Digging into Gig Economy in Serbia:
Who are the digital workers from Serbia and why do they work on global platforms?

Branka Andjelkovic | Jelena Sapic | Milica Skocajic
Introduction

Serbia has been at the very top of the world for years in the field of crowdwork\(^1\) on Internet-based platforms. This “silent revolution” (Aleksynska et al., 2018) was initially revealed in the 2015 World Bank report (Kuek et al., 2015). Serbia, together with Romania, was ranked as one of the leading countries in both the world and Europe by the percentage of digital workforce in relation to the total population and to the total workforce in the country (ibid).

Although using different measurement techniques, researchers continuously seem to get similar results: the Online Labour Index (OLI)\(^2\) of the Oxford Internet Institute shows that Serbia was ranked the eleventh in the world and the fourth in Europe based on the number of active digital workforce in December 2018. Simultaneously, an article on the size of the global market of online freelancing for 2018 (AnalyticsHelp, 2018) listed Serbia as the eleventh based on the number of its digital workers; and thereby as the country in which digital work, measured per capita, is the most widespread. According to this source, Serbia has 3.52 digital workers per 1,000 inhabitants, compared to 1.72 workers in the United States of America, the cradle of gig economy.

These estimates make Serbia an interesting member of the global community of digital workers. The results call for the investigation of this phenomenon in terms of social and economic upgrading of digital workers, with a particular focus on implications on the labour market and shadow economy in the country.

This first study on digital gig economy in Serbia answers the questions of who the digital workers from Serbia are and what is their socio-economic status in society. At the same time, this exploratory research reflects upon the principles of decent work in Serbia in the context of digital work. If this form of work entails changes brought by digitalization and technologies, as many researchers and scholars claim today, the perspective of decent work seems to be very important. It enables a critical assessment of the well-being of all workers as well as of the quality of their employment.

In order to provide answers to the above research questions, quantitative and qualitative methods were applied. In this regard, quantitative methods include new approaches such as collecting open data on platforms, but also “traditional” ones like online surveys. As for the qualitative techniques, semi-structured interviews with the workers, decision-makers in the field of labour, employment, and social policy, as well as with the representatives of international and local organizations active in these fields were carried out. Also, digital workers forums were assessed.\(^3\)

Digital work was analyzed from the decent work\(^4\) perspective, employing six fundamental dimensions: decent pay, security of employment, social protection, working hours and work-life balance, skills development and training, and social dialogue (UN, 2015). Decent work conceptualized in this manner encompasses a number of employment aspects that are not hierarchically organized and can be understood only in mutual relation. The structure of the study and the summary are organized in six sections to discuss the status of digital workers from Serbia through selected decent work dimensions.

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1 An overview of terminology (Heeks, 2017) indicated nearly 30 different terms to describe the intersection between work, connectivity and digital technologies. The most commonly used classification of paid work done on the Internet is on-demand work and crowdwork (Sundararajan, 2016; de Stefano, 2016). In case of on-demand work, matching of supply and demand takes place over an Internet-based platform but the service itself is delivered in a real, geographically defined space (e.g. BlaBla Car, CarGo, AirBnB, Booking). On the other side, in crowdwork, the entire process – matching of supply and demand, service delivery – takes place online (e.g. Upwork, Freelancer, GeeLancer) and the work is done remotely. In this study, the terms crowdwork and digital work are interchangeably used as synonyms.

2 For more details on Online Labour Index, see: Kassi & Lehdonvirta, 2018.

3 The collection of open data was conducted from March to April 2018 on three general platforms: Freelancer (452 active workers), Guru (7 active workers) and People per hour (6 active workers), and from May to June 2018 on two specialized platforms: DMM Eikawa (1939 active workers) and Microworkers (202 active workers). The classification of general and specialized platforms is made in accordance with range and type of tasks offered on platforms. This collection was organized in accordance with the ethical principles for online research (Townsend and Wallace, 2016) and respecting the principles of data protection. The survey was conducted from July to August 2018 and included a total of 228 respondents (120 men and 108 women). Furthermore, discussions on the five groups on social networks were analyzed. Last but not least, in total, 30 digital workers were interviewed in August-September and 10 decision makers in December 2018.

4 In this study, decent work is defined as productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equality, security and human integrity (ILO, 2008: vi).
WHAT IS DIGITAL WORK?

Digital work is one of the first and most massive phenomena that links the fields of digitalization, labour, and employment. Digital (crowd) work stands for paid remote work in which the employer is not necessarily located, or registered, in the same country as the worker. According to the analysis of the digital labour market, the supply side is more present in developing countries with the growing IT industry while the demand is being located in developed countries (OECD, 2018).

Digital work is reflected in performing a series of specific tasks, i.e. gigs, without indications of permanent employment (Graham et al., 2017a). These tasks can either refer to microtasks that can only be completed in a few minutes (e.g. tagging photos) and do not require matching education; macro-tasks that require significant time and suitable skills (e.g. web development); and the complex tasks which entail multifaceted work and sophisticated skills (Feltiner 2011). Skills needed to perform these types of tasks can be classified into six major groups: software and technology development, writing and translation, creative and multimedia industry, sales and marketing, clerical and data entry, and professional services such as law, finance, consulting.

Digital work is facilitated by Internet-based platforms that emerged as business models on the wave of digital innovation. Although they often define themselves as intermediaries, the platforms actually perform some of the functions of an employer. Apart from acting as profit-making entities, they prescribe procedures and rules for the work to be carried out. They also decide who and under what conditions can be engaged or dismissed. Finally, platforms perform accounting functions (e.g. providing invoices, pay, refunds, etc.), but they do not offer any opportunity to establish the employment or the basis to cover social benefits.

Some experts estimate that the use of digital platforms increased by around 30-40% between 2015 and 2016 (OECD, 2018). One of the reasons for this rise is the ability of a platform to efficiently and quickly match supply and demand, thus significantly reducing transaction costs ( McKinsey, 2015). The platforms allow access to skills and talents around the world at any given time. Their emergence has provided clients – individuals and legal entities – with a place for unprecedented scalability of the workforce. Platforms have offered a possibility to use the workforce only for those tasks that their clients need, and terminate the (working) relationship as soon as the required task is completed (Marvit, 2014). In the recent past, this could not have been an option under the most flexible labour law.

On the other hand, platforms have provided workers with a chance to overcome the shortcomings of a local

5 This classification of skills in digital work was prepared by the Oxford Internet Institute.
labour market in which there is no demand for their skills and/or which offers lower prices for their work. Platforms offer a myriad of job opportunities, accessible even to those without previous working experience. This proved to be particularly important for workers in rural areas where other employment opportunities may not exist (Greene & Mamic, 2015; Narula et al., 2011). It is also important for workers who face high barriers when attempting to enter the labour market due to their age, health conditions, discrimination (e.g. migrants, women, sexual and national minorities), or for workers who are temporary out of the labour market.

The emergence of digital labour has deepened the already existing disbalance between flexibility and security. This trend has been created in the last two decades with the rise of non-standard forms of employment such as temporary employment, part-time and on-call work, disguised employment, and multiparty employment relationships (ILO, 2016; Eurofound, 2017).

Digital work has also contributed to reducing the rights stemming from the employment, such as eight-hour working day, basic social protection, the right to paid sick leave, vacation and/or insurance in case of an injury at work. The self-determination of platforms as applications, web platforms and/or intermediaries (Todoli - Signes, 2017) enabled them to opt out of the employers’ obligations. Along these lines, they treat all the workers as self-employed.

Digital work, in various local contexts, has been presented as the engine of the economic development and ultimate panacea against unemployment and other structural problems of the labour market. However, its impact on the legacy of decent work and the quality of employment has not been sufficiently explored in the growing body of literature.
WHO ARE THE DIGITAL WORKERS FROM SERBIA?

Young and highly educated people with university degrees in economics, design, marketing, architecture, philology, and engineering make up the majority of digital workers from Serbia.

They most often provide services in the field of software and technology development (30%), writing and translation (29%) or in the creative and multimedia industry (22%). A significantly lower percentage of digital workers from Serbia is engaged in sales and marketing (3%), clerical and data entry (6%), and in professional services (10%).

The Center's research shows that the main motivation for joining the digital workforce includes the access to better-paid jobs, the source of extra money, and the inability to find a job in the offline world. Most digital workers work on platforms that offer various types of work (e.g. Upwork and Freelancer), followed by those specializing only in one area such as foreign language lessons (DMM Eikawa, ABC Tutor) or design (99 Designs).

The following illustration shows the basic demographic characteristics of digital workers from Serbia, as well as skills, length of engagement on platforms, etc.

In addition to this basic data illustrating typical digital workers from Serbia, the next sections examine their socio-economic position from the decent work perspective.
Income is a very important element of decent work because it is the basis of the material well-being of workers. The main motivation of most hired workers is aspiration to provide a decent living standard for themselves and their families.

As the Center’s research shows, income is one of the main motives for workers from Serbia to join the digital workforce. For some digital workers, however, such work represents the main source of income, whereas for others it is additional cash inflow apart from their main earnings, and for some, only pocket money. Taking this into account, examining the role of their income in the context of decent work poses a challenge.

In general, digital workers earn better than their counterparts in the traditional economy. Their average gross income is about 1,200 USD per month compared to average gross salary of 680 USD (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018a) in Serbia in July 2018, when the Center’s survey was conducted. The average consumer basket in the same month amounted to about 700 USD (Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Telecommunications, 2018).

For one-third of the surveyed digital workers who are registered as entrepreneurs, digital work represents the main source of income. Simultaneously, they are among the best earners: on average, they earn 1,960 USD gross per month. Most of them provide services in the IT sector and in the creative and multimedia industry.

In contrast, the rest of the respondents earn less – on average about 800 USD gross monthly. This gross amount actually represents net income which is fully available to them. Due to the legal framework in Serbia which does not recognise this type of work, the activity of these two-thirds of digital workers remains in shadow economy; thus not subjected to tax regimes.

Despite good earnings among digital workers in Serbia, the digital transformation of work has not eradicated income inequalities and gender pay gaps. According to the research results, the total earnings of the top 20% of digital workers are 18 times higher than the earnings of the 20% of those at the bottom. In comparison, these differences are twice as large as those between workers’ salaries in the traditional economy. For example, the total income of the top 20% in Serbia is 9.7 times higher than the income of the 20% of the population at the bottom of the income scale in the offline world (Krek, 2018). Although two spheres of work cannot be compared, it is interesting to note that the significant difference in the digital pay mirrors Serbia’s position as the country with the highest income inequality in Europe.

Women’s income in digital work reflects the gender pay gap in the offline work. More than 50% of the surveyed women monthly earn 600 USD gross compared to more than 50% of the men who earn 1,000 USD gross a month. Not only are their earnings lower, but women are also dominant in sectors that are traditionally less paid and labeled as female (e.g. writing and translation).

The Center’s findings coincide with the findings of similar studies conducted in countries with the same or similar level of development as Serbia, such as Ukraine, the Philippines, etc. (Aleksynska et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2017b). Short term digital work produces positive impacts on national economies by enabling the workers to afford a decent standard of living. However, its structural characteristics reflected in income and gender inequalities call into question its long-term benefits both for the individual and for the society.

6 Some of digital workers are accounted as employed in the offline world, some are registered as the unemployed, some belong to inactive population.
IS THERE SECURITY OF EMPLOYMENT IN DIGITAL WORK?

Digital workers from Serbia do not enjoy security of employment and predictability of work. By its nature, digital work is a flexible form of work that excludes the establishment of permanent employment. But, digital workers form Serbia cannot conclude any type of short-term contract in accordance with the local legislation even if they wanted to because there is no legal basis for doing so in Serbia. This is why digital workers from Serbia are in a worse position than their European counterparts.

The stability and security of employment is defined by international and local standards of work, international, by an open-ended contract, a guaranteed working week, minimum wages, protection and safety at work. These constituents protect workers from the risks that short-term contracts can have on their well-being and personal development.

In digital work, short-term contracts are the most common. They define the level of fees, means of payments, sanctions in case of the job not being completed, and mediation instance in case of a dispute. However, the possibility for digital workers from Serbia to be hired as an employee or under a service contract does not exist because the platforms are not registered as employers in Serbia.

The only option offered by the local legislation is the registration of a business entity. Almost a third of the surveyed digital workers regulated their legal status in this way. Those who opted for such a solution in most cases decided to register as entrepreneurs, and only in few cases they established companies. Most digital entrepreneurs are men, whereas only 18% are women.

Apart from the good income, the decision to become an entrepreneur is often influenced by the predictability of the job. According to the Center’s research, having steady clients was the key factor for digital workers to consider regulating their legal status in Serbia as a business entity.

About two-thirds of the respondents remain in shadow economy due to the lack of other solutions. A possibility to register as an independent worker and/or a freelancer does not exist in Serbia, although there is legal basis to draw upon such a solution. Currently, it is only available to a limited number of professions (e.g. artists, journalists, priests).

Due to the lack of legal provisions, these workers are often registered as the unemployed at the National Employment Service (NES) or are considered as inactive population, and thus their work remains invisible. Even when they are “visible” to the system through another job in the offline world, they cannot get a supplementary contract referring to the digital work. This gap between the existing legal solutions and emerging forms of non-standard forms of employment contributes to the growth of informal employment, which is already relatively high in Serbia – in the third quarter of 2018, it accounted to 20.4% (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018b). Informal employment is more present among women in both the online and offline sphere of work. As already pointed out, digital female workers rarely register business entities which is the only legal option in Serbia to make their work on platforms visible.

One of the ways to reduce the insecurity of employment for these workers is to create a legal environment so that they can be treated as employees, as already done in France and Belgium. These two countries have a large number of independent professionals, i.e. freelancers, and have adapted their systems to this growing phenomenon that also includes digital work. For example, freelancers in France can join umbrella organizations (fr. portage salarial8) or co-operatives. These organization provide them with administrative and accounting services. In return, they treat freelancers as employees for the duration of their contracts.

The nature of digital work in its principle exposes individuals to uncertainty and unpredictability of work, regardless of their country of origin. Thus, the position of digital workers from Serbia at first glance appears to resemble the position of their European peers. However, what makes a difference is the availability of local solutions adjusted to the emerging forms of work, and envisioned as means to reduce exposure to the risks. If the position of digital workers from Serbia is assessed from the perspective of legal options and opportunities to regulate their working status, it can be considered as the one leading to precariousness.

7 The supplementary work contract is foreseen for persons already in full-time employment in Serbia. This contract is subject to a limitation – it may be concluded up to one third of working time. When concluding this contract, the consent of the main employer with whom the employee has signed a contract of employment is not required (Paragraf, 2013).

8 Portage Salarial is an umbrella company that assists freelancers, consultants, digital workers, etc. In handling registration processes and making payments (including, earnings and social benefits). It was established in the 1980s but got popular recently with the rise of digital work (Entreprendre Avant Tout, 2012).
Who are the digital workers from Serbia and why do they work on global platforms?

Digital work as a non-standard form of employment is not recognized by the local legislation, and thus cannot be in itself the basis for the access to the social protection system. In order to achieve the access to social benefits, digital workers in Serbia resort to other solutions such as retention of employment in the offline sphere or registration of a business entity. Compared to Serbia, other European countries offer a number of solutions for workers in flexible forms of work, including digital work.

The importance of social protection covering health, pension, and disability insurance, as well as unemployment insurance, is to provide workers with safety nets during their working lives, especially in the event of adverse circumstances or sudden termination of the employment. Equally important aspects of the quality of employment include the right to a paid sick leave, maternity/paternity leave, and paid vacations. Envisioned in this manner, social protection as one of the key legacies of decent work has been challenged by the growth of flexible working arrangements and has been especially weakened by the character of digital work.

Unlike traditional employment structures where social security contributions are deployed between the employer and the employee, this relationship in the field of digital work is now changing. Platforms are not registered as employers in most national jurisdictions, including Serbia. Thus, all social security costs are transferred to workers who cannot establish employment or conclude contracts as the basis to exercise their fundamental labour and employment rights.

In order to gain full access to the national social protection system, digital workers in Serbia have two options: to establish employment in the offline world or to register their own business entity. More than half of the surveyed digital workers (54%) have another job or are entrepreneurs. In this way, they gain access to the entire social protection package – health care, pension, insurance in case of disability, and unemployment insurance. As women more often have another (offline) job, and men are more often entrepreneurs, there are no gender disparities in access to the basic social protection system. Digital workers who are employees in the offline sphere are in an advantageous position to the entrepreneurs as they are entitled to paid sick leave, vacation, and absence from work. Entrepreneurs generally enjoy these rights, but unpaid.

For the remaining 46% of the surveyed digital workers in shadow economy, access to the social protection system is considerably more tangled. Due to the nature of the healthcare system in Serbia, digital workers are in most cases insured – either through registered unemployment status at the NES, or through the insurance of their parents (if younger than 26) or of their spouses. However, about 20% of respondents do not have access to health insurance, which is surprising, given that public health services in Serbia are available to almost the entire population (97.2%; SIPRU, 2018).

The biggest challenges for the 46% who work under the radar are in the domains of pension and disability insurance, and unemployment insurance coverages. Digital workers who are registered as the unemployed or inactive population in the offline world, despite their digital work, do not exercise these rights. In other words, their years of services on platforms are not recognized by the system. These digital workers only sometimes seek social protection through contributions in private health, pension, and/or life insurance funds.

Digital workers who already enjoy basic social protection (from employment or their own business) are also likely to have private insurance, either pension, health or life insurance, compared to other digital workers who are registered as the unemployed or are inactive. This points to the emerging inequalities among the digital workers and the creation of two classes – one that is socially protected on several levels, and another that is, due to the legal vacuum, at a greater risk of social exclusion and poverty at the old age.

Access to the social security system of digital workers in Serbia reflects the problems that they share with their colleagues in Europe and other parts of the world (Pesole et al., 2018, Berg et al., 2018, Aleksynska et al., 2018) which arise from the legal regulation lagging behind in accommodating the new trends.
Non-linear careers with frequent interruptions and changes in work engagements, just like in digital work, are increasingly present. They undermine the sustainability of the current designs of social protection systems. Anticipating the increase of the number of freelancers, including digital workers, some European countries, such as France and Belgium, have reformed and adapted social protection systems. In these countries, freelancers enjoy the same protection as employees. At the same time, the issue of allocating social protection costs between workers and (non-existent) employers requires higher engagement of the state. Under current circumstances, the state is expected to play an increasing role and take over part of the responsibility of the employer in providing social security benefits.

The eight-hour working day, i.e. 40-hour working week, represents one of the greatest achievements of the decent work legacy. The balance between work and private life is a very important aspect of good work since it acts as a guarantee of the meaningful and creative work and leaves time for a leisure and rest.

According to the Center’s research, 83% of digital workers work standard 40 hours a week or less. Thus, most workers on digital platforms enjoy a working week that does not deviate significantly from the number of hours their colleagues in traditional employment spend at work. Additionally, this reflects similar working hours patterns in other European countries (Pesole et al., 2018).

The survey also shows that those digital workers who work more than 40 hours per week most often are entrepreneurs or have a firm, and digital work is their main source of income.

Digital work often involves working non-standard hours, in the evening or during the night. In spite of this, digital workers value their freedom of choice when it comes to their working hours. In the Center’s survey sample, about one-fifth of digital workers work in the morning, about two-fifths (38.6%) in the afternoon, and about one-fifth in the evening and at night (26% and 18%). This freedom to choose one’s own working hours allows most digital workers (85%) to combine work on the platforms with other obligations.

An important feature of digital work is work from home, making it an appealing option for those who like to work in their own arrangements and outside the office. As the survey shows, most digital workers purposefully chose this type of work. However, what should be kept in mind is that digital work, in the long run, can impair the balance between work and private life. Continuous working arrangement “between four walls” erases the boundary between working and free time and opens up space for fatigue, constant exhaustion, and lack of social contacts that digital workers often report as negative sides of their work.

Regardless of the shortcomings, so far, digital work in Serbia with its flexible working hours retains the characteristics of decent work.
SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING IN DIGITAL WORK

The nature of digital work requires self-initiative and a continuous development of technical and professional skills, including soft skills. By recognizing the importance of non-formal education and training, digital work provides the opportunity for greater horizontal and vertical mobility of workforce. In comparison to the offline environment, skills acquired through digital work have a higher degree of transferability. In this vein, the acquisition of the skills and transferability observed in the case of digital workers from Serbia do not differ from practices and trends among their colleagues from other countries.

The quality of work depends on a set of skills and the availability of training needed to perform work well and efficiently. This quality also depends on the compatibility of skills that workers possess in relation to the scale of demand for a particular type of work. Under conditions of traditional employment, the employer assumes the obligation to train workers before entering the workplace, and the obligation to develop the skills of workers when the need arises. But, in comparison to the offline sphere, skills development in digital work depends on the workers themselves who are responsible for both personal and professional development.

As research finds, digital work requires continuous learning that is spurred by the nature of online jobs. Such learning also entails retraining, primarily through non-formal education. Digital workers from Serbia are themselves exploring the market demand and finding ways to respond to it. In this race, they are ready to set foot in other fields of work. For example, among IT workers, there are those who have completed studies in languages, arts or social sciences (19.1%), and vice versa (14.5%).

Improving skills in digital work relates to professional and technical skills, as well as soft skills. The latter is crucial for success and involves active communication, creativity, problem-solving, negotiation ability, and flexibility. Equally important is the knowledge of business cultures in different contexts, which contributes to a better placement of services in both online and offline environments. In this manner, a transfer of skills between the two spheres of work is facilitated.

Another level of analysis is related to gender dynamics. Men dominate the IT sector, and women the field of writing and translating. The analysis also shows that formally acquired education still plays a crucial role when choosing the (digital) occupation. However, having in mind the importance of non-formal education in the online sphere, it can be expected that digital work at least partially neutralizes the established gender roles.

From the perspective of acquiring and improving skills, European and Serbian digital workers alike are left on their own. Some countries (France, Sweden, Spain, etc) recognize the growth of the freelancer community and the need to support them in professional development through organizing trainings. However, such examples are still rare and the range of training topics are not sufficiently adapted to the undergoing process of digitalization of the working world. In the long run, digital work has the potential to contribute to the added value of services in the global and local economies.
Social dialogue is essential and contributes to the democratization of work relations. It enables workers to participate in decision making that directly affects them, while at the same time encourages the development of mechanisms and instruments for reducing inequalities in the labour market. The dialogue is primarily concerned with the freedom of association and collective bargaining in regard to the socio-economic policies in the field of work and employment. The partners in social dialogue are trade unions and employers’ associations (that bring together entrepreneurs, small, medium, and large enterprises and business associations).

Since they cannot establish employment, digital workers in Serbia cannot officially organize into unions. According to the labour law, trade unions are solely defined as employees’ organizations. On the other hand, one-third of all surveyed digital workers are officially classified as employers, since they opted for becoming entrepreneurs or setting up a firm. They can join the union of employers and formulate their demands by advocating business incentives rather than improving working conditions and rights.

These challenges are reflected in the Center’s survey, which shows that the collective organization of digital workers from Serbia with the aim of achieving better working conditions on the platforms is almost nonexistent. Only 4% of surveyed digital workers were involved in some of the initiatives to achieve labour rights. Such low interest in advocating better working conditions resembles the offline environment in Serbia.

Previous initiatives to improve working conditions of digital workers from Serbia were of ad hoc character and related to solving fundamental issues such as the minimum pay (per hour) or sudden termination of the engagement (contract) by the platform. They have introduced a novelty regarding the use of social networks and forums to organize and advocate labour rights. Facebook has proven to be a significant resource for mobilizing and defining their requests addressed to the platforms. However, insufficient protection of personal data of Facebook activists exposes them to deactivation of profiles on the platforms on which they operate, i.e. fire or shut down of their profiles.

Findings of this exploratory research from Serbia correspond to the results of research carried out in different parts of the world. A global study by the International Labour Organization in 2018 showed that only 5% of digital workers considered improving working conditions on platforms along with trade unions, while only a few expressed willingness for the trade unions to represent their interests (Berg et al., 2018).

Taking into consideration that digital workers are geographically dispersed and atomized, driven by various motives to work on platforms, the question regarding the common set of values that would mobilize and organize them arises. Ideas such as the 40-hour working week, decent salaries, job security, social protection and participation in employee-related decisions were the backbone of the collective organization and bargaining in the offline environment. In the new digital context, relationships and dynamics are changing. All this requires a redefinition of the social dialogue that would enable the achievement of good working conditions and reduce inequalities among workers in the new global digital economy.
CONCLUSION

Digital work: opportunity or threat for decent work?

Like other developing countries, Serbia is characterized by low economic growth, low wages, high unemployment and a limited supply of jobs for high-skilled professionals. All this makes the relationship between the digital work and the decent work agenda multi-dimensional and ambiguous. On the one side, digital work is a harbinger of positive change in certain domains of decent work, such as decent pay, work-life balance, and strong motivation for workers to improve their skills. These positive features of digital work are, on the other side, accompanied with high job insecurity, the absence of social insurance coverage, and the lack of social dialogue that are still reserved for the traditional forms of employment.

Due to this complexity, digital workers from Serbia represent a hybrid model of a worker torn between the future and the past. They are willing to accept fluctuations embedded into the digital work as they primarily value flexibility and earning opportunities. Nonetheless, they get exposed to eroding security of employment and social security, consequently bearing high costs of the transfer of risks and responsibilities onto themselves.

Although this is more or less typical of all digital workers in Europe, those from Serbia are faced with significantly greater challenges than their European counterparts. In Serbia, the legislation has not yet accommodated this emerging form of work. This study shows that the existing models of regulating the status of workers in non-standard forms of employment, including digital workers, are not satisfactory, thus leaving most of them in shadow economy. So far, current solutions are centered around the traditional employer-employee relationship, in which rights and protection derive from the established employment.

Serbia has two strong motives to focus its attention on defining the appropriate solutions that would reconcile the need to protect the individual rights of digital workers and enable them to contribute proportionately to their own development and well-being in the society. The first motive is to preserve the professionals that are globally high in demand. The digital labour force possesses globally demanded and valorized skills, and they can decide to leave Serbia if their needs are not addressed. The other is the long-term goal of Serbia to build a competitive knowledge-based economy. Seeking solutions that will create a conducive environment for digital workers’ prosperity is a milestone on this road.

The well-being of all workers and the quality of employment in the digital age must take into account the growing importance of autonomy and atomization in relation to the social character of work, but not at the expense of solidarity, social justice, and equality.
Digging into Gig Economy in Serbia

References


Public Policy Research Center (CENTER) is a team of innovative researchers and digital enthusiasts deliberating on the future of work in Serbia, as well as inclusive security and the creation of sustainable partnerships focused on social change. The CENTER was founded in year 2010 as an independent think tank aiming to contribute to the development of a sustainable, prosperous and just society in which the opinions and concerns of all citizens are equally heard and appreciated.

The CENTER strongly believes that the future of work should be addressed now should Serbia aim to keep decent work and quality of employment legacies in place. The future transformation will depend on today’s responses of policy-makers, business leaders, and workers in Serbia.

During 2018, CENTER carried out the research on profiles and socio-economic positions of workers, women and men, from Serbia working on global digital platforms. This form of work is a novelty globally, and Serbia is no exception. The goal of this project is to draw the attention of the general public, national actors and policy-makers to the position of digital workers, and to advocate for the introduction of labour and employment policies able to accommodate their needs.

According to the Online Labour Index (OLI) developed by the Oxford Internet Institute, Serbia was ranked as the tenth in the world and the fourth in Europe in December 2018. According to the 2015 World Bank data, Serbia, together with Romania, had one of the most populous communities of digital workers, relative to the country population and total labour force.

This is the first ever research in Serbia that deals with profiles of workers on digital platforms. As such it has attracted the attention of the international academic community. In 2018, CENTER presented the preliminary results of this research at the leading academic conferences dedicated to platform work and economic geography in Bucharest, Cologne, Amsterdam, and Milan, and got invited to present the final results in Vienna, Barcelona, and Valparaíso in 2019.