

The impact of a global crisis on the world of work

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Abstract

The global crisis caused by the spread of coronavirus was firstly acute and visible for the sanitary system, but the economic and social life were equally affected also. Work, professions, jobs were already suffering rapid transformations before the outbreak of Covid 19 and the pandemic brought new patterns, directions, hierarchies, preferences and necessities for companies, employees or entrepreneurs.

Using data from the International Labour Organization and Eurostat, this paper aims to understand how the crisis determined by the Covid 19 outbreak influenced the work domain, from a comparative perspective, at global and European level. Several indicators, like employment and unemployment rates evolution, the share of temporary or part-time contracts or changes regarding remote work are captured. Several issues as work-family balance, blurrier boundaries between the two, remote working and the impossibility to perform frontline jobs remotely, the challenges caused by the pause in providing care and educational activities are also discussed.

Keywords: *Changes; Covid 19; crisis; employment; work.*

1. Introduction

Although the course of humankind has always been littered with unexpected events, natural disasters or sanitary impairments, the actual global world, characterized by rapid, instant communication, constant economic relations, intense travelling between regions, countries and continents, certainly represents an unprecedented context for the spread of a virus. The crisis caused by the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic affected and continues to influence all life sectors, people of all ages and professions, from countries and territories all around the globe. Work domain represents no exception. For some professionals, their home also became their office and sometimes even their children`s school or playground, while for other jobs remote work was not possible, and employees were confronted with higher medical risks, longer programs, difficulties in meeting their family requests. Official data also speak about job loses, increasing gaps, reduced earnings and unemployment (Eurostat, 2021; International Labour Organization, 2021).

Another particularity of this pandemic determined by the actual context consists in the existing possibilities of study and analysis present in every scientific domain. Medical sciences, biology, economy, engineering, law and social sciences, for example, and probably the list can be easily extended, contributed to developing tools for fighting with

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the effects of this medical issue. Furthermore, research in all domains benefits from this natural study environment, which brings to light aspects that can be analysed, enriching thus scientific knowledge.

The International Labour Organization displays a rather pessimistic perspective concerning the actual context and considers that the consequences of the repeated and recurrent waves of the coronavirus will continue to produce short and even medium- and long-term undesirable effects: “The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unparalleled disruption worldwide through its devastating impact on public health, employment and livelihoods. Governments and workers’ and employers’ organizations everywhere have taken immediate measures to tackle the crisis, preserve jobs and protect incomes, though these measures have differed in scope and generosity. While such measures have been crucial in mitigating the crisis, all countries have suffered a sharp deterioration in employment and national income, which has aggravated existing inequalities and risks inflicting longer-term “scarring” effects on workers and enterprises.” (International Labour Organisation, 2021:3). In the following lines the conceptual and methodological framework is presented, followed by an analysis of data available at European level (Eurostat) and global (International Labour Organisation).

2. Conceptual and methodological background

Acknowledging that sociology itself was also considered a science of crisis, some authors state that “professional sociology currently lacks an understanding of crisis that would allow it to accurately interpret the ongoing upheavals” (Aulenbacher et al., 2017: 4). The authors referred to claim the absence of a generally accepted and inclusive definition of crisis. We may use the help of an older perspective here. Thus, without neglecting the “provisionality and problematic nature of the ‘normal’”, Holton defines crisis by differentiating it from normal (Holton, 1987: 502), accusing also the large-scale use of the “crisis” concept, in all domains. Starting from the broader understanding of the concept of crisis as a “decisive moment in the resolution of a narrative or illness” (Holton, 1987: 502), one can certainly include the actual context, determined by the Covid 19 pandemic in the crises category.

For the present paper, the aspect that is most interesting in terms of crisis is their transformative effect. Thus, our construction is built on the idea of understanding the transformations brought by the global spread of Coronavirus in terms of labour. Work is among the major life domains impacting both individuals and economies, while communities may group and develop around potent working environments. Although the concepts “work” and “labour” have different connotations (Pogan, 2019), in the present paper they are used as interchangeable.

An objective indicator used at a large scale when analysing the work domain, is the labour force status, according to which people are divided between three main groups: employed, unemployed and outside the labour force, usually reported to the reference week (European Commission Eurostat Directorate F: Social statistics, 2021). For assigning respondents to the three main categories above mentioned, the legal framework is defined by the guidelines of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), through the resolution issued in 1982, at the International Conference of Labour Statisticians. At European level, these regulations are doubled by the Integrated European Social Statistics Framework Regulation 1700/2019 (European Parliament, 2019) and the Implementing Regulation 2240/2019 (European Commission, 2019).

The European Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) provides information regarding the labour force status quarterly and annually, from 2005 onwards. Besides demographic variables as age, sex, education, other indicators are also targeted: activity rates, employment status, part-time/temporary/self-employment, unemployment, working time etc. The working definitions for the categories of the labour force status, above mentioned, are reported to the reference week and defined as follows, according to the unitary provisions of the International Labour Organisation and the European Commission, as explained previously.

Employed persons are the ones aged 15 to 89 who:

- “worked for at least 1 hour for pay or profit, including contributing family workers” (International Labour Organisation, European Commission, 2021).
- “have a job or business, who were temporarily not at work during the reference week but had an attachment to their job, where the following groups have a job attachment: persons not at work due to holidays, working time arrangements, sick leave, maternity or paternity leave; persons in job-related training; persons on parental leave, either receiving and/or being entitled to job-related income or benefits, or whose parental leave is expected to be 3 months or less; seasonal workers during the off-season, where they continue to regularly perform tasks and duties for the job or business, excluding fulfilment of legal or administrative obligations; persons temporarily not at work for other reasons where the expected duration of the absence is 3 months or less” (Idem).
- “persons that produce agricultural goods whose main part is intended for sale or barter” (Idem).

Starting with 2021, people that produce agricultural goods only or mainly for their own consumption, are excluded from employment, as new regulations for the Labour Force Survey state, both at European level and in Romania.

Unemployed persons are aged 15 to 74 who were “not employed during the reference week according to the definition of employment described above (...) and were currently available for work, (...) or were actively seeking work” (International Labour Organisation, European Commission, 2021). According to the same Guidelines of the European Labour Force Survey, among the activities considered as indicators of active job search are: “studying job advertisements, placing or answering job advertisements, placing or updating CVs online, contacting employers directly, asking friends, relatives or acquaintances, contacting a public employment service, contacting a private employment agency, taking a test, interview or examination as part of a recruitment process and making preparations to set up a business” (Idem).

Working time is another valuable indicator present in statistics dealing with labour. In analysing the data presented in the following section, the understanding of the working time is again the one agreed about at European and international level. Thus, the used indicators are:

- usual working hours, defined as “all hours including extra hours, either paid or unpaid, which the person normally works, but excludes the travelling time between home and workplace and the time taken for the main meal break (usually at lunchtime). The number of hours per week usually worked is collected for both the main and second job” (International Labour Organisation, European Commission, 2021).

- actual working hours, seen as “all hours including extra hours regardless of whether they were paid or not” (Idem).

Data analysis

The report issued by the International Labour Organisation estimates a working hours decrease of more than 8 percent, for the entire year 2020, while the recurrent waves of the pandemic maintained the same trend for 2021 also, but at a slower pace, of approximately four percent (ILO, 2021). The decrease of working hours was caused by both reduced programmes and unemployment. At global level, compared to 2019, at the beginning of 2021, 108 million more workers are estimated to be extremely or moderately poor (less than 3 dollars/day for living), which is the level of 2015. The same report draw attention on the already increasing gaps between developed economies and less developed ones and on the risk of bankruptcy for micro and small businesses, doubled by the uncertain future for the ones still surviving (ILO, 2021: 3). Based on a survey and a sample of more than 4500 companies, distributed worldwide, from approximately 45 countries, the “World Employment and Social Outlook” report of the ILO draws attention that around three quarters of the micro and small business were already confronted with debts, jeopardised future development plans and a series of financial problems due the repeated disruptions in their activity (Idem).

For the European Union, the unemployment rate increased in 2020 for the first time after six years of continuous decrease, reaching 7%, for the entire population aged 15 to 74 (Eurostat a, 2021). Shifting our attention to employment rates for different categories of respondents, the young are the most affected by unemployment, as seen in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1. Employment rates for different categories– EU and Romania, comparison between 2020 and 2019

| Year | 2020 | | 2019 | |
|---------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|
| | Romania | EU | RO | EU |
| Total | 70,8% | 72,4% | 70,9% | 73,1% |
| Female | 61% | 66,8% | 61,3% | 67,3% |
| Male | 80,3% | 78,1% | 80,3% | 79% |
| Young | 24,6% | 31,5% | 24,7% | 33,5% |
| Senior | 48,5% | 59,6% | 47,8% | 59,2% |

Source: Own elaboration based on the data provided by Eurostat, available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Employment_-_annual_statistics

While for the Romanian men the employment rate remained the same in 2020 as in 2019, at UE level decreased with almost one percent and for seniors increased for the entire Union (average) and in Romania also. Employment rates for the young population are the smallest, at both levels and decreased from 33,5 in 2019 to 31,5 in 2020 in Europe. The International Labour Organization emphasizes the same negative trend, concluding that “The crisis has affected many young people at a critical moment in their lives, disrupting their transition from school or university to work. Evidence from previous crises shows that entering the labour market during a recession reduces longer-term employment

probabilities, wages and the prospects for on-the-job skills development” (International Labour Organization, 2021: 4). The information available at the beginning of 2021 regarding data from 2020, for 33 countries shows that in 24 of those countries the proportion of young people in education, employment or other forms of training decreased. A possible explanation, besides the shortage in the number of available jobs might be represented by difficulties of attending school in areas or contexts with difficulties or even impossibility to access distance learning or other digital resources.

The National Institute for Statistics of Romania provides data regarding these issues for 2021 already, but as the methodology of the Household Labour Force Survey changed, numbers cannot be compared with those from previous years. Namely, persons producing agricultural goods intended exclusively or mainly for self-consumption are no more considered as part of the employment (INSE, 2021).

Table 2. Unemployment rate by age groups, sex and area, in the first quarter of 2021 in Romania

| Age | Male | Female | Urban | Rural |
|-------------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| 15-24 years | 21,5% | 21,6% | 14,1% | 25,8% |
| 25-34 years | 7,6% | 6,5% | 4,1% | 11,9% |
| 35-44 years | 4,9% | 4,2% | 3,0% | 7,2% |
| 45-54 years | 4,3% | 4,0% | 2,6% | 6,4% |
| 55 years and over | 4,0% | 3,4% | 2,9% | 4,8% |

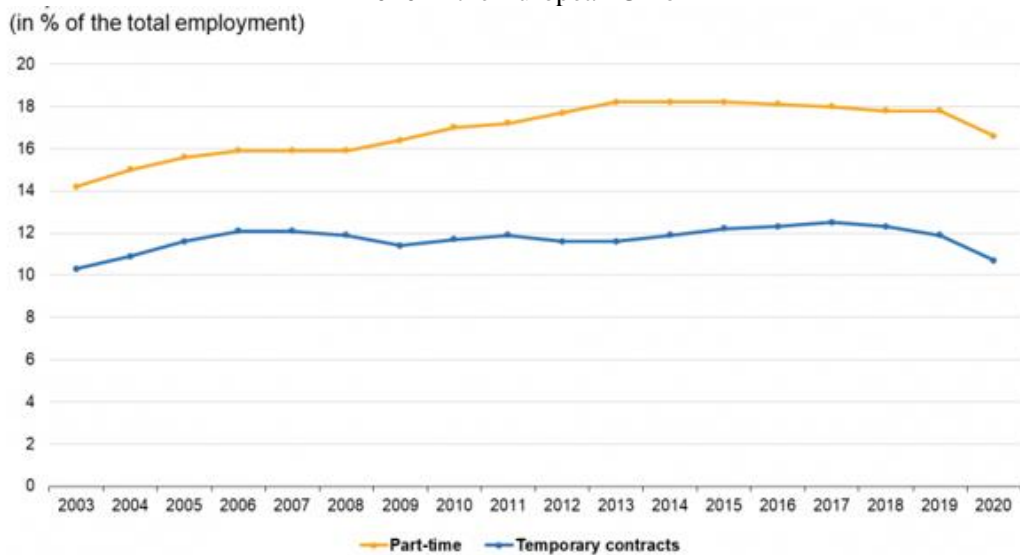
Source: Romania National Institute of Statistics

https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/somaj_tr1e_21

The same negative trend noticed at global and European level, of lowest occupation rates for the young population is visible for Romania also, with great differences between urban and rural areas, for all age categories. The unemployment rate is almost double and sometimes more than double in rural areas that for the inhabitants of cities, from 4,8% for those aged 55 and more, to 25,8% for the 15-24 age category. Women have lower occupation rates than men, no matter their age, with the greatest differences for the 25-34 years category (Romania National Institute of Statistics, 2021).

Besides, after a relatively stable evolution of the part-time and temporary contracts for the last ten years, 2020 brought a decrease in the share of this working arrangements, compared to the previous years. The following figure (No. 1) suggestively presents this evolution, as available on the site of the Eurostat (2021 b). The share of temporary contracts decreased, reaching approximately the level from 2003 and a possible explanation might be the restrictions imposed in travelling across the continent, if we consider seasonal working performed by immigrants in agriculture or tourism as a significant part of such working arrangements.

Figure 1. Evolution of temporary and part-time employment contracts between 2003 and 2020 in the European Union



Source: Eurostat 2021b ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Evolution_of_temporary_contracts_and_part-time_employment_in_the_EU,_2003-2020_\(in_%25_of_the_total_employment\).png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Evolution_of_temporary_contracts_and_part-time_employment_in_the_EU,_2003-2020_(in_%25_of_the_total_employment).png))

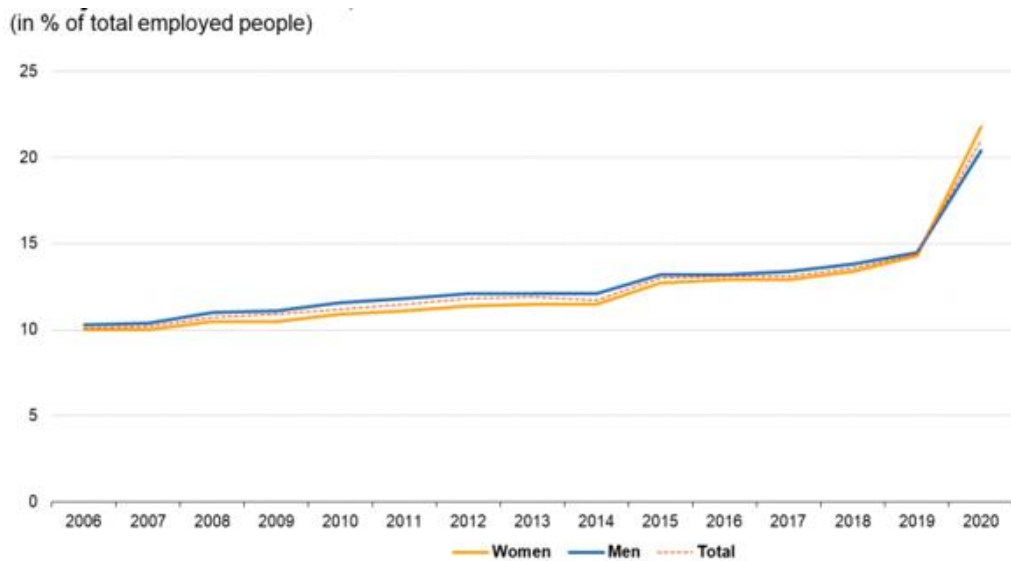
Furthermore, the International Labour Organization also addresses the precarity and vulnerability of migrant workers in the pandemic context, with negative consequences for individuals, as reduced earnings, restricted or no access to social protection services, impossibility to travel in order to find a job. These abrupt disruptions also impacted origin countries through reduced remittances, unemployment and destination countries which had to face new challenges in finding and maintaining the workforce in domains dependent of migrant workers. In such conditions the vulnerability of seasonal migrant workers increased, facing new challenges (International Labour Organization, 2021). Regarding the European Union, in terms of national economies, “legal migration can bring along significant and highly remarkable contribution to the welfare of the European Union’s Member States (...) offering viable solutions to the lack of workforce, providing high-skilled professionals for the European developing economies, and ensuring aid in solving the issue of aging population throughout the European continent” (Porumbescu, 2019: 38).

Another worth mentioning aspect regarding the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemics over the work domain is the differentiated impact on different domains, types of jobs, skills and even areas. Thus, if for some professionals shifting to remote working is accessible and feasible, for many domains this is not possible or the existing infrastructure does not allow such adaptation. Moreover, the pause in providing care facilities for children or the online education brought new sets of challenges for those parents working from home and for the parents absent from home also. About increased inequalities regarding class and gender speaks a report deployed in the United Kingdom, stating that “More than a year on from the first lockdowns in the UK, we found that the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the key, essential but under-valued work performed by working class women. It both exposed and intensified the deep gender and class inequalities that, together, impact the women’s working lives, with pandemic pressures resulting in further job and financial

insecurity, heavier care responsibilities, and real challenges in managing unpaid and paid work” (Warren and Lyonette, 2021: 1).

On all continents and in every country remote work was not a possibility for the so-called front-line workers like medical staff, delivery, employees from shops, restaurants, constructions, agriculture or care facilities, for example. European aggregated data show that just over 20% employed Europeans worked from home usually or sometimes in 2020 (Eurostat 2021b). Their share reported to the total employed population increased though compared to the previous years, doubling if compared with 2006, as visible in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Distribution by gender of employed people who usually or sometimes work from home in the European Union – Evolution between 2006-2020



Source: Eurostat 2021b ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Evolution_of_employed_people_by_gender_who_work_sometimes_or_usually_from_home_in_the_EU_,_2006-2020_\(in_%25_of_total_employed_people\).png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Evolution_of_employed_people_by_gender_who_work_sometimes_or_usually_from_home_in_the_EU_,_2006-2020_(in_%25_of_total_employed_people).png))

Comparing data from 2020 to the ones in 2019, the increase in remote work exceeds five percent for both men and women, although for employed females working from home is more common than in the case of men. The gender discussion was frequently put in relation with this new context, regarding blurrier boundaries between teleworking and child care or cooking and other household responsibilities (Schieman and Badawy, 2020; Allen et al, 2021; Schieman et al, 2021).

3. Discussions and conclusions

The global impact of the coronavirus pandemic represents a major preoccupation for the general public and an intriguing research topic for the science world. All life domains are abruptly transformed by crisis, as emphasised in the theoretical part of this paper and described in the literature (Holton, 1987). Covid-19 brought a new, unexpected context that

changed relations between persons, work contexts and possibilities, economies, restructuring individual and collective priorities.

Regarding the work domain, some inequalities persisted, others sharpened while new risks, challenges and opportunities emerged. If for some professions remote work is a plausible option, still are domains constrained by direct interaction or physical presence. Moreover, existing unequal development in terms of infrastructure or access to digital resources fostered disparities in using such tools or ways for working or learning. Some areas, like rural ones or poorer countries are the ones most probably to remain disconnected from many possibilities, work and study opportunities and the rapid transformations of the actual global world.

The risk of increasing gaps between the so-called global north and global south, the low-skilled and the high-skilled workers, inhabitants of rural or urban areas and between households with different economic status is generally amplified by such abrupt social transformations, as the Coronavirus pandemic is.

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