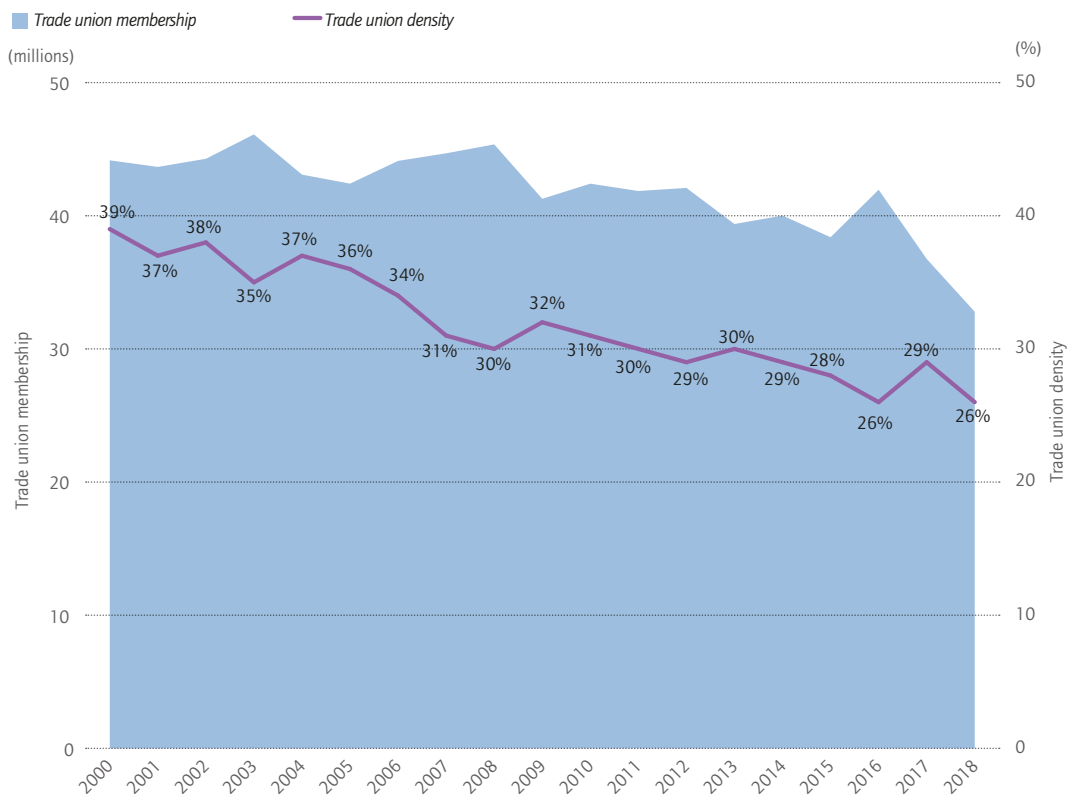


Trends in trade union density and strike activity

4.9%
is the total
annual
decrease of
trade union
membership
in 2010-
2016

Figure 4.11 Trade union membership (in millions) and density over time (2000-2018)



Source: OECD based upon administrative data and Visser (2016) for Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Malta and Romania.

A long-term decline in union membership...

The area graph in Figure 4.11 depicts the total trade union membership in the EU27 countries plus Norway, Switzerland, and the UK, from 2000 until 2018 (the latest year for which data are available for most countries). The years 2017 and 2018 are only illustrative here, as data are still lacking for several countries for those years. Continuous data are also not available for several countries, especially in central and eastern Europe, so that the pattern of the area graph is artificially uneven, that is to say it is determined by the availability of data. Nevertheless, what we can see is that total membership dropped from about 44 million members in 2000 to just under 42 million members in 2016. Taking into account only the countries for which continuous data are available from 2000 to 2016 (AT, BE, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FR, IT, MT, NE, NO, SE, SI, SK, UK), then the 2000s are marked by a total annual decrease in membership of 4.6%. The total annual decrease stands at 4.9% in the period from 2010 to 2016.

...but some increases since the pandemic

It remains to be seen whether the outbreak of the coronavirus has stimulated positive attitudes towards unions among workers. Clearly, economic uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as growing concern over workplace health and safety issues, have, in certain industries, driven more workers into the arms of unions in at least some European countries. In Belgium, for example, a considerable growth in union membership has occurred since the pandemic (L'Echo, 23 March 2020). This can be explained by the involvement of the unions in the administration of unemployment benefits, known as the 'Ghent system'. For the same reasons, Swedish unions have seen a similar influx of new members (Bender and Kjellberg 2020). Membership increases also occurred in the Netherlands (Trouw, 8 May 2020). UNISON and Unite, the two largest unions in the UK, also report membership growth (Gall 2020). The same holds true for the UK's National Education Union. Whether this all means that there will be a 'next upsurge' (Clawson 2003) in union membership – historically associated with socio-economic turmoil and labour unrest – remains to be seen, however. And there are reasons to be cautious. The economic fallout of the pandemic is causing

mass layoffs and redundancies, which means unions should expect drops in membership as, in countries without a 'Ghent system' where union benefits and services are generally limited for them, unemployed workers leave to save on costs even if union dues are lowered for them. In countries where such a system is present, unions run the risk of becoming 'giants with feet of clay': large in numbers but weak in actual organisational power, especially if the relationship they build with those (unemployed) newcomers is mainly or solely based on 'instrumental motives' (Vandaele 2020).

Persistent country differences in union density

The line in Figure 4.11 shows a slow but almost inexorable decline in union density in Europe, for which the financialisation of the economy is just

one explanation (Kollmeyer and Peters 2018). If we only take into account the countries for which data is available for the whole period, i.e. from 2000 to 2018 (AT, BE, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, IT, NE, NO, UK), the picture looks as follows: while on average, more than one worker out of three was unionised in the period from 2000 to 2009, this average declined to nearly 31% in the period from 2010 to 2018 – a drop of three percentage points. Furthermore, this is an aggregated figure which masks, for example, occupational and sectoral variation. The figure is in fact even lower, since the denominator, which is based on the number of wage and salary earners, does not consider all workers relevant for unions, such as solo self-employed workers and workers in the 'shadow economy'. Also, in reality, average union density for all European countries considered will be lower, and the drop will be more pronounced since the fall in density is particularly notable in central

Figure 4.12a Trade union density per country, 2000-2009 and 2010-2018

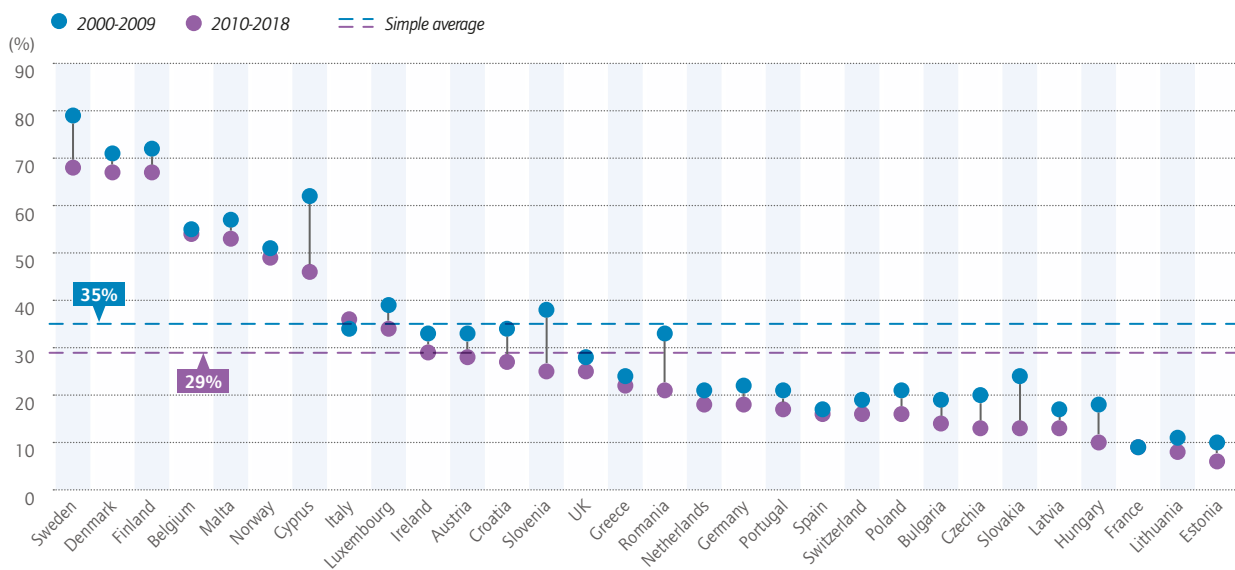
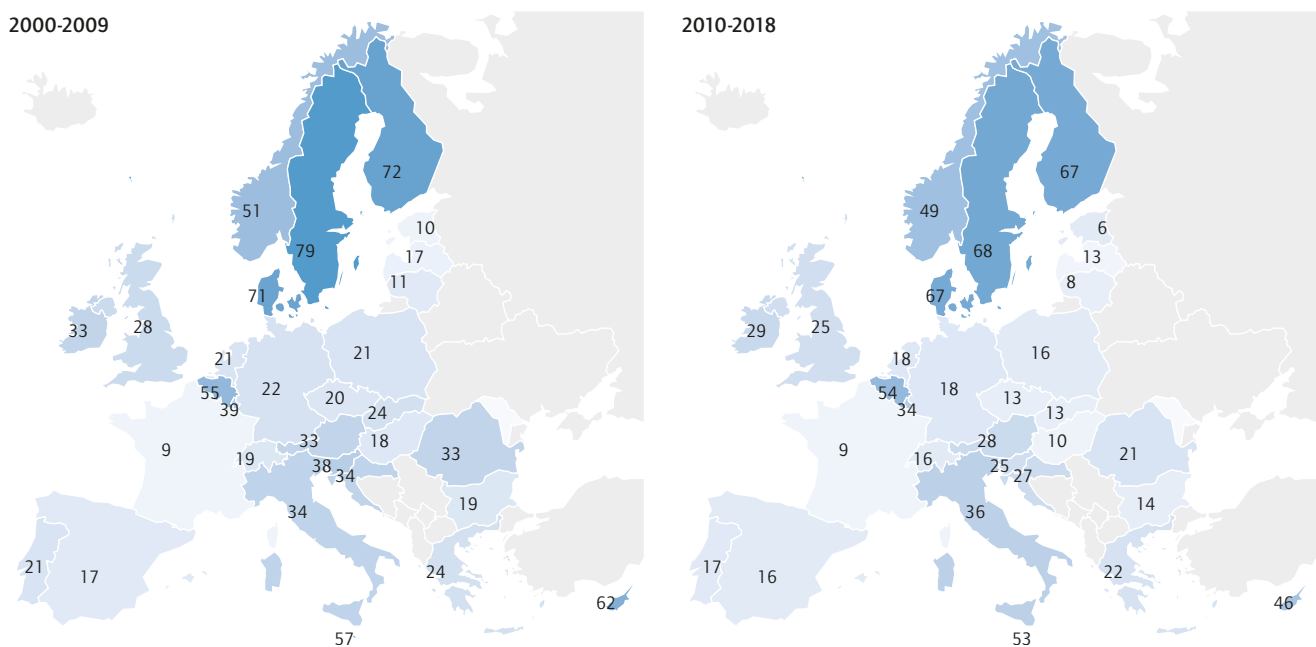


Figure 4.12b Trade union density per country, 2000-2009 and 2010-2018 (map)



Source: OECD based upon administrative data and Visser (2016) for Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Malta and Romania.

and eastern European countries (Vandaele 2019), for which consistent and robust data are mostly lacking.

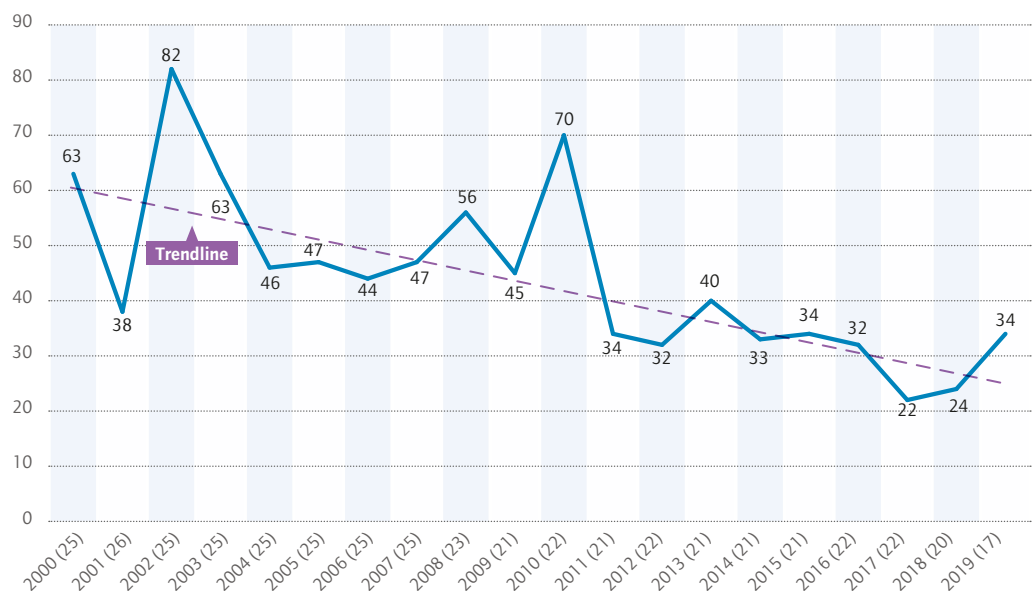
Strike activity

Figure 4.12 depicts a comparison between averages in trade union density in the 2000s and the period 2010-2018. These figures also demonstrate that union density in most countries has weakened in the two periods considered here, especially in the CEE countries. There are, however, a few exceptions. Italy has seen a slight increase in density, but this is largely due to a decrease in the number of wage and salary earners, while Spain and France have a rather stable union density. These two countries with low unionisation rates illustrate that union legitimacy can also be based on their mobilisation capacity (Sullivan 2010), as in France, or in union elections for workplace representatives and works council representatives in companies, as in Spain (Martínez Lucio 2017). All in all, considerable divergence in the level of unionisation remains, partly as a result of the variation in labour-friendly labour market institutions (Schnabel 2013), and partly due to how union membership is understood in society. The Nordic countries and Belgium are still at the top of the 'unionisation league' due to a relatively benevolent institutional setting. While the 'Ghent system', which guarantees unions' involvement in unemployment insurance schemes, is an important explanation for this in these countries (except for Norway) (Høgedahl and Kongshøj 2017), union access to the workplace is also key (Ebbinghaus et al. 2011; Ibsen et al. 2017). Furthermore, centralised collective bargaining is associated with a higher unionisation level, as management has relatively lower incentives to thwart unions at the workplace in such industrial relations systems (Rasmussen 2017). At the bottom of the league we find most CEE countries; Croatia, Slovenia and Romania have been exceptions in the past, but (rapid) decline has now set in in these countries too.

An overall long-term decline in the strike volume...

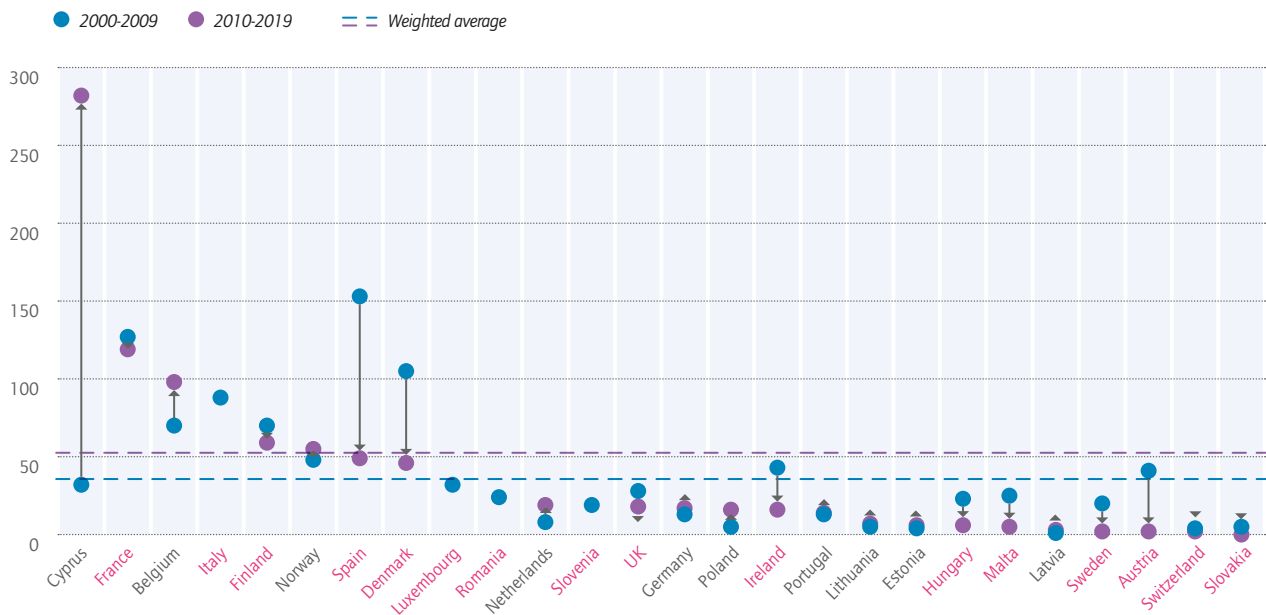
Strike activity informs us about the degree of collective discontent of workers either aimed at the employers at the company or industrial level or targeted at political authorities if regulations on strike action allow for this. Figure 4.13 depicts the weighted average of the days not worked due to industrial action (which includes lockouts) per 1,000 employees in most European countries, especially those in western Europe, from 2000 until 2018. It displays a declining trend, with relative peaks in the strike volume in 2002 and 2010 in the last two decades. The first peak has been attributed to the 'dot-com bubble' and the 9/11 recession (European Commission 2011: 46), whereas the second peak mainly results from 'national days of action' against pension reforms in France (Ancelovici 2011). Thereafter, the volume falls to a level equal to or below 40 days. Whereas data on industrial action are generally underestimated, this is certainly the case for post-2008 developments, as data for some strike-prone countries are lacking and the data ignore several general strikes linked to anti-austerity protests (Dribbusch and Vandaele 2016). In general, though, the long-term but uneven fall in the strike volume mirrors the shrinking weight of industrial trade unionism, and a shift from strike activity towards the private services sectors, especially within transport and logistics, where strikes tend to be shorter, and sometimes smaller, due to their more disruptive capacity (Bordogna and Cella 2002; Vandaele 2016). One can only speculate whether these trends will continue or be reversed during and especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. Although there have been press and media reports of strike actions in certain industries since the pandemic, often linked to health and safety issues, the actions have seemed to be of rather shorter duration, with issues quickly settled.

Figure 4.13 Days not worked due to industrial action in Europe per 1,000 employees (weighted average), 2000-2019



Source: Data on industrial action: ETUI based upon data from national statistical offices. For details about the availability and reliability of data, see Dribbusch and Vandaele (2016).
Employees in employment: Eurostat.

Figure 4.14 Days not worked due to industrial action per 1,000 employees (country comparison), 2000-2009 and 2010-2019



Source: Data on industrial action: ETUI based upon data from national statistical offices. For details about the availability and reliability of data, see Dribbusch and Vandaele (2016). Employees in employment: Eurostat.

Figure 4.14 makes a comparison between the average strike volume in the 2000s and the period 2010-2018 in each European country for which (sufficient) data are available. It largely confirms the secular trend in the strike volume, but it also provides a more nuanced picture at the country level. In several countries, on average, the volume declined in the most recent period. This is notably the case in Spain and Denmark – two countries previously marked by a certain proneness to industrial action in the past. In contrast, the open-ended conflict that erupted in the construction industry in 2013 explains the remarkable increase in Cyprus, which led the European ‘strike league’ in the 2010-2019 period. Remarkably, a low-strike country such as the Netherlands also saw a certain increase in the last period compared to the 2000s, in particular due to some large strikes in education and healthcare in 2019. In particular, political mass strikes, such as

large-scale strikes in the public sector and general strikes, help to explain differences in the country's volume. Quintessential examples of this are an exceptional general strike against pension reforms in Austria in 2003 and a 24-hour national public sector strike in protest at the government's pay cuts in Ireland in 2009. Public sector, national and general strikes also took place in Belgium in the period 2012-2018, which explains why industrial action increased in the most recent period. The increase in Poland, meanwhile, can largely be explained by a nationwide strike action for higher wages in education in 2019. Poland is a relative exception, as strike activity in most other CEE countries stands at a very low level (Greskovits 2015). Above all, Figure 4.14 demonstrates the persistency of cross-country differences in the strike volume over time, with those differences tending to increase during upswings in industrial action (Brandl and Traxler 2010).