

SECTION III EUROPEAN LAW AND PUBLIC POLICIES

EVOLUTION OF TELEWORK IN THE E.U BEFORE AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Concepts, history, similarities and non-similarities between remote and classical work will there below be found to be approached through statistical analyses in the EU member countries. Eurostat, the official EU statistics, through its department called Labour Force Survey (LFS), was used especially for data of previous years and decades in Europe, but for the last 2021-2022 interval results of scale survey conducted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Working and Living Conditions(Eurofound) were rather decisive. This latter was a live survey made by Eurofound and called Living, Working and COVID-19 Series. Its aim was responding to the newly arisen difficulty on the search of that common denominator, as conceptual and legal, for all EU member States in the respect of remote work. This survey research was enough helpful to this paper in understanding the impact of work organization and its specific measures taken during pandemic on all activities, production, productivity and especially on employees in the EU.

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

JEL classification: J81, J21, J24, O52

1. Introduction

Differences subsist in nomination and law-ruling among EU member States on concepts like: *remote work, teleworking, working at home* and *home-based work* (ILO,2020). Difficulties here strengthen since no unique statistical standards within the EU region on this and then the recent Covid-19 pandemic made it worse on data comparability and collection. The higher number of people working from home, i.e. directly imposed by the social distancing policy and by lockdown, was one of primary effects of the pandemic. Then, situation might extend on at least the medium term, in which both the new work location and organizing strengthen their significance.

A context in which the International Labour Organization(ILO) came to publish some guidance in defining and measuring the distance work - i.e. "*Defining and measuring remote work, telework, work at home and home-based work*" - in May 2020. This guidance was intended to strengthen the four concepts 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.

2. Methodology and data collection

A description of distance work/ telework will be seen below mostly basing on data from *EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS)* made by EUROSTAT (the largest European household sample survey). Data and analyses develop on extended periods in this data source and our paper will here select just those referring on distance/home-work.

A second data source will be the *European Working Conditions Survey(EWCS)*, done by *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound)*

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– 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.

Actually, Eurofound since 2015 does collect data on a set of variables that make possible measuring the work at distance in a comparative way among the EU member countries – i.e. through the *European Working Conditions Survey*.

The survey made by Eurofound during the pandemic and called *Living, working and COVID-19* was developed in the EU countries by three stages. The first one took the April-May interval, the second stage was June-July the same year, 2020, and the third one came in the next 2021 on the February-March interval.

2.1 Eurostat

The Eurostat data see a high enough weight of employees never working from home before the pandemic period in the EU region – i.e. it is true that the same weight was slightly lowering between 2002(90.8%) and 2019(85.6%), then in 2020(79%) and 2021(76%).

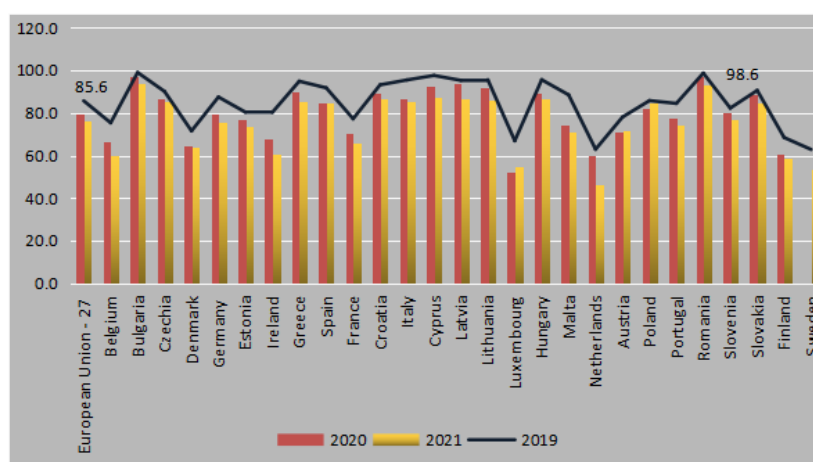


Figure 1. EU - Employed persons never working from home (%) of the total employment

Source: Eurostat - Labour force survey 2021, EU-LFS [lfsa_ehomp]

Eurostat keeps statistics on distance work on three categories of workers: (a) frequently/usually, (b) sometimes and (c) not usually working at distance/from home. (a) *Frequently /usually working from home/at distance* means any productive activity so developed for at least one half of the total working time of the last four weeks before the survey done. (b) *Sometimes working at home/distance* means having worked this way for at least one hour in the same four weeks time before the study done.

In the pre-pandemic years, in most EU member countries *sometimes* working at distance was the most highly frequent among employees, i.e. 9% of the whole employed population of 15-64 years old, then about the same in 2020 and easy rising in the next 2021 to 10.6%.

In 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic already, the *usually* distance work was getting the most highly frequent rather in the whole world and even the typical work arrangement for the pandemic. It was not too much different in the EU: 5.4% of the 15-64 years old employed people in 2019, as during the last decade up to the pandemic, then a spectacular rise to 12% in 2020 and 13% in 2021. See Figure 2 for both *sometimes* and *usually* distance work arrangements' evolving in the EU's population employed between 2006 and 2021.

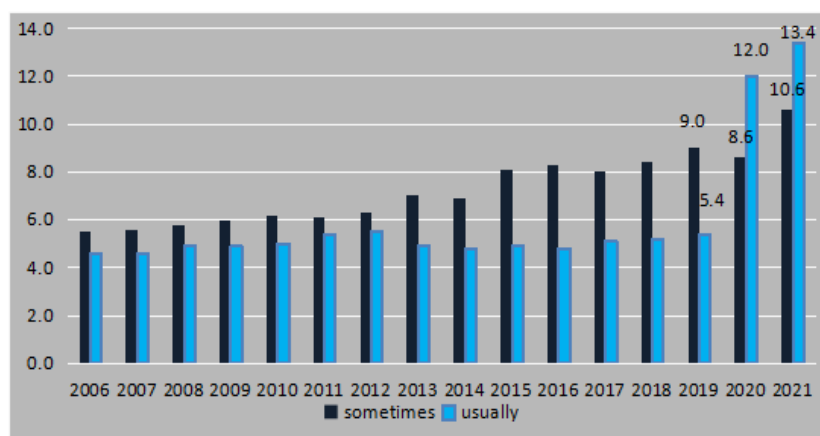


Figure 2. EU - Employed persons *sometimes* and *usually* working from home, (%) of the total employment

Source: Eurostat - Labour force survey 2021, EU-LFS [lfsa_ehomp]

The whole population's working at distance/from home weight significantly rose from 14.4% in 2019 to 21% in 2020 and 24% in 2021. Actually, the Covid-19 crisis enlarged the distance work size by as much as 7 percentage points between 2019 and 2020 and by 3 percentage points between 2020 and 2021. As by *EU member countries*, the highest percentage of employees usually working from home in the EU region in 2019 (before the pandemic) was in Finland, 14% of the country's total employment, and about the same in Netherlands, the two followed by Luxembourg, with 11%. Then, in pandemic this top-countries of the EU group did not too much change: Finland(25.1%), Netherlands(22%), but they came to be over-passed by Luxembourg(28.1%), and Ireland(32%) became the new top one (figure 3).

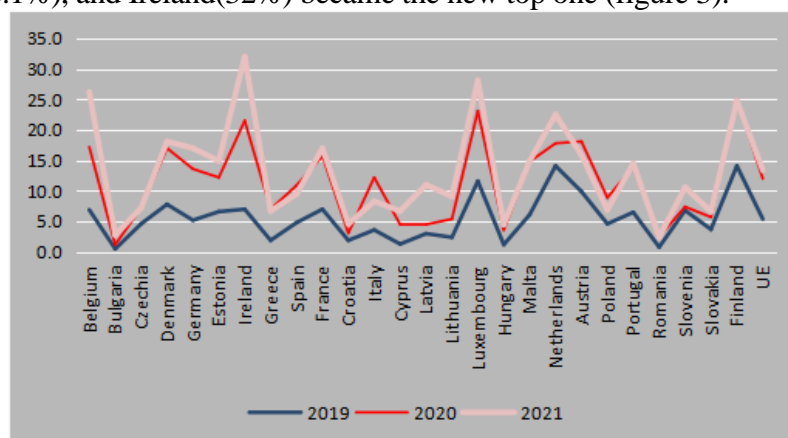


Figure 3. EU member countries - Employed persons *usually* working from home (%) of the total employment 2019-2021

Source: Eurostat - Labour force survey 2021, EU-LFS [lfsa_ehomp]

As by *age groups* in the EU region, the one of 50-64 years old is not only the highest age one, but equally the first one for working-from-home both before and during the pandemic – i.e. 6.6% in 2019 and about double in 2020. The 25-49 years old group comes next – i.e. 5.2% before pandemic and also doubling in 2020. Finally, the youngest 15-24 years old group worked from home only by 2.1% of their effective before the pandemic, but this percentage just tripled to 6% in 2020 and then went even up to 7.4% in the next 2021.

2.2 Eurofound and ILO

And now it is the moment to observe the difference of results between the above EU-Labour Force Survey (Eurostat) and the other data source here used, i.e. Eurofound Survey - with a common Eurofound-ILO report (Eurofound 2020,2021). Causes of such differentiation (Diagram

2) would be supposed to come at least from the following:

- data collecting procedures: for Eurostat, in each country data collected by the institutes of statistics from the households and then reported to the European statistic office, the same in both pre- and pandemic periods; for Eurofound, a live survey directly on the ground in each country;

- reporting methodologies: Eurostat directly reports the *sometimes* and *frequently* types results; Eurofound uses as a methodology questionnaires launched in several rounds, addressed by telephone to representative samples in terms of age, gender, occupation from each of the EU member countries;

- measuring the specific effects of the pandemic: i.e. differences in national laws, the same of/in concepts themselves for distance working and of others by country methodologies, all these leading to difficulties in data comparability among countries under pandemic.

In such circumstances, as already mentioned in the paper abstract., the impact of the pandemic appears much more surprised by Eurofound through the multitude of questions in the questionnaires addressed to workers in the EU. Therefore, there will be 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.

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. 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 4).

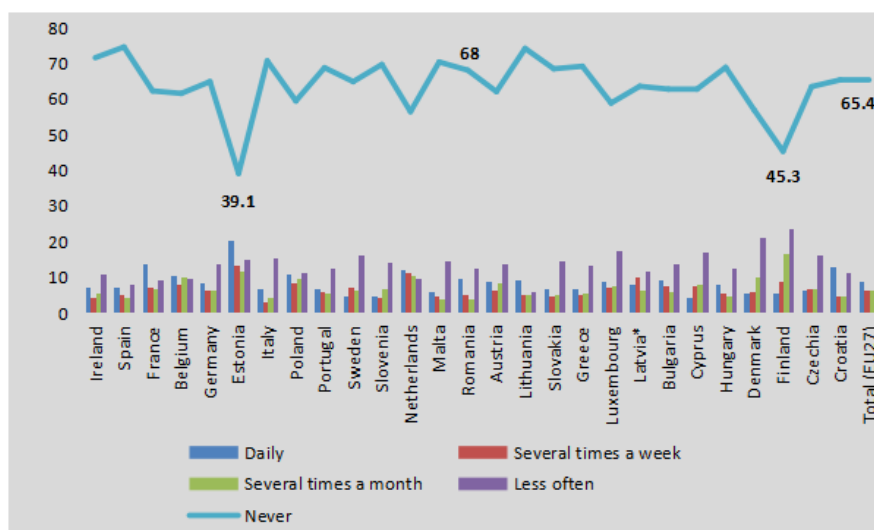


Fig 4. EU- Frequency of working from home before the outbreak (%) - Apr/May 2020

Source : Eurofound (2020)

Work-at-home taken in the Covid19 Pandemic conditions did not remain a restricted crisis-related alternative, but it brought an important change for the near future as a new opportunity of keeping jobs and employment. Throughout the EU region, also in pandemic, Romania had the lowest percentage of respondent-employees working-from-home, 19%, while this highest corresponding percentage was in Finland, 61%, 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 (Figure 5). Romanians proved less experienced in this before the pandemic (Eurofound 2020).

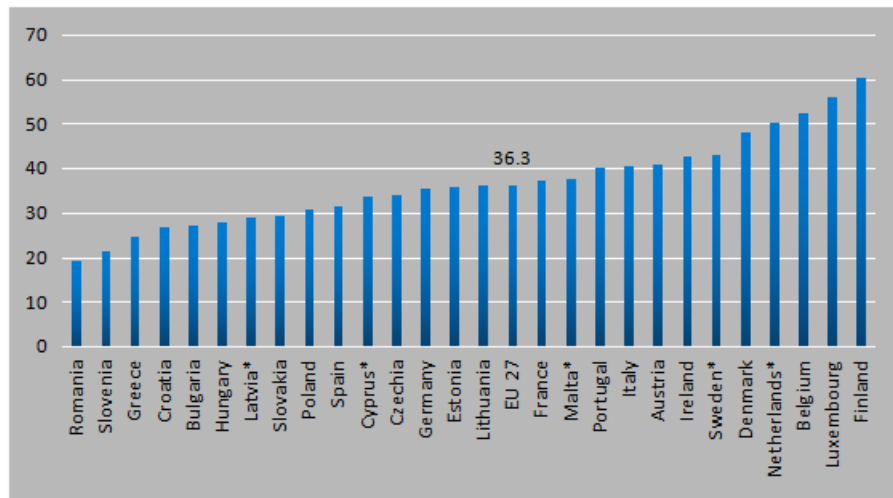


Figure 5. EU respondents who started to work from home strictly as an effect of the Covid19 Pademic (%) - april/may2020

Source : Eurofound (2020)

2.3. Location of work

Actually, Eurofound, in its Survey, took the location issue of work done in its larger sense – i.e. home, for work-at-home, but not only: the employer's diverse establishments and/or working points, other places accepted by the employer and adequate to the specific of work or of relationships with customers. 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 (Figure 6), the weight of working-at-home employees started diminishing, i.e. 42.2% in the E.U countries, in favour of those going back to the employers' places, i.e. about the rest of 58.5%.

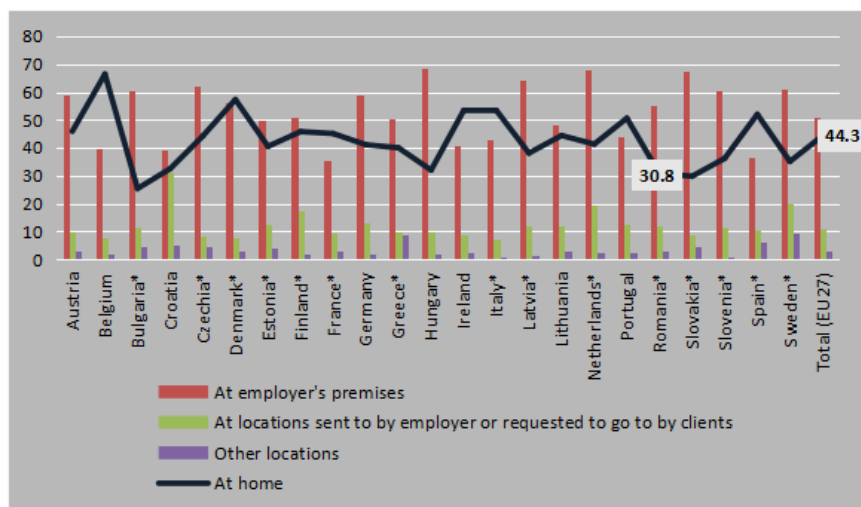


Figure 6a. Location of work during the Covid-19 pandemic(%); 2020 Jun/Jul

Source : Eurofound, 2021

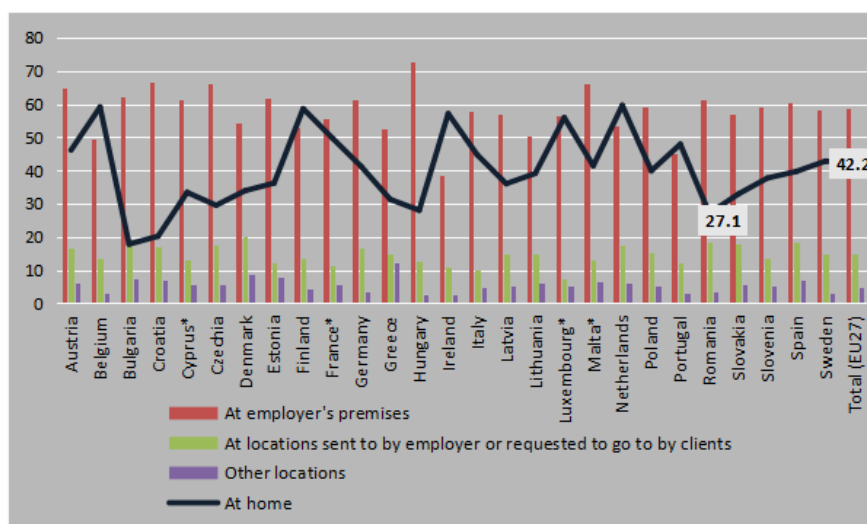


Figure 6b. Location of work during the Covid-19 pandemic(%); 2021 Feb/Mar
Source : Eurofound , 2021

3. 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.

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	Netherl*	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.

4. Performance of work - Quantity and quality

The same Eurofound survey also searched to investigate quantity and performance of work, its evolving up to the pandemic period and during this in its way, i.e. through specific questions-answers. 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(Figure 7).

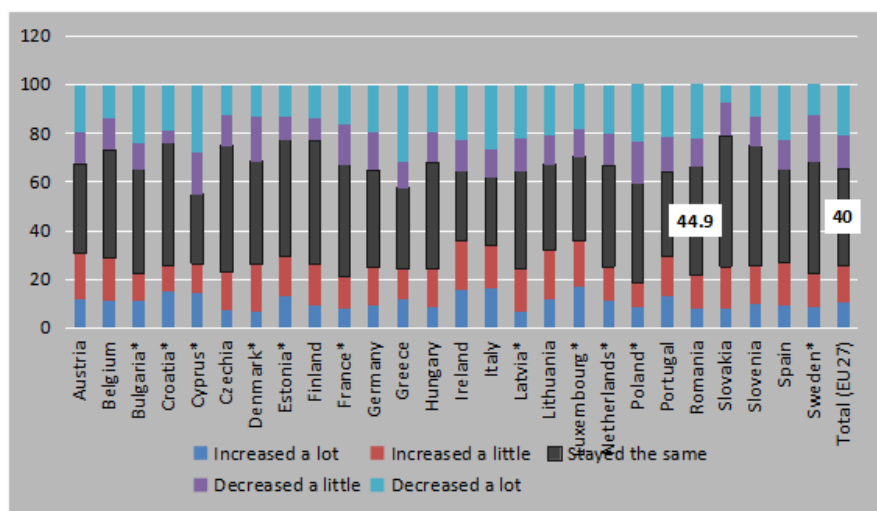


Figure 7. EU- working performance (quantity) during Pandemic, by country (% of respondents); June/July2020

Source : Eurofound , 2021

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 8).

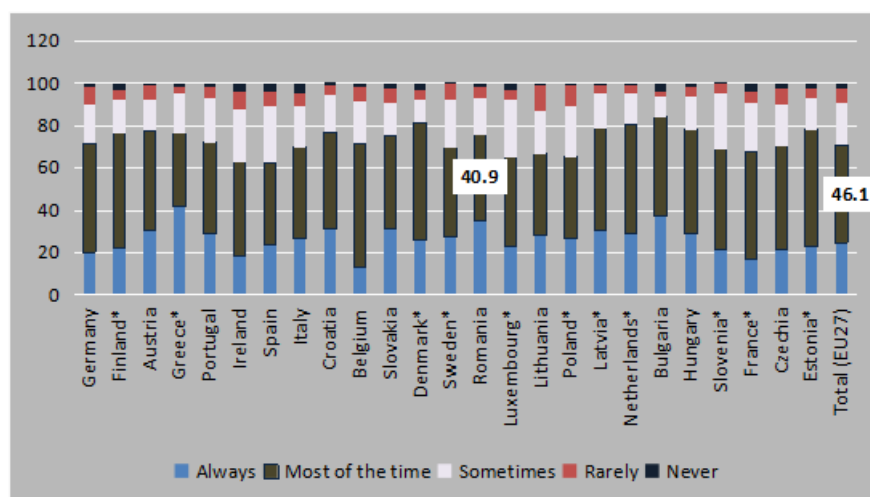


Figure 8. EU- working performance (quality) during Pandemic, by country(% of respondents);iunie/iulie2020

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.

5. Conclusions

It looks like previously to the recent Covid19 pandemic in both the employee's and employer's minds the latter's place was the main, if not even the lonely work place admitted. Then, the pandemic, lock down, social distance and related measures taken by the authorities and 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, previously to the pandemic both Eurostat and national statistics were collecting data on basically measuring the work-at-distance, but data comparability amongst was suffering – i.e. both concepts related to and legislation in the domain stayed different for all parts. Then, the International Labour Organization (ILO) made some recommendations on such reporting, but some circumstances made them impossible in practice for E.U member States.

This was what made 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 psychical 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 stared working at home directly as the result of pandemic was as high as 36.3% for the whole EU.

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.

Finally, it was since the decrease in the number of cases of Coronavirus and the weakening of the intensity of the Pandemic, that the question about continuing or not the work-from-home really raised for both employees and employers. And if yes how exactly? The Eurofound's survey's results also include part of the employees' declared preference for continuing the work from home over the pandemic period – this is at least comparable with the opposite preference of other employees for going back to their former work (employer's) places. More exactly, this is about a majority of employees preferring to work from home a few times a week.

Last, but not least, activities themselves are different amongst the way that not all of them prove able to accept shifting work places between the traditional employers' ones and others, e.g. the ones that belong to the employees'. Sectors like constructions, food and cosmetics industries rather couldn't afford such a structural change. In such circumstances more firms opt for a presumptive hybrid work force of the future (KCS,2020).

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