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Concluding Remarks: European Narratives About the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Coworking



Marco Hölzel, Mina Akhavan, and Divya Leducq

1 Structure and Origin of the Sources

This book aimed to get an overview of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on work, new working spaces—as direct effects—and the effects on people’s daily routines, work-life, well-being, real estate markets etc., from different countries. This book has collected narrations from 12 European countries on our object under investigation. The chapters are based on a working paper from 2021, which was used only internally, and authored by members of the Workgroup 2 ATLAS of the COST action CA18214 (2019–2023) ‘The Geography of New Working Spaces and the Impact on the Periphery’.¹

¹ www.new-working-spaces.eu.

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Regarding the differing situation, the sources and perspectives of the chapters vary and offer a broad spectrum of insights and findings from the different participating authors and countries. The collected conclusions are structured like the following structure and as far as on hand in the chapters:

- Effects on Coworking Spaces (CS)
- Governmental Measurements to curb the Pandemic
- Effects on Work, Remote/Telework Work, Working-From-Home (WFH)
- Effects on Commuting, Transportation Mods and Services
- Effects on the Housing, Place of Residence, Office and Real Estate Market
- Effects on Tourism
- Effects on Urban Planning.

2 Core Discussions: Various Topics about the Direct Effects on Coworking Spaces

The share of people working in public or coworking spaces are still low in **Estonia**. Still, an increase is estimated due to a general rise in remote work to growing awareness by companies, employees and the government. A government-owned company was issued to create buildings for staff and offer remote workplaces and public services in several counties already in 2018. New types of coworking spaces have occurred recently, like libraries, community centres, extraordinary spots like igloos, radio stations, art galleries etc., for an impressive work experience—transferring work to an event. The massive increasing number of Coworking Spaces in **France** before the pandemic received a drawback during the pandemic but is still growing. Besides, freelancers and self-employed workforce companies rent desks in Coworking Spaces to avoid the long-lasting restraints by renting an entire office unit compared to the sort lasting leases in coworking spaces. In regions with lower demand for desks, the combination with other uses offers an opportunity to lower the investment risk. After the closure of Coworking Spaces in **Norway** from March to May 2020, they were open again. Some activities have been virtualised or hybridized, and the number of CSs have grown in the following month. Libraries have become a new place to work or study remotely. Some centrally located CS started offering additional services and becoming an active part of the neighbourhood. In total, 45% of Norwegian CS are located in small and rural towns. The increase in the number of CSs in **Germany** has continued for years and was only slightly affected by the pandemic. Thanks to a governmental economy support program, most CS could weather the decrease in uses and bookings. During the lockdown, people stressed by the double task of private and professional life found an alternative to commute to the company's office in CS, closer to their residence. To perform work remotely was usual in the **Netherlands**, as well before the pandemic, but to work in a CS was not. The lockdown cut the yields from hosting events and meetings in CSs. People

moving to lower-dense settlements could offer the opportunity to CSs to host remote working employees.

The measures tackling the spreading of COVID-19 hit CS in **Poland**, but they have been proven resilient, just losing some users and a massive decline in events. The pandemic accelerates the trend from bottom-up founded and operated CS, which are declining, to top-down corporate CS, which are growing in number and size. CS outside of the capital seems to be less affected by the pandemic. The contact restriction thwarts in-person meetings and reduces the establishment of a milieu and cohesion within the CS community and with the surrounding services [7]. Due to the contact restrictions, coworkers avoid CS, and online events increase as a substitute in the main cities of **Slovakia**. In more remote regions, the trend was the opposite. Several supporting schemes were taken to mitigate the effect of the anti-COVID-19 measurements on businesses. International operators of CS open new spaces in Slovakia, not only in the capital and offer flexible third places to perform work. CS increased the number of events, primarily virtual ones, in the COVID-19 waves, especially in east Slovakia. The pandemic and the migration of refugees from Ukraine raise the growth of the CS sector, especially in the main cities of **Turkey** but in remote touristic regions. CS offer new services such as virtual offices with a postal address, cargo and phone receiving. Companies are starting to book desks for their employees in CS to offer alternative workplaces and reduce office maintenance costs. Starting in Budapest, the capital city of **Hungary** with a considerable post-industrial economy and creative business, in 2009, Coworking Spaces have spread sparsely in other regions in the last ten years and continued this trend during the pandemic. Without any support from the government, coworking spaces must solve the pandemic situation on their own. Cancelled events, an important revenue source, forced some CSs to move to the periphery. In remote regions, CSs have been used for quarantine separation rooms or to offer remote teaching.

In **Italy**, CSs have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in varying kinds. Large CSs, which also give leases to companies, were more likely to survive the pandemic, but several were shut down. A similar trend occurs in remote regions where the CSs also stayed more stable. In general, the number of customers is rising, financial aid by the government does not offer accessible support to CSs, and only a view could negotiate rent discounts and the like with their landlord. Spatial redistribution of work provides a chance for local CSs. Additional to the service of desks and workspace, they could provide services like childcare etc., to facilitate work-life balance. Since the occurrence of CSs in **Malta** in 2014, they have been used mainly by freelancers and self-employed. With the experience of working from home, it is expected in the future that work will be performed by employees not only in the company's office but also at home or in a CS. The missed social contact while people working from home could be offered in CSs. In the first wave of COVID-19 in **Portugal**, CSs could not stay open during the lockdown. The reduced number of users generates a loss of yields. Rural CSs could gain new customers, especially if they could offer high-speed internet access. Stressed by the overlapping private and professional life, people working from home seek an option to separate both sides

and found that in nearby CSs. At the same time, the CS offer alternative or additional social contacts and interaction.

3 Discussion of other Topics Related to the Effects of the Pandemic

3.1 *Governmental Measurements to Curb the Pandemic*

In the globally connected world, it was just a question of a few days until every European country was affected by infected people and the governments must adopt measures to reduce the spreading of the virus. According to international recommendations and scientific standards, e.g., personal and physical contacts have to be reduced, the transmission path through the air should be reduced by declining the number of viruses in the air by wearing masks, raising the air change rate etc. and obligatory use of hand sanitiser to avoid contact transmission. Depending on the different situations in the countries, the measurements adopted by the government were slightly different.

For **Estonia**, the governmental restrictions to stem the pandemic were not as intensive as in other European countries. In **France**, the batch of restrictions, administrative closures, and barrier gestures was set with the spread of the COVID-19 virus first in main cities, later in the countryside. The restrictions due to stem the spreading of the virus were strict in **Norway** related to other Nordic countries. The **Netherlands** received two primary waves of COVID-19 with a lockdown of public life.

The anti-COVID-19 restrictions in **Poland** were relatively moderate, related to other European countries. **Slovakia** was heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a drop in GDP, like Spain, Italy and France. The governmental measures to tackle the spreading of the pandemic boost inflation and currency crises in **Turkey**. **Hungary** was challenged by spreading the COVID-19 virus in a core-peripheral pattern in the first wave, followed by several. The restrictions enacted were shorter than in other EU countries.

To tackle the spreading of the COVID-19 virus, **Malta** was put in a kind of soft lockdown. To avoid an infection, people avoid meeting others. With the arrival of COVID-19 in **Portugal**, the government has taken measures and set regulations to protect lives and mitigate the economic and social effects of the contact restrictions.

3.2 *Effects on Work, Remote/Telework Work, Working from Home (WFH)*

Estonia put its effort into the ICT sector already before the pandemic. Hence people were well prepared for the demand of remote work. Blurring the boundaries between private and professional life is a challenge to be regarded, like social isolation, work environment etc. The Estonian Parliament is also working on an act to secure healthy work conditions for remote work. The government is pursuing a policy to keep the share of central administrative staff low and hire people from more rural regions, to stay there and work remotely. In pre COVID-19 times, **France** was not keen on remote work. With the need to reduce personal physical contact to stop/reduce the spreading of the virus, employers and the entire society must reconsider this. Germany got a boost in remote work from the contact restrictions and calls to work from home. Some employees get stressed by the double task of private and professional life; after lifting restrictions, people still prefer to work from home. The government is working on an adaption of the employment law regarding mobile work opportunities. **Norway** has already before the pandemic a high share of jobs in the tertiary sector. The kind of work in the tertiary sector is mainly knowledge work which could be performed remotely in huge shares. Different from other countries in the **Netherlands**, people are used to working remotely, from cafes, libraries, CSs—third places—or from home. In inner-city districts, where space is scarce and expensive, working from third places such as libraries or Cafes is common.

After lifting contact restrictions in **Slovakia**, workers tend to keep shifting between onsite presence and remote work from home as a comfortable option to make use of both types of working [3]. **Turkey** has experienced a remarkable rise in remote work in the last decade, already before the pandemic, starting from Istanbul and spreading to other major cities and later more remote locations [2]. Remote work received an enormous boost in **Hungary** of the contact restriction due to the pandemic and nearly triple the share. After the ease of restrictions, the numbers decrease slightly but are still above pre-pandemic. Regarding sectoral, socioeconomic and territorial verities, not everyone can work remotely.

Traditional employers in **Malta** maintained the work-in-the-office culture. With the contact restriction, work must be performed remotely. This experience seems to change the common way of working in the office culture. The contact restriction creates a lack of social contacts. Working at home could not substitute these social interactions. To reduce physical contact and reduce the spreading of the virus, **Portugal** set up a telework regime wherever possible. The number of remote working employees skyrocketed, notable in the service sector, e.g. education, finance, insurance administration etc. Before the pandemic, remote work was uncommon, with only high-ranked staff and occasionally.

3.3 *Effects on Commuting, Transportation Mods and Services*

Regarding the yellow vests protests in **France**, mobility costs were already an issue. With the option to work remotely, the cost of work issues can be reduced, and it becomes more likely and cost-saving to move to the periphery, more remote areas. Some remote peripheral CSs come along with an opportunity to live in combined housing and working project. During the COVID-19 waves, the number of users of public transport services drastically dropped in **Norway**. Campaigns are launched to get people back to public transport, especially if they commute less often. During the high waves of COVID-19 in the **Netherlands**, it was recommended to avoid the commute. With spatially dispersed workspace hubs in **Italy**, employees could save the commute and use the time for work-life balance.

Two new imperatives have emerged due to Covid and directly concern home-work mobility. On the one hand, it is a matter of encouraging the connection of coworking spaces to public transport and, on the other hand, of promoting active modes of mobility and the city of proximity thanks to coworking spaces which concentrate on other amenities than the only workspace.

3.4 *Effects on the Housing, Place of Residence, Office and Real Estate Market*

While the number of visitors in grocery stores, train stations etc., dropped, increases the number of users in parks—outdoor, open-air amenities in **Norway**. People start moving outside main cities and demanding larger properties, shifting the view from the city core to more remote, green and lesser dense locations for residents and offices in **German**. This offers opportunities for dwellers and companies to save money and time. With no need for a short trip to the office or school, people in the **Netherlands** tend to lower dense settlements with easier accessibility open green spaces or private gardens.

The demand on office market in **Poland** is looking for short-term leases, like cooperate coworking, to keep maximum flexibility. Besides the typical office locations, the demand seems to move closer to the residence and is less centralized. The occupation rate in CSs is higher than the typical office market vacancies. Companies are looking for short-term leases in **Slovakia**, and the marked demand moves from typical offices to ready-to-work, furnished and installed desks, as CS can offer. The conversion of cultural heritage buildings provides an opportunity and could set a new trend. Forced by the contact restrictions, people moved to their hometowns, only travelling occasionally for meetings in major cities. Suburban towns and attractive regions, like, e.g., Lake Balaton, ca. 1 h from Budapest, are gaining population in **Hungary**, still in the pandemic, especially with highly skilled people.

With the fading pandemic in **Italy**, companies have started to run hubs geographically dispersed, offering their employees desks and a place to work closer to their place of residence. With the experience in **Malte** that employees could perform their work from home, employers could realise, there is no need to own or rent a company office just to offer a desk. As an alternative, CSs could offer desks and meeting rooms for occasional encounters in real life. With the lockdown and contact restriction in **Portugal**, urban dwellers moved to second homes in rural regions. When offices and schools were closed, the demand for commuting vanished. Companies are considering a move outside of city centres: some offer their employees CS memberships, and others dedicate their floorspace for coworking.

Among the points of convergence that can be noted in the various chapters are the attention given or sometimes found for rural areas and small towns on the margins of metropolises and large cities. Indeed, in France, Estonia, and Portugal, the possibility of high-speed connections to work from anywhere has allowed many households to invest in these territories and settle there during the pandemic. The question is, how long will these territorial effects last? Are they long-lasting? Rousseau M [5] show that these newcomers to the countryside are, in fact, few in number and that the trend has been confirmed mainly by COVID-19.

3.5 *Effects on Tourism*

In Southeast **Estonia**, a region with a declining population, from July 2020, a company has been organizing hosts in this region for people who want to stay in the countryside and get the opportunity to work from there. The company has widened their target group from domestic now to neighbouring countries like Poland and Germany. Without the need to commute to the office, many people in **Norway** moved to their cabins/weekend cottages in rural, sometimes touristic regions, spending more time and money there.

As a new trend, CSs have been opened in touristic destinations in **Turkey**. Some coworking spaces in the main touristic region around Lake Balaton in Hungary offer not only desks and workspace but they also provide accommodations. During the COVID-19 restriction, this combination offers a greater source of revenue. Hotels and other touristic enterprises in **Portugal** have been hit hard by the lockdown. They could cover some losses by renting rooms for businesses or as coworking spaces.

3.6 *Effects on Urban Planning*

By questioning the workplaces, COVID-19 re-examined the question of the quality of urban life, and the possibility of densifying urban living spaces while preserving quality and meeting spaces for the inhabitants (green spaces, public spaces). It also re-interrogated the role of actors, public (mayors) and private (small and medium

enterprises, local agencies...), as capable of understanding the bottom-up dynamics of coworking, co-living and the capacity of other semi-public spaces to become commutators for the city (café, thirds spaces, library...). The last point that the pandemic has shown in terms of land use planning is the great interdependence of the territories concerning each other, beyond the revenge of the small and medium-sized cities on the metropolises.

4 Final Remarks: A Framework for Future Research on the Effects of Coworking Spaces

In this final chapter, we summarised and highlighted some of the core topics discussed in the previous chapters regarding the effects of the pandemic on CSs. The findings discussed in this volume confirm the previous studies on the effects of the new working spaces in general (see [1, 6]).

Although the literature on this topic is growing fast, empirical studies on the effects of new working spaces are limited (see, for example, [4, 8]). Table 1 summarises the main topics related to studying the direct and indirect effects pre and during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This can be used as a theoretical framework for future empirical studies on the effects of NWS, particularly CSs. This book intended to contribute to empirical studies. Future research works should consider seriously producing evidence that can be transferred to policymakers at different levels: regional level (EU, for example), national (in particular deprived and marginal areas of the country) and local level (city administrative and municipalities) so they can consider tailored policies and planning for better diffusion of such new working spaces for all.

Table 1 Direct and indirect effects of the new working spaces; positive and negative effects of the pandemic

Direct effects (on the individuals)	Cost saving (office rental, office energy consumption); increased flexibility for employees (reduction of time lost by employees due to commuting to work; higher motivation and work-life balance; reduce their risks of isolation; increase meeting and networking opportunities; boost business collaboration and promote innovation; foster employee work productivity and working efficiency; improving job satisfaction and well-being; help mitigating gender issues (specialized female-focused spaces); keeping older generations in the workforce		
Indirect effects on the living, working and built environment)	Space and economy	Environment (energy)	Urban planning and policy
	• Urban regeneration and revitalization of abandoned/underutilized spaces. Development of spontaneous communities in the neighbourhood (i.e. Social Streets in Italy) • Transformation in the public space (temporary installations, permanent/new elements) • Pandemic “working from everywhere” → development potential for peripheral areas • Enhancing rural attractiveness • Gentrification effect (digital nomads vs. local village population)	• Pollution reduction • Decreasing traffic congestion • Enhance the energy use patterns both at home and associated with travel/transportation • Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions • Rebound effects (private mobility increases during the Pandemic—also in the case of peripheral and remote areas)	• Changes in the urban transport planning • Policy on remote working and teleworking • Alternative uses for traditional office spaces and changes in real estate prices • Rethinking local urban plans: the concepts of 15-min city and neighbourhood coworking—due to pandemic restrictions

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Effects—during the pandemic	Negative impacts: • Imposed working from home: many NWSs were closed—and then re-opened with few coworkers • Imposed working from home: social distancing, isolation issues, and need for more proximity • Gender issues? Some data say that work-life balance has been harder for women during the pandemic Positive effects: • The rise of remote working: less community, less traffic, less centralised office spaces needed • “Working from everywhere”: potential for peripheral areas and rural development? • Teleworking revolution and public awareness of teleworkable sectors • Gender issues? Women can benefit more from flexible working models → NWSs may become the future of workplaces, replacing the traditional office concept → Reshaping local urban plans: the concepts of 15-min city and neighbourhood coworking? → Will NWSs thrive in the post-pandemic society?
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Source Adapted from Mariotti et al. [4]

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