

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON YOUTH EMPLOYMENT: A SOUTHERN EU PERSPECTIVE

YOUTHShare CONTRIBUTION TO THE NEW BASELINE STUDY (ACTIVE YOUTH)

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, the health emergency and the subsequent economic crisis have strongly affected socio-economic life across the globe. The health crisis has implied severe economic turbulence, caused mainly by unprecedented mitigation policies and lockdown measures, with significant disruptive effect on economic activity and detrimental effects on employment. However, these effects have been socially stratified and geographically differentiated. Some sectors, such as hospitality and tourism, have been hit much worse than have others, leading to significant economic disruption for those places with high concentrations of workers employed in such sectors. Likewise, those regions and countries that were most affected by the 2008 global economic crisis and that were still recovering when the pandemic broke have tended to experience worse economic outcomes than have those which were in better economic position.

Although a number of studies related to the COVID-19 impact upon employment have been published, these have generally focused upon national-level analyses (Coibion et al, 2020; Nicola et al, 2020; exceptions are Bailey et al, 2020 and Rose-Redwood et al, 2020). Furthermore, although some (e.g., Mongey and Weinberg, 2020) have explored how different types of workers have been differentially impacted by the pandemic, few have considered the potential for young employees' individual or collective agency to push back against the new 'Great Recession'. By way of contrast, here we want to make some brief observations about the pandemic through an analysis of its impacts upon sub-national labour markets and young employees therein. In so doing we comment upon two elements of the pandemic, these being: i) the COVID-19 uneven regional impact across the Southern EU with a special emphasis on the Greek regions and the NEET population; and ii) the need for youth-oriented agencies and institutions to develop spatially-informed responses challenging the increasing economic precariousness which COVID-19 has unleashed. In terms of the pandemic's overall impact upon the Southern EU, by early November 2020 there were 4.41 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and nearly 125,000 deaths. However, several countries have experienced health outcomes much worse than average – Italy, for instance, has a Case-to-Fatality ratio nearly double the global rate, approximately 4.4% compared to 2.4%, which likely reflects, at least in part, Italian family structure wherein multi-generational households are more common

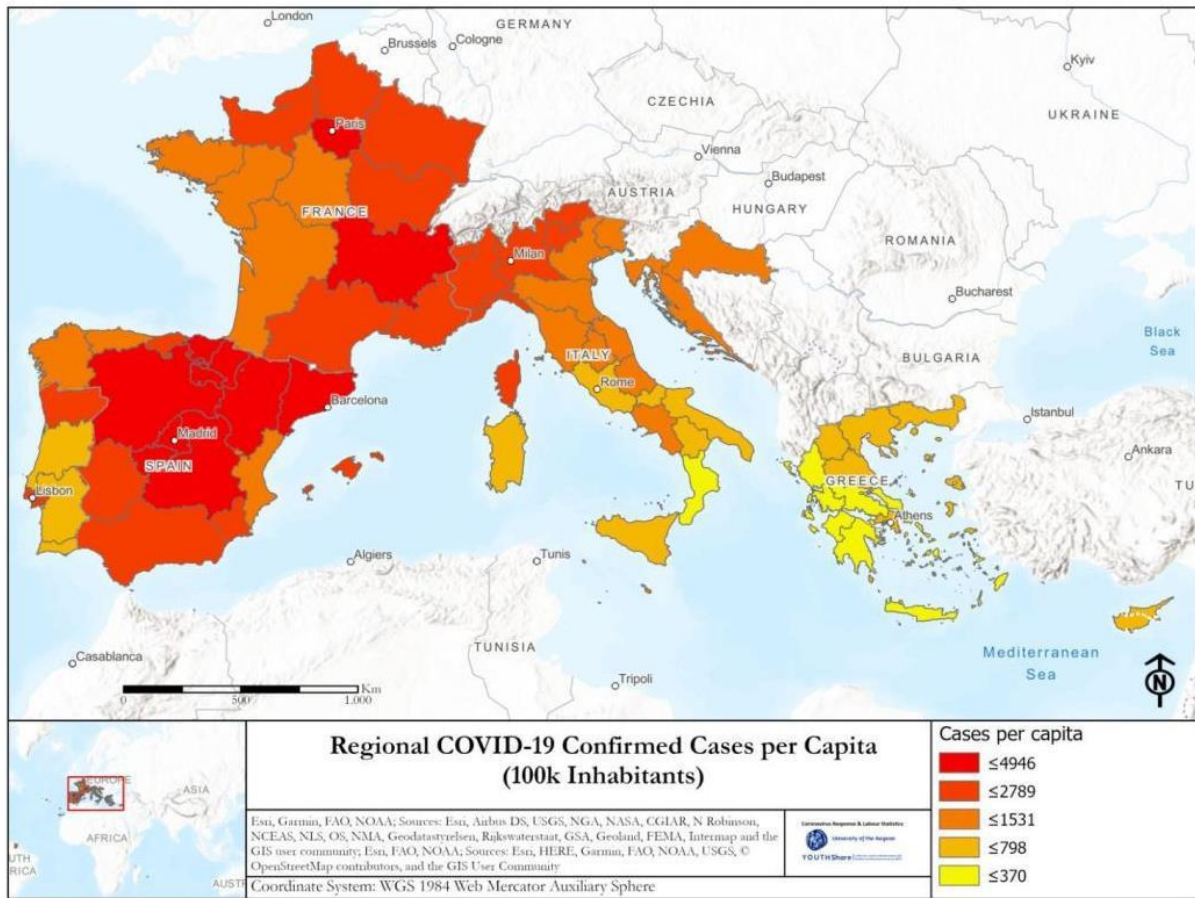
than they are in, say, Sweden. Indeed, though part of the advanced economies of the Global North, Italy was one of the first countries severely affected and is in the top twenty countries globally (alongside France and Spain) in terms of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (Rose-Redwood et al, 2020). This is noteworthy because in almost all counties that were severely impacted, political, social, and commercial disruptions have been significant (*New York Times*, 2020; Bailey et al, 2020; Kuebart and Stabler, 2020).

THE UNEVEN REGIONAL IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC UPON WORK AND YOUTH EMPLOYMENT: INSIGHTS FROM SOUTHERN EU

The double crisis is having a decidedly uneven regional impact upon production, work, and youth employment. This is a reflection both of the geographical pattern of the COVID-19 diffusion and of the underlying characteristics of the communities to which it has come. Generally speaking, and perhaps not surprisingly, across all Southern EU countries the earliest outbreaks occurred in highly urbanised and internationally linked regions, before emerging in places with less connection to the wider global economy (Kanelleas et al, 2020; Kapitsinis, 2020; Maloutas, 2020). Having first exploded across northern Italy, COVID-19's Southern EU epicentre then shifted to countries like Spain and Greece. Here the virus showed up early in many of these countries' tourist spots, which attract visitors from other parts of Europe and the world, as well as in the capital regions, which are more connected to international flows of people than are some other urban (and certainly rural) areas (Map 1).

For instance, in Catalonia and Andalucía, Spain's two most important tourism destinations, large numbers of jobs were lost, as was the case with Madrid which, though it receives fewer visitors than the Balearic and Canary Islands, has more people working in tourism (Gómez and Salvatierra, 2018). Significantly, though, whilst both Spain and Greece are important tourist destinations, in Greece the outbreak of the pandemic largely took place before the beginning of the shorter (in comparison to Italy and Spain) tourist season. Greece is a less important node for international economic networks and production chains, whilst its tourist season refers mainly to the summer period, with cases largely accounted for by Greeks who travelled abroad at the beginning of March than by foreigners visiting Greece (Kanelleas et al, 2020, Map 1).

Map 1: Confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100.000 inhabitants, NUTS-II level regions of Spain, Italy, Greece, Croatia, Cyprus and France, late-October 2020.

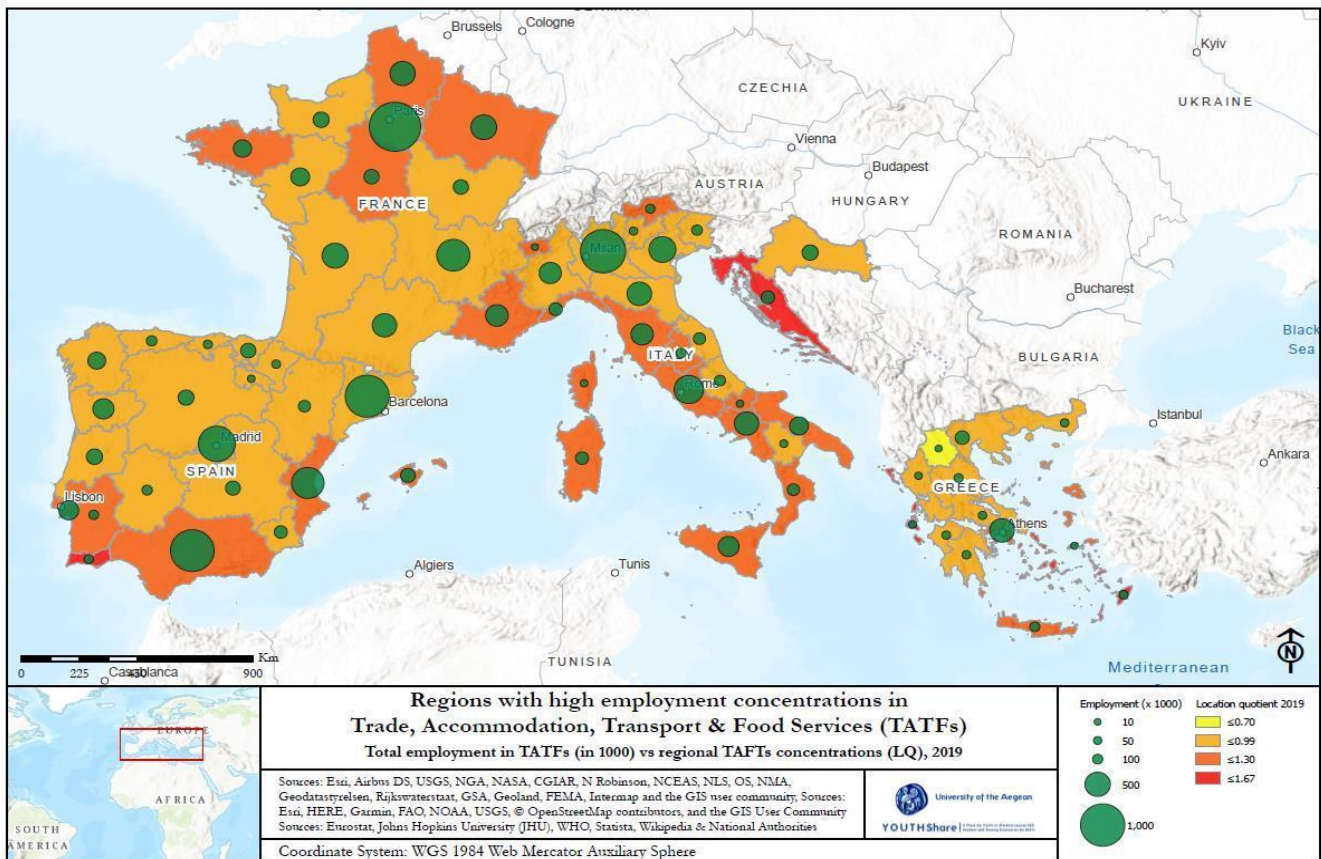


Source: Authors' compilation

In considering the Covid-19 impact upon the geography of employment, it is important to not just look at overall job losses, though. Thus, the pandemic has been particularly impactful in several of the Greek insular regions since, unlike in some other tourist-destinations (e.g., capital cities) where there are other types of employment available, in these islands tourism is by far the dominant employer. The loss of employment caused by the drop in travel, due to fears of getting infected by the virus, has been particularly acutely felt there and had a major impact upon younger parts of the economically active or even inactive population. Andalucía is in a similar situation compared to the rest of Spain. Whilst the greatest number of job losses across the Southern EU during the early period of the lockdown, in spring, were generally in the more urbanised areas (Athens, Barcelona, Madrid, Milan, Rome) and some tourist-orientated regions, it has been the South Aegean and Ionian Islands in Greece, together with Sardinia, that have seen the highest proportion of jobs lost in their local economy.

Urbanised regions, on the other hand, despite being heavily burdened by the stalling of economic activities, have seen proportionately fewer job losses relative to the size of their local economies as a whole (Map 2). This speaks, then, to the complex patterns of interaction between places' connections to other places and their internal dynamics. Overall, places that are more connected saw the virus arriving earlier and so felt its impacts earlier than did those places that are less connected with the outside world. By contrast, those places with more diverse economies have typically done better relatively than have those whose economic eggs tend to be in the same basket. At the same time, though, the specifics of the particular industries upon which 'single-industry' communities rely make a difference – 'single-industry' communities reliant upon tourism and young employees offering seasonal labour were more impacted than those reliant upon, say, commercial fishing. Geography, in other words, makes a difference to how the virus affects places and different age groups.

Map 2: Regions with high employment concentrations in Trade, Hospitality, Transportation, and Food Services, Spain, Italy, Greece and France, 2019.



Source: Authors' compilation

REGIONAL CHANGE OF EMPLOYMENT: A CASE STUDY IN GREECE

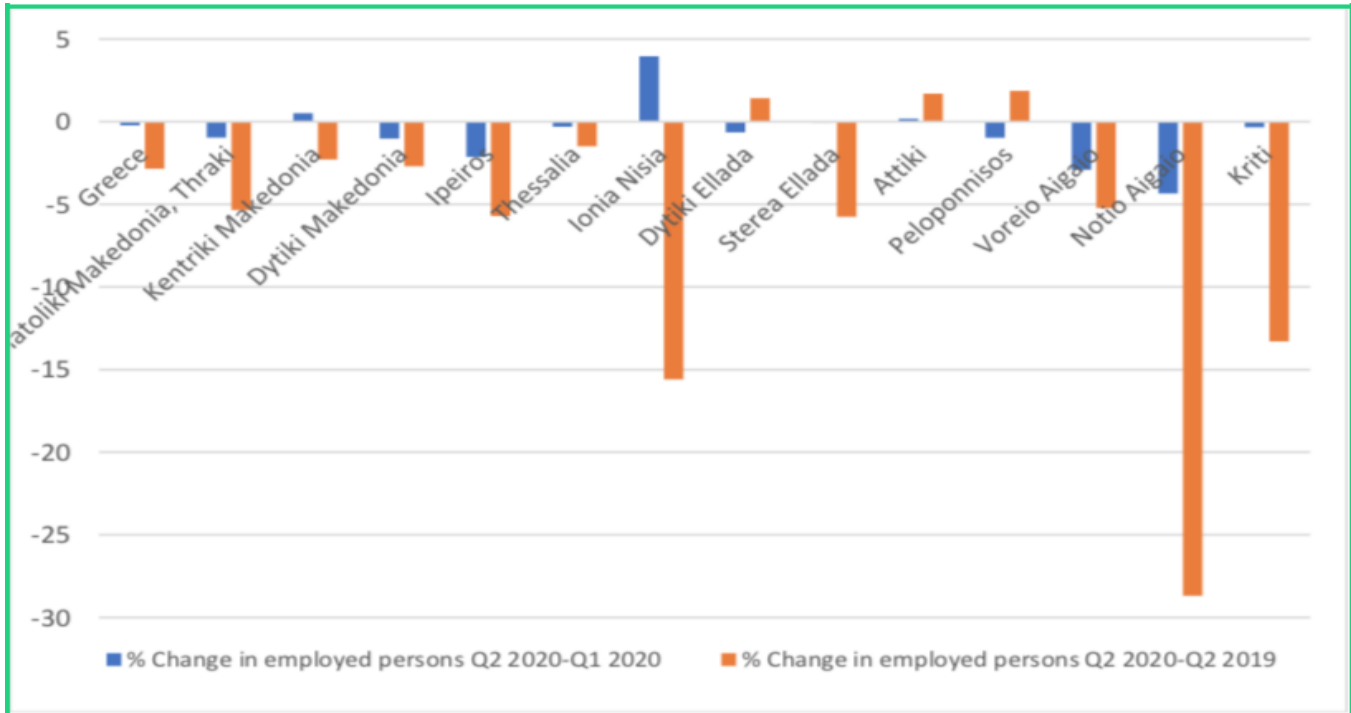
Particularly, in Greece, provisional data for 2020 Q2 (i.e. second quarter, April to June) published by the Greek Statistical Agency highlight a rise in unemployment, despite the economic recovery plan adopted by the Greek government, and a spatially uneven footprint of COVID-19 crisis on employment. Unemployment rose despite the claim of the EU Commission that a 'swift policy response has helped cushion the impact on employment and businesses so far' (EU Commission, 2020: 92).

The analysis shows that the insular regions, whose economies are strongly dependent on tourism, have demonstrated the greatest decline in the number of employed people (Figure 1). The region of Notio Aigaio saw its employment declining by 4.3% in the quarter to 2020Q2 followed by Voreio Aigaio region (2.9% quarterly fall). Notio Aigaio experienced the greatest quarterly increase in unemployed persons in 2020Q2 (113%), followed by other two insular and tourism-dependent regions (Ionia Nisia with 56.5% and Kriti 17.6%). By contrast, Attiki, the capital region, and Kentriki Makedonia, including

Thessaloniki urban area, saw a quarterly positive change in employment in the quarter to 2020Q2 (0.2% and 0.5%, respectively). This could indicate a relative resilience of the regions with large urban centres, contrasting evidence about the impact of the 2008 global economic crisis which has been relatively important on the regions with metropolitan areas.

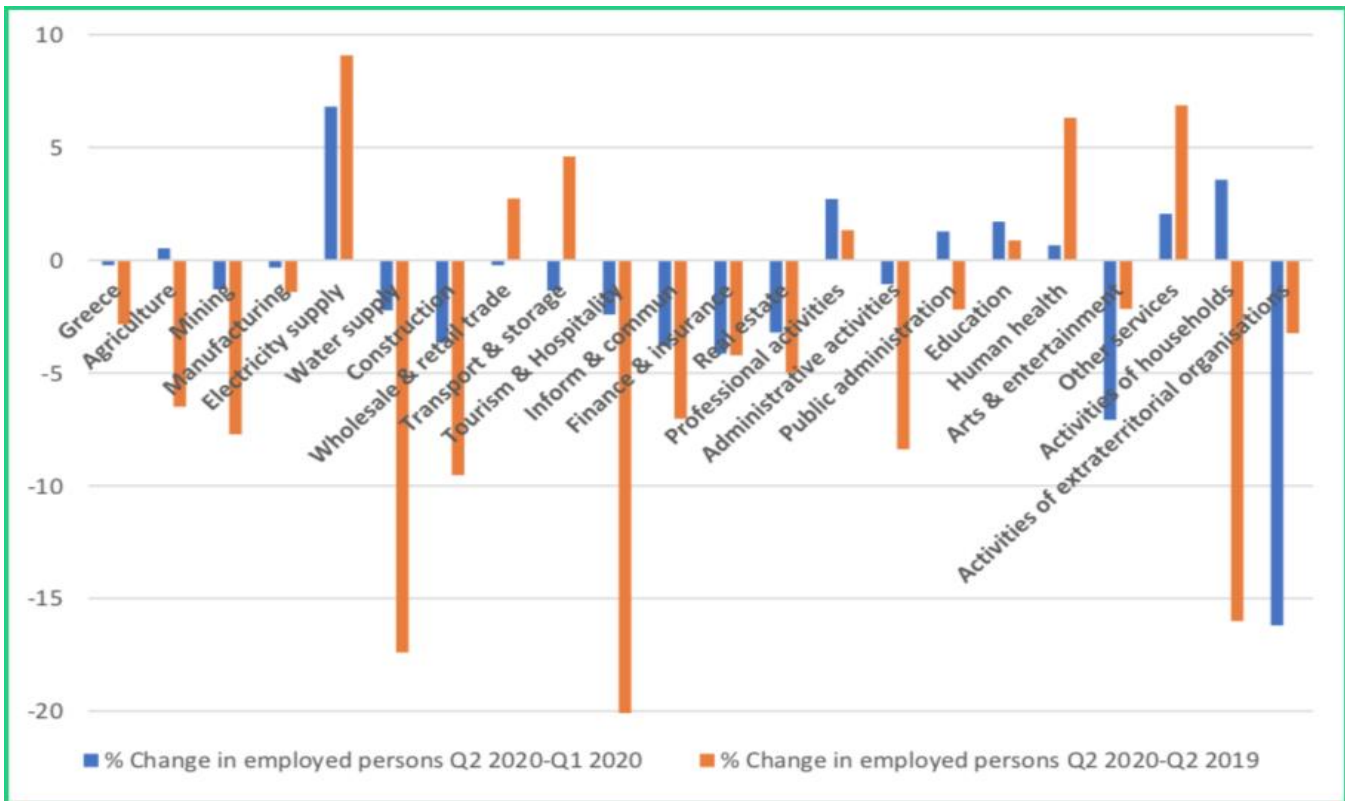
At an annual basis, figures demonstrate that again the insular regions have been most acutely affected. Figure 1 illustrates that Notio Aigaio region recorded the greatest decline in employment between 2019Q2 and 2020Q2 (-28.7%), followed by Ionia Nisia (-15.6%) and Kriti (-13.3%). Similar, these regions saw the greatest annual rise in unemployed people from 2019Q2 to 2020Q2 (Notio Aigaio 194.8%, Kriti 103.5% and Ionia Nisia 48.2%). By contrast, Peloponnisos (1.8%), Attiki (1.7%) and Dytiki Ellada (1.4%) were the only regions that demonstrated a positive annual change in the number of employed persons in the year to 2020Q2. Dytiki Makedonia (-34.7%), Attiki (-22.3%) and Peloponnisos (-18.3%) were the regions with the greatest annual decline in the number of unemployed persons between 2019Q2 and 2020Q2

Figure 1. Annual and quarterly change in the number of employed persons by NUTS 2 regions, Greece, 2020Q2



Source: Greek Statistical Agency

Figure 2. Annual and quarterly change in the number of employed persons by industry, Greece, 2020Q2



Source: Greek Statistical Agency

The evidence suggests that the geographical footprint in employment could be related to the diversified impact on local industries and specialisation, with tourism-dependent insular regions recording the most significant impact on employment.

In fact, the effects on employment are likely to vary by region due to specific socio-economic factors, such as the industrial base and local mix of productive activities. That is, the level of measures' restrictiveness has been differentiated across the sectors of the economy (Kapitsinis, 2020). For instance, the operation of firms in hospitality and tourism has been significantly disrupted, while the food processing and manufacture of pharmaceutical products may have been less affected. Indeed, Figure 2 shows that accommodation and food services was the sector that demonstrated the greatest annual decline in the number of employed persons in the year to 2020Q2 (-20.4%), followed by water supply (-17.4%), activities

of households as employers (16%) and construction (-9.5%). By contrast, electricity supply (9.1%), other service activities (6.9%), human health activities (6.3%) and transportation and storage (4.6%) were the industries that recorded the greatest annual increases in employment between 2019Q2 and 2020Q2.

In the quarter to 2020Q2, activities of extraterritorial organisations and bodies was the industry that saw the deepest decline in the number of employed persons (-16.2%), followed by arts, entertainment and recreation activities (-7.1%) and finance and insurance (-4.1%). Electricity supply (6.8%), activities of households as employers (3.5%) as well as professional, scientific and technical activities (2.7%) recorded the greatest quarterly increase in employment in the quarter to 2020Q2 (Table 1).

Table 1. Annual and quarterly change in the number of employed persons by industry, Greece, 2020Q2

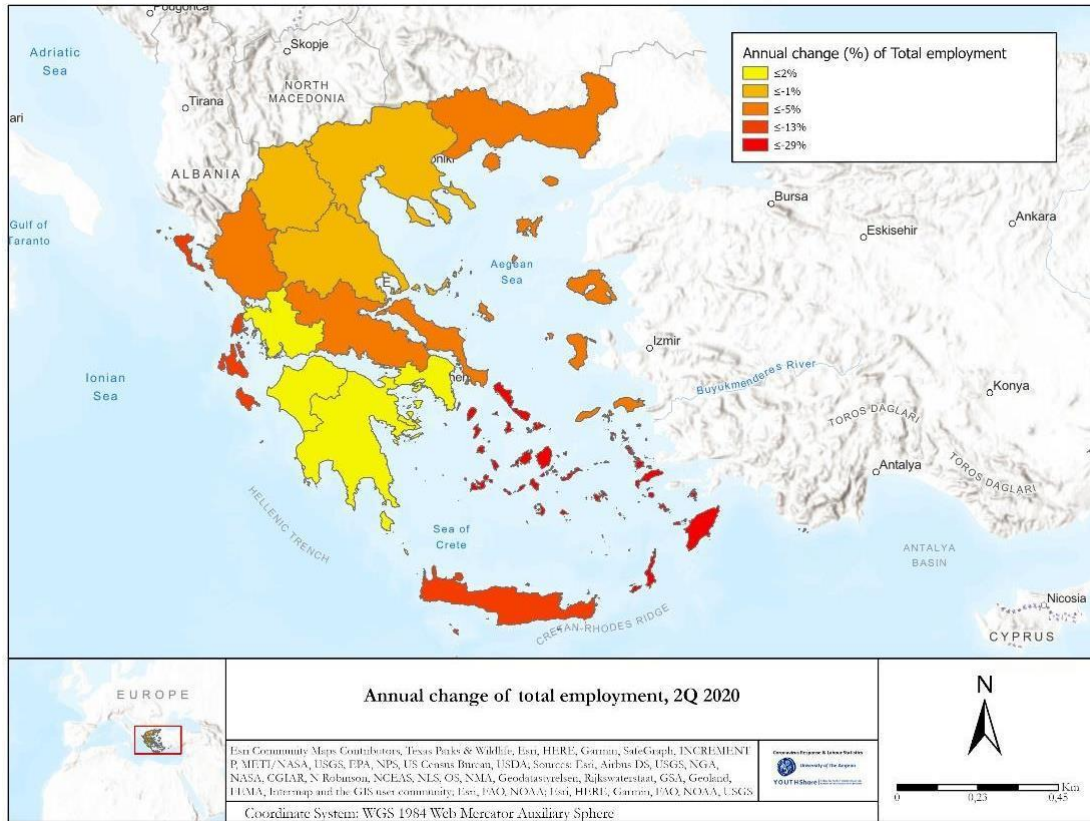
	% Change in persons Q2 2020-Q1 2020	employed persons Q2 2020-Q2 2019	% Change in employed persons Q2 2020-Q2 2019
Accommodation and food service activities		-2.41	-20.42
Water supply		-2.22	-17.4
Activities of households as employers		3.57	-16
Construction		-3.67	-9.54
Administrative and support service activities		-1.06	-8.39
Mining		-1.29	-7.72
Information and communication		-3.82	-7.03
Agriculture, forestry and fishing		0.53	-6.5
Real estate activities		-3.21	-4.98
Financial and insurance activities		-4.15	-4.21
Activities of extraterritorial organisations and bodies		-16.19	-3.24
Total		-0.22	-2.84
Public administration and defence, compulsory social security		1.27	-2.19
Arts, entertainment, recreation activities		-7.08	-2.16
Manufacturing		-0.32	-1.41
Education		1.71	0.87
Professional, scientific and technical activities		2.72	1.33
Wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles		-0.22	2.74
Transportation and storage		-1.36	4.6
Human health and social work activities		0.66	6.32
Other service activities		2.06	6.87
Electricity supply		6.81	9.09

Source: Greek Statistical Agency

In conclusion, as shown in Maps 3 and 4 below, the regions specialised in tourism and hospitality and which proved to be less vulnerable against the impact of the 2008 global economic crisis, seem to be in the worst position in the aftermath of the

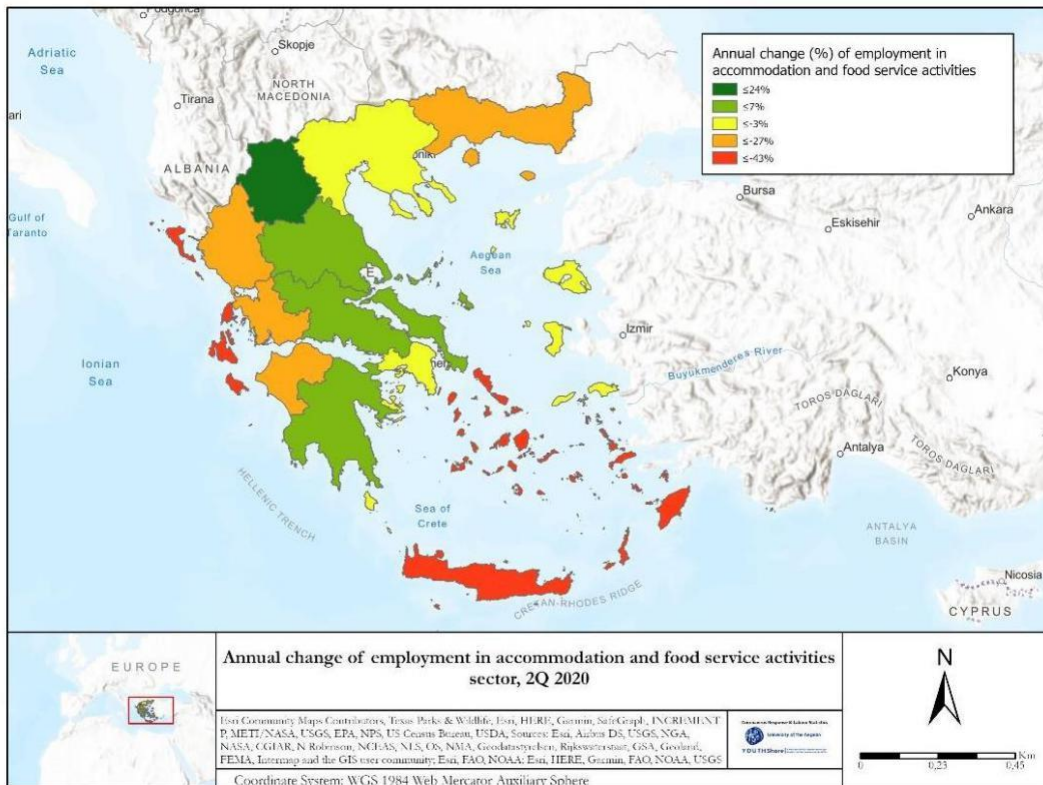
first outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent economic turbulence. Finally, metropolitan areas are identified as more resilient, with this possibly related to the expansion of the economically inactive population.

Map 3: Annual percentage change of total employment by NUTS 2, Greece, Q2 2020-Q2 2019



Source: Authors' compilation

Map 4: Annual percentage change of employment in accommodation and food services by NUTS 2, Greece, Q2 2020-Q2 2019



Source: Authors' compilation

Young people which are either unemployed or not seeking a job, while they are not following a training program, also known as **NEETs**, have seen an important but regionally uneven growth. The greatest increase is observed in the insular regions of Kriti, Voreio Aigaio and Notio Aigaio, all of them specialised in tourism. Meanwhile, across all the Greek regions, the increase in NEETs is positively associated with the significant growth of the economically inactive young people.

The regional unevenness issue seems to increase in significance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, since regions, even within the same country, demonstrate different infection rate

and speed of implementing mitigation policies. Considering, in addition, that the restrictiveness of the mitigation measures has been differentiated across the economic sectors, important changes are anticipated to take place in the regional industrial structure. Figures reveal that in 2020Q2, the Greek regions that have been most acutely affected in terms of employment include the territories dependent on tourism, contrasting the evidence regarding the 2008 global economic crisis, when regions specialised in tourism have proved to be relatively resilient. Reflecting on the evidence from previous economic crises, the socio-economic impacts are expected to be largely uneven across regions and industries.

Table 2: Annual and quarterly change in the number of unemployed and economically inactive youth (NEETS) by NUTS 2, Greece, 2020Q2

		Unemployed			Economically inactive		
		NEET			NEET		
		15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29
% Change in employed persons Q1 2020-Q1 2019	Greece	-53.2	-20.2	-14.2	35.7	0.7	29.5
	Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	-47.9	9.9	-8.7	31.1	134.0	56.0
	Kentriki Makedonia	-0.4	-5.7	-4.6	6.2	-22.3	34.6
	Dytiki Makedonia	-73.1	-31.5	-48.9	2.3	31.8	289.2
	Ipeiros	-100.0	-12.7	70.9	100.7	2.9	-45.8
	Thessalia	16.3	2.1	-46.5	116.7	-65.9	57.5
	Ionia Nisia	-0.8	-70.0	-43.7	500.3	16.3	32.4
	Dytiki Ellada	-31.8	-5.5	-5.5	-40.9	15.7	210.8
	Stereia Ellada	-59.9	19.3	45.7	90.3	-34.2	-4.4
	Attiki	-100.0	-40.7	-18.3	40.7	8.1	-2.1
	Peloponnisos	32.6	-15.1	-37.5	84.4	-39.3	39.6
	Voreio Aigaio	-69.9	-54.4	-34.3	712.3	-10.5	0
	Notio Aigaio	-57.6	-43.8	-63.9	-9.8	53.2	234.3
Kriti	-25.6	14.8	11.5	-48.4	15.0	-9.6	
% Change in employed persons Q2 2020-Q2 2019	Greece	-35.5	4.4	2.6	82.7	29.1	40.5
	Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	-63.1	3.5	18.8	56.6	89.6	49.1
	Kentriki Makedonia	-1.4	34.6	-18.5	6.8	-18.1	25.3
	Dytiki Makedonia	-100.0	-1.1	-36.7	-16.7	1.3	199.9
	Ipeiros	0	-32.6	23.4	86.6	154.3	71.9
	Thessalia	5.2	12.8	-35.0	151.3	-1.2	55.5
	Ionia Nisia	2.4	320.7	10.0	255.8	-38.1	44.2
	Dytiki Ellada	112.5	72.4	-16.6	-20.1	140.6	130.7
	Stereia Ellada	-71.7	18.0	69.5	61.7	3.3	-22.4
	Attiki	-90.2	-32.7	-7.8	321.8	92.1	18.1
	Peloponnisos	57.3	43.9	-17.6	259.0	-43.5	17.7
	Voreio Aigaio	42.3	-34.4	-16.1	304.1	-66.8	0
	Notio Aigaio	-18.0	120.4	184.7	-18.6	101.8	191.0
Kriti	4.3	22.0	154.2	-28.9	-28.9	11.2	

Source: Greek Statistical Agency

YOUNG WORKERS AGENCY DURING THE PANDEMIC

COVID-19 has clearly had devastating impacts upon many young workers. However, although some success has been achieved in flattening the infection curve across the Southern EU, as we write, a second wave of infections is emerging that led governments to impose restrictions once again. Without enough financial support, however, enforced lockdowns to stop the virus's spread have the potential to condemn millions of young people to even greater levels of penury. Given that those jobs and workers likely to be most negatively affected in the second lockdown are unevenly spread across space, there is clearly a complex geography to the challenges that youth faces. This raises the issue of how employees of different age groups and their representative institutions must think spatially in response to the pandemic. Indeed, we would aver that young people will need to act, at both the individual and collective levels, in geographically-aware ways if they are not to, once again, be caught in the 'lockdown for health protection' vs the 'risk their health by keeping the economy open' dilemma which has had such a disproportionate impact upon the most precariously employed amongst them. This binary is particularly impactful upon those who lack adjustment capacity to 'social distance' and have no flexibility to 'work from home' (Maloutas 2020; Mongey and Weinberg, 2020) but who do not have sufficient financial resources.

One way in which to navigate the binary youth faces would be to agitate for the enactment of protective and regulative provisions based on how local labour markets are functioning rather than a one-size-fits-all model. Labour markets with greater proportions of precarious workers are likely to need different combinations of lockdown and aid than do those with lower proportions. That way, a precarious youth population could avoid further deterioration of its wellbeing, a danger presaged by the International Labour Organisation (2020). In addition to implementing spatially sensitive policies which accept different strategies for different labour markets and age groups, another approach would be to organise around the ways in which young individuals must navigate the new micro-geographies of their living and workspaces.

Likewise, a strategy to which many employers have turned is to encourage employees – many of whom are low-paid young workers – to telecommute. Telecommuting offers advantages but also poses problems. On the one hand, it facilitates streamlined production costs, particularly regarding wage/non-wage costs and fixed capital costs; on the flip side, employers

often mention problems with reduced productivity (Gorlick, 2020). At the same time, telecommuting also presents challenges to (young) employees, who now must dedicate part of their living space to work activities and who often see their workday expand and their work-life balance dramatically disrupted (Griffith, 2020).

Given, then, the challenges about how to deal with the new dispersed employment geographies that the pandemic is creating, such as how to exercise control over, and secure productivity from, spatially-dispersed employees now working from home rather than in a more easily monitored office, organisations representing young people will have to be attentive to these new geographies. Hence, many employers are experimenting with cameras, recording operations, teleconferencing, etc., in an effort to ensure control over their employees. The fact that efficient monitoring systems are quite costly can be a key weapon in forthcoming negotiations and might open opportunities to implement alternative arrangements, again with the savings to capital shared with labour. Finally, another key field of political intervention is in the realm of demands for new state welfare policies that will aid communities particularly hard hit by the pandemic because of their disproportionate shares of precarious young workers.

Additionally, other (new) forms of resisting precariousness for young entrants in the labour market are evident in actions like efforts to stop rent/mortgage payments and evictions, which have been supported by many unions and which also clearly have a geographical dimension to them – this is more of an issue in some places than in others (Kapps, 2020).

The above brief comments about the need for workers to be spatially aware during the pandemic speak to themes long central to Labour Geography – understanding how the nature of place and how places are geographically connected affects employees' lives and how the workers must engage with geographical difference in order to proactively network and organise across multiple spatial scales. The nature of the new double crisis exposes young people to circumstances that combine the local with the global, whilst avoiding labour devaluation in certain places can demand the solidarity of workers from other places. In deciding whether and how to act, young people and their representative institutions can play a proactive role in shaping how the geography of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to play out, in the process helping to shape their own destinies.

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