

## Trends in life expectancy

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in unprecedented reductions in life expectancy in many EU countries in 2020 and 2021. In the EU as a whole, life expectancy at birth reached just over 80 years in 2021, over one year less than in 2019. Spain and Sweden had the highest life expectancy among EU countries (over 83 years) while life expectancy was over 10 years lower in Bulgaria and Romania (Figure 3.1).

The pandemic led to a sharp widening of the life expectancy gap across EU countries, as the fall in life expectancy was much greater in Central and Eastern European countries that already had much lower life expectancy before the pandemic than most Western and Northern European countries. In many Central and Eastern European countries, the decline in life expectancy since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 erased at least temporarily all the gains from the previous decade if not longer (Figure 3.2).

Only two countries managed to register a small gain in life expectancy between 2019 and 2021 – Luxembourg and Norway. Other Nordic countries, along with Malta and Switzerland, also did relatively well by not experiencing any reduction or only a marginal reduction.

Some countries like Belgium, Italy and Spain had a huge reduction in life expectancy in 2020, but were able to recover most of the loss in 2021 as the number of deaths from COVID-19 and other causes fell. This was not the case in many Central and Eastern European countries where deaths from COVID-19 and other causes were much greater in 2021 than in 2020, precipitating further reductions in life expectancy. Bulgaria, the Slovak Republic, Latvia and Estonia had the greatest reduction in life expectancy in 2021, with a drop of at least two years (Eurostat, 2022<sup>[1]</sup>).

Looking at the life expectancy of people at age 65, the loss in 2020 and 2021 largely due to the pandemic erased at least temporarily the gains from the previous decade in many countries. On average across EU countries, life expectancy at age 65 was slightly lower in 2021 than in 2010 (19.3 years in 2021 compared with 19.4 years in 2010).

Women continue to live many years longer than men in all EU countries – 5.6 years on average across the EU in 2021. While the gender gap was narrowing before the pandemic, it has widened slightly since the beginning of the pandemic as COVID-19 mortality has generally been greater among men than women. However, the gender gap in healthy life expectancy is much smaller as women tend to spend a greater proportion of their lives with some health issues and activity limitations (see indicator “Healthy life expectancy”).

### Definition and comparability

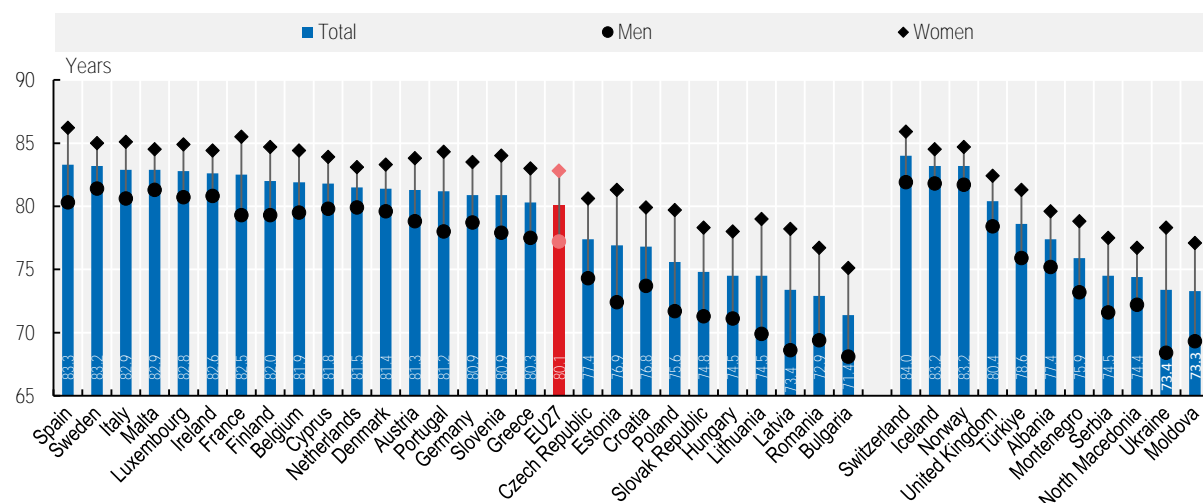
Life expectancy at birth measures the average number of years that a person can expect to live based on current mortality rates (age-specific death rates). However, the actual age-specific death rates of any particular birth cohort cannot be known in advance. If age-specific death rates are falling as was the case before the pandemic and can be expected to be the case once the pandemic is over, actual life spans will be, on average, higher than life expectancy calculated with current death rates.

## References

Eurostat (2022), “Life expectancy continued to decrease in 2021 in the EU”, *News release*, 6 May 2022, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20220506-2>.

[1]

Figure 3.1. Life expectancy at birth, by gender, 2021 (or nearest year)

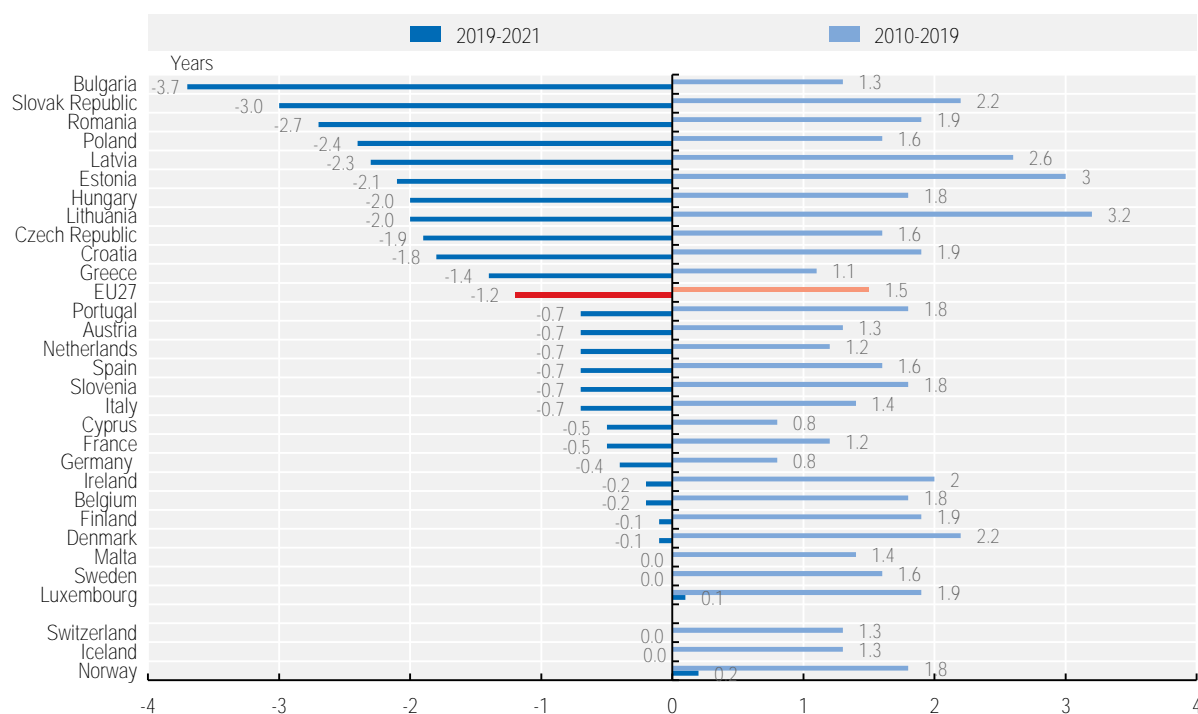


Note: The EU average is weighted. Data refer to 2020 for Ireland, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and the United Kingdom, and to 2019 for Moldova, Türkiye and Ukraine.

Source: Eurostat Database, complemented with OECD Health Statistic 2022 for the United Kingdom and Türkiye, and WHO for Moldova.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/uowhdr>

Figure 3.2. Gains or declines in life expectancy, 2019-21 and 2010-19



Note: The EU average is weighted. Data for 2021 in Ireland refer to 2020.

Source: Eurostat Database.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/ew9yjq>



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