

# Employment and Unemployment in the EU. Structural Dynamics and Trends<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Worldwide, employment trends are most often related to the ageing of world countries' populations.*

*The changes in the main shares of age groups in total population were significant, but concomitantly annulling their influence on total employment: the increase in women's participation to labor determined the increase in employment, but youth (15-24 years) employment has declined. The latter phenomenon occurred due to increase in tertiary education enrolment, as well as to the increase in youth unemployment. Also, the employment of persons aged 65 and over has evolved differently in the developed, emerging and developing economies: in the first two cases it had determined delayed retirement.*

*Also in the European Union and, implicitly, in Romania, deep changes in the employment structure and unemployment dynamics have occurred, revealing particular features of which some are addressed in our paper.*

**Keywords:** employment, unemployment, European Union, youth employment/unemployment, older workers, educational attainment

**JEL Classification:** J11, J21, J60

## Introduction

Worldwide, employment trends are most often related to the ageing of world countries' populations. The sharp decline in the birth rates and the increase in life expectancy especially experienced by the developed economies in the last decades have called for specialists' attention, as well as for adequate measures to mitigate such trends, such as increasing retirement age, lifelong learning, labor migration, etc.

Irrespective of their development stages, the older and the newer member states of the European Union are all going through such demographic changes<sup>4</sup> - the age structure of the population and of the workforce is gradually shifting to older age cohorts, concomitantly with accession of fewer young people to employment due to higher education and, especially after 2008, due to the post-crisis effects on jobs for youth.

For instance, in 2011 the share of young people (below 15 years) reached only 16% in the EU, as compared to 27% worldwide, ranging from 13% in Germany to 21% in Ireland, while the share of elders (over 65 years) reached 17% in the EU, as compared to only 7% worldwide, ranging from 10% in Cyprus to 21% in Germany. Moreover, according to projections, the share of European population aged 65 years or more will

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<sup>1</sup>The paper was presented at the GEG-2015, 3rd Global Economy & Governance – Challenges of Environmental Finance, Social Responsibility & Governance, September 3 – 5, 2015, Ming Chuan University, Taipei, Taiwan.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, *The Future of Work. Jobs and Skills in 2030*, UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2014.

increase from 17 per cent in 2010 to 30 per cent in 2050. At that time, Romania had a somehow balanced situation, both the share of young people and elders reaching 15%<sup>5</sup>.

All the countries make efforts to accommodate such challenges with the least possible negative impacts on their economies and societies, especially on their labor markets. Based on Eurostat data regarding the working age population (15-64 years), in the following the paper presents some of the particular features of employment and unemployment dynamics in the EU countries, focusing on young and older age cohorts (15-24 years and 50-64 years, respectively).

### **Employment and Unemployment Dynamics in the EU Countries**

The *dynamics of employment* is a structural indicator on which the European Union has put large emphasis in recent times in order to foster competitiveness through a larger workforce and to foster societies through larger participation to the labour market. Also, the *dynamics of unemployment* is another very important indicator for the analysis of economic cycles<sup>6</sup>.

Until the onset of the 2008 global crisis, most of the EU countries were successful in reducing unemployment and improving employment (Appendices 1 and 2). However, across the EU, the *unemployment/employment rates behaved very differently*, with some countries displaying steadily declining unemployment and increasing employment rates over time (Germany, Sweden, Poland, Austria, Malta), while others exhibiting more marked unemployment/employment fluctuations<sup>7</sup> (Greece, Spain, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania). The *young people* continue to be particularly affected by the weak and uneven recovery after the crisis. It is estimated that some 74.5 million young people – aged 15–24 – were unemployed in 2013; the global youth unemployment rate has reached 13.1 per cent, and the youth-to-adult unemployment ratio has reached a historical peak<sup>8</sup>. Such trends persist despite considerable improvements in average educational attainment of youth cohorts. The share of youth in the labour force with tertiary education has increased, but the unemployment rates among young workers with tertiary education have also risen since the onset of the crisis. At the same time, the *older persons* have fared relatively well during the crisis and their employment rates have remained stable, even in those countries that have been hit hard, because the companies decided to hold on to their most experienced workers<sup>9</sup>.

Overall, the *share of active population* in the working age population increased steadily in the European Union, from 69.7% in 2005 to 72.3% in 2014, the highest shares being recorded in 2014 in Sweden (81.5%), the Netherlands (79.3%) and Denmark (78.1%), and the lowest in Italy (63.9%), Romania (65.7%) and Croatia (66.1%)<sup>10</sup>. The *employment rate of working age population* had a different dynamics, with marked

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<sup>5</sup> ET2050 Draft Final Report, Scientific Report, Volume 2, Demographic Trends and Scenarios, Territorial Scenarios and Visions for Europe (ET2050), CEFMR, ESPON Project 2013/1/19, February 2014.

<sup>6</sup> ET2050 Draft Final Report, Scientific Report, Volume 3, Economic Trends and Scenarios, Territorial Scenarios and Visions for Europe (ET2050), Politecnico di Milano, ESPON Project 2013/1/19, February 2014.

<sup>7</sup> M. Ward-Warmedinger, C. Machiarrelli, Transitions in Labor Market Status in the EU, IZA Discussion Paper No. 7814, Bonn, Germany, December 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Global Employment Trends 2014. Risk of a jobless recovery?, ILO, Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>9</sup> World employment and social outlook: Trends 2015, International Labour Office, Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>10</sup> Authors' computations based on Eurostat data, available upon request.

increase over the interval 2005-2008 up to 65.7%, decline over the interval 2009-2013 down to 64.1% and a recovery in 2014 (up to 64.9%). However, there were countries which either did not experience a contraction of the share of employed population (Germany and Luxemburg), or a low one and/or over a short interval (France, Austria and Sweden from among the EU15 countries and the Czech Republic, Malta, Poland, Hungary and Romania from among the NMS13 countries<sup>11</sup>). The highest and continuous decline of employed population share after 2008 was recorded by Greece (down to only 49.4% a share in 2014). Consequently, the *percentage ratio of employed population in the active population* reveals a somewhat similar dynamics by the two sub-intervals, with the highest levels recorded in 2014 in Germany, Luxemburg, Austria, but also Malta, and the lowest in Greece, Spain and Croatia.

The *share of unemployed population in the working age population* of the European Union shows a significant jump in 2009, followed by a steady rise until 2013 (up to 7.9%) and a slight decline in 2014. By country, the situation varied largely: from countries which experienced lower jumps and improvement in unemployment position afterwards (Germany, but also the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, Sweden) to countries which revealed higher jumps, but recovery after some time (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Ireland), and to countries which experienced augmented decline in unemployment position after the initial shock (Greece, Spain, Croatia, Portugal, Cyprus and Slovakia). Under such circumstances, the *unemployment rate of working age population* behaved similarly, increasing up to 11% in 2013 and 10.3% throughout EU, the lowest levels being recorded in 2014 by Germany (5.1%), Austria (5.7%), Malta and Luxemburg (5.9%), and the highest levels by Greece (26.7%), Spain (24.6%), Croatia (17.5%) and Cyprus (16.3%).

Over the same period, the *share of inactive population in the working age population* has declined steadily in the EU and the individual countries, but with significant discrepancies among the countries – from 18.5% in Sweden to 36.1% in Italy in 2014. Given the combined dynamics of active working age population and inactive working age population, the *percentage ratio of inactive to active working age population* reveals a similar trend, but even higher discrepancies among the EU countries – from only 22.7% in Sweden to 56.4% in Italy, 52.3% in Romania, 51.3% in Croatia and 50.9% in Malta.

Since our paper also considers the effect of demographic change on employment/unemployment, we further analyze the *employment and unemployment dynamics* of the two age groups placed at both ends of working age, namely *young workers* (also referred to as youth, 15-24 years) and *older workers* (50-64 years). The *dynamics of youth employment rates and the older workers employment rates* behaved differently in the EU countries over the interval 2005-2014 – fluctuating highly and declining in the former case and increasing steadily in most of the member states, with some striking peculiarities, in the latter case. A *ratio of young to older workers employability* reveals a declining trend, in accordance with the dwindling young population and its delayed access to the labor market due to prolonged education and increasing cohorts of older workers, and significant differences among the EU countries, with more favorable situation regarding youth perspectives in countries such

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<sup>11</sup> EU15 countries refer to the older member states of the EU – Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, France, Germany, Greece, Spain, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom, while NMS13 countries refer to the newer EU member states – Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia.

as Malta, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark and the United Kingdom and less favorable in Italy, Greece, Spain, Bulgaria and Luxembourg (Appendix 3).

The differences among the EU member states are even higher if we analyze the same ratio by *educational attainment levels*: low (ISCED 0-2), medium (ISCED 3-4) and high (ISCED 5-8)<sup>12</sup>. The overall declining trend of the ratio may be found in all the three cases, but the yearly or period fluctuations are higher and the country peculiarities important. Countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Austria reveal more favorable situations regarding youth employability for all three levels of educational attainment, signaling more balanced labor markets and possibly lower skill mismatches, Malta reveals a more favorable situation in the cases of low and highly educated young people, while Germany and Finland reveal a more favorable situation in the case of medium and highly educated young workers. At the other extreme, Italy reveals a less favorable situation regarding youth employability for all three levels of educational attainment, consonant with its unfavorable demographic dynamics, Greece reveals a less favorable situation in the case of low and medium educated young workers, while Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovakia in the case of low and highly educated young people. A significant number of countries, especially NMS (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia), reveal *poor employability prospects for low educated young people*, signaling the need both for educational policies aiming at increasing the young people's educational attainment and for overall policies aiming at economic growth and for labor market policies aiming at diminishing skill mismatches. At the opposite end, there are many countries (both developed and NMS) that reveal better employability prospects for highly educated young people (Denmark, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland and the United Kingdom), but also countries where the *employability prospects of young people with high educational attainment levels are less favorable as compared to those of older workers with similar educational level* (the Czech Republic, Croatia, Italy, Luxembourg, Romania and Slovakia), calling for better policies aiming at youth insertion on the labor market and faster and easier school-to-work transition and for overall economic growth policies and labor market policies aiming at diminishing skill mismatches in the case of jobs that require higher educational content.

The *youth unemployment rates* and *older workers unemployment rates* have, on the whole, increased after 2009 in the European Union and in many of its member states, but the yearly and period fluctuations were higher from one country to another than in the case of employment rates. Especially the *youth unemployment rates* soared in Greece, Spain, Croatia and Italy, while in Germany, Poland and Malta they decreased, and in the Netherlands and Austria fluctuated little, at lower levels. On the other side, the *older workers unemployment rates* also soared in Greece, Spain and Cyprus (but at much lower levels than the youth unemployment rates), and also in Portugal, Bulgaria, and Slovakia and, to a lesser extent, in Latvia, Lithuania, Ireland and Estonia, while in Germany they decreased significantly. The economic crisis affected the youth more than the older workers; however, the latter were also seriously hit in the more fragile economies.

In such circumstances, there is no wonder that the *youth to older workers unemployment ratio* increased (although slightly) after 2009 in the EU as a whole and in many of its member countries, revealing very high discrepancies among them (Appendix 4). The highest levels (and the worst prospects regarding youth

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<sup>12</sup> Data available upon request.

unemployment as compared to older workers unemployment) were recorded in Italy, Romania and Luxembourg, while the lowest levels were recorded in Germany, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Malta and Latvia. By *educational attainment levels*<sup>13</sup>, a better situation regarding youth unemployment as compared to older workers unemployment for all the three levels was recorded only by Germany and the Netherlands, while a worse situation for all educational levels by Italy and Romania. Large EU economies, such as the United Kingdom, France, Sweden and Belgium, reveal worse prospects regarding the unemployment of low educated young people as compared to the older workers (the UK also in the case of young people with medium educational attainment), while almost all of the NMS regarding the unemployment prospects of highly educated young people. In the latter case, the youth unemployment becomes not only a serious economic and societal concern per se, but also regarding its most competitive segment – the highly educated young people - who are pushed towards marginalization, inadequate use, inappropriate jobs or migration, at extremely high and unrecoverable costs for these countries.

### Conclusions

Worldwide, employment trends are most often related to the ageing of world countries' populations, and irrespective of their development stages, the older and the newer member states of the European Union are all going through such demographic changes. Besides the shift in the age structure of the population and of the to older age cohorts, fewer young people accede to employment due to higher education and, especially after 2008, due to the post-crisis effects on jobs for youth.

Until the onset of the 2008 global crisis, most of the EU countries were successful in reducing unemployment and improving employment, but the unemployment/employment rates behaved very differently, some countries displaying steadily declining unemployment and increasing employment rates over time, while others exhibiting more marked unemployment/employment fluctuations. Overall, the *share of active population* in the working age population increased steadily in the European Union, but the *employment rate of working age population* had a different dynamics, with marked increase over the interval 2005-2008, decline over the interval 2009-2013 and a recovery in 2014. Also as effect of the crisis, the *share of unemployed population in the working age population* of the European Union revealed a significant jump in 2009, followed by a steady rise until 2013 and a slight decline in 2014, with significant country variations. The *share of inactive population in the working age population* has declined steadily in the EU and the individual countries, but with significant discrepancies among the countries and due to the combined dynamics of active working age population and inactive working age population, the *percentage ratio of inactive to active working age population* revealed not only a similar trend, but even higher discrepancies among the EU countries.

The *dynamics of youth employment rates and the older workers employment rates* behaved differently in the EU countries over the interval 2005-2014 – fluctuating highly and declining in the former case and increasing steadily in most of the member states. The *ratio of young to older workers employability* revealed a declining trend, in accordance with the dwindling young population and its delayed access to the labor

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<sup>13</sup> Data available upon request.

market due to prolonged education and increasing cohorts of older workers, as well as significant differences among the EU countries.

A significant number of countries, especially NMS, revealed *poor employability prospects for low educated young people*. This signals the need both for educational policies aiming at increasing the young people's educational attainment, and for overall policies aiming at economic growth, and labor market policies aiming at diminishing the skill mismatches. At the opposite end, there are also countries where the employability prospects for highly educated young people are less favorable as compared to those of older workers, calling for better policies aiming at youth insertion on the labor market and faster and easier school-to-work transition and for overall economic growth policies and labor market policies aiming at diminishing skill mismatches in the case of jobs that require higher educational content.

The *youth unemployment rates* and *older workers unemployment rates* have, on the whole, increased after 2009 in the European Union and in many of its member states, but the yearly and period fluctuations were higher from one country to another than in the case of employment rates. The economic crisis affected the youth more than the older workers; however, the latter were also seriously hit in the more fragile economies. The *youth to older workers unemployability ratio* increased after 2009 in the EU as a whole and in many of its member countries, revealing very high discrepancies among them in this respect. Some large EU economies revealed worse prospects regarding the unemployment of low educated young people as compared to the older workers, while almost all of the NMS regarding the unemployment prospects of highly educated young people. In such a case, *youth unemployment becomes not only a serious economic and societal concern per se, but also regarding its most competitive segment – the highly educated young people* - who are pushed towards marginalization, inadequate use, inappropriate jobs or migration, at extremely high and unrecoverable costs for these countries.

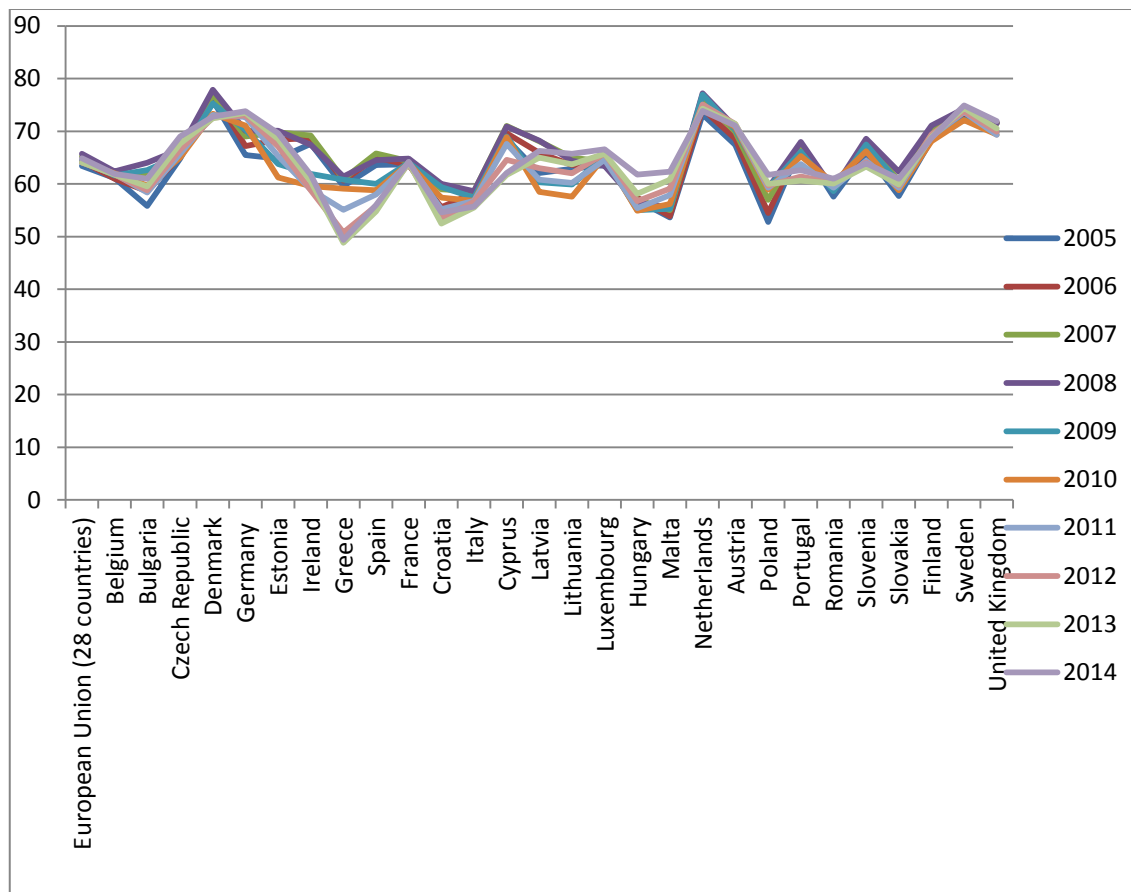
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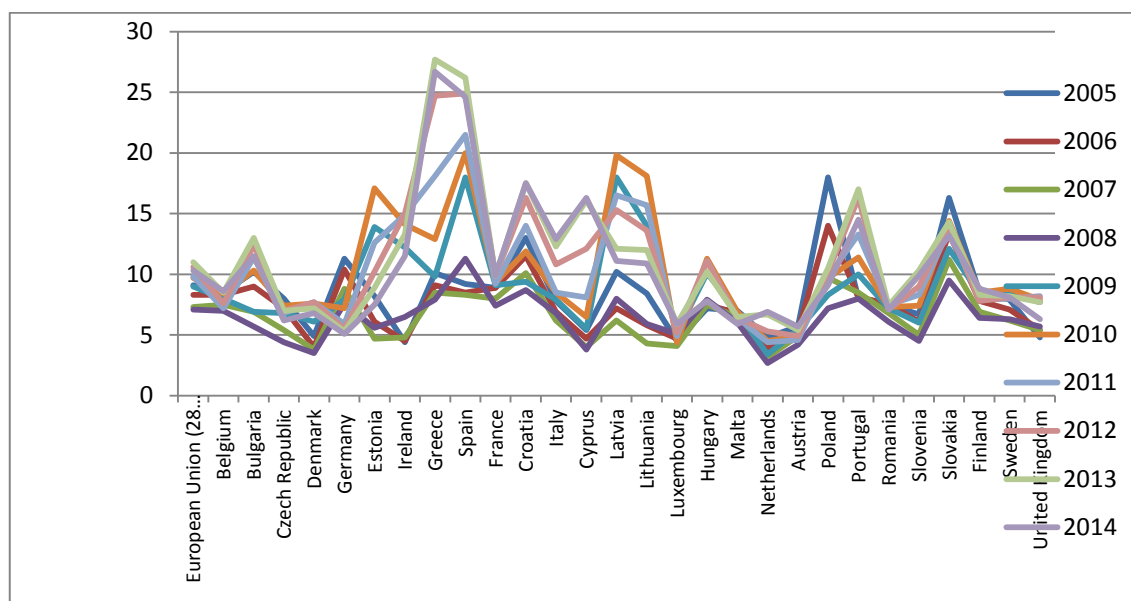
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### Appendix 1. Dynamics of Working Age Population Total Employment Rates in the European Union



Source: Data from Eurostat.

## Appendix 2. Dynamics of Working Age Population Total Unemployment Rates in the European Union



Source: Data from Eurostat.

## Appendix 3. Ratio of Young to Older Workers Employability in the European Union

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
European Union (28 countries)	0.68	0.67	0.67	0.66	0.62	0.60	0.58	0.56	0.54	0.54
Belgium	0.60	0.60	0.57	0.57	0.52	0.50	0.50	0.48	0.44	0.42
Bulgaria	0.46	0.46	0.46	0.47	0.45	0.42	0.41	0.40	0.38	0.36
Czech Republic	0.47	0.47	0.48	0.46	0.45	0.43	0.42	0.42	0.41	0.42
Denmark	0.92	0.94	0.97	0.98	0.93	0.87	0.86	0.81	0.78	0.76
Germany	0.74	0.74	0.74	0.74	0.71	0.70	0.70	0.67	0.66	0.64
Estonia	0.49	0.47	0.49	0.52	0.43	0.41	0.48	0.48	0.47	0.48
Ireland	0.83	0.84	0.84	0.76	0.64	0.55	0.52	0.51	0.50	0.48
Greece	0.49	0.47	0.46	0.45	0.44	0.39	0.33	0.29	0.27	0.31
Spain	0.75	0.76	0.74	0.67	0.54	0.48	0.42	0.36	0.33	0.32
France	0.56	0.56	0.58	0.59	0.57	0.56	0.54	0.50	0.49	0.48
Croatia	0.59	0.57	0.58	0.59	0.56	0.50	0.43	0.37	0.32	0.40
Italy	0.59	0.56	0.53	0.51	0.45	0.42	0.39	0.36	0.31	0.28
Cyprus	0.61	0.61	0.58	0.60	0.55	0.53	0.48	0.47	0.41	0.47
Latvia	0.57	0.56	0.57	0.55	0.46	0.45	0.44	0.47	0.49	0.51
Lithuania	0.36	0.40	0.40	0.42	0.35	0.32	0.32	0.35	0.40	0.43
Luxembourg	0.52	0.48	0.46	0.47	0.51	0.40	0.39	0.39	0.39	0.36
Hungary	0.46	0.47	0.47	0.46	0.41	0.41	0.39	0.39	0.41	0.45
Malta	1.15	1.15	1.23	1.20	1.15	1.09	1.09	1.02	1.03	1.00
Netherlands	1.13	1.13	1.12	1.10	1.05	1.00	0.98	0.95	0.93	0.91
Austria	1.14	1.08	1.05	1.02	0.99	0.95	0.97	0.94	0.90	0.88



Poland	0.56	0.58	0.59	0.60	0.58	0.56	0.51	0.50	0.48	0.50
Portugal	0.60	0.59	0.58	0.57	0.53	0.48	0.47	0.41	0.39	0.40
Romania	0.50	0.47	0.48	0.48	0.47	0.49	0.48	0.47	0.45	0.44
Slovenia	0.72	0.71	0.77	0.77	0.68	0.68	0.67	0.57	0.55	0.54
Slovakia	0.52	0.51	0.53	0.48	0.42	0.39	0.37	0.37	0.37	0.39
Finland	0.65	0.66	0.69	0.68	0.62	0.60	0.62	0.63	0.63	0.62
Sweden	0.52	0.54	0.56	0.56	0.51	0.52	0.54	0.52	0.54	0.55
United Kingdom	0.84	0.83	0.81	0.79	0.74	0.72	0.70	0.70	0.68	0.70

Source: Authors' computations, based on data from Eurostat.

#### Appendix 4. Ratio of Young to Older Workers Unemployability in the European Union

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
European Union (28 countries)	2.8	2.7	2.8	3.0	3.1	3.0	3.1	3.1	3.0	3.0
Belgium	4.1	3.7	3.8	3.9	4.3	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.6	4.2
Bulgaria	2.5	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.7	2.5	2.7	2.7	2.4	2.2
Czech Republic	3.0	2.9	2.1	2.5	3.0	2.8	3.0	3.3	3.3	3.2
Denmark	2.0	2.2	2.4	3.3	2.9	2.5	2.5	2.6	2.6	2.6
Germany	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.5	1.4	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.6
Estonia	2.3	2.7	2.8	2.6	2.5	2.1	2.0	2.5	2.6	2.5
Ireland	2.8	3.1	3.0	3.6	3.4	3.0	2.9	2.7	2.5	2.6
Greece	5.5	6.1	6.0	5.8	4.8	4.5	4.4	3.5	3.1	2.8
Spain	3.2	3.0	2.9	3.1	3.0	2.9	3.0	2.8	2.7	2.6
France	3.5	3.6	3.5	3.7	3.8	3.6	3.4	3.4	3.6	3.4
Croatia	3.8	3.7	3.8	3.9	4.1	4.8	4.6	4.2	4.7	3.8
Italy	6.9	7.3	8.2	6.6	6.8	7.0	7.0	6.2	6.2	6.6
Cyprus	3.8	2.7	3.1	3.1	3.3	3.9	4.9	3.0	3.1	2.4
Latvia	1.4	2.1	2.1	2.1	2.3	2.1	2.1	2.0	2.0	2.0
Lithuania	1.9	1.5	2.2	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.3	2.2	2.0	1.9
Luxembourg	4.3	7.4	5.8	6.2	6.9	4.7	5.4	6.3	4.2	5.5
Hungary	4.2	4.1	3.5	3.4	3.7	3.1	2.8	3.2	3.3	3.3
Malta	3.5	3.8	3.6	3.2	2.8	2.7	3.3	2.8	2.3	1.9
Netherlands	2.1	1.8	1.8	2.0	2.4	2.3	1.9	2.2	1.9	1.6
Austria	2.7	2.4	2.5	3.1	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.7	2.5	2.5
Poland	2.7	2.9	2.9	3.0	3.2	3.1	3.5	3.4	3.5	3.5
Portugal	2.6	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.6	2.7	2.8	3.0	2.8	2.7
Romania	5.6	5.5	5.7	5.5	4.8	5.0	5.3	5.8	5.5	6.0
Slovenia	3.7	3.6	2.5	3.0	3.2	3.1	2.2	3.1	2.5	2.6
Slovakia	2.2	2.4	2.2	2.5	2.9	3.0	3.2	3.1	2.9	2.7
Finland	3.0	2.9	2.8	3.2	3.5	3.2	3.2	3.1	3.0	2.9
Sweden	5.3	5.0	5.2	5.6	5.0	4.4	4.6	4.6	4.7	4.3
United Kingdom	4.6	4.5	4.6	4.5	4.2	4.1	4.3	4.4	4.4	4.3

Source: Authors' computations, based on data from Eurostat.