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Rural development through remote working in regions rich in rural tourism resources -1-

The case of Madrid rural areas in (post) pandemic Spain.

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abstract

Spain, one of the most visited countries of the world (second in 2019; UNWTO, 2019), a tourist behemoth whose tourist sector contributes more than 10% to GDP (12.6% in 2019; INE, 2022), a strange place that is, at the same time, one of the least (only 12.7% of the country is inhabited; Gutierrez, 2021) and one of the most (of the 33 one Km² areas most densely populated in Europe, 23 are in Spain; Rae, 2018) densely populated countries in Europe, has a rural problem. Were we to name that problem with just one word, that will have to be “depopulation”.

Funds and policies centered in the agrarian sector have not worked to alleviate the depopulation problem (Collantes & Pinilla, 2019). On the other hand, funds and policies centered in the non-agrarian part of the rural economy, especially the tourist sector, have proven to be one of the key elements to successfully face the multitude of problems that arose from the depopulation crisis (Collantes, 2019). Even before the world changed with the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, the conflation of tourism with work-related activities via remote work was being thought as a possible way to activate even more the non-agrarian part of the rural economy (Coca & Maldonado, 2020). In this research notes we will analyze the influence, or lack thereof, that the sudden demand of remote work after the initial stages of the coronavirus crisis is having in rural areas of Madrid rich in rural tourism resources.

1 | The depopulation problem: *La España vaciada* - The emptied Spain.

For more than forty years the rural part of Spain, and its problems, was mostly ignored by the mass media and the public debate. Then, suddenly, something happened during the second part of the 2010s. News regarding the so-called rural problem started to appear on a regular basis, essays about the rural problem became best sellers (Del Molino, S., 2016, being the most famous), citizen platforms focused on the rural problem started to gain momentum and even political power at the provincial and national level (*Teruel Existe* being the most successful), culminating in strikes and demonstrations in 2019 that demanded the Central Government to face the rural problem (Campo Vidal, M., 2020). Nevertheless, the rural problem, depopulation, is neither new nor a sudden anomaly (Giné Sánchez, X., 2019).

1.1 Depopulation patterns in Spain (1950–2019).

In the case of Spain, population density has always been “bipolar”, very high in the cities, extremely low outside the cities (on par with the least populated areas of northern Europe in Norway and Finland) and, even before the industrial revolution, with a low aggregate if compared to other European countries. Already by 1700 the population density in Spain was half the population density in England, Italy, or France, and less than a third that in Belgium or the Netherlands (Bandrés, E. & Azón, V., 2021). Also, the impact that the industrial revolution and its modernization of the economy had in the population density of the rural areas was very different. While in the case of England and Wales took more than two centuries (1700-1911) to get the population actively engaged in agrarian-sector activities below 30%, and more than 50 years in France (1920-1955), it took a little more than 30 years in Spain (Collantes G., F., 2007-B). In other words, the process of transfer of population from the rural spaces to the towns that took several generations in England and even in France, happened during a generation and a half in Spain.

1.1.1 First stage (1950–1990): emigration, masculinization, deagrarianisation.

In Spain, the peak of rural population was reached in 1950. By then 13.5 million people, close to half the population, lived in what is referred to as rural Spain, that is to say, in cities under 10 000 people (Delgado U., J.M., 2018). By 1990, 10 million people, one in four of the total population, inhabited the rural parts of Spain (Cos Guerra, O.D. & Reques Velasco, P., 2005). The main reasons behind this exodus were four. First, the oppressive social system of the Franco regime (1939-1978) thwarted any hope of upward mobility by the landless population. The only way to escape the political, social, and economic oppression of the rural parts of

Spain was by leaving it behind. Second, modernization and mechanization made superfluous a considerable part of the population previously engaged in agriculture. Third, only rural areas relatively close to urban centers were able to diversify their economy and made it less dependent on an agriculture sector unable to offer enough work to the existing population; the secondary and tertiary sector of not well communicated rural parts didn't have enough strength to offer an alternative to emigration to those seeking to escape the oppression cycle (Collantes G., F., 2007-A). Fourth, the prevalence of violence against women, symbolic and otherwise, and of the male-centered worldview was bad in the cities, but terrible in the rural parts of Spain. For the female part of the rural population, the only way to escape it was by moving out (Camarero Rioja, L., 2006).

1.1.2 Second stage (1991–2019): four different *rural Spain*.

The bulk of the depopulation of rural areas happened between the fifties and the seventies. During the eighties the pace of depopulation slowed and reached a halt during the nineties. The first decade of this century saw an increase in population in many rural areas, mainly in those relatively close to the big cities. This increase in population was due, in no small part, to Spain becoming an international immigrant receiving country. The financial crisis of 2008 caused a decrease in population, but a positive trend started again in the second half of the 2010s (Ministerio, 2017).

By the end of the 2010s, four very differentiated “rural Spain” appeared (Colino, C. *et al.*, 2019; Bandrés, E., & Azón, V., 2021).

Map 1. Four different “rural Spain” .

First, the rural regions of Madrid, País Vasco, Navarra, and Cataluña (number 1 in the map). These regions have a high per capita income, low unemployment rate, and have been increasing in population since the nineties. Second, the rural regions of the so-called *humid Spain* (Aragón, La Rioja, Castilla y León, Cantabria, Galicia, and Asturias; number 2 in the map). These regions also have a high per capita income and low unemployment rate but, while half of the provinces have been increasing in population since the 2000s and are in a positive trend, the other half haven't increased in population, suffer from ageing, masculinization (unbalanced sex ratio with more males than females) and are part of the so-called depopulated Spain¹. Third, the rural regions of the Mediterranean part of Spain (Balears, Valencia, and Murcia; number 3 in the map). These regions have a slightly lower per capita income and a relatively higher unemployment rate than the previous two groups, but don't face depopulation, ageing or masculinization problems. Last, the rural regions of Canarias, Castilla-La Mancha, Andalucía, and Extremadura (number 4 in the map). They have the lowest per capita income and the highest unemployment rate but, except Cáceres and Cuenca that are part of the depopulated

- 1 Provinces part of the so-called *depopulated Spain*: Zamora, Palencia, Soria, Ávila and León (Castilla y León); Lugo and Ourense (Galicia); Cáceres (Extremadura); Cuenca (Castilla-La Mancha); and Teruel (Aragón). (Bandrés, E., & Azón, V., 2021).



Spain, don't suffer ageing or masculinization and, although half the provinces haven't changed in population since the end of the depopulation crisis, the other half of the provinces have been increasing in population since the nineties.

2 | Rural development and rural tourism (1986–2019).

Despite the misleading image given by the media and how rural Spain is perceived by the urban population, the rural parts of Spain are not agrarian anymore in any meaningful sense (Camarero, L., 2009). The percentage of population engaged in agrarian sector activities in rural Spain has been continuously decreasing since the peak of rural population: 75% in 1950, 52% by 1970, 26% by 1991, around 10% by 2001, and below 10% by 2017 (Collantes Gutierrez, F., 2007; Colino, C. *et al.*, 2019).

Map 2. Percentage of working population engaged in primary sector activities. INE (National Statistics Institute) 2022 data.

Although the agrarian sector is no more even close to objectively represent the realities of the rural economy, the great majority of the policies aimed to revert the depopulation crisis have been focused on funds allocated to the agrarian sector via the Common Agrarian Policy (CAP).

2.1 Common Agrarian Policy (CAP) failure.

For the rural part of Spain, joining in 1986 the European Economic Community (EEC, superseded by the European Union, EU, in 1993) became a mixed blessing. For the rural provincial towns, the structural funds allocated, and the policies taken, helped to alleviate the post 1979 economic crisis and to transform them into the provincial economic centers that they become until the second half of the 2010s (González-Leonardo, M., 2019). For the rural secondary and tertiary sector, already weakened by the depopulation crisis, the effects were disastrous (Del Molino, 2021).

Several changes in CAP policy notwithstanding (1988 budget reform, 1992 MacSharry reforms, 2003 Fischler reforms), the bulk of the funds were focused on the agrarian sector of the rural economy (Swinnen, F.M., 2009) when, already by 1990, only 15-20 % of rural income was based in agriculture activities (Collantes G., F., 2007-A). As a tool to prevent or revert rural depopulation, CAP policies focused on the agrarian sector have been a failure: *“The question we have to ask ourselves is: is agriculture really useful to retain population in the rural spaces? And the answer, supported by a great amount of evidence from different countries*

and different historical periods, is no, it isn't" (Collantes, G., F., 2019; translated from the Spanish original by me).

2.2 LEADER, PRODER and rural tourism success.

In contrast with the failure of the agrarian sector in retaining or attracting population, the policies centered in revitalizing the non-agrarian sector of rural Spain have shown positive results in three ways. First, although depopulation is a problem that cannot be addressed only locally, there were almost no instruments of inter-municipal cooperation in Spain. The territorial approach taken by the policies that tried to revitalize the non-agrarian sector of the rural economy forced inter-municipal cooperation precisely to the areas that most needed it (Esparcia, J. & Buciega, A., 2015). Second, they were a key factor in professionalizing the rural tourism sector and in creating synergies that helped the non-agrarian part of the rural economy as whole (Maroto Marcos, J.C., Pinos Navarrete, A., 2017). Third, for the female part of the rural population, the most precarious work market was, and still is, the local one (Camarero Rioja, L. *et al.*, 2006). The territorial approach and the synergies of the rural tourism sector helped against the masculinization problem by revitalizing regional work markets and creating stable, non-precarious work at the local level.

2.2.1 Rural tourism emergence and first LEADER program (1986-1994).

During the first phase of the depopulation crisis (1950-1990), a lot of rural areas suffered depopulation, but weren't completely forgotten. Many of those that emigrated to the economic centers of Spain (Madrid, País Vasco, Cataluña) had still family ties and even properties in the rural part they emigrated from, the ancestral family home, that could be used during holiday periods. And they were used. During the eighties, many a family spent more than a month every year (Christmas, Easter, summer holidays, etc.) there. The demand for services that they periodically created prepared the ground for the appearance of the rural tourism sector.

The first LEADER program (*Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale*, in the French original) from 1991 to 1994 was a game changer. The objective of the program was to revitalize the non-agrarian part of the rural economy using a regional bottom-up approach focused on the creation of Local Action Groups (LAGs). The great majority of the funds allocated during LEADER I were used to improve the emerging rural tourism sector (Maroto Marcos, J.C. & Pinos Navarrete, A., 2017). The symbol of the rural tourism in Spain, the *casa rural* (rural houses with town level commodities dedicated exclusively to rural tourism), was created during this period.

2.2.3 Rural tourism consolidation (1995–2008).

The LEADER initiatives were so successful that the Spanish Government created in 1995 its own parallel program, PRODER (*Programa Operativo de Desarrollo y Diversificación Económica de Zonas Rurales*), to expand the revitalization of the non-agrarian part of the rural economy to regions that were excluded from the subsequent LEADER programs².

In this period of economic growth, the consumer habits of the second generation of emigrants from rural Spain (city born population whose parents were born in rural Spain) gradually changed toward favoring rural tourism outside the regions where their parents were from. Also, in many rural areas the forced cooperation of several actors from different municipalities helped to create a regional identity to be marketed as a rural tourism product (wine tourism regions, adventure tourism regions, etc.) (Arévalo, A.B., 2012).

Rural tourism, the synergies it created, and the improvement of rural infrastructures (internet connection, road improvement) dynamized rural work markets creating new jobs at a local level, and not only in the tertiary sector (Foronda Robles, C., 2008). The fact that rural tourism in Spain is, from the beginning, mainly a national market (foreigner consumers of rural tourism are rare), made it stable and not easily driven by international trends or crisis.

2.2.4 Crisis, reemergence, rural development through digitalization (2009–2019).

But a crisis came. The financial crisis of 2008 had a negative impact on the weaker links of rural tourism: overextension (too many un-registered low-quality lodgings not on par with *casa rural*) and seasonality (pernoctations heavily concentrated in August, Easter, and Christmas seasons). The financial crisis, after an initial shock, had a positive impact in those rural regions not so dependent on the *casa rural* model. Many members of the second generation of emigrants from the rural areas cut leisure spending by taking their holidays in the properties they, or their relatives, have in those rural areas³.

The loss of confidence caused by overextension stopped being a major problem after 2015, when the recovery of the rural tourism market was followed by a wave of regularization of previously unregistered *casa rural* establishments. The seasonality problem was more difficult to tackle. After all, tourism as an activity is intrinsically seasonal in both ends, the consumer end (no vacations from work, no tourism) and the supplier end (summer cannot be enjoyed in winter, and vice versa). The digitalization of local and regional production and distribution chains as a way to make the non-agrarian part of the rural economy less dependent of the peak peri-

► 2 In Andalucía alone, while LEADER I program (1991-1994) covered only 13% of the land and 9% of the population, the latest LEADER and PRODER programs combined (2014-2020) covered 95% of the land and 53% of the population. (Maroto Marcos, J.C. & Pinos Navarrete, A., 2017).

► 3 In Castilla y León alone, in the municipalities under 20 000 inhabitants, 23% of the houses were secondary houses of people living in the big towns (Valladolid and Madrid, mainly). After the 2008 crisis, those houses were used again to spend long, affordable, vacations. The periodical revitalization of the rural economy that this kind of floating population brought with them also drove the municipalities to increase spending in leisure infrastructure (municipal swimming pools, gyms, etc.) to increase the fidelity of this kind of population. (Delgado Urrecho, J.M., 2018).

ods of rural tourism came into prominence mainly in the second half of the 2010s (Valero Mata, J.A., 2020). Remote working in the economic sectors more adapted to it (digital industries, professional sector, scientific sector, and financial sector) also started in this period, but very slowly. Before the pandemic started in earnest, Spain was the country in the EU with less hours per week remotely worked (Observatorio Nacional, 2022). Also, it was heavily concentrated in the regions that are the centers of the digital, professional, scientific, and financial sectors, mainly among them, Madrid. Nevertheless, this digitalization drive achieved some successes like remote working programs, or the creation of economies of scale by digitally integrating rural production and distribution chains (Ministerio, 2017). However, the problem of regional brain drain hampered this process. Along the drive for digitalization, a new wave of emigration, this time from rural towns (rural municipalities with more than 10 000 inhabitants), of young, university educated population, started in the second half of the 2010s. The destination, the digital, professional, scientific, and financial center of Spain, Madrid (González-Leonardo, M. *et al.*, 2019).

3 | The case of Madrid rural areas in (post) pandemic Spain (2020–2022).

As a whole, rural areas of Madrid are amongst the most dynamic rural areas in Spain, and do not suffer from depopulation, ageing or masculinization. Nevertheless, there are three regions inside Madrid that did suffer it to some extent and, in order to improve the non-agrarian part of their rural economy, have been participating in LEADER and PRODER programs since the beginning. Their respective LAGs are the ones that have been targeted in the investigation presented in this research notes.

3.1.1 Local Action Groups (LAGs) targeted.

The three LAGs active in Madrid during the research period have been targeted. They are: ARACOVE (*Asociación de Desarrollo Rural Comarca de las Vegas y Alcarria de Alcalá*), number 1 in the map; GALSINMA (*Grupo de Acción Local Sierra Norte de Madrid*), number 2 in the map; and ADI Sierra Oeste de Madrid (*Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral de la Sierra Oeste de Madrid*), number 3 in the map.

Map 3. Local Action Groups targeted.

All three regions are rich in rural tourism resources and, since in Spain the market for rural tourism is predominantly national (Maroto Marcos, J.C. & Pinos

Navarrete, A., 2017), have been greatly favored by being the closest rural tourism destination to Madrid, the biggest market.

3.1.2 Research methodology

The methodology adopted here is similar to that previously used in other studies of rural areas of Spain (Arévalo, A.B., 2012; Esparcia, J., Escibano, J. & Buciega, A., 2015; Esparcia, J., Escibano, J. & Serrano, J., 2015). The methodology has two aspects, first, consultation of so-called *grey* literature published by the three Local Action Groups (LAGs) object of the investigation; second, qualitative analysis of the actual situation based in fieldwork and interviews done on-site in autumn of 2022. Fieldwork in LAGs 1 and 2 proceeded as planned, but fieldwork in LAG 3 had to be cancelled due to pandemic related problems, as a consequence, LAG 3 analysis is based only on the consultation of the *grey* literature. Two are the questions relevant to this research, first, whether there has been a change, be it positive (more than before) or negative (less than before), in the remote-work situation of the targeted LAGs during the pandemic (2020-2022); second, whether the changes in the remote-work situation had any influence on the allocation of funds by said LAGs, be it positive (funds allocated to projects related to remote-work) or negative (no funds allocated to projects related to remote-work).

3.2 Local Action Group 1. *Asociación de Desarrollo Rural Comarca de las Vegas y Alcarria de Alcalá* (ARACOVE). Characteristics and main problems.

This LAG was originally two different LAGs that merged in 2014 for the new LEADER program⁴. It consists of thirty municipalities, two thirds of them with less than 2 000 inhabitants and only one that exceeds 10 000 inhabitants, the line that divides rural municipalities from urban towns. All the municipalities that are part of this LAG, except one, had been increasing in population since the nineties⁵. The population of this region, over 37 000 people in 1996, has risen to over 62 000 in 2021. The distance to Madrid, on average, is 48 km, with San Martín de la Vega (over 20 000 inhabitants in 2021) being the closest (only 22 km), and Estremera (1381 inhabitants in 2021) being the farthest (77 km). Daily commuting to and from Madrid presents no problem if done by car. Commuting by public transportation is another matter. For the population that needs public transportation commuting is difficult because of the lack of sufficient bus lines (the only option) and the long intervals between buses. This affects specially women, old people, and young people.

The population density of this region, 60 people per square km, is low if compared with the average of the Madrid region (more than 800 per square km). Housing is a problem in the municipalities that have its historical city center protected by

►4 Anchuelo, Campo Real, Corpa, Olmeda de las Fuentes, Pezuela de las Torres, Pozuelo del Rey, Santorcaz, Los Santos de la Humosa, and Valverde de Alcalá were part of *Grupo de Acción Local Alcarria de Alcalá*, a GAL active during the 2007-2013 LEADER program. Loeches, Nuevo Batzán, Torres de Alameda, and Villabilla also were part of this GAL, but are not part of ARACOVE. (*Análisis de los nuevos municipios que podrán integrarse en el periodo 2014-2020 en el territorio del GAL ARACOVE*).

►5 Increase in population between 1996 and 2021 according to INE (National Statistics Institute) data. Municipalities with less than 2000 inhabitants in 2021: Valdaracete. (-5%), Brea de Tajo (7%), Estremera (28%), Villamanrique de Tajo (30%), Titulcia (48%), Belmonde del Tajo (53%), Pezuela de las Torres (71%), Santorcaz (74%), Valdelaguna (90%), Orusco de Tajuña (92%), Corpa (93%), Valverde de Alcalá (95%), Anchuelo (128%), Olmeda de las Fuentes (144%), Ambite (218%), Pozuelo de Rey (372%). Municipalities with more than 2000 inhabitants in 2021: Villacanejos (19%), Villarejo de Salvanés (40%), Tielmes (40%), Chinchón (43%), Colmenar de Oreja (48%), Fuentidueña de Tajo (59%), Valdilecha (71%), Carabaña (101%), Villar del Olmo (118%), San Martín de la Vega (130%), Morata de Tajuña (145%), Campo Real (151%), Perales de Tajuña (153%), Los Santos de la Humosa (197%).

law, where is not unusual to see empty, huge, crumbling old houses near the touristic sites. The law that protects the traditional architecture makes it difficult to alienate houses (create, without changing the outward appearance of the building, two or more big houses from one huge house) or to adapt them to contemporary worries (no solar panels are allowed on the roofs of traditional houses). The population pyramid is typical of the developed countries, and very similar to that of the Madrid region, although the ARACOVE region has a slightly higher proportion of people in the productive ages range and a higher proportion of male population (51%, while the average for Madrid region is 48%). The municipalities that are part of this LAG since 2014 have a slightly higher proportion of people under 9 years of age, and a slightly higher proportion of male population (52%). Close to 15% of the population is foreign born.

The agrarian sector of the economy is less than 3% of the GDP of the LAG, with less than 5% of the working population engaged in first sector activities. The agrarian sector suffers from ageing (the average age in the sector exceeds 55 years old), masculinization, and closeness (the access to the land is very difficult for those that are not already part of the local agrarian community). The tertiary sector engages more than two thirds of the working population. The rural tourism sector is in a positive trend having expanded from 4 establishments in 2006 to more than thirty in 2022. The disposable income of the region is only 63% of the Madrid region average (if the average of Madrid region is 100%, ARACOVE region is 63%).

ARACOVE region, whose traditional architecture is a touristic resource in itself (the city center of Chinchón is a World Heritage Site since 1974) is very rich in rural tourism resources. It has two *vías verdes* (rail trails), several scenic routes for bicycle and hiking, and more than 400 km of rural non-asphalted public roads (used in primary sector activities) that cross what is a very beautiful, somewhat ragged, landscape full of wineries, olive trees, greenery, flowers, honeycombs, and rivers (Tajuña River, Henares River). As of 2022, this region is in the process of establishing itself as a wine tourism region, an olive oil tourism region, and a family friendly outdoor tourism region. The tourist season of 2021, the first after the lock downs of 2020 and 2021, was the best on record.

3.2.1. Remote work in ARACOVE region.

The latest strategic plan of the LAG established the creation of jobs related to the ICT (information and communication technology) sector as one of the priority goals for the 2014-2020 LEADER period⁶. Nevertheless, before the pandemic only one ICT related project received funding (project number 18/1192/004). Remote work was almost nonexistent in the region. The pandemic and the lock down periods boosted remote work in the LAG, with the municipal administration taking the leading role. Once the worst of the pandemic ended, a hybrid system (one to two

►6 *Estrategia de Desarrollo Local de ARACOVE 2014-2020, Submedida III. Apoyo a la creación, ampliación y modernización de Pequeñas Empresas y Microempresas; III.1. Ayuda a la creación de empresas; III.2 Ayuda a la modernización y mejora de la competitividad de las empresas ya existentes; V.2 Apoyo a la promoción, difusión y comercialización.*

days a week remotely worked) is being introduced. After the pandemic, at least two ITC related projects received funding (project numbers 21/1192/048 and 21/1192/036), one of them a remote work (e-commerce) project.

3.3 Local Action Group 2. *Grupo de Acción Local Sierra Norte de Madrid (GALSINMA)*. Characteristics and problems.

This mountainous LAG consists of 45 municipalities, 31 of them with less than 1000 inhabitants in 2021. All the municipalities, except five, had increased its population since the nineties⁷. The population of this region, over 21 000 people in 1996, has risen to over 39 000 in 2021. The distance to Madrid, on average, is 80 km, with Talamanca de Jarama (4 123 inhabitants in 2021) being the closest (53 km), and La Hiruela (72 inhabitants in 2021) being the farthest (109 km).

Despite the distances involved, daily commuting to and from Madrid is easy for the people of the municipalities that have a quick access to the *Autovía A1*, a highway that connects Madrid with the north of Spain and traverses GALSINMA region from south to north. From this municipalities, commuting by private car or by public transportation presents no obstacle. For the people of the municipalities that do not have a quick access to said highway, commuting to and from Madrid can be a problem, especially in bad weather (this is a mountainous region). Commuting inside GALSINMA region is also easy if done by car, but extremely difficult if public transportation is used. This problem affects specially women, old people, and young people. An on-demand shared taxi service program that is being funded since 2020 to, initially, face this problem, is having an unexpected side effect. By making commuting inside GALSINMA region easier it has revitalized regional work markets for women, the main users of this service.

The population density is 30 people per square km, half that of the ARACOVE region. Housing is a problem, and not only in the city centers whose traditional architecture is protected by law (there they have the same problems that in the ARACOVE region). The lack of new housing projects, and the purchasing power of Madrid residents that want to have a second house in this region, make purchasing of renting a house difficult for residents of GALSINMA. The population pyramid is typical of a mountainous region, with more old people (over 65) than young (between 0 and 14), and with a higher proportion of male population (51%) than the average of the Madrid region (48%). 13% of the population is foreign born.

The agrarian sector of the economy is even smaller than in the ARACOVE region. Only in seven of the municipalities more than 50% of the arable land is in use, between 25% and 50% in four, and below 25% in the rest. The agrarian sector also suffers from ageing, masculinization, and closeness. The rural tourism sector,

- 7 Increase in population between 1996 and 2021 according to INE (National Statistics Institute) data. Municipalities with less than 1000 inhabitants in 2021: Robregordo (-18%), La Serna del Monte (-14), Somosierra (-12), Puebla de la Sierra (-4%), Canencia (-3%), La Acebeda (4%), El Atazar (13%), Robledillo de la Jara (15%), Piñuecar-Gandullas (16%), Pinilla del Valle (17%), Garganta de los Montes (25%), La Hiruela (29%), Montejo de la Sierra (31%), Horcajuelo de la Sierra-Aoslos (34%), Lozoya (34%), Praderas del Rincón (35%), Braojos (40%), Navarredonda y San Mamés (42%), Patones (46%), Alameda del Valle (48%), Villarejo del Lozoya (53%), Madarcos (58%), Cervera de Buitrago (62%), Garganta del Lozoya y Pinilla del Buitrago (62%), Puentes Viejas (74%), Redueña (80%), Berzosa del Lozoya (86%), Gascones (87%), Valdepiélagos (87%), Cabanillas de la Sierra (104%), El Berrieco (150%). Municipalities with more than 1000 inhabitants in 2021: Rascafría (20%), Buitrago de Lozoya (38%), Navacerrada (81%), Torrelaguna (87%), Valdemanco (97%), El Vellón (99%), Bustarviejo (101%), La Cabrera (108%), Lozoyuela-Navas-Sieteiglesias (126%), Talamanca de Jarama (209%), Torremocha de Jarama (235%), Navalafuente (243%), Venturada (343%).

►8 *Estrategia de desarrollo rural de la sierra norte de Madrid V.02 2020-06/20; B.11 Necesidades estratégicas; C4. Objetivos y propuestas de cooperación.*

►9 *Project number: 17/2192/26, 17/2192/27, 17/2192/37, 17/2192/38, 17/2192/47, 17/2192/53, 17/2192/104, 17/2192/57, 17/2192/64, 17/2192/65, 17/2192/66, 17/2192/74, 17/2192/92, 17/2192/31, 17/2192/52, 17/2192/101, 17/2192/63, 17/2192/80, 17/2192/93, 17/2192/50, 17/2192/94, 17/2192/97, 17/2192/67, 17/2192/78, 17/2192/62, 17/2192/83, 17/2192/88, 19/2192/060, 19/2192/003, 19/2192/004, 19/2192/008, 19/2192/014, 19/2192/021, 19/2192/030, 19/2192/036, 19/2192/042, 19/2192/052, 19/2192/053, 19/2192/054, 19/2192/056, 19/2192/063, 19/2192/073, 19/2192/080, 19/2192/072, 19/2192/006, 19/2192/007, 19/2192/015, 19/2192/016, 19/2192/041, 19/2192/87 and 19/2192/013.*

►10 *Ciclodge El Nevero, El Refugio Coworking & Coliving, Estrella Rural, Huerto de San Antonio, Monte Holiday, Quercus Tierra Hotel, Hotel Rural El Valle, Finca Prados Riveros, Finca El Robledo, Coworking Puerta de la Sierra, El Bulín de Montejo. (Venues in Sierra Norte de Madrid for corporate meetings and events. MAD RURAL).*

although suffering from seasonality, is bigger than in the ARACOVE region, having more than 219 registered establishments, and more than 130 non-registered establishments. The disposable income of the region is only 68% of the Madrid region average (if the average of Madrid region is 100%, GALSINMA region is 68%).

GALSINMA region, whose mountainous nature is its main touristic resource, has 26 hiking trails totaling more than 650 km, several mountain bike trails totaling more than 210 km, several lakes, one National Park (Parque Nacional Sierra del Guadarrama) and one Biosphere Reserve (Reserva de la Biosfera Sierra del Rincón). As of 2022, this region has established itself as a hiking and cycling tourism destination and is in the process of establishing itself as a cultural and culinary tourism destination. The tourist season of 2021, the first after the lock downs of 2020 and 2021, was the best on record.

3.3.1. Remote work in GALSINMA region.

The latest strategic plan of this LAG established the creation of jobs related to the ICT sector as one of its priorities⁸. Before the pandemic, 51 ITC related projects received funding⁹, one of them a remote work (e-commerce) project; almost all of the projects funded the installation of public municipal Wi-Fi infrastructure. Although remote work was rare in the region before the pandemic, there is one coworking space and ten rural tourism establishments in the region with spaces dedicated to remote work¹⁰.

During the lock downs of 2020 and 2021, a population increase of 20% was recorded (calculated via a 20% increase in garbage disposal) directly related to an increase of people working remotely from their second houses in the region (houses that before the pandemic were used only during weekends and holidays). During the lock down periods the coworking spaces and rural establishments with spaces dedicated to remote work were not used. After the lock down periods the population decreased, but still it is around a 10% (also calculated via changes in garbage disposal) higher than the pre-pandemic level. This coincides with the introduction of a hybrid system of remote work (one or two days a week). After the pandemic, three ITC related projects received funding (21/2192/057, 21/2192/072 and 21/2192/025), two of them remote work (e-commerce) projects.

3.4 Local Action Group 3. *Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral de la Sierra Oeste de Madrid* (ADI Sierra Oeste de Madrid). Characteristics and main problems.

This LAG, previously known as *Consorcio Sierra Oeste de Madrid*, has been active since 1995. All the nineteen municipalities that are part of this LAG, eight of them with less than 2000 inhabitants, have been increasing in population since the

nineties¹¹. The population of this region, over 28 000 people in 1996, has risen to over 53 000 in 2021. The distance to Madrid, on average, is 61 km, with Villamanta being the closest (44 km), and Rozas de Puerto Real being the farthest (89 km). Daily commuting to and from Madrid presents no problem if done by car, specially from the municipalities closest to Madrid. Commuting to and from Madrid using public transport is not difficult if done by bus. Train can only be used from Zarzalejo, Robledo de Chavela and Santa María de la Alameda. Commuting inside *ADI Sierra Oeste* is easy if done by private car, but extremely difficult, sometimes impossible, if public transportation is used. This affects specially women, old people, and young people.

The population density of this region is 54 people per square km. As in the GALSINMA region, there are more old people (over 65) than young (under 14), and more male population (53%) than the average of the Madrid region (48%). 14% of the population is foreign born.

The disposable income is 62% of the Madrid average. Less than 7% of the working population is engaged in first sector activities. The agrarian sector also suffers from ageing (the average age in the sector exceeds 45 years old), masculinization, and closeness. The tertiary sector engages more than 70% of the working population.

The landscape in *ADI Sierra Oeste* is one of the most beautiful and varied of Madrid, having in the region the Gredos mountain range, the only lake in Madrid where motorboats are permitted, good river bathing areas in the Alberche river basin, oak tree forests, chestnut tree forest, and pine tree forest. With more than 60 establishments, 47 of them of the *casa rural* type, the rural tourism sector is in an upward trend. Nevertheless, this region is struggling to find a specific rural tourism niche (adventure, gastronomy, outdoor, cultural) to promote itself.

3.4.1 Remote work in *ADI Sierra Oeste* region.

The latest strategic plan of the LAG established the creation of jobs related to the ICT sector as one of its priorities¹². Nevertheless, before the pandemic there were only one project related to it (e-commerce, expedient number 19/3192/010). After the pandemic there were no projects related to ITC.

4 Closing remarks.

In this research notes, first, I have presented the main problems of the so-called *emptied Spain* from a historical perspective and the impact that the policies focused

- 11 Increase in population between 1996 and 2021 according to INE (National Statistics Institute) data. Municipalities with less than 2000 inhabitants in 2021: Valquemada (43%), Zarzalejo (78%), Rozas de Puerto Real (85%), Santa María de la Alameda (91%), Colmenar de Arroyo (130%), Fresnedillas de la Oliva (174%), Villanueva de Perales (260%), Villamantilla (348%). Municipalities with more than 2000 inhabitants in 2021: Cenicientos (10%), Cadalso de los Vidrios (44%), San Martín de Valdeiglesias (47%), Villamanta (76%), Villadelprado (83%), Robledo de Chavela (109%), Navas del Rey (113%), Capinería (118%), Pelayos de la Presa (136%), Aldea del Fresno (150%), Navalgamella (190%).

- 12 *Periodo 2014-2020. Estrategia para el Desarrollo Integral de la Sierra Oeste de Madrid. Estrategia de desarrollo local participativo; 5.2. Sector Empresarial y Artesanal; 5.3. Sector Turismo y hostelería; 5.5. Sector medio ambiente y patrimonio; M01. Apoyo al Desarrollo del Sector Agrícola; M02. Apoyo a la Industria Agraria y Alimentaria; M03. Desarrollo de Empresas en la Comarca; M05. Mejora de Servicios a la Población y Renovación de Poblaciones Locales. 7.3. M03: Desarrollo de empresas en la comarca.*

in revitalizing the non-agrarian part of the rural economy, mainly among them those focused in the rural tourism sector, are having in the rural parts of Spain. Then, I have presented the main problems and characteristics of the three LAGs focus of the investigation and the remote work situation before and after the pandemic. Here I will present the closing remarks.

4.1 Rural development trough remote working in regions rich in rural tourism resources -1- The case of Madrid rural regions-

Not all kind of work can be done remotely. Remote work is best suited to the digital, professional, scientific, and financial sectors of the economy. In Spain, specially since the second half of the 2010s, the center of these sectors is being concentrated more and more in Madrid (González-Leonardo, M. *et al.*, 2019). Remote working allows a better conciliation of working and private life and makes possible living in a rural municipality while working for a company situated in an urban city. As regard to commuting distance, the three rural regions of Madrid object of this research are, by far, the best suited regions for doing that. As regard to rural tourism resources also, all three regions are rich and growing. However, not all rural regions are equally attractive to the remote working population.

Of the LAGs object of the investigation, the one with the highest population growth since 1996, *ADI Sierra Oeste de Madrid*, seems to be the less attractive of the three. It had only one ITC related project before the pandemic, and zero after it. It happens to be the only LAG that is still seeking what kind of rural tourist region it wants to be. *ARACOVE* region is the second most attractive region for the remote working population. Before the pandemic, remote working was as unheard of a thing as in the rest of Spain. Nevertheless, one ITC related project received funding. After the pandemic, two ITC related projects (one an e-commerce) received funding and remote working became a real possibility in the region. This region, years before the pandemic started, reached a consensus as to what kind of rural tourist region it wants to be: a wine tourism region, an olive oil tourism region, and a family friendly outdoor tourism region. *GALSINMA* region is the most attractive region for the remote working population. Before the pandemic, 51 ITC related projects (almost all public municipal Wi-Fi infrastructure) received funding. Also, it was the only region of the three where remote working was being done well before the pandemic (it had one coworking space and ten rural tourism establishments with spaces dedicated to remote work). After the pandemic, three ITC related projects (two of them e-commerce projects) received funding. This region is the one with the strongest identity as a rural tourism region. Is the prime hiking and cycling tourism region of Madrid and is in the process of adding to that resources cultural and culinary tourism resources.

It is still too early to discern what kind of influence, if any, the kind of rural tourism resources present, the commuting distance to big cities, the niche targeted by the image projected, and other factors, have in the remote working situation of a rural region rich in rural tourism resources. More research is needed.

4.2 Next step

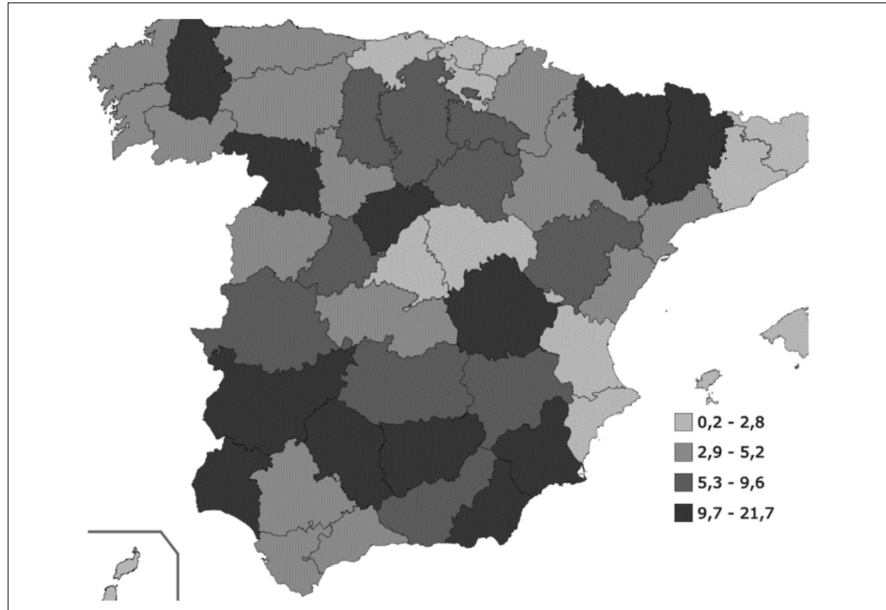
The research presented here is but the starting point of a multiyear research endeavor, made possible thanks to the support granted by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS KAKENHI 22K12611). In the next step the LAGs of the two provinces closest to Madrid from the north (Ávila and Segovia) will be targeted.

Maps

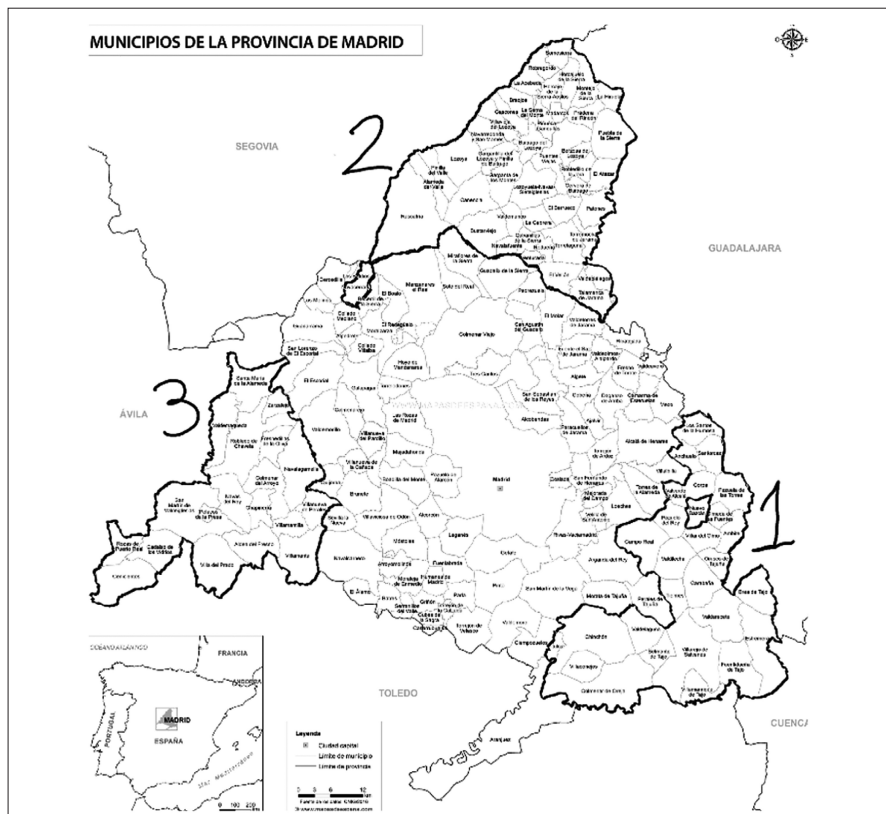
Map 1. Four different “rural Spain”



Map 2. Percentage of working population engaged in primary sector activities. INE (National Statistics Institute) 2022 data.



Map 3. Local Action Groups targeted.



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