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Memoir

An exploratory research into the situation of Serbian freelancers working on digital labour platforms in the context of the war in Ukraine

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Chapter 1 Introduction

A few years ago, I got a job thanks to a platform that connects teachers and students with people looking for academic support. Little did I know then that I was participating as a worker to what is called the platform economy. This phenomenon, known to the general public as 'uberisation' because of the eponymous company, has deeply marked the last decade. Scientific literature refers to it under different terminologies such as 'digital economy', 'sharing economy', 'gig economy' or 'platform capitalism', to name but a few. Generally, these terms describe an economy driven by digital platforms which, by embracing technological innovations, contribute to the emergence of 'new' forms of works outside the scope of any regulation (Janine Berg 2018). Digital labour platforms are a particular concern for the International Labour Organization which promotes decent work through labour standards, policies and national programmes. Since 2015, researchers affiliated to the Organisation have published reports attesting to the growing number of people accessing platform work and assessing their working conditions. According to the European Council, while today, about 28 million people in the European Union are working on digital labour platforms, this number will increase to reach 43 million people in 2025.[1]

Therefore, the specificity of this Master thesis is that it forms part of a larger investigation conducted by ILO researchers regarding the effects of the current war in Ukraine on freelancers and platform workers in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The development of digital labour platforms in this region is attested by an ILO report which notes, among other things, that "according to various sources, in 2013-2017, Ukraine occupied the first place in Europe, and the fourth place in the world, in terms of the amount of financial flows and the number of tasks executed on digital labour platforms" (Aleksynska et al. 2018). For their part, Serbia and Moldova have one of the highest percentages of digital workforce in the world relative to their entire population and the total workforce. (Ibid.) Moreover, the co-founder of the Public Policy Research Center in Serbia,

[1] `https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/platform-work-eu/`

Branka Andjelkovic, puts forward a new analysis of the consequences of the war on the globalisation of work, saying the following: "With the war in Ukraine, we are looking at another face of the phenomenon of digital nomads, represented by the forced migration of gig workers from domicile countries to other states. At the same time, the Ukrainian war has shed further light on the significance of dignified work for the globalised labour force and the question of the activities of platforms in the conditions of risk and forced migrations." (Andjelkovic 2022).

By fuelling my intellectual concerns, these findings led me to develop two research questions related to these topics: How does the Serbian freelancers perceive their working conditions and arrangement? How does the war in Ukraine impacted their situation?
By exploring the subjective experience of Serbian freelancers working on digital labour platforms, especially global work marketplaces and online tutoring, I will attempt to respond to that question and contribute in my way to novel research on the relationship between armed conflicts and platform work.

Chapter 2 Literature review and theorical framework

The first challenge, when it comes to defining a research object, is precisely its definition. In the existing scientific literature, multiple terminologies exist in relation to the topic of platform economy and digital labour. Related words like 'platform capitalism', 'digital economy', 'gig economy' or 'sharing economy', to name but a few, have flourished over the past decade (Heeks 2017). Generally, these terms refer to an economy driven by digital platforms which, by embracing technological innovations, contribute to the emergence of 'new' modes of production and sharing services, as well as new forms of works outside the scope of any regulation (Janine Berg 2018). The nature and issues arising from these non-standard forms of employment will be further discussed. Most notably, it seems important to grasp the nuances brought by these terms, as well as the theoretical approach to which they belong, in order to understand in which field this Master thesis falls.

2.1 Towards a definition of the 'platform economy'

If the idea of 'sharing' exists since the dawn of time, the phenomenon of 'sharing economy', emerged due to the global diffusion of ICT, and in particular the Internet (Belk 2014); (Pouri & Hilty 2021). According to Shor, the origins of this phenomenon date back to 1995, when online marketplaces such as eBay and Craigslist were created in a perspective of recirculation of goods, as well as in 2000 with the advent of Zipcar, a peer-to-peer carsharing system considered to be the ancestor of Uber (Shor 2014). Still in its infancy, the 'sharing economy' became popular following the financial crisis of 2008, partly in reaction to it (Henry et al. 2021); (Habibi et al. 2017). The possibility to rent assets was then a more economically attractive solution (Shor 2014). As argued by Habibi

et al., "The necessity to reduce customer costs combined with technological advances created a synergy prompting firms and consumers to find creative ways to consume through pooling and sharing resources that would otherwise be left idle" (Habibi et al. 2017, p. 114). In this sense, the 'sharing economy' appeared to be a collaborative economy that tried to emancipate itself from purely commercial principles in order to better respond to the challenges of economic and social sustainability (Compain et al. 2019). Thus, the sharing economy seemed to provide "a potential new pathway to sustainability" (Heinrichs 2013).

As stated by Henry et al., the "SE [sharing economy] literature experienced its major growth in publications around 2012" (Henry et al. 2021, p. 7). It seems no coincidence knowing that this period has been marked by the expansion of Airbnb and Uber. While some initiatives were designed to achieve a common purpose within a local community in a non-profit way, by contrast, these two platforms affected the landscape of the 'sharing economy' by their worldwide scope and their business model founded on the maximisation of profit (Shor, 2014).
This phenomenon has suddenly appeared on such a huge scale, that political institutions could not avoid expressing preoccupations concerning workers' rights, tax obligations and fair competition on the market. As observed by Codagnone and Martens, the notion of 'sharing economy' came to be included in reports from "the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c); the OECD (OECD, 2015a, 2015b); and in official documents of the European Commission (European Commission, 2015a, 2015b), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC, 2014) and the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2014)" (Codagnone & Martens 2016, p. 6).

However, as mentioned by Frenken and Shor, "There has been widespread ambiguity and even confusion about the term 'sharing economy' among academics and the public alike" (Frenken & Schor 2017, p. 4). Indeed, many scholars have pointed out the lack of consensus surrounding the label of 'sharing economy' (Botsman 2013); (Koopman et al. 2015); (Codagnone & Martens 2016), as well as its comprehensive framework (Acquier 2017); (Ranjbari et al. 2018). Some of them have attempted to draw up a definition or a categorisation of this phenomenon.

Instead of using the term 'sharing economy', Botsman and Roger develop

the 'collaborative consumption' one, which they describe as the "traditional sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, and swapping, redefined through technology and peer communities" (Botsman & Rogers 2010, p. 10). According to them, the new forms of sharing that have emerged, such as bike or car sharing, are part of an environmental and social improvement process that seeks to empower the citizens by getting rid of "outdated modes of hyperconsumption" (Ibid.). For his part, Belk argues that the concept of 'collaborative consumption' proposed by Botsman and Roger appears "too broad and mixes marketplace exchange, gift giving, and sharing" (Belk 2014, p. 1597). In his opinion, car sharing systems are based on "pseudo-sharing" practices that have more to do with "short-term rental activities", while gift giving involves a "permanent transfer of ownership" that moves away from the dimensions of 'sharing' and 'market exchange' (Ibid.).

On their side, Koopman et al. propose to understand the 'sharing economy' as "any marketplace that brings together distributed networks of individuals to share or exchange otherwise underutilised assets" (Koopman et al. 2015, p. 4). In a sense, their view echoes Botsman and Roger's arguments concerning the consumer welfare of these new forms of sharing. In her attempt to define the 'sharing economy', Shor provides, on the other hand, four broad categories rather than a definition, including "recirculation of goods, increased utilisation of durable assets, exchange of services, and sharing of productive assets" (Shor 2014, p. 2).

The sustainability issues and the innovation challenges that have been raised from these definitions of the 'sharing economy' allow to better understand the popularity of this concept in fields such as business, environment and information technology. By adopting a critical view, Kenney and Zysman have affirmed that "the notion of the sharing economy was, with a few exceptions, an effort by entrepreneurs to give a social facade to their, sometimes productive, innovations that upset existing market rules" (Kenney & Zysman 2020).

In his paper analysing the different terms related to labour issues in the digital economy, Heeks has observed that despite its high general prevalence in the literature and on Twitter, the term 'sharing economy' rarely overlap with the topic of 'labour' and 'online labour' (Heeks 2017, p. 3). By comparison, the notion of 'platform economy', which is moderately

used in the literature as well as on Twitter, has presented some overlap with this topic (Ibid.). More interestingly, the number of items published since 2016 has indicated an increased interest for the 'platform economy' instead of the 'sharing economy', as well as for the 'gig economy' which appears to be a relevant term when it comes to labour issues (Ibid.). This may be due to the fact that from 2014[1], the 'new' forms of work, the working conditions and the regulation issues referring to this so-called 'sharing economy' have gained more and more awareness of the academics, the political actors and the public.

The term 'gig economy' came out first in the Anglo-Saxon literature, in particular in the American economic and labour context, by referring to what Friedman described as "the dramatic decline in long-term employment relations" and the rise of short-term tasks or jobs for which the workers "are hired under 'flexible' arrangements, as 'independent contractors' or 'consultants'" (Friedman 2014, p. 171). The 'gig economy' has then been referring to 'new' forms of work that are mediated by the use of digital platforms (Cardon & Casilli 2015); (Janine Berg 2018). Typically, the 'gig economy' literature encompasses two forms of work: 'crowdwork' and 'work-on demands via apps'.

'Crowdwork' refers to tasks or jobs that are outsourced through digital platforms to a wide range of workers geographically dispersed (De Stefano 2016). Crowdworking platforms are characterised by the nature of their proposed tasks (Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn 2019). While online work marketplaces such as Upwork, Fiverr or Freelancer.com put clients in touch with generally high-skilled workers all over the world, other platforms like the emblematic Amazon Mechanical Turk provided microtasks that Stefano described as "extremely parcelled activities, often menial and monotonous, which still require some sort of judgement beyond the understanding of artificial intelligence (e.g. tagging photos, valuing emotions or the appropriateness of a site or text, completing surveys)" (De Stefano 2016, p. 2). On the other hand, 'work-on demands via apps' involve several services ranging from driving to delivery and

[1]It is worth noting that the year 2014 was characterised by the first workers' protests against Uber (Burns 2014). Media started to show interest toward the 'sharing economy', by relaying the workers' concerns regarding their misclassification and their lack of social protection. The same year, severe strikes leading by formal taxi drivers took place in Paris in order to alert the French government to the unfair competition on the market originated by Uber (LePoint 2014)

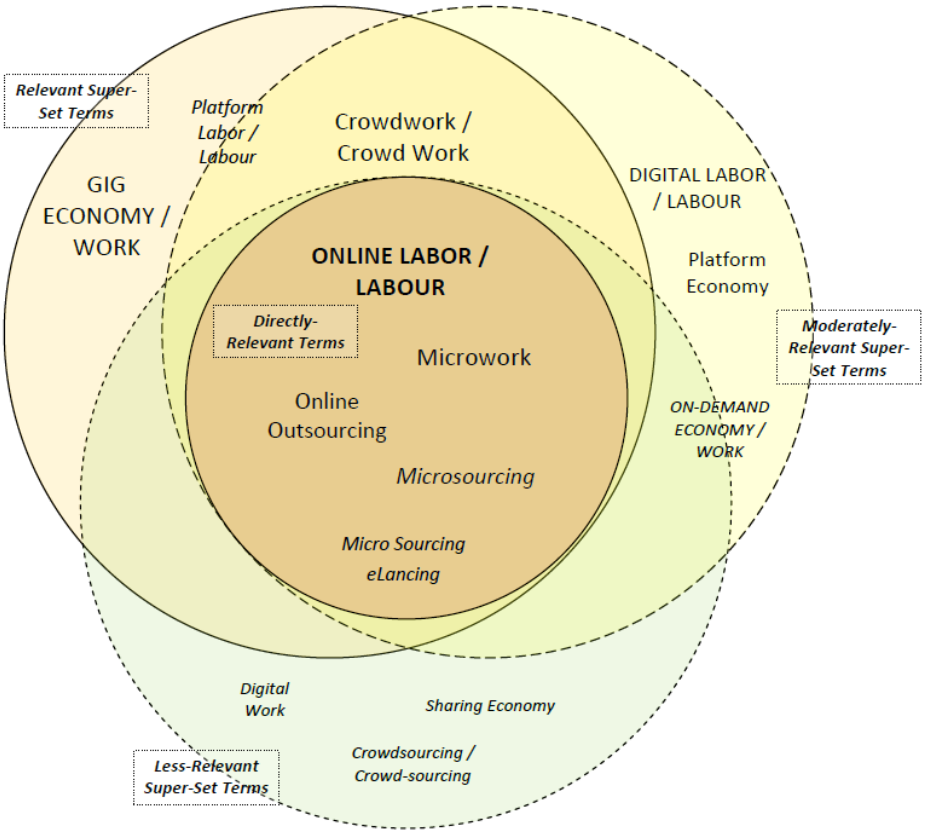

Figure 2.1: Relevance of Literature Terms in Digital Gig Economy Work (Heeks 2017, p. 3)

cleaning assigned online to workers who perform them offline in a clearly designated geographical area (Ibid.). On both cases, platform workers are not classified as employees but instead as "self-employed person" or "independent contractors" (Janine Berg 2018, p. 13). This is a severe issue since they cannot benefit from labour protection (Ibid.).

While the notion of 'gig economy' seems useful when assessing the employment relationship and the nature of the tasks involved on digital platforms, the 'platform economy' appears more relevant in order to grasp the social and economic dimensions of the use of these platforms (Heeks 2017). In their paper adopting a regulationist approach, Montalban et al. define the platform economy as "economic activities where tangible or intangible resources are exchanged between providers and users by the way of centralised electronic platforms" (Montalban et al. 2019, p. 807).

According to Heeks' observations, the literature that emerged around the 'platform economy' has essentially focused on the business models, the impact and the regulation of the digital platforms (Ibid.).

Therefore, while the 'sharing economy' is considered as an umbrella term, often related to the circular economy and the sustainability discourse (Henry et al. 2021), the notion of 'platform economy', sometimes referred to as 'platform capitalism' (Acquier 2018); (Abdelnour & Bernard 2018); (Perticone et al. 2022), is mostly used by critical approaches to capitalism that focus particularly on the commodification of labour and the dimension of exploitation that may emanate from the platformisation of work. In this sense, Abdelnour and Bernard stated: "These changes in employment status and forms of work organisation, as well as the shifting of responsibilities in the exercise of the activity, appear to be major and specific and justify the use of the term 'platform capitalism'. Indeed, this notion emphasises the creation of value and its unequal sharing, between, on the one hand, the owners of the algorithms, sites and applications that are the platforms and, on the other hand, the workers present on them" [*free translation*] (Abdelnour & Bernard 2018, p. 2).

By using the term 'platform economy', this Master thesis falls within the critical approaches to capitalism and follows research that assesses the impact of digital platforms on working conditions (Abdelnour & Bernard 2018); (Wood et al. 2019); (Rani & Berg 2021). Furthermore, this work shares the intellectual concerns expressed by the ILO regarding decent work in the digital labour market (Janine Berg 2018).

2.2 The platform economy: a new form of capitalism?

A scientific controversy encountered in the literature concerns the novel nature of the platform economy. While some authors used the term of 'uberisation', by arguing that platform economy represents a new form of capitalism (Morozov 2013); (Edward 2020), others qualified its innovative nature by comparing it to a previous existing model (Acquier 2018); (Abdelnour & Bernard 2018); (Montalban et al. 2019); (Kenney et al. 2020); (Raj-Reichert et al. 2021). In order to gain a better understanding of this question, the business model and the work organisation related to

digital platforms must be clarified.

'Digitalisation' and 'outsourcing' appear to constitute the pillars of digital platforms business model. According to Wood et al., digital platforms "act as market intermediaries that significantly reduce the overhead costs of outsourcing and offshoring by providing an architecture for cheaply identifying and contacting workers, and a standardised means to contract and pay them" (Wood et al. 2019, p. 936). Digital technologies are thus the core of the platforms' architecture. As stated by Beerepoot and Lambregts: "The emergence of global online job marketplaces is part of the global trend towards outsourcing and offshoring work that entails the provision of digitally transmittable services from afar" (Beerepoot & Lambregts 2015, p. 239). By fragmenting work all over the world at lower costs, digital platforms may represent the most extreme form of outsourcing.

Historically, outsourcing emerged in the early 1980s when companies saw the cost-benefit to entrust non-core tasks to an external party which possessed specific competencies for doing them, while the headquarters could focus on its core businesses (Hätönen & Eriksson 2009). Over time, companies massively outsourced parts of their production in low-wage countries with more precarious working conditions. Thus, according to Meil and Akguç: "Outsourcing project management to intermediaries is not new but moving coordination and monitoring activities to platforms is a fresh development which is imbued with a number of challenges, including for labour in terms of wage pressures, dispersed management and control systems, and, of course, the lack of employment regulation" (Meil & Akgüç 2021, p. 58). This last point has been the subject of much discussion.

By rejecting the standard employment relationship, and classifying workers as independent contractors or self-employed, digital labour platforms focus their discourse on the flexibility and the independence conferred to them, with the idea to promote entrepreneurial culture. However, according to Drahokoupil, "the algorithmic management and monitoring systems that allow the platforms to work with casual labour entail authority structures that put workers into a position of subordination to the platform, and hence in the situation of an incomplete contract akin to an employment relationship" (Drahokoupil 2021, p. 40). Generally, workers

themselves as well as most of the academics contested this misclassification by pointing out the precariousness and the vulnerability associated with platform work (Abdelnour & Bernard 2018); (Berg 2016); (Wood et al. 2018); (Sutherland et al. 2020).
Indeed, platform workers are subjected to financial precarity because of the lack of social protection that this non-standard form of employment provides and the type of income they perceived that is often low, unstable and unsecured (Berg 2016); (Wood et al. 2018). For example, while studying the working conditions faced by crowdworkers, Berg reported that most of them were experiencing "low level of pay, the lack of a reliable and steady source of work, the unresponsiveness of platforms to their concerns and the poor, and at times abusive, relationship with requesters" (Berg 2016, p. 17). Additionally, without any organisational structure and long-term relationship, platform workers appear to be isolated and unorganized workers (Sutherland et al. 2020).

As expressed by Abdelnour et Bernard: "By putting independent workers to work, platform capitalism, far from conferring autonomy on them, participates in the emergence of renewed, even exacerbated, forms of subjection of workers, aiming to mobilise them, and this away from the current regulations of the worlds of work" [*free translation*] (Abdelnour & Bernard 2018, p. 2). In the same line of thinking, Montalban et al. contested the novelty of the work organisation of the platform economy that appears to be "a more radical version of certain existing processes" (Montalban et al. 2019, p. 8). Therefore, many scholars established a parallel between the outsourcing of work through digital platforms and the 'putting-out system' that has characterised proto-industrialisation. This economic system, widely used in Europe throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, was based on a free domestic labour that mobilise their own means of production to perform on-demand work (Mika 2020). Here, the fragmented nature of work was reflected in the fact that specific tasks were allocated to people geographically dispersed who needs to produce a good for a merchant (Ibid.). In the same way, as stated by Acquier: "Digital platforms do not possess any productive assets. It is up to the 'workers' to obtain and provide the capital necessary to perform the work, and to bear any associated risks. Individuals must obtain and use their own capital (a car for ride-share drivers, a property for Airbnb) before they can work" (Acquier 2018, p. 19).
Thus, after a period marked by the ascendent of the modern company, it does seem that the contemporary economy sees a resurgence of the

putting-out system in its digitalised form (Abdelnour & Bernard 2018).

2.3 Working conditions in digital labour platforms

As briefly mentioned earlier, working conditions within the platform economy have been studied by several scholars that pointed out the failures of the system that contribute to the precariousness and the vulnerability of the workers. Even if digital labour platforms can be an opportunity for finding a job, especially in countries with a difficult economic and employment situation, it poses serious challenges in terms of ensuring decent work (Janine Berg 2018). This is particularly reflected in the low incomes that the majority of platform workers receive (Gawer & Srnicek 2021).

Various studies pointed out that crowdworkers are being lower paid than offline workers (Berg 2016); (Rani & Furrer 2021). This is partly due to the fact that a wide range of crowdworkers are performing microtasks such as the ones proposed by Amazon Mechanical Turk for just a few cents (Drahokoupil 2021). Additionally, among all types of digital labour platforms, crowdwork appears to be the most accessible work (Gawer & Srnicek 2021). Therefore, Gawer and Srnicek stated: "A polarisation of work may occur, split between relatively high-wage, high-skill, information-centric set of occupations – ranging from programmers to data scientists, and so on. On the other hand, there is the low-wage, low-skill, service-centric set of occupations" (Gawer & Srnicek 2021, p. 41). But even on global work marketplaces designed firstly for high-skilled freelancers, like Upwork, Fiverr or Freelancer.com, it appears that professionals have to compete with novices; thus, this situation leads to underbidding on prices.

Moreover, the digital labour market does not provide any skill training and professional development (Andjelkovic et al. 2019). According to Graham et al.: "The high-level of individualisation and commoditisation of labour power, the planetary scale of the labour supply for the platform work and an intense competition between workers means that workers are both left to fend for themselves and compete against one another" (Graham et al. 2021, p. 21). Additionally, research has suggested that

the precariousness and economic vulnerability experienced by workers in the platform economy can be attributed to the increased outsourcing risk they face in comparison to traditional forms of employment. In this regard, Gawer and Srnicek specify: "Whereas the standard employment contract aimed to balance risks between workers, businesses, and governments, platform work instead transfers risk almost entirely onto individual workers" (Gawer & Srnicek 2021, p. 47).

Furthermore, other than competition and income issues, it seems that platform workers may be affected by a loss of meaning and a sense of dehumanising. According to Acquier: "Work on such microtask platforms is reduced to an extremely fragmented and alienating task, the individual to an operator, with the same effects in terms of deskilling, dehumanisation, and loss of meaning in work as in Taylorist forms of organisation" (Acquier 2018, p. 16-17).

Another particular issue that has been assessed by the literature is the impact of the architecture and the algorithmic management of digital platforms on working conditions. Some scholars pointed out the information asymmetry that digital labour platforms mediated between workers and clients. These latter can access to a lot of information concerning workers, as their profile, previous work and more importantly previous feedback. By comparison, workers are often unaware of the scope of the project they are working on, especially when it comes to microtasks. As stated by Graham et al.: "When we compare the ways in which employers learn about workers to the ways that workers learn about jobs, the scalar differences in how workers and employers can read the planetary labour market become apparent" (Graham et al. 2021, p. 10)
Additionally, some researches have highlighted that the algorithmic control on platform work increases the economic vulnerability of platform workers. Indeed, it appears that platform workers face greater risks of seeing their work rejecting or/and not getting paid when the information related to the task is unidirectional, like on microtask platforms, and when the platform's architecture is not designed to facilitate communication between parties (Rani & Furrer 2021).
Finally, by deliberately excluding workers from certain tasks due to their country of origin and their group belonging, and by making women more precarious than men, digital labour platforms encompass structural dimensions of gender and racial exploitation (Ibid.); (Anita Gurumurthy

2021).

When it comes to studying the impact of international crises on working conditions in the platform economy, the scientific literature seems to be lacking or very scattered. Regarding digital labour platforms, research appears to focus only on two major topics: COVID-19 crisis and labour migration.
The pandemic was indeed an important concern among academics who focused their research on the impact of this sanitary crisis on platform workers (Rani & Dhir 2020); (Howson et al. 2022) as well as on the process of (dis)embeddedness of platforms (de)commodification of labour that operated during this period within (Katta et al. 2020). While transportation and delivery played a key role during the COVID-19, the increasing vulnerability of platforms workers who were performing an essential activity has come to light (Rani & Dhir 2020). Thus, it seemed relevant to study how this international crisis affected their working conditions within the platform economy.
On another hand, some scholars have studied the relation between the phenomenon of migration and the platform economy, by assessing the importance of the migrant workforce within digital labour platforms (Altenried 2021); (van Doorn et al. 2020) and the opportunity that platform work provides in complex refugee situations (Hunt et al. 2018). It appeared then, that the literature related to platform work has focused more on the forced migration caused by the war than the impact of the war in a population directly affected by it or near to it.

Thus, the research object of this Master thesis is therefore guided by a desire to enrich the scientific literature around the war issue and the digital labour platforms. Given the lack of research conducted exclusively on freelancers working on macrotasks platforms, it was decided to make them the main point of focus.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

As mentioned previously, the specificity of this Master thesis is that it forms part of a larger investigation conducted by ILO researchers on freelancers and platform workers in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, especially regarding the effects of the war in Ukraine. While there is a gap in the existing literature regarding this topic, this research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of Serbian freelancers working on digital labour platforms in this current context of war. For these reasons, it was decided to conduct an exploratory study in order to further clarify the problem and to draw up useful avenues for future research. Indeed, exploratory study is an important prerequisite for research that is based on a minimum of knowledge. In this regard, some authors explain that "exploratory study makes it possible to identify a reality to be studied or to choose the most appropriate data collection methods to document aspects of this reality or to select informants or data sources capable of informing on these aspects" [*free translation*] (Trudel et al. 2007, p. 39).

3.1.1 Philosophy and type of research

The use of a qualitative methodology[1] was more relevant to this research, for two main reasons. Firstly, because this exploratory study was conducted on a small sample. This will be discussed further in section 3.1.4. Secondly, because this research tried to explore the perceptions and concerns of Serbian freelancers were facing working on platforms by appealing to their subjective experience. As such, it had involved analysing discourse through interviews and therefore mobilising language rather than numbers. Because a single reality does not exist apart from our perceptions (Trochim & Donnelly 2006), this research had implied to

[1]While some authors propose replacing the notion of qualitative with exploratory (Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2005), others argue that not all qualitative researches are exploratory in nature (Trudel et al. 2007). As such, this chapter does not present these terms as interchangeable and attempts to treat them separately.

work with data arising from multiple socially constructed realities, while risking bringing a personal bias into the analysis. However, as scientific literature suggests, qualitative research valorises subjectivity in considering it as a space for the construction of human reality. In this perspective, "The knowledge is a shared construction based on the interaction between researcher/participants" [*free translation*] (Anadón & Guillemette 2007, p. 28) Therefore, this exploratory study was based on the interpretivist paradigm, which considers the reality as socially constructed (Creswell 2003), and had followed an inductive reasoning by assuming no prior knowledge.

3.1.2 Research strategy

This research was based upon a case study. According to Robert K. Yin, a case study may be defined as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Aberdeen 2009, p. 18). For this author, case study research is particularly useful when it comes to answering a "how" or "why" question related to contemporary events over which the researcher has little control (Yin 2003, p. 9). Thus, this research strategy has inherent advantages for exploratory studies because it relies on multiple data sources (Aberdeen 2009) in order to provide "the first line of evidence" (Gerring 2009, p. 10).

Typically, a case has "a pre-defined boundary" which clarifies the space and time frame of the study (Slight et al. 2011). In this research, Serbian freelancers working on digital labour platforms during the period of the war in Ukraine were considered as the case. This choice was made after consultation with the ILO researchers who were working at the same time on the impacts of this war upon Ukrainian freelancers and platform workers. The articulation between Serbia and Ukraine should allow a better understanding of the specific situations that platform workers were facing in each country due to this context of war, as well as the potential similar experience they have encountered in the platform economy in relation to its structural dimension. In order to facilitate future investigation adopting a comparative perspective, both case studies have applied the same data collection process.

3.1.3 Data collection

In an attempt to respond to the research question, word-based data were essentially collected through interviews. Since this research was qualitative and explorative in nature, it was decided to conduct semistructured interviews by which the "real-life experiences" (Horton et al. 2004) of Serbian freelancers working on digital labour platforms could be revealed. This type of interview relies on open-ended questions and follow-up questions, which allow participants to respond in depth and bring in new themes (Ibid.). The main features of semistructured interviews are presented in Figure 3.1.

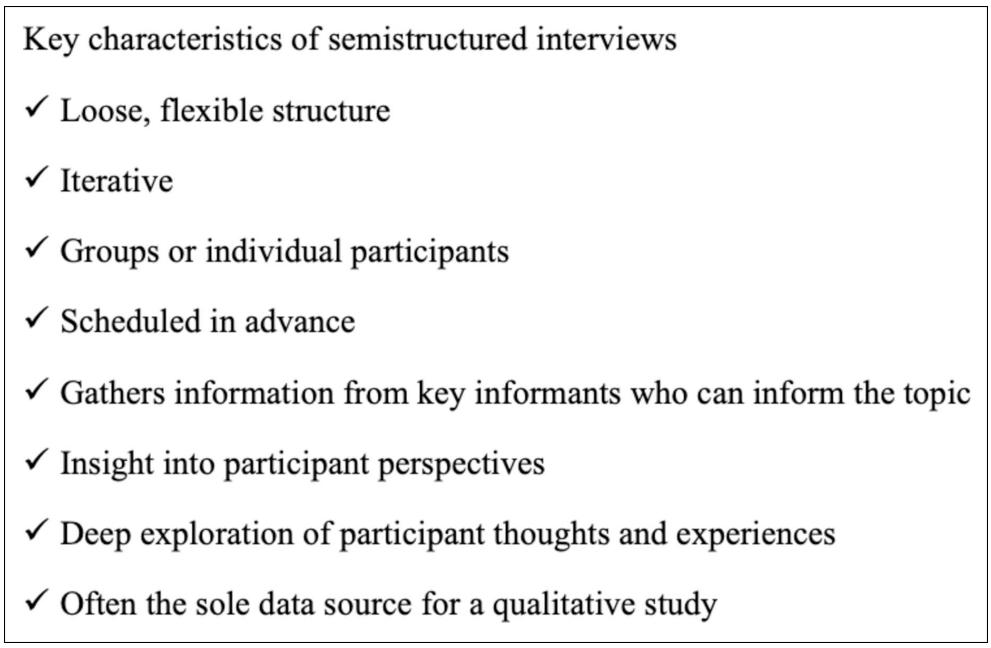

Figure 3.1: . "Key characteristics of semistructured interviews" (Horton et al. 2004, p. 3)

The interviews were held in English and lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 15 minutes. In order to facilitate the comparison with the data collected by the ILO researchers on the case of Ukrainian freelancers and platform workers, the eighteen questions that served as the basis for the interviews were written following their same model. Some modifications were necessary in order to take into account the specificity of the Serbian case, particularly in its relationship with the current war and its own national challenges.

Due to the distance, the interviews were taken place mostly online through the video calling function provided by Zoom or Facebook and, to a lesser degree, through telephone calls using Viber (two participants) and face-to-face meetings (two participants). These last meetings were organised on the spot, in Belgrade, during a short work trip. This gave the opportunity to collect more data and to briefly experience the atmosphere of the capital town. A tour of the city was arranged with a native guide. His explanations of the historical, political and economic context, as well as of the geopolitical stakes of Serbia, have helped to enrich the points expounded in Chapter 4.

The interview period lasted four months, from mid-September to mid-December. The respondents were primarily recruited from a Facebook group called *Udruženje radnika na internetu* (The Association of Workers on the Internet). This group advocates for the fair treatment of freelancers impacted by the government's new tax law concerning them. Additionally, some participants were recruited through a contact person in Belgrade who was connected to several freelancers, as well as through word of mouth.

3.1.4 Sampling criteria

The sampling required for this research was small in nature, by including ten freelancers. A freelancer was defined as a person who had worked on digital labour platforms on the day of questioning. However, the explorative nature of this study allowed to be a bit more flexible regarding the profile of the participants and the type of platform on which they worked. Therefore, two out of ten respondents had stopped working on platforms a few months before the interview, but still seemed legitimate to answer the questions given the fact that the war in Ukraine had already started. The platform types selected for this research were either global work marketplaces, like Upwork, or those owned by companies specialised in a specific area. Most of these latter platforms focused primarily on English teaching toward the Asian market.

The age of the participants ranged from 24 to 45, with a mean of 35,6 years. Five of them were living in Belgrade, four in Novi Sad and one in Niš. These are the three largest cities in Serbia. While the majority of the freelancers were teaching English on platforms, the others were working in fields such as translation, recruitment, video production or

data gathering. Furthermore, some of the participants were having two or more jobs simultaneously, either solely in the digital labour market or on both digital and traditional labour markets. Regarding the gender, three out of ten freelancers were women. That percentage reflects the general trend by which the representativeness of women on digital platforms is lower than the one of men (Stephany et al. 2021).

3.1.5 Data analysis

For this research, it was intended to conduct a thematic content analysis. According to Braun and Clarke, this method is used for "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 79). To this end, transcribing the interviews was an important step so that the discourse of the participants would serve as useful raw material. Since the analysis focused more on content than on form, it was decided to simplify the quotations of all repetitions of words, articles and injunctions, in order to make reading easier.

As stated by Paillé and Mucchielli, the thematic content analysis has the merit of fulfilling two main functions that are "identification" and "documentation" (Paillé & Mucchielli 2012, p. 232). The first step is to identify all the themes that appear relevant when it comes to the research aim, before confronting them in a second phase. In this sense, it would be ascertained "whether they are repeated from one material to another and how they overlap, join, contradict, complement" (Ibid.).

As the ambition of this method is to present a global view of the phenomenon under study, it is adapted essentially to small corpus of data (Ibid.). Therefore, it seems particularly suitable for an exploratory study that focuses on the subjective perception of ten respondents. While the thematic content analysis is used more often in the field of psychology, it seems that research on political science could benefit from it, especially when exploring novel topics or sensitive issues, as it is the case with war.

3.2 Methodological limitations

This exploratory study encountered a number of both methodological and personal limitations. They should be stressed and taken into ac-

count in further reflection that may lead to new analysis on the subject. Therefore, after confronting the methodological limitations and specific scientific strengths related to this research, potential areas for improvement will be proposed.

Firstly, the lack of previous research on the topic was one of the major issues in this study. While there are already somme scientific literature around the relationship between digital labour platforms and forced migration, there is no specific research on the impact of war on the platform worker population. In this context, mobilising an exploratory study seemed to be the right-fit solution in order to develop further knowledge on the object of research that was not clearly understood. However, despite the range of possibilities that this research method offers in terms of data collection, only one was finally found to be successful in order to collect a sufficient amount of data. Therefore, some initial ideas had to be abandoned.
Because a part of the scientific literature has highlighted the importance of social networks and forums for exchanges and potential collaborations among platform workers (Andjelkovic et al. 2019), it was thought at the beginning to use netnography to collect some data. This method pioneered by Kozinets is considered as being "a new approach to conducting ethical and thorough ethnographic research that combines archival and online communications work, participation and observation, with new forms of digital and network data collection, analysis and research representation" (Kozinets 2015, p. 1). The benefit of netnography is that "a significant amount of the data collected and participant-observational research conducted originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the Internet" (Ibid. p. 19). While at first glance, this data collection process seemed particularly relevant for exploring freelancers' perceptions and concerns, the language barrier and the lack of specific information on the war made it impracticable to gather sufficient data with this method.
Indeed, most of Facebook groups and Reddit forums (which are popular places of communication on the Internet) concerning Serbian freelancers were exclusively written in Serbian and the searches with keywords related to the war in Ukraine did not produce more of a handful of results. For these reasons, interviews with freelancers therefore formed the basis of the research material.

Additionally, some limitations must be underscored regarding the size and the selection criteria of the sample. Although English teachers working on digital platforms for Asian companies constitute one of the biggest groups of freelancers in Serbia, they may have been overrepresented among the surveyed population. Accordingly, their viewpoints stand out more on the analysis, unlike those shared by freelancers working on Upwork. Further research should ensure a balance distribution of these two types of Serbian freelancers in order to emphasise the specific challenges as well as the shared experiences that they are facing in the platform economy. By adding five more interviewees, it would have been possible to bring more diversity in the profiles, by including freelancers working in sectors not or underrepresented in this research, such as designers or software engineers.

This point leads to a personal limitation that is the lack of time to conduct empirical research. Due to the thesis submission deadline, the participant recruitment process was not able to extent over a lengthy period of time, which would have allowed for a more thorough selection of profiles in order to accurately represent reality. A more comprehensive analysis could have been achieved if there had been a more balanced representation, without this over-representation of English teaching freelancers.
Furthermore, the completion of this research required proficiency in both English and Serbian. While Serbian was initially used when contacting freelancers on Facebook groups, English was subsequently utilised for various purposes. This included oral communication during interviews with participants and exchanges with experts, as well as written communication through email exchanges and the writing of this work. It is worth noting that English is an important language in the field of research, and even though it may have taken longer due to my non-native status, it facilitated collaboration with the ILO. Overall, the ability to use both English and Serbian was crucial to the success of this project.

In order to avoid these limitations in future research, it seems important to identify sufficiently early the more appropriate methodological tools. When it comes to the study of Serbian freelancers working on digital labour platforms, interviews as well as netnography does not provide the same level of investigation. While netnography relies on an observational method, interviews involve the researcher who seeks to get in-depth information than that initially provided. Therefore, for research objects

related to very specific events or/and sensitive issues, interviews seem to remain a more adequate method. People reveal themselves much more during an interview than on the Internet forums, where the public nature can dissuade them from specifying the activities they perform on platforms and their personal situation, especially for fear of reprisals. Therefore, freelancers dare to speak more openly about sensitive issues through interviews. However, netnography should be encouraged for further studies that aim to gain a better understanding of general trends related to the situation of platform workers in Serbia. Such a data-oriented study could benefit from a collaboration with a data science lab that could bring expert knowledge on data analysis and state-of-the-art methods applied to social networks. Studies leveraging hundreds of thousands of posts and comments have already been conducted by data science lab, such as the dlab at EPFL (Mamié et al. 2021) Such a multidisciplinary study could yield a more in-depth analysis of the platform work phenomenon.

Chapter 4 Serbian context

Serbia is composed of two distinct areas: Vojvodina, in the wide agricultural plain of Pannonia, in the north, and Central Serbia and Kosovo-Metashia in the south, a region of low and medium mountains.
Gathering some 6.8 million inhabitants (WorldBank 2021) in a territory of 88,360 km^2 (ibid), or 77,480 km^2 if the area of Kosovo is excluded, which is of the same order of magnitude as the Czech Republic (78,870 km^2), Austria (83,880 km^2) and Portugal (92,230 km^2) and seven times smaller than Ukraine, Serbia has no less than eight neighboring countries: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Northern Macedonia, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. Since Montenegro's independence in 2006, Serbia has had no access to the sea.
It was part of the only communist entity that enjoyed some economic prosperity - the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia - and founded and led the important movement of non-aligned countries, independent of the Western and Eastern blocks throughout the Cold War, It was then ostracized by the international community following the ethnic conflicts in the Balkans, and is still traumatized by the NATO bombings that hit the country barely twelve years ago, amputated from a part of its territory - Kosovo - which it considers to be the cradle of its nation (Pristina 2018). The Serbian people today has one of the lowest standards of living in Europe, leading many of its young people to emigrate, especially the most qualified.
Meanwhile, the Serbian government is pursuing EU membership while developing a privileged - and much-criticized - relationship with Russia, also Orthodox and a major supplier of cheap gas and oil.

Historical background
In 1217 Serbia broke away from the Byzantine Empire. A powerful Serbian state was established in the Middle Ages, reaching its peak in the 14th century under the reign of Emperor Stefan Dušan. In the 14th and 15th centuries, Serbia was gradually attacked by the Ottomans and remained in their possession from 1459 until the 19th century. Following a first uprising against the Turks in 1804, and a second in 1815, a principality of Serbia was created, autonomous from the Sublime Porte in 1830.

In 1878, after more than 400 years of Ottoman occupation, the Congress of Berlin granted independence to Serbia, which was officially recognized in 1882 (Troude 2006). Modern Serbia developed at the beginning of the 20th century under the Francophile king Peter I of Serbia, who came to the throne in 1903. This king promulgated a new constitution, the most democratic and liberal in Europe after that of Great Britain (ibid). This constitution allows:

- the creation of a British-style constitutional monarchy
- freedom of the press (Lutard 1998)
- the establishment of trade unions and advanced social laws (ibid)

This freedom was the basis for a wide range of cultural activities. The regime of freedom continued until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. However, following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia, followed by the German Empire's entry into the war against the allied countries Russia and France. In turn, the Ottoman Empire sides with the Germans and attacks Russia. The First World War was launched.
Serbia was liberated in 1918 by the Serbian army supported by the Allied forces. The southern Slavs were then united through the constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which became the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929. From 1921 onwards, France pushed Peter I of Serbia to establish a more centralizing and authoritarian regime, with the aim of fighting the risk of communist contamination, thus putting an end to the freedoms enshrined in the 1903 constitution (ibid).
At the beginning of World War II, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was neutral, but Nazi Germany invaded it in 1941. Liberated in 1945 thanks to the internal resistance led by Tito and supported by the Allies, Yugoslavia adopted a communist regime within the framework of a Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, not subordinated to the Soviet Union. In 1955 Tito launched the non-aligned countries movement in collaboration with the Indian Nehru, the Indonesian Sukarno and the Egyptian Nasser (Feugas 2014).
The gradual dislocation of Yugoslavia began with the independence of Slovenia and Croatia in June 1991, followed by that of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992. A prolonged armed conflict between the different peoples began and only ended with the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999. Montenegro, with which Serbia still formed the Federation of Yugoslavia,

decided to leave the union with its neighbor in 2006. From that year onwards, Serbia is fully independent but has to deal with a conflict situation in Kosovo, a former autonomous province of Serbia which declared its independence unilaterally in 2008.

Fifty years of socialist self-rule and ten years of war and economic sanctions

The Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, proclaimed in November 1945, although built on the Marxist-Leninist model, has occupied a special place within the communist world. Having never joined the Warsaw Pact, unlike all the communist countries of Eastern Europe, it has developed since 1950 a specific system known as **self-management**, opposed to the highly centralized and bureaucratic Soviet economic model. With a high level of autonomy, this system, called "market socialism" at its peak between 1965 and 1971, placed the management of companies in the hands of the employees, allowed for competition between companies and integrated the notion of profitability, both in the industrial and agricultural sectors. The Yugoslav experience was followed sympathetically by the Western world. The Yugoslav economic model resulted in a purchasing power and a standard of living significantly higher than that of the populations of the Eastern bloc: the GDP per capita in Yugoslavia reached that of Spain and Greece and exceeded that of Portugal. Between 1952 and the end of the 1970s, average GDP growth in Yugoslavia was about 6%, higher than in the Soviet Union or Western European countries (Marcellin 2019). Yugoslavs enjoyed freedoms unknown in the East, including the freedom to travel abroad. The permission to emigrate limited unemployment and resulted in a significant source of income (money transfer from abroad). Germany, Austria, Italy and Switzerland received hundreds of thousands of Yugoslav workers (called "gestarbeiter" in West Germany) whose remittances were a considerable source of income for the country. The Adriatic coast of socialist Yugoslavia was also a popular tourist destination for many Europeans. After the dissolution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Balkan War, the economy collapsed. Serbia, which in 1989 comprised one third of the Yugoslav population, was subjected to economic sanctions by the international community. A first period of sanctions lasted from 1991 to 1995, severely affecting the country's economic situation. Then, due to the war between Serbia and the Kosovan independence fighters, another set of economic sanctions was put in place between 1996 and 2001. During this conflict with Kosovo, Serbia was bombed by NATO, which caused extensive damage

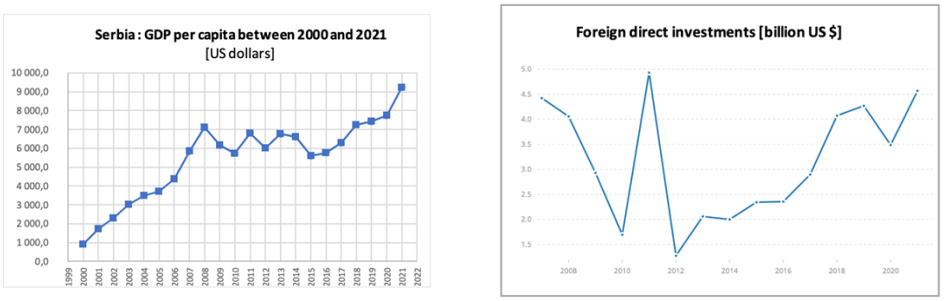

Figure 4.1: The World Bank, Open Data, 2022

to the country's infrastructure and industrial sites. The deterioration of the economic situation was reinforced by the loss of export markets, which were taken over by companies from other European countries.

Re-entry into the international community in a difficult economic context

Since the departure of President Slobodan Milosevic, who was arrested in 2001 and transferred to The Hague to be judged by the International Criminal Tribunal, and with the end of sanctions, Serbia has experienced a period of significant growth and has seen the arrival of major foreign investors (SDA 2023) from the West (Fiat-Chrysler, Siemens, Bosch, Philip Morris, Michelin, Coca-Cola, Lafarge-Holcim...) as well as from Russia and China, the former in the energy sector (Gazprom, Lukoil) and the latter in the metallurgy sector. During this growth phase, Serbia was nicknamed the "Balkan Tiger". Nevertheless, the GDP per capita in 2006 did not exceed that of 1990.

After a decade of strong growth, Serbia suffered the effects of the 2008 global economic crisis, entering a recession for many years. During this period, the unemployment rate exceeded 20% of the working population and reached 26% in 2012, compared to 11% in the European Union (Eurostat 2023). The situation began to improve in 2015 with the return of foreign investment, particularly from Middle Eastern countries. From that year onwards, the unemployment rate fell below 20% and was around 10% in 2020 (7% in the European Union, ibid). The Serbian government encourages foreign investments by means of public aid according to the jobs created and by adopting laws and regulations that have become more flexible. The 2020 health crisis (Covid-19) also had a negative effect on the Serbian economy, but given the smaller share of tourism in GDP, this effect was less felt than in other European countries.

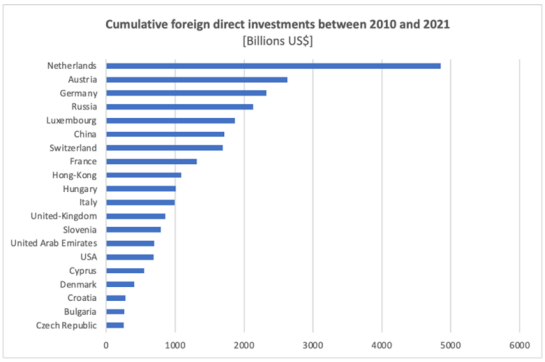

Figure 4.2: Origin of investments over the period 2010-2021 by country (National Bank of Serbia, 2021)

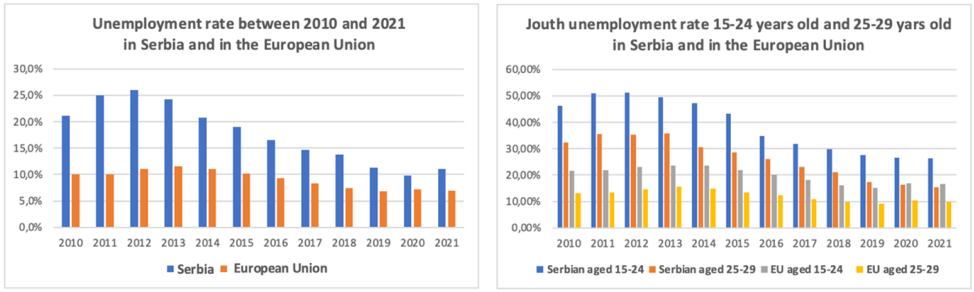

Figure 4.3: Eurostat, 2022

In terms of energy and in a very tense global context, Serbia benefits from particularly favorable agreements with Russia. Serbia currently imports 81% of its gas and 18% of its oil and oil derivatives from Russia. The renewal of the agreements between the two countries, which took place in May 2022, ensures the continuation of an advantageous supply of Russian natural gas, at the lowest prices in Europe (about a third of the price paid by other European countries).
Today (WorldBank 2021), 57% of the Serbian population works in the tertiary sector (61% in Ukraine and 71% in the European Union), 27% in industry (25% in Ukraine and the European Union) and 16% in agriculture (14% in Ukraine and 4% in the European Union). Unemployment remains high (11.1% compared to 7% in the European Union). Young people are particularly concerned (Eurostat 2023): 26.4% of 15-24-year-olds are unemployed (16.6% in the EU), with this rate falling to 15.3% for 25-29-year-olds (9.8% in the EU).

Very significant informal economic activity
The informal economy in Serbia is large and struggling to be contained. In 2018, it accounted for 26% of GDP and 19% of employment, according to the Statistical Institute of the Republic of Serbia, cited in the report of the 109th session of the International Labour Organisation Conference held in 2021. At the conference, the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia (CATUS) pointed out that many young people are employed in the informal economy without employment contracts, health insurance and retirement provision.

High emigration, especially of skilled workers
Difficult economic conditions, unemployment, but also fears about the impact on health of a very degraded environmental context, are at the origin of a significant flow of emigration towards Europe, both neighboring countries (Slovenia, Croatia) and further away (Germany). According to the director of the National Statistics Office, Mr Snezana Lakčević, "it is the most highly qualified, the best trained who leaves first" (Dérens 2020). Indeed, as in other Balkan countries, many doctors, nurses and engineers are leaving Serbia in search of better living and working conditions. Serbian emigration to other countries, combined with a falling birth rate of 8.9 per thousand residents, compared to 9.7 per thousand in the European Union (INED 2023), is causing a sharp reduction in the population, which, after having exceeded 7.7 million inhabitants in 1994, will only be 6.8 million in 2021, i.e. a loss of almost one million inhabitants in less than thirty years.

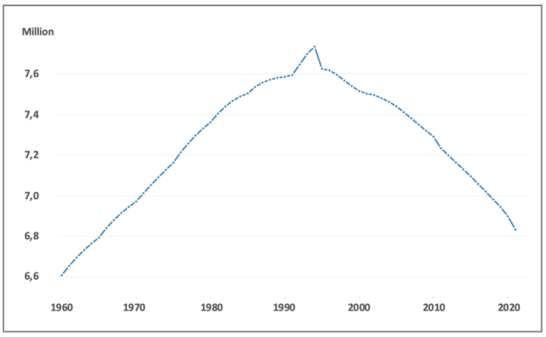

Figure 4.4: Demographic evolution (The World Bank, Open Data, 2021)

A catastrophic environmental situation
The motivation to leave the country in relation to air pollution is quite new and deserves to be described. Indeed, the quality of the environment

has become one of the major concerns of the Serbian population, both in urban and rural areas. According to the NGO Eco Guard (Euronews 2022), air pollution in Serbia and neighboring countries comes primarily from coal-fired power plants and private heating installations, to which are added local emissions from heavy industries or transport-related discharges. According to a study published at the end of 2019 by the NGO Bankwatch CEE (Bankwatch 2023), sixteen Balkan power plants emit as much sulfur dioxide (SO_2) as all 250 coal-fired power plants in the European Union. Air pollution is also increased by the use of cement plants to incinerate household waste, medical waste, tires and plastics. The cement plant acquired by Holcim in Beočin, northern Serbia, furthermore, operates its kilns not on natural gas, but on petroleum coke, a by-product of oil processing burning at very high temperatures (Ivanović 2021). Cheaper than natural gas but much dirtier, petroleum coke produces large amounts of microparticles, sulfur dioxide and soot.
Due to weather conditions, pollution peaks occur from autumn to spring each year, with intense smog episodes. Belgrade is reportedly the most polluted capital in Europe. Since 2019, thousands of people have regularly taken to the streets of the country, blocking roads, particularly in Belgrade, to denounce the quality of the air, to protest this internationally recognized situation. Indeed, the European Environment Agency notes that "the mortality rate linked to pollution in Serbia is the highest in Europe." (Euronews 2022)
But the environment is also suffering from massive exploitation of mining deposits. Although the Serbian subsoil, rich in precious metals and rare earths, was not exploited to any great extent until recent years, for some time now international groups - notably the Chinese group Zijin and the Anglo-Australian group Rio Tinto - have been interested in this wealth, particularly in the extraction of lithium, which is increasingly sought after for the manufacture of batteries or copper. These companies are buying up land and houses in order to have the necessary surface area to exploit these deposits. Entire villages are affected. The unbridled exploitation of these deposits leads to the cracking of houses, the drying up of drinking water, air pollution and the monopolization of agricultural land. In order to encourage the arrival of these groups, the government is adopting certain laws, including the law on expropriation, to facilitate them. The impacts on the habitat, the environment and the health of the population have led to a significant local opposition movement, but in some places the population is afraid to demonstrate in order not to lose their jobs (Rico 2022)).

Curiously, there is one area in which Serbia has a highly favorable situation: the good condition of its agricultural land. Indeed, from 1990 to 2000, due to economic sanctions imposed by the international community, Serbia was unable to import fertilizers and pesticides for 10 years. After the end of the sanctions, farmers continued the habits they had acquired, also due to a lack of means to purchase chemicals. This situation has made Serbian farmland one of the most organic in Europe.

The slow evolution of the EU accession process

As Serbia struggles with a dramatic environmental and economic situation, and suffers a significant and steady demographic decline due to a sharp reduction in the birth rate and high emigration, the government is pursuing its approach to the European Union for membership. Following its application for EU membership in December 2009, the European Council granted it official candidate status on 1er March 2012 (EC 2023). Thirty-five chapters of the EU-Serbia negotiation package have been opened to ensure the assimilation of the acquis communautaire. Of these chapters, 12 present "no expected medium difficulties", 17 require "extensive efforts", 4 require "considerable efforts". These 4 chapters for which "considerable efforts [are] required" concern: agriculture and rural development, judiciary and fundamental rights, justice, freedom and security and financial control. But one chapter is still considered to be 'totally incompatible with the acquis': the environment (ibid). The dispute between Serbia and Kosovo has made it difficult to advance the process of granting candidate status, particularly throughout 2011. In 2018 the European Commission indicated that Serbia's accession would not take place before 2025.

In a resolution of 6 July 2022, Members of the European Parliament deplore Serbia's "backsliding" "on issues essential for EU membership" (Europarl 2022). The MEPs call on Serbia "to make progress on the rule of law, fundamental rights, freedom of expression, strengthening media pluralism and normalizing relations with Kosovo". Moreover, the public seems to be less and less attracted to EU membership. A recent poll conducted in October 2012 by Ipsos revealed that, in the event of a referendum, 44% of respondents would be opposed to membership, with only 35% in favor (Euronews 2022).

A difficult balancing act between West and East

However, this is part of a difficult balancing act that Serbia is used to maintaining international relations with the West, the East and the

emerging countries of Africa and South America. Serbian diplomacy combines its desire to join the European Union with closer ties with China and the Middle East, continued membership of the Non-Aligned Movement and close relations with Russia. Since 2006, Serbia has had observer status in the Union of Russia and Belarus. In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, Serbia refused to support the EU sanctions against Moscow, which put it under fire and under pressure to clarify its foreign strategy and join European policy. Even today, Serbia is the only country in Europe to maintain air links with the Russian capital. The thousand-year-old sharing of the same religious confession - Orthodoxy - and the place of the Russians on the side of the Serbs during its fight for independence from the Ottoman Empire do not explain by far the rapprochement of Serbia and Russia... The Serbian commercial interest, notably linked to the purchase of Russian gas and oil, and the Russian geopolitical interests, which could take advantage of a deterioration of the situation between Serbia and Kosovo to destabilize Europe, seem obvious. Nevertheless, and contrary to what is happening in the rest of Europe, Serbia welcomes many Russians who want to escape the mobilization in the army and economic conditions worsened by international sanctions (Léotard 2022).

Chapter 5 Plarform worker in Serbia

The development of digital labour platforms in Eastern and Southeastern Europe is attested by an ILO report which notes, among other things, that "according to various sources, in 2013-2017, Ukraine occupied the first place in Europe, and the fourth place in the world, in terms of the amount of financial flows and the number of tasks executed on digital labour platforms". For their part, Serbia and Moldova have one of the highest percentages of digital workforce in the world relative to their entire population and the total workforce (Ibid.). According to the Online Labour Index, in comparison with Ukraine that occupied in 2022 the 5th place in the world ranking related to global online worker shares, Russia was placed in the 6th, and Serbia reached the 11th (Kässi & Lehdonvirta 2018). The percentage of Serbian freelance workforce was then 2.2%, against 3.2% in Russia and 4.2% in Ukraine (Ibid.).

Without any official estimate, there would be at least 100'000 people in Serbia engaged in digital labour platforms activities (Golušin 2020). Interestingly, the popularity of the digital labour market as a means of either additional or main income has shown a growing trend in recent times. Digital platforms provide work opportunities in a local labour market where unemployment is high, and few jobs match the qualifications held. Moreover, the income proposed on digital platforms are generally higher than that encountered in the traditional market, acting as another important driver. Finally, digital platforms are also a welcome source of income-generating activities for people with precarious status (i.e. those who face significant barriers when trying to enter the labour market due to their age, health, and discrimination (e.g. migrants, women, sexual and national minorities)), as well as for those temporarily unemployed. Overall, it is worth noting that 85% of digital workers combine work on digital platforms with other obligations. Therefore, the increasing use of digital platforms tends to reflect the economic and social shortcomings of the traditional Serbian job market model.

The landscape formed by the Serbian digital labour market can be described as mainly dynamic and qualified. Indeed, young people as well as profiles with a high educational level in economics, design, marketing, architecture, philology and engineering constitute the largest share of digital workers in Serbia. Turning on working hours, (Andjelkovic et al. 2019, p. 10) indicates that "83% of digital workers work standard 40 hours a week or less [...] those who work more than 40 hours per week are most often entrepreneurs or have a firm, and digital work is their main source of income." In addition, those are the hourly distribution of digital work: "20% works in the morning, 38.6% in the afternoon, 26% in the evening, 18% in the night" (Ibid.), as illustrated in Figure 5.1. The sectors of activity present on the Serbian digital labour market are varied. They include software and technology development (30%), writing and translation (29%), creative and multimedia industry (22%), professional services (10%), office work and data entry (6%), sales and marketing (3%) (Andjelkovic et al. 2019, p. 6). This is shown in Figure 5.2.

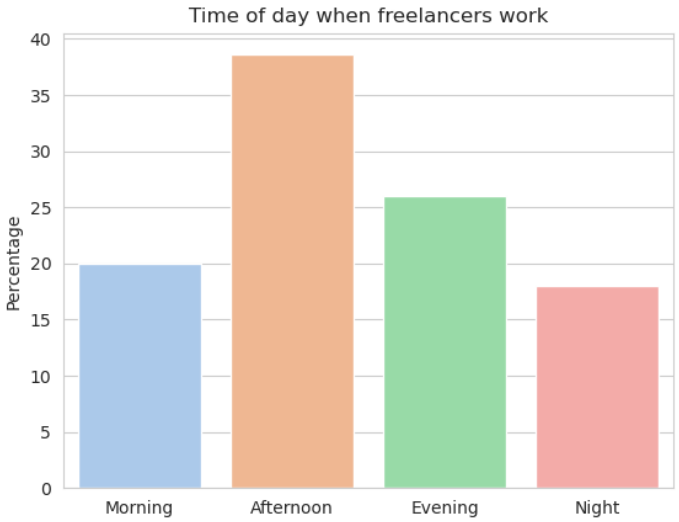

Figure 5.1: Time of day when freelancers work

Nevertheless, while the digital labour market has presented many beneficial aspects in Serbia, including being an alternative to the depressed

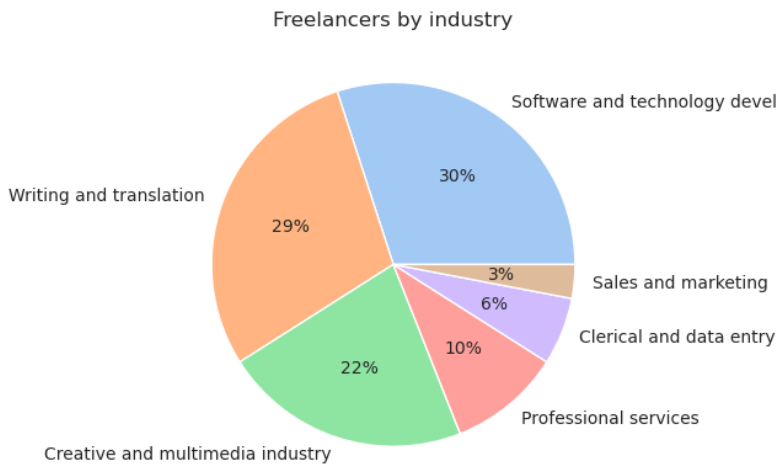

Figure 5.2: Distribution of Serbian freelancers by industry

traditional market, it has also raised socio-economic concerns, which are all the more relevant to study as digital market grows in importance. Firstly, inequalities based on sectors of activity or gender have been reported. For example, IT, multimedia or creative activities on digital platforms generate higher revenues than others, which has the direct consequence of offering a better social protection, since a threshold of one third of total personal income on digital platforms has been set to benefit from the legal status of entrepreneurs. By the way, only 18% of women work in these "high-income" areas. Conversely, the other sectors of activity generate little turnover and often feed the parallel market (especially activities related to writing and translation). Statistics show that women are overrepresented in these "low income" sectors and that they suffer from a pay gap. Secondly, despite the growing number of workers that access the digital labour platforms, it appears that the five most important platforms do not provide sufficient working conditions (Ibid.). Digital workers are not legally considered as employees or agents in Serbia as the platforms are not registered as employers. Workers are instead registered as self-entrepreneurs (above a certain income) or officially unemployed, leading to a growth in informal employment, which is already high in Serbia (20.4% in 2018). The consequence of non-registration has two pernicious effects: the absence of any social protection and the transfer of social costs to the digital worker. Consequently, the worker

will often try to perpetuate his situation by having a second job in the traditional labour market or being registered as an entrepreneur (54% of workers in this situation). Otherwise, subscribing to a social or health insurance remains the ultimate solution to avoid total social insecurity (54% of the Serbian population have social and health insurance, 26% have only health insurance and 20% have no coverage, as shown in Figure 5.3). One of the ways to politically reduce the insecurity of employment for these workers would be to create a legal framework, which gives them a legal and fiscal status that allows them to claim social protection, as in France or Belgium. Unfortunately, social protection, which is "one of the main legacies of decent work, has been challenged by the growth of flexible work arrangements and has been particularly weakened by the character of digital work" (Ibid.).

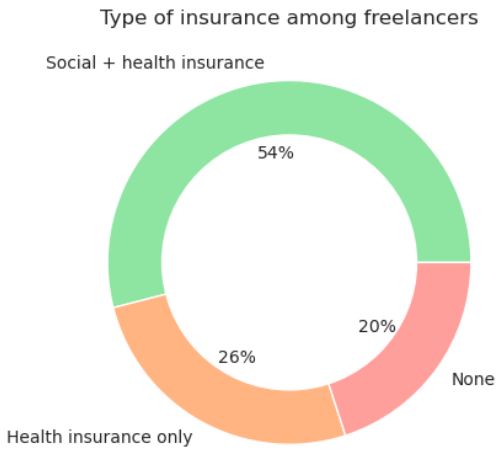

Figure 5.3: Type of insurance among freelancers

It is also interesting to note the fact that an "Association of Internet Workers" was created in 2020, which counts with the support of the two most important Serbian trade union organisations in Serbia, CATUS and TUC Nezavisnost. The main reason for the foundation of this association was the government's decision submitting internet workers to report their incomes earned from 2014, so as to tax them. The association agrees with the principle of taxation, but not with the rates that are considered prohibitive. The Digital Platform Observatory is funded by the European

Commission and gather trade unionists, experts and specialists of worker representation and action in platform economy (DPO 2023)

As stated by the 2021 Fairwork report[1] : "Although platform work in Serbia is recognised as a novel labour market phenomenon that increasingly attracts workforce, this is still an under-researched field" (Fairwork 2021, p. 2). In this sense, this master's thesis aims to open up avenues of reflection and investigate certain issues specific to the digital labour market in Serbia.

[1] A project developed in collaboration with the Oxford Internet Institute, the University of Oxford and the Berlin Social Science Center that aims to assess the labour standards and the quality of working conditions in digital platforms by country.

Chapter 6 Analysis

6.1 Freelancing experiences on digital labour platforms

The first theme of the thematic content analysis looks at the way Serbian freelancers experience working on digital labour platforms. This theme has been divided into two sub-themes, which are "motivations in joining the platform work" and "perception of working conditions". This theme is important in regard to the key research question because it presents the plurality of experiences, as well as general trends that have already been highlighted in previous papers conducted on the subject (Andjelkovic et al. 2019); (Golušin 2020); (Fairwork 2021). By doing so, it allows a better understanding of the current issues faced by Serbian freelancers on the digital labour market. This is a necessary starting point before discussing how the war in Ukraine affects their situation.

6.1.1 Motivations in joinging the platform work

While discussing about their motivations for joining the digital labour market, almost all the respondents mentioned the same factors related to the economic and employment situation in Serbia. Their main drivers appeared to be the high unemployment and the lack of job opportunities in the traditional labour market, as well as the low average salaries on it. By contrast, it seems that freelancing on platforms usually led to a higher pay scale. As stated by a participant: *: "When I started working in 2015, while the average salary in Serbia was around $350, the average salary for freelancers on platforms was probably between $700 or $800"* (F1). Likewise, another respondent affirmed: "*Even in the area of recruitment, for example, recruiters are better paid on freelance platforms than within companies*" (F8). For some interviewees, freelancing on platforms has provided higher wages, while also meeting certain personal requirements. For example, it seemed particularly suitable for students and home parents. According to a freelancer: "*Students would often do some freelancing beside their studies, usually on their third our*

fourth year of studies when they are close to finishing. Then, they would continue while searching for a job. And searching for a job in Serbia could take long (laughs), so that is why there are so many freelancers" (F1).

Depending on the locality and the sectors, job offers are scarcer and work is underpaid. While the biggest job opportunities are in major cities, people from small cities and villages are facing a much harder situation regarding the employment possibilities. As stressed by a respondent, inhabitants there are more likely to find work in butcher shops or in factories that produce, for instance, tires and cables for cars. Thus, he concluded: "*There are opportunities in that manual labour, very cheaply paid jobs, which will require you to have another job so that you can survive*" (F4). The problem surrounding the insufficient income in the local economy was also emphasised by another participant: "*Job offers are not attractive, especially in the teaching sector. The average pay for a teacher is €500, which is quite low, especially now that the inflation has led to the rise of prices for some necessities. Then, even if you get this job, you will have to find another job to survive financially, like freelancing on platforms, or offer some extra classes*" (F3). In this sense, freelancing appears to be used as a springboard in order to achieve an adequate income to live on. Therefore, the general low level of salary in the traditional labour market explains in large part why "*freelancers in Serbia have several gigs or several jobs, that they are doing simultaneously*" (F1).

Moreover, some respondents pointed out the fact that the difficulty of finding traditional employment appears to be more acute for young people with a tertiary degree, especially in specific fields. While it seems that there are quite a few job offers in the IT and programming areas, people with majors in subjects like history, or people who are doctors may struggle with finding work in Serbia and may need to go to other countries for more opportunities – unless they consider freelancing on digital labour platforms. As expressed by a video producer: "*From the beginning, I was aware that in my line of work it is hard to have a steady employment. So I am freelancing since I finished the college*" (F6). Likewise, three other participants accessed the digital labour market without having any experience on the traditional one. If the reason was partly due to the lack of job offers in their respective field, they also mentioned

the higher requirement specifications on the local market as well as the needed peer network. While searching a job in a café beside her studies, a participant confessed that she could not be hired anywhere because of any prior experience and the fact that nobody could recommend her. Conversely, she was able to access the platform work more easily, by becoming an English teacher for a Japanese company which did not require any degree. As an English language graduate, a respondent explained for her part that without connections it is difficult to find a job as a teacher in the public sector, especially in high school level where wages are higher than in the primary. Therefore, while extra classes and private courses for Serbian clients do not provide enough income, "*freelancing on platforms is probably the best paid option*" (F7).

Generally, it appears that teaching English on platforms became very popular in Serbia, since the activity is suitable for both professionals and any people having a high level of English proficiency. As revelled by most of the interviewees, this teaching activity is essentially addressed towards the Asian market, with China as a huge marketplace for English language instruction. If there is no official data, some participants estimated that since 2015 around 20'000 Serbian freelancers were teaching English on platforms, making this sector the biggest one among the freelancing landscape in Serbia. As a freelancer explained: *"Chinese companies wanted people from Europe or America to teach English for the lowest price possible. That is how the Serbian, as well as Bosnians and Montenegrins, and freelancers for surrounding countries, found their way inside this industry*" (F1).

In summary, the previous testimonies have demonstrated that the decision made by the Serbian freelancers to join the digital labour market is largely driven by economic necessity and the fact that platforms sometimes offer the only suitable job opportunities in the context of a saturated employment market that is inadequate for their qualifications. However, the singular example of one respondent who entered the market of the English teaching platforms after quitting her steady employment as a public official shows other relevant factors. What was striking about her speech was the way she said she had "*escaped regular work*" (F9). In her view, digital platforms offered her new perspectives in both professional activity and personal life. The unpleasant work atmosphere and her desire to discover a novel activity pushed her to look at other

possibilities. As her daughter was starting her first grade at school, she confessed: "*That also influenced my decision to stay at home and work online in order to take care of her. So after six or seven years on platforms, I did not want to go back to some office*" (F9). While she became aware through social media of the existence of these Chinese platforms for English teaching, she found out that she was the best-fit solution for her needs.
On another hand, as mostly young Serbian are forced to stay at home due to the difficulties in finding employment in the traditional market, and much more so since the pandemic, the platform work also seemed to be an opportunity for a lot of them.

6.1.2 Perception of working conditions

As evidenced by the following examples, almost all the digital platforms listed by the participants promote on their website the independence and the flexibility provided by the work they offer: "Control when, where, and how you work" (Upwork), "Teach when you want" (VIPKid) or "Organise your life and earn by working from any location with totally flexible working hours and schedule" (NativeCamp).

owever, it appears that the majority of the respondents do not fully enjoy these promised working arrangements. This is particularly the case for freelancers working on English teaching platforms who face several constraints. As stated by a respondent: "*Those platforms are not like Upwork. It is more like a regular job than freelance, since most of the time you cannot choose your customers and your own materials. You can choose your working hours but they have to be in their own timetable. So you cannot really work when you want*" (F1). But even within these types of platforms, freelancers meet different conditions and levels of restrictions. Therefore, some can at least keep some flexibility with their working hour: "*I can change my work schedule on a weekly basis*" (F3) or "*I really like it [flexibility] because I worked two or three hours this morning. Now, we have this interview. After that, I will study. And then, I will work three more hours at night*" (F2).
For their part, participants working on Upwork can effectively choose which working hour suit them best: "*I work my own hours, so I do enjoy flexibility. Sometimes I continue to work into the night and get up later the next day*" (F10). By contrast, one respondent confessed the false sense of flexibility and the constant pressure system established by

the platform for which he works: "*It is how much you work, that much you get paid. So it is in my interest to work as much as I can. And to be honest, there is not enough work for me. For example, you can choose when you would like to work and apply to certain jobs, but then, the company decides who will get it. This creates an atmosphere where people are fighting to get the job.*" (F4).

On the other hand, the independence that freelancers should have due to the fact that there are not regular employees seem to be relative either. Some of the respondents were required to sign a service agreement that stated their financial and working arrangements, and in certain cases severe requirements. For example, one participant has been instructed never to disclose the name of the company he works for, as well as the tasks he performs on the platform: "*Otherwise, they will fire me if they ever find it anywhere*" (F4). According to another participant: "*Some companies have the policy that you cannot work for any other similar platform*" (F9). Therefore, without being regulated, digital labour platforms are holding disciplinary power upon freelancers while establishing many rules that they cannot get rid.
Additionally, while some of their conditions seem close to those set in the traditional employment, freelancers do not benefit from pension and health insurance: "*This is totally opposite to the idea of independency. It is as if you were an employee of the company, but you are a worker with no right. They have the same power as true employers. If you want to stop working or have a vacation for more than two weeks, then you should notify them. It is not only not enough to check the slots. For certain platforms, you even have to ask for permission. Also, you cannot be late or even sick*" (F9). So most of the interviewees pointed out the dimension of control and the penalties that exists within the digital labour platforms.

Currently, the platform's control is reinforced through a system of rewards and punishments. The latter imply financial consequences, and in the worst case, a termination of the contract. Most of the freelancers are being confronted on a regular basis with feedback that clients or students submit on the platform in order to assess the quality of their work. According to an English teacher: "*The students are asked to give you feedback after each class. If they leave you one star, that is a complaint. If you get two bad feedback in one month, you can lose your job*" (F9).

It appears then that platforms' requirements are such that no error is allowed without consequences. As one participant deplored: "*There is no way you are not going to make a mistake. It just depends on its level of gravity. For minor mistakes, you lose a percentage of your earnings. For major mistakes, you get sacked*" (F4).
The perverse nature of the feedback function is that it constitutes both a tool of pressure that can lead to severe penalties and an opportunity to attract new clients through good reviews: "*It is really important to get positive feedback on those platforms. If you do not, you will not get any client*" (F8).
On the other hand, it seems that the rewards are few and more difficult to achieve: "*Every six months, if you belong to the 5% of the most popular teachers, your rate will be increased by $1. This is the only financial reward that we may get, and no other perks*" (F9). According to another respondent: "*If you are a really good worker, they will reward you by giving you more work*" (F4).

Moreover, in some cases the control dimension is also reflected in the architecture of platforms and the management decisions of companies. In this regard, it appears that the user interface of some platforms is limiting interaction between individuals, or even prohibit them completely: "*There is one part of the platform similar to Facebook where students follow you and you follow them back. You can only publish photos or some text, so that they can leave a comment there. But there is no other way to communicate with them, like outside of the class. It is strictly prohibited from sharing any contact with them. Because if you do, maybe students will choose to have classes with you directly. And that is strictly forbidden*" (F9). More than that, the profile or the name of other workers are often not visible, so that freelancers cannot exchange with each other. Even when guidelines are given through instant messaging application, groups are set up in such a way that no personal information can be revealed: "*They made a WeChat group, so that one teacher assistant in charge of fifty teachers could send notifications to more than just one person. As they did not want any communication between teachers, they turn off the ability to send a message directly to another worker. So you are a member of the group but you cannot see other people's profile and number to contact them*" (F9).
In some more extreme cases, freelancers find themselves alone behind their screen: "*I do not have a boss. I do not have anyone. There is no communication with a person in this job. You are just communicating*

with an admin. You do not know anyone's name and you cannot find out anyone's name" (F4).
It appears that stripping workers of their identity and interpersonal ties, and excluding them from any materialised structure, lead them to feel 'mechanistic dehumanisation' (Haslam 2006). While discussing platforms support toward freelancers, this respondent deplored: "*They generally do not care for you. The whole system is set up in such a way that nobody knows each other, so you are just a number. They can fire you without giving any explanation. That happened to a colleague of mine. They just told him, 'it is the final decision, we will not reconsider'. And they left the man... I mean, they are not humane, they just left a person without a job overnight. [...] They have workers all over the world, making billions and not paying taxes anywhere. And their attitude is like 'if you do not want it, someone else will'. So it is a pretty hard and humiliating situation. There is not any gratitude of the work done. It is like working with robots (laughs)*" (F4).

6.2 Impact of the war in Ukraine

The second theme of the thematic content analysis addresses the key research question, namely the impact of the war in Ukraine on the situation of Serbian freelancers working on digital labour platforms. This theme has been divided into three sub-themes, which are "market changes", "cost of living effects" and "other concurrent issues". The theme is important because it provides new knowledge about the experiences faced by Serbian freelancers during this war. By understanding their perceptions and concerns about this conflict, we can gain insights into the additional issues that may exacerbate the challenges they are already facing.

6.2.1 Market changes

For most of the interviewed, the war in Ukraine did not affect the work they perform on digital labour platforms. This is partly due to the fact that some of them are working in sectors or/and with clients that are not specially associated with Ukraine. A typical example is the sector of the English teaching that is particularly addressed to Asian clients. As expressed by a respondent: "*It did not affect me because the students that I have come from Japan, so there are not affected in any way*" (F2). However, if most of the wages in the online English teaching companies

remained at the same level since the beginning of the war, this was not the case for a few companies related to the Russian market: "*I know that the pay rate of one company for English teaching that had close relations with Russia was $10 per hour. But since the war, their price became lower. Now, they are paying the teachers $7 per hour*" (F2).

By contrast, the sectors in which the Ukrainian freelancers were already strong competitors are more prone to changes. In this regard, two participants pointed out that the IT sector might be facing more competition on the digital labour market due to the war, because of the number of Ukrainian and Russian professionals in the field that could switch to freelance work. According to a freelancer working on Upwork, this also applies to the area of video production in which Ukrainian are still fierce competitors, notably due to their low wages compared with other countries. Additionally, he showed his dissatisfaction with the fact that some of them "*are trying to evoke client's empathy to get the work*" (F6) before others, by publishing job posts in which they describe their situation regarding the war.
Moreover, only one respondent who are gathering data from sports events mentioned the slight change that occurred in his workload: "*Regarding the war in Ukraine, it seems to me that it has just made a little bit less work than before, maybe 5% to 10%. But that is really insignificant in this field*" (F4). So in general, the war does not appear to have affected the amount of work freelancers were handling before its start, despite a stiff competition in specific sectors.

Furthermore, as stated by two participants, the influx of Ukrainian and Russian refugee raised questions about the nature of the work they might perform in Serbia. While speaking Serbian is generally a prerequisite to access a job on the traditional labour market, it seems difficult for them to work for a local company. In this context, the digital labour market might be an option instead. As one freelancer note: "*I do not see any Russian or Ukrainian people doing normal, ordinary jobs. I therefore believe that the people who managed to run away from war are mostly working online. I have never noticed anybody working in a shop or in a company*" (F7). If this hypothesis turns out to be right, that could exacerbate the competition mentioned previously.

Another point brought out was the potential sanctions platforms might

take for Serbian freelancers, as the country has not formally aligned itself with the international sanctions against Russia. According to a participant: "*When the war started, I know that Upwork released a statement saying that the Russian freelancers would be blocked from the platform. I think it was also mentioned something about Serbia. Currently, Serbian freelancer can still work on the platform, but people are a bit scared of what might happen in the future*" (F5).
If the majority of the interviewees reported being unaware of that issue, one respondent recalled having seen a long time ago such a statement: "*It was about Russia and Belarus. I am not sure that Serbia was mentioned then. There was something written somewhere. There was not only a rumour. Maybe this was because Serbia did not immediately join the sanctions and that in the beginning there were some stupid protests [in favour of Russia]*" (F9).

Finally, if the war in Ukraine does not seem to have yet a significant direct effect on the activities performed by Serbian freelancers on digital labour platforms, some of them raise the point that it is perhaps too early to draw conclusions. As affirmed by a respondent: "*Maybe in 2023 or 2024 something will change*" (F3).

6.2.2 Cost of living effects

About half of the respondents mentioned inflation as an indirect effect of the war that affects their everyday lives. In this regard, they expressed concern about the steady increase in fossil fuels, electricity and heating prices, as well as daily necessities. As attested by a participant: "*If last year you bought some things for €100, now the same things cost you €160. So the war is not really affecting the digital market but it is affecting me, and I cannot do anything*" (F10). This sense of helplessness also echoes the view of one freelancer who explained that despite the general rise in prices, wages in the digital labour market will not increase. By contrast, he pointed out that people in some sectors of the traditional employment were able to negotiate higher salaries given the current inflation situation. Therefore, it seems that platform workers face a greater economic vulnerability, especially when their condition of employment does not allow them to negotiate their wages: "*We get around a 5% raise every six months, it is in our contract. But in between, you cannot ask for more compensatio*n" (F5). However, according to a respondent, far from discouraging people from accessing the digital labour market,

the inflation appears to be the main driving factor behind the fact that individuals are moving to freelance platforms. This is likely due to the generally higher wage workers receive on such platforms than the ones on the traditional labour market. Therefore, the core of the problem is that the bargaining power of freelancers is relatively weak compared to the employees of one who can rely on a union base.

Additionally, two participants stressed that the influx of Ukrainian and Russian refugees, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, contributed to the sharp increase in rent prices. According to a respondent: *"If you want to work in the private sector as an English teacher, you would need to invest at least half of your day to get maybe €400, which is nothing. Since the situation in Ukraine brought many refugees in Serbia, renting an apartment for a month currently costs between €500 to €600. So you cannot survive with that salary*" (F7).

6.2.3 Other concurrent issues

It is important to note that different context layers have blurred the lines of this research. The stiffer competition and the substantial income decline that some interviewed freelancers have experienced in the last few years result from several factors. Therefore, while speaking about the effects of the war in Ukraine, they could not help but notice other major events that have had significant impacts on the work they perform on platforms. These events can be understood as concurrent issues to this war. Sometimes they even intersect with each other.

The pandemic

For some respondents, the COVID-19 crisis has considerably disrupted the activities they were doing. As a result, the pandemic has led to a sharp decline in work opportunities, and accompanying compensation, especially in specific sectors of the digital labour market. As confessed by a freelancer gathering data from sports events: "*During the whole pandemic period, there were no sports at all. This affected me much more than the war in Ukraine. [...] For the entire year of 2020, I only received income for the first two month*s" (F4). This testimony shows, once again, the economic vulnerability faced by freelancers in times of crisis, as well as the lack of support they have in the platform economy.

For another participant working on the sector of video production, also the pandemic rather than the war has severely affected the business he was doing through Upwork in terms of amount of work and income. While the sector of video production has been experiencing increased competition for several years, the COVID-19 crisis has caused a shortage of job offers on the platform that has sometimes led many freelancers in his field to compete for only one job post per day. Paradoxically, since a lot of people lost their job on the traditional labour market, the pandemic period acted like a catalyst, thereby increasing the number of freelancers on the digital one despite the lack of work opportunities. In this regard, the video producer asserted: "*After summer 2020, when the activity was slowly getting back, everyone went online. This was not good for me who have already been on platforms for a lot of years. Then, further enhancing competition has led to lower prices every day*" (F6).
Apart from the income and competition issues, he has experienced another difficulty that refers to the global production network. Since his main clients used to be Chinese companies, he was accustomed to receiving the product to shoot in two days from China. But the pandemic which affected the international shipping led the Chinese companies to change their logistics in order to optimise the means of transport and deliver the product as fast as possible to their service providers. According to the freelancer: "*During the pandemic, the same product travelled for three weeks because the companies had to wait for the planes in order to maintain the price of the shipping. But Chinese do not want to wait (laughs), so they manage to send their goods exclusively by large ships and containers to the United States, where they are currently stored in big storage. Therefore, it now appears expensive for them to bring the goods back to Serbi.*" (F6). This changing situation has led to a privileged relationship between Chinese companies and American freelancers who became major competitors in this specific market to the detriment of European video producers. This example is particularly interesting because it shows how an international crisis impacts global supply chains, with companies that seek to modify their logistic strategy in order to minimise charges. Consequently, these changes affect the employment landscape in which the digital labour market is part of.

Chinese platforms collapse

Another major event which has suddenly and severely affected the En-

glish teaching freelancers is what some of them called 'the Chinese crash'. This refers to the collapse of the industry of online tutoring in China after the government has banned private tutoring for elementary subjects taught at school, in order to reduce educational costs and promote birthrate (Reuters 2021). As explained by a respondent: "*In the past ten years, it was totally normal that all Chinese kids study English online in supplement of their regular classes at school. It was a cultural specificity, a growing phenomenon. But from August 2021, the government of China released a policy ordering the reduction of students' extracurricular classes, and especially advising students not to take English classes anymore*" (F9). For the respondents, the reasons behind this policy reflect other concerns than the declining birthrate: "*The Chinese State rulers wanted to prevent the westernization of their population. That is what they called it. They felt as if native-speaker teachers influenced children's attitudes, and that could be a potential danger*" (F7); "*These platforms became such huge companies, that they even went to stock market. There were also lots of foreign investments. Platforms were not only Chinese by the capital and the ownership. This industry grew up so much that the Chinese government thought that something was going wrong*" (F9).

The restrictions imposed by the Chinese government has therefore led most of the companies to reduce the number of their teachers, while others have had to close. This situation had significant impacts on the working conditions of the freelancers, who already faced the usual instability of the platform economy: "*My school shut down past November without any announcements. One day, I just woke up and when I entered the platform it was written 'from today we are suspending our classes'. There was no other formal email. And of course, we knew that we will not be paid for that month, or even for the month before. Also, students who paid in advance, and most of people were paying in advance the packages of classes, their money disappeared just like ours*" (F9).
For this respondent, the situation was such that she did not have an additional job and source of income due to the directives of her company which had forbidden that. While the system of digital labour makes freelancers dependent to the platform, they do not get any support and compensation once the platform closes, or worst, disappears. A few times later, the domain name for the company's website was erased and it was impossible to ask for further detailed information: "*You have no email from financial department, nor the number of someone in the company. A few days later, we just received a WeChat message from the teacher*

assistant saying that the management run away with all the money and that she was wishing us all the best in life" (F9).
Generally, the architecture of the platforms and the management style, when there is one, are designed in such a way that no freelancer can ever claim their money back, or simply calling for better working conditions. Regarding the previous example, a parallel may be drawn here with the phenomenon of "rug pulls" in the cryptocurrency sector, when a development team suddenly abandons a project by keeping the money of the investors (Valibhay 2022). In the same way, some platforms shut down and disappear without giving the money back to the teachers and students. While experts pointed out that scams appear in the cryptocurrency industry because of the lack of financial regulation (Ibid.), the same failure might exist in the platform economy thus explaining the existence of a phenomenon which borders illegality.

Finally, the Chinese platforms collapse led to what some participants called an 'inflation of teachers'. Rather than the war in Ukraine, it appears that the Chinese crash disturbed much more the digital labour market. According to a respondent: "*I do not think it [the war in Ukraine] has influence in a major way the market. I would say that the Chinese government has had probably one of the largest impacts on the market, and not just only among the English teachers. Because the people who were teaching could not find a job, they started doing some other work as designers or SEO content writers. So the other sectors felt inflation*" (F1).

Chapter 7 Conclusion

The aim of this exploratory study was to analyse the effects of the war in Ukraine on the situation of Serbian freelancers working on digital labour platforms. On the one hand, the analysis of the ten interviews revealed that the war in Ukraine did not affect significantly the digital labour market and the freelancers in Serbia, but had an impact on some specific sectors. According to the respondents, the two most affected sectors are IT and video production, due to the prior existing competition among Serbians, that has been exacerbated by Ukrainians joining these markets. Since the most significant part of freelancers are English teachers working for Asian companies, especially for the Chinese market, the impact of the war in Ukraine has been limited in Serbia because Ukrainians are not involved in this sector. English teaching platforms from Russia might have been the most affected as at least one of them had to shut down.
On the other hand, the analysis showed that the war in Ukraine has had relevant indirect effects on the cost of living of Serbian freelancers. According to the respondents, this has been reflected in an increase of existing inflation in Europe, leading to a rise in the prices of essential goods. Since they are responsible for their business expenses and their work environment, they face an acute economic vulnerability. This example highlights what some authors called the outsourcing of risk to the freelancers (sources). Other participants also pointed out the increase in rent caused by the influx of refugees, both Ukrainian and Russian.
These findings, although scarce, provide a starting point for research that can serve as a basis for future studies specific to Serbia as well as in a comparative perspective with Ukraine.

More surprisingly, the analysis interview brought to light two other major international concerns that are the COVID-19 crisis and the Chinese platform collapse. These two events have had long-listing impacts on the workload of the freelancers, their opportunities to get a job in the digital labour market and their working conditions. A potential avenue for future research could be further investigating the close relationship between Serbian freelancers and the English teaching platforms addressed

to the Asian market. Given that the platform operates in an unregulated market, it would be valuable to investigate how government policies from a single country can have a significant impact on an international market, thus affecting freelancers directly within that market. Another possibility that arose from the first theme of the analysis would be to focus on what appears to be "platform ghosting". This phenomenon, characterised by the fact that a platform disappears overnight without paying the freelancers, seems not to have drawn attention among the scholars interested in the working conditions of platform workers. It is a symptomatic example of the lack of regulation and existing failures within the platform economy, which subjects and pressurises freelancers.

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