Increased support to social services for homeless people was delivered at the central and the local level. At the central level, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (MOLSAF) supported services for homeless people through specific measures and more general measures targeted at all social services (described in Section 2.8).

In addition to the general humanitarian grants (Section 2.8), the MOLSAF increased the financial subsidy for night shelters during the pandemic. In order to stabilise their economic situation amid growing costs related to prevention and the need for clients to quarantine, night shelters were also exempted from the obligation to return unused funds (the funds for places in the facilities that were not filled). The total volume of the funds that the night shelters did not need to pay back to the MOLSAF was EUR 1,100,000 (for the period March 2020 to October 2020).¹⁵

Night shelters were also allowed to extend their operating hours, in order to give sufficient time to provide adequate care for the clients.

At the local level, municipalities increased their engagement in providing social services for homeless people. This was particularly relevant for the larger cities. For example, Bratislava – the capital city – established a local quarantine 'town' for homeless people with a diagnosis of COVID-19, thus extending the capacities provided by non-governmental organisations.

- b) Category: Flat benefit.
- c) Timing: The MOLSAF implemented its measure in autumn 2020. The measures taken by municipalities were implemented successively, depending on how the situation developed.
- d) Amount and duration: The subsidy per bed in night shelters was increased by EUR 30 per month. Night shelters were exempted from the obligation to return unused funds.
- e) Targeted population: Providers of social services for homeless people and homeless people themselves. There are 53 registered night shelters in Slovakia, run by public and private providers. They provide 1,264 places.
- f) Beneficiaries: Data not available.
- g) Novelty: The measures taken by the MOLSAF and municipalities represent an adjustment to existing measures (existing financial subsidy for night shelters).

¹⁵ <https://www.employment.gov.sk/sk/informacie-media/aktuality/pomahame-noclaharnam-zariadeniam-ludi-bez-domova.html>

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

2.7.1 *Pandemické ošetrovné (Pandemic benefit for the care of a sick relative)*

- a) Short description of the measure: The so-called *pandemic benefit for care of a sick relative* was one of the first measures taken by the government at the onset of the pandemic. It targets parents who have to stay at home and care for their children under the age of 12 for the following reasons:
- closure of schools and pre-school facilities;
 - quarantine of child; or
 - quarantine or illness of the person who regularly cares for the child.

The pandemic benefit is also granted to parents who care for a sick child under the age of 16 and to parents who provide full-time care for a child and whose entitlement to parental benefit has expired. Persons who care for relatives at home due to the closure of a social service facility are also entitled to the benefit.

Although paid at the same level as the standard benefit for the care of a sick relative (55% of gross daily earnings), the pandemic benefit is paid for longer, covering the whole period during which schools and social service facilities are closed.¹⁶ Persons are entitled to the benefit from the first day they stay at home with the child or relative. The administrative burden is reduced by the possibility of applying electronically via the website of the Social Insurance Agency.

- b) Category: Conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The measure came into force at the end of March 2020 and is still in force at the time of writing.
- d) Range, duration and conditionality: The benefit amounts to 55% of gross daily earnings. It is paid for the whole time during which schools and social service facilities are closed.
- e) Targeted population: Employees (including non-standard workers) and self-employed persons.
- f) Beneficiaries: The number of pandemic benefits paid out grew markedly in 2020, compared to the number of standard benefits for the care of a sick relative in the previous year (Table 3, last column). In particular, the onset of the pandemic brought the highest year-on-year increase. A slowdown in the increase in the autumn was a result of the start of the school year. In general, the huge year-on-year increase in the number of beneficiaries might also be associated with the small number of recipients in 2019.
- g) Novelty: it represents an adjustment of the existing benefit.

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

2.8.1 *Finančná podpora poskytovateľov sociálnych služieb (Financial support for social services providers)*

- a) Short description of the measure: From the start of the pandemic crisis, social services providers could claim a grant designed to support humanitarian aid, up to EUR 15,000 per year. These funds could be used to purchase personal protective equipment, vitamins and supplements for clients, to provide accommodation for staff, and to

¹⁶ Standard benefit for care of a sick relative is granted for a period of 10 days.

remunerate people working in an infectious environment. In October 2020, the maximum limit of the grant was abolished, allowing social services providers to claim for greater funding.

- b) Category: Flat benefit.
- c) Timing: Financial grants have been available since the beginning of the pandemic crisis (April 2020).
- d) Amount and duration: Up to EUR 15,000 per year in 2020. For 2021, the limit was abolished.
- e) Targeted population: Providers of social services (legal persons) and, indirectly, employees and clients in the social services facilities. In 2020, 7,726 providers of social services were registered with the MOLSAF. However, not all of them provided social services in the kind of facilities that the support focuses on. Information on the number of providers running the social services facilities is not available for 2020. In 2019, there were 745 providers with 'crisis intervention services' and 3,387 providers with institutional social services for the elderly, disabled and persons in poor health.¹⁷
- f) Beneficiaries: In 2020, the grant was provided to 199 social service providers, i.e. 2.8% of the total number of registered providers. Taking into account only entities that provide social services in facilities, the share of providers that received support was 4.8%. In 2021, at the time of writing there have been 136 grants approved.¹⁸
- g) Novelty: This is an extension of an existing measure, as grants in support of humanitarian aid are among the standard instruments of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family.

2.8.2 Odklad splátok hypoték (Deferral of mortgage payments)

- a) Short description of the measure: Deferral of mortgage payments was introduced with the aim of protecting households from the consequences of loss of income. The payment obligation was postponed for up to 9 months. Deferral could be requested only once and the process was free of charge. Banks warned clients that a payment holiday could increase the overall cost of the loan, as interest continued to be charged on the loan.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Amount and duration/Range, duration and conditionality: not applicable.
- d) Timing: The measure was launched in April 2020 and will be in force for as long as the emergency measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are in force.
- e) Targeted population: Mortgage debtors, with the exception of defaulters with mortgage arrears of more than 30 days, who are not eligible. There is no information on the number of mortgage payers in Slovakia.
- f) Beneficiaries: Data on the use of the measure are not available yet.
- g) Novelty: This is a novel measure.

¹⁷ Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (2020).

¹⁸ Data from the website of the MOLSAF: www.employment.gov.sk

3 Social protection and inclusion responses to the crisis: overall assessment and possible gaps

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 a section (3.4) on debates and recommendations.

3.1 Expected cost of social protection and inclusion measures

As data on the expected costs of the main new measures have not been published, we present information on the actual spending.

In general, the packages 'First aid' and 'First aid plus' represent the main platform of the anti-COVID-19 socio-economic policies. Up to 11 February 2021, the amount spent on these (1% of 2019 GDP) was EUR 968 million, covering the period between March 2020 and January 2021.¹⁹

Expenditure on the first measure in the packages – support for employers who have been forced to shut down by decision of the Slovak Public Health Authority (Section 2.2.1) – was EUR 63.9 million (0.07% of 2019 GDP). In all, 165,000 persons were supported through this scheme.

Expenditure on short-time working (Section 2.2.2) was almost EUR 700 million. The scheme includes two measures. Support depending on the extent of the drop in revenue was the more frequent measure and had the greater expenditure: EUR 480 million (0.5% of 2019 GDP) was spent on 1.6 million employees. The other measure – support through wage compensation of up to 80% of an employee's average gross salary (or since October 2020 up to 80% of total labour costs) – had cost EUR 213 million (0.2% of 2019 GDP), covering 712,669 employees.

Expenditure on the SOS subsidy amounted to EUR 20 million (0.02% of 2019 GDP); it had helped almost 82,000 persons who had lost their income during the pandemic and had no other sources of income.

In addition to the 'First aid' and 'First aid plus' packages, several other measures were implemented. The costs of pandemic sickness benefit reached almost EUR 500 million in the period from March 2020 to December 2020 (0.5% of 2019 GDP). Pandemic benefit for the care of a sick relative cost almost EUR 152 million in the same period (0.2% of 2019 GDP).

The total costs of the deferment and (one-off) waiver of the social contributions of employers were approximately EUR 118 million in the period from March 2020 to July 2020 (0.1% of 2019 GDP).

Data on expenditure related to other measures mentioned in the report are not available. This also applies to expenditure on the extension of the period of unemployment benefit receipt. Only aggregate statistics on the total expenditure on unemployment benefit are available, without any distinction between expenditure on the standard benefit and on its extension.

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

Of all social inclusion and social protection measures implemented during the pandemic, the short-time work scheme supporting job retention – *Kurzarbeit* – may contribute to the

¹⁹ <https://www.teraz.sk/najnovsie/mpsvr-v-ramci-projektu-prva-pomoc-bol/527568-clanok.html>

reshaping of the social protection system and social policies. The government plans to establish it as a permanent instrument.²⁰ As of February 2021, the MOLSAF has prepared a draft law and submitted it for public consultation.

According to the draft legislation, *Kurzarbeit* will be applied in unavoidable emergency situations that adversely affect employers. The condition for claiming support from the *Kurzarbeit* scheme will be if the employer cannot assign work to at least one third of the employees and if the reduction in work represents more than 10% of weekly hours. In this case, employers will be entitled to financial support covering 60% of an employee's average net hourly wage. It is expected that 20% of the wage will be covered by the employer. As result, the employee will receive 80% of the net wage. Employers will have to maintain the jobs for 2 months after the support expires.

In order to fund the *Kurzarbeit* scheme, a new specific insurance fund (provisionally called the employment fund) will be established by the Social Insurance Agency. According to the draft legislation, employers will pay 0.5% of the assessment base of employees (daily gross earnings). This new social contribution will be compensated for by a reduction in employer contributions to the unemployment insurance fund of 0.5% of the assessment base.

In addition to the *Kurzarbeit* scheme, the SOS subsidy represents a novel measure that will probably permanently augment the social protection system toolkit, if the reference in the government's Programme Manifesto in 2020 is any guide. The question remains of how it will be combined with the existing minimum income scheme.

The crisis has also brought increased support for social services. This is a positive step, as the financing of social services (and its sustainability) has for decades been one of the main problems of social policy. The question remains whether and how this increased support will change the system of financing of social services in the future.

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

The set of measures implemented to tackle the pandemic crisis includes several new measures. It is thought that almost all of them will be only temporary solutions, to be scrapped after the end of the crisis. Consequently, some of the weaknesses of the social protection system and social inclusion policies will persist: short duration of unemployment benefit, inadequate minimum income scheme, the low enrolment rate of poor children in pre-school education and their poor results once they start compulsory schooling.

Single-parent households form the group that has been hardest hit by the crisis and by gaps in the social protection and social inclusion policies. Although there is only episodic evidence,²¹ it would seem that the combination of the need to stay at home with children due to the schools being closed, loss of income/revenue and inadequate support renders this category very vulnerable. This was confirmed by the president of the Slovak Republic, who initiated a meeting with the representatives of those people who are not covered by any of the measures and have suffered a loss of income.²²

3.4 Debates and recommendations

Since the onset of the pandemic and the launch of the support measures in the field of social protection and social inclusion, experts and social partners have questioned two aspects of the measures: the overall low volume of the financial resources devoted to the

²⁰ <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22453606/turning-kurzarbeit-into-a-permanent-labour-market-instrument.html>

²¹ <https://dennikn.sk/2275200/zhanaju-peniaze-na-jedlo-najom-aj-na-notebooky-pre-deti-rodiny-osamelych-rodicov-sa-pocas-pandemie-prepadaju-do-chudoby/>

²² <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/1198544/mnohe-treba-vylepsit-caputova-privitala-ludi-ktori-prepadli-systemom.html>

support and the lack of coverage of some categories of employees/employers/self-employed at risk (Gerbery, 2020).

In an open letter to the government (*Slovak Spectator*, 2020), top Slovak economists argued that in April 2020 aid provision was too slow and its volume too low. Some experts have argued that the government's assistance has been less generous, more limited in scope and slower than in other countries (*Centrum pre verejnú politiku*, 2020). Representatives of the business sector have pointed out that some of the measures adopted have been not only inadequate, but also administratively demanding. The results of an opinion poll among the self-employed and entrepreneurs confirmed that these objections were widely shared (*Denník N*, 2020).

In the second half of 2020, attention was paid to the fact that some sectors needed more support, including restaurants, tourism, the culture sector and the arts.

The delay in support for employers, the self-employed with employees and people without any income are among the most frequently discussed problems of pandemic-related policies. This delay caused serious difficulties and created instability and uncertainty among companies and people at social risk.

The consequences of the pandemic and the policy responses have been discussed publicly, in particular in relation to poverty. The media have provided a lot of anecdotal evidence about the impact of the pandemic on various categories of people, helping experts to understand the ways in which the pandemic affects socio-economic conditions. Among the various forms of poverty, attention was also paid to energy poverty. NGOs warned that anti-pandemic measures, including lockdown and the closure of schools, led to increased energy consumption, placing at risk households on low incomes and households living in dwellings with low energy efficiency.²³ However, there has been no empirical estimate of the risk of energy poverty. NGOs have also pointed out that, while employers have been helped with the cost of energy during the pandemic (through support schemes for businesses), the energy consumption of households has not been addressed by public policy. Furthermore, issues of increasing indebtedness and the living conditions of single-parent families and of families living in socially excluded communities have also been raised as part of the public discourse.

²³ <https://euractiv.sk/section/energetika/opinion/energeticka-chudoba-pocas-pandemie-covid-19/>

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