

OLDER WORKERS IN THE BALTIC STATES OVER THE PANDEMIC YEAR: SHARE CORONA SURVEY RESULTS

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Abstract. The study is based on the dataset collected within the framework of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement (SHARE), namely in two subsequent SHARE Corona Surveys via computer-assisted telephone interviews: in June-August 2020 and in June-August 2021. The survey is targeted specifically at collecting data on the living situation of people who are 50 years and older during the pandemic across Europe.

The objective of the research is to analyse the change observed in the respondents between 2020 and 2021, how the continuing Covid-19 crisis influenced their work and employment, their retirement decisions, and what kind of financial support and from what sources they received due to the pandemic. The situation in Latvia is examined against the background of the other Baltic States as well as other European countries.

Despite the effects of the Covid-19, the levels of employment among the 50+ population remain high and do not demonstrate a trend to decline. A considerable share of the study population in Latvia received some kind of additional financial support from the government helping to mitigate the financial cost of the crisis. As concerns the changes in working time among those who remained in employment, for the absolute majority of the Baltic participants there were no changes compared to the situation one year before, as well as to the place of work. Recent developments in the labour legislation in Latvia related to the creating of the legal framework for remote work.

Keywords: COVID-19, Baltic States, employment, elderly, remote work.

JEL code: I15, J14, J21

Introduction

Older people are one of the most vulnerable groups experiencing serious effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. While people have adapted to the pandemic, restrictions to mitigate the risk of Covid-19 have been more targeted including the special financial support to people whose employment status and/or income might have suffered from lockdown measures and other pandemic-related economic implications.

In this work we continue our analysis that was commenced last year (Rajevska, Reine, Baltmane, 2021, 2022) using the results of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) special Covid-19 Wave, which was carried out with the means of computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) in 26 European countries and Israel in June-August 2020 (Börsch-Supan, 2022a). The questionnaire studied how population aged 50 years and older coped with socioeconomic and health-related impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It should be noted that only older respondents participate in the surveys of the SHARE project, so it is not possible to compare older workers with their younger counterparts using the given data.

In June-August 2021, the second special COVID-19 Wave (Börsch-Supan, 2022b) was carried out accessing where possible the same respondents that participated in the first interviews in 2020. The new questionnaire focused on their current situation, as well as the changes that took place between the two waves.

This paper mainly provides the descriptive statistical analysis and we focus on two major topics from the questionnaire: 1) the financial support received by respondents in relation to the pandemic, and 2) changes to their employment status and working environment. As in previous publications, we also provide the analysis of the legal framework development of remote work in Latvia.

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Research results and discussion

As in the first wave, we analysed only those respondents who were aged 50 years and older and who were in employment before the outbreak of the virus. For the present study, we selected the same participants, (i.e. those who were in employment before the pandemic), in order to see what happened to these people during the time period between two special SHARE waves. In total, there were 54,548 respondents in 27 countries participating in the both special SHARE Corona surveys (among them: in Latvia – 1,038, in Estonia – 4,646 and in Lithuania – 1,324). Of them, 11,487 had reported themselves as employed or self-employed before the start of the pandemic (in Latvia – 319, in Estonia – 1,397 and in Lithuania – 419). These respondents were selected for the purpose of this study, while all other participants were excluded from the research. Data were weighted using the calibrated cross-sectional individual weights (variable *cciw_w9ca_ca*).

Initially, we intended to compare the results between urban and rural population in Latvia among other things, but, regretfully, the type of the place of residence (a big city, suburbs of a big city, a large town, a small town or rural area or village) is known for less than 5% of Latvian respondents. Therefore, any sound comparison was impracticable and we had to discard that dimension.

1. Financial support due to pandemics: sources and types

The 2021 questionnaire included questions concerning specific corona-related financial support. The respondents were asked if they had received additional financial support that was due to the Corona crisis from their employer, the government, relatives, friends, or others, and what type of support it was – short-work compensation, unemployment benefits, social assistance or other (multiple answers were possible both in respect of the source and the type of support).

Most of the respondents in all participating countries reported that they did not receive any additional financial support due to the Covid-19 outbreak. The only exception is Slovenia, where 55.9% of those surveyed answered positively. In other countries the share of positive answers varied from 1.9% (Romania) to 38.9% (Israel). In Latvia, 29.4% of the respondents in the group we are investigating, reported receipt of some sort of additional financial support. This is higher than in Lithuania (21.0%) and Estonia (6.6%).

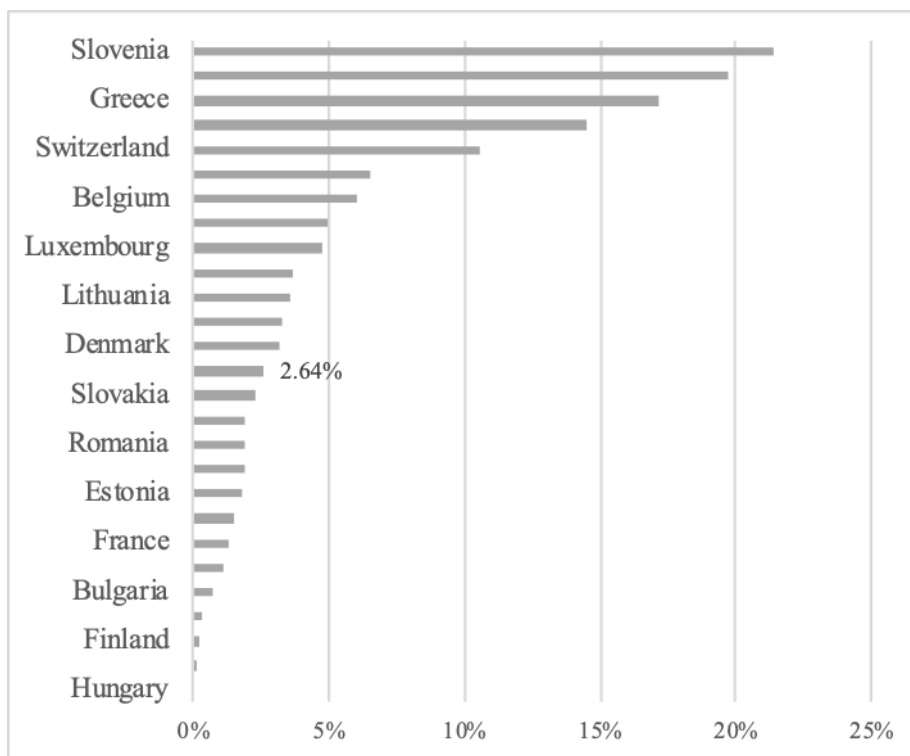
Quite interesting, that the source of this additional financial support varied quite considerably among the countries: in majority of the countries, the support was predominantly received from the government rather than the employer. The exceptions are Germany (64.2% from employer compared to 38.9% from the government), Sweden (58.4% and 41.6%) and Finland (54.2% and 38.8%). In the Baltic States, the role of employers in providing financial support was lower: 17.0% of respondents in Latvia, 17.7% in Lithuania and 37.3% in Estonia confirmed receipt of same. The proportion of the government support recipients was 71.1% in Latvia, 71.0% in Estonia and 82.0% in Lithuania.

None of the respondents in Latvia reported receiving financial support from relatives or friends, but 13.5% received it "from others" (for example, as we may conclude from further analysis of the data, social assistance received from local municipalities belong to this group).

As concerns the type of the support received, 9.0% of the respondents in Latvia who got at least one type of support received short-time work compensations, making the proportion of such recipients in the whole study group equal to 2.6%. This ratio is relatively low against the backdrop of the majority of the surveyed countries (Fig. 1). This kind of compensations were one of the major social protection measures widely used by governments in most of the European countries during the lockdowns (Baptista, I. et al, 2021). The highest share of short-time work compensation beneficiaries can be found in Slovenia, where

21.4% of respondents received such kind of support. The lowest – 0.2% - in the Czech Republic (and in Hungary, where this support type seems to be non-existing as it was chosen by none of the respondents). In Lithuania, 3.6% of respondents received short-time work compensations, in Estonia – 1.8%. On the other side, Estonians more often received unemployment benefit – 2.4% of all respondents compared to 0.9% in Lithuania and 0.5% in Latvia.

Job retention schemes have been introduced in all three Baltic States to avoid an increase in the unemployment rate and to provide support for businesses and their employees that are unable to work due to restrictions on economic activities posed to mitigate the risk of Covid-19. To reduce the share of unemployment, many employees become furlough, used vacation days, were on sick leave or had reduced working hours (Lemieux et al. 2020). In Latvia, during the Covid-19 period employers, self-employed people who qualified for the state support could apply for wage subsidies or aid during furlough if revenue had decreased due to the Covid-19 crisis (Klave et al., 2021). In Estonia, wage subsidy schemes were also introduced to support employees if their representative company was closed, their client base decreased and it was impossible to pay wages (Eurofound 2020). Similarly, in Lithuania wage subsidies for furlough were set and aid for self-employed whose economic activities were restricted, in addition, job search benefits were placed (Braziene et al., 2022). Introduced measures to support employees of economic sectors which were most affected by the pandemic helped people to avoid income losses and reduce the insecurity (that arose due to the pandemic). Koppel and Laurimae (2021) noted that without salary subsidies the impact of the pandemic in Estonia would have led to more people facing poverty, especially, men and workforce aged 50-63.



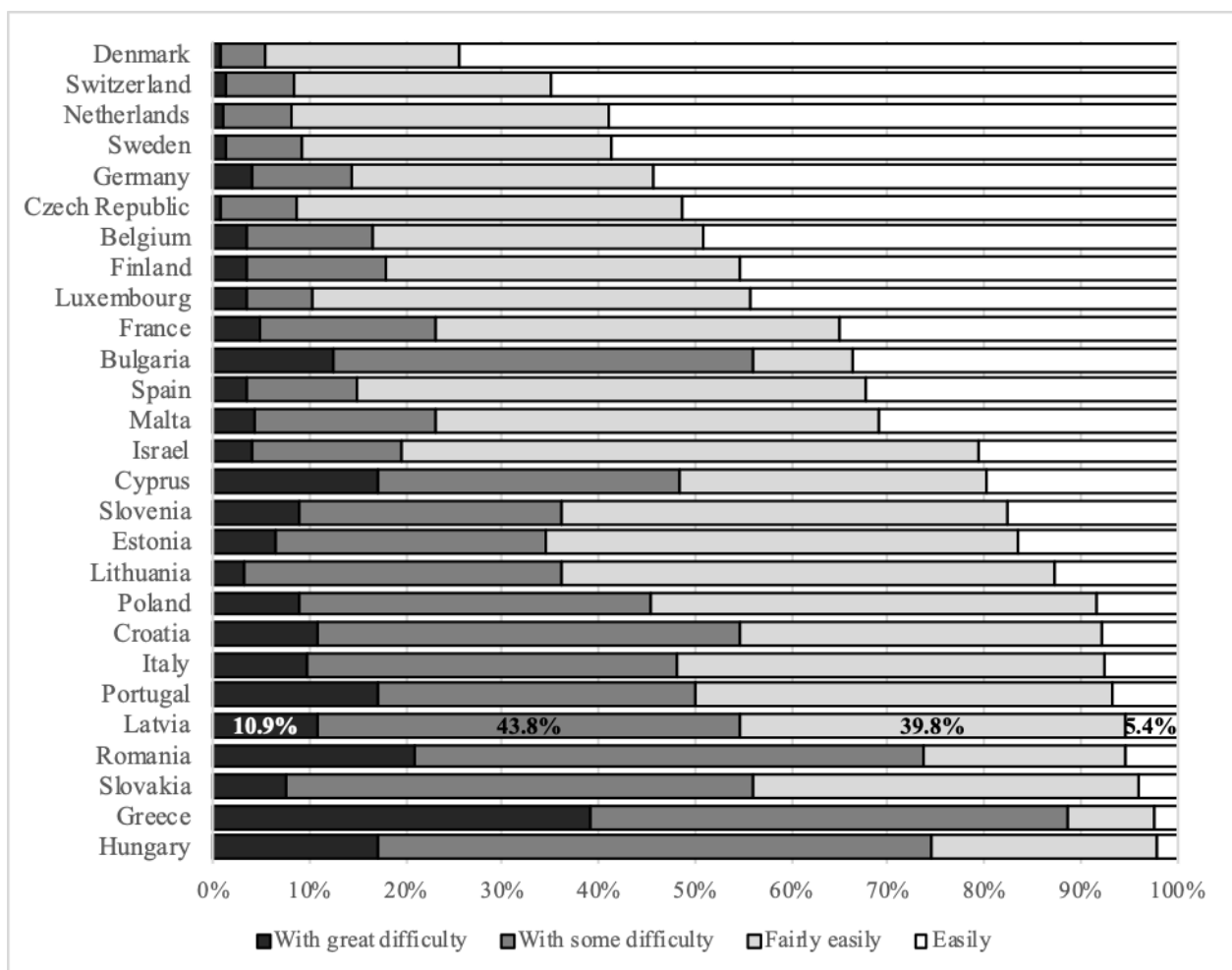
Source: authors' calculations based on the survey data

Fig. 1. Share of the respondents who received short-time work compensation in the period between two interviews, %

17.0% of Latvian beneficiaries of financial support (i.e., 5.8% of all respondents) received social assistance. Among Lithuanian respondents there were 12.1% of social assistance recipients, in Estonia – 0.5%.

However, most of those who got at least one type of support in Latvia – 70.6% - reported that this was neither short-time compensation, nor unemployment benefit, nor social assistance, but instead some "other financial support". So, in total 20.7% of all people 50+ who were in employment in summer 2020 received it. We presume, that the predominantly these were one-off allowances (so called 'helicopter money') paid in Spring 2021 to all Latvian pensioners (€200) and to parents of dependent children (€500 per child).

Despite quite elaborated support measures that were put into force in Latvia during the pandemic, the households' ability to make ends meet since last interview was not that satisfactory: only 5.4% chose the answer "easily", 39.8% - "fairly easily", 43.8% % faced "some difficulty", and "great difficulty" was experienced by 10.9% of residents. The households with the least economic problems are in Denmark, Switzerland and the Netherlands, while the most difficult situations were in the households in Greece, Romania and Hungary (Fig. 2).



Source: authors' calculations based on the survey data

Fig. 2. Household ability to make ends meet

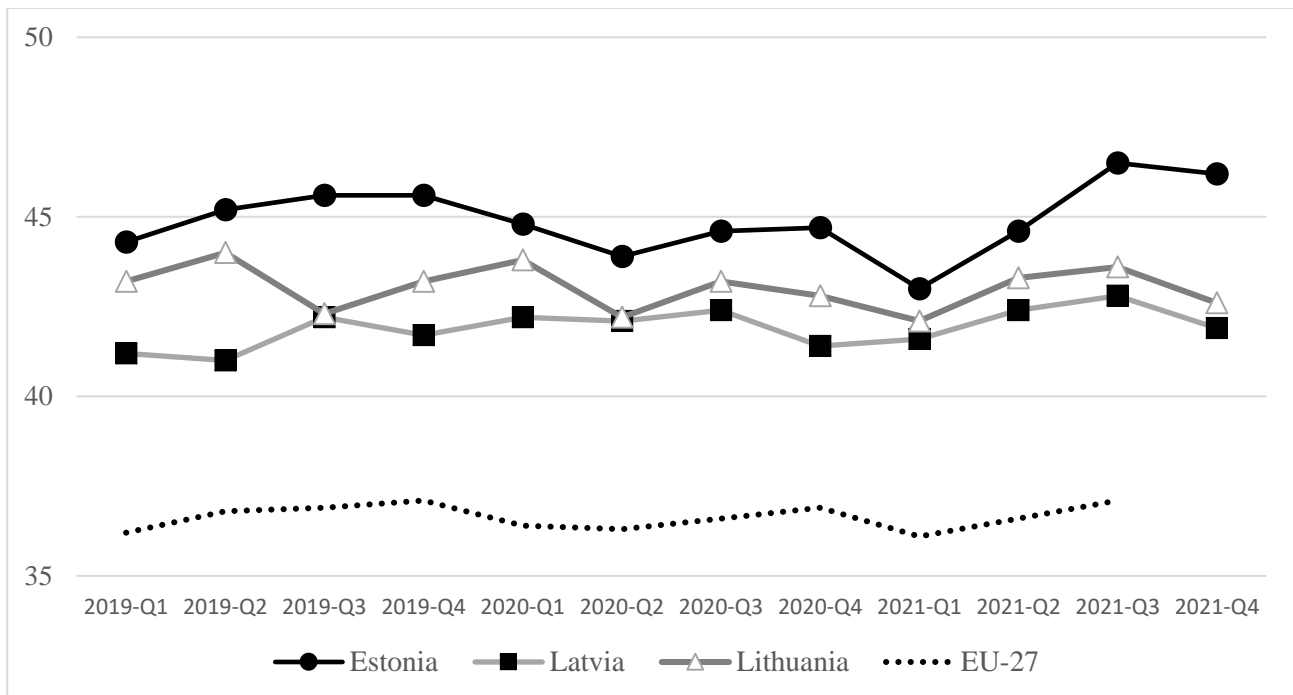
In Latvia, 10.5% of the households facing difficulties postponed regular bills since last interview, and 9.1% of such households reported that they dipped into savings since the last interview; however, the most frequent answer to the last question was "I had no savings" – it was chosen by 52.4% of respondents.

In the considered group of population (i.e. people aged 50+ who were in employment during the first interview in summer 2020), Latvia had the 3rd highest share of not-vaccinated against Covid-19: 48.3% (higher numbers were observed only in Bulgaria – 71.3% and Romania – 61.8%). Lithuania had a slightly better position with 45.2%, while in Estonia there were only 28.7% of not-vaccinated respondents in this

group. The lowest percentages were found in Spain (only 1.0% without vaccination), Denmark (3.6%), Israel (3.8%) and Malta (4.3%).

2. Changes in work and employment between two waves of the interviews

According to the Eurostat data, no decline in employment levels of people in the age group 50+ was observed in 2020 and 2021 compared to the pre-pandemic 2019, neither in the EU-27 on the average, nor in the three Baltic countries. Older people in the Baltics continued to demonstrate considerably higher levels than the average EU ratios (Fig. 3).



Source: Eurostat, LFSQ_ERGAN

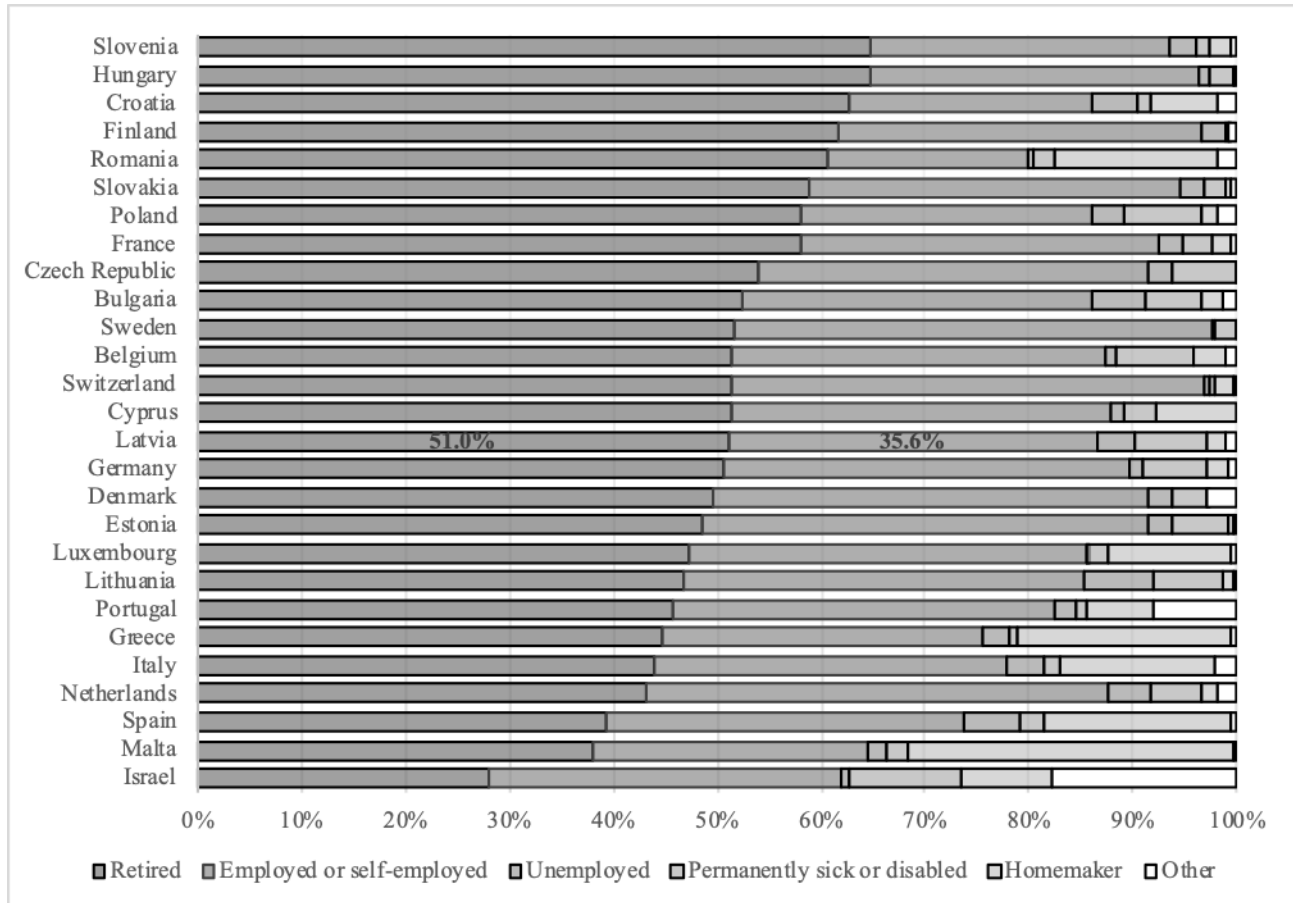
Fig. 3. Employment rates in the age group 50+ in 2019-2021, %

We were aiming at analysing the changes of the employment statuses at the individual level, using the data from two SHARE Covid-related waves.

There is a certain inconsistency in the data between the two survey waves: in the first Covid-19 survey in summer 2020, the respondents' employment status was assessed by one single question - they were asked if they were employed or self-employed when Covid-19 broke up, and the only options offered as an answer were "yes" or "no". Since the SHARE survey includes only people aged 50+, quite naturally, the majority of respondents in all countries, including Latvia and other two Baltic States, answered "no" about their work status. So, for further analysis we selected only those respondents who were in employment. However, a similar question in the second Covid-19 survey in summer 2021 offered the respondents a wider choice of the answers: 1) retired; 2) employed or self-employed; 3) unemployed; 4) permanently sick or disabled; 5) homemaker; or 6) other.

The majority of the respondents who were employed or self-employed at the time of the beginning the outbreak of Corona in 2020, reported themselves as retired in summer 2021 (Fig. 4). In Latvia, 51% of the respondents in the target group declared themselves retired at the time of the second interview. The other two Baltic countries demonstrated slightly lower proportions: 48.6% in Estonia and 46.9% in Lithuania. The smallest shares of retired participants were observed in Israel (28.0%), Malta (35.6%) and Spain (39.2%), while the highest - in Slovenia (64.7%), Hungary (64.7%) and Croatia (62.8%). We expected that the countries where the respondents were older would demonstrate higher proportions of

retired participants, but this hypothesis was not confirmed, as no correlation was found. On individual level, however, positive correlation between the age of participant and their retirement was present and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) in all countries; but the strength of the relationship is quite weak, varying between 0.17 in Greece and 0.30 in the Netherlands (Spearman's rank correlation coefficient used), and Latvia ranked at the level of 0.22.



Source: authors' calculations based on the survey data

Fig. 4. Employment status of the respondents 50+ who were employed or self-employed before the outbreak of Covid-19, as at the time of the 2nd interview

However, looking at the answers of the respondents to the question if they retired since the outbreak of the Covid-19, it can be seen that very few gave a positive answer: from 0.5% in Cyprus to 6.8% in Switzerland. In Latvia, 2.1% of the respondents selected this option (Lithuania – 4.3%, Estonia – 3.7%). That makes us think that the absolute majority of those who self-reported themselves as "retired" during the second interview, had this status in 2020 already, but continued employment. In most of the European countries, including all three Baltic states, it is possible to take retirement at reaching the statutory pensionable age and continue work in order to combine income from work with pension. In some countries, partial retirement is also possible, so a considerable part of pensioners is working pensioners. In Latvia, according to the data of the State Social Insurance Agency, 13%-14% of retired women and 19%-21% of retired men remain in full or partial employment. So, these people may classify themselves both as "retired" and as "employed". Whereas in 2020 survey a working pensioner could explicitly choose the "employed" option only, in 2021 survey a working pensioner may be found both among those who chose "retired" and those who chose "employed". It can be confirmed also by age distribution in these sub-groups: while the statutory retirement age in 2021 in Latvia was 64 years for men and women, in the sub-group "retired" we find people aged from 59 to 82 years, and in the group "employed or self-employed" – people from 50 to

71 years. Therefore, to our regret, the change of the wording of the question does not allow us to correctly estimate the working status of a considerable share of the respondents.

Looking at those respondents who explicitly reported that they retired after the outbreak of the coronavirus, in most of the countries, the gender of the respondent did not play a statistically significant role in their decision. Only in three countries the retirement was statistically significantly ($p < 0.05$, Chi-square test) associated with gender: in Malta and Portugal women retired more frequently than men, but in Romania men reported higher retirement than women. In Latvia, as well as in the other Baltic countries, gender was not a statistically significant factor.

Among those, who retired since the outbreak of the pandemic, the majority of the respondents in Latvia said that their retirement had taken place earlier than planned (47.6%), 8.9% retired later than planned, and the remaining 43.5% - as planned. However, earlier or later retirement had no relation to Corona in 84.2% of cases. Thus, we can conclude that the pandemic had a very weak influence on retirement decisions of the survey participants. This is true for all surveyed countries, as well we may conclude that the pandemic has not violated the retirement decisions of the employees in older age groups.

The other research, though, show that Covid-19 may have had some impacts on the retirement decision-making of elderly. Results from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) Covid-19 study examine how retirement plans have already been affected by the crisis. The main results indicated that due to the pandemic one in eight of elderly people changed their retirement decision due to the Covid-19 crisis (8% will retire later and 5% plan to retire earlier). Older people who work from home are more likely to plan to retire later than expected, contrary those people who are on paid or unpaid leave from their current work are more likely to retire earlier (Crawford and Karjalainen 2020). In our case, however, the respondents were not asked about their plans for future retirement, but about the already exercised retirement, therefore the results are not 100% comparable.

The proportion of those people in the participating countries who became unemployed, were laid off or had their business closed since last interview varied from 0.7% in the Czech Republic to 48.8% in Spain, the average rate reaching 11.4%. The Baltic States demonstrate relatively low rates, i.e. in Latvia - 5.8% and Estonia - 5.5%, but higher than average in Lithuania - 13.9%.

As concerns the changes in working time among those who remained in employment, for the absolute majority of the Baltic participants there were no changes compared to the situation one year before. 7.4% (5.2% among males and 9.1% among females) of Latvian respondents reported that they worked shorter hours since last interview and 8.3% worked longer hours (4.7% among males and 11.2% among females). Rather similar proportions were observed in Estonia: shorter hours were reported by 5.3% (male - 4.9%, female - 5.6%) and longer hours by 7.0% (male - 7.3%, female - 6.8%); and Lithuania shorter hours by 8.9% (male - 9.1%, female - 8.7%) and longer hours by 10.8% (male - 9.3%, female - 11.9%). Thus, in Latvia women more often faced both increase and decrease in working hours than men, but the trend was not the same in other Baltic states. According to Tverdostup (2021), the majority of the available reports indicate that the employment status of women has been more affected by the pandemic than men employment, also in terms of decreased working hours, while few of reports illustrate that Covid-19 situation affected male and female workers in a similar way. Brugiavini et al. (2021) in their research concluded that elderly women are more affected by Covid-19 crisis in terms of employment than men.

Concerning the place of work during the time between the first and the second interviews, most of the respondents in all countries (85.2%) worked at the usual workplace outside the home: the proportion varied from 62.9% in Sweden to 96.0% in Romania. In Latvia, 85.2% of the participants chose this answer, in Estonia - 89.1%, in Lithuania - 88.2%. Globalization, population's mobility and evolvement of

information and communication technologies contributed to the switch to remote work. People with higher education level are more likely to work remotely, while occupations, where direct communication with people are required, are less likely to switch to remote work (Gallacher & Hossain, 2021). In our study, the option "worked from home" was, on average, chosen by every fourth participant (25.7% in all countries): from 8.2% in Hungary to 52.9% in Sweden. In Latvia, from home worked 18.9% of respondents, and this ratio is lower than in Estonia – 23.1%, and Lithuania – 19.3%. In all countries (except for Switzerland and Romania), work from home was associated with higher level of education. Thus, in Latvia, the median years of education of those participants who worked from home was 16 (Q1-Q3: 11-14), while of those who didn't – 12 years (Q1-Q3: 12-16). Finally, the option "worked elsewhere at a different work place" was the least frequent: in Latvia – 1.1%, in Estonia – 2.9%, in Lithuania – 3.3%. In other countries it varied from 0% in Romania to 11.1% in the Czech Republic (4.4% on average).

3. Development of the legal regulation of remote work in Latvia during the Covid-19 pandemic

The increased numbers of people who switched to full or partial work from home required adoption of relevant legal framework of such work form. In the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was the lack of the legal regulation regarding remote work in Latvia, both in respect of employees' and employers' rights and obligations that may arise from such work form (Reine, 2020). The pandemic forced development of the national legal labour relations regulation. On 1 July 2020, the amendments to the Labour Protection Law entered into force and, along with these amendments, the clarification of the concept of "remote work" was for the first time included into the legal framework. Inter alia, it was determined by these amendments that employees who work remotely should, in cooperation with their employers, perform the assessment of the risks of the work environment at the remote work place. It gave employers the right to ask questions to their employees about the environment at their homes (or other places from which remote work was carried out) and required employees to cooperate. At the same time, in addition to the amendments to the Labour Protection Law, the Cabinet Regulations No.950 "Procedures for Investigation and Registration of Accidents at Work" were also amended. It was determined, that all accidents occurring at the time when an employee is working remotely should be investigated as accidents at work, thus extending the pre-existing framework, which had not laid down conditions for remote work.

On 1 August 2021, the amendments to the Labour Law entered into force. Along with them, it was stipulated that in the case when the employee and the employer have mutually agreed on the performance of work obligations remotely, the additional costs incurred by the employee relating to the carrying out of remote work shall be reimbursed by the employer, unless otherwise provided for by the individual employment contract or the collective agreement entered into with the employees' trade union and provided that the overall level of protection of employees is not reduced by such a collective agreement. Within the meaning of the Labour Law, the "remote work" is such a way of work performance when the work which could be performed by an employee within the scope of the undertaking of an employer is permanently or regularly performed outside the undertaking, including also the work performed with the means of information and communication technologies. With these changes, finally the definition of the remote work was included also into the Labour Law, and the requirements for the employer were set regarding the expenses related to this form of work.

Due to rapid technological development in the recent decades, remote work form in fact was present before the Covid-19 outbreak (especially, in such branches as IT, consultancy, academia etc.). Regulatory changes have been a long time coming. The above-mentioned amendments made to Latvian labour

legislation that came into force during the pandemic years, is just the start of the solving large-scale questions regarding remote work. The slow development of the legal regulation has led to confusion when neither employees nor employers were aware of their rights and obligation caused by change of the work environments. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was more urgent need to address other issues in order to reduce the spread of the infection; therefore, it was reasonable that regulation of remote work issues was not the top priority of the legislator; nevertheless, its development should have been launched faster. Still, there are many unsolved detailed questions regarding remote work, such as environmental risk assessment while working remotely, which require univocal clarifications written down in the legal regulation. Only clear legal definitions and requirements may ensure the understanding of the employees as well as of the employers about their rights and responsibilities, elaborate guidelines and establish the best practices in remote work cases.

Even with the end of the pandemic, remote work will remain the new way of working arrangements that may be in many cases very productive and benefit to both employees' and employers' interests. At the time being, the legal regulation of the situation is not solved completely, but it demonstrated the legislator's ability and willingness to develop the labour regulation in order to make it more appropriate to the work environment and practices of the 21st century.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

- 1) The authors analysed the data of only those respondents who were aged 50 years and older and who were in employment before the outbreak of the virus. The study is based on the dataset collected in two subsequent SHARE Corona Surveys in June-August 2020 and in June-August 2021. The survey is targeted specifically at collecting data on the living situation of people who are 50 years and older during the pandemic across Europe. For the present study, we selected only those participants who were in employment before the outbreak of the pandemic, in order to analyse the changes in their employment status, work environment, as well as the financial assistance received due to the pandemic.
- 2) The share of people who received additional financial support due the pandemic varied significantly among the surveyed countries. In Latvia, 29.4% of the respondents in the study group reported receipt of some sort of financial support. This is higher than in Lithuania (21.0%) and Estonia (6.6%). The government was the major provider of the support in the Baltic States, and the role of employers in providing financial support was lower.
- 3) High participation of older age groups in labour market in Latvia as well as the other two Baltic States was not practically affected by the Covid-19. The proportions of those workers who experienced unemployment, laid off or closure of business in Latvia and Estonia were lower than average ratios for all surveyed countries, but in Lithuania – higher than the average.
- 4) The inconsistency of the wording of the question relating the employment status of the respondent in the second wave of corona-survey compared to the first wave does not allow us to correctly distinguish working pensioners from those who fully retired and stopped participation in labour market.
- 5) Only 2.1% of Latvian respondents retired within the inter-wave period, and only 9.0% of them reported their decision to retire was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. These small numbers do not allow us to undertake any further investigation of the influence of the pandemic on retirement decision in Latvia.
- 6) Remote work from home was quite spread among old age groups in Latvia – 18.9% of the study population used this form of work. In 2020 and 2021, the legal framework for the remote work was

elaborated and the rights and obligations of the employees and employers in relation to the remote work arrangements have been stipulated in laws and regulations.

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