

Working time and absences – results of 2021 renewal

Introduction

In this paper, some comparison between countries will be made according to the time series of working time in its different dimensions.

The renewal of 2021 refers to a new legislation of the LFS and its more precisely prescribed content, regarding here working time variables.

As a case, Finland has been taken out knowing that traditionally, absences from work have been at the higher level and working time one of lowest among countries.

A short history of the harmonization

Somewhere around 2012-2013, Eurostat decided to set up a task force on the measurement of working time and absences, in addition to the task force of harmonization of measurement of employment and unemployment. The adjustment of the measurement of absences and working time was a part of the larger overall revision of the core LFS.

The term of office of the working time TF lasted eventually 2013 to 2015 with several meetings and test periods. The analyses showed that in many Member States there is a substantial under-reporting by respondents of their absences, which leads to limitations regarding the international comparability of estimates on hours actually worked. Thus, the main point of the TF was to reach a comparable measurement for actual worked hours.

In the end, TF proposed certain variables – and LAMAS WG agreed – for the working time module. The most of them weren't new, and accordingly, the concept of the working time in its different forms were basically still the same. Explanatory notes and the model questionnaire were still renewed.

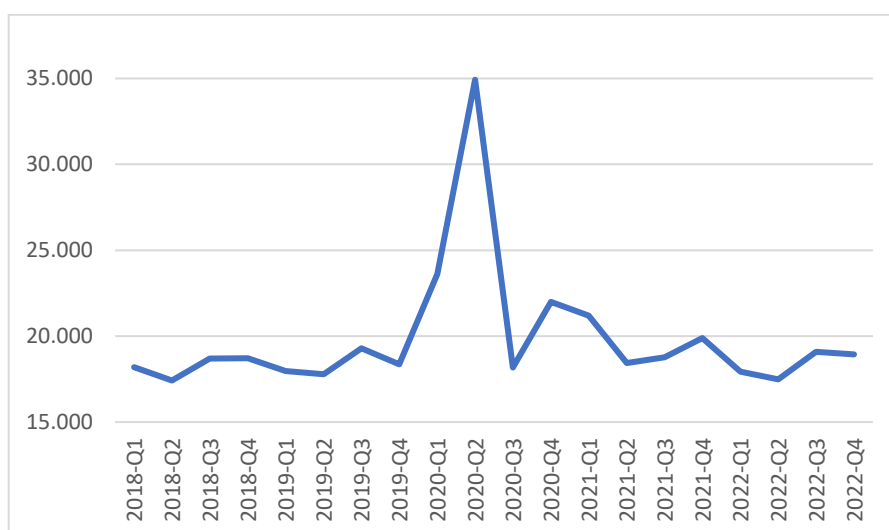
As a result of the TF, variables for weekly hours were proposed to be contractual hours (new), usual hours, absences (3), extra hours and actual hours. It was new that absences and their reason were divided into three variables, when before there was one variable (NOWKREAS) where all the reasons were listed. Furthermore, overtime variables had been divided between paid and unpaid overtime variables, which was now proposed to be one variable (EXTRAHRS), because of the difficulties of knowing which is paid and not paid overtime.

Also, the number of hours were now expected to give at the accuracy of a half an hour.

The results of absences

As the TF pointed out absences as a source of incompatibility between countries, it is interesting to see how results have developed after 2021. In a figure 1, we see quarterly data of EU-27 total absences from work. The unit is the number of employed persons being absent from work.

Figure 1: Total absences from work, seasonally adjusted series, 20-64-years old, employed in thousands.

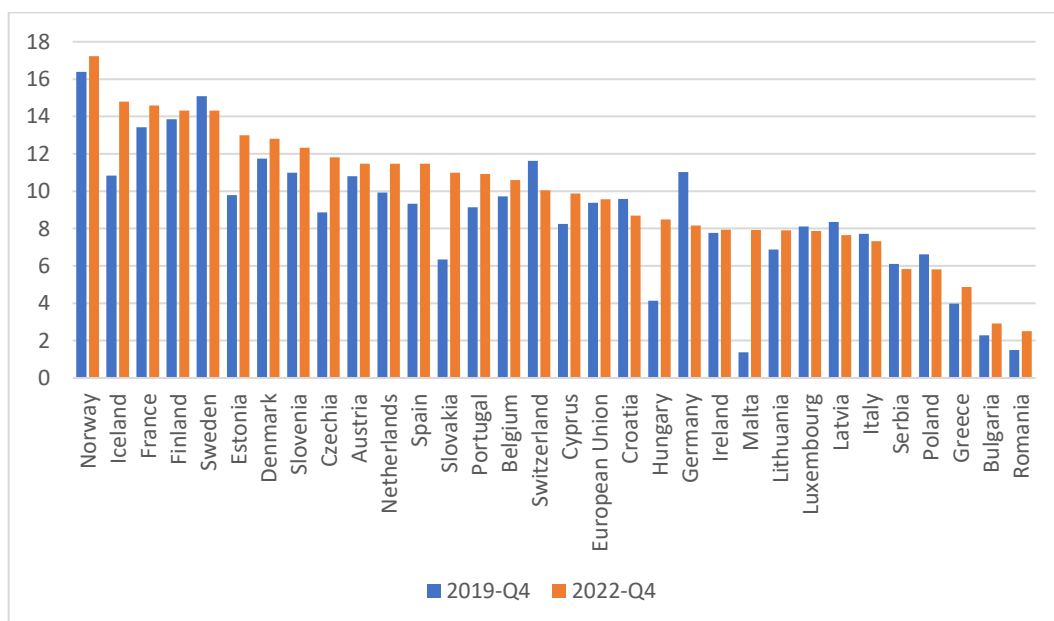


It is obvious that a peak in the figure comes from the COVID-19 measurements: they caused a tremendous increase in absences from work. Otherwise, it is a little bit difficult to interpret the significance of COVID-19 for absences during the longer period. Anyway, we can be quite sure that the corona virus does not impact at the second half of 2022 to work absences anymore.

Taken account this, we hardly can see differences between time before and after the renewal of the LFS in absences. They seem to be at the same level e.g., in 2018 as 2022.

Taken account that results could be quite different in each country than in the EU-level, it is reasonable to have a look at by Member States. To filter out COVID-19 impact, the last quarter of 2022 is taken and respectively, Q4/2019. Absences are here counted as a percentage of employed persons of a country.

Figure 2: Percent of employed persons absent from work 2019/Q4 and 2022/Q4, employed persons/total absences, 15–64-year-olds.



As a result, in many countries the change is remarkable – for both directions. The increase of absences is quite essential at least in Iceland, Estonia, Czechia, Spain, Slovakia, Portugal, Hungary, Malta. However, e.g., Germany, gives a result of

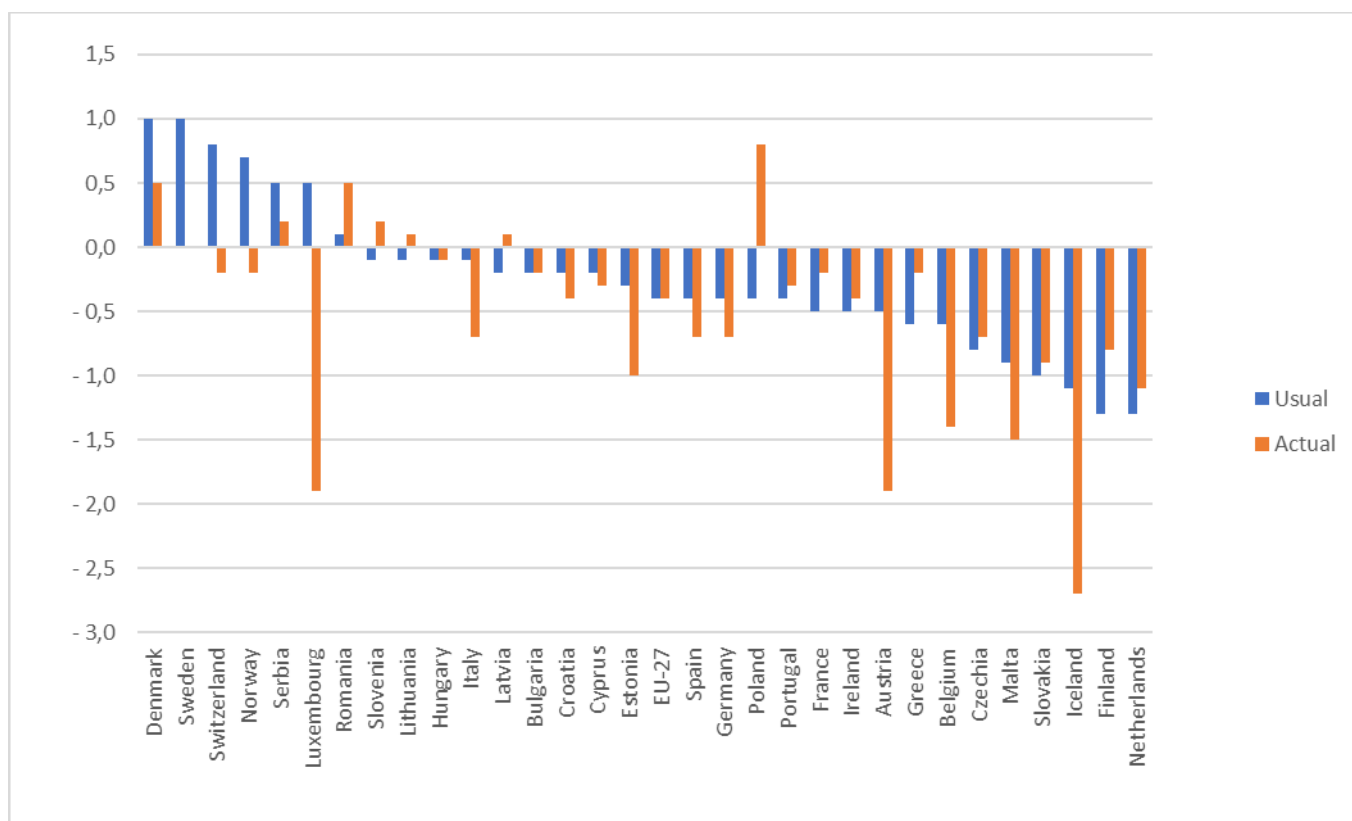
decreasing percentage of absences. Thus, the average of the European Union does not change more than a little.

Absences are still quite usual as they were before the renewal in Scandinavian countries and France, also in Estonia now, and in addition, in Slovenia over 12% of employed persons. On the other corner of the figure, employed in Romania, Bulgaria and Greece are the most less away from work, though, the share of absentees is higher in 2022/Q4 than 2018/Q4.

Usual and actual working hours

Then, we should ask, how is the working week in participating countries, is it now shorter than before. To get all in one figure, we compare here directly the difference between two years, 2019/2021, in both working time concepts. The restriction has been made that figures are only for full-time employed.

Figure 3: Usual and actual working hours: difference between 2019/2021, hours, full-time employed person, 15-64-years-old.



Results are rather interesting. Taken the first European Union, we see that hours have decreased the same, namely 0.4 per week.

Again, changes in countries differs from each other. The box below shows how countries can be grouped according to the changes. In Lithuania and Hungary, the changes are so little that they are not mentioned in the box. Furthermore, changes in Slovakia and Latvia are small but however, they are noted in the box.

	Usual +	Usual –
Actual +	Denmark, Serbia, Romania, Slovenia	Slovenia, Latvia, Poland
Actual -	Switzerland, Norway, Luxemburg,	Italy, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Spain, Germany, Portugal, France, Ireland, Austria, Greece, Belgium, Czechia, Malta, Slovakia, Iceland, Finland, Netherlands

EU average of working week and below

To take an example of one country, namely Finland we will firstly produce here some comparisons and then possible reasons for a working week which is below the EU average. Usual hours of full-time employed persons are the lowest in Finland (figure 4), but actual hours (figure 5) are even lower in Norway. As we saw before, the number of absences is clearly highest in Norway.

Figure 4: Usual hours (full-time) 2021, 15-64-years-old, EU average and below.

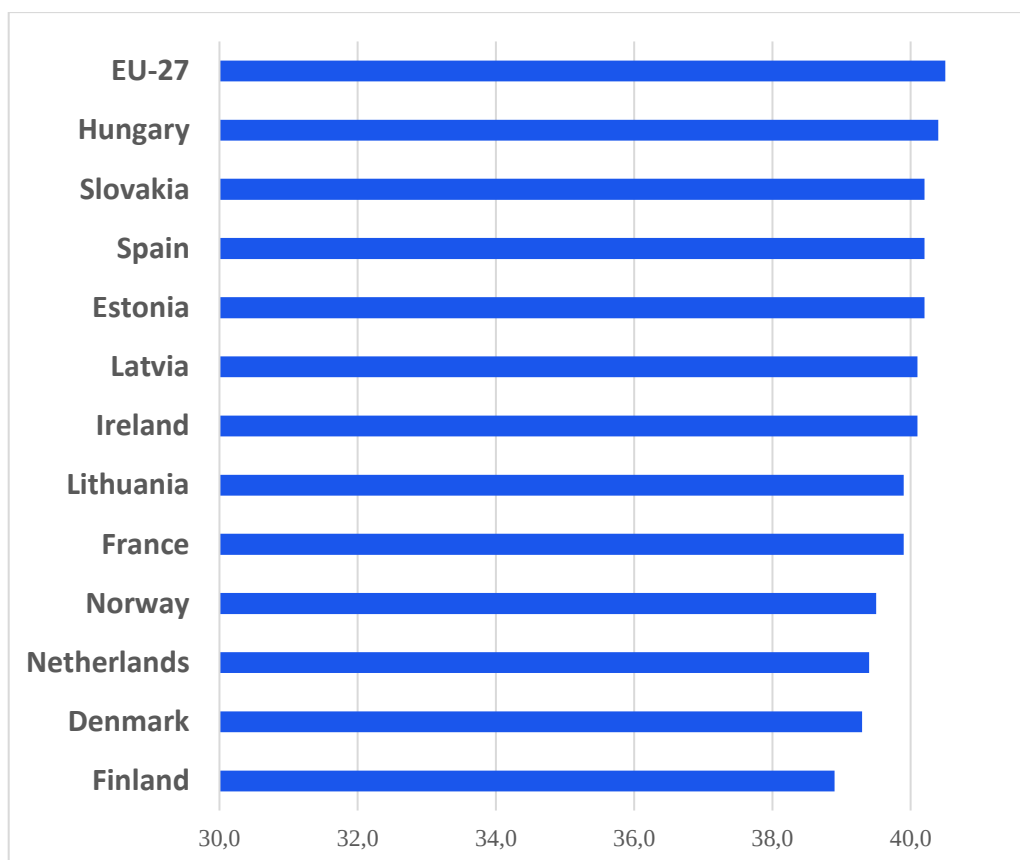
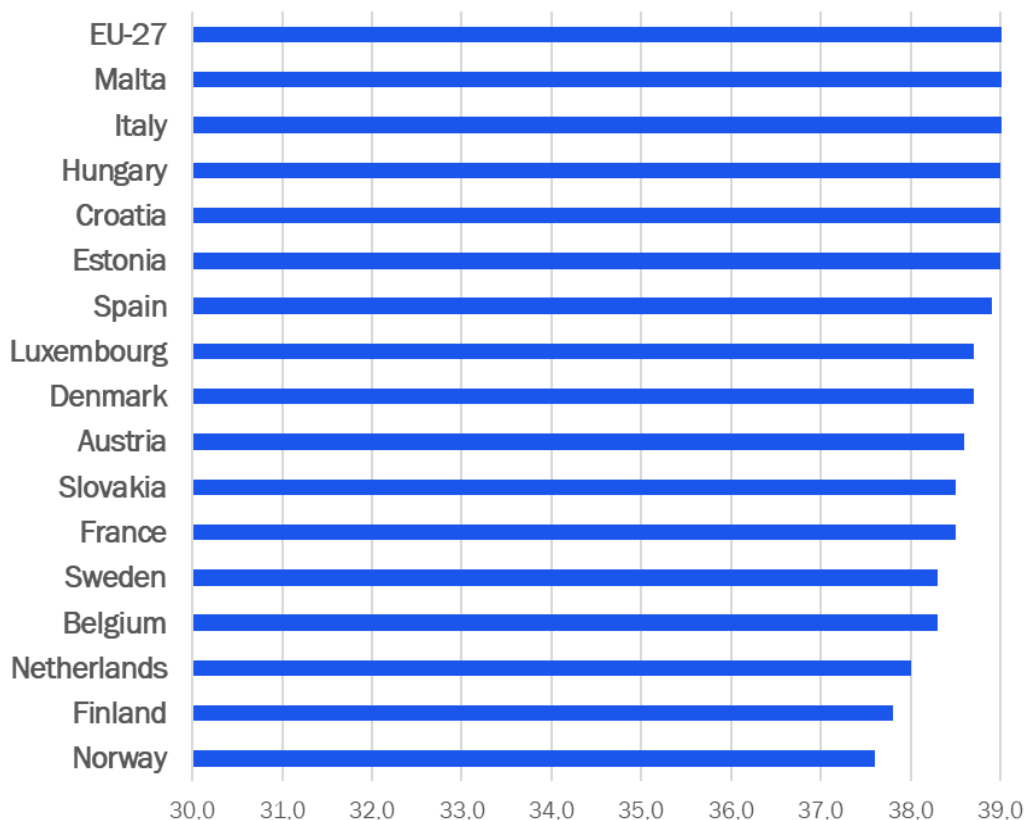


Figure 5: Actual hours (full-time) 2021, 15-64-years-old, EU average and below.



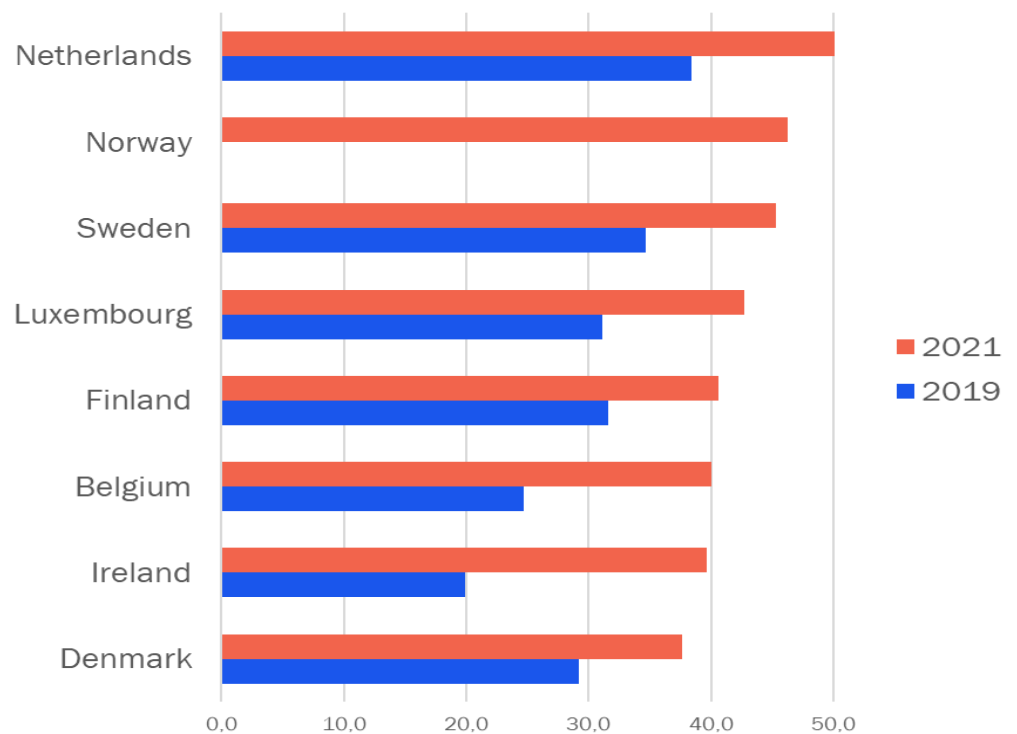
Possible reasons for shortened working hours in Finland

Knowing that working week in Finland has been clearly below the average already before the renewal, and still shortened in 2021-2022, we could propose some reasons for the development:

- Mixed mode data collection (from 2021): lower hours at web questionnaire. However, that does not pass analysis made by some regression model.
- Remembering of *contract type* (national variable) and contractual hours may have some effect, at least it gives a more precise bottom to evaluate even worked hours
- Working at home (see below).
- Part time working has increased; however, average number of hours has decreased among full-time workers too.
- Other, unknown factors.

Speaking about working at home (teleworking), the share of employed persons has definitively increased in the most countries, Netherlands being at the top (Figure 6). Comparing countries where working at home is general, it seems that we can propose that working home may even have caused shorter working time rather than longer. However, this is only a quick conclusion when comparing working home and the change in working time in the same countries.

Figure 6: Working home, % of employed people, European top countries.



Conclusions

We can conclude that:

- The number of absent employed persons are at the same level in EU after the renewal when comparing time before it.
- Absences by country either dropped, rose, or remained the same after the 2021 reform, no uniform line in results.
- Though at the EU level both in usual and actual weekly hours there is the same change (-0.4), results are quite heterogenous between countries.
- In Finland, it is very difficult to totally exclude possible mode effect, CAWI is perhaps giving more correct results because it does not include social desirability bias.
- In Finland, worked hours decreased plausibly for multiple reasons. The questionnaire did not change a lot and the effect of the change (if there is) cannot be traced.