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# WORK-LIFE BALANCE DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK: THE CASE OF LATVIA

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*This paper aims to shed light on work-life balance in Latvia during the state of emergency. The COVID-19 outbreak has led many governments to introduce lockdowns. While the restrictions imposed may help to contain the spread of the virus, they may also result in substantial damage to the well-being of the population. The COVID-19 outbreak in Latvia demonstrates the extent and ways in which socio-demographics has determined different patterns of behaviour, attitudes, employment changes and harmonised work and life balance. The study describes the development of COVID-19 in the country chronologically. It shows labour migration to and from Latvia before the COVID-19 outbreak, and then discusses geographical features of the distribution of confirmed COVID-19 cases. The extent of the COVID-19 threat is assessed focusing on the global, national, regional and intra-family levels. Finally, types of employment and work-life balance are analysed according to the geography and age groups.*

## **Keywords:**

COVID-19 outbreak, work-life balance, Latvia, type of employment, perception of threats.

## **Introduction**

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The turbulent times of the COVID-19 outbreak have changed society and conventional approaches to everyday life around the globe. Many governments have implemented lockdown measures, and while the restrictions imposed may help contain the spread of the virus, they may also result in substantial damage to population well-being at various geographical scales. These set the need to assess the

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extent and ways in which socio-demographics have determined different spatial patterns of behaviour, and attitudes and shifts in employment patterns. Moreover, COVID-19 displays geographic inequalities among the age groups of the population in Latvia: the outbreak is causing severe health, social and economic challenges, many of them being directly related to demographic factors.

Given that older people tend to have a weaker immune system and are more likely to suffer from chronic illness, they are particularly vulnerable to viruses like SARS-CoV-2 [1]. Thus, the severity of COVID-19 does not depend only on a country's health system and policy measures in imposing restrictions, but also on the age structure, regional distribution and social behaviour of its population [2]. Demographers have provided evidence showing that urban areas where people have stronger social ties appear to have a higher number of COVID-19 cases [3]. Early evidence shows that population gender-age structure and socio-economic status may explain the remarkable variation in mortality and the vulnerability to the COVID-19 outbreak [2, 4]. Furthermore, spatial disparities are also important when it comes to analysing the extent and ways in which demographic factors have determined different patterns of behaviour and socio-economic consequences caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. Besides, demographic factors are key to considering how various age groups interact in societies and thus to understanding the spread of the virus. Because of the travel restrictions and the closing of borders, population migration was largely affected. By considering the population age structure, particularly its vulnerable groups, it is possible to predict the consequences of the epidemic curve, the burden of acute diseases and expected needs for health care and different assistance measures [5]. Co-residence patterns and the age structure of the households are also of principal significance [6]. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the impact of social and economic inequalities on the distribution of resilience to the large-scale health crises among various groups. Research from the UK shows that the crisis has adversely affected the increase of relational and situational poverty and further aggravated disparities based on social class, gender, race, and ability [7–8]. Several recently published studies elucidate the most important challenges and immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and the quality of life of individuals and families all over the world [9–14]. These latest investigations offer original methodology as well as empirical data on the topic researched. However, their results are incomplete, sometimes even controversial and in some way may have a strong cultural impact.

Several publications are related to the broader context of well-being in families [15]. For instance, there is a study on the impact of COVID-19 on separated families [16], on the increase of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic and the reduction of support measures [17] during this period. There is also a publication reporting a change in the sexual behaviour of young people during the COVID-19 outbreak [18]. Nevertheless, another study reveals that during the COVID-19 pandemic couples are more willing to become parents [19].

The outbreak of COVID-19 has not only affected the mental state and social relations among individuals but also transformed educational systems and pat-

terms of employment all over the world. The issue of new forms of employment, including the ICT-based ones [20], has been under discussion in Europe and Latvia for several years now. Recent studies demonstrate that, due to the COVID-19 crisis, 37% of Europeans have started to work from home. While COVID-19 has unleashed the enormous unexploited potential for flexible working schedules, research has shown that, when working from home, employees may suffer from sleeping disorders, ergonomic injuries, as well as have to work longer hours to accomplish their duties, often because their children also spend their time at home [21]. At the same time, the presence of school-age children in the household had little effect on the need to work from home during the crisis. Amongst those working from home there was a somewhat higher share of those who did not have school-age children. This confirmed that the primary determinant of working from home was the nature of one's work and the extent to which remote work was feasible rather than the individual or family circumstances of employees<sup>1</sup>.

The pandemic-induced crisis is having an impact on many of the pre-existing inequalities along age, gender, socio-economic and geographic dimensions in Latvia [22–23]. Moreover, several recent studies have pointed out the importance of employees' work-life balance, on the one hand, and the mismatch between remote work setting expectations and reality, on the other<sup>2</sup> [24–25].

This paper aims to shed light on work-life balance in Latvia during the state of COVID-19 emergency.

The following research questions are to be answered in order to shed light on whether the outbreak of COVID-19 has affected the work-life balance of the population in Latvia:

1. What has been the chronological development of the COVID-19 outbreak in Latvia?
2. How does the individual perception of the threats differ?
3. To what extent were the work-life balance and type of employment influenced by the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020?

This paper is divided into five parts. The first part describes state of the art in the field under investigation and the methodological approach of the authors. Further, the results section covers the chronological development of the COVID-19 situation the country, describes patterns of labour migration to and from Latvia and maps the geographical features of the distribution of confirmed COVID-19 cases. Then, the level of COVID-19 threat is assessed focusing on the global, national, regional and intra-family levels. Finally, the type of employment (remote or non-remote) is analysed according to the geography and age groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Living, working and COVID-19, 2020. In: *Eurofound, Telework and ICT-based mobile work: Flexible working in the digital age*, New forms of employment series, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg Union. URL: [https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef\\_publication/field\\_ef\\_document/ef19032en.pdf](https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef19032en.pdf) (accessed 16.10.2020).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## Data and Methods

The study adopts a mixed-method approach. Firstly, the study carries out an analysis of the officially available statistical data on confirmed COVID-19 cases and their geographical distribution. Secondly, it exploits the data from a survey carried out in mid-2020.

Two officially available data sources used in this study are the national Government decisions related to COVID-19 provided by the Cabinet of Ministers<sup>3</sup> and the data from the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control of Latvia (*Slimību profilakses un kontroles centrs* or SPKC), which are used to describe the dynamics of confirmed cases. These datasets were available from the Latvian Open data portal<sup>4</sup>.

This study is also based on a unique dataset obtained from a survey of 1473 respondents. The survey was organised in two phases. The first group of 459 respondents was surveyed from May 29 to June 30, 2020 directly by the Faculty of Geography and Earth Science, the University of Latvia. The second group of 1014 respondents was surveyed by the Market and Social Research Agency, *Latvijas fak-ti*, from July 3 to July 13, 2020. The two groups of participants were surveyed using the same questionnaire and comparable survey methodology (computer-assisted web interviews). The survey includes answers from respondents throughout Latvia.

The survey data was stratified by gender and age of the population, by regions, as well as by urban and rural areas. When analysing computer-assisted web interviews, the fact that not all respondents have access to the Internet was taken into account.

An essential part of the questionnaire consisted of questions related to behaviour and attitudes, as well as to changes in employment characteristics. The answers allowed researchers to analyse the impact of the crisis on mobility and remote employment options. Detailed information on the respondents' place of residence was obtained. Therefore, the survey data were closely related to the research topic and provided novel information for the analysis. The survey also included questions on the perceptions of threat, actions concerning quarantine and pandemics, the impact of quarantine on income, daily and social contacts, the challenges faced by the population. This allowed the researchers to include critical aspects of the analysis.

The survey results were mainly analysed using with the use of descriptive statistics methods. *Chi-square tests* and non-parametric *Kruskal Wallis test* were used to evaluate differences between various groups.

Descriptive statistics of the survey sample are shown in Table 1. Respondents are divided into groups based on their geographic location, as well as on their socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics.

<sup>3</sup> COVID-19. Valdības aktualitātes saistībā ar COVID-19, 2020, *Cabinet of Ministers*. URL: <https://mk.gov.lv/lv/content/COVID-19> (accessed 16.10.2020).

<sup>4</sup> COVID-19 apstiprināto gadījumu skaits un 14 dienu kumulatīvā saslimstība pa administratīvajām teritorijām, 2020, *Data.gov.lv*. URL: <https://data.gov.lv/dati/lv/dataset/COVID-19-pa-adm-terit> (accessed 16.10.2020).

Table 1

**Characteristics of the survey sample.**  
**Descriptive statistics**

Variable	Urban areas, %	Rural areas, %	Riga, %	Outside of Riga, %	Total, %
<i>Gender</i>					
Men	51.4	42.3	53.5	46.7	48.9
Women	48.6	57.7	46.5	53.5	51.1
<i>Age group</i>					
18—34 years old	35.1	24.5	41.6	27.6	32.2
35—54 years old	41.9	51.1	38.1	47.5	44.4
55—64 years old	23.0	24.4	20.3	24.9	23.4
<i>Educational level</i>					
Primary education or less	1.1	3.5	0.6	2.3	1.8
Secondary education	11.7	11.0	9.8	12.3	11.5
Post-secondary non-tertiary education	14.9	14.9	11.9	16.4	14.9
Tertiary education	72.3	70.6	77.7	68.9	71.8
<i>Occupational status</i>					
Employed	78.7	77.0	81.3	76.8	78.3
Unemployed	6.5	5.6	6.4	6.1	6.2
Retired	3.8	6.7	3.1	5.3	4.6
Unemployed student, pupil	3.1	1.3	1.8	3.0	2.6
Other	6.5	8.6	6.8	7.3	7.1
Did not want to answer	1.4	0.8	0.6	1.5	1.2
<i>Changes in income level during the COVID-19 outbreak</i>					
Sharp decrease	8.9	9.4	10.5	8.3	9.0
Moderate decrease	21.0	18.8	19.7	20.8	20.4
No change	62.5	62.1	63.5	61.7	62.4
Moderate increase	5.7	7.4	4.9	6.7	6.1
Sharp increase	1.2	1.3	1.0	1.4	1.2
Did not want to answer	0.7	1.0	0.4	1.0	0.8
<i>Household type</i>					
Single households	19.1	12.9	18.9	16.8	17.4
Larger households	80.9	87.1	81.1	83.2	82.6

*Source:* Authors' survey "Behavioural patterns and attitudes towards the COVID-19 outbreak in Latvia", 2020, N=1473.

Most of the respondents of the survey were women: they made up the majority of respondents outside Riga and in other areas. The “35–54 years old” age group was the largest in all parts of the country, except Riga, where the youngest age group made up a slightly larger part of the respondents. The situation with other groups was more ubiquitous. The vast majority of respondents in all areas were university graduates, most of which were employed. As for changes in income level, the answers were less homogenous. Whilst in most cases, no change had occurred; approximately a fifth of the respondents experienced a moderate decrease in their income level.

Finally, but importantly, most of the respondents lived in larger (non-single) households, which was especially common for rural areas. The geographical aspect was vital when analysing the responses. Assessments from respondents living in Riga and the respondents living outside of the capital were compared. Age composition of the residents was crucial, too, so the responses of different age groups were also compared.

### **The spread of COVID-19 in Latvia: a chronological approach**

To limit the spread of COVID-19, Latvia declared the state of emergency on March 12, 2020. Initially, it was set to last until April 7. Along with this declaration, numerous decisions were made regarding various aspects of the pandemic. For example, face-to-face (contact) education had to cease at all educational institutions, and teaching resumed online. Social distancing measures were also implemented: no more than two persons were allowed to gather in public indoor or outdoor spaces, separated by no fewer than 2 meters. Some exceptions were, for instance, people living in the same household and their children (minors), as well as persons performing work or service duties. On March 12, it was announced that, as of March 17, an additional safety measure, a travel ban was imposed on all passengers travelling internationally through airports, seaports, by buses and or rail.

Numerous decisions were made on March 25. On weekends and public holidays, only selected stores (e.g., grocery stores, pharmacies, construction materials) were allowed to remain open in all shopping centres. Operation of sports clubs and additional education clubs was put on hold. In several medical institutions, physicians were no longer able to provide health care services. Government approved the criteria for receiving downtime compensations and tax holidays on March 26. Downtime benefit was to be paid to those employees who had to suspend work due to the spread of COVID-19.

Starting March 29, for the remainder of the emergency period, all private events, except outdoor funeral services (with epidemiological safety rules in place), were prohibited. Cultural, entertainment, outdoor sports and other recreational facilities were only allowed to work from 8 am to 10 pm.

On April 7, a decision was made to extend the emergency period until May 15. It was also decided that all citizens of the European Union and persons permanently residing in the member states, would be allowed to cross the territory of Latvia at specific land border crossing points to return to their country of residence.

As of May 12, organisation of public events, including cultural events both indoors and outdoors, was allowed. The maximum number of participants was set at 25 people, the duration of indoor events — at no longer than 3 hours.

From June 1, some restrictions concerning educational, athletic and cultural activities were lifted. State examinations and entrance examinations at the level of primary education, secondary education and higher education, as well as educational processes for all types of education, were allowed to take place on-site. Professional athletes were allowed to practice without keeping the 2-meter distance.

The COVID-19 emergency ended in Latvia on June 9. The 2-meter distance could now be disregarded for sports events, as well as dancing and acting classes. The total number of visitors at indoor cultural events was not to exceed 100 people, and 300 people in case of outdoor events.

From July 11, certain restrictions aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19 were reinstated. In public catering places, the maximum number of persons (not members of one household) at one table was set at 4 for indoors and 8 for outdoor seating areas.

Beginning July 17, both foreign tourists and Latvian citizens returning home were obligated to fill out the immigrant questionnaire upon their arrival. This measure was implemented to keep track of all travellers from abroad.

Up to 1,000 people were allowed to gather indoors from August 17, while the maximum number of people for outdoor gatherings was set at 3,000.

According to the State Revenue Service (Valsts ieņēmumu dienests or VID), during the period of lockdown caused by COVID-19 from March 12 to June 30 2020, a total of 133,462 downtime compensations in the total amount of 53.6 million euros were paid, and 55,179 individuals, including 2,388 self-employed persons, received these compensations at least once<sup>5</sup>.

20% of compensation recipients reported to have been employed in wholesale and retail or in automotive and motorcycle repair industries; 13.9% in the hospitality industry; 9.5% in manufacturing, and another 9.5% provided professional, scientific and technical services. An average downtime payment recipient would be a salesperson or an employee of catering or hospitality industries.

When the state of emergency ended, the proportion of remote workers decreased. In June 2020, 15.5%, or 117,100 employees aged 15—74 worked remotely, which was 2.7 percentage points (18,800 people) fewer than in May; of these remote employees, 70% were women and 30% — men. In June, approximately one fifth (20.9%) of employees had the opportunity to work remotely<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Dīkstāves pabalstu periodā teju 55 tūkstošiem cilvēku VID izmaksājis dīkstāves pabalstus vairāk nekā 53 miljonu eiro apmērā, 2020, VID. URL: <https://www.vid.gov.lv/lv/dikstaves-pabalstu-perioda-teju-55-tukstosiem-cilveku-vid-izmaksajis-dikstaves-pabalstus-vairak-0> (accessed 16.10.2020).

<sup>6</sup> Attālināti nodarbināto darbinieku skaits, 2020, CSB. URL: <https://www.csb.gov.lv/lv/statistika/COVID19/attalinati-nodarbinato-darbinieku-skaits> (accessed 16.10.2020)



Table 2

**Timeline of main events during the COVID-19 outbreak**

Date	Event / decision
12.03.2020	A state of emergency is declared
17.03.2020	International passenger traffic through airports, ports, buses and rail is suspended
25.03.2020	Government of Latvia expands precautions to limit the spread of COVID-19
26.03.2020	Government approves the criteria for receiving lockdown compensations and tax holidays
29.03.2020	Stricter rules of social distancing are introduced to curb the spread of the virus
02.04.2020	The government expands the range of beneficiaries for lockdown compensations and tax holidays
07.04.2020	State of emergency is extended until May 12
23.04.2020	The minimum downtime allowance is set at 180 euros
30.04.2020	Due to the state of emergency, the usual procedure for students to take final exams in schools is changed
06.05.2020	On May 15 the internal borders of the Baltic States are set to open for free movement of people
07.05.2020	From May 12, the government enables the organisation of small cultural events and, following the requirements of the Sanitary Protocol, the operation of affiliated cultural institutions
14.05.2020	Beginning May 15, international passenger transportation between the Baltic States is allowed
21.05.2020	Starting June 1, some educational, cultural and athletic activities and events are allowed to take place on-site
09.06.2020	The COVID-19 emergency comes to an end in Latvia; many restrictions remain in place
10.07.2020	From July 11, certain restrictions are renewed
16.07.2020	Registration is introduced for incoming foreign travellers

*Source:* authors' compilation based on the Cabinet of Ministers data

Latvia recorded the first case of COVID-19 on March 2<sup>7</sup>. After that, the number of cases began to increase until reaching a (then) peak of 48 new cases on April 1. After that, and until the end of the emergency period, the pace was much less intense, with new cases not exceeding 27 new cases per day, so the situation remained relatively stable. On May 5, June 1, there were no new cases. The number of confirmed new cases is shown in Figure 1<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Latvija apstiprināts pirmais koronavīrusa «COVID-19» gadījums, 2020, *LSM.lv*. URL: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/latvija-apstiprinats-pirmais-koronavirusa-COVID-19-gadijums.a349768/> (accessed 16.10.2020).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

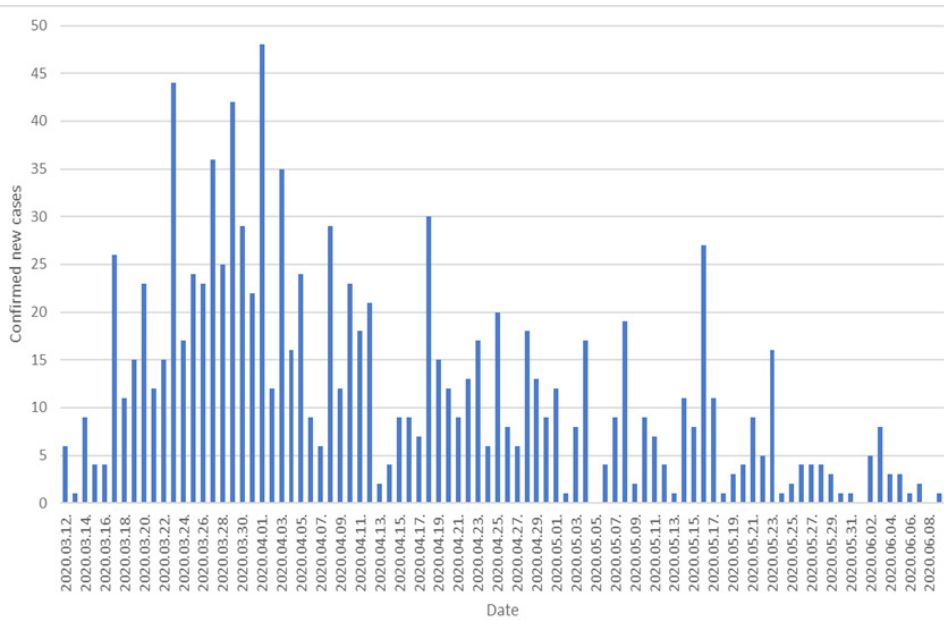


Figure 1. Number of confirmed new cases during the state of emergency

Source: authors' calculations, based on SPKC data.

## International Labour Migration Flows to and from Latvia

The overall trend shows that the share of immigrants to Latvia is increasing, but the percentage of emigrants is slowly decreasing. The main destination countries for Latvian migrants are the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland, Norway and the Netherlands. One previous study on labour migration geography shows that there are core-periphery differences in terms of labour market choices within and outside Latvia<sup>9</sup>, particularly evident in the case of young internal migrants [22].

Around 46% of all immigrants to Latvia are the so called return migrants — citizens and non-citizens of Latvia. According to the national statistics of Latvia, in the early 2020 total population of Latvia was 1 million 908 thousand people with 10.4% non-Latvian citizens. The main group with non-citizens' status is Russian-speaking population with special passports, who permanently reside in the country [26]. In recent years, return migration has been steadily increasing, with migrants favouring the return to the capital — Riga, as well as other largest cities and surrounding municipalities<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the changes in the behaviour of labour force in Riga and its neighbouring region, as well as work-life balance there, are more topical, since internal migration is an essential phenomenon of the labour market in Latvia.

<sup>9</sup> Population migration databases, 2020, CSB. URL: [http://data1.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/en/iedz/iedz\\_\\_migr/?tablelist=true](http://data1.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/en/iedz/iedz__migr/?tablelist=true) (accessed 16.10.2020).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Moreover, strengthening the initiatives related to the support of return migrants was also a part of the public discourse and a priority at the national and regional policy-making level during the global COVID-19 pandemic-induced crisis<sup>11</sup>. After the first COVID-19 outbreak and suspension of international passenger transportation on March 17, numerous repatriation options were introduced. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, around 5,000 persons returned to Latvia with the repatriation flights with compulsory 10 days quarantine afterwards<sup>12</sup>. These were those Latvians who happened to be abroad at the time for travel or work arrangements and some return migrants. Global pandemic made those who previously considered a return viewing Latvia as a calmer, less affected place compared to other densely populated areas.

Of all immigrants, around 54% were labour migrants and international students. Due to the changes in the immigration legislation in 2019, there was an increase in the employability of third-country nationals having a long-term visa. The total number of legally employed international workforce increased from around 2,500 persons a year in 2012 to 15,363 persons a year in 2019. This highlighted the issue of labour shortage and the attractiveness of Latvia as a destination among labour migrants from Ukraine, Belorussia, Russia, Uzbekistan and India. According to the latest report on migration and asylum in Latvia, the number of third-country nationals working in Latvia based on visa and temporary residence permits increased by 63% by in 2019. The majority of those were employed in the following industries: 1) road transport and pipeline transport; 2) civil construction; 3) computer programming and consulting and 4) special construction works. Apart from that, there is also an increasing demand for cooks, builders and truck drivers [27]. Since the introduction of state of emergency and the lockdown, when international passenger transportation was not operating, national railway company of Latvia “Latvijas Dzelzceļš”, among others, organised repatriation train trips: Kyiv — Riga — Kyiv with around 500 labour migrants returning home<sup>13</sup>.

## Geography of COVID-19 in Latvia

March 22 is the first date for which the number of cases with a breakdown for the municipality level is available<sup>14</sup>. It should be noted that, if the number of con-

<sup>11</sup> COVID-19 pandēmijas laikā arvien vairāk cilvēku vēlas atgriezties uz dzīvi Latvijā, 2020, NRA. URL: <https://nra.lv/latvija/328632-COVID-19-pandemijas-laika-arvien-vairak-cilveku-velas-atgriezties-uz-dzivi-latvija.htm> (accessed 6.10.2020).

<sup>12</sup> Information for travellers to Latvia on the provisions for preventing the spread of COVID-19, 2020, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia. URL: <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/consular-information/news/66019-emergency-situation-in-latvia-to-restrict-the-spread-of-COVID-19> (accessed 16.10.2020).

<sup>13</sup> “Latvijas dzelzceļa” un Ukrainas dzelzceļa repatriācijas reisu izmantojuši vairāk nekā pustūkstošis iedzīvotāju, 2020, Ministry of Transport. URL: <https://www.sam.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/latvijas-dzelzcela-un-ukrainas-dzelzcela-repatriacijas-reisu-izmantojusi-vairak-neka-pustukstotis-iedzivotaju> (accessed 16.10.2020).

<sup>14</sup> Aktualitātes par COVID-19, 2020, SPKC. URL: <https://www.spkc.gov.lv/lv/aktualitates-par-COVID-19> (accessed 16.10.2020).

firmed cases per municipality was five or fewer, then the actual number was not included in the statistics, but instead was listed as “1 – 5.” Still, the total number of cases (for the country) was 139. At that point, 28 municipalities (out of 119) had at least one confirmed case. The COVID-19 incidence in Riga was significantly higher than elsewhere, as evidenced by the fact in 26 municipalities, the number of cases was 1 to 5 (Figure 2).

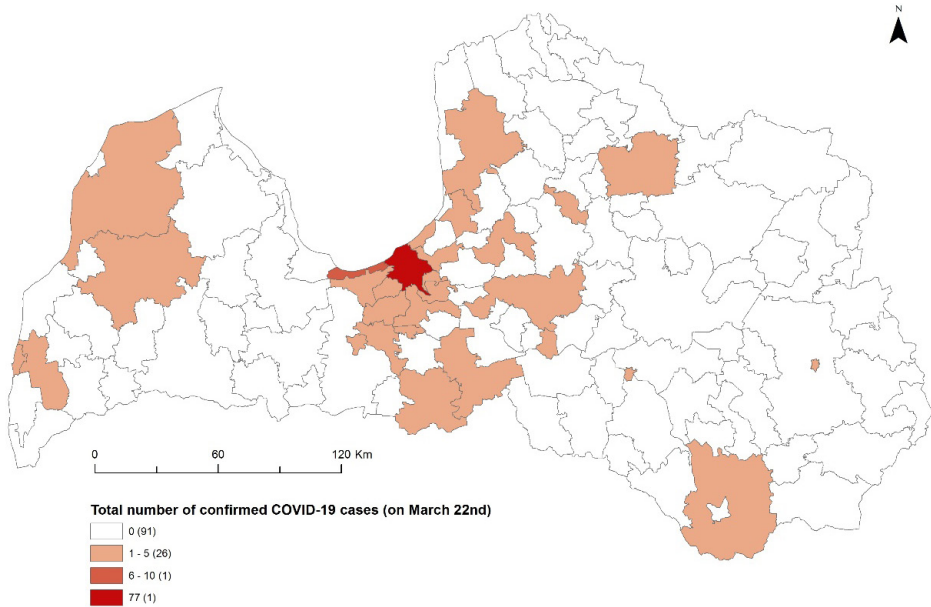


Figure 2. The geography of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Latvia on March 22, 2020

*Source:* authors' calculations, based on SPKC data<sup>15</sup>.

By April 7, when the decision was made to extend the state of emergency until May 15, the number of municipalities with at least one confirmed case had grown to 55. Riga still had the largest number of cases, up to 295. Overall, municipalities in central Latvia, along with some cities, saw an increase in the number of cases. A total number of cases had risen to 577.

On May 7, when the government announced the lifting of restrictions as of May 12, 72 municipalities had at least one confirmed case. The number of confirmed cases in Riga had surpassed the 500 mark. The higher number of cases was still prevalent for central Latvia and some cities there. However, the number of cases had increased for individual municipalities in the northern part of the country, too (Figure 3). A total number of confirmed cases had reached 909.

<sup>15</sup> COVID-19 apstiprināto gadījumu skaits un 14 dienu kumulatīvā saslimstība pa administratīvajām teritorijām, 2020, *The Latvian Open data portal*. URL: <https://data.gov.lv/dati/lv/dataset/covid-19-pa-adm-terit> (accessed 16.10.2020).

On June 9, when the COVID-19 emergency in Latvia ended, nearly 70% (79) of municipalities had at least one confirmed case. Once again, Riga had notably more cases than any other municipality. Nevertheless, the growth rate was much lower compared to the previous dates. While the number of confirmed cases once again tended to grow in central areas of Latvia, several more municipalities further away had also experienced an increase in the number of cases. The total number of confirmed cases was now 1089.

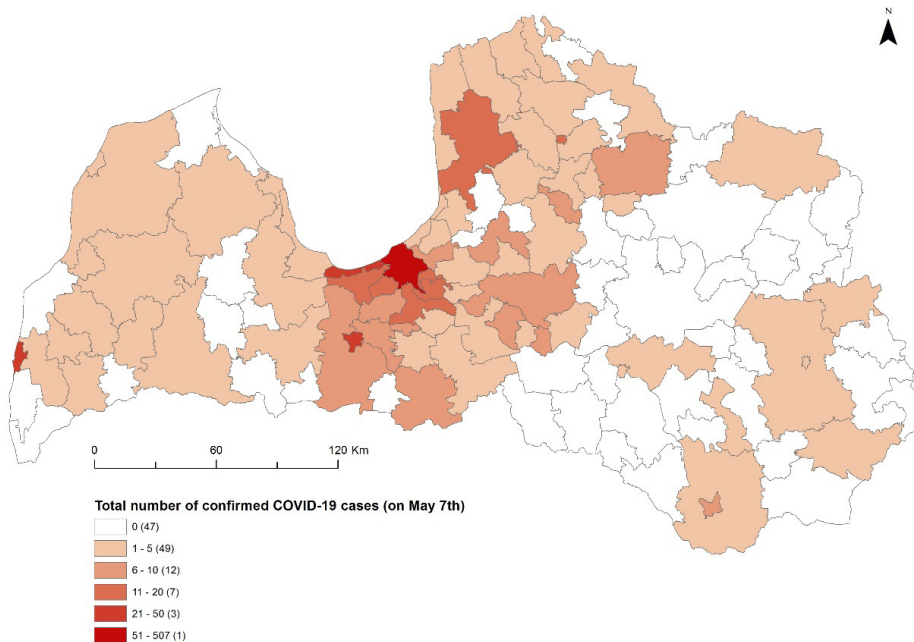


Figure 3. The geography of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Latvia on May 7

*Source:* authors' calculations, based on SPKC data<sup>16</sup>.

## Perception of the COVID-19 threats

When respondents assessed the threat at different levels, they mostly indicated that the highest threat was at a global scale, a lower threat rating at the national level followed this assessment. Significant differences were noted in the answers of respondents from Riga, who indicated that the threat level of COVID-19 in Riga was higher than in other parts of Latvia. On the other hand, those living outside Riga suggested that the threat in their municipality of residence was lower. The threat to families and the respondents themselves were perceived lower outside Riga than in the capital.

<sup>16</sup> COVID-19 apstiprināto gadījumu skaits un 14 dienu kumulatīvā saslimstība pa administratīvajām teritorijām, 2020, *The Latvian Open data portal*. URL: <https://data.gov.lv/dati/lv/dataset/covid-19-pa-adm-terit> (accessed 16.10.2020).

Table 3

**Perception of COVID-19 related threats**  
(1, low level of threat, to 4, very high level of threat)

Place of residence	Index	In the World	In Latvia	In the Municipality	Family	Myself
Riga	Mean	2.99	1.94	2.02	1.6	1.59
	N	467	482	471	476	473
	Std. Deviation	0.873	0.783	0.807	0.735	0.763
Outside Riga	Mean	2.9	1.99	1.61	1.5	1.54
	N	939	956	938	954	951
	Std. Deviation	0.837	0.772	0.707	0.689	0.735
Total	Mean	2.93	1.97	1.75	1.54	1.56
	N	1406	1438	1409	1430	1425
	Std. Deviation	0.85	0.776	0.766	0.706	0.745
	Kruskal Wallis Test	5.728*	2.010	100.122**	9.812**	3.621

Note: Statistically significant at \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ .

Source: Authors' survey "Behavioural patterns and attitudes towards the COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia", 2020, N=1473.

Comparing the impact of COVID-19 on different areas of life, it was noted that the daily lives of respondents were most affected by changes in employment. There were not only significant differences between those living in Riga and outside Riga, but also differences between age groups. Respondents in the age group 18–34 and 35–54 were affected more significantly than respondents of the 55–64 age group. There were no significant differences in the assessments of values and attitudes towards life between different groups. Respondents living in Riga indicated that the pandemic had affected the work-life balance, and these assessments differed significantly from those of the people living in other parts of Latvia. There were also significant differences between age groups, especially between younger (18–34) and older (55–64) respondents.

Table 4

**The effects of COVID-19 on various aspects of respondents' lives  
(1, low effect – 4, very high effect)**

The effects of COVID-19	Index	Place of residence			Age groups			
		Riga	Out-side of Riga	Kruskal Wallis Test	18–34	35–54	55–64	Kruskal Wallis Test
COVID-19 effects on work-life balance	Mean	2.66	2.53	6.983*	2.65	2.62	2.38	14.093**
	N	471	953		455	639	330	
	Std. D	0.999	0.995		1.027	0.984	0.963	
COVID-19 effects on values and attitudes towards life	Mean	2.44	2.46	0.000	2.45	2.46	2.46	0.794
	N	474	956		456	637	337	
	Std. D	0.938	0.940		0.957	0.935	0.924	
COVID-19 effects on work form	Mean	2.79	2.64	5.724*	2.78	2.78	2.40	27.329**
	N	476	949		458	636	332	
	Std. D	1.072	1.120		1.102	1.078	1.120	

*Note:* Statistically significant at \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ .

*Source:* Survey “Behavioural patterns and attitudes towards the COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia”, 2020, N=1473.

During the state of emergency, 55.5% of the respondents living in Riga worked remotely, while outside the capital, 41.4% of the respondents did so. There were also significant differences among age groups, with respondents of the 35–54 age group being more likely to work remotely, while respondents in the 54 to 64 were much less affected by remote work.

During the lockdown, 12.2% of all respondents had experienced a temporary shutdown of their workplace. This was slightly more notable among younger respondents (13.9%) and those living outside Riga (12.4%). For the younger respondents, the reasons for this situation were probably the same as in the case of work form preferences. That those living outside Riga reported, a somewhat higher share of shutdowns could have been caused by changes in everyday commuting activities to Riga and good internet access.

Table 5

**Temporary shutdown of workplace by place of residence and age group**

State	Place of residence		Age groups		
	Riga	Outside Riga	18–34	35–54	55–64
Closed temporarily	58	122	66	78	36
	11.9%	12.4%	13.9%	11.9%	10.5%
Not closed	430	863	409	576	308
	88.1%	87.6%	86.1%	88.1%	89.5%

Source: Authors survey “Behavioural patterns and attitudes towards the COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia”, 2020, N=1473.

**Challenges for the work-life balance**

According to the results of the Labour Force Survey of the Central Statistical Bureau<sup>17</sup>, in April 2020, slightly more than a fifth (22%) of employees aged 15–74 worked remotely. Due to the state of emergency, the number of remote workers increased eight times, to 148,400. Previously only 19,000 employees had worked remotely. Women were more likely to work remotely than men (difference of 27 percentage points: 63.5% and 36.5%, respectively). The highest share of remote workers (24.3%) in the total number of employees in April 2020 was observed in the 25–34 age group, but the lowest (16.7%) in the 55–64 age group. The result could be related to computer literacy to some extent, but it could also be explained by the overall age segmentation of the occupations. In numerous occupations, such as shop assistants, builders, hairdressers and many other professions, remote work was not an option. It was observed that state institutions, for example, Riga City Council, Ministry of Finance as well as large private companies, like, Latvian Mobile Telephone encouraged employees to work remotely. However, medium and small companies were neglecting to remote work possibilities, which seemingly was related to the lack of trust.

According to the survey results, the most significant changes during the COVID-19 pandemic were related to the balance between work and personal life. There was a strong sense of loneliness observed for those respondents who live alone in households, as well as non-employed retirees and students. Those respondents who have chronic illnesses and older respondents faced such health-related issues as sleep-disturbances and anxiety. This can be explained by the fact that the elderly and persons with pre-existing conditions could be included in

<sup>17</sup> In April 2020, 22% of employees in Latvia worked remotely, 2020, CSB. URL: <https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistics/statistics-by-theme/social-conditions/unemployment/search-in-theme/2854-april-2020-22-employees-latvia> (accessed 16.10.2020).



the risk group. Moreover, in most cases, the emergency adversely affected populations' well-being. It affected behaviour and communication with other people within family and society. Social distancing and hygiene requirements also contributed to the change. Parents with preschool or school-age children experienced a dramatic change in their daily routines since apart from their own employment-related commitments, they now had to make sure that requirements for distance learning were fulfilled. Often, numerous internet-connected devices had to be used simultaneously within a household. For some families, this caused an additional challenge to provide the required technical support. Moreover, younger children had to be continuously assisted during their learning process.

Respondents generally indicated full-time remote work as the most appropriate form of work in the COVID-19 pandemic situation, while the respondents in Riga chose full-time work as a priority more often (31.8%). Concerning the age groups, there were significant differences between respondents ages, with 18–34 (35.5%) preferring full-time teleworking, and the two older groups choosing full-time on-site work (23.5%).

Table 6

**Respondent preferable work form characteristics during COVID-19 first phase, March to June 2020**

Work form	Age groups						Place of residence			
	18–34		35–54		55–64		Riga		Outside Riga	
	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%
Full-time work at a workplace	2	27.1	2	24.5	1	23.5	2	25.5	2	25.0
Part-time work at a workplace	3	8.0	3	11.9	5	9.6	4	9.0	3	10.6
Full-time remote work	1	35.5	1	27.1	2	20.6	1	31.8	1	26.6
Part-time remote work	4	7.6	5	8.7	4	9.9	3	9.9	5	8.0
Contract-based work	5	5.9	4	10.9	3	12.2	5	8.0	4	10.4

Source: Authors' survey "Behavioural patterns and attitudes towards the COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia", 2020, N=1473.

Respondents indicated that full-time remote work was the preferable work form during the state of emergency (Table 6). This was the case for all groups, except for respondents aged 55–64. For them, the preferable work form would be full-time work at their workplace, accounting for 23.5%. This group had more limited digital abilities or were employed in jobs that required working at the workplace, which could have caused such disparity. Among those groups for whom full-time remote work was widespread, the youngest age group and residents of Riga had the highest shares. These respondents having jobs which enabled them to work remotely could explain the former. The latter was most likely caused by the fact that the number of COVID-19 cases in Riga was much higher than in the regions, which facilitated stricter measures for many workplaces.

## Discussion and concluding remarks

The paper aims to provide insights into the aspects affecting the balance of work and everyday activities during the COVID-19 outbreak in one country. Based on the official confirmed COVID-19 cases, national regulations on the state of emergency and individual-level survey data, this study presented the case study of Latvia during the first phase of the pandemic in early 2020.

The results suggest that national regulations in the first part of 2020 were efficient. Latvia, among other European countries, was presented as a success story with its first phase response<sup>18</sup>. Another COVID-19 related study on the efficiency of medical assistance during the pandemic suggests that among other countries of Northern Europe, Latvia shows the lowest death rate [28].

In 2020, as in previous years, net migration in Latvia was still negative<sup>19</sup>, and thus studies on the outgoing migration have been more prevalent in the country [29–31]. In the case of Latvia, internal work and study commuters largely contribute to the labour market geographic composition [32]. However, there is also a recent study on the local and foreign workforce, their well-being and social protection [33], which states that most of the state-supported social benefits and services are granted to the permanent residents, while persons without any social insurance residing in Latvia and having temporary residence documents receive insufficient social protection compared to other groups.

Geographically, COVID-19 cases were more common in the capital, Riga, with other large towns and rural areas having a low number of confirmed cases. This is somewhat similar to other countries, for instance, Poland or Italy, where the regions were affected with the varied distribution of cases, and urbanised locations were those that suffered most [34–35].

<sup>18</sup> First phase of COVID-19 response successful in Latvia, 2020, *LSM.lv*. URL: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/karins-first-phase-of-COVID-19-response-successful-in-latvia.a363059/> (accessed 16.10.2020).

<sup>19</sup> Population migration databases, 2020, *CSB*. URL: [http://data1.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/en/iedz/iedz\\_\\_migr/?tablelist=true](http://data1.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/en/iedz/iedz__migr/?tablelist=true) (accessed 16.10.2020).

The results of this study have shown several interesting phenomena concerning public attitudes toward the COVID-19 outbreak. Perceptions are crucial to understanding the links between macro-level conditions and micro-level behavioural or attitudinal responses [36–37]. While on an individual level, people tend to estimate their level of concern as moderate, when it comes to their families, the level of anxiety is higher [38]. The results also suggest the geographic divide: a pandemic is more threatening globally, however, within Latvia threats are perceived as higher in the capital than at the regional or local level, which can be explained by the population density. Presumably low level of threat or optimism bias [39] remains only until a person is a confirmed coronavirus positive as individuals can assume that others are more predefined to any negative events [40], including the COVID-19 virus. Moreover, in other studies on the topic it was found that fear is one of the central emotions during pandemics [39].

Apart from individual struggles to maintain one's work-life balance, there were also intra-family and distant learning challenges in Latvia. This may have contributed to the increased parental burnout [41] and family violence [17].

According to the results of this study, full-time remote work was the preferable employment form during the state of emergency in Latvia. In Riga, it accounted for about 32%, was mostly exploited by the younger age group and related to the employers' response and specifics of the sector of the economy. This, again was intertwined with the family status and the need to care for children. The issue of new forms of employment, including the ICT-based forms of employment [20], has been discussed in Europe and Latvia for several years. In Latvia, remote work and self-employment have been defined as the new forms of employment in the field of labour protection. Recent studies show that due to the COVID-19 crisis, 37% of Europeans have started working from home. A study in Lithuania showed that around 40% of the working population started working from home, and linked job satisfaction from a distance working to socio-demographic characteristics [25]. While COVID-19 has unleashed the vast unexploited potential for flexible forms of employment, research has shown that employees face sleeping disorders and ergonomic injuries when working from home, as well as the need to work longer hours to accomplish their duties, often because their children also spend their time at home [21].

Finally, according to the results of our study, the balance between work and private life proves to be the most challenging to achieve, and there remain several groups of individuals such as parents, people living alone and seniors who are more predisposed to the risks described above.

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