

THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS IN TIMES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC: FRAGMENTATION VS. SOLIDARITY

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Abstract

The article analyzes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the European integration process, particularly focusing on its economic component. The pandemic effects were particularly severe in the Tourism and Hospitality and Aviation sectors, most affected by measures to combat the SARS-CoV-2 virus, such as confinement and border closures. Some of the main consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on European countries are explained according to a critical assessment of the success of some public intervention measures implemented by policy makers to address it. The research carried out highlighted important lessons: i) solidarity between the different EU Member States was fundamental to the success of the vaccination process; ii) better health increased labor supply and productivity, contributing decisively to economic growth in the EU; iii) neither the tourism nor aviation sectors were prepared to deal with major health-related crises, and iv) economic recovery will take several years.



Keywords

Enlargement, macroeconomic impacts, European integration, COVID-19 pandemic, solidarity.

Resumo

O artigo analisa o impacto da pandemia da COVID-19 no processo de integração europeia, centrando-se particularmente na sua vertente económica. Os efeitos da pandemia foram especialmente graves nos setores do turismo, hotelaria e aviação, os mais afetados pelas medidas de combate ao vírus SARS-CoV-2, tais como o confinamento e o encerramento das fronteiras. Algumas das principais consequências causadas pela crise da pandemia da COVID-19 nos países europeus são explicadas com base numa avaliação crítica do sucesso de algumas medidas de intervenção pública implementadas pelos decisores políticos para a enfrentar. A investigação realizada destacou lições importantes: i) a solidariedade entre os diferentes Estados-Membros da UE foi fundamental para o sucesso do processo de vacinação; ii) a melhoria da saúde aumentou a oferta de mão de obra e a produtividade, contribuindo decisivamente para o crescimento económico na UE; iii) nem o setor do turismo nem o da aviação estavam preparados para lidar com grandes crises relacionadas com a saúde; e iv) a recuperação económica levará vários anos.

Palavras-chave

Alargamento, impactos macroeconómicos, integração europeia, pandemia de COVID-19, solidariedade.

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Introduction

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19, caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Shortly thereafter, on March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic.

With greater or lesser intensity, all Member States of the European Union (EU) were affected by this pandemic. Its effects were particularly severe in the Tourism and Hospitality and Aviation sectors. Faced with the need to provide emergency response against the negative socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and the need to support countries' recovery, the EU and its Member States, implemented a series of measures to protect the health and well-being of its citizens, to strengthen national health systems and to limit the spread of the virus. The development, production and availability of vaccines and the implementation of public intervention policies to support employment, businesses and the economy became priorities.

The first measures taken by States to combat and control the COVID-19 pandemic were essentially measures to impose confinements, ban travel and close borders. These were political decisions that went against the common principles and values that guided the creation of the EU, as they limited the free movement of people, goods, services and capital within the European space (Duarte & Sol Murta, 2024). The limitation of fundamental rights during this period has been documented and research on this topic

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has highlighted how the assessment of impacts needs to account for the existing contexts and variations across the EU (Grogan, 2022).

Given this reality, this work aims to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the European integration process, particularly on the budgetary management of crises (Musiałkowska & Idczak, 2021). The methodology employed in this study is based on a descriptive statistical analysis of the macroeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on a geographically diverse set of EU Member States (Germany, Spain, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Sweden) selected to capture different economic structures, political contexts and levels of exposure to the vaccination process. The empirical approach is used to infer the main macroeconomic consequences of the pandemic in these Member States of the EU and, more particularly, its impact on both the Tourism and Hospitality and Aviation sectors. Our purpose will also be to ascertain whether, following the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the implementation of measures to mitigate and combat it, the budgetary effort carried out increased the risk of fragmentation of the EU or, on the contrary, opened doors for a new phase of European integration, supported by a basis of greater institutional and financial solidarity between the so-called “frugal” countries and the countries most indebted and affected by the pandemic.

The contribution of this work to the literature results not only from the fact that it enables a better understanding of the behavior of the Member States of the European Union in a crisis context, but also by allowing some lessons to be drawn for the future, namely about the way in which countries must coordinate and respond in pandemic situations.

The work is structured into five sections. In addition to this introduction, in section 2, the literature review is carried out. In section 3, the macroeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on European integration are analyzed. Its general impact on some Member States and, more particularly, on their Tourism, Hospitality and Aviation sectors is investigated. In section 4, a critical assessment of the policies implemented to combat the pandemic crisis is made and some lessons for the future are drawn. Finally, in section 5, the main conclusions of this research are presented.

Literature review

The economy of the COVID-19 pandemic, “Corononomics” as it is called by Eichengreen (2020), marked the year 2020 and beyond in a very significant way, and it is therefore pertinent to analyze its impact on the European integration process.

Given that this is a global public health problem, which has unexpectedly affected all countries, most of the initial work carried out on the topic focused fundamentally on the immediate and most visible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e., on the number of contagions, deaths and hospital capacity to provide health care in response to the disease (see, e.g., Altig et al., 2020, for the USA and the United Kingdom; Ataguba, 2020, for countries in the African continent or Chan, 2022, in the case of China), leaving the analysis of its macroeconomic effects largely unaddressed, namely in terms of product growth, public and private consumption, investment, exports and unemployment rate.



Even so, it is possible to find in the literature some important works that sought to investigate the macroeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in the European integration process³.

Starting from a counterfactual analysis developed from an ARIMA (Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average) prediction model, Duarte et al. (2022) examine the behavior of a set of macroeconomic variables (Gross Domestic Product (GDP), public debt, inflation rate, public deficit and unemployment rate) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic against a hypothetical situation without a pandemic in the EU-27 countries and, in particular, in four of its Member States – Germany, Spain, Italy and Portugal. As expected, the results point to significantly better performance of all variables in the four countries and the EU, had the COVID-19 pandemic crisis not existed. In a scenario without the pandemic, all countries would have higher levels of output, however, presenting relatively weaker economic growth rates when compared to the pandemic situation, namely in 2021 and 2022. The results also point to the occurrence of budget surpluses in Germany and Portugal, in 2020, 2021 and 2022, as well as a sharp reduction in Spanish public debt if the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak had not occurred. In 2021 and 2022, there would still be a lower inflation rate for the EU-27, Germany, Spain and Italy, after a very sharp rise in prices in 2020. With regard to the labor market, with the exception of Germany and the EU-27, where the unemployment rate would be relatively higher, especially in 2022, the other countries would record lower unemployment rates if, hypothetically, the pandemic context had not occurred.

Similar results were also found in studies carried out for other EU economies, as is the case, e.g., by Albu et al. (2020) and Radulescu et al. (2020), on the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania; Sanfelici (2020), for a socioeconomic analysis of the Italian response to the pandemic crisis; Pedauga et al. (2021), on the macroeconomic effects of the disease on the Spanish economy; and Silva and Duarte (2021), for the case of Portugal and the rest of the euro area, when they analyzed the macroeconomic consequences of a shock to the labor supply in the context of the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak.

Dukić et al. (2021) investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on GDP, unemployment and public debt of the EU, concluding that there is a strong correlation between these variables. However, they go further, stating that in addition to the economic crisis, there is a crisis in the EU's national health systems, which require significant investments. In this context, the authors consider that it is difficult to expect a more prominent economic recovery until the global pandemic is over. Their results also suggest that a few more years are needed for European countries to compensate for the economic losses caused by the pandemic, so that without greater cooperation and financial solidarity between Member States, it will be difficult for new advances to be made in the process of European integration.

Based on a set of interviews with public health experts from several EU Member States and officials from the European Commission, carried out between May 2020 and August 2020, Gontariuk et al. (2021) largely share the previous assessment, demonstrating that the EU's limited mandate in the field of health makes it difficult to take appropriate actions to prevent and combat outbreaks of infectious diseases, such as the COVID-19

³ A review of this literature can be found in Duarte & Sol Murta (2024), which we follow closely in this work.



pandemic. In the authors' view, the European Commission fulfilled its role of coordinating and supporting Member States, facilitating networks and information exchange. However, they point out that the political challenges underlying EU decision-making on health emergencies still make it difficult to have an aligned response. In fact, the expansion of EU institutions' powers on health governance, as a result of the pandemic, have been singled out as an ad-hoc deepening of European integration, beyond what is stated in the founding treaties (Books and Geyer, 2020).

Sapir (2020) investigates why the economies of southern EU countries have been more affected by the COVID-19 crisis than some northern European countries. For the author, the severity of confinement measures, the percentage of tourist activity in the economy and the quality of governance play a significant role in explaining differences in economic losses in different EU countries. Depending on the country groupings used for comparison, Sapir (2020) concluded that differences in GDP losses were between 30 and 50 percent due to the strictness of the lockdown, between 35 and 45 percent due to the quality of governance, and between 15 and 25 percent due to the weight of tourism in the economy. However, public debt did not play a relevant role, nevertheless suggesting that the European Central Bank's (ECB) pandemic emergency purchasing program was effective.

Sapir's (2020) conclusions are particularly important as they may have implications for the allocation of the so-called Recovery and Resilience Fund (FRR) between recovery and resilience expenditure. For the author, supporting recovery through a combination of demand and supply initiatives is important to ensure that countries recover as quickly as possible from the COVID-19 crisis, without causing too much damage to their economies. However, in many countries, especially in the Southern EU, hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis, the poor quality of their governments has had a negative impact on their economic resilience, as demonstrated by the relatively large size of their GDP shocks. In this sense, it is crucial that FRR programs also devote sufficient attention (and naturally resources) to improving the quality of governance in these countries. This approach is not new, if we consider the support the EU grants to candidate countries to improve governance systems, and also if we consider the application of governance-related conditionality in the EU's external relations, namely on the Development Assistance. Internal conditionality, nevertheless, is politically harder to impose.

More recently, Duarte et al. (2023) coordinated an investigation carried out by a vast group of academics belonging to universities and research centers from several European countries, and also from other continents, where they sought to study, from different dimensions (political, social, economic, philosophical) the process of European integration in its double aspect of crisis and resilience in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The main objective of this research was to bring together in a single work four different perspectives for European integration in a post-pandemic context: i) the perspective of Euro Zone countries; ii) the perspective of candidate countries to the Euro Zone; iii) the "vision" to the East of the candidate countries to the European Union, and iv) the view of the rest of the world. Most contributions pointed to a shift in the European integration process in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, based on greater solidarity and economic and institutional cooperation between the different Member States, rather than a possible fragmentation of the European community space.



Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis on European Integration

The COVID-19 pandemic that hit Europe and the world at the beginning of 2020 led European countries to close their borders, preventing the normal flows of goods, services, people and capital. In doing so, member states risked common principles and values that guided the creation of the EU, namely the functioning of the common market. Created by the Treaty of Rome in 1958, the EU common market aimed to liberalize trade between member states with the purpose of increasing economic prosperity and contributing to “an ever-closer union between the peoples of Europe”⁴. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has brought back some obstacles to the four freedoms (free movement of goods, services, people and capital). Companies temporarily closed, causing huge endogenous negative shocks, both in supply and demand, with devastating macroeconomic effects, firstly in the production and consumption of countries, particularly from the European Community.

The methodology employed in this study is based on a descriptive statistical analysis of the macroeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on a geographically diverse set of EU Member States (Germany, Spain, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Sweden) selected to capture different economic structures, political contexts and levels of exposure to the vaccination process. Using harmonized data from Eurostat and from European Center for Disease Prevention and Control, the analysis examines key macroeconomic indicators as well as sector-specific metrics. We construct and present figures that illustrate the behavior of macroeconomic variables and tourism and the performance of the tourism and aviation sectors over the period 2015-2024, thereby covering several years before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. By comparing these trends, the study identifies cross-country differences in the magnitude of the shock and the subsequent recovery.

The empirical approach is used to infer the main macroeconomic consequences of the pandemic in these Member States of the EU and, more particularly, its impact on both the Tourism and Hospitality and Aviation sectors. A critical analysis is then deployed to place these economic results on the literature on European integration and the expected results in terms of potential fragmentation of the political and economic landscape of the European Union.

General Impact

To better understand the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on European integration, let us start by analyzing the real GDP evolution (at constant prices), of some European countries in comparison with the set of twenty-seven EU countries (EU- 27) and the Euro Zone.

The countries were chosen considering their geographic diversity, but also political and economic specificities. It was therefore decided to include countries from Southern Europe (Portugal, Italy and Spain), Central Europe (Germany), Eastern Europe (Poland) and Northern Europe (Sweden) in the analysis. In addition to Portugal, which was the Southern European country with the highest vaccination rate against COVID-19 in 2021,

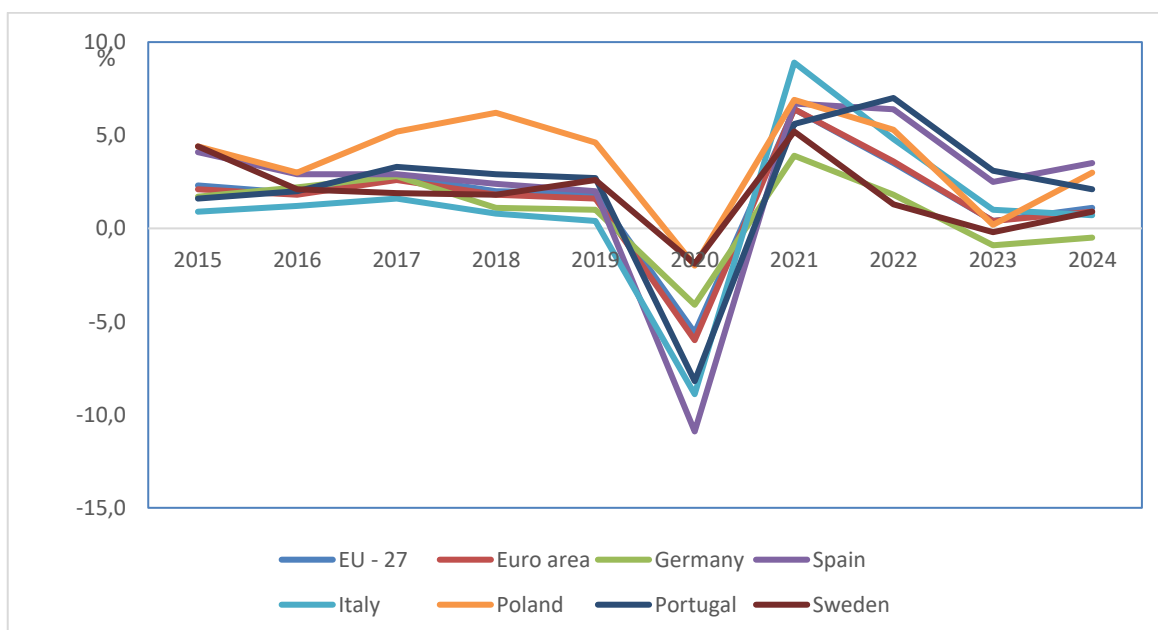
⁴ For more details, see Duarte & Sol Murta (2024).



we included Italy and Spain because these were the countries that first suffered the impact of the disease and had the highest number of registered cases in the first three waves of the pandemic. The choice of Germany was due to the fact that it is the economy with the greatest capacity and financial availability to carry out economic policy measures to mitigate the negative effects caused by the pandemic. A somewhat similar decision guided the choice of Sweden, and this country was included in the sample also because the Swedish welfare state is traditionally characterized by a high level of social protection, based on universal coverage and solidarity, by a vast public sector, a labor market largely supported by collective agreements and by recording relatively high rates of economic growth. We therefore sought to determine whether these structures were strongly affected by the pandemic crisis or, on the contrary, demonstrated great resilience in the face of the pandemic situation. Poland, on the other hand, was included in the analysis as an Eastern European country where recent political divisions have created major obstacles to the vaccination process against the SARS-CoV-2 virus. As a comparative reference, we also included the EU-27 and the Euro Zone in the analysis.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the real GDP growth rate for this group of countries between 2015 and 2024. Table A.1 in the appendix shows the corresponding real GDP growth rates.

Figure 1. GDP – real growth rate (%)



Source: Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/nama_10_gdp).

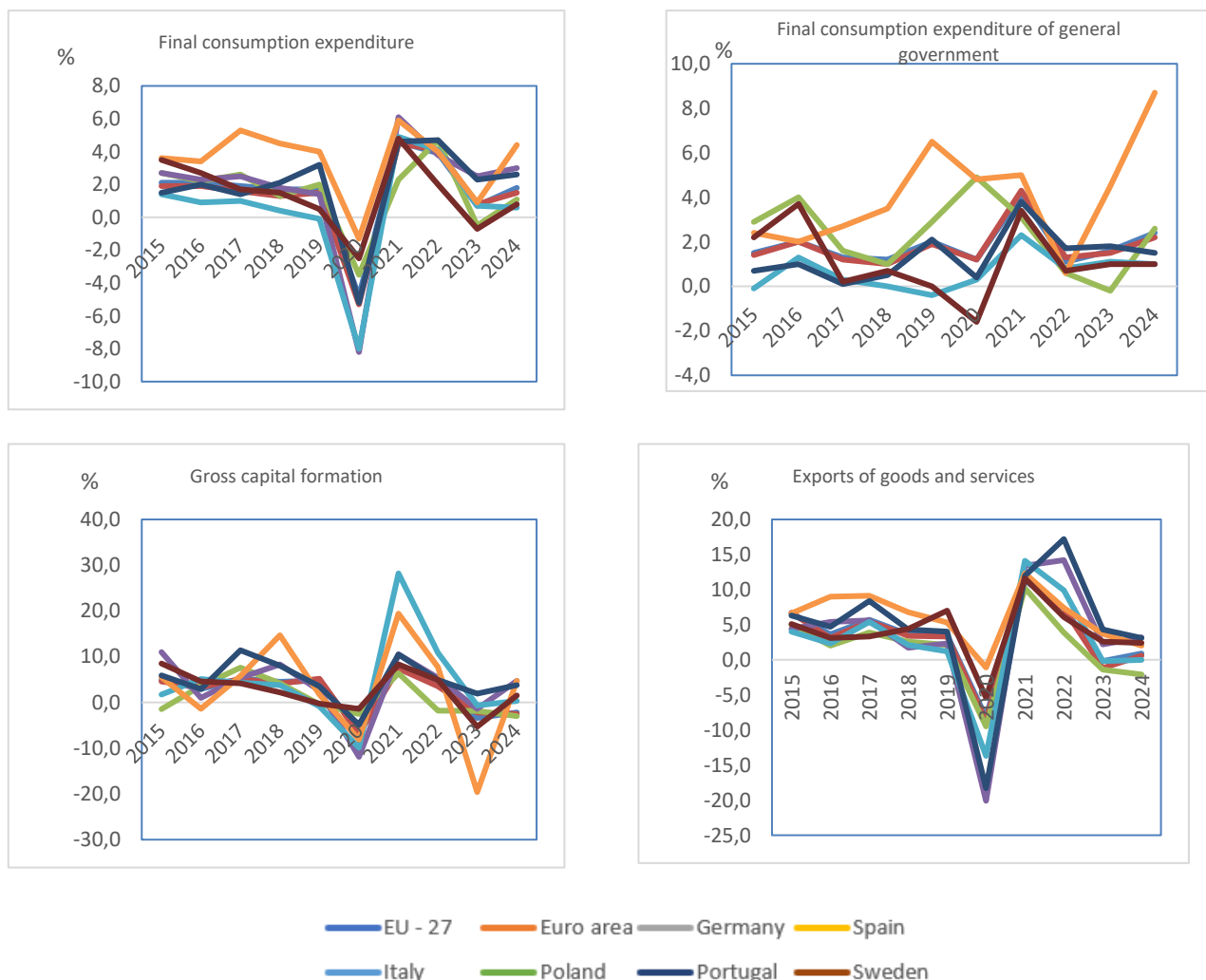
Looking at Figure 1, it is clear that the year 2020, corresponding to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, was marked by a sharp decline in real GDP, and consequently in living standards, across all the countries analyzed. Spain recorded the steepest contraction, with real GDP falling by 11.2 percent followed by Italy (-9 percent) and Portugal (-8.3 percent). In 2021, all countries returned to a positive growth trajectory,



with Italy showing the strongest performance, registering an 8.3 percent increase in real GDP compared with the previous year. In 2022, although all countries continued to grow, Portugal was the only one to accelerate, posting a real GDP growth rate of 6. percent. By 2024, GDP growth has stabilized across countries, with Germany experiencing a decline, while Spain, Poland and Portugal recorded the highest growth rates, although data from that period reflects other structural and geopolitical conditionalities impacting the European economies, including the war in Ukraine.

For a more detailed analysis of all countries covered, Figure 2 shows the evolution of the various components of real GDP (private consumption, public consumption, investment/gross capital formation, exports), excluding imports. Again, the corresponding annual rates of change are shown in the appendix, in Tables A.2 to A.5.

Figure 2. GDP main components – real growth rate (%)

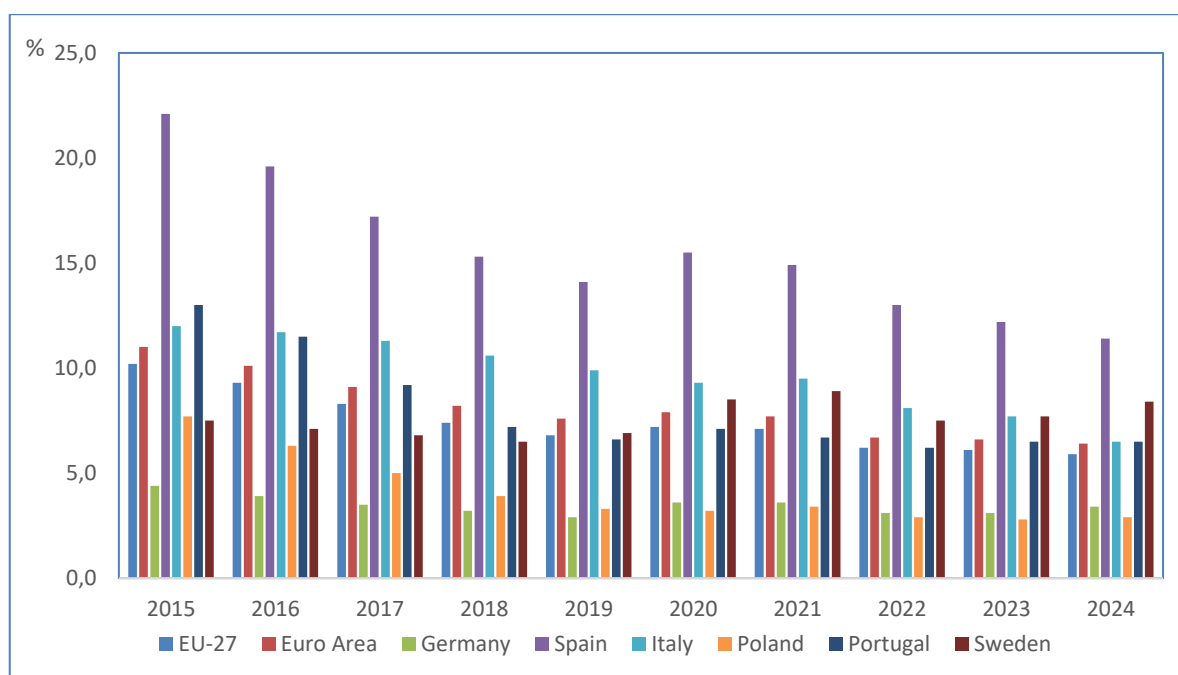


Source: Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/nama_10_gdp).



As can be seen, in general and for the different countries presented, the components of real GDP fell sharply in 2020. The strongest declines were observed in the exports of Spain (-20.1 percent), Portugal (-18.6 percent) and Italy (-13.5 percent). This behavior can be explained by the fact that these countries are highly dependent on tourism. The lockdowns, travel bans and other measures taken in the face of the pandemic have dramatically affected all tourism and travel activities and contributed to this negative impact on exports. The only component of real GDP that did not decline (with the exception of Sweden) was government consumption. The economic policies adopted to support households and the economy naturally led to a substantial increase in real public consumption in most countries. It should be noted that in Germany and Poland, public consumption even grew by more than 4 percent in both 2020 and 2021. In Poland, public consumption also increased in 2023 and 2024, at a level higher than in the other countries, possibly due to its proximity to the war in Ukraine. Finally, Figure 3 shows the evolution of the unemployment rate in the countries mentioned. Table A.6 in the appendix documents the figures for this variable.

Figure 3. Unemployment rate (%)



Source: Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/une_rt_a).

As expected, the unemployment rate (number of unemployed/labor force) increased across the board in 2020, but still only slightly, considering the brutality of the negative shock caused by the pandemic situation. Once again, one of the strongest effects was recorded in Sweden (150 basis points). Given the 'protective' nature of the Swedish state, this result is not surprising. It could possibly be explained by the degree of severity and surprise of the shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caught even public decision-makers 'off guard' in countries that are traditionally considered to have more of

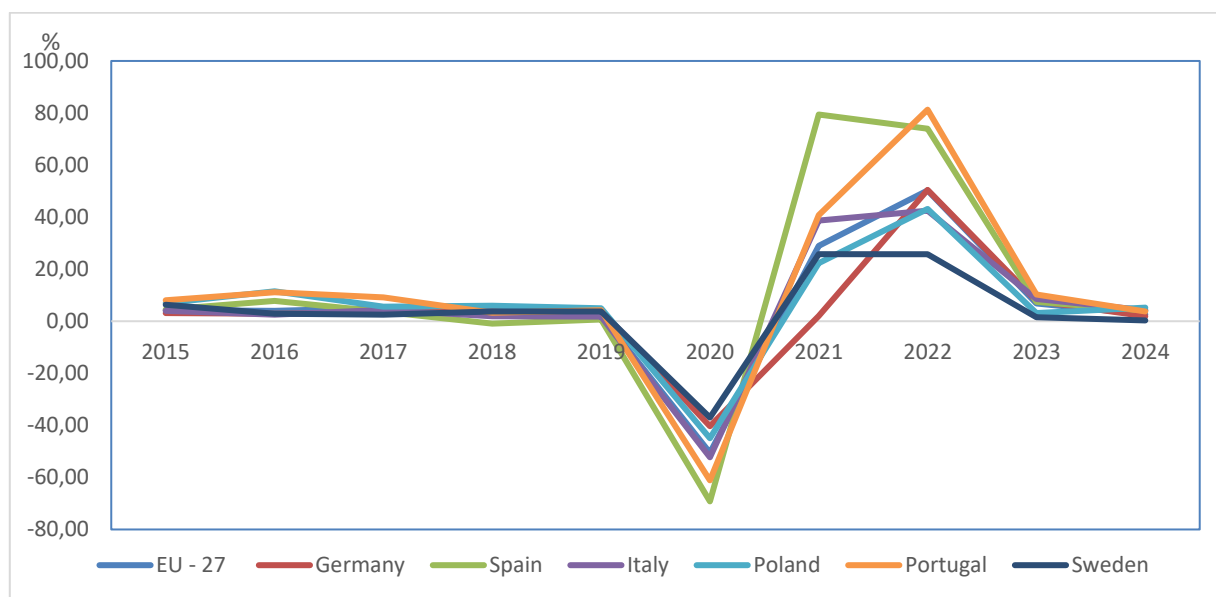


a welfare state. Sweden is seen as the model where the welfare state has taken the most sophisticated form (Bernitz, 2007), and it was therefore expected that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market in this country would be minimized, which in fact and unexpectedly did not happen.

Impact on the tourism, hospitality and aviation sector

As we noted in the previous section, the real GDP of the various European countries analyzed fell significantly in 2020, especially the exports component. This was largely due to the lockdowns and border closures that hampered tourism activities, both domestically and abroad. Among the various countries analyzed, Portugal, Spain and Italy, the southern European countries where tourism is predominant were the most affected, as can be seen in Figure 4 (and corresponding Table A.7 in the appendix) through the analysis of the number of nights spent in tourist establishments. As might be expected, after the measures taken to alleviate the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was also in these countries that tourist activity grew most, in the years that followed.

Figure 4. Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments



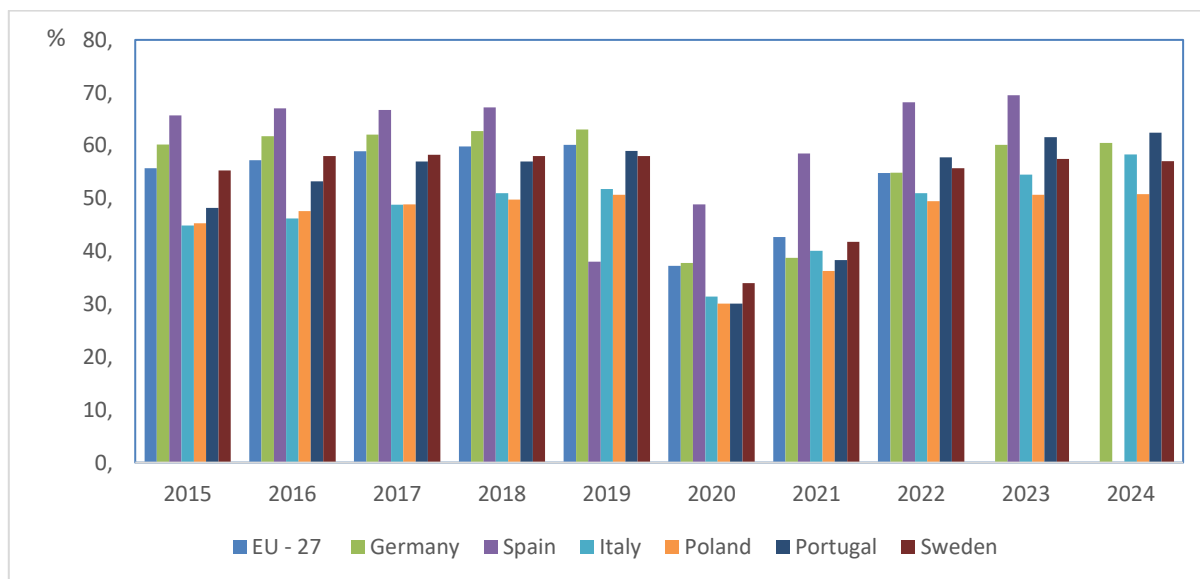
Source: Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/tour_occ_ninat).

In line with this behavior, the occupancy rate of tourist establishments also fell sharply in 2020, as can be seen in Figure 5 (and Table A.8 in the appendix). On the other hand, 2021 and 2022 were years of recovery for tourism in most of the countries analyzed, but there is no doubt that the new growth trend in this sector of activity was more pronounced in the three southern European countries, where the vaccination rates and the set of measures to mitigate the pandemic crisis were also more successful. In fact, this seems to suggest that part of the reasons why vaccination was such a priority in



some countries is due to human health improvement, but also to economic performance, as vaccination schemes would allow for a more structured reopening of tourist-related economic activities.

Figure 5. Net occupancy rate of bed-places and bedrooms in hotels and similar accommodation



Source: Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/tin00180).

As far as the aviation sector is concerned, the measures initially implemented to deal with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, namely lockdowns and border closures, have had disastrous consequences, at least in the first phase (2020), as can be easily seen by analyzing Figure 6 (and Table A.9 in the appendix), which shows the rate of change in reported air passenger traffic by country.

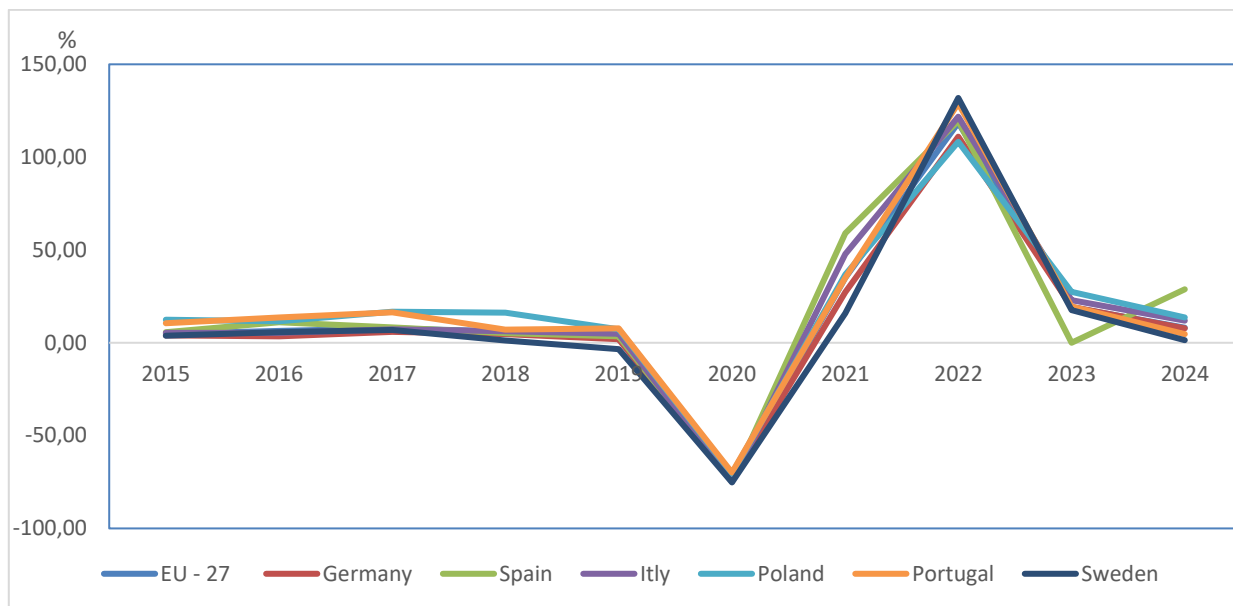
Air passenger transport fell sharply in 2020 (consider that there was still no pandemic in the first months of 2020), with some recovery in 2021 and spectacular growth in 2022. Of all the countries analyzed, Portugal was the country with the smallest decrease in the number of passengers in 2020, possibly due to its peripheral geographical position in Europe and its strong links with emigrant communities and African Portuguese-speaking countries (PALOP).

In 2022, Portugal was also the country with the highest growth in passenger numbers, a clear reflection of the strong growth in tourism and the brand image that "Portugal is in fashion". In recent years, tourism in Portugal has expanded beyond the traditional offer known as the three "S" tourism (Sun, Sea and Sand), attracting the interest of a wider range of tourists who visit the country not only for its long white sandy beaches and sunshine, but also for its gastronomy, history and urban heritage, culture, leisure, religious activities, outdoor activities and adventure in perfect harmony with nature (Duarte, 2015; Duarte et al., 2024). Therefore, it is not surprising that once the pandemic was over and Portugal had the highest vaccination rate in Europe, this was seen as a sign of safety for visitors. The impact was evident as these measures made Portugal one of



the most sought-after destinations in Europe for many people from all corners of the world, with a very positive direct impact on the number of flights landing at Portuguese airports, but also on the number of overnight stays and stays in the various types of tourist accommodation offered by Portugal.

Figure 6. Air Passenger Transport Growth Rate, by Reporting Country



Source: Authors' own work using data from Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/avia_paoc).

Public Intervention Measures Implemented by the European Union

All EU Member States have been affected by the brutal negative shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, following the WHO declaration on January 30, 2020, of the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, and shortly thereafter, on March 11, 2020, of COVID-19 as a pandemic, the EU and its Member States implemented a package of measures to protect the health and well-being of its citizens, strengthen national healthcare systems, and limit the spread of the virus. Simultaneously, public intervention strategies were defined to support employment, businesses and the economy and work was being done on future recovery (Duarte & Sol Murta, 2024).

Public Policies to Combat the Pandemic

The first measures taken by States to combat and control the COVID-19 pandemic were essentially measures to impose confinements, ban travel, and close borders⁵. The development, production and availability of vaccines against COVID-19 has also become a priority. In this sense, on June 18, 2020, the European Commission was mandated by

⁵ For this and other European Union responses to COVID-19, see Duarte and Sol Murta (2024).



Member States to begin talks for the joint acquisition of vaccines. It was clearly a new phase of European cooperation and integration, more based on solidarity than on a fragmentation of the EU between the so-called “frugal” countries and the most affected and indebted countries. Initially defending a hard line in the negotiations of the Economic Recovery Fund and the community budget, the “frugal” countries (Netherlands, Austria, Denmark and Sweden) would have a lot to lose with a possible fragmentation of the European single market, or if eventually free circulation of goods, services, people and capital within the community space would (definitely) cease to exist. Although these countries are net contributors to the community budget, they are also among the main beneficiaries of the internal market. In these circumstances, in the discussions on what should European aid for post-pandemic reconstruction be, accounts of these benefits were rarely considered (Gandra, 2020). In turn, helping the most indebted countries affected by the pandemic such as Portugal, Spain and Italy became imperative and necessary, since countries with greater budgetary capacity could inject massive stimulus into their economies and state aid to their companies, thus accentuating asymmetries and the risk of fragmentation in the EU.

Linking economic policies with public health and regional and global solidarity issues, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic evidenced the pressures bearing on national and European governance systems alike. At the end of December 2020, the vaccination process began in Europe. By June 2022, eighteen months later, nine in ten adults (86 percent) of the EU population were fully vaccinated against COVID-19. However, as it was a voluntary process, adherence by the population was not the same in all countries. In Table 1, it can be seen for the set of countries in our analysis and EU-27 what percentage of the population was vaccinated with at least one dose or with complete vaccination (available) at the end of 2021, one year after the start of the process⁶.

Table 1. Vaccination process - % of the population vaccinated at the end of 2021

Vaccination	EU-27	Germany	Spain	Italy	Poland	Portugal	Swede
% of population with at least one dose	73.0	75.4	84.3	81.3	57.6	91.8	70.7
% of population fully vaccinated	68.4	71.1	75.1	75.0	55.8	83.5	68.4

Source: *European Center for Disease Prevention and Control.*

As can be seen, Portugal is the country where the population most adheres to vaccination, followed by Spain and Italy. Of this group of countries, Poland and Sweden are those with the lowest vaccination rate.

In March 2021, the European Health Union Program was created, an investment of 5.3 billion euros with the aim of creating stronger and more accessible health systems and paving the way for a European Health Union. Post-COVID health integration policies have been spearheading the establishment of the necessary regulatory and inspection bodies

⁶ More details about the vaccination process in some of these countries, at earlier stages, can be found in Duarte & Sol Murta (2022).



and creating the financial incentives through programmatic funding. This evidences the well-studied trend in the EU to use crises as drivers of European integration (Dinan, Nugent and Paterson, 2017), with member states mandating the Commission to propose common measure to ensure the political and economic integrity of European policies.

On July 1, 2021, the EU also created the so-called "common European digital certificate for COVID". This certificate was in force until June 2023 and was intended to facilitate the free and safe movement of the population between countries. To support families and companies, on April 9, 2020, the EU created an instrument (540 billion euros) of temporary support to mitigate the risks of unemployment in an emergency situation (SURE) and thus help workers, companies and Member States. On 21 July 2020, Member States reached an agreement on Next Generation EU, a €750 billion recovery package, to help the EU face the crisis caused by the pandemic. They also agreed on a long-term EU budget for 2021-2027 of €1074.3 billion to support investment in digital and green transitions and resilience⁷. Portugal's first Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR) was presented in April 2021. The PRR is expected to boast significantly the economic recovery of Europe, in the short term, but most significantly in the medium to long-term, as these projects aimed at renovating infrastructure and preparing the European for the digital and green challenges.

The ECB began, in March 2020, the pandemic emergency asset purchase program (PEPP), totaling 1850 billion euros, with the aim of reducing loan costs and increasing the granting of credit in the euro area. These net asset purchases ended in April 2022. In 2021, the ECB also carried out four emergency extended-term refinancing operations to support the liquidity of the euro area banking system and preserve the smooth functioning of the money market, among other measures. These measures contributed to stabilizing the European financial system, creating sustainable bases for the future recovery of confidence and investment, two fundamental variables for the resumption of economic growth in the EU.

Critical Assessment of Policy Success: some lessons for the future

A critical assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on some European countries and the set of public intervention measures implemented in the meantime to mitigate and combat its negative effects and, in this way, allow the resumption of economic growth and the process of European integration allows us to draw some important lessons for the future. Specifically, on the common principles and values that guided the creation of the EU, namely on the free movement of people, goods, services and capital, and also on guaranteeing freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law, and promoting peace and stability.

Firstly, the political-economic solidarity achieved between the various EU Member States following the COVID-19 pandemic was fundamental for the success of the vaccination process and for helping the most affected and indebted countries. Solidarity without which it would have been very difficult to overcome the existing public health problem and combat the negative economic effects caused by the widespread spread of the SARS-

⁷ For more details, see, e.g., Fernández et al. (2023), Camisão & Vila Maior (2023) and Sebastião (2023).



CoV-2 virus. This solidarity contrasted sharply with the post-2008 financial crisis measures of austerity imposed on the most indebted countries at the time, and reinvigorated the commitment to EU integration across Europe and reinforced the international standing of the EU.

Secondly, better health and the promotion of digitalization as a basis for recovery and exit from the crisis within the scope of the European plan Next Generation EU has made it possible to increase the supply of labor and productivity, thus contributing decisively to the maintenance of employment levels in the EU, particularly, in the Member States initially most affected by the pandemic. Digitalization was a key issue in the first von der Leyen Commission, set to push the Union's economic recovery and to reposition the Union in a age of great power competition driven by innovation in the digital field and its supporting infrastructures.

Third, neither the aviation sector nor the European hospitality and tourism industry in general were prepared to deal with major health-related crises, so public intervention measures implemented jointly by the EU and Member States were extremely important for these sectors to be able to maintain their jobs, resume their activity and, in some cases, restructure the form and mode of business they had carried out until then.

Finally, although as of 2021 there were already signs of resumption of growth in some Member States, the widespread economic recovery will still take several years and will be gradual. Given the context of war currently occurring in Ukraine and in the Middle East, and in the event of the emergence of new variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, it is essential to maintain solidarity, cooperation and coordination of economic and social policies between the various Member States and quickly advance the EU enlargement process to the East.

Conclusion

All countries in the world have been affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Member States of the European Union were no exception. It was effectively a negative shock of global dimension, both on the supply and demand sides, with macroeconomic impacts on all countries and sectors of activity. However, its effects were particularly intense in the Tourism and Hospitality and Aviation sectors, which were most affected by globally accepted public intervention measures to mitigate and combat the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which included confinement, travel bans and border closures. These political decisions were, however, contrary to the common principles and values that guided the creation of the EU, namely the free movement of people, goods, services and capital, but also the guarantee of freedom, equality, rule of law and promotion of stability.

Based on this "political-institutional dilemma", this work's main objective was to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on the European integration process. To this end, a descriptive statistical analysis was carried out for a geographically distinct set of EU Member States (Germany, Spain, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Sweden). The analysis revealed that, coinciding with the first wave of the pandemic, the year 2020 was particularly critical in terms of the behavior of macroeconomic variables. Most countries



experienced negative real growth rates, sharp reductions in private consumption, investment and exports, as well as strong disturbances in the functioning of the labor market and an increase in the unemployment rate.

As would be expected, the negative effects of the pandemic were felt more intensely in the sectors of activity where the public health measures taken had a direct and immediate impact on their functioning. Specifically, the Tourism and Hospitality and Aviation sectors. Among the Member States analyzed, the most affected were the countries of Southern Europe, whose specialization and economy are heavily dependent on these sectors, thus increasing the risks of greater asymmetries and fragmentation in the EU. Still, everything seems to indicate that the institutional and financial solidarity implemented by the various EU Member States to face the pandemic shock have eliminated this destabilizing potential of the European integration process.

From the research carried out, it was also possible to draw four important lessons for the future of European integration: i) cooperation between the various EU Member States was fundamental to the success of the vaccination process for the majority of the population, cooperation without which it would have been very difficult to mitigate the negative human and economic effects caused by the pandemic crisis; ii) better health increased labor supply and productivity, contributing decisively to economic growth within the EU; iii) neither the European hotel and tourism industry in general, nor the aviation sector were prepared to deal with major public health crises, and iv) economic recovery may take a few years and will certainly be gradual, so that before the context of war in Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas armed conflict, or the possible emergence of new variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, it is essential to maintain solidarity and cooperation between the various Member States and move quickly towards EU enlargement process to the East.

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Appendix

Table A.1. GDP – real growth rate (%)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
EU - 27	2,3	1,9	2,8	2,0	1,9	-5,6	6,4	3,5	0,4	1,1
Euro Area	2,1	1,8	2,6	1,8	1,6	-6,0	6,4	3,6	0,4	0,9
Germany	1,7	2,2	2,8	1,1	1,0	-4,1	3,9	1,8 ^p	-0,9 ^p	-0,5 ^p
Spain	4,1	2,9	2,9	2,4	2,0	-10,9	6,7	6,4	2,5 ^p	3,5 ^p
Italy	0,9	1,2	1,6	0,8	0,4	-8,9	8,9	4,8	1,0	0,7
Poland	4,4	3,0	5,2	6,2	4,6	-2,0	6,9	5,3	0,2	3,0
Portugal	1,6	2,0	3,3	2,9	2,7	-8,2	5,6	7,0	3,1	2,1 ^p
Sweden	4,4	2,1	1,9	1,8	2,6	-1,9	5,2	1,3	-0,2	0,9

Note: p - provisional.

Source: Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/nama_10_gdp).

Table A.2. Final consumption expenditure – real growth rate (%)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
EU - 27	2,1	2,1	1,9	1,7	1,7	-4,8	4,6	3,9	0,7	1,8
Euro Area	1,9	1,9	1,6	1,3	1,5	-5,3	4,5	4,1	0,8	1,5
Germany	2,7	2,2	2,6	1,3	2,0	-3,5	2,3	4,7 ^p	-0,5 ^p	1,1 ^p
Spain	2,7	2,3	2,5	1,8	1,4	-8,2	6,1	3,8	2,5 ^p	3,0 ^p
Italy	1,4	0,9	1,0	0,4	-0,1	-8,0	4,9	4,1	0,7	0,6
Poland	3,6	3,4	5,3	4,5	4,0	-1,3	5,9	4,0	0,9	4,4
Portugal	1,5	2,0	1,4	2,1	3,2	-5,2	4,6	4,7	2,3	2,6 ^p
Sweden	3,5	2,7	1,7	1,5	0,5	-2,5	4,8	2,0	-0,7	0,8

Note: p - provisional.

Source: Eurostat.

Table A.3. Final consumption expenditure of general government -- real growth rate (%)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
EU - 27	1,5	2,0	1,3	1,2	2,0	1,2	4,1	1,1	1,6	2,4
Euro Area	1,4	2,0	1,2	1,0	1,9	1,2	4,3	1,3	1,5	2,2
Germany	2,9	4,0	1,6	1,0	2,9	4,9	3,1	0,6 ^p	-0,2 ^p	2,6 ^p
Spain	1,9	0,9	1,0	2,1	2,2	3,5	3,6	0,8	4,5 ^p	2,9 ^p
Italy	-0,1	1,3	0,3	0,0	-0,4	0,3	2,3	0,8	1,1	1,0
Poland	2,4	2,0	2,7	3,5	6,5	4,8	5,0	0,6	4,5	8,7
Portugal	0,7	1,0	0,1	0,5	2,1	0,4	3,8	1,7	1,8	1,5 ^p
Sweden	2,2	3,7	0,2	0,7	0,0	-1,6	3,4	0,7	1,0	1,0

Note: p - provisional.

Source: Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/nama_10_gdp).

Table A.4. Gross capital formation – real growth rate (%)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
EU - 27	4,9	2,9	5,2	4,5	4,8	-6,4	8,3	3,9	-3,4	-2,2
Euro Area	4,6	3,3	5,1	4,1	5,2	-6,9	7,4	3,5	-2,2	-2,5
Germany	-1,5	3,6	7,6	4,2	-0,4	-2,5	6,4	-1,8 ^p	-1,9 ^p	-3,0 ^p
Spain	11,0	1,0	5,4	8,3	2,6	-11,9	10,5	5,4	-1,4 ^p	4,7 ^p
Italy	1,7	5,1	4,3	3,8	-0,9	-9,9	28,2	10,8	-0,7	0,3
Poland	5,5	-1,4	5,8	14,7	1,7	-8,1	19,4	7,7	-19,6	4,7
Portugal	5,9	2,9	11,4	8,0	3,5	-4,9	10,5	4,9	1,9	3,8 ^p
Sweden	8,5	4,6	4,2	2,2	-0,3	-1,4	8,3	4,9	-5,3	1,5

Note: p - provisional.

Source: Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/nama_10_gdp).

**Table A.5.** Exports of goods and services --- real growth rate (%)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
EU - 27	6,6	3,6	5,7	3,6	3,5	-8,2	11,3	7,3	-0,2	0,9
Euro Area	6,7	3,1	5,5	3,4	3,3	-8,7	11,5	7,3	-1,2	0,6
Germany	4,9	2,0	3,9	2,6	2,1	-9,5	10,2	3,9 ^p	-1,4 ^p	-2,1 ^p
Spain	4,4	5,4	5,6	1,7	2,3	-20,1	13,4	14,2	2,2 ^p	3,2 ^p
Italy	4,0	2,3	5,4	2,1	1,2	-13,7	14,1	9,9	-0,2	0,0
Poland	6,6	9,0	9,1	6,8	5,3	-1,1	12,3	7,4	3,7	2,0
Portugal	6,3	4,7	8,4	4,3	4,0	-18,3	12,0	17,2	4,3	3,1 ^p
Sweden	5,1	3,1	3,3	4,4	7,0	-5,4	11,6	6,1	2,6	2,4

Note: p - provisional.

Source: Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/nama_10_gdp).

Table A.6. Unemployment rate (% of population in the labour force)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
EU - 27	10,2	9,3	8,3	7,4	6,8	7,2	7,1	6,2	6,1	5,9
Euro Area	11,0	10,1	9,1	8,2	7,6	7,9	7,7	6,7	6,6	6,4
Germany	4,4	3,9	3,5	3,2	2,9	3,6	3,6	3,1	3,1	3,4
Spain	22,1	19,6	17,2	15,3	14,1	15,5	14,9	13,0	12,2	11,4
Italy	12,0	11,7	11,3	10,6	9,9	9,3	9,5	8,1	7,7	6,5
Poland	7,7	6,3	5,0	3,9	3,3	3,2	3,4	2,9	2,8	2,9
Portugal	13,0	11,5	9,2	7,2	6,6	7,1	6,7	6,2	6,5	6,5
Sweden	7,5	7,1	6,8	6,5	6,9	8,5	8,9	7,5	7,7	8,4

Source: Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/une_rt_a).

Table A.7. Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments - growth rate (%)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
EU - 27	4,22	4,01	5,14	3,39	2,28	-	28,94	50,24	6,84	2,67
Euro Area	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	7,09	2,61
Germany	3,14	2,86	3,17	4,58	4,15	-	2,05	50,47	7,75	1,90
Spain	4,52	7,75	3,57	-0,90	0,62	-	79,42	73,98	7,39	4,16
Italy	4,00	2,57	4,38	1,95	1,84	-	38,73	42,48	8,53	4,25
Poland	6,99	11,45	5,65	5,94	5,04	-	22,31	43,15	3,16	5,23
Portugal	8,08	11,10	9,12	3,29	4,28	-	40,74	81,29	10,32	3,75
Sweden	6,37	2,92	2,53	3,70	3,81	-	25,73	25,74	1,54	0,34

Note: nd - not available.

Source: Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/tour_occ_ninat).

Table A.8. Net occupancy rate of bed-places and bedrooms in hotels and similar accommodation (%)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
EU - 27	55,72	57,22	58,93	59,86	60,11	37,26	42,69	54,78	59,22	59,92
Euro Area	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	55,76	60,61	61,41
Germany	60,23	61,80	62,07	62,72	63,04	37,80	38,78	54,89	60,17	60,52
Spain	61,97	65,72	67,07	66,77	67,22	38,00	48,86	58,52	68,17	69,52
Italy	44,90	46,20	48,80	51,00	51,80	31,40	40,10	51,00	54,50	58,30
Poland	45,30	47,60	48,90	49,80	50,70	30,10	36,30	49,50	50,70	50,80
Portugal	48,20	53,24	56,98	56,98	58,98	30,11	38,33	57,76	61,60	62,46
Sweden	55,27	58,00	58,27	58,00	58,00	34,00	41,81	55,71	57,47	57,08

Note: nd - not available.

Source: Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/tin00180).

**Table A.9.** Air Passenger Transport Growth Rate, by Reporting Country (%)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
EU - 27	4,93	6,34	7,70	6,12	3,90	-	35,07	118,48	19,13	8,16
Euro Area	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd
Germany	4,02	3,48	5,83	4,72	1,95	-	27,34	111,02	19,30	7,71
Spain	5,62	11,00	8,23	5,14	3,47	-	59,00	119,51	0,00	28,76
Italy	5,37	5,34	7,31	6,27	4,77	-	47,78	121,78	22,98	11,98
Poland	12,42	11,62	16,79	16,14	7,25	-	36,66	108,26	27,50	13,71
Portugal	10,58	13,68	16,47	7,02	7,82	-	35,04	128,95	19,43	4,73

Note: nd – not available.

Source: Authors' own work using data from Eurostat (DOI: 10.2908/avia_paoc).