

**Comparative report call center/BPO sector
in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia**



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INTRODUCTION

The sector of business process outsourcing, known as the BPO sector, though a relatively new sector, is experiencing great growth all over the world. The global business process outsourcing market size is expected to reach USD 405.6 billion by 2027, expanding at a CAGR of 8.0%, according to a study conducted by Grand View Research, Inc.¹.

The Western Balkans have ‘collectively’ become one of the most attractive locations for outsourcing. The region is competitive in the ICT-BPO – Information, Communication, and Technology – Business Process Outsourcing – sector compared to global giants like India and the Philippines².

Some of the attractive features of the Western Balkans include competitive labor and business operating costs; proximity to most major clients in core European countries; and good-quality internet is available across most of the region.

Also, the region there have been recent investments in new models, such as work-from-home arrangements. In the other hand, the young people from this region are multilingual.

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, India and Philippines, the world centers of the ICT-BPO sector, were hit hard, as customers did not allow the transfer of work from home, and employees could not move to the work center due to restrictive measures taken by the respective governments.

The pandemic crisis is seen by experts as an opportunity for the Western Balkans to return to the service center of the ICT-BPO sector.

However, these potentials are not adequate and exploited systematically. The driving force for BPOs are volume-driven services such as human resources, customer care, technical support and solutions, finance and accounting services, and website services. It also deals with predefined processes as defined by their clients.

A problem for the development of the sector remains the fragmentation of the enterprises of this sector that exercise their activity in the countries of the Region, which makes impossible the possibility of investments and the growth of enterprises. Only a small number of companies in the ICT-BPO sector are successful in entering the markets, while most of them are not able to take full

¹ <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/press-release/global-business-process-outsourcing-bpo-market>

² <https://www.helvetas.org/en/switzerland/how-you-can-help/follow-us/blog/inclusive-systems/business-process-outsourcing-Western-Balkans>

advantage of the opportunities. Cooperation between industry actors and those with government institutions is low.

This comparative report, based on reports conducted in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia, tries to provide an overview of the functioning of one of the branches of the ICT-BPO sector, call center sector and its findings aim to contribute to the design of measures and policies from each country to improve the situation.

The Call Center sector in the Balkan region and in particular in the three countries analyzed is a new sector but has grown rapidly in recent years. These countries have become very attractive to this sector also based on a very significant element of their labor market. They have a predominantly young, educated workforce that knows and speaks many international languages.

Most call centers in the countries of the region have been opened by foreign companies, and these are the largest companies in the sector. Later call center companies were opened by local entrepreneurs. The call center sector has already become the most powerful generator of employment for the young people in these countries, especially in Albania. Also, this sector already has a significant impact on the economy of the respective countries and is considered one of the sectors with a very good future in these countries.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this survey was to offer an insight into enforcement of labour rights in the call Center (part of BPO) sector in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia, and compliance with international and national legislations and norms, in particular with the national Labour Law and Law on Safety and Health at Work in each countries. The studies that will be analysed were conducted by “Together for Life” in Albania, Kosovar Stability Initiative in Kosovo and Public Policy Research in Serbia.

In this study it's used a mix method approach combining qualitative, quantitative and comparative methods. This includes data research, review of national literature to each country and international literature, analysis of the primary data from the national institutions as a quantitative method. On the qualitative side, there are analysed data obtained through the qualitative survey and the semi-structured interviews with the employees, representatives of the public and private institutions, CEOs and former owners of the call centers and experts in the industry as well as members of the unions.

However, this report focused mainly on data obtained through the survey as the main source of comparison of the labour conditions in the BPO sector in the three countries.

Albania and Serbia applied the snowball method targeting employees from the call centers registered. Kosovo had include employees not only from call centers, but from other activities in BPO sector such as retail, online or postal orders from home, computer counselling, ICT Services, market research and opinion poll research, ect.

In Albania and Serbia, employees in ICT services have higher education and salaries than in other groups, while employees in postal services have a lower level of education and short-term contracts. This is the reason why the findings in this study show some differences in education, labour status, nature of work and remuneration of employees between Kosovo and two other countries included in this study.

The total sample for the qualitative survey included 1377 interviewees in three countries: 1000 interviewees in Albania; 200 interviewees in Kosovo and 177 in Serbia. The survey was performed: face to face in Albania; online via Survey Monkey in Serbia; and mix methodology (face to face and online) in Kosovo.

The anonymity of the employees was secured. Respondents were never asked to reveal their personal data.

It is important to note that the study in Albania was conducted in 2017, meanwhile the data on Kosovo and Serbia were gathered and analysed during 2020, which may have a slight affect on the data provided.

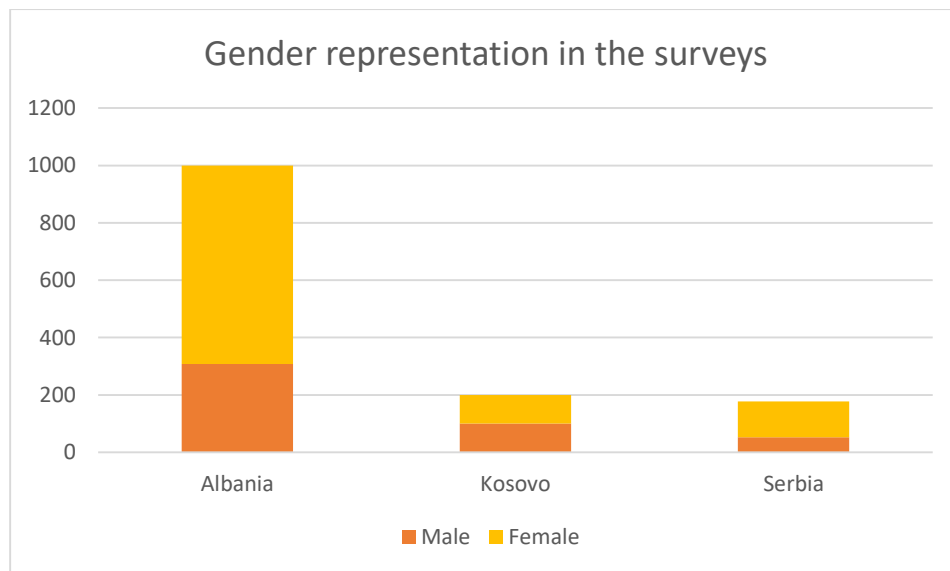
FINDINGS

The three studies in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia has their specifics, as mentioned in the presentation of the methodology. Below we are comparing the findings of each country, having in mind though their differences and common points.

GENDER REPRESENTATION

In terms of gender representation, it is noticeable that almost 2/3 of those included in this report (66%) are female and only 34% are male, indicative of the predominance of female gender in this sector. For Serbia this ratio is even higher in favor of women 70% (f) and 30% (m) compared to for Albania 69% (f) with 31% (m). As can be seen from the graph, the study sample for Kosovo is more balanced with a slight advantage of males (51%) over females (49%).

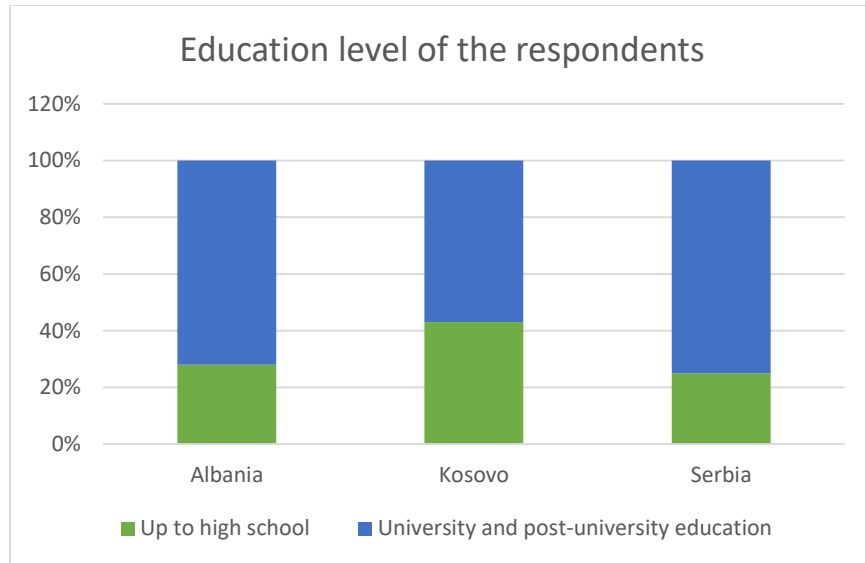
This may also reflect the method used for data collection in the three countries, where Albania and Serbia included only employees of call centers, while Kosovo included other sub-sectors such as retail, online or postage from home; other activities in the field of telecommunications; IT consulting activities; other ICT services; market research and opinion poll research. These sectors are dominated by male employees that balance the employees in call centers.



The sector is dominated by employees with higher education, which can be seen from the graph below. For Serbia almost 3/4 of respondents (75%) continue or have completed higher or postgraduate education and only 25% of respondents have completed secondary education.

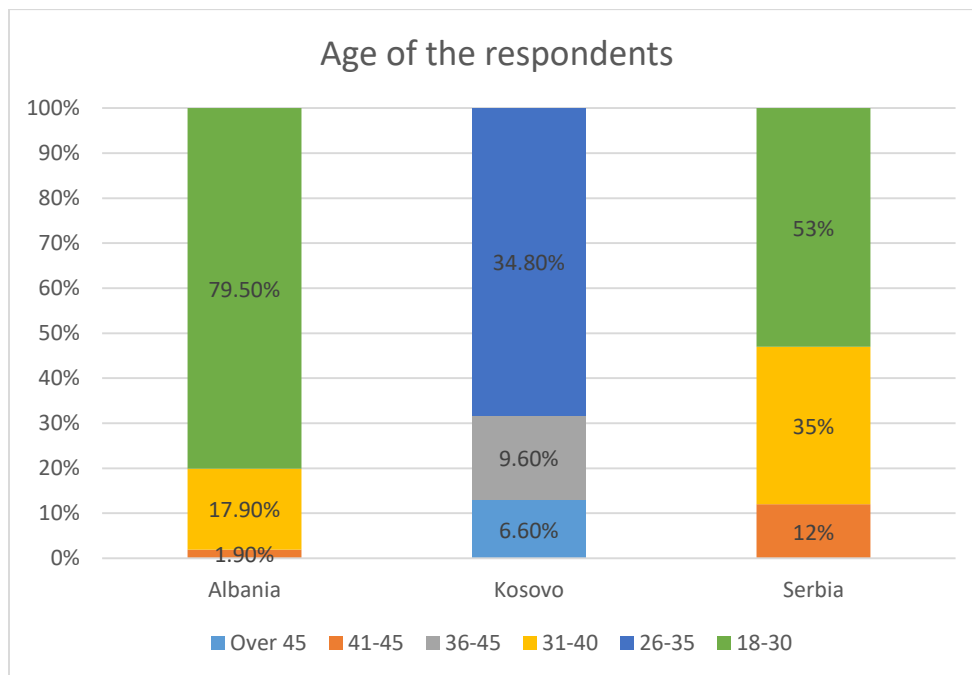
For Albania, 72% of respondents continue or had completed higher education and 28% with secondary education or less.

In the Kosovo sample, 43% of respondents have secondary education or less and 57% continue or have completed higher or postgraduate education



CALL CENTER AND YOUNG PEOPLE

In the call center sector, young people predominate and this is evident in these reports as well. In all three countries predominated young people aged 18-30. It is the period where, after completing their education, young people find it difficult to have a job in their profession. In Albania, the percentage of young people aged 18-30 goes up to 4/5 of all respondents. The graphic below shows the age of the respondents, taken in consideration the changes between the questionnaires on the three countries.



Albania - 79.5% of the respondents belong to the age group 18-30 years, 17.9% to the age group 31-40 years and only 0.7% are under 18 years and 1.9% are 41 years and above.

More than half of the respondents (54%) are single and live with either their parents (41%) or alone (13%). The family status of the people who participated in the study reflects their young age. Only 35% of them have the status of 'married' or 'divorced'.

Kosovo - The call center sector is dominated by young people. 83.7% of respondents employed in the call center belong to the age up to 35 years, of which 4.5% are under 18 years, 44.4% from 18-25 years and 34.8% belong to the age group 26-35 years. Only 10% of respondents belong to the age group 36-45 years, while less than 7% are more than 45 years old.

In terms of marital status, 66% of respondents surveyed report being married, while 29.8% of respondents' nationals are single. Other social statuses follow with significantly lower percentages.

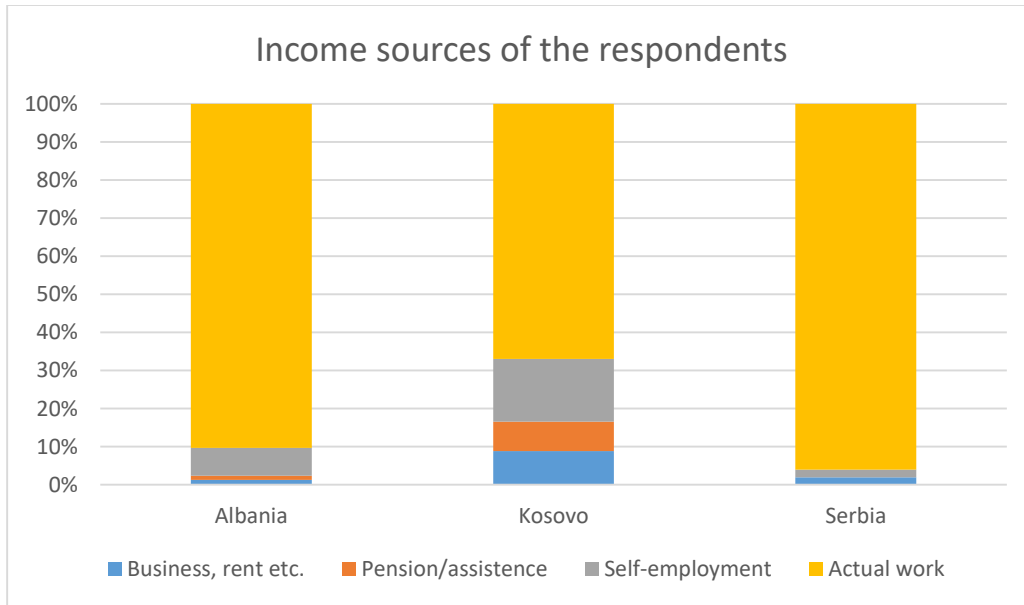
Serbia - The structure is dominated by respondents aged 18-30 (53%), followed by respondents aged 31 to 40 (35%). Only 12% of respondents are those aged 41 to 50 years.

About 25% of respondents claim that they still live with their parents. This is followed by respondents living alone (22%), and those living with a wife / husband / partner (21%). A significant percentage of respondents live in a family with a spouse / partner and children (18%).

SOURCE OF FAMILY INCOME

In all three countries included in the report, it is noticeable that employees in the call center sector provide the main salary in their families. So the family income is closely related to the employment of its members.

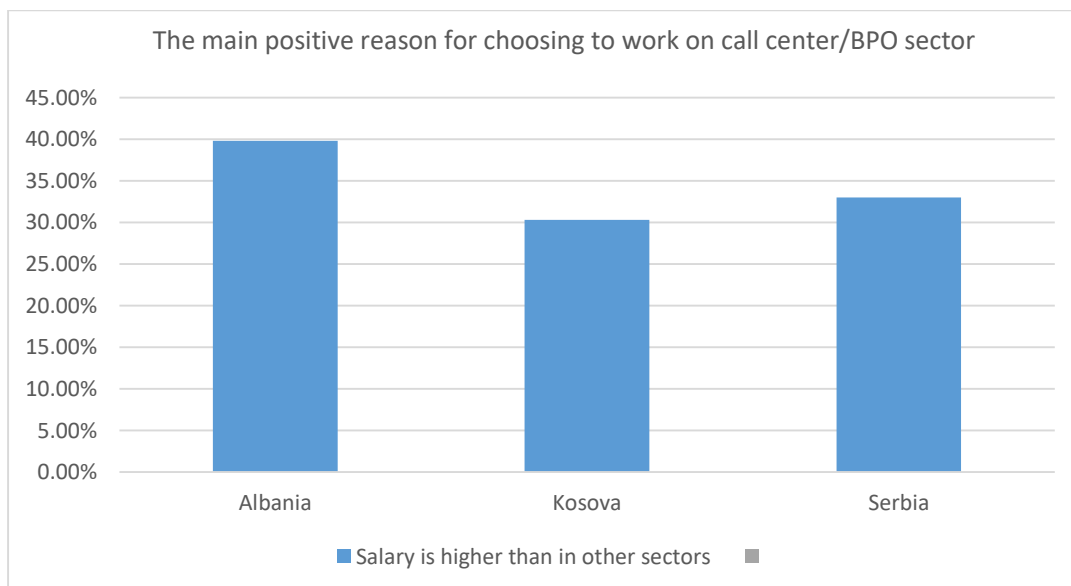
Employees in Serbia have the highest dependence on salaries with 96% and Albania with 90.3%. In Kosovo, the employees claim that although income from work occupies the leading place with 69%, they also have other important household income, such as income from self-employment (17%), income from business 9.1% and pension / assistance incomes received by the family members (98%). Kosovo has a different approach from the other two countries in terms of income as the family structure in this country is slightly different, where families with many members predominate, where 47.9% claim that they live in families with 3-5 members and 42.9% in families with 6-10 members.



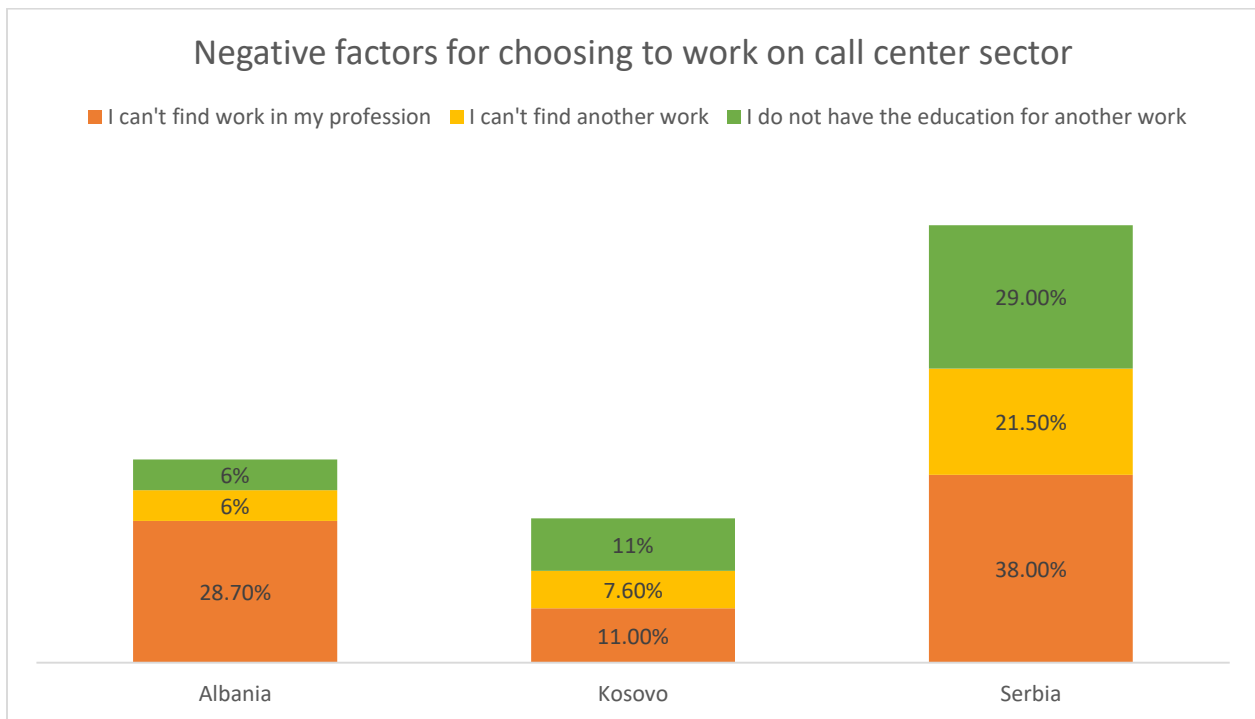
REASONS FOR EMPLOYMENT IN CALL CENTER

Most young people consider employment in call centers as a temporary employment, until they get a job in the profession for which he / she has studied.

Thus 50% of respondents in all three countries claim that they have experience in the call center sector for up to a year, in the same company or in different companies. The factors that push employees to choose to work in this sector are various, and can be categorized into positive and negative factors. Positive factors include high salary, learning new skills at work, job satisfaction and flexibility of working part-time or from home.



Among the negative factors that force employees to approach this sector are the inability to find a job in their profession, because this is the only job they manage to provide, or the lack of necessary education in another profession.



According to the study conducted **in Albania**, employees in this sector list as the main reason they are employed in this sector, high wages (39.8%), followed by the inability to find a job in the profession (28.7%). 15.6% of respondents' claim that working in a call center is most appropriate as long as they are students (22% of respondents continue their higher education). Other reasons are the lack of relevant education to find another job (6.2%) and because this is the only job they have managed to find (6.2%).

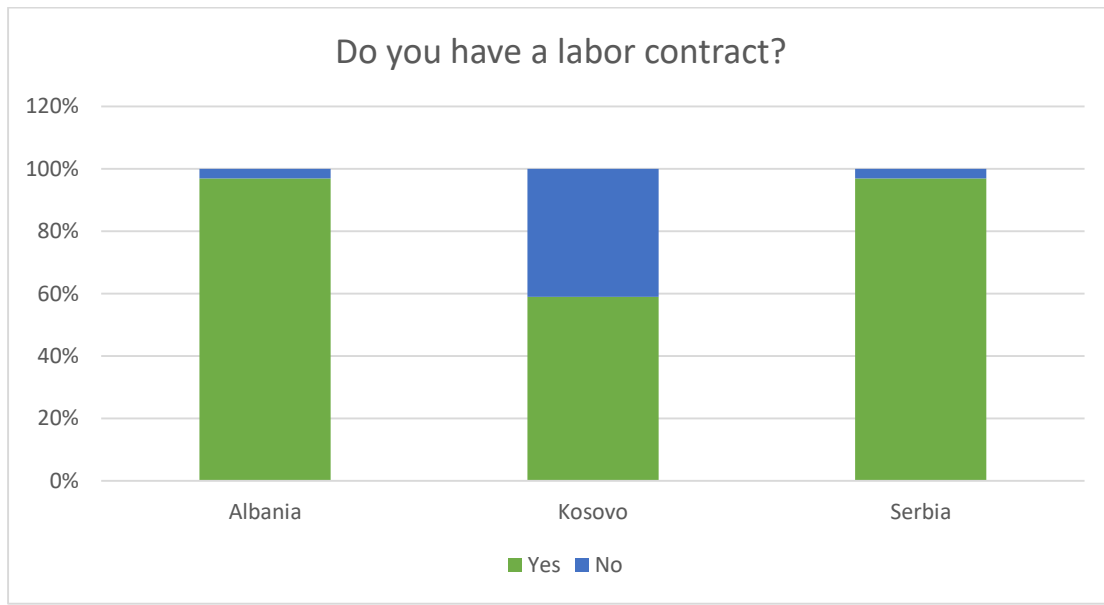
In Kosovo only 22.7% of respondents' claim that this is their long-term career choice. 30.3% claim that one of the reasons they choose to work in the sector is the best salary compared to other sectors. While 10.6% of respondents' report that they are not fit for other jobs and 11% claim that they have not managed to find a job in their professions. 7.6% claim that this was the best job they managed to find and only 14% claim that this is the most suitable job for them while studying.

In Serbia, the main drivers to choose the work on call center sector are: the inability to find a job in their profession (38%), this is the only job they have managed to find (21.5%) and lack of education and skills to engage in any other job by 12%. Others claim that they have chosen to work in this sector as they estimate that the salary is higher than in other sectors (33%), because they have the opportunity to gain new skills while working (29%), and because they like this job (25%).

Within the sector there is a large workflow. The main reason is considered due to the fact that most positions in the sector (operators) require little skill other than knowing a foreign language, depending on the markets where the company cooperates.

CONTRACT WITH THE EMPLOYER

The call centers sector is mainly a formal sector, especially in Albania and Serbia, as shown in the table. In Kosovo, the level of informality seems to be higher and this seems to reflect the selection of the study sample.



Albania - Informality in the labor market remains high in Albania. Informality affects more employees with lower education and coming from families belonging to vulnerable and groups and in poverty or extreme poverty. Given that in the call centers sector work mostly educated young people, where over 2/3 of those included in this study have completed higher education, the data in the graph below support this paradigm. 97% of respondents declare that they have a regular employment contract with the employer. Rarely the contracts in this sector are fixed term. Only 1.4% of the respondents claim that they have no contract³, while 1.6% refuse to comment or are not aware if they have a contract with the employer. 70.8% admit that they have an indefinite contract, while 5.6% have a contract of up to one year and 7.3% contract up to 6 months.

Kosovo - 59% of respondents confirm that they have employment contracts, while 40% report that they do not have employment contracts. 1% of respondents refused to answer this question.

³In a later survey conducted in Albania during May-July 2020 from “Together for Life” with the sample of 105 employees of Call Center, 10% of males and 5% of females responded that they do not have a labor contract with their employer. This means that further studies are needed to better evaluate the situation.

Out of about 59% of employees who report to have employment contracts, 19% report that they have indefinite contracts and 13.3% report that they have 1-2 year contracts. 21% of respondents claim that they have a 6-12 months' contract, while 7.5% have contracts with a term shorter than 6 months and 8% report that they are on probation. Almost 30% of respondents only reported having limited time contracts without specifying their length.

High employee turnover within the sector and performance-based compensation are a major obstacle to collective organization and negotiation in the sector. Neither employers nor employees of this sector are represented in collective bargaining bodies. For this purpose, they both lack representation in the Economic and Social Council as well as sectoral representation (employers' association and trade union). This also makes it impossible to reach the third level of collective bargaining, namely the enterprise level. On the other hand, employees also seem to lack the basic understanding of collective bargaining, unions and show little interest in taking the initiative to create one in their company.

Serbia – 97% of respondents have a work contract, where 54% have an open ended work contract (for indefinite time) 21% fix ended contact, and 7% have work contract for the probation period. 19% have a work contract for up to 1 year, and 2,26 % for up to 2 years. 3% of respondents claim to not have a contract.

However, it must be said that many employees are either unaware of the rights deriving from the employment contract or are completely uninterested in the rights that belong to them through their contracts. Those in short-term contracts are usually on probation, which are sometimes handled by leasing agencies.

NATIONAL LEGISLATION FOR THE BPO / SSC SECTOR

None of the countries included in this report has specific legislation for the BPO sector, but specific aspects of it are regulated through general legislation in the field of entrepreneurship and employment.

Albania has a comprehensive legal framework governing fiscal and tax legislation. Business registration is based on Law No. 9723, dated 03.05.2007, "On Business Registration", with facilitation procedures through the one stop shop system. Also, the operation of call centers is based on labor legislation, which is a complete legislation that contributes to the establishment of clear rules regarding the rights and obligations between the parties.

The Labor Code is the highest law regulating labor relations and social partnership in the Republic of Albania, which is based on the Constitution and the International Conventions ratified by the Albanian government. Pursuant to the Labor Code, the Council of Ministers drafts and approves Decisions for regulation of specific sectors. Yet today there is no specific legislation regulating the call center sector, which relies on the Labor Code and the law. No. 10237, "On Safety and Health at Work" and bylaws in their implementation.

Kosovo - The activity of all enterprises in Kosovo is well regulated by the Law no. 04 /L-006 Amending and Supplementing Law no. 02 / L-123 on Business Organizations. No specific license or permit is required in Kosovo to operate a call center / BPO / CSC. The registration process is easy and can be done online. Business registration is free and can be completed within two days. No special export license is required to provide services abroad and the export of services is exempt from VAT, which is flat and currently set at 18%, as much as for the same services that would be provided in the country.

According to Article 10 of the Labor Law, an employment contract can be concluded for “an indefinite period; a fixed period”. The law further limits the duration of contracts for specific duties and tasks to a maximum of one hundred and twenty (120) days within one year. Regarding fixed-term contracts, the law stipulates that they cannot be concluded for a cumulative period of more than ten (10) years.

Occupational health and safety in Kosovo are regulated by Law # 04 / L-161 on Health and Safety and the Workplace, which is in line with the EU Acquis covering these aspects. A total of 12 administrative instructions have been used to transpose the EU Workplace Health and Safety Directives, and inspectors have been trained to implement the new inspection standards. However, the insufficient number of labor inspectors throughout Kosovo makes the effective implementation of this law very challenging.

Serbia - The establishment and functioning of this sector is based on the compliance with international and national legislation and norms, in particular the National Labor Law and the Law on Occupational Safety and Health. However, the existing legislation is facilitative for this sector. Based on the domestic legislation, in Serbia businesses benefit from facilities such as: Corporate Profit Tax is only 10%; the import of machinery, equipment and semi-finished goods is carried out duty free; companies are exempt from income tax for a period of 10 years if they invest in fixed assets in excess of approximately € 8 million, and during the investment period if they employ at least 100 additional employees; concession investments are exempt from taxes; Revenues generated in Free Zones are exempt from VAT, etc.

THE IMPACT OF THE CALL CENTER SECTOR ON THE NATIONAL ECONOMY

The call centres/shared service centres (BPO sector) in three countries is a new sector, but has been rapidly growing in the past few years.

Albania - Based on INSTAT data on Gross Domestic Product until 2016, the activities with the highest growth in the years of economic crisis were services, mainly call center activities.

For the period 2012-2016, this sector increased on average by 24% per year, marking the highest growth rate in the Albanian economy. An element that is affecting the contraction of the sector is the digitalization and automation of processes, which is still expected to have a negative impact on the demand for services from physical operators.

The overall size of the BPO industry in Albania in 2017 was estimated between \$ 120 and \$ 140 M⁴. As of July 2019, the General Directorate of Taxes claimed that 659 businesses operating as call centers have been registered. Compared to 2017, when 817 companies were registered, their number has shrunk and in 2019 is estimated at about 20% less.

Kosovo - Call centers and BPO companies transfer certain processes to predominantly western enterprises representing one of the fastest growing ICT market segments in Kosovo. While most of them were created less than five years ago, profitable profits from outsourcing, sales or customer support centers for high-end western markets have been a powerful incentive for these centers to emerge rapidly. Some of the companies have hundreds of employees and represent some of the largest employers in Kosovo. Consequently, the implementation of labor rights and occupational health and safety standards in this sector is of paramount importance to ensure widespread influence among the targeted workers. The overall development of the ICT sector in Kosovo has been stable and consistent. Internet penetration in Kosovo is among the highest in Europe. According to a recent study conducted by the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, internet access in Kosovo is available to 93% of households.

Kosovo ICT Sector Summary 2014 by KIESA, citing official data from KBRA, says that the ICT-BPO-CSC sectors are a vibrant sector with potential for youth employment and innovation and that can help revitalize of Kosovo's economy for a long period. "Currently, 220 registered companies exist in this sector, of which 120 are considered to be active." Since then, many other companies have been established that perform such services.

Most call centers in Kosovo have opened in the recent years and the vast majority of companies in this sector provide services to customers in international markets. Given the wide potential in international markets for such service and the relatively lucrative profits, these companies have been able to rapidly increase their presence and increase in size, becoming an important generator of employment, especially for young people.

Serbia - According to the latest data (2019) obtained through the Serbian Business Registration Agency (SBRA), there are 257 companies registered under the activity code 8220 Activities of the Call Center, of which 222 are local companies. Judging based on the balance of payments provided by the central bank, under the column other sources, industry experts estimate the value of the sector in 2019 at EUR 1.8 billion, which is a significant increase compared to 2018 when the figure was EUR 1.44 billion.

IMPACT ON THE EMPLOYMENT SECTOR

In Albania, Kosovo and Serbia, the call center sector is considered to be the most important in generating employment, especially among young people.

⁴ <https://invest-in-albania.org/investment-tips-2/outsourcing-to-albania/>

Albania - In Albania, the BPO sector has undergone great development in the last decade and is among the largest sectors in the country in terms of employment. Along with the increase in the number of call center companies from year to year, the share of employment of the sector in the economy increased, becoming the savior of many young people who managed to secure salaries above the average labor market in Albania. With the closure of many companies, but also with the contraction of large companies after 2015, the share of employment in the sector has begun to decrease.

Based on INSTAT data in 2019, about 22 thousand people were employed, out of 25 thousand employees employed by the entire sector in the period 2015-2016, marking a decrease of 11%. The first companies call centers were Italian companies due to the territorial proximity to Albania and because the Italian language has been the most popular language and used especially by young people. In recent years, the approach of Albanians to foreign languages has changed and it is becoming more and more evident that for the younger generation they are inclined towards English and no longer have such good knowledge of Italian as the young people 10- 15 years before. More and more young people are studying and learning English better, but experts estimate that here Albania competes with other countries that offer lower labor costs around the world.

Kosovo - The call center sector is an important source of employment in Kosovo. A significant proportion of enterprises in this market are established as partnerships between local and diaspora partners. Given the language skills available and the presence of the Diaspora in Kosovo, it is natural for most companies in this country to serve German and English speaking markets.

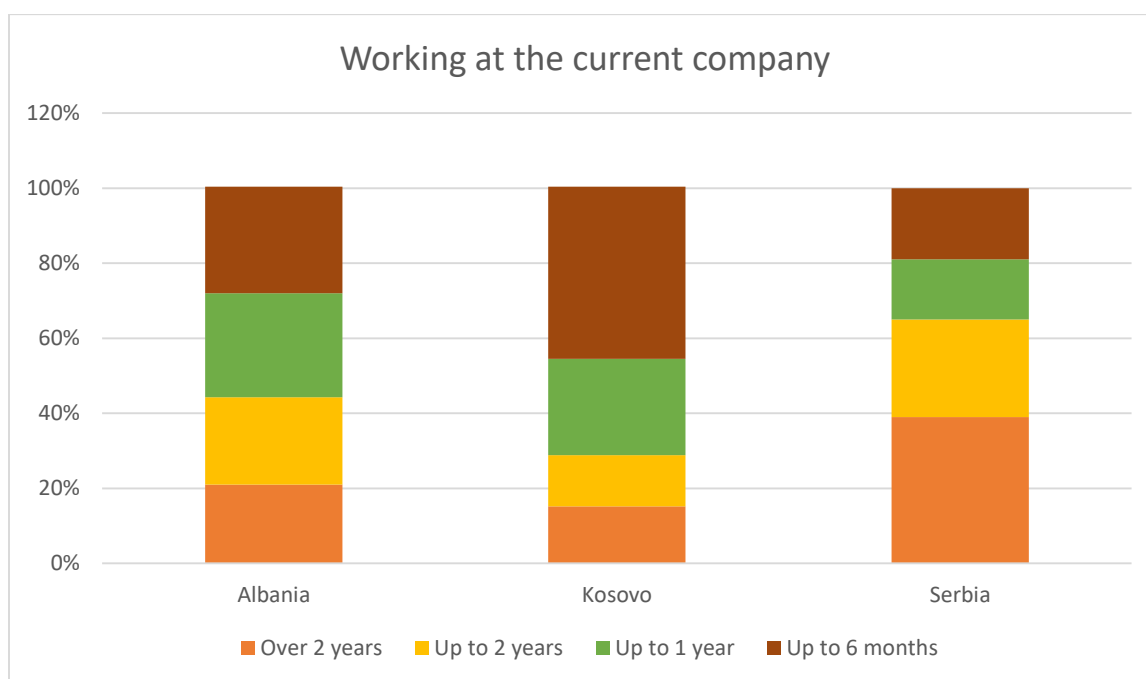
Serbia - Based on the latest data (2019) obtained through the Serbian Business Registration Agency (SBRA), there are 6,000 employees in the BPO sector although the real numbers are probably higher as SBRA has this data for only 98 out of 257 business entities in its base. Most of the workforce is employed by NCR and Sitel. According to 2018 data, the former has 2,800 and the latter 950 employees. According to the State Employment Agency and the private employment agency the number of companies looking for call center operators is growing.

EMPLOYMENT STABILITY IN SUCH SECTORS (SEEN EVEN FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE)

Employment in the call center sector is characterized by high mobility within the sector, reflecting high volatility. Given that some of the employees in this sector claim that they chose it because they did not find a job in their profession, or that it is the only job they found, it is understandable that from the first moment given the opportunity to find a job in their profile, they are willing to leave call center companies. Also, career opportunities within the sector are very limited, which does not motivate employees, mainly young people, to consider call center employment as long-term employment. Given the relatively young age of employees in this sector, most of them express interest in migrating west in search of a better life. As such, the

regional dimension of this report is particularly important as both the threat and the solution are influenced by the progress of the countries of the Region towards EU accession.

The Call Center / BPO sector is one of the most gender balanced sectors in the economy. Given the under-employment of women in Kosovo, the value that the sector offers in terms of women's employment is considerable. In Albania and Serbia, women predominate in this sector and it is noticeable that in the call center subjects included in the report, they occupy almost 69%.



Albania - During the survey conducted with 1,000 employees in the call center sector, it is noticeable that more than half (56.1%) of the respondents' claim that they have less than 1 year of employment in the same company, while 28% have more less than 6 months. Only 21% of respondents' claim that they have more than 2 years in the same enterprise.

Kosovo - It is obvious that labor mobility in Kosovo is higher than in the other two countries. More than 2/3 of the respondents (71.6%) claim that they have held the same job position in a sector enterprise for no more than 1 year, while 45.9% admit that they have been in that position for less than six months. Only 15.2% of the sample of 200 respondents have over 2 years of work in the same enterprise and job position.

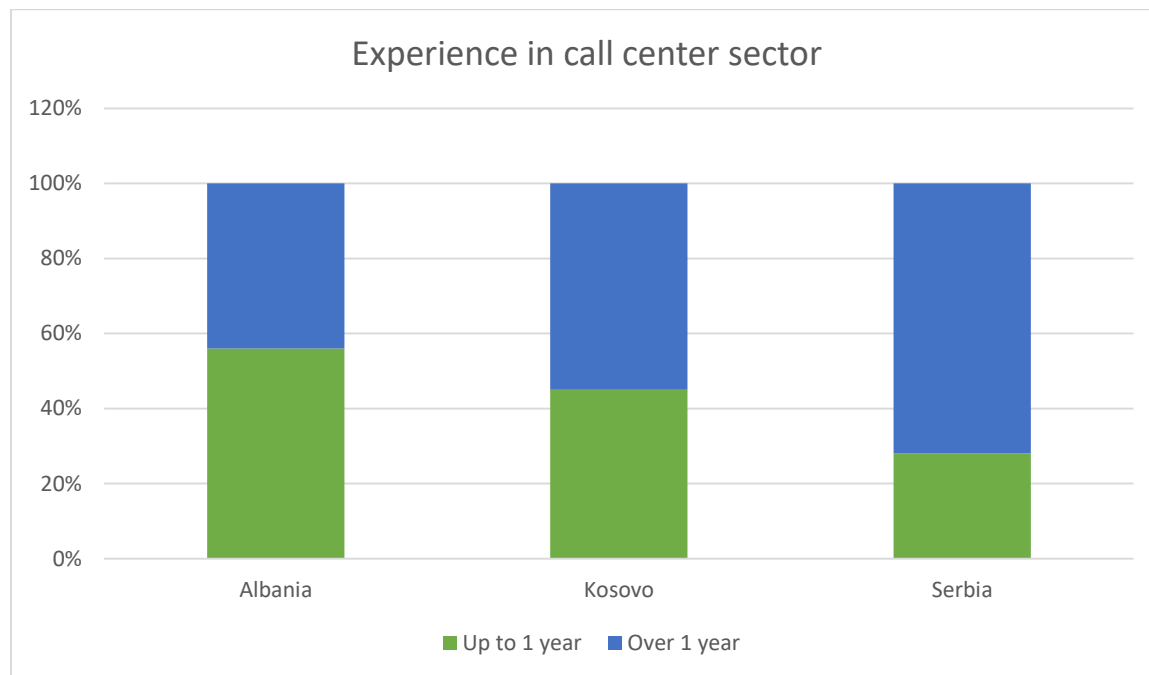
Serbia - The graph shows that in Serbia employment in the call center sector is more stable and the mobility lower than in Albania and Kosovo. Only 19% of respondents claim that they have up to 6 months in a job position and 16% that have up to a year in the same position. 26% of the respondents claim that they have one to two years of work in the same position, where 39% have over two years.

Despite good wages and open contracts, the sector is, as everywhere in the world, prone to high instability and employee volatility (turnover). Either employees tend to leave the sector in order

to pursue careers in their main area of expertise, either because of stress, or they simply go from one call center to another with better salaries and overall offers. The job offers few opportunities for advancement either in the hierarchy of the particular call center or in terms of useful knowledge for career advancement in other fields.

DURATION OF WORK IN THE CALL CENTER

One of the biggest problems in the development of the sector is the recruitment of staff with the right skills. Many of the vacancies remain unfilled, while companies find it difficult to provide people with the right skills. Another problem for the growth of this sector is the negative perception of the ICT-BPO sector, especially among young people. They think companies in this sector pay low wages. The main reason for this situation is the mismatch between the skills developed by education and training providers in the countries of the region (AAP) and the skills required by employers. In Albania, the Albanian Business Services Association and Together for Life asked the National Employment and Skills Agency to build curricula in line with the skills required in this sector and to support the sector with employment promotion programs based on their support of publicly funded business to provide in-service training for those interested in working in the sector.



Albania - More than 1 in 2 participants in the survey conducted in Albania have admitted that they have been working in call centers for no more than a year, where 28.4% have less than 6 months. Only 23% of respondents claim that they have more than 2 years of work in the call center sector.

Kosovo - 45% of respondents reported having less than a year of experience in the call center sector. When asked about time spent in the current position, 45.9% report less than 6 months,

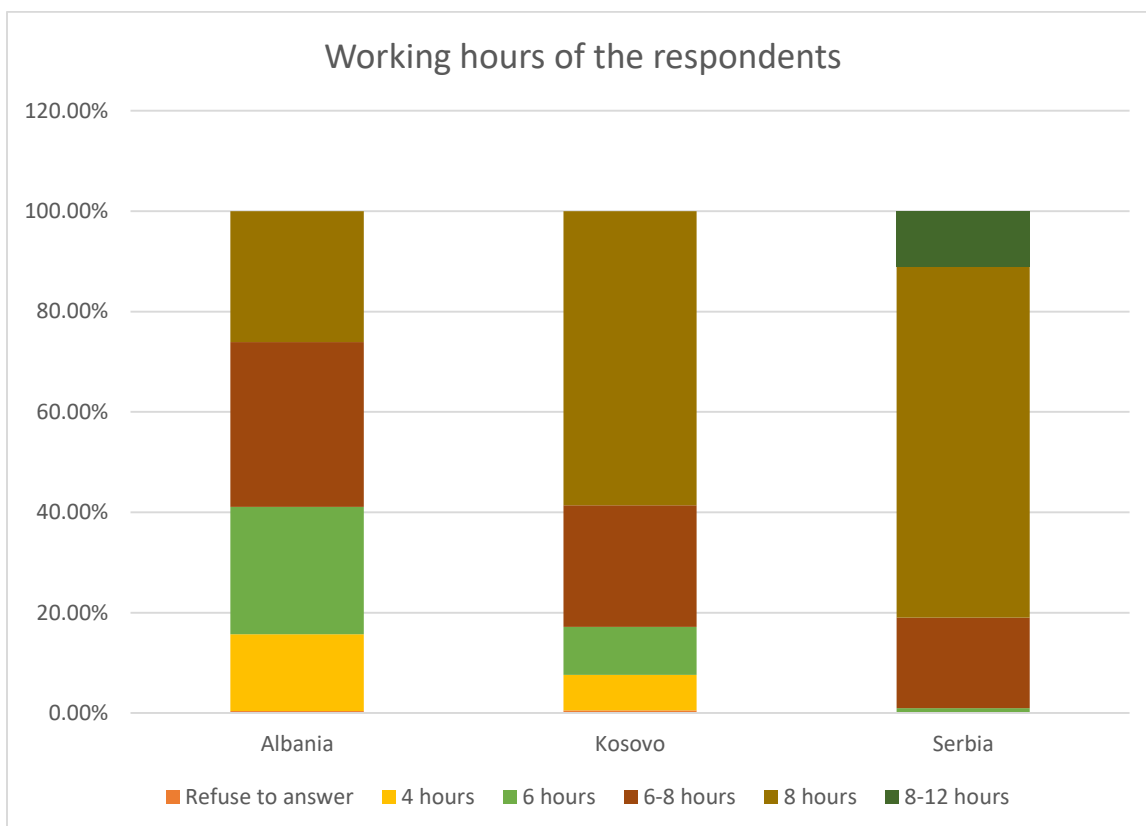
with an additional 24.3% reporting staying up to one year. 13.6% of the respondents' claim working in the current position between 1 and 2 years, while slightly more than 15% of them report being in the same position for more than two years.

Serbia - From the calculation of the total experience of years in the sector, it results that 28% of workers have less than 1 year of experience, 27% up to 2 years, 22% of respondents have up to 3 years of work and 23% more than 3 years of experience.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LABOR CODE IN THE CALL CENTER SECTOR

Implementation of the labor code in the call center/BPO sector is very important part of this comparative report. In the surveys that took place in the three countries targeted it results as below:

WORKING HOURS



Of the three countries included in the report, it is noticeable that only employees involved in the call center sector in Serbia admitted that they work 8-12 hours a day (11%). Furthermore, in Serbia, employment in this sector is considered mainly as a full-time job (70%). In Albania and Kosovo, data analysis show that the sector is flexible in schedules and has a balance between full-time and part-time work.

Albania - According to the Labor Code, the normal daily duration of work in Albania is no more than 8 hours per day and 40 hours per week.

40.7% of respondents claim that they work 4-6 hours a day. These schedules provide flexibility for employed students. 59% admit that they work 6-8 hours a day, where the percentage of those who work 8 hours a day is only 26%.

In some cases, when deemed necessary by the employer, the employee may work above normal working hours, according to the Labor Code. According to Albanian legislation, overtime can not exceed the limit of 48 hours per week and 200 hours per year.

From the results of the focus group discussions, it is noticed that in call center businesses work outside normal working hours. According to the law, for overtime hours that are not compensated with leave, the employer must pay the employee the normal salary and an additional not less than 25% of it (125% of the usual salary). Employees in the call center claim that they are informed about these overtime pay, but are not aware of the legal limit of overtime hours (it turns out that in the region of Tirana it is the choice of the employee to work 12 hours a day), based on the need for rewards.

The law stipulates that overtime hours performed during the weekly rest or on public holidays are compensated with leave or salary at least 50% more than the normal salary. Employees of the surveyed call centers admit that in many cases, even though they work overtime, on weekends or on public holidays, they are not paid according to the provisions of the Labor Code.

In case the employee is required to work on public holidays, when they fall off working days, he / she is compensated with an additional salary, not less than 25%. 43.2% of the call center respondents claim that, in some cases, they have also worked on official holidays. It is noticeable that when the call center owners are foreign, they tend to respect international holidays, or their country of origin and in violation of the law do not apply holidays on Albanian national holidays (employees and the country where they perform the activity).

15% of respondents admit they work during the third shift, from 22:00 to 06:00 in the morning, which are recognized by the legislation as night work. Employees who perform night work are entitled, according to the Labor Code, to a salary supplement of not less than 50% (150% of the regular salary). 22.2% have admitted that they work from 19:00 to 22:00 for which the law provides for a salary supplement of not less than 20 percent (120% of the regular salary).

Respondents admit that they have received additional payment, but 12.3% said they do not know how much they are paid for overtime or holidays, while 9.2% refused to answer. 3% of surveyed employees claimed that for overtime hours or on holidays, they are compensated with vacations.

Kosovo - Less than 58.6% of respondents confirmed that they work eight hours per day, 24.2% report that they work between 6-8 hours, 9.6% that they work an average of six hours and 7.1% that they work four hours. Given the high rate of respondents reporting that they are studying while working, it is understandable to have higher rates of part-time work of less than forty hours per week.

Sector companies that work for clients and foreign countries and often in different time zones, therefore have schedules that exceed normal business hours (08:00 - 16:00 or 09:00-17:00). The Labor Law stipulates that "If the work is organized in shifts, it is necessary to organize the shifts

in such a way as to prevent an employee from working one (1) week in a row on night shifts, without a day off." Working with shifts is considered particularly difficult, as it disrupts normal sleep cycles and normal human biorhythm. Long night shifts also create severe psychological conditions, including insomnia and other similar disorders in the employee. The law recognizes this growing risk and prohibits night shifts "for persons under eighteen (18) years of age and pregnant workers and women who are breastfeeding."

Regarding shift work, 75.3% of respondents in the survey report that they work only in the first shift, 16.2% claim that they work in the second shift (18:00 - 22:00), while 3.5% report that they work in the second shift. third (22:00 - 06:00).

The survey shows that in the case of paid leave, official holidays and vacations for health reasons, legal provisions are often violated by employers.

Article 56 of the Labour Law on Allowances, specifies that working during national holidays should be compensated at 50% higher levels than for normal pay. The list of national holidays is determined with by the Government of Kosovo in accordance with Article 2 of Law No. 03/L-064, on National Holidays in the Republic of Kosovo. Regarding work during official national holidays, over 66% of respondents have reported that they do work during these days.

Serbia - The call center sector is dominated by working 8 hours per day as 70% of respondents say they work 8 hours per day. 18% admit that they work mainly 6.5-7 hours per day. What stands out is the high percentage of employees who admit to working 8-12 hours per day (11%). Due to the nature of the work, employees sometimes work in shifts, including night shifts (third shifts) and always respect public holidays, based on the national holidays of the countries where the service is provided.

There is no data on whether employers respect Serbia's official holidays in terms of days off or additional paid treatment for these days, if the employee is at work.

Asked which rights they enjoyed in line with their work contract, 91% of those polled said that they have health insurance and the right to annual holiday respectively. Respondents were much less confident when answering whether they have a right for a sick leave (80%), covered expenses for transportation and meal provision (71%) and pension. Given that all those items are a part of the standard employment contract; it is most likely that these percentages speak about workers' ignorance rather than factual situation.

WORK CONDITIONS

Albania - For the vast majority of respondents working conditions in the call center sector are good and very good. Only 1% of respondents claim that the environment is not equipped with heating / cooling and the same 1% claim that the temperatures in the work environment are inappropriate. 97.4% of respondents claim that workplaces are well lit and 95.2% confirm that

workplaces are equipped with fire protection equipment and only 3% claim that they are unaware. Even in terms of space and ventilation, it seems that the call centers sector is at the forefront of all sectors in meeting legal obligations and guaranteeing working conditions within the standards for employees. 94.2% of respondents admit that the spaces in the workplace are spacious and 88.4 estimate that they are well ventilated.

The main devices used by an employee working in the call center are the computer and headphones. Prolonged use of these devices and their quality affect the development of occupational diseases in call center employees very early. 60.4% of respondents claim that computers are of high quality and with protective screens, compared to 20.9% that the computers they use offer little or no protection for the eyes. Even higher (71.6%) is the number of respondents who claim that the hearing aids / headphones are of a high quality.

Kosovo - The working environment is generally at very satisfactory levels where lighting, ventilation and other working conditions are above average for business standards in Kosovo.

61% of respondents rate their working conditions as very good, followed by 23.7% who rate them as good. Only 2% of respondents rated the overall working conditions as not good. Regarding the specific conditions in the work environment, almost 70% of the respondents consider that the work environment temperature is very good and 17.7% estimate that most of the time the temperature is very good. For 12.2% of the respondents the heating conditions in the workplace are considered as not good and not good enough.

Lighting is considered adequate by 88% of respondents, while 85.4% of them claim that the spaces in the workplace are sufficient and 80.9% admit that there is good ventilation.

Fire protection is one of the aspects that is well regulated by Law # 04 / L-161 on Health and Safety and the Workplace. 49.5% of respondents report that workplaces are equipped with fire protection equipment, compared to 18.2% who say they do not have them. 8.2% of respondents claimed that the fire protection equipment of the workplace is limited and insufficient. High (23.7%) is the number of employees who answer that they do not know if the work premises are equipped with the necessary tools for fire protection. The second aspect of fire protection is that of certification of personnel according to legal provisions, where 34.3% claim that they are certified (18%) for fire protection, or know someone (16.7%) in the enterprise that is certified. Based on these data, it results that the call center sector in Kosovo is one of the avantgarde sectors in taking measures for fire protection and in the implementation of national legislation in this field.

Article 11/ 5 of the Law, stipulates that "The employer develops an evacuation plan and a response pole for emergency situations, about which it informs all employees and conducts training, in accordance with this plan at least once every two years." The responses received in the survey show that employers underestimate and ignore this aspect, as only 24.2% of respondents reported that they had such plans in their workplace. 21.7% of respondents claim

that they do not have such plans at work, while 49% of them report that they do not know if such plans exist.

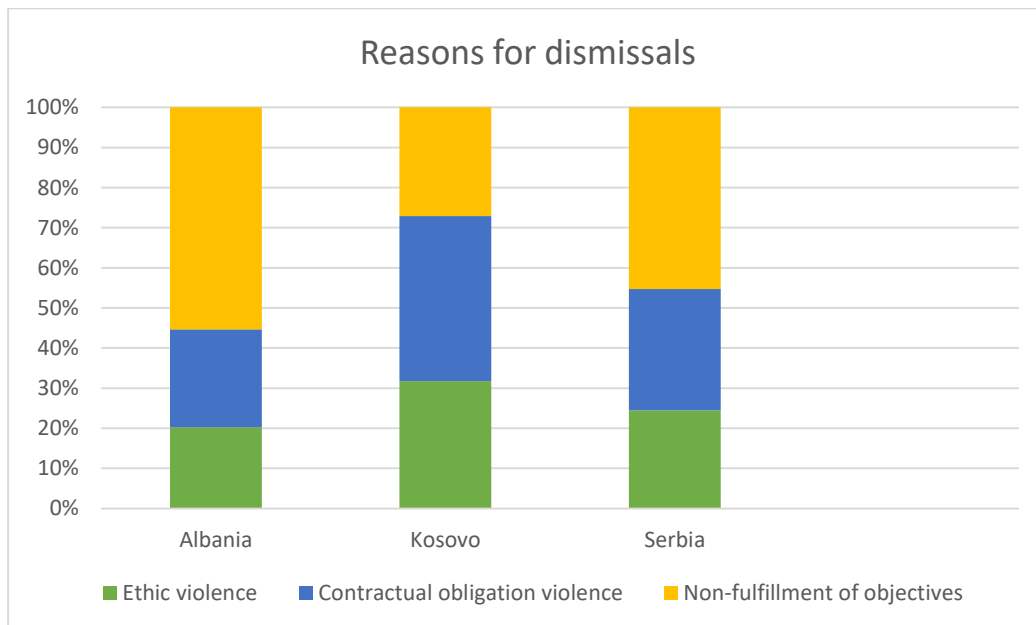
Serbia - The working environment in general is quite satisfactory in terms of equipment, lighting and other working conditions, being in most call centers above the average of businesses operating in Serbia, however employees rarely use protective equipment, which are available.

24% of respondents' rate working conditions as very good, followed by those who claim that working conditions in the company where they work are good (38%). For 27% of respondents the general working conditions are considered satisfactory, and only for 11% the working conditions are poor.

LOSS OF JOB

In the call center sector there is a high mobility of manpower. As a sector dominated by young people, mainly students, for this category it is estimated that the sector offers little career prospects and students seek temporary and short-term employment in it, with the aim of providing incomes during their study period. This contingent, especially after completing their studies, tends to leave the sector, and in the other hand, these employees are often willing to tolerate the employer even if he violates their rights and does not correctly implement labor legislation.

Another dimension of the nature of work and employment in the sector includes the dismissal of employees.



As can be seen from the table, in Albania and Serbia the main cause of dismissals according to respondents is the repeated non-fulfillment by employees of the objectives set by the enterprise. In Kosovo, the first place as a reason for dismissal in the call center sector is the violation of contractual obligations by the employee.

Albania - In Albania it is noticeable that 50.1% of respondents claim they will leave their current job to move to another job outside the sector and 14.2% that they would move within the sector to another company that offers better conditions higher employment and / or salary. However, some are dismissed. 58.6% of respondents claim that they are aware / have heard of dismissal with motivations that start from repeated failure to meet objectives (41.1%), breach of contractual obligations (18.2%), breach of work ethic and discipline (15%) as well as other causes.

Kosovo - 34.3% of respondents confirm that there have been dismissals, while 18.2% do not admit that there have been dismissals. More than 2/5 (44%) of respondents' report that they are not aware of dismissals in their companies. From the reasons presented, what happens often is the violation of contractual obligations (17.9%), followed by the violation of work ethic and discipline with 13.8% of respondents who claim it. Repeated failure to achieve objectives is the third most common reason for dismissal of employees in their company with 11.8% claiming it. 5.6% of respondents claim verbal or physical conflict with the manager as a reason for dismissal.

Serbia - The most common reason why workers lose their jobs is the failure of employees to achieve the objectives. Important reasons are breach of contractual obligations (38%), and breach of ethical standards and discipline by employees. Dismissal of a worker may occur due to the completion of the project in which the employee worked (32%). With almost 18% of responses that the usual reason for dismissal may be a verbal and physical confrontation of employees with supervisors, it implies the sensitivity of interpersonal relationships of employees in different positions in call centers. On the contrary, conflicts within workers are less frequent (7%).

HEALTH AND SAFETY (PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL PROBLEMS, ETC.)

Albania - Working in a call center affects the health of employees since the first years of work. About one third of respondents (32.9%) say they suffer from occupational diseases. The health concerns are as vision problems (12.4%) due to lack of protective equipment against radiation of computer screens, hearing problems (5.4%) in people who work for more than a year in the sector, persistent headaches (9.3%), stressful and uninterrupted (3.1%), and problems with the spine as a result of sitting for a long time 6-8 hours every day (2.7%).

It is precisely the health problems that the employees of this sector suffer from, one of the reasons that forces them to leave the sector after a few years, even when they have no other employment opportunity, or when the salary they receive is higher than the new job they get.

Albanian legislation stipulates that every enterprise must have a company doctor who works full-time or part-time depending on the number of employees and the level of risk to safety and health at work of each enterprise. In addition to the health check of the employees, the doctor makes the workplace suitable together with the employee and is part of the team that drafts the Risk Assessment Document. From the research conducted in 10 call center companies in Tirana, Durres, Shkodra and Vlora, it results that in addition to companies operating in Tirana, in other cities in most call center companies' employees are not aware of the existence or not of the company doctor.

Kosovo - A very competitive, aggressive, stressful and traumatic work environment for employees as the reward is based on performance. Stress has been determined to be a major cause of other health concerns if it continues to perpetuate for longer periods of time.

From the field observations of the interviewers it was noticed that the most worrying aspect in terms of working conditions is working for hours inside isolated cabins, without communication with colleagues, which affects the mental health of employees.

Employees' goals to achieve performance goals force them to work, even when they are not in good health, endangering not only their personal health but also their colleagues when they have a contagious disease.

In the other hand, 61% of respondents have rated their working conditions with superlative level (very good), followed by 23.7% of them who have rated the same as 'good'. Only 2% of respondents have rated the overall working conditions as not good. Other aspects of workplace health and safety, including fire protection, emergency response, staff training for such situations, etc. are implemented quite well by companies in the sector.

Serbia –As mentioned, workers in call centres usually report various health care problems. About one half (51%) of the respondents' report that their health suffers due to working conditions. Most often respondents feel back pain (32%) followed by stress and anxiety (26%) and vision problems while headache, hearing problems and other health issues are less represented.

About two fifths (43%) of our respondents use the protective equipment while others don't. This large percent (57%) of non-users covers many different reasons among which are both that the employer doesn't provide it or that employees, even when they have it, don't use the provided equipment either because employer never asks for that (27%) or because employee say that it bothers them to use the equipment (10%) or they doubt its functionality (5%).

REPRESENTATION IN TRADE UNIONS

The call center sector is a new sector that has developed in the last 10 years in the countries of the region. In many aspects this sector is considered to operate in accordance with the legislation

of the respective countries, especially with regard to the implementation of labor legislation and the guarantee of employees' rights. However, from this survey it is obvious that trade unionism is less developed in this sector.

Albania - Only 6.9% of survey participants claimed that the company where they work has an employee union and only 3.4% of them admit that they are aware that an employee and / or they themselves are a member of a union. Respondents generally recognize the role of the union in defending their employment rights (86.6%) and about half of them (45.8%) admit that they would join a union if it were to be established within their company.

Kosovo - 68% of respondents claim that they have knowledge about trade unions and their role while 32.3% have no information. In terms of union membership if it would exist 36.4% answered positively, while 37% said they were hesitant and 25.8% answered negatively. Regarding the current situation of trade unionism in the call center sector in Kosovo 14.6% of respondents claim they know at least one colleague who is a member of the union, while 84.4% do not know anyone.

Serbia - Only 5% of respondents claim that a trade union has been set up and operates in the company where they work. This does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that there are only a few unions in the entire sector, as 42% of respondents claim that they do not know if a union has been established in their companies. However, 53% of them claim that there is no union in their firms. However, out of eight who responded that there was a union in their companies, eight also responded that they were union members.

WORK RELATIONS DURING COVID-19

Six months after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the international institutions' short-term forecasts for the global economy look less bleak than before. However, the long-term outlook remains bleak. In the most recent analysis of the world economy, published on October 13,⁵ the IMF has revised its expectations for global growth during 2020, from -4.9% in June to -4.4% in the most recent update. However, growth in 2021 is expected to be lower. The International Monetary Fund warns that the recovery is likely to be "long, uneven and precarious".

Most major countries are projected to experience deep recessions this year, ranging from a 4% contraction in America to almost 10% in Britain. This decline is about twice as large as the one in 2009, after the global financial crisis. Among the largest economies, only China is expected to grow this year - and by only 1.9%.

More than two million cases of the new coronavirus have been recorded worldwide so far, and experts' forecasts for the spread of the pandemic are worrying. The global economy has been hit hard. Companies around the world are already designing and implementing emergency response strategies, one of which is to take measures to switch to working remotely for an indefinite period. No one knows how long this situation will last, but of course it will affect not only the economy but also the labor market worldwide. Given such circumstances, call center businesses are also adapting to new realities. On-line services are becoming the key and in many cases the only way of communication with the customer. Now their role in the company will be more important than ever.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 outbreak has increased the risks to human rights violations, with employees already facing additional stress levels, fearing a reduction or loss of income due to temporary or permanent loss job, pay reduction, sickness or quarantine. At the same time, COVID-19 has brought new health risks to workers, especially when there is a lack of personal protective equipment or measures of social distance at work.

ONLINE WORK

The organization of work for call centers during COVID-19 has put the entrepreneurs of this sector before the responsibility to find solutions to new complex problems. One of them is the transition to the format of remote work and work from home. In order to effectively pass this period, some call centers have restructured their daily work processes and some of the processes have been transferred to their homes.

⁵<https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/10/13/the-world-economy-will-suffer-from-long-covid-too>

This process has not been easy as companies have had to deploy technical support to in-house staff and change the employee effectiveness monitoring system.

Albania – During this time, given the Covid-19 situation TFL had a survey with 105 call centre employees (75 female vs 30 male) about the situation during May – July 2020. The results of this survey included:

- 77% of the males and 59% of the females claimed that they started working from home due to Covid-19 pandemic
- 3% of males and 13% of females claimed that they were suspended from work, but on total 23% of the males and 13% of the females claim that the company they work for had suspensions of the workers due to the pandemic.
- 19% of males and 27% of the females claim that the company they work fired their employees due to the pandemic.
- Only 6% of the males and 11% of the females claimed that they had continued their work as regularly
- A large number of the employees claim that they work 8 hours per day and none of the ones that worked on night shifts did not work on night shift after the start of the pandemic.
- Only 5% of the employees claimed that they were paid with the minimum wage, meanwhile 27% claimed their salary was reduced and 68% claimed their salary had no changes.

Kosovo - Covid-19 is a virus that spreads rapidly and the non-compliance with physical distancing and hygienic conditions in any environment, including workplaces can endanger not only employees but also their families, especially those included in the groups of risk. Given that in general in Kosovo are very common families with many members and the family structure is extensive, which can include up to three generations, the risk of infection and health impacts is considered high.

Following the outbreak of the pandemic and the announcement of restrictive measures by the Government, the call center sector in general decided to relocate work to employees' homes. Some companies also limited their activities and cut jobs. Even the call center sector was restructured to a considerable extent. According to official data, the unemployment rate rose and over 35,000 new jobseekers were newly registered since the pandemic broke out.

Serbia - due to the situation created by COVID-19 for the first time the work in the call centers were completely organised from home. Some of respondents stated that they don't use the protective equipment as they are working from home, on their personal computers. Some employers are neglecting their obligation to oversee whether their employees are properly using it. Furthermore, some equipment is of a doubtful quality or it was entirely missing at the time when employees in the call centers massively shifted to work from home during Covid 19.

CONCLUSIONS

This moment temptation does not serve the sustainability of the sector in the long run, as it appears from the study that the mobility of employees in this sector is high for a short time. The main reason seems to be the lack of career prospects within the sector. Employees of the sector are willing to move from the enterprise where they work if they find another job with the same or similar salary, but where they have more career prospects.

In general, the call center sector is formalized and represents a high (above average) level of implementation of domestic legislation, mainly the Labor Code and the Law on Safety and Care at Work. Employees in all three countries state that in general the working environment is satisfactory in terms of equipment used during work, lighting, ventilation, fire protection measures and equipment, etc.

For the vast majority of respondents, working conditions in call center are very good or good. Workplace health is a very important part of this study, as well as the disadvantages of call center work. The main health problems that resulted are: stress, problems with hearing and sight, work monotony, problems with concentration, non-use of headphones or telephone after work, problems with the spine. Stress is a psychophysical response that occurs when job demands exceed the resources or capabilities of the worker to cope with it and in this sector is a disturbing and influential phenomenon in health.

Although call center employees are aware of their rights, they are often indifferent in seeking these, including the right to organize - the trade union right, probably because they do not see themselves for a long time in that position, in that enterprise.

The work done on official holidays presents a specific situation in this sector. Contracts that the enterprises of this sector have with clients, who in most cases are foreigners, the official holidays of the client's country are respected or dismissed by employers, while employees employed under national labor law do not enjoy the right to official holidays under the law.

The call center / BPO sector is disorganized and unrepresented in employer and employee structures. Employers and employees of the sector are little or not organized in unions / organizations. This prevents them from being part of the consultative or decision-making structures in the respective countries and has no influence on government policies that set economic development and employment priorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study it is recommended:

- 1- Strengthening the inspection system and mechanism through state structures to respect the rights of employees in the Call Center sector. This should be done through increasing the professional capacity of labor inspectors, based on the specifics and characteristics of the sector, with the aim of more professional monitoring and control;
- 2- Developing initiatives and encouraging policies to enable the functionality of Occupational Safety and Health Councils in the Call Center sector, aiming at unifying its functionality in a large part of the entities operating in this sector of the economy;
- 3- Strengthening state structures that control the implementation of legislation in the field of labor and safety and health at work and drafting / approving specific manuals for the call center / BPO sector;
- 4- Establishment and strengthening of representative structures - unions of employees and employers of the sector in each country involved in the study as well as their involvement and representation in the highest decision-making structures in the country.