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**The evolution of digital nomad lifestyle in Central Eastern Europe**

Until the year 2020, it seemed travel had become, almost undoubtedly, an inseparable part of our life. The COVID-19 pandemic raised serious doubts about this development and posed several questions about how we value mobility. Mobility is key to the spread of viruses, its very survival in fact, as well as of its illnesses it causes. As a consequence, severe devaluation of mobility started on international and local levels by closing down national borders, pausing air passenger travel, introducing local lockdowns and standardizing the institution of 'work from home' (Cresswell 2020). Over time, despite the increasing vaccination, companies established novel work arrangements with a focus on social distance utilizing technology-based tools to work remotely. Even though the notion of 'remote work' may not mean work from 'everywhere and anywhere', COVID-19 is still seen as a driver of stimulated interest in experiencing a new digitally enabled nomadic lifestyle (De Almeida et al., 2021). Besides independent professionals, even traditional job holders have been 'freed' from offices, with many, instead of staying in one place, taking the road and willing to invest in learning the digital nomad lifestyle (State of Independence in America Report, 2020).

The spread of the 'digital nomad' concept has started long before the COVID-19 pandemic and appeared from 2008 in the public media, Google Search volumes rapidly increased on this term since April 2012. While as a research category, digital nomads have appeared in academic publications during the last decade with straightforward upward trends only from 2017, 5 years later, based on the number of published titles, abstracts and keywords in Scopus Search. The theoretical framing of the term 'digital nomadism' is still emerging, and transitioning in meanings. Previously, the label 'digital nomad' has referred to the long-term travelers who leveraged the low-cost transportation and the expanding tourism market. The term 'digital nomad' was first mentioned in the academic literature by Makimoto and Manners (1997) who focused on how mobile and portable technologies would augment work and leisure and produce a new lifestyle which they defined as 'digital nomadism'. The recent literature approaches this trend from various angles, as a new way of work life, a form of tourism or mobility, as an economic model, a whole lifestyle, or even as a cultural phenomenon.

There are five key characteristics of digital nomad lifestyle that are common in previous studies. Firstly, it is a technologically-enabled behavior which assumes being equipped with mobile and digital technologies. The technology savvy nomads use technology as a connectivity tool to plan, book, execute and share their journeys as well as stay in touch with their work and social networks (Paris, 2009). Secondly, the digital nomad lifestyle is largely dependent on employment type. Müller (2016) in fact identifies digital nomads as the new generation of location independent

freelancers, young entrepreneurs, and online self-employed persons. However, besides work, also leisure is an integral component of digital nomadism. In fact, the employment-related work may be even perceived as leisure in this lifestyle (Reichenberger, 2018). The interconnection, or the mediation of dichotomies between leisure, work and travel is the third main characteristic of the digital nomadism phenomenon (Thompson, 2019). Furthermore, location-independence is also key to be able to work from “anywhere” and “everywhere”. Thompson (2019) highlighted this independence as the ability for individuals to work remotely from their laptop and use their freedom from an office to travel the world. Finally, the digital nomad lifestyle is built for purpose including passion for travel and adventures, seeking novelty, finding the higher meaning and balance of work, even perhaps the detachment from nation and state.

The pandemic showed that mobility for digital nomads is more than just a spatial dislocation, it composes various cultural perspectives on self-identities. Digital nomads are not just tourists but individuals who are dissatisfied with the demanding work cultures. Therefore, digital nomads are often seen from the perspective of the ‘future of work’ as a good example for capturing trends and forecasting future practices and lifestyle shifts (De Almeida et al., 2021). In addition, the economic aspects of the digital nomad lifestyle have become better known during the pandemic. Digital nomads often virtually serve clients from higher-wage labor markets while living in lower-cost locations allowing them to fund their travels and spend less time working to support themselves. This practice is known as ‘geoarbitrage’, a term that is popularized by Tim Ferriss (2007). In addition, Wang et al. (2018) emphasize that new forms of production and consumption emerged as a result of the digital nomad lifestyle such as digital work, digital platforms, and the digitalization of consumed environments. As a result, new types of businesses were established for (co-)living / (co-)working spaces, digital nomad house rentals, leisure programs, conferences, banking, healthcare insurance and even magazines.

Furthermore, destinations also responded by marketing themselves as ‘digital nomad friendly’. Especially, countries relying on tourists may profit from this revenue as destinations can increase their power to lure this segment by establishing attractive taxation, visa-free stays, e-residency, and digital nomad visa schemes. Arrangements like ‘digital nomad visa’ have been already experienced in Estonia, Georgia, Germany (freelance visa), Greece, the Czech Republic (long-term business visa) and Spain (self-employment work visa) within Europe (Krakat, 2021). In particular, Greece made significant steps to transform into a digital innovation destination by introducing both legal and technological ecosystems attracting digital nomads. The Law 4825/2021 now allows third-country citizens to work remotely from Greece, while a regulatory framework was introduced for licensing digital wallet companies and crypto-assets exchange. Radical digital developments like satellite network expansion, completion of the 5G network licensing process evolved the technological environment in Greece (Nanopoulos et al., 2021). Currently, there are

3 European locations (Lisbon, Canary islands, Tenerife) out of the top 5 list of the digital nomad destinations according to the popular website, nomadlist.com. Prague leads the CEE toplist ranking as 10 on the global one, with Budapest being the 30th most popular digital nomad destination worldwide. The website's ranking is based on a 27-factor scoring system which considers the attitude towards families, females, LGBTQ+ society, foreigners, the cost of living, the internet speed, the weather conditions, the level of crime, racism, education, income among many others.

Zooming in more to the Hungarian digital nomad ecosystem, it has started evolving from 2017 mainly thanks to the founders of backpacker.hu and the 'Digitális Nomádok' Facebook community who regularly organize MeetUps, lectures to the interested audience. In the Hungarian public media, the first book on the digital nomad lifestyle is also attributed to one of the founders which was published with the title 'Hogyan menjünk világgá - Az álmodozástól az indulásig'. The book is written mainly for those people who are constantly on the move, and the ones who have been cherishing the dream to travel around the world for years discussing the question of how desires can be turned into goals, and excuses into tasks. In the Hungarian academic literature, the subject of 'digital nomadism' is a relatively weakly researched area yet, covered mainly by MSc thesis discussions. However, deeper research is needed on the scope to better understand how digital nomadism triggered in Hungary, and Central Eastern Europe from both inbound and outbound perspectives. To fill this research gap, this study aims at understanding in-depth the digital nomads' travel patterns into and from Central Eastern Europe, with particular focus on Hungary, as well as the drivers in the choice of digital nomad destinations.

Keywords: Digital nomadism, Hypermobility, Digital technology, Tourism, CEE

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