

DIGITAL LABOUR MARKETS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

COVID-19 and the Future of Work

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INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

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This book focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on changing labour markets and accelerating digitalisation of the workplace in Central and Eastern Europe. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted workplaces substantially. As the lockdowns or stay-at-home measures entered into force, a large proportion of the workforce was instructed to stay home and continue to work remotely if their functions made it possible. This policy accelerated the introduction of many digital solutions, requiring the establishment of new patterns of work, and new institutional logic guiding daily activity for both organisations and individuals. In a relatively short time, remote working has become a kind of commonly accepted new institution with its own new logic, structures, rules, and behaviours (Jacks, 2021).

The trends contributing to a shift towards more flexible, digital working patterns were emerging before the pandemic (over the last decade) in response to societal developments, the increasing participation of women, and greater global competition. In 2020, the combined health and economic shocks have only deepened the concerns about technology-driven displacement of jobs, growing income inequality, and rising societal discord towards globalisation.

Yet with the global innovation and technology landscape changing rapidly and with the winner-takes-all tendencies of digital technologies, Europe and especially Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries risk becoming entrenched in their position as a follower of digitalisation. During the pandemic time, the adoption of digital technologies by firms in the European Union was improving, but only some EU countries are at the global forefront of digital transformation, while others risk being left behind (EIB, 2021).

Many research states that digitalisation is mainly an opportunity, now more than ever. The digital firms are more productive, employ more skilled workers, and foresee more employment growth opportunities ahead. Recently rising remote working patterns offer autonomy, which can lead to increased motivation and

commitment of employees (Rupietta & Beckmann, 2018; Chen & Fulmer, 2018; Clancy, 2020; Gorlick, 2020). Work from home (WFH) in its initial incarnation or in the emerging form of work from anywhere (WFA) allows the employee increased flexibility over their time and geographic location. This may expand the labour market, allowing employees to compete for a wider set of jobs, potentially contributing to both job satisfaction (Ipsen et al., 2021) and productivity (Ahrendt et al., 2020).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the feasibility of remote working in many occupations, the ability to go digital is not universal to all types of jobs. Analyses of COVID-19 job losses in the wake of the introduction of remote work revealed the vulnerability of the young, women, the digitally less literate, and self-employed as well as those with jobs that cannot be done remotely and disenfranchised such as labour migrants and others engaged in physical labour (ILO, 2020). Moreover, more generally, accelerating digital substitution of routinised tasks may culminate in the loss of middle-skilled jobs and subsequent crowding around jobs with non-routinised but low-skilled tasks (e.g., requiring physical dexterity or social skills) and – to a lesser extent – around jobs requiring cognitive skills and creativity of human workers (Acemoglu & Autor, 2011; Goos et al., 2014; Vermeulen & Psenner, 2022). Therefore, while the digital revolution has the potential to mitigate persistent individual, sectoral, and regional labour disparities, which are partly attributed to historical or compositional differences (e.g., natural advantages, and productive amenities) and institutional settings, the speed and diversity of these changes can exacerbate the new discrepancies.

Remote working also presents challenges related to new organisational culture, managerial capability, and technological infrastructure. Yet, research also finds that remote work can lead to increased feelings of isolation, loneliness, overworking, prioritising work over personal or family life, inability to switch off, and technostress (Henke et al., 2015; Shepherd-Banigan et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2020). The higher flexibility and autonomy associated with remote working are often accompanied by greater work intensity and longer working hours. Zoom fatigue is now real (Fauville et al., 2021). Long working hours and the sense of isolation associated with remote work, together with the increased use of online monitoring and surveillance methods, may, however, negatively affect the mental health of teleworkers, besides raising privacy issues. Thus, there are the well-being costs of digital technology (Messenger et al., 2017).

Therefore, exploiting the full potential of remote working arrangements requires skills and managerial capabilities. Pre-pandemic literature has identified the factors managers consider when deciding who should be able to telework (Lautsch & Kossek, 2011; Williamson et al., 2021). These are work-related considerations (such as suitability of the job for teleworking), personal and household characteristics, and technological limitations. Work-related factors are the most important.

Moreover, the level of access to digital infrastructure is converging across Europe, but more needs to be done to accelerate the spread of fast connections. Effective technology, a well-equipped and dedicated workspace at home, regular

communications with colleagues, job characteristics and managers' understanding of the permeability of boundaries (work-life balance) are all factors enabling successful working from home (Greer & Payne, 2014; Basile & Beauregard, 2016; Morikawa, 2020).

Shaping opportunities and understanding the challenges of the new digital world require a human-centred approach to ensure decent digiwork. Decent digiwork is about creating opportunities for all to participate fully in a future of digital work that affords self-respect and dignity, security and equal opportunity, representation, and voice. It is also about fostering inclusive innovation policy while meeting the changing needs facing businesses and securing sustainable economic growth (ILO, 2019). Through its attention to democratic participation, fairness, and legitimacy (Papadakis, 2006; ILO, 2013; Hermans & Ramiou, 2016), social dialogue can play a central role in addressing both the innovation potential of new working patterns and the problems associated with digital work.

All these trends of the future are present in Europe. In this context, the following questions arise: how have labour markets in Eastern Europe dealt with the coronavirus crises, has the rapidly introduced digitalisation brought about more advantages or disadvantages for employees and employers, what kind of advantages and disadvantages prevail in the digitalisation of the European labour market after the pandemic, and finally – to what extent does the digitalisation of the labour market require changes to existing regulations?

Thus, this book aims to assess the impact of digitalisation on the future of work in the CEE by exploiting the unique experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, we will investigate the ongoing changes in the world of work during the COVID-19 pandemic and identify the challenges for the post-pandemic digital labour markets in CEE countries. The geographical scope of the study concerns Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Romania, but some chapters present the largest context analysing EU-27 countries. The book concentrates predominantly on the current data from the pandemic period, however, to understand better the determinants of the ongoing changes, and particular chapters will also describe the theoretical aspects of these shifts and present the earlier trends.

The presented research will be important in formulating policy that will ensure that the benefits of this digital revolution are shared by all. Exploiting the full potential of digital transformation requires skills and managerial capabilities, better access to digital infrastructure, regional development policy, strengthening of cohesion, and new regulations of flexible working patterns. Moreover, in this book, we argue that the adoption of digital technologies in CEE countries has improved during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the region has not yet closed the gap with Western Europe or among different groups of employees. Thus, to achieve sustainable growth and lasting competitiveness, Europe must support the shifts that are only just started in many industries, as well as in the lives of many Europeans.

The expected contributions of this research are to address the three key goals. First, a better understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on

the adoption of workplace digitalisation in the selected labour markets in CEE countries and the potential trade-offs facing those who do and do not have access to this benefit. Further, the book is to complement the labour market research by incorporating the outputs of changing demand for skills. Finally, this book will contribute new insight into policies and regulations that govern the future of work.

The structure of the book

The book comprises 12 chapters and is divided into two parts. The first concerns the new work experience from the pandemic time and the second, new challenges and policy needs for the post-pandemic digital work. The first part (consisting of the first seven chapters) discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the labour markets in selected CEE countries. In this part, the authors will identify the factors deepening the digital divide at the EU regional level, the scale of changing digital skills demand and deepening jobs polarisation, labour mobility of posting workers and demand for migrant workers during the corona crisis, changes of labour productivity, and the role of social partners in job prevention in times of COVID-19 crisis. The second part of the book (comprising five chapters) tries to identify the challenges for the future of work in terms of new labour law (the right to disconnect or appropriate monitoring and surveillance of remote work), the potential application of an unconditional basic income (UBI), the potential of Google's Trends Data (GTD) in the assessment of the current labour market situation, and the problem of NFT gig tokens.

In both parts, the authors focus their attention on particular case studies or, more broadly, analyse and compare the dataset for CEE or EU27. The authors apply various methods (quantitative and qualitative) in their research, considering the investigated problems on different levels of analysis – micro, mezzo, and macro. Such diversity provides us with a broad perspective on the problem of the COVID crisis and its impact on labour markets and workplaces, and at the same time gives us a wider audience for our research results.

The first three chapters focus on how the pandemic impacts the digital divide and polarisation of labour markets. In Chapter 1, Beata Woźniak-Jęchorek and Piotr Matuszak investigate the changes in the scale of work from home (WFH) during the COVID-19 pandemic concerning the pre-existing inequalities in the EU regions, including differences in the income level, economic structure, demographics, and education. More specifically, this explanatory study investigates the factors related to the scale of WFH in the EU regions and aims at indicating which of them were the drivers of the deepening digital divide during the COVID-19 pandemic. To econometrically analyse the potential determinants of the observed discrepancies at regional levels, they use the dataset including 218 regions (NUTS 2 level) in the 27 European countries for which data on WFH is available in both 2019 and 2020. This explanatory study reveals that the scale of WFH increased more in 2020 in the regions with relatively larger WFH indicators already in 2019 and had larger

income levels and employment share of the finance and insurance sector, and in countries that introduced stricter COVID-19-related restrictions.

In Chapter 2, Brian Fabo studies the impact of the pandemic on labour market matching and skills demand in Slovakia during the pandemic period. To show the changes to digital skills demand caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, he examines a large database of nearly 500,000 job vacancies posted on the website *Profesia.sk* in 2020 and 2021. His findings confirm a major increase in demand for office and teleworking (Zoom, MS Teams, and Cisco Webex) software, but mainly limited to clerical support workers and managers. He identifies that the increase was particularly pronounced in small firms, which are likely more nimble and thus more likely to modify their job postings. The increase appears to remain sustained even after the end of lockdowns, suggesting a possibly permanent shift to working from home. If the shift to working from home remains permanent, it might lead to a deepening digital divide between workers whose work is possible to be performed from home and service or blue-collar workers, who are by the nature of their jobs unable to take advantage of this shift.

In Chapter 3, Łukasz Arendt, Ewa Gałęcka-Burdziak, and Robert Pater explore how the dynamic implementation of digital technologies, being a result of the COVID-19 pandemic outburst, cause deepening polarisation of the labour market in Poland. More specifically, they analyse online job offers from selected Polish job portals before and after the COVID-19 outbreak and verify indirectly the extent to which potential COVID-driven enhanced automation and robotisation processes lead to changes in the routine and non-routine mix of jobs available in the Polish labour market. The empirical part of this study is based on data on job vacancies posted online, retrieved from the System of Online Job Offers (SOJO) developed by the Institute of Labour and Social Studies in Warsaw. Changes in the demand for task content of jobs and skill mix are estimated with the use of difference-in-difference methodology and multinomial logistic models. Their findings reveal a structural shift in demand which favours non-routine jobs and shall translate into more dynamic labour polarisation. Moreover, with the use of logistic regression, they match skill requirements specified in job offers with task-content groups, showing a COVID-19-driven increase in demand for computer, mathematical, and cognitive skills, and lower requirements for self-organisation, communication, managerial, and office skills.

During the COVID pandemic, workers have experienced a tremendous amount of upheaval, and the changes are both seismic and persistent. In some occupations, the possibility to work remotely is limited or impossible, potentially excluding some workers from enjoying a valuable non-pecuniary benefit (Garrote Sanchez et al., 2020). This is potentially the case of posted workers. Therefore, in Chapter 4, Elizabeta Zirnstein, Klemen Širok, Suzana Sedmak, and Suzana Laporšek attempt to reveal how the pandemic affected the posting of workers within the EU, with a special focus on the posting of workers from Slovenia – one of the European leaders with the highest number of posted workers. Although according to official data, the posting of workers seems a marginal topic; it is a topical issue, as

labour mobility is crucial for the future of Europe, due to huge work shortages in the EU with big structural disparities in the labour markets. The chapter presents the regulatory framework for posting workers in the EU and Slovenia and discusses the characteristics and specifics of posting over the pandemic. The findings are based on primary data collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and on secondary data on the numbers of posted workers in Slovenia. The authors argue that the number of posted workers in Slovenia has been increasing steadily since 2004 and kept rising throughout the pandemic period. However, during the pandemic, the biggest obstacles to posting were constant changes in containment measures, uncoordinated measures between EU countries, and obligatory quarantines. For posted workers, the pandemic resulted in numerous lay-offs, high risk of infection, limited access to medical treatment, undeclared work, and no wage compensation in case of illness. Consequently, the pandemic deepened the vulnerability of posted workers.

Similarly, adopting the disadvantaged labour market participants groups' perspective in Chapter 5, Olena Shelest-Szumilas and Marcin Woźniak investigate how the demand for migrant workers in the local market in Poland was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic shock. Based on their own survey conducted in the Poznań region, they present quantitative data on the employment changes and employers' plans in terms of hiring migrants in the short term. To identify the factors that may increase or decrease the probability of hiring migrant workers by local Polish enterprises in 12 months following the survey, they develop three ordinal logistic regression models. As was expected, the results indicate that the situation of foreign workers became much more uncertain in the local labour market. The factors of particular risk are mainly connected with firm characteristics (e.g., firm size and economic sector) and working conditions (e.g., type of job contract).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also caused a profound disruption in the business activity, forcing firms to introduce new solutions, replacing standard work with teleworking, breaking the supply chains, and decreasing production and sales. Therefore, in Chapter 6, Petr Suchánek, Tomáš Ondráček, Ladislava Kuchynková, Pavla Marciánová, Petr Pirožek, and Peter Mikuš aim to assess how Czech companies dealt with the COVID-19 crisis at the beginning of the pandemic and how this crisis impacted labour productivity in selected sectors of the Czech economy. Their study is based on two data sources – a secondary statistical database and a survey conducted in the firms in the Czech Republic under the declared state of emergency in autumn of 2020. Their findings show that labour productivity measured in hours worked has increased, but labour productivity measured as the ratio of the total sales to the number of employees has decreased. Supplementary data from online surveys showed that manager and government policies during the COVID shock were generally targeted to achieve the interests of the business or the interests of customers but did not stop the decline in sales.

The emerging new digital reality of the labour markets with the ambiguous effects of the remote working poses a challenge for the public policy analogous to the regulation of temporary contracts which despite their capability to increase overall

productivity and labour utilisation often resulted in labour market segmentation and increased precarity. The policy and social partners' response to the pandemic crises are the subject of research conducted in Chapter 7. Here Vassil Kirov, Lucia Kováčová, Martin Guzi, Jan Czarzasty, Dragoş Adăscăliţei, and Martin Kahanec provide early evidence on the role of social partners in shaping job preservation policies and measures, focusing on three main types: short-time working arrangements (e.g., *Kurzarbeit*); wage subsidies; and flexible work arrangements (e.g., teleworking) in five CEE countries: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. More specifically, they critically explore how social partners have been involved in designing and adopting job preservation policies responding to the recent COVID-19 economic crisis and increasing unemployment rates. They also focus on teleworking; however, the social dialogue in the implementation of this new work arrangement has been done rather at the company level. Their findings indicate strong involvement of social partners in the design of short-term working schemes but less engagement in the introduction of teleworking as a novel form of work organisation in CEE countries.

The next two chapters concentrate on the challenges of the new working solutions and workers' rights. Blurring the boundary between working time and leisure may introduce difficulties in separating work-family life (work-life balance) and increase the risk of working overtime without proper remuneration (Yarmolyuk-Krock, 2022; Vargas Llave et al., 2020). In Chapter 8, Branka Andjelkovic, Tanja Jakobi, and Maja Kovac discuss the effects of monitoring and surveillance practices that emerged with remote work in Serbia. Conceptually, their research seeks to explore the practices and ramifications of monitoring remote workers via constructs of power asymmetry in the (remote) workplace in the context of employee privacy and labour rights. They argue that a lack of institutional response, primarily in the fields of labour law and data protection, increases the grey zone of remote work and exposes workers to several unforeseen vulnerabilities. Their findings relied on a mixed-method approach with two separate surveys, one of the workers and one of the employers, who worked remotely during the pandemic. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with labour and personal data protection experts, representatives of trade unions, policymakers, and regulators. The main findings of the research show that power asymmetry has increased in all fundamental privacy and data protection domains. However, this shift in power has provoked neither collective action nor individual resistance by Serbian remote workers. Instead, they continued to comply with the new practices primarily due to ignorance.

In Chapter 9, Olga Chesalina explores the legal nature and the regulation of the right to disconnect in the EU member states and the EU Draft Directive, which become a crucial problem for hyper-connected teleworkers. Special attention is paid here to the character of the right to disconnect, the personal and material scope of this right, the relationship to other labour rights, and the role of this right in the prevention of psychosocial risks. The chapter also investigates different factors that influence the effective implementation of the right to disconnect.

It concludes that the right to disconnect is not a new labour right but rather a remedy to prevent hyper-connection from the employer's side and the constant over-accessibility of employees.

In turn, in Chapter 10, Sven M. Gruner takes a more general view, assessing the role of an Unconditional Basic Income (UBI) in the post-COVID time. The emerging form of Work from anywhere (WFA) could expand the pool of potential employees, allowing the companies to search for workers outside their local labour markets. As a result, the firms may hire more productive employees for similar or lower wages (Clancy, 2020). Therefore, Sven M. Gruner addresses the question of how UBI can become a policy tool in reducing the negative aspects of labour market technological changes. More specifically, the chapter will focus on UBI in the context of growing flexibility of working relationships, decreasing social security, the need for quick skill adaptation to the new digital environment, and work-life balance challenges in the case of remote working. The chapter reveals findings that COVID-caused elements might be a nutrient medium for UBI. On the one hand, the pandemic exacerbated existing problems; and on the other hand, the crisis drew attention to the problems already known but so far discussed on the border of the mainstream economics.

Technology brings many benefits such as easy access to information, time savings, better mobility, better communication, cost efficiency, less wastage, and more optimal usage of resources. Because of technology, companies can act faster, make quicker decisions, and remain adaptable. To do that, new digital data are used. The generation of this data significantly accelerated during the COVID time. Therefore, in Chapter 11, Sławomir Kuźmar and Bartosz Totleben put forward an interesting explanation of the potential of Google Trends Data (GTD) in the assessment of the current labour market situation, paying special attention not only to the research potential but also to the limitations and possible drawbacks of studies based on this data. The authors trace the general trends in scientific research based on GTD and present some empirical examples of these studies related to the labour market. Discussing the potential limitations of Internet search data, they focus on some external or general factors that may impact the representatives of search queries such as the demographic dimensions of Internet users, differences in behaviour, and sources used in web searching. They also concentrate on factors related directly to the methodology of collecting and sharing data by Google, including sampling, time range sensitivity, and categories. The chapter concludes that the authors and reviewers of studies based on Internet search data should adopt an enthusiastic but critical approach, particularly regarding key assumptions and methodological aspects of their studies.

Finally, in Chapter 12, Kamilla Marchewka-Bartkowiak, Michał Litwiński, and Karolina Nowak address the problem of labour valuation in the gig economy which has increased significantly in the last couple of years and could offer flexibility that was much appreciated during the pandemic time and in the new digital world. Specifically, they explore the question of whether NFT gig tokens constitute a tool for valuing one's work that will consider both the financial and network dimensions of the individual. Authors assume here that NFT gig tokens have the

potential to become a new means of labour valuation for and by gig workers. In this chapter, we can find the newly developed classification of work offered by digital token issuers, axiological reasoning of network factor of valuation, and identification of factors influencing the valuation of work using personal tokens. The financial benefits seem to be of lower relevance here. The main criteria of work valuation are the appearance in the virtual world and the development of a network of contacts, which will enable them to achieve a network effect in the long term.

The chapters presented in the book discuss how new digital technologies affected the labour markets and workplaces during the specific and extraordinary time of the COVID pandemic. These experiences might develop scenarios on how digitalisation is likely to affect the CEE labour markets in the next years and derives implications for policymakers on how to shape the future of work. The main challenge will be the structure of jobs and the corresponding need for supply-side adjustments to meet the shift in demand both within and between occupations and sectors; also appropriately capturing the benefits of digital work while mitigating its social costs will largely depend on public policy design and regulation of this new paradigm.

The COVID-19 crisis has clearly shown that being able to get online was a crucial determinant of people's ability to continue engaging in the workplace. Investing in digital infrastructure and closing the digital divide will allow disadvantaged groups to participate meaningfully in the future economy. To reduce inequality and give people better prospects, governments need to strengthen education and training to better prepare workers for the jobs of the future. Lifelong learning also means bolstering access to schooling and skills training to help workers displaced by economic shocks like COVID-19. Wage subsidies and public-works programmes can help people regain their livelihoods during the recovery, but the pandemic was likely to change how work is done. For shaping a decent digital work environment, the will of social dialogue actors to engage in intensified and better organised dialogue and to adapt more quickly to the new realities must also play a central role. It is also about fostering development-driven innovations while reshaping the business models, meeting the changing needs facing companies, and securing inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Ensuring decent digitally enabled work is still a challenge in current times.

Looking to the future, we do hope that this book has captured at least a small part of contemporary digitalisation process and its impact on labour markets and workplaces, and that it will help us to have a better understanding of this extraordinary phenomenon shaping our working life.

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