



MAGAZINE

**THE DESERTED CENTRE OF
BRUSSELS DURING THE
COVID-19 CRISIS**

COVID-19 HITS EUROPE

EZA-Members describe their situation.

EUROFOUND-RESEARCH

Inequalities will rise.

MINIMUM WAGES

Oxygen for EU to grow.

THE RURAL EXODUS IN EUROPE

Dangers and departures.

ISSUE 2/2020

Dear Reader,

We are back after the summer break with the second issue of our new EZA magazine. In the spring, we still had the hope of returning back to “old normality” as soon as possible after the end of the lockdown. Today we know that we’re going to have to live with the “new normality”, i.e. with the coronavirus, for a long time yet. The pandemic is having a dramatic impact on society in general and on the economy in particular, with effects that will be felt for the foreseeable future. The EZA magazine features impressions from EZA members together with a report on the latest scientific findings from EUROFOUND.

The EU and its Member States are now trying to respond to COVID 19 with a number of unprecedented measures. Initial successful results are already emerging. The Next Generation EU recovery plan is a step in the right direction. Economic recovery after corona has to be sustainable and courageous. The Member States and the EU must make future-oriented investment in a European economy that is innovative, sustainable and competitive, that creates jobs fit for people to do and boosts the social dimension of the EU.

The system has been kept up and running by many key workers often under precarious conditions. We should be grateful for all their efforts and stand up for them. One instrument for asserting fair wages consists in the European minimum wage, which is looked at in one of the chapters of the magazine. Despite all the dramatic consequences of the crisis, we should not lose sight of some of the positive aspects. The coronavirus shock is also a chance to change direction. Will we manage to take this opportunity?

The pandemic also offers EZA a chance. We have been forced to modernise, with digitisation being imposed by circumstances, something from which we at EZA have also benefited after overcoming initial difficulties. Together with our partners from Latvia, Austria, Romania, Spain and others, we have also succeeded in offering several projects in a digital or hybrid format which had originally been planned to take place as face-to-face, physical meetings. EZA education also works online! Without intending to be a full replacement for people physically attending events in person, in the uncertain times of the current pandemic this option offers opportunities which we as worker organisations should definitely not miss!

I hope you enjoy reading the magazine. Stay healthy!

Sigrid Schraml
Secretary-General



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IMPRINT

COVID-19: A CRISIS HIT EUROPE

The pandemic had a tremendous impact on the European Union. EZA member organisations give impressions of how they dealt with the coronavirus.

TEXT: Lukas Fleischmann
PHOTOS: EZA-Network

BJØRN VAN HEUSDEN, WOW, NETHERLANDS

For a relatively small country, we were hit quite badly. One of the major measures taken was to close offices, workplaces, and schools. The response by the public was positive and people reconciled themselves to the measures taken.

Personally, I managed to find a good balance between working and caring for my two children. Thankfully my job as Executive Secretary of the World Organization of Workers (WOW) allows me to work from everywhere. This has truly been a benefit. Otherwise our situation would have been quite different. For me this is very rewarding and I am grateful for that.

Whereas before the crisis I would go to the office at least three times a week I now go maybe once a week and sometimes even less than that. My network is not necessarily at the office, but instead it is spread around Europe and the world. Like many of my colleagues, what strikes me is the fact that the way we are doing things now actually works and is sometimes far more efficient than how we did things previously.



BJØRN VAN HEUSDEN, WOW, NETHERLANDS

SERGIO SILVANI, EFAL/MCL, ITALY

Distance working, continuous assistance, online training, but also solidarity and support for families. EFAL and the Christian Workers' Movement were not frightened by the economic crisis caused by COVID and rolled up their sleeves to stand by the most fragile and prevent the epidemic from becoming a further cause of disintegration in the social and economic fabric. In this way, the members of our organisations and the volunteers have started solidarity initiatives throughout the country.

In Emilia Romagna, the coronavirus resulted in more than 800 deaths in the territory of Piacenza. This made our community and the various movements and associations rediscover the true sense of generosity. Cremona and other cities in Lombardy were hit hard by the virus, where our volunteers collaborated to create a triage structure to avoid contagion in the hospital. Bergamo was one of the cities worst affected by COVID-19 in Italy, with 575% more people dying than in the same period last year and coffins being piled up in churches. Our offices were kept open all the time, implementing all the necessary precautions.

Efal in the meantime has continued all its training activities by choosing the online mode and even including some training courses specially dedicated to the coronavirus emergency. Numerous webinars gave workers of different categories an opportunity to learn all the information necessary to protect their health and perform their work in complete safety. Training and support in the area will continue to accompany the commitment of the MCL bodies also in the post-COVID phase.



HOSPITAL IN BERGAMO, APRIL 2020



JOSEPH THOUVENEL, CFTC, FRANCE

Measures to encourage employees to stay at home such as short-time work schemes are generating high costs. On this point, the CFTC takes good note of the Labour Minister Muriel Pénicaud's announcements in favour of the state taking responsibility when people are not able to work, on a broader basis than the usual minimum wage. This was one of our proposals. The CFTC is of the opinion that these periods of short-time work should be used to boost training activities, particularly distance training, i.e. training at home. This takes account of the incentive to limit groups of people meeting and is also a productive approach to the situation with benefits for the company as well as for the worker! The CFTC also subscribes to the minister's proposal to make sick leave automatic without having to see the doctor, without a waiting period, without any loss of salary and with the employer having to file all the paperwork. „If you have a child under the age of 16 and telework is not possible, you are automatically entitled to sick leave,” said Mrs Pénicaud.

The CFTC also advocates suspending application of the new unemployment insurance rules or rescheduling bank loans in the most difficult situations. Lastly, it calls for stronger state guarantees with regard to rent payments to social landlords and private individuals. Finally, the CFTC deplores the sad spectacle presented by Europe's lack of solidarity with our Italian neighbours who have been forced to rely on China for the supply of masks and breathing apparatus and ventilators.

ANTONIO M. SANTAMARÍA, HOAC, SPAIN

As workers, we have had to face the pandemic without the necessary means in many cases. The health sector has seen a high level of contagion among doctors, nurses, administration and cleaning staff in health centres, staff working in geriatric homes, staff caring for our elderly and dependent people etc. Similarly, our unions have found it very difficult to attend to our colleagues. We could not go to visit them, they could not come to our offices. Contact has been by telephone and in video conferences. We have been overwhelmed by the applications for short-time work schemes, working at almost any time of the day... and night. It is even more painful to see that many workers have not received public aid during the period they have not worked.

This situation has given us the opportunity to grow in respect to certain more human aspects, which perhaps tended to slip to the back of our minds amidst so much obsession with production and consumption: the time to stop and think, to value the small things of each day, the simple, everyday pleasures, to listen and pay attention to those around us, to bring out the most creative and artistic part that is within each of us, with a greater feeling of community, against invasive individualism.

BARBARA SURDYKOWSKA, SOLIDARNOŚĆ, POLAND

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 epidemic revealed the weakness of Poland's tripartite dialogue system. The government saw no need to talk to the social partners about comprehensive solutions to save the economy. Even worse, it has attacked the autonomy of social partners by introducing a regulation during the period of epidemic that allows the Prime Minister to recall the members of the main tripartite body - the Social Dialogue Council consisting of representatives from trade unions and employers' organizations. This met with their protests and the concerns of the ITUC, ETUC and ILO.

With regard to protecting jobs during the coronavirus crisis, the government introduced standard solutions similar to those adopted in other Member States (co-financing downtime and reducing working hours). However, there seems to be a greater focus on the self-employed than on dependent employees. As far as employees are concerned, the key issue in the current difficult situation on the labour market consists in increasing unemployment benefits, which are extremely low compared to other EU countries.



BARBARA SURDYKOWSKA,
SOLIDARNOŚĆ



MARA ERDELJ, BOFOS, SERBIA

One of the first measures was to distribute personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, disinfectants) to all employees (this has continued after the state of emergency was lifted). Some employers have made additional efforts to help employees maintain a better quality of life in a situation of concern and isolation. They have issued a short e-newsletter with useful tips on a daily basis, entitled Optimism Against Coronavirus, and an e-booklet of universal value called Guide for Employees. This shows how to adapt to the new situation caused by the coronavirus with special reference and instructions for working from home and networking. Some employers have also made it possible for employees to watch useful videos on a daily basis, e.g. how to preserve mental health in crisis situations, entitled Hygiene of the Soul by Dr. Zoran Ilić, psychiatrist and psychotherapist.

There are also some negative examples, but fortunately not from our sector. The city of Leskovac is one such bad example with the South Korean cable factory „Jura“, where the employer decided to continue working despite the outbreak of the epidemic, without reducing the number of employees or applying adequate protection measures. As a result, Leskovac is still one of the local hotspots of coronavirus in our country.

VESELIN MITOV, PODKREPA, BULGARIA

Bulgaria is a small country with an open economy that simply couldn't afford to let the virus get out of control. It also had to give due consideration to the existing capacity of the national healthcare system. And so Bulgaria reacted swiftly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. We were one of the first states in Europe to establish an Emergency Board and imposed active restriction measures to limit the spread of infections. National measures were fully in line with the recommendations and the population was kept informed about the epidemic situation on a daily basis. The fact that Bulgaria has Europe's lowest ratio of confirmed cases and third lowest ratio of deaths from this disease is an indication of how timely and good these measures have been.

Social dialogue has been successfully used to develop short-time work schemes, thereby preventing mass redundancies and allowing companies to retain staff, to ensure a prompt restart after the crisis. This is probably the reason why Bulgaria has been able to control the spread of the pandemic.



“EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS ARE EXPECTED TO AMPLIFY EXISTING INEQUALITIES”

Massimiliano Mascherini from EUROFOUND talks about the results of the “Living, Working and COVID-19” survey from August 2020.



MASSIMILIANO MASCHERINI,
RESEARCHER AT EUROFOUND

INTERVIEW: Lukas Fleischmann

PHOTOS: Eurofound

EZA: Countries in the European Union have been dramatically affected by the pandemic. What impact does the pandemic have on social policies? Can you give us some general statements about that?

Massimiliano Mascherini: According to the findings of Eurofound’s “Living, Working and COVID-19” survey, in April 2020, around 28% of employees claimed to have lost their job temporarily (23%) or permanently (5%). In the second wave of the survey in July 2020, around 11% indicated that they had lost their job permanently. As dramatic as these numbers are, the EU and its Member States have put in place several initiatives in order to prevent the economic crisis from escalating into a more dangerous social crisis. Short-time working schemes, whose effectiveness was proven during the previous crisis, have been boosted in all EU Member States. Furthermore, Eurofound has created the COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, a tool that collates information about how governments and the social partners are responding to the crisis and also gathers examples of company practices aimed at mitigating the social and economic impacts. Finally, in July 2020, EU leaders agreed on an extraordinary recovery effort: Next Generation EU (NGEU). The aim of the package is to help the EU to rebuild after the COVID-19 pandemic and to support investment in the green and digital transitions.

EZA: Speaking about inequalities: are any tendencies emerging as a result of the crisis?

Massimiliano Mascherini: While women appear to be more resilient than men to COVID 19 in terms of health outcomes, that is not the case when it comes to the economic and social fallout. The effects of the COVID-19 crisis are expected to amplify existing inequalities. In this regard, the highly sectoral nature of the economic crisis at the moment means that there is the risk of young people and women becoming the victims of this crisis. We should not forget that young people were the victims of the previous crisis, with soaring youth unemployment and a NEETs rate that rocked Europe in 2008-2013. It is very important to act promptly in order to avoid history repeating itself. In this regard, the European Commission’s “Youth Employment Support: A bridge to jobs for the next generation” package as well as the proposal to strengthen the European Youth Guarantee in July 2020 were very timely – essential to prevent unemployment rates from soaring again.

EZA: Can you be a bit more specific about gender inequalities as a result of the crisis?

„WHILE SOME OF THE GENDER-UNEQUAL IMPACTS OF THE CURRENT CRISIS MIGHT BE TEMPORARY AND COULD BE REVERSED ONCE WE HAVE FULLY EMERGED FROM LOCKDOWN, OTHERS COULD HAVE LONG-LASTING CONSEQUENCES. “

Massimiliano Mascherini: The unintended consequences of measures put in place in order to control the pandemic, such as the lockdowns, seem to have placed an additional burden on women. Women’s share of unpaid work is likely to have increased considerably, with children out of school and any older dependents in the home needing more care. Eurofound data from the “Living, Working and COVID-19” survey confirm this and show a general deterioration of work-life balance among workers in Europe, particularly women. Among parents of young children (up to and including 11 years old), the data confirm that work-life balance conflicts were troubling women more than men. For instance, almost one third of these women found it hard to concentrate on their work, compared to one sixth of men, while family responsibilities prevented more women (24%) than men (13%) from giving the time they wanted to work. But work was also impinging on family life: 32% of women in this group said that their job prevented them from giving time to their family, compared to 25% of men. While some of the gender-unequal impacts of the current crisis might be temporary and could be reversed once we have fully emerged from lockdown, others could have long-lasting consequences. It is essential, therefore, that the economic and social inclusion of women is at the centre of the recovery measures.

EZA: What about the Member States? Are disparities rising at the moment?

Massimiliano Mascherini: Yes, there is a risk that disparities might increase again as happened during the 2008-2013 crisis. Tourism and travel account for a large share of national GDP in France, Italy and Spain – countries that have been hit very hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the economic crisis might have an asymmetric impact among Member States.

BERLAYMONT BUILDING
BRUSSELS**EZA: What consequences does that have for our society?**

Massimiliano Mascherini: A slackening of social progress could potentially undermine political support for maintaining or deepening economic and political integration of the European Union. Increased disparities among Member States are sure to make citizens lose confidence in the ability of the EU and their own governments to deliver on the promises of better working and living conditions.

In this regard, the agreement reached at the July Council is very important both for giving Member States the funds to react to this unprecedented situation and for showing European solidarity to its citizens. In times of social upheaval, it is crucial for the values of the European Union, including solidarity, to be communicated to citizens in the right way. It is important to avoid communication failures, such as the impression given to the public after the April Council that the Mediterranean countries worst hit by the pandemic were being abandoned by the other countries, as this can easily fuel support for populist and anti-EU movements.

EZA: In which way will the COVID-19 crisis shape work and labour rights in the EU in the future?

Massimiliano Mascherini: The COVID-19 crisis is profoundly reshaping our societies and our habits, including labour markets and access to services. Activities such as telework and remote working, once looked upon a bit suspiciously by some employers, or contacting and accessing a general practitioner for an e-prescription became the norm in a matter of only a few weeks. While some of these changes will be only temporary, others will remain. Studies on the productivity of teleworkers are ongoing, but it is conceivable that smart working will be a feature of the post-COVID-19 labour market, and it will be easier to work from home in sectors where this is possible. While this new form of work organisation can meet the needs and expectations of those workers who need more flexibility, such as women with children, it is absolutely necessary that telework is well regulated and that employees are provided with the right equipment, as they should not be the ones bearing the financial cost of working from home. Furthermore, regulation should provide clarity on working hours and establish employees' right to disconnect, to prevent the danger of fading boundaries between work, leisure and family life.

Massimiliano Mascherini has been Head of Unit ad interim for Social Policies at Eurofound from October 2019. He joined Eurofound in 2009 as a research manager, designing and coordinating projects on youth employment, NEETs and their social inclusion, as well as on the labour market participation of women. In 2017, he became a senior research manager in the Social Policies unit leading new research on monitoring convergence in the European Union. Previously, he was scientific officer at the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission. He studied at the University of Florence, majoring in Actuarial and Statistical Sciences and completing a PhD in Applied Statistics. He has been visiting fellow at the University of Sydney and at Aalborg University and visiting professor at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences.

THE EU INITIATIVE ON MINIMUM WAGES: WHERE DO WE STAND TODAY?

The European Commission has just concluded its consultations on the EU initiative for minimum wages. Great expectations are being made of this process. Mon Verrydt, Head of the EZA Brussels Office, explains the importance of the consultations and their importance for all members of the EZA network.

TEXT: Mon Verrydt

PHOTOS: Lukas Fleischmann

On 3 June, the Commission launched the second-stage consultation of European trade unions and employers' organisations on how to ensure fair minimum wages for all workers in the European Union. This follows the first-stage consultation. Based on the replies received, the Commission concluded that there is a need for further EU action. Already a political priority for the von der Leyen Commission, recent events have further cemented demand for EU efforts to reduce rising wage inequalities and in-work poverty. Nicolas Schmit, Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, said: "One in six workers are classified as low-wage earners in the EU, and the majority of them are women. These workers kept our societies and economies alive when all else had to stop. But paradoxically, they will be hit the hardest by the crisis. Work towards an initiative on minimum wages in the EU is an essential element of our recovery strategy. Everyone deserves a decent standard of living." Here at the EZA, we were prepared for the second round. The future of the minimum wage was a topic of concern at our EZA conference in Brussels (read the article in EZA magazine issue 1/2020). Eurofound presented various findings to this conference which were very enlightening for the debates, such as the differences in national minimum wages and their developments (see the graphics). As a European workers' organisation with a focus on strengthening and training within the framework of social dialogue, we want to use these insights to support our member organisations. For instance, it became clear that the new Member States from Eastern Europe in particular put a special emphasis on having a single framework and rules for European minimum wages. This will be the basic mechanism for advancing the

MON VERRYDT,
EZA-OFFICE BRUSSELS

necessary convergence between the new and the old Member States. Western European countries tend to focus more on the importance of collective bargaining.

High enough to prevent downward pressure

It is important that the level of the minimum wage is high enough to prevent any downward pressure and to achieve a real upward convergence in Europe. In fact, the European Social Charter states that the minimum wage should be 60% of the median wage. In this sense, according to official data, many people who still earn the legal minimum wage are at risk of poverty in most EU member states, because the median wage does not rise.

Important for social partners to be involved

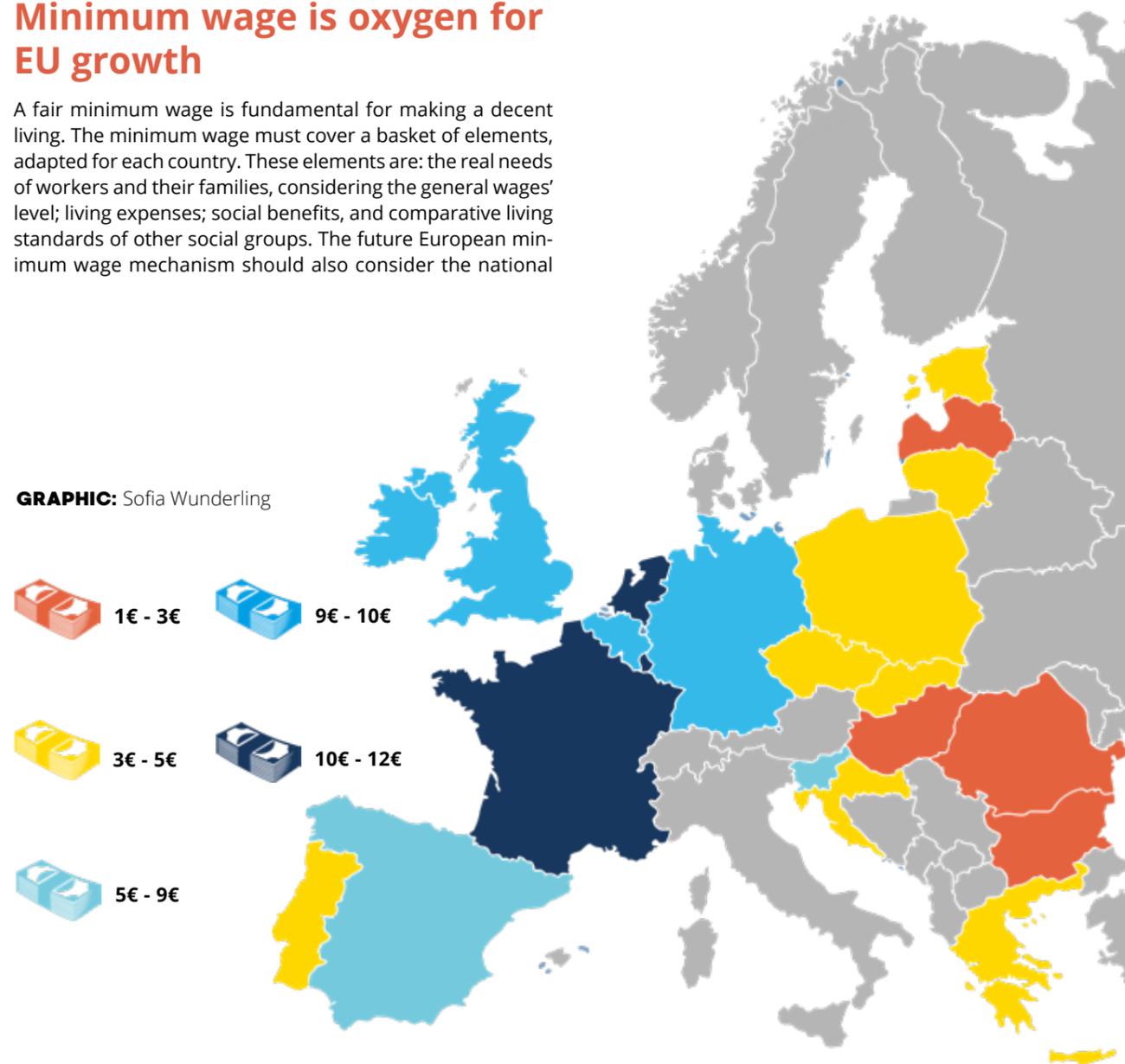
As far as fair minimum wages are concerned, one crucial condition is to boost the involvement of the social partners and for governments to acknowledge the important role of collective bargaining and collective agreements. This is currently failing in most EU countries. Employers refuse to speak with the unions or to exchange views. As a result, there is a decrease in collective bargaining on an interprofessional or on sectoral levels, thus directly leading to decreasing wages. Trade union representatives are under great pressure because employers always threaten with job losses when wages increase too much. However, the results of Eurofound surveys show that increasing the minimum wage has a positive impact on domestic purchasing power and doesn't lead to job losses. We must strongly insist the forthcoming discussions on the EU minimum wage being part of the official tripartite dialogue on the national level. This is the only way to make employees' voices count and to protect workers' interests.

poverty line for workers and their families. Member States should ensure that workers have sufficient weekly, monthly, or daily working hours to enable and achieve decent wages. Complementary measures are required for a fair and statutory minimum wage, based on full-time employment and considering the fact that a growing number of workers are in precarious, informal or part-time employment with fewer working hours than they want. In addition to median wages, we argue that dialogues with the social partners regularly evaluate the threshold of 60% to verify wages are commensurate with consumer prices. The level of 60% is a minimum threshold and should not be considered an ultimate goal. Finally, we must hope that any policymaker involved in building a better EU society knows this phrase by heart: the minimum wage is the oxygen for EU growth.

Minimum wage is oxygen for EU growth

A fair minimum wage is fundamental for making a decent living. The minimum wage must cover a basket of elements, adapted for each country. These elements are: the real needs of workers and their families, considering the general wages' level; living expenses; social benefits, and comparative living standards of other social groups. The future European minimum wage mechanism should also consider the national

GRAPHIC: Sofia Wunderling

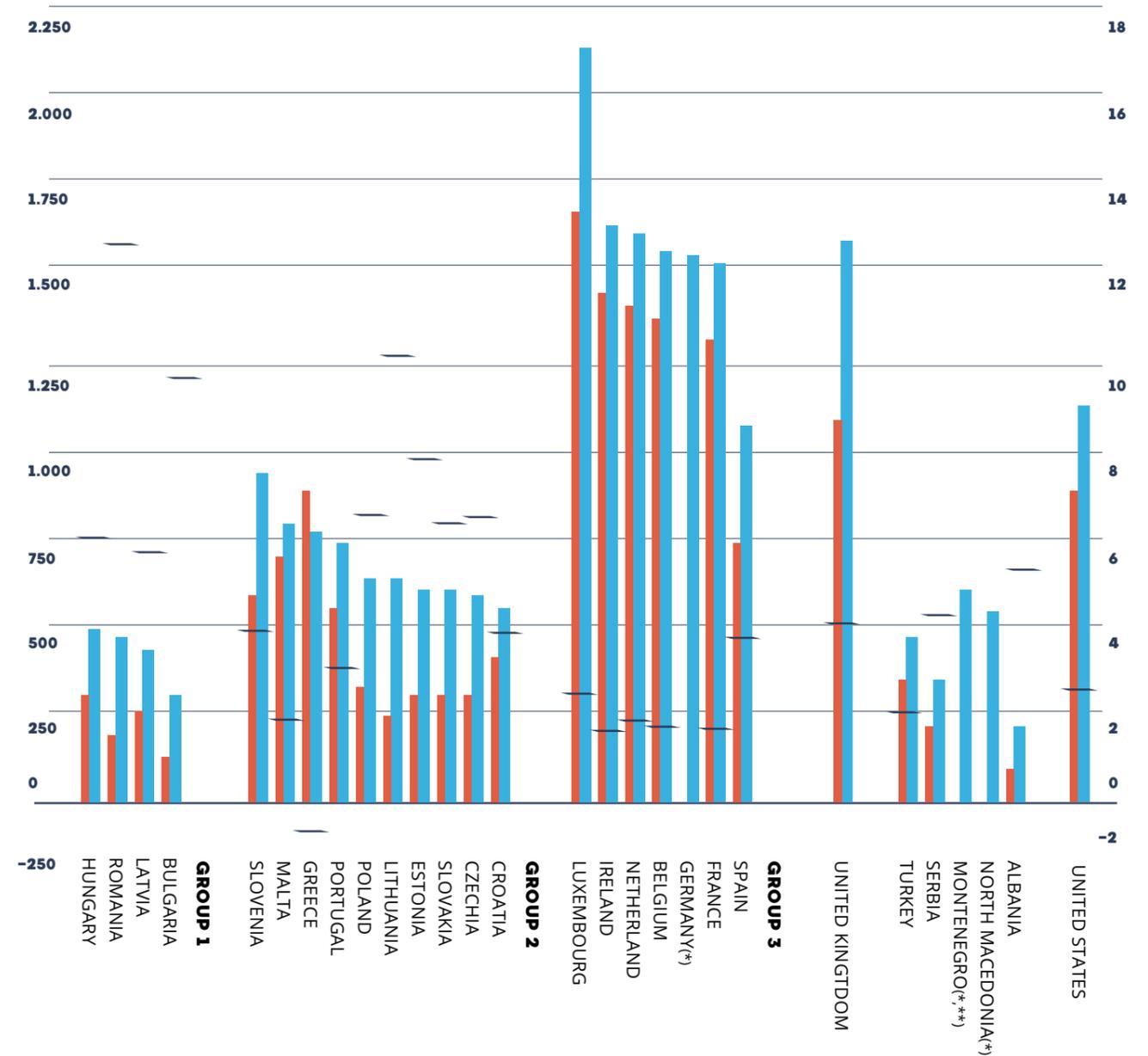


GRAPHIC: EUROSTAT



MINIMUM WAGES (EUR PER MONTH)

AVERAGE ANNUAL OF CHANGE (%)



THE RURAL EXODUS IN EUROPE: DANGERS AND WAYS OUT

AN ALLEY IN ATIENZA IN SPAIN

The rural exodus is a problem that affects many countries in Europe. When people leave whole areas, the remaining local population faces enormous challenges. An example of this is Atienza in Spain, where we spoke to Mayor Pedro Loranca Garces about the potential departures.

INTERVIEW: Lukas Fleischmann

EZA: For all the people who are reading this magazine in a big city, can you describe life in a Spanish town that has been affected by the rural exodus? What difference does this make to everyday life?

Loranca Garces: I'll talk about the town and region of Atienza, where I am the Mayor. Atienza is the municipality in a region with a rugged landscape full of charm, arid and rough land. It nestles at the foot of a rocky castle, with squares and streets full of history and Romanesque churches. During its history, Atienza has seen periods of exodus caused by war, followed by the subsequent recovery of the population with the opening of the Hiendelaencina silver mines. Its population has dwindled from 2,500 inhabitants in 1900 to 475 in 2001 and has now stabilised on this low level. The rural exodus has caused a reduction in public services, including education, health and administrative services, which has forced families to seek these services in large cities. Daily life in a town is better than in the city in terms of quality and cost of living, and housing is also cheaper. However, the big city offers all the educational, health and transport facilities as well as superior audio-visual communication infrastructure.

EZA: What are the most serious consequences of depopulation in these areas of Spain?

Loranca Garces: Depopulation results in public services closing down; shops and food stores are abandoned and small industries disappear, while less use is made of agricultural resources.

EZA: What kinds of people leave the rural areas? What is their main motivation for leaving the small towns and villages?

Loranca Garces: The first to leave the villages are young people because they have no job opportunities that match their studies and degrees. The next to leave the villages are families with school-age children who want to give their kids the chance of a high standard of education. And lastly, families who find themselves in precarious circumstances, barely scraping by and with no possibility of finding employment.

EZA: Where do the people who leave the rural towns and villages go? What are the preferred destinations?

Loranca Garces: The destinations are big cities with industry and services and tourist areas on the coast. Some young people leave to emigrate to industrialised European countries where they have a greater chance of finding jobs.

EZA: What strategies must be implemented to halt or at least slow down the rural exodus?

Loranca Garces: The municipality needs to establish small or medium-sized companies, in the public or private sectors. This has happened in Atienza, where a meat company employs around 54 workers from the area. The best bet would be teleworking and the tourist industry based on ecology and our rich history.

EZA: What role does migration play? Could that be a solution?

Loranca Garces: In the specific case of the two companies in Atienza, 80% of their employees are immigrants. They live in Atienza and the villages and towns in the area. They are from Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia.

EZA: So can we assume that immigrants are a solution to the problem? How can these people access integration processes and education?

Loranca Garces: The integration of Ibero-American immigrants is fairly rapid and unproblematic owing to the shared culture and language. European immigrants rely on family members who have already settled in the area. As education is free in Spain, migrants can access it on equal terms with Spanish citizens.

EZA: What role do telecommunications play? Is the IT infrastructure good enough in the area?

Loranca Garces: I see digitisation as the driver of change and a generator and useful tool for new jobs, but telecom networks in rural areas are currently poor quality, with no guarantee of IT security.

This interview was recorded during the seminar of the EZA member C.E.A.T. (Centro español para los asuntos de los Trabajadores), held in June 2020 in Atienza, and is also available digitally.



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THE DESERTED PLACE AT BRANDENBURGER TOR IN BERLIN



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