

Chapter 5

Digital nomads: niche outliers or the new mainstream?

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Introduction

Digital nomads have a 2-in-1 life: they ‘work while traveling and travel while working’ (Hannonen 2020: 1). Digital nomads are an amalgam of innovative phenomena – remote work, digital technologies and increasingly individualised mobility trajectories.

Digital nomads are seeking alternatives to the traditional career path and are looking for ways to break free from the constraints of a 9-to-5 job and a fixed location. They desire the freedom to choose their work hours, the places they visit, and the experiences they gain along the way. Digital nomadism offers a lifestyle that emphasizes experiences, personal growth, and the pursuit of passion projects. It aligns with the idea that life is not solely about work but also about exploring the world, building connections, and creating lasting memories. (Phoenix 2023: 7-8)

They are at the same time visible – there are 35 million global nomads, 16.9 million of them in the US – and invisible because they elude statistics (Cook 2023; OTS 2022; Rasnača 2023); at once both attractive and ephemeral.

The aim of this chapter is twofold: to analyse digital nomadism as a new form of intra-European mobility and as a new type of correlation between remote work and mobility. If in the case of classical migration mobility precedes work, in that of digital nomadism mobility is much more deeply interwoven in the specific digitised space-time of work.

Numerous studies situate digital nomadism within lifestyle-led mobilities (Hannonen 2020). In the spirit of this volume, however, the focus of this chapter is different: it is on labour mobility.

Zane Rasnača (2023: 204-205) distinguishes three scenarios of digital nomadism in the EU: namely EU citizens working for an employer in a different EU country, working for a non-EU employer while being in the EU, and working for an EU-based employer while not yourself in the EU.

These distinctions are clear but not fully applicable in practice, because the diverse mobility of digital nomads is difficult to classify into rigid categories. This chapter attempts to shed light on digital nomadism by providing a fieldwork, covering in-

depth interviews with 15 individual digital nomads, that focuses on the perspectives of individual nomads. Two types of sampling methods were mobilised: cluster sampling (respondents were selected/clustered by geopolitical region – the EU) and snowball sampling (respondents' networks were useful for recruiting new interviewees). The interviews were conducted in 2023, with the exception of one taken earlier - in 2021.

The interviewees fall into the first two categories identified by Rasnača (2023: 204). In the first category of intra-EU digital nomads, the interviews included two individuals from Sweden and Slovakia both working in Portugal, an individual from Poland working in Spain, an individual from Ireland working in Germany, two individuals from the Netherlands and Italy working in Bulgaria, and an individual from Bulgaria working in Czechia. The second category are digital nomads working for an employer based in a country outside the EU while living in an EU country. This was the case of an individual from Bulgaria working in France for a transatlantic employer. Another interviewee was from the UK. Two of the interviewees were digital nomads from other continents working in the EU: one is from the United States and one person with dual citizenship – Canadian and American. Annex 1 provides a brief description of the sample of interviewees.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 1 aims at mapping the field of digital nomadism overviewing definitions and conceptual history and reviewing the rise of digital nomadism. Section 2 overviews policies on managing digital nomads from a work perspective. Section 3 addresses the analytical questions of 'who, how and why,' analysing the profile and typology of digital nomads, the specificity of remote working and the reasons for becoming a digital nomad and for quitting digital nomadism. The analysis outlines the global phenomenon of digital nomadism, but the emphasis is on its manifestations in the EU. The final section concludes the chapter.

1. Mapping the field

1.1 Defining digital nomads

The conceptual history of digital nomadism is brief but turbulent. The term 'digital nomad' as a 'location-independent, technology-enabled lifestyle' (OECD 2022: 2) was first coined over twenty-five years ago (Makimoto and Manners 1997), although the first research article indexed in Web of Science only appeared in 2006 (Šímová 2023: 9). The decade after that until 2015 was marked by a stagnation in the number of publications on the subject. The boom came with the Covid-19 pandemic, when publications saw a staggering annual growth of 24.36 per cent (Šímová 2023: 6). According to Teresa Šímová's bibliometric analysis (2023: 9-10), the three most productive countries in terms of the number of publications on digital nomads are the US, Russia and the United Kingdom (UK). Publications thus provide less data on the EU than the US, which informs any analysis of the dynamics and specificities of digital nomadism.

The definition of digital nomads is as much a conceptual issue as it is a political one, and is needed by governments, policymakers, corporations and academics: 'As Lily Bruns,

author of a white paper on digital nomads visas asks ‘how can countries design usable digital nomads visas, if we don’t have clear definitions?’ (Cook 2023: 258). Scholars are critical that the conceptualisation of digital nomadism ‘is still in its early stages and not fully framed as a proper research category’ (Šímová 2023: 1). The novelty of the phenomenon and the early stage of research into it are reflected in an abundance of definitions. Caleece Nash et al. (2018; 2021) structure the concept around three pillars: gig work; nomadic life; and adventure and global travel. Marko Orel (2019) also identifies three thematic pillars, but defines them in a different way: optimal work and leisure ratio; work in community-oriented workplaces; and value placed on freedom of movement. Olga Hannonen (2020) defines digital nomads as a rapidly emerging class of highly mobile professionals whose work is location independent. They work while travelling on a (semi) permanent basis and travel while working, forming a new mobile lifestyle. One of the most comprehensive definitions, which is also followed by this study, belongs to Dave Cook, who identifies key characteristics: ‘Digital nomads use digital technologies to work remotely, they have the ability to work and travel simultaneously, have autonomy over frequency and choice of location, and visit at least three locations a year that are not their own or a friend’s or family home’ (Cook 2023: 259).

Digital nomads are of academic interest, but still lack a category in EU law: ‘digital nomads as a category technically do not exist in EU law’ (Rasnača 2023: 208).

In order to highlight more clearly the conceptual contours of digital nomads, they are compared with other related concepts such as expats, travelling professionals and remote workers. The literature on expatriates tends to concentrate on individuals whose employers have transferred them and their families to another country and for whom, unlike digital nomads, it is therefore organisations rather than individuals that are the drivers of international work and mobility (Woldoff and Litchfield 2021: 14). The distinction between digital nomads and travelling professionals is important: mobility is a choice in the case of digital nomads but a working condition or requirement in the case of travelling professionals (Hannonen 2020). Key to this study are the links to the concept of remote workers. The OECD (2022: 2) considers digital nomads as cross-border remote workers. Cook (2023) also adds international mobility to remote work as a specific feature of digital nomadism, while Rasnača defines digital nomadism as ‘an extreme (or exaggerated) case’ of remote work:

... crossborder teleworkers such as digital nomads ... might travel and work elsewhere or frequently change their ‘home’, residence or even their habitual place of residence. Such a broader and more inclusive understanding with regard to telework has been adopted by both the International Labour Organization and Eurofound (ILO 2017; Vargas Llave et al. 2022). (Rasnača 2023: 204)

Rasnača extends the comparison to include ‘posted workers, frontier workers, intra-EU migrant workers, migrant workers from third countries and workers working for multiple companies in multiple countries (in line with Article 14 of the Social Security Regulation)’, going on to stress that:

... digital nomads might at some point coincide with one or even more of these categories – but not necessarily and not always. For example, one could ask whether an intra-EU digital nomad could be considered a posted worker under the Posted Workers Directive (96/71/EC) if the employer has agreed to the worker working from another EU country. (Rasnača 2023: 208)

There are still several open questions, such as how often and how far digital nomads must travel to be counted as such. Steve King (quoted in Cook 2023: 258), explains that ‘in order to be considered a digital nomad in their sampling, ‘You have to move around a minimum of three times in a year’. However, this definition overestimates the mobility of digital nomads, a number of whom work in their chosen country all year round. There is also a debate as to whether working remotely within the same town or city location (but not at home) can be considered digital nomadism (Reichenberger 2018). One nomad interviewed in the course of this study had chosen an eastern European country over his native western European one, but had already felt like a digital nomad even while he was still a student circulating between his home village and two big cities. In both the relevant literature and this study, digital nomadism is understood as remote work in international mobility. It should be emphasised that this connection is present but not always explicit, as noted in a Eurofound report on telework in the EU: ‘most national regulations consider working remotely to include locations different from the home, which could be interpreted as ICT-based mobile work being covered by existing telework legislation in most Member States, even though mobile work is not defined as such’ (Vargas Llave et al. 2022: 62).

1.2 Counting digital nomads

The issue of the availability of data on digital nomads is a critical one. Cook (2023) confirms that there is very limited data on how many people are adopting digital nomadism and how the population dynamics are evolving in that respect in the UK context. Researchers compensate for the lack of specific data on digital nomads by using data on remote work: ‘About two million people in the European Union live in a country other than the one in which they work and there are sizeable regional differences with such regions as Benelux having thousands of workers in incoming and outgoing labour flows ... while others are less affected’ (Rasnača 2023: 205).

Nicola Countouris et al. (2023: 9) emphasise that ‘[r]emote work has also been invisible in official labour market statistics in the pre-pandemic period ... And, as with many concepts in social sciences, what is not measured tends to be ignored’. There is also a lack of reliable data on remote work beyond borders:

Currently there is no European-level data available as to how many workers work remotely for an employer based abroad. LFS [EU Labour Force Survey] data reveal that the rate of workers working (almost) exclusively from home varies among EU countries with Luxembourg, Finland, the Netherlands and Ireland having comparatively more such workers than other EU countries ... However, there is no comparative data revealing how many of these workers work for

an employer without a permanent establishment in the country in which they currently reside. (Rasnača 2023: 205)

Given the lack of quantitative data, this study focuses on qualitative research methods: desk research, interviews with digital nomads and discourse analysis of social media groups of digital nomads. This chapter summarises the first results of the study, which will continue with fieldwork in digital nomad hubs.

1.3 The rise of digital nomadism

The brief, meteoric history of digital nomadism can be structured in three stages. During the first stage prior to Covid-19, remote work was an exception: only 12 per cent of workers in the US worked remotely full-time (MBO Partners 2019) and just 6 per cent in the UK (ONS 2020). The digital nomads who rejected traditional ways of living and working were ‘niche outliers’ (Cook 2023: 257).

The second stage, during the Covid-19 pandemic, was brought about by a seismic shift in the way we work, heralding the revolution of remote work. The pandemic was the single most significant influence on the growth and makeup of digital nomads: in the US alone, the number of digital nomads increased by a staggering 131 per cent in the short period from 2019 to 2022 (MBO Partners 2023: 3). During the global lockdowns, workplace institutions, cultural norms and employee obligations – the office, in-person meetings and the daily commute – abruptly disappeared. This opened up conversations that challenged other accepted norms: the nine-to-five routine, the five-day work week, the traditional meaning of a vacation (as a break from work) and the home as a private domestic space were all disrupted (Cook 2020; Newbold et al. 2022). In consequence, teleworkers in Europe numbered 41.7 million in 2021 (Taylor 2023).

The period after Covid-19 marks the transition from niche outliers to centre stage: ‘nomadism enters the mainstream’ (MBO Partners 2023). Mainstream is not understood as the majority, but as an emerging alternative model, a real prospect for remote work on the road: ‘People who embrace a location-independent, technology-enabled lifestyle have moved from eccentrics to mainstream in less than a decade’ (MBO Partners 2023: 2). Digital nomad numbers are growing but have begun to level out: in the US, they increased by 2 per cent, from 16.9 million in 2022 to 17.3 million in 2023 (MBO Partners 2023: 3). In addition, the dynamics differ across the different categories of digital nomads – while some are decreasing, others are increasing. In 2023, ‘the number of American digital nomads with traditional jobs decreased by 4 per cent. However, the number of digital nomads who are independent workers (freelancers, self-employed, independent contractors, etc.) continued to grow, increasing a substantial 14 per cent compared to 2022’ (MBO Partners 2023: 4).

Estonia is an emblematic case in the EU for digital nomadism: 600 digital nomad visas have been issued since the scheme launched in August 2020 but, overall, the government estimates that 51,000 digital nomads visited Estonia in 2023, including Europeans who do not need a visa (Agyemang 2024).

2. Policies on visas, taxes and the enforcement of labour rights

Digital nomad management policies are still at an embryonic stage, but they are key in three respects:

- They accelerate the transition of digital nomadism from academic into policy and legal discourses.
- They have an impact on digital nomadism by attracting new adherents through favourable conditions.
- They establish the reputation of digital nomadism as a desirable mobility and type of migration of talented labour.

This section analyses policies on digital nomads regarding visas, taxes and the enforcement of labour rights. Visas are not directly relevant to the main target group of this study – EU citizens working remotely in another EU country – but they are significant for the reasons listed above.

2.1 Digital nomad visas

These are one of the latest innovations in labour migration policies. Logically and expectedly, the first EU country to introduce a digital nomad visa scheme was Estonia, which had branded itself as ‘e-Estonia’, a pioneer in digitalisation in all spheres. Estonia is very clearly and ambitiously targeting particular beneficiaries: the new visa is designed to attract entrepreneurs and freelancers, but also salaried remote workers (Agyemang 2024). Estonia introduced its digital nomad visa in August 2020, followed by Greece at the end of 2021. Hungary, in February 2022, launched the ‘White Card’, a one-year permit for digital nomads to reside in Hungary while working for a foreign employer or foreign clients. In June 2022, Latvia introduced a digital nomad visa for up to one year, renewable for another year, for all OECD country residents who have an income of at least 2,857 euros per month and health insurance, without the need to shift their tax residence (OECD 2022: 2; Rasnača 2023: 203). Italy is the most recent country to introduce a digital nomad visa, in 2024 (Agyemang 2024). Several other EU countries such as Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Malta, Portugal, Romania and Spain offer some form of specific visa for digital nomads, although the approaches vary greatly: Portugal requires digital nomads to earn four times the national minimum wage (Global Citizen Solutions 2023), while:

In Germany only the self-employed and freelancers in healthcare, law, tax and some other professions have the possibility to stay based on a sort of digital nomad visa ... only for three months (but these can be converted into a residence permit of up to three years during that period of time). At the same time, Germany requires them to be registered with their tax office. (Rasnača 2023: 203-204)

In sum, 19 EU countries offer digital nomad visas (Taylor 2023), making Europe the world region with the largest number of countries offering such visas as of November 2023.

2.2 Tax exemption

As a rule, digital nomads (just like any other foreign resident) become tax residents in the host country after 183 days. However, as an additional factor of attractiveness for digital nomads, several countries, among them Croatia, have provided income tax exemptions for up to one or two years. Greece, for example, offers a seven-year 50 per cent tax break to any newly arrived or temporary resident holding a digital nomad visa or any other residence permit (OECD 2022: 2). In February 2024, the European Economic and Social Committee recommended that the taxation of remote employees should take place in the country of the employer's residence, with some tax revenue shared with the employee's country of residence (Agyemang 2024).

The interviews conducted in this study show that taxes are an important pull factor: one French entrepreneur said that one of the reasons he had chosen Bulgaria was the 10 per cent flat rate income tax.

2.3 Enforcement of rights

The issue of rights is conspicuous by its absence. Digital nomads are regarded as a privileged category of mobile workers and, as a rule, are not associated with vulnerability and demands for rights. Zane Rasnača's analysis for the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) titled 'Enforcing the rights of remote workers: the case of digital nomads' is rather an exception:

[T]here is little to no data revealing whether and how remote workers actually enforce their rights, the topic as such requires closer analysis. Indeed, the conclusions of the Council of the European Union in 2021 on telework already require Member States to consider amending their policies regulating telework on the issues of the monitoring of health and safety, the monitoring and organisation of working time and effective checks by labour inspectorates; thus recognising the utmost importance of enforcement practices in the context. So far, however, no comprehensive EU legal measures have been adopted specifically with telework in mind and even less attention has been paid to the challenges in enforcing the rights of workers who work remotely. (Rasnača 2023: 201)

3. Being a digital nomad: who, how and why?

Digital nomads are characterized by a very strong agency, they assume and emphasize the authorship on their life decisions: 'I decide myself', as one of the interviewees summed it emphatically. This agency is also reflective, they analyse the impact of mobility on their identity and personality: 'Digital nomadism changed me. I'm not the person who left. Today I feel a citizen of Europe and of the world', as another put it.

This third section analyses *who* through the profile and typology of digital nomads. For the purposes of this chapter, the huge question of *how* focuses on work done

remotely by mobile workers. *Why*, the question of reasons, is examined in terms of the beginning and the end; that is, the reasons for embracing as well as for quitting digital nomadism.

3.1 Who: profiles of digital nomads and a typology

The popular image of the digital nomad is of a young, tech-savvy professional who likes travelling and work-life flexibility. The purpose of this analysis was to check, on the basis of the fieldwork as well as the relevant literature, to what extent and in what respects the profile of digital nomads corresponds to this prevalent image. It is important to emphasise that digital nomads are highly mobile not only in terms of space but also in those of work, changing employers and careers and moving from one category to another.

The age profile of digital nomads could be analysed through their percentages in the various generations defined by the year of birth. Broadly, most digital nomads (58 per cent) are comprised of the younger generations: Gen Z (21 per cent) and Millennials (37 per cent). Gen Z has aged into the workforce, and already about one in five digital nomads are Gen Zers. Only about 70 per cent of Gen Zers are 18 or older, which means more Gen Zers will enter the workforce over the next seven years (MBO Partners 2023: 6). Digital nomads are young in age and young in spirit: only one in three (27 per cent) is over 40 and just 15 per cent are over 50. Nevertheless, '[t]he increase in older digital nomads resulted in the median age of digital nomads increasing to 39 from 37 in 2022, and 36 in 2020' (MBO Partners 2023: 7). Among the interviewees for this study, active digital nomads ranged in age from their early 20s to their late 30s. Those who had already settled down were in their 40s.

Table 1 Share of digital nomads by generation

Generation	Born	2022	2023
Gen Z	1997-2012	16%	21%
Millennials	1981-1996	47%	37%
Gen X	1965-1980	23%	27%
Baby boomers	1946-1964	13%	15%

Source: MBO Partners 2023: 6.

We know from migration studies that women migrants were a minority for a long time and only caught up with men in the second half of the 20th century. In the new phenomenon of digital nomadism this has not yet been achieved: 'Men continue to comprise a larger share of digital nomads than women. In 2023, 56 per cent of the digital nomads surveyed reported they were men, with 43 per cent reporting female and 1 per cent nonbinary' (MBO Partners 2023: 7). Among the interviewees for this study, 73 per cent were women because the snowball sampling method worked better among women. In terms of agency, most had authored their mobility project themselves; three had undertaken it for family reasons.

All the interviewees in this study appear to be well-educated and tech-savvy: they had a tertiary education – a bachelor’s or master’s degree, while one was applying for a PhD; and all actively worked with information and communications technology (ICT) with, for some, the latter being a profession. One interviewee had a PhD and had then gone into business in the hi-tech field of health technology.

MBO Partners (2023) report that while the sectoral distribution of digital nomads is rather wide, it mainly covers professions including information technology (19 per cent); creative services (14 per cent); education and training (9 per cent); sales, marketing, and PR (9 per cent); finance and accounting (8 per cent); and consulting, coaching, and research (7 per cent). The digital nomads in this study’s fieldwork somewhat overlaps with this observation, whereby the interviewed digital nomads worked in information technology, marketing, public relations, creative services, online psychotherapy, NGOs, humanitarian organisations or research. Some were entrepreneurs and founders of startups where everyone can work remotely, the team getting together face-to-face once a year.

Although they are a relatively new phenomenon, digital nomads have diverse trajectories, motivations and identities. Typologies are an attempt to order the diversity; that is, to group different cases into basic categories, with the two that are the most renowned being analysed here.

The first is the one offered by Woldoff and Litchfield (2021), based on length of stay. They identify three groups: honeymooners; visa runners; and resident nomads. Honeymooners are those who are new to a location and have stayed less than the 60-day maximum on a tourist visa. They are excited about discovering the new lifestyle, and bring energy and vitality to local digital nomad communities. Visa runners are digital nomads who make a short trip out of the country for the purpose of renewing their entry visas in order to extend their stay. Resident nomads are those who have been based in a country for over a year and intend to stay for longer. This typology reflects the dynamic nature of digital nomads who move from one category to another. It has three significant limitations, however: it does not apply to EU digital nomads in the EU, who do not need visas; it is based on the specific case of a local digital community studied by the authors; and it focuses on only one indicator, also limited to an aspect of temporality – the stage of the practical realisation of digital nomadism.

A more complex and heuristic typology is offered by Cook, who identifies five categories: digital nomad freelancers; digital nomad business owners; salaried digital nomads; experimental digital nomads; and armchair digital nomads (Cook 2023: 267). This taxonomy is based on two criteria that are not explicitly defined by the author but are evident in the way the individual types are analysed. The first is the type of employment – freelancer, salaried or business owner; while the second is the state of digital nomadism – whether it is real or aspired to; whether it is embodied in experience or still unfolding only in the form of plans and aspirations.

The best-known category, regarded almost as synonymous with digital nomads, are freelancers, who have control over their mode of employment. Digital nomad

business owners run more complex businesses with contractors, employees or business infrastructure. Salaried digital nomads are employed by a company and have a contract and salary (Cook 2023: 267). The first three categories are actual digital nomads, the other two are potential ones.

Experimental digital nomads are not yet earning or generating revenue. They are not tourists, because they are defined by a work context in so far as they may be learning new skills, attending courses or setting up businesses which are not yet earning. They are situated in a specific temporality being either in a transitional state or in a process of self-definition with two possible scenarios – to embark on digital nomadism or to abandon this experiment: ‘Experimental digital nomads might become freelance digital nomads, digital nomad business owners, or they may return to a settled, location-dependent way of living’ (Cook 2023: 270).

The processual character of digital nomads is also evident in the original category of armchair nomads, proposed in a report by MBO Partners (2022). This is the other potential category, with digital nomadism regarded as a project that can be for the relatively distant future: armchair nomads ‘plan on becoming digital nomads in the next two to three years’ (Cook 2023: 271). Unlike experimental nomads, armchair nomads earn but do not travel. A participant in a digital nomad festival in Bansko, Bulgaria, said she wanted to learn more in order to make an informed choice about whether to risk undertaking such a radical change of work-mobility-lifestyle.

3.2 How: imagining and narrating digital nomadism

These latter two categories, experimental and armchair digital nomads, illustrate a key specific feature – the constructed and narrative nature of digital nomadism. A growing avalanche of books and websites are ‘selling’ digital nomadism with attractive and superlative-filled stories of a new way of working and living that emphasises experiences, exploration and the pursuit of a fulfilling and well-balanced life (Phoenix 2023: 9). These publications and digital channels are guides and handbooks designed to introduce people to digital nomadism and prompt them every step of the way – from visa applications to accommodation and community life (Lonely Planet 2020; Phoenix 2023; Theory 2023). Marketing strategies for promoting digital nomadism also take more concrete forms – tours with potential or novice digital nomads to lesser-known countries, for example, eastern European ones: these are longer than tourist tours, allow for a more in-depth experience and often end with the choice of a country. This was the experience of the two transcontinental respondents in this study.

‘I’ve never had an office job’, said an interviewee from Poland living in a southern European country. She had always let potential employers know that she would accept job offers only if they offered online opportunities. A Slovakian respondent living in Portugal commented in the same vein. Office without borders, location-independent, telework, telecommuting, remote work – the cluster of terms is significant. Some are rather metaphors (‘office without borders’); others are the subject of serious research, such as the ETUI publication on *The future of remote work* (Countouris et al. 2023)

and the Eurofound (2022) report on *Telework in the EU: regulatory frameworks and recent updates*.

If media and marketing images portray digital nomads on the beach or on a terrace with stunning views, studies emphasise that digital nomadism is not a pastime but a serious activity: ‘not on holiday: making money and building dreams’ (Woldoff and Litchfield 2021: 113). Labour mobility itself has various transformations. One interviewee, a digital nomad from a central European country, had first practised classic labour mobility – she had worked a full-time job in London and then in Berlin for several years each before moving as a freelancer digital nomad to Portugal.

Mobility and professional advancement prove compatible for digital nomads. One digital nomad interviewed had moved from a job in public relations to online psychotherapy, receiving the required two-year training in the meantime.

The remote work/mobility nexus allows creative transformations such as the professionalisation of one’s passion and hobby, subsequently turning them into an occupation. A typical example is a central European who supplemented her passion for yoga with courses and practice sessions during her Asian mobilities while, later on during her European ones, she turned to teaching yoga. There were three similar such cases in the sample I interviewed.

3.3 Why: becoming a digital nomad and quitting it

Creative class jobs and cities, supposedly the bedrock of the new economy, are failing to deliver the personal fulfilment that many ambitious younger professionals believe is essential to their lives. Unwilling to sacrifice their autonomy and values to strive for someone else’s dream on someone else’s terms, and excited by new options for personal mobility and online work, digital nomads have struck out on their own. ... They leave their cities, jobs, friends, families, and countries in search of a face-to-face community of unconventional people who share their ideals and goals ... There, united by an intense, shared commitment to personal reinvention, digital nomads are creating new paths to meaningful work. (Woldoff and Litchfield 2021: 2)

This long quote sums up an influential concept about the reasons for global nomadism; namely, the collapse of the utopia of creative cities. Richard Florida (2005) had captured the public imagination with his ideas of creative class and creative cities, of diversity and creativity as basic drivers of innovation and growth. Woldoff and Litchfield (2021: 182) argue that the promise of creative class jobs in top-tier cities has been oversold. Creative class cities are expensive and the cost of living is outpacing wage growth; the culture of creative class cities is a toxic mix of materialism, business and workaholism that leaves little time and energy for personal growth, to invest in relationships or to take advantage of the much-promoted urban amenities. Furthermore, actual creative class work is often unfulfilling, taking place within organisations that routinely subject employees to indignities and rob them of autonomy over both their work and their lives.

Woldoff and Litchfield consider the flight from creative cities to be the main reason for embracing digital nomadism with the aim of creating smaller cosy communities of shared values for a meaningful life in more accessible destinations.

This concept is interesting but does not explain the variety of forms in which people become digital nomad. There are several others that may be identified from this fieldwork.

The first is that some young professionals engage in digital nomadism when they start their professional life: ‘My only condition in looking for a job was that it had to be remote so I could travel’, said one digital nomad who had already changed jobs several times and risen in her career while continuing to lead a mobile lifestyle. The same desire to work and live in the wider global world was shared by another digital nomad from a small central European country, with a third coming from Ireland to Germany as part of his career path and desire for mobility and cultural discoveries. Finally, a successful professional had left Bulgaria for the Czech Republic for family reasons.

These examples illustrate two deficiencies in Woldoff and Litchfield’s concept and two key features of digital nomadism: it is not driven by frustration with previous experiences, because it marks the beginning of a professional path; and it does not necessarily lead from global cities to small cosy communities in southern European countries, such as Portugal or exotic destinations such as Bali, because some digital nomads from small countries such as Slovakia are seeking broader horizons. There are also counterexamples to Woldoff and Litchfield’s hypothesis: one of the interviewees in this fieldwork, born in a small community in southern Italy, had moved to Sofia while another digital nomad in Sofia was born in a village in France.

Family reasons play important role in mobility decisions at various stages of digital nomadism. A very mobile digital nomad was choosing her destinations for harmonizing her mobility with the partner’s professional engagements. Another respondent was considering ending his mobile experience because of caring – his parents were getting old and he wanted to live closer/with them. A third interviewee decided to go back to her country and parents’ house because of a separation with her partner in mobility.

Digital nomadism is by definition a temporary phenomenon for a variety of reasons, of which two are identified here. The first is that legal permits like digital nomad visas are themselves short or medium-term – from one to two or three years. If they stay for a long time or forever, they move out of the category of nomads and mobile, and enter into the category of migrants and settled. The second reason is the intention of governments to attract them to stay and become permanent residents because, for several countries, digital nomad visas are a policy tool in ‘the global war for talent’ (Agyemang 2024).

Among the key reasons for quitting reported by digital nomads are as follows: they got tired of travelling, it was too expensive and the logistics were too challenging; loneliness; difficulties combining work and full-time travel; and missing family and friends (MBO Partners 2023: 14). One of those interviewed in this fieldwork summarised it more subtly: ‘I like digital nomadism, but I’m also tired – you build up, but then you leave’.

The interviewees also highlighted other reasons. One of the most successful and fulfilled digital nomads, still actively enjoying working while mobile, said that she plans to settle down after a while because digital nomadism is an interesting stage in one's professional and existential journey, but it is a journey followed by an arrival. She had decided that she would not return to her home country but was still vacillating between Switzerland and Colombia. Another digital nomad had just returned to her home country – she needed a refuge from the negative concurrence of the end of a relationship and of a work contract, and had found it with her parents, but she intended to continue to combine sedentary and mobile lifestyles, working nine months at home and three months while travelling. A third had permanently settled in the country he had come to as a digital nomad. In his case, two changes had catalysed the transition – starting a family and starting a company, moving from freelancer to entrepreneur.

Conclusions

The concluding remarks of this study are summarised along four key lines: the transformative change of digital nomadism; the impact of the single market and regulatory grey areas on digital nomadism; the emergence of a new innovative agency; and the lagging of research behind the dynamics of the new trends.

Digital nomadism is both a result of and a catalyst for profound societal and technological changes such as the ubiquity of mobility and technology in everyday lives and increasingly flexible employment (Phoenix 2023; Hannonen 2020). It is one of the drivers of a trend in which an 'intensification of the remoteness of work might actually be the first step toward establishing a different future for work' (Ekbja 2023: 232).

The single market and regulatory grey areas in Europe create a conducive environment for digital nomadism. The single market simplifies business operations across borders such that digital nomads can provide services to clients in different EU countries without facing complex regulatory hurdles. This is particularly advantageous for remote workers who often have clients in multiple countries. Furthermore, tax obligations for digital nomads can vary significantly between countries. This lack of clarity can sometimes be beneficial, allowing digital nomads to optimise their tax situations by choosing to spend time in countries with more favourable tax regimes.

Digital nomads impress with very strong agency, which is innovative – it challenges work, mobility, meaning, autonomy, individualism and collectivism, and professional and existential life, while also changing the person moving both professionally and personally, as it emerged from the fieldwork. The digital nomad agency is very reflective – they like narrating, sharing, and analysing their experiences. Digital nomads may well be poised to turn from niche outliers to the new mainstream, not as a number or a majority, but as actors, trends and transformations carrying the future.

Finally, digital nomadism is a new and highly dynamic phenomenon, but it is true that research is still lagging behind – both conceptually and theoretically, and in

terms of the lack of sufficient empirical evidence to support the analytical discussion (Hannonen 2020). This chapter is a small contribution to filling this theoretical gap.

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Annex

Table A1 Interviews with digital nomads

Country of work	Country of origin	Gender	Age	Sector of activity	Category*
Bulgaria	France	M	About 40	Entrepreneur IT	A
Czechia	Bulgaria	F	Late 20s	Social entrepreneur IT	A
Germany	Ireland	M	Late 30s	IT	A
Bulgaria*	Netherlands	F	About 30	Humanitarian work	A + B
Sweden	Bulgaria	F	Late 20s	Video editor	A
Spain	Poland	F	About 30	Marketing	A + B
Portugal	Sweden	F	About 30	Entrepreneur platform economy	A
Portugal	Slovakia	F	About 30	Online psychotherapy	A + B
Portugal	Slovakia	F	Late 30s	Employee	A
Portugal	Slovakia	F	About 30	Project manager	A
France	Bulgaria	F	About 30	Project associate	A + B
Bulgaria	Italy	M	Mid 40s	Employee and civil society organiser	A
Bulgaria	Canada	M	Mid 40s	IT	B
Cyprus	US	F	About 30	Product designer	B
Bulgaria	UK	F	Late 20s	Academia	B

Note: categories (following Rasnača 2023: 204): A – intra-EU digital nomads; B – digital nomads working for an employer outside the EU and living in the EU. All interviews carried out in 2023, except for * which was carried out in 2021.

Source: author's own elaboration.