

ADAPTING TO CHANGE: KEY TRANSFORMATIONS IN EU TELEWORK DURING AND BEYOND COVID19

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ABSTRACT: *This paper investigates from a statistical perspective, the significant transformations that occurred in the organization of work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in European Union (EU). The analyzes are based on data obtained from a multi-stage Eurofound survey known as Living, Working and COVID-19, at the request of the International Labor Organization (ILO). Some important aspects are examined : (i) first of all, the frequency of workers' commuting to work before the pandemic is compared with the situation of those who adopted teleworking exclusively as a result of the pandemic; (ii) paper also explores the places where the employees from the member states of the European Union carried out their activity during pandemic; (iii) the analysis also focuses on the number of hours worked and changes in this regard in each state ; (iv) finally, employee work performance is examined both from a quantitative and qualitative perspective, considering the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and the fluctuations in the number of hours worked. All these aspects are referring only to some changes brought by the pandemic on the labor market, underlining the need for adaptation and adjustment in a constantly changing context.*

Keywords: *remote work, work from home, telework, COVID-19, European Union, Romania*

JEL Classification : *J81, J21, J24, O52*

1. INTRODUCTION

Differences subsist among EU member States on concepts like: *remote work, teleworking, working at home* and *home-based work* (ILO,2020). *Remote work* encompasses tasks performed by both dependent and independent workers and occurs when work is conducted fully or partially outside the traditional workplace, which may or may not include the home environment (European Parliament, 2021). In contrast, *telework* typically applies to employed individuals and involves the utilization of information technology and digital tools (Mandl et al., 2015; Messenger et al., 2017; Eurofound, 2020b). On the other hand, *working from home* specifically refers to work carried out entirely or partially within the confines of one's own residence, a practice also applicable to both dependent and independent workers, and may not always involve the use of digital devices (European Parliament, 2021).

International Labor Organization (ILO) published in May 2020 guidance in defining and measuring the distance work - i.e. "*Defining and measuring remote work, telework, work at home and home-based work*". This guidance was intended to strengthen the four concepts

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for the help of national statistic synchronized reports, including data collection at the national level. The countries' feed-back was expected since April 2021, but surprisingly no country produced this kind of reports – i.e. based on such new guidance. This made necessary new special and specialized studies at the EU level, especially for telework – i.e. before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A description of distance work/ telework will be seen below mostly basing on data from the *European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS)*, done by *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound)* – i.e. this will be for deepening conclusions on telework and its consequences /impact on humans' life during the pandemic in the EU and Romania.

2. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Eurofound has been collecting data since 2015 on a range of variables that enable the measurement of remote work in a comparative manner across EU member countries, notably through the European Working Conditions Survey. The Eurofound survey conducted during the pandemic, known as the Living, Working, and COVID-19 survey, was carried out in EU countries through three stages. The first stage occurred during the April-May interval, followed by the second stage in June-July of the same year (2020), with the third stage taking place in the following year (2021) during the February-March interval.

As outlined in the paper abstract, Eurofound's comprehensive questionnaires addressed to workers in the EU reveal a nuanced understanding of the pandemic's impact. Therefore, there we briefly here developed some results published by Eurofound, using its interactive database. This live survey of Eurofound was called "*Living, working and COVID-19*" and started in the April-May 2020 as the result of the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s recommendation to the EU space in the interest of how people were living and working there (Andrei,2023).

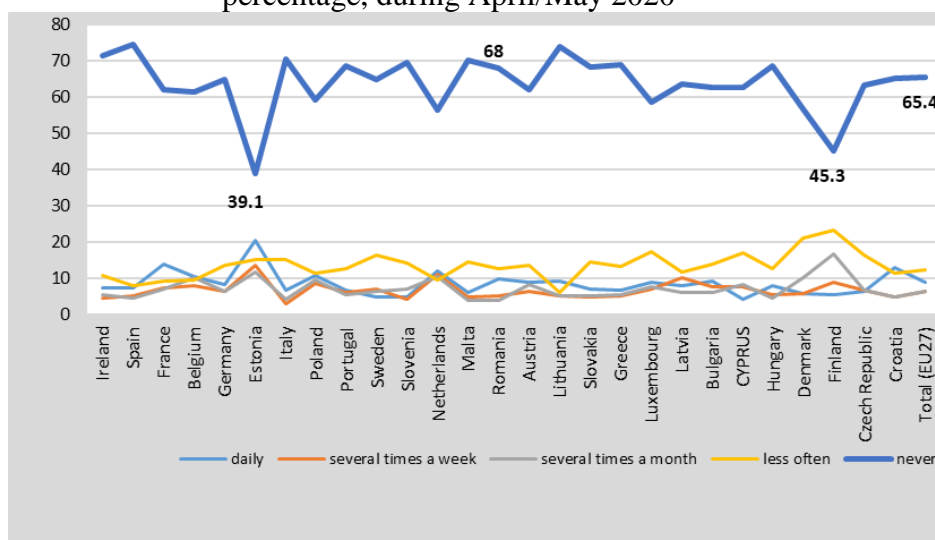
The survey has been made as electronically in all the EU member countries on representative employee samples and by several rounds both in 2020 – i.e. in April-May, when lockdown in most EU member countries – and in 2021 – i.e. when society and economy were entering a step by step opening phase in part of these countries, but in others a new restrictions wave was preparing.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Frequency of working from home in the EU before the outbreak

The primary survey rounds revealed that the employees in the EU were starting the work-at-home experience as the consequence of the lockdown and the others measured taken by the authorities in the healthcare related crisis context. 65.4% of respondent employees in the EU region had never worked from home before the pandemic and the rest of 34.6% had done it at least on occasions (Figure 1).

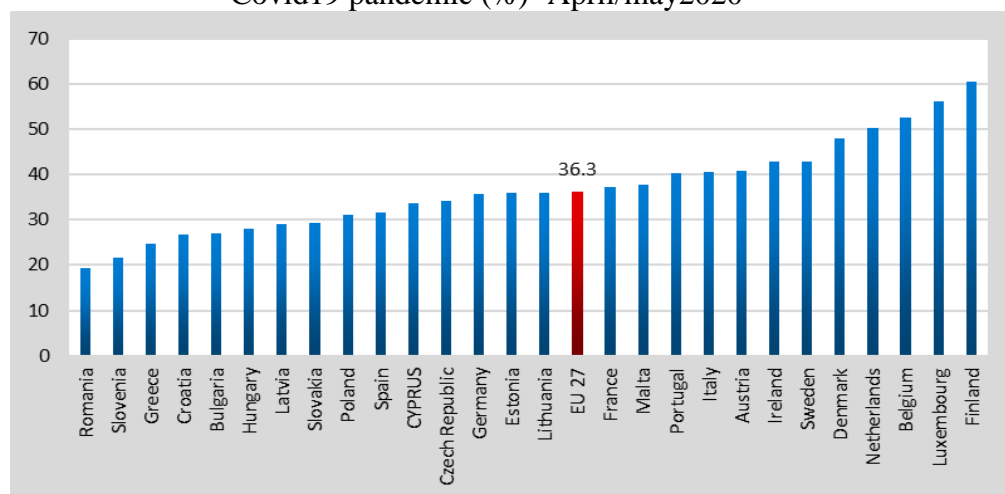
Figure 1. Frequency of working from home in the EU before the outbreak, expressed as a percentage, during April/May 2020



Source: Eurofound (2020)

Throughout the EU region, Romania had the lowest percentage of respondent-employees working-from-home (19%) strictly as an effect of the Covid19 pandemic while this highest corresponding percentage was in Finland, 61%. (figure 2). the EU member countries' average was 36.3% and other above average countries as such were Luxembourg, Belgium, Netherlands and Denmark, all with actually more than 50%, a group followed by Ireland, Austria, Italy and Sweden with about 40% of respondents also recognizing the new situation as the effect of the pandemic. Romanians proved less experienced in this before the pandemic (Eurofound 2020).

Figure 2. EU respondents who started to work from home strictly as an effect of the Covid19 pandemic (%)- April/may2020



Source: Eurofound (2020)

📍 Location of work during the Covid19 pandemic

Throughout the survey's three rounds deployed, the same employees worked either at home, or in other locations/ headquarters/ work-points, therefore the percentages do not add up to 100%. The whole EU region's 36.3% average for working-at-home employees found in the April-May 2020 1st round then rose to 44.3% in the 2nd June-July round of the same year. Most

employees (i.e. 51.2%) remained to work in the employer's headquarters and work points; the rest in other places roughly according to the work specific and others related to. In the 3rd round of this same survey, i.e. February-March 2021 the weight of working-at-home employees started diminishing, i.e. 42.2% in the E.U countries, in favor of those going back to the employers' places, i.e. about the rest of 58.5% (Andrei,2023)

Changing in working hours in the E.U member countries during Covid19 pandemic

The lockdown, again, has strongly influenced the work time throughout the E.U region. So, in April-May 2020 the number of hours worked clearly here diminished – i.e. actually 32.4% of the interviewed employees was saying so, while another 31.5% comparable part of the interviewees said they were working the same time as previously. It is also true that percentage results appear different in different countries. One third of the E.U member States accused a lowering of the work time in the pandemic interval, e.g. Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain and Romania. But similarly to the whole rest of the EU, in Romania 36.7% of the interviewees said the number of working hours had gone down and another 30.2% said the work time had stayed the same as previously. Finally, see the next Table 1 for two groups of EU member countries according to changes happening to the work time of employees during April-May 2020 (Andrei,2023).

Table 1. EU -Change in working hours by countries (% of respondents); 2020 Apr/May

Stayed the same				Decreased a lot	
Austria	32.6	Latvia	37.8	Croatia	37.0
Belgium	34.0	Lithuania	41.2	Cyprus*	42.3
Bulgaria	36.2	Luxembourg	36.3	France	46.0
Czech Rep.	40.1	Netherlands	37.3	Greece	51.8
Denmark	42.9	Poland	33.1	Italy	43.7
Estonia	36.7	Portugal	33.8	Malta*	36.2
Finland	52.5	Slovakia	37.6	Romania	36.7
Germany	36.9	Slovenia	35.5	Spain	35.3
Hungary	42.8	Sweden	54.0	Total (EU27)	32.4

Source: Extracted from Eurofound, 2021 data

In June-July 2020 – i.e. when the primary anti-pandemic restrictions were lifted and an important part of the employees then went back to their previous work places - in only 4 countries the work time was seen going down – i.e. Greece, Portugal, Italy and Spain -, while in the rest of the Union, the former working time was going to recover (Table 2).

Table 2. EU- Change in working hours by country (% of respondents);2020 Jun/Jul

Stayed the same				Denmark	55.4	Netherland*	49.7	Decreased a lot	
Austria	31.5	Hungary	40.9	Estonia	50.3	Poland*	30.5	Greece	32.3
Belgium	38.2	Ireland	33.9	Finland	43.4	Romania	36.9	Italy	30.5
Bulgaria	44.6	Latvia	43.7	France	32.4	Slovakia	43.1	Portugal	26.3
Croatia	49.0	Lithuania	41.1	Germany	44.0	Slovenia*	43.3	Spain	27.7
Czech Rep.	42.7	Luxembourg	32.8	Total (EU27)	36.3	Sweden*	45.9		

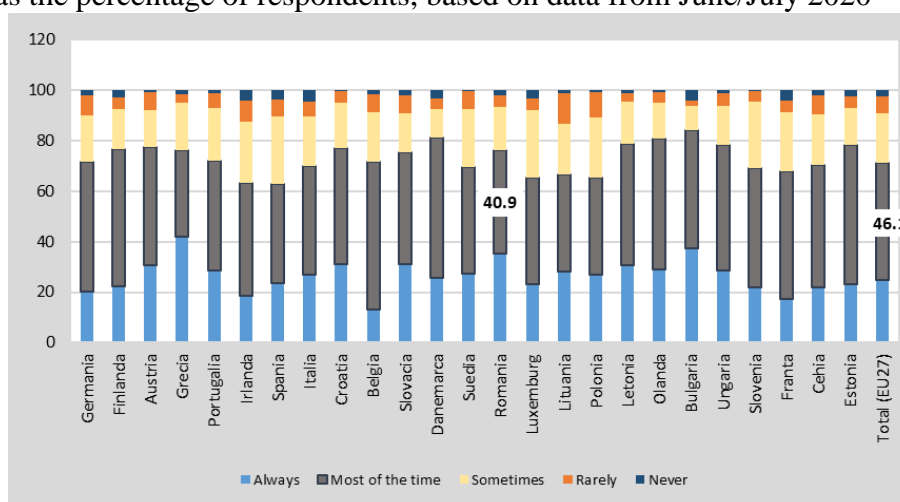
Source: Extracted from Eurofound, 2021 data

The weekly average number of hours worked in the EU went about 41.5 in June-July 2020 and 40.1 in February-March 2021. Of these totals of hours worked, the worked-at-home ones were about one third (34%): 14.2 hours worked at home within the EU in June-July 2020 and 14.5 in in February-March 2021.

Employees performance of work - Quantity and quality

At the EU level 40% of the interviewed employees claimed the quantity-performance of work as staying the same in pandemic. In other words, the workers' performance would not have varied with the pandemic in both variants of less or of the same work time. However, in Greece, Italy and Cyprus it is rather about the same between the performance staying constant and the one significantly decreasing. As for the quality of the same work done most interviewees also said it was the same as before the pandemic, and this once more when quantity – i.e. number of hours worked – had gone down. 46.1% of the EU respondents, after reassessing all their own work performances, concluded as such while 32.4% of respondents admit that the hours worked had diminished. It was rather the same for Romania, where 40.9% of respondents saw their quality of work rather constant for most of the time (Figure 3).

Figure 3. EU- working performance (quality) during the pandemic across EU countries, as the percentage of respondents, based on data from June/July 2020



Source: Eurofound, 2021

And now there can be said that the first conclusion, an interesting one, is already here approached: neither the pandemic restrictions, nor the lockdown with the work-at-home alternative have lead to diminishing the work quantitative and qualitative performances, according to data extracted from Eurofound survey.

4. CONCLUSIONS

It seems that prior to the recent Covid19 pandemic in the mind of both the employee and the employer, the office place was the main, if not the only accepted place of employment. Then, due to the pandemic with its lock down, social distance and related measures taken by the authorities the employers saw themselves forced to accept their establishments leaved empty and to proceed to organizing other places for work (KCS, 2020). “*Work is what you do, not where exactly you are when doing it*” seems an actually old expression today updated as it was from the beginning. As for the EU Organization ILO and Eurofound proceed together to that large Survey regarding the pandemic period and work-at-home in all the EU member

countries (ILO 2020) -i.e. data comparability on both. Eurofound succeeds to reveal enough profound aspects related to the Pandemic's effects, but first to the human perception, here including physical and psychological affections, plus the employees' options for the post-pandemic future.

In its work order, Eurofound finds that a majority of 65.4% of employees never did work from home before the pandemic and the rest of 34.6% did it at least on occasions – as correspondingly, in Romania, 68% of interviewees never worked from home before the pandemic and the rest of 32% did it in diverse forms, e.g. daily, a few times a week/ month or more rarely. Then, the weight in the total employees of those who started working at home directly as the result of pandemic was as high as 36.3% for the whole EU (Andrei,2023).

The *weekly average number of hours worked* by the interviewees in the EU went as high as 41.5 hours in June-July 2020 and 40.1 hours in February-March 2021. One third of this average number of hours worked a week was made by the work-at-home: 14.2 hours a week in June-July 2020 and 14.5 hours a week in February-March 2021 (34-36% of total for both).

In this same survey context respondents have got about equally divided about yes and no worked time significantly reduced in pandemic between, respectively, 32.4% and 31.5%. But despite such a difference of opinions on the worked time, the work performance, in quantitative and qualitative terms, was viewed as similar before and during the health crisis – i.e. 40-46% for the EU respondents.

With the decline in the number of Coronavirus cases and the easing of pandemic intensity, the question of whether to continue working from home or not became prominent for both employees and employers. The Eurofound survey results shed light on employees' preferences regarding continued remote work during the pandemic period. Interestingly, a significant majority of employees expressed a preference for working from home a few times a week, which contrasts with the preference of other employees to return to their former workplace.

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