

**Bleak prospects:
mapping trade union membership
in Europe since 2000**

Kurt Vandaele

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This report provides descriptive evidence of shifts in trade union membership and density at the aggregated level in 32 European countries since 2000, with a focus on the current age structure within trade unions. Substantial variation across-country in unionisation levels remains, and the least unionized countries in the 2000s have largely stayed at the bottom of the 'unionisation league' in the 2010s. Countries with a moderate to high union density have generally been able either to limit membership shrinkage, or to increase membership. Yet, overall, membership and density rates are heading downwards in most countries, and very drastically in Central and Eastern Europe.

Trade unions are not only struggling to keep membership developments in line with growing employment rates but are also 'greying'. The average age of union members is increasing and is higher than the average age of wage- and salary-earners in general. Simultaneously, while young people generally hold positive views about trade unions, they lack knowledge about them. With the loss in membership going hand in hand with a decrease in revenues, it remains to be seen to what extent and how trade unions will address the membership and generational challenges.

Key findings

- Trade union membership is slowly decreasing in the period 2000-2016, but with a slightly stronger decline in the most recent period i.e. since 2010.
- A fall in union membership occurred in 24 of the 32 European countries surveyed between the membership averages in the periods 2000-2009 and 2010-2017, with the decline averaging 13.9 per cent. Countries with a decrease above this average are: Netherlands (-14.8%), Ireland (-15.8%), Portugal (-16.5%), Greece (-17.4%), Croatia (-22.0%), Turkey (-24.9%), Lithuania (-25.4%), Bulgaria (-26.4%), Czechia (-32.1%), Latvia (-32.8%), Slovenia (-35.2%), Romania (-37.0%), Hungary (-39.6%), Estonia (-43.0%) and Slovakia (-43.7%).
- Countries with an increase in membership are Spain (+0.2%), France (+2.5%), Luxembourg (+5.4%), Belgium (+6.7%), Malta (+7.9%), Norway (+9.6%), Italy (+10.7%) and Iceland (+10.9%).



European Trade Union Institute,
2019
Kurt Vandaele
49 pages



www.etui.org/Publications



Elisa Bruno
ebruno@etui.org
etui@etui.org
+ 32 (0)2 224 05 70
5 bd du Roi Albert II
1210 Brussels
www.etui.org



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- While, on average, more than one in four wage-earners were unionised in Europe in 2000, this proportion had declined to 21.4 per cent in 2016, a drop of 6.4 percentage points. The continual decline in union density is not only the result of falling union membership, but also of higher labour market participation.
- Union density ranges from a very low 4.2 per cent in Estonia to 90.4 per cent in Iceland. Apart from Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Belgium, Malta, Cyprus, Luxembourg and Italy have a density rate above the European average; density lies below the average in 22 European countries.
- Comparing the 2000s and the period 2010-2017, it is clear that density has declined in the majority of countries. Exceptions are Iceland, Italy, Spain and France – the latter countries at low level of union density.
- The average age of a union member increased significantly in eight countries between 2006 and 2016: Belgium, Czechia, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain.
- The general pattern is that highly unionised age cohorts are leaving or retiring from the labour market, being replaced by less unionised cohorts.
- Revenue losses due to falls in membership do not automatically or necessarily incentivise unions to reorient resources and to prioritise organising strategies and the recruitment of new members. Much will depend on a trade union’s own identity and framing, its conception of membership and its degree of institutional embeddedness in the labour market and welfare state regime.

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