#### **Telecom Services**

### **Quantifying Churn Benefits During COVID-19**

21 April 2020

#### **Key Takeaway**

There can be no doubt that virus-related lockdowns reduce mobile churn. The question is by how much. Heading into results season, we show real-time mobile number porting data suggesting churn reduction of 55-63% in France, Italy and Belgium. Associated lower commercial costs would provide a material lever to mitigate top-line pressures. We discuss why so far stable porting activity in other countries indicates almost certainly just a delay of the effect.

**Quantifying churn reduction.** Given the still material share of brick-and-mortar distribution in many mobile markets, it stands to reason that the virus-related lockdowns across Europe will reduce churn. The question is by how much. To address this question, we analyse proprietary real-time data on number porting activity. Heading into 1Q20 results season, this is leading, not lagging information.

**Number porting down 55-63%.** Naturally, effects should be expected to show up first in markets with short notice periods (see last point on limitations). Mainly for that reason, we focus on Italy, France and Belgium.

- In Italy, number porting post-lockdown reduced by 59% compared to the prelockdown situation. This is a 3.9x standard deviations effect.
- In France, number porting reduced by 63% (4.3x sigma).
- In Belgium, number porting reduced by 55% (4.2x sigma).

A particularly striking feature of these three markets is the relative uniformity of the size of the churn reduction, despite significantly different market structures and dynamics. This is a major reason why we (a) write up these conclusions in a sector context (and not just for the countries in question), and (b) are confident that markets with longer notice periods will see similar effects once number porting reflects customer decisions taken *during* the lockdown (rather than *before*).

**Impact I: Cost reprieve.** Most obviously, reduced churn (porting activity) means lower commercial cash costs. Under normal circumstances, these can run at 15-20% of sales. Together with the churn reduction figures quoted above, this suggests savings potential of 10+pp of sales, in principle. We believe that this, together with capex flexibility, supports the view that outlook statements on FCF made pre-lockdown may prove resilient.

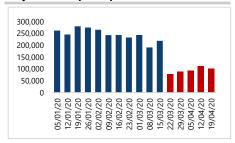
**Impact II: Challengers lose momentum.** A second impact of reduced churn is a changed dynamic in markets with secular share shifts. In Italy, Iliad's share momentum is clearly flagging post-lockdown (giving Wind-Tre some reprieve, in particular), and in France, Bouygues and, to an extent, SFR lost momentum, benefitting Orange and Iliad. Clearly, the challengers will benefit from lower commercial costs as well, but the incumbent operators are the "double winners" (lower cost, less share loss).

Limitations. Among the limitations of this analysis, we highlight: (a) lengthy notice periods in some markets introduce a delay between the subscriber decision and the number port; (b) certain types of post-M&A number migrations as well as MVNOs changing network host do not reflect subscriber decisions; (c) resellers in operators' number spaces do not show up as ports; (d) IFRS15 'smoothing' of contract acquisition costs washes out the P&L impact.

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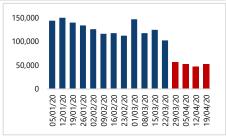
### Jef**data**.

Italy - Mobile ports per week



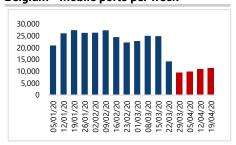
Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

#### France - Mobile ports per week



Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

#### Belgium - Mobile ports per week



Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

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### **Quantifying Churn Benefits During COVID-19**

Virus-related lockdowns across Europe naturally suppress commercial activity. On top of that, consumers might at the moment have priorities other than upgrading mobile handsets (a major driver of contract sales) or running the risk of connectivity disruptions, as is always possible when switching supplier.

When discussing our expectation for relative resilience of the telco sector in prior research (see *Telcos and the virus*, 11 Mar 2020, and the more detailed analysis in *Looking beyond collective punishment*, 19 Mar 2020), we referred to an expectation of reduced churn on the back of generally reduced commercial activity and also more telco-specific reasons. However, in the absence of hard data on the level of churn reduction, this is a structural argument at best.

This is not a marginal question. All-in commercial costs can run as high as 15-20% of sales, based on anecdotal information we have heard from operators. This means materially reduced churn (as compared to just marginally reduced one) will hand operators a major lever to mitigate top-line issues, e.g., from roaming-in, out-of-bundle roaming-out, or B2B.

To address the issue, we have analysed proprietary real-time number porting data sourced from TMT Analysis. We describe this data in a following paragraph, but highlight here that 'real-time' means daily data for the prior day's number ports. This means we are dealing with leading, not lagging information as we are heading into 1Q20 results season where management teams will likely comment on the COVID-19 impact on their business, including churn.

While we have analysed the data for a number of European countries, it proves useful for the present purposes in only three of them - Italy, France and Belgium. The main reason is that in many markets, lengthy notice periods introduce a delay between the subscriber's decision to churn on the one hand, and the number porting event that is visible in this type of data on the other. For example, in Switzerland this notice period is 60 days, in Germany it varies between 1 and 3 months, in Austria it is mostly 3 months. Notably, these notice periods apply to *out-of-contract* customers. In other words, current number ports in these situations reflect subscriber decisions even before the lockdowns were put into effect.

We have highlighted the main conclusions on the front page. Prior to discussing the individual countries, we now describe the nature of the data for context.

- TMT Analysis mainly routes text messages from businesses to their customers ("A2P [application to person] SMS routing"). This requires information about which network services a given target number.
- Operators are allocated 'number spaces' by regulators. Initially, this means a
  given number can be attributed to the operator directly.
- Mobile number porting is a regulated process that enables a mobile customer to change network while keeping their phone number.
- This means the initial attribution of number to operator through the regulator's number space breaks up over time.
- TMT Analysis uses a number of sources to trace the number-to-operator attribution through porting events.
- This process produces aggregate information on the amount of number porting activity between operators. This is the data we are discussing here. Notably, we have no access to data on individual telephone numbers, only the number of porting events between operators on a given day.

Unsurprisingly, the data suffers from limitations. Again, for context, we summarise the ones we consider material for our purposes.

- Notice periods. As highlighted earlier, subscribers are tied into lengthy notice
  periods in many markets. This means that today's number porting activity
  reflects subscriber decisions that were made well before the lockdown. We
  believe this is the main reason why the data for Switzerland, Germany, and
  Austria in particular shows no material identifiable reaction.
- M&A. Certain types of post-acquisition number migrations do not reflect subscriber decisions but simply the migration of the acquired operator's subscribers onto the consolidated network. This naturally happens with a delay, and then often in waves such that the number ports are difficult to distinguish from moves that reflect individual subscriber decisions which are of course the focus of our interest. This area is a particular issue in Scandinavian data.
- MVNO host changes. Independent MVNOs and resellers can switch their network host on management's volition. In some countries, this results in large numbers of migrations, which again can happen in waves and are therefore not distinguishable from subscriber-led ports. This area is a particular issue in Scandinavian data.
- Independent resellers in the operator's number spaces. Independent resellers without own number spaces (i.e., 'light' MVNOs or resellers relying on plain wholesale) produce churn within the host operator's number space that is not visible as number porting. This breaks the link of observable number porting to actual operator-reported churn.
- IFRS15. The cost savings we are discussing here arising from lower churn during lockdown – will provide immediate benefit to reported cash flows. However, under IFRS15, contract acquisition costs are recognised in the P&L over the contract duration. This means that EBITDA benefit will be spread over the next 18 months or two years, being much less pronounced during any given quarter.
- Availability. Porting data is not readily available to us for certain markets, most notably Spain and the UK. This reflects technical issues arising from local MNP rules, more than anything else.

This list might seem overly detailed, but we highlight these issues here so explicitly in order to head off the obvious discussions, such as: why are the number ports not directly matching reported churn levels, and why do we refrain from drawing more quantitative conclusions directly from the data?

The discussion of the nature of the data and its limitations does, however, also underpin what we *can* conclude with some confidence from the data. Based on everything we've stated so far, we believe the *trend* in churn should be not only directionally correct but also by order of magnitude, as any limitations in the total number of economically relevant churn events (our focus) that are caught by number porting (our data) should not have materially changed post-lockdown vs pre-lockdown.

#### France

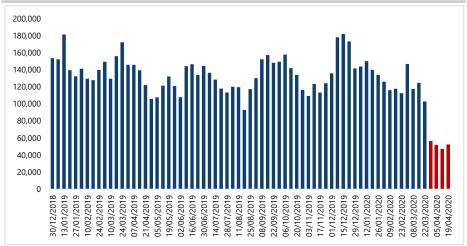
The French government announced a strict nationwide lockdown on 17 March. All public gatherings were banned, with residents instructed to stay at home except for grocery shopping and other essential tasks. As of the release of this note, the lockdown is still in place, with the original end date extended to 11 May.

In France, for an out-of-contract postpaid customer wanting to port their number to a new network, there is a 3-day deadline for the port to take place. Therefore, we consider

20 March to be the date for which the lockdown's impact would begin to appear in the porting data.

Exhibit 1 shows the total porting cases in France between the key mobile players and with the smaller providers on a weekly basis. The bars are for the total ports in each week, Monday-Sunday. The final four bars cover the period 23 March-19 April . There is a clear drop off in total ports. In relative terms, the volume of ports has dropped by 63%, a change by 4.3x the standard deviation during the pre-lockdown period shown.

Exhibit 1 - France - Mobile ports per week

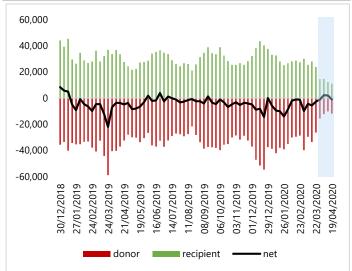


Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

In Exhibits 2-5 we present the ports for the four major players in the French mobile market; Orange, SFR, Bouygues and Free Mobile (Iliad). The green bars are for the portsin, and the red bars for the ports-out. The black line is the net ports. The blue region highlights the COVID-19 impact on the last four weeks.

The decline in ports is evident across each of the key operators. The beneficiaries of the reduced porting appear to be Orange and Free Mobile, as their net ports move away from a negative net position to neutral. However, Bouygues and SFR, who had been consistently achieving positive net ports (more customers porting to their networks than leaving) are now achieving about neutral net ports.

Exhibit 2 - Orange - Mobile ports



Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

Exhibit 3 - SFR - Mobile ports

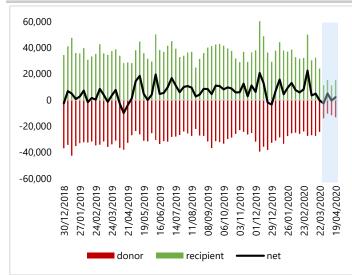


Exhibit 4 - Bouygues - Mobile ports

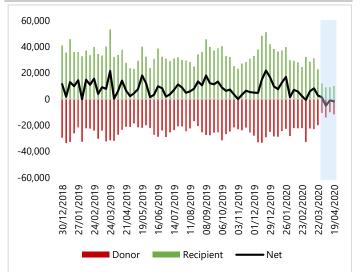
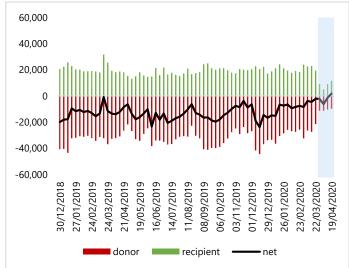


Exhibit 5 - Free Mobile - Mobile ports



Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

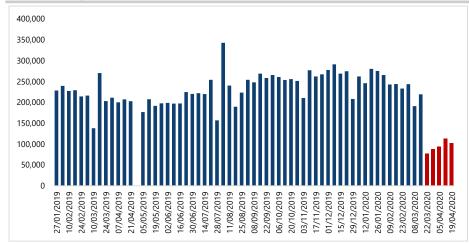
#### Italy

The Italian government's nationwide lockdown began on 9 March. Citizens have strict limitations on leaving their homes. Activity limited to solitary exercise close to home, grocery shopping and going to the doctor. Currently the lockdown remains in effect, with the deadline having been extended to 3 May.

In Italy, for an out of contract post-paid customer, the intra-operator port takes place on the second working day after the request. Therefore we consider 11 March to be the date for which the lockdown's impact would begin to appear in the porting data.

Exhibit 6 shows the total porting cases in Italy. The final four red bars cover the period 16 March-19 April. There is a clear drop-off in total ports, similarly to France, with port volume down by 59% (3.9x pre-lockdown standard deviation).

Exhibit 6 - Italy - Mobile ports per week

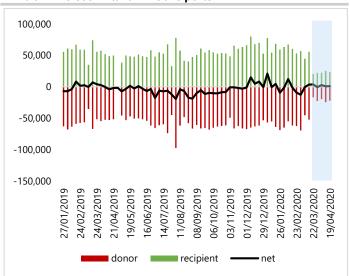


Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis. Note: not displaying ports in week ending 28/04/2019

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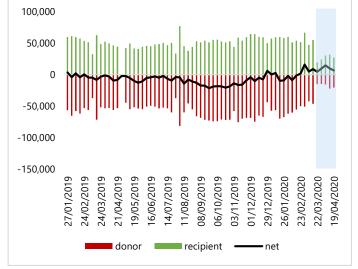
As in France, secular share shifts between the operators have slowed materially post lock-down. The notably beneficiary appears to be Wind Tre, and to an extent also Telecom Italia and Vodafone, unsurprisingly at the expense of new entrant Iliad. We note the effect seemed to have somewhat of a run-up into the lockdown, but the trend changes further strengthened post-lockdown.

Exhibit 7 - Telecom Italia - Mobile ports



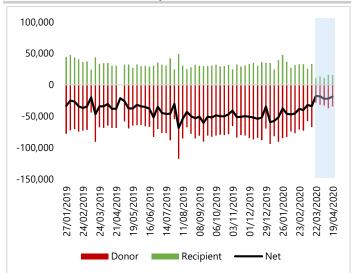
Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

Exhibit 9 - Vodafone - Mobile ports



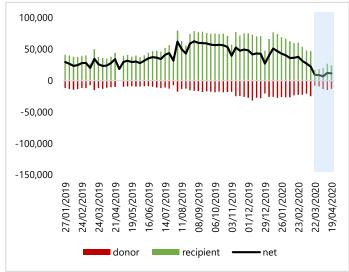
Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

Exhibit 8 - Wind Tre - Mobile ports



Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

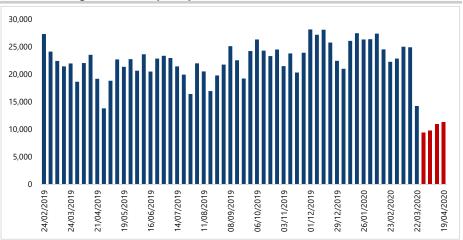
Exhibit 10 - Iliad - Mobile ports



### **Belgium**

Exhibit 11 below shows porting volume per week for Belgium. Lockdown began on 18 March. The final four red bars highlighted COVID-19 impact with average ports down 55% from the 2019 norm, a shift of 4.2x standard deviations.

Exhibit 11 - Belgium - Mobile ports per week

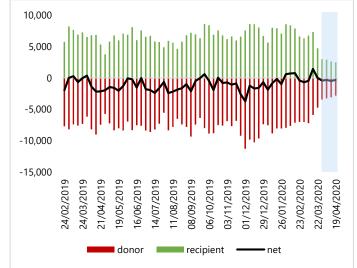


Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

Exhibits 12-15 illustrate the four main mobile operators in Belgium. Net ports flatten to neutral for Proximus and Orange Belgium. After an initial reduction in net port losses, Telenet looks to be returning to an net loss as seen in early 2020, mainly to VOO. Exhibits 14 and 15 clearly show the negative retail impact on Telenet of the arrival by VOO's MVNO project as net adds inflect from to negative as VOO ports emerge.

We have highlighted in prior research that OBEL had planned a major share campaign on the back of a new mobile portfolio whose launch was overshadowed by the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. Exhibit 13 shows a lack of impact form the new portfolio on net adds since the lockdown started to take effect.

**Exhibit 12 - Proximus - Mobile ports** 



Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

Exhibit 13 - Orange Belgium - Mobile ports

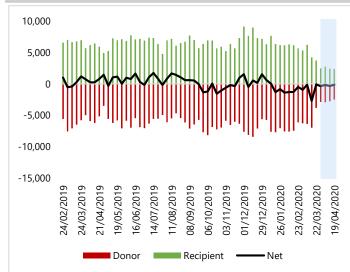


Exhibit 14 - Telenet - Mobile ports

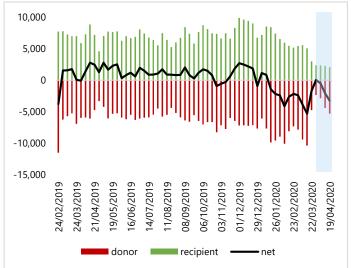
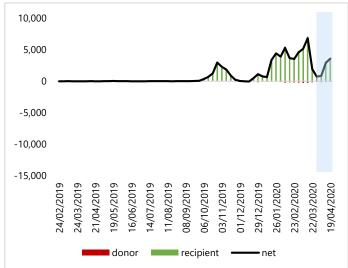


Exhibit 15 - VOO - Mobile ports



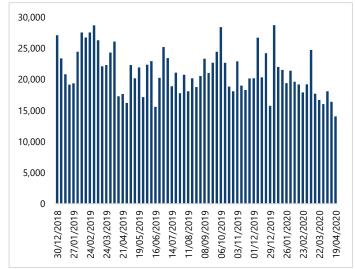
Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

### **Netherlands & Germany**

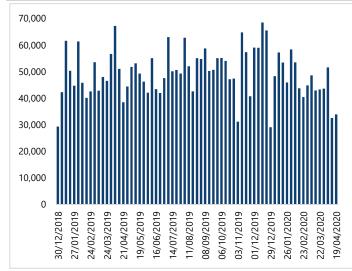
For comparison, Exhibits 16 and 17 show the porting volume in Netherlands and Germany. While these graphs appear to indicate some reduction to porting activity, the effect is washed out and difficult to isolate from other factors (campaign timing, seasonality effects), in our view. We believe this mostly reflects the contract tie-ins mentioned earlier. In addition, the German data is heavily affected by the reseller issue mentioned earlier (about 20% of the market is in the hands of independent resellers without their own number space).

Exhibit 16 - Netherlands - Mobile ports per week



Source: Jefferies, TMT Analysis

Exhibit 17 - Germany - Mobile ports per week





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- Bouygues (EN FP: €26.70, BUY)
- Orange Belgium (OBEL BB: €15.50, BUY)
- Orange S.A. (ORA FP: €11.51, BUY)
- · Proximus (PROX BB: €21.78, UNDERPERFORM)
- · Telecom Italia S.p.A. (TIT IM: €0.35, BUY)
- Vodafone plc (VOD LN: p111.00, BUY)

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Distribution of Ratings						
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