

## The effects of the pandemic on the demography of players in Europe

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### 1. Introduction

The 59th Monthly Report presents the results of the annual census of players active in clubs from 31 men's European top divisions. This survey has been carried out by the research group of the CIES Football Observatory since 2009. For 2020, the sample was made up of 12,088 footballers from 479 teams (25.2 players per club).

To be included, players had to be present on the 1st of October of the year of reference in the first team squad of the clubs analysed (or on the 20th of October for 2020). Moreover, they had to have already played in domestic league games during the current season or, this being not the case, to have played matches in adult championships during each of the two preceding seasons (B-teams not included). The second and third goalkeepers were taken into account in all cases.

The typical player profile of a footballer in the 31 championships analysed is a 26-year-old man, with a height of 182.2cm, present in the first team squad of its employer club for about two years and four months and having, in over half of the cases, already migrated abroad within the framework of his football career.

Figure 1: study sample (2020)

			Players	Clubs	Players per club
big-5	ESP	Primera Division	520	20	26.0
	ENG	Premier League	509	20	25.5
	GER	Bundesliga	457	18	25.4
	ITA	Serie A	563	20	28.2
	FRA	Ligue 1	514	20	25.7
next-5	POR	Primeira Liga	474	18	26.3
	RUS	Premier League	411	16	25.7
	BEL	Pro League	472	18	26.2
	UKR	Premier League	349	14	24.9
	NED	Eredivisie	420	18	23.3
middle-10	TUR	Süper Lig	539	21	25.7
	AUT	Bundesliga	288	12	24.0
	DEN	Superliga	278	12	23.2
	SCO	Premier League	293	12	24.4
	CZE	Czech Liga	451	18	25.1
	CYP	1. Division	345	14	24.6
	SUI	Super League	250	10	25.0
	GRE	Super League 1	369	14	26.4
	SRB	Super Liga	513	20	25.7
	CRO	1. HNL	263	10	26.3
last-11	SWE	Allsvenskan	399	16	24.9
	NOR	Eliteserien	387	16	24.2
	ISR	Ligat ha'Al	317	14	22.6
	BLR	Premier League	376	16	23.5
	BUL	First League	334	14	23.9
	ROM	Liga I	433	16	27.1
	POL	Ekstraklasa	427	16	26.7
	SVK	Super Liga	283	12	23.6
	SVN	1. SNL	246	10	24.6
	HUN	NB I	305	12	25.4
	FIN	Veikkausliiga	303	12	25.3

## 2. More young and debutant players

One of the principal changes observed in 2020 following the pandemic is the increase in the proportion of very young players in teams' squads. Between 2009 and 2019, footballers under 19 years of age at the time of the survey represented, on average, 3.2% of the total number of players. On the 20th October 2020, this percentage reached a record level of 4.0%.

The percentage of players having made their debut in a professional league during the reference year was never as high as in 2020: 5.4% as opposed to an average of 4.1% between 2009 and 2019. In a context where there is little rest between matches, with mostly five possible substitutions, coaches have given more chances to debutants.

Figure 2: % of under 19 players (2009-2020)

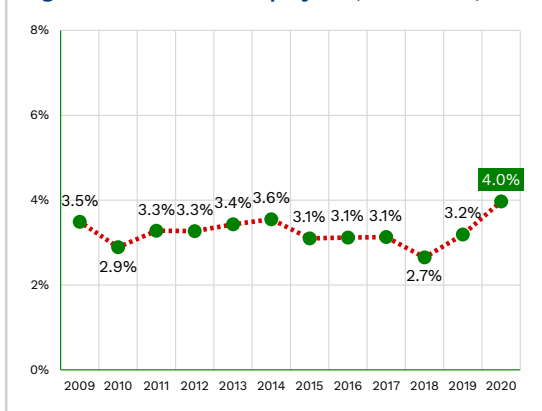
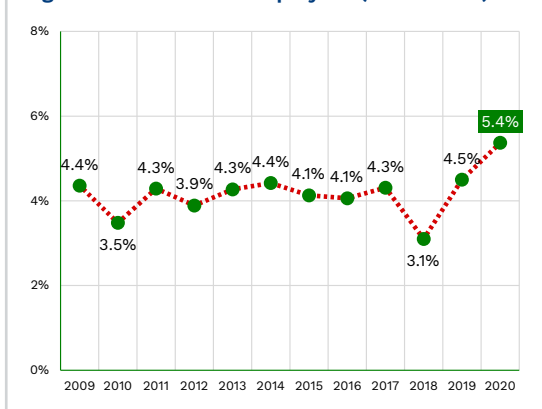


Figure 3: % of debutant players (2009-2020)



The increase in debutant players was particularly notable in the least competitive championships. On the 20th October 2020, only 2.8% of players from teams of the five major leagues (big-5) had made their debut during the season (+0.2% in comparison with the average measured between 2009 and 2019). Between the same periods, the percentage of players in the 11 least performing championships increased from 5.1% to 7.0% (+1.9%).

The German Bundesliga is the only big-5 league where the players' average age has diminished after the pandemic. On the contrary, a rejuvenation was observed in 17 out of the 26 other championships analysed. This result confirms that COVID-19 has reinforced the gaps in terms of players' experience between clubs of different levels. More than five years separate the youngest league (Slovakia) from the oldest (Turkey).

**Figure 4: % of debutants, by league level (average for 2009-2019 versus 2020)**

	average 2009-2019	2020	evol
big-5	2.6%	2.8%	+0.2%
next-5	4.4%	6.1%	+1.7%
middle-10	3.9%	5.1%	+1.2%
last-11	5.1%	7.0%	+1.9%

**Figure 5: average age of players, by league (2020)**

	(years)	compared to 2019
SVK	23.78	-0.53
CRO	24.66	+0.02
NED	24.70	+0.18
SVN	24.97	+0.40
FIN	24.99	-0.38
SUI	25.05	-0.19
SRB	25.20	-0.78
DEN	25.25	+0.24
AUT	25.39	-0.19
BEL	25.41	+0.13
NOR	25.52	-0.22
ISR	25.58	-0.35
FRA	25.63	+0.05
POR	25.74	+0.12
UKR	25.79	+0.15
POL	25.82	-0.05
SWE	26.01	-0.30
GER	26.02	-0.23
BLR	26.18	-0.39
SCO	26.23	+0.20
ROM	26.24	+0.16
RUS	26.36	-0.34
HUN	26.37	-0.64
CZE	26.40	-0.27
BUL	26.55	-0.30
GRE	26.61	-0.21
ENG	26.98	+0.13
ITA	27.03	+0.12
ESP	27.11	+0.34
CYP	27.33	-0.12
TUR	27.91	-0.06

### 3. More club-trained players at lower levels

Confronted with even tougher financial difficulties than in the past, teams have relied more on players from their youth academies. After having fallen constantly from 2009 to 2018, the percentage of footballers having played for at least three seasons between 15 and 21 years of age in their employer club has increased for the second year running. However, the percentage of club-trained footballers remains at a considerably lower level (17.8%) than the average recorded during the preceding decade (20.5%).

In this case also, the evolution observed between 2019 and 2020 is very different according to the sporting level of championships. Within the three top league categories, the percentage of club-trained footballers has actually dropped slightly following the pandemic. Conversely, the percentage of these players has noticeably increased within the group of the least performing competitions (+2.3%).

Figure 6: % of club-trained players (2009-2020)

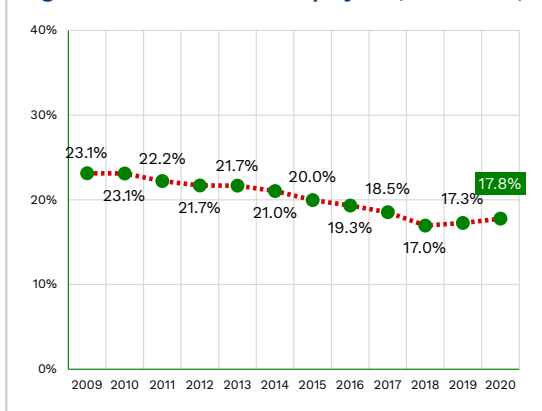
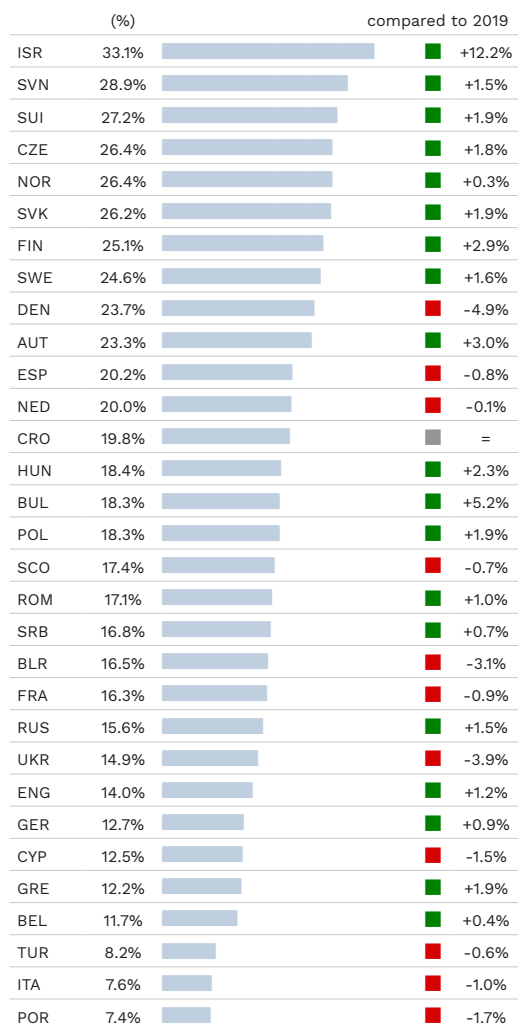


Figure 7: % of club-trained players, by league level (2019 versus 2020)

	2019	2020	evol
big-5	14.3%	14.1%	-0.2%
next-5	14.3%	13.6%	-0.7%
middle-10	18.1%	17.9%	-0.2%
last-11	20.2%	22.5%	+2.3%

On the 20th October 2020, club-trained footballers represented more than a quarter of squads in the top division leagues of seven countries: Israel, Slovenia, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Norway, Slovakia and Finland. None of these championships figure in the top two league categories of the sample, and only two are not part of the least competitive championships group.

**Figure 8: % of club-trained players, by league (2020)**



#### 4. Fewer new recruits

In October 2019, 43.2% of players surveyed had been recruited during the year (debutant players are not considered as new recruits). This percentage had reached a new record high in 2017 (45.0%), and fell thereafter. The pandemic has thus reinforced an existing downward trend. On the 20th October 2020, the percentage of new signings in teams was only 40.7%.

A stabilisation of squads has been observed in all league categories. Confronted with the losses due to the pandemic, teams have kept on a greater proportion of players compared to their usual previous practices. In the meantime, they have favoured debutant players over more experienced but also usually more expensive new recruits.

Figure 9: % of new signings (2009-2020)

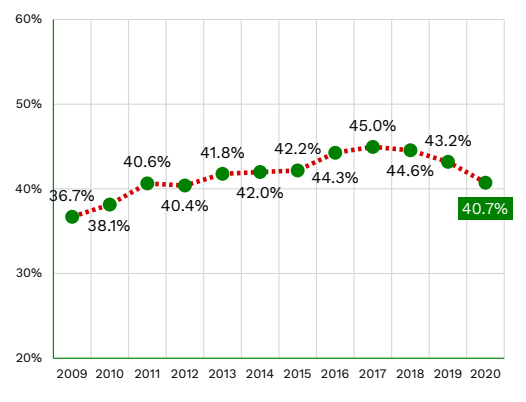
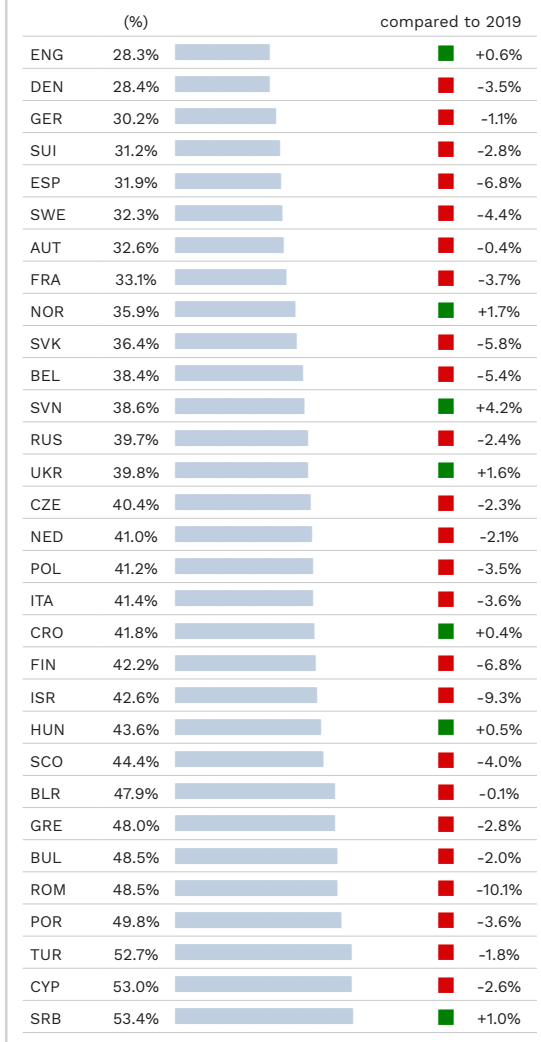


Figure 10: % of new recruits, by league level (2019 vs 2020)

	2019	2020	evol
big-5	36.1%	33.2%	-2.9%
next-5	44.7%	41.9%	-2.8%
middle-10	45.3%	44.3%	-1.0%
last-11	45.2%	41.7%	-3.5%

In October 2020, the percentage of players recruited since the start of the year varied from 28.3% in the English Premier League to more than 50% in the Serbian, Cypriot and Turkish top divisions. The Italian Serie A is the only big-5 league where team squads are made up of more than a third of new recruits (41.4%).

Figure 11: % of new signings, by league (2020)



### 5. Falling number of expatriates

Between 2009 and 2019, the percentage of players grown up in another association than that of their employer club has increased steadily. This trend has reversed due to the pandemic. In October 2019, expatriates accounted for 41.9% of squads, as opposed to 41.2% one year later. However, the figure for 2020 remains well above the average observed during the preceding decade: 37.8%.

The percentage of expatriate players has declined most for the category of the least competitive leagues: -2.5%. Badly hit by the health crisis, the teams from these championships have reduced their international recruitment in favour of young players readily available. This process was much less marked in the top leagues, where the percentage of expatriates remained at a very high level.

Figure 12: % of expatriate players (2009-2020)

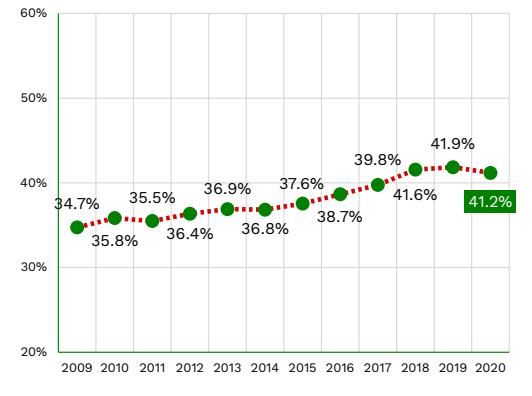


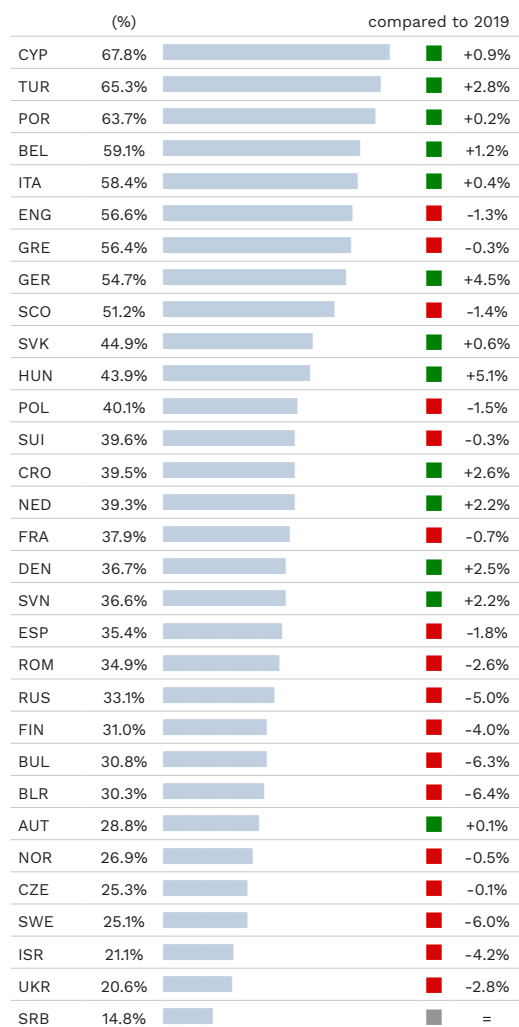
Figure 13: % of expatriates, by league level (2019 vs 2020)

	2019	2020	evol
big-5	48.4%	48.6%	+0.2%
next-5	45.9%	44.9%	-1.0%
middle-10	41.8%	42.4%	+0.6%
last-11	35.4%	32.9%	-2.5%



Expatriates are in the majority in nine championships. Particularly high values have been measured in the top divisions of Cyprus (67.8%), Turkey (65.3%) and Portugal (63.7%). Conversely, the lowest proportions of players not having grown up in the association of their club were recorded in Serbia (14.8%), Ukraine (20.6%) and Israel (21.1%).

**Figure 14: % of expatriates, by league (2020)**



## 6. Conclusion

This study reveals that the pandemic reinforced the gaps in players' profiles according to the clubs' sporting and economic levels. While the percentage of debutant players within squads has increased at all levels (+1.3% in comparison to the previous decade), the increase has been particularly marked for teams in the least competitive leagues (+1.9%).

After having fallen progressively between 2009 and 2018, the percentage of club-trained players has increased for the second year running (17.8%). This increase is exclusively linked to the greater recourse to footballers from their youth academy by clubs in the least performing leagues (+2.3%). Indeed, within the three top championship groups, the percentage of club-trained footballers has actually diminished (between -0.2% and -0.7%).

A drop in player mobility has also been observed as a result of the pandemic. Squad stabilisation has occurred in all league categories. In 2020, the percentage of footballers recruited during the year in team squads has dropped by 2.5% in comparison to the previous year to reach a level not seen since 2012 (40.7%).

COVID-19 has also reversed the trend when it comes to the international mobility of players. While the percentage of expatriates has grown steadily between 2009 and 2019, it has fallen slightly after the pandemic (41.2%, -0.6%). Here also, the biggest decrease was recorded for the minor championships (-2.4%), while a slight increase has been observed in the top leagues (+0.2%).

These findings show that the pandemic has exacerbated the inequalities between clubs throughout Europe. Smaller teams had to lower their ambitions even more than bigger ones. For many of the former, the immediate future presents itself more than ever as a fight for survival. In this extremely tense context, the clubs having built up solid training sectors will pull through better than the others. This holds true from both a sporting and a financial perspective.