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Covid-19, Gig Economy and Employment in Greece: Threat or Opportunity?

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Abstract

Since early 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to the labour market, provoking high unemployment among salary earners, while helping increase employment in some sectors of the loosely regulated gig economy. As 'self-employed' gig work does not come with pensions, sick pay, holiday entitlement or parental leave, this trend is widely considered as a serious threat to workers' rights. However, in this paper we argue that the rise of the gig economy can be interpreted as an opportunity for the Greek economy and labour market. Starting with a brief analysis of the gig economy and employment, the paper first summarizes part of the international literature on the topic. It then sketches the situation in Greece, discussing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and trends in the labour market, and weighs the problems and prospects of employment transformation. The paper concludes with linking gig employment, higher education and prospects of re-orientation of Greek exports, related to the possible further development of Greece's gig economy.

Keywords: Gig economy, Covid-19, pandemic, Greece, employment

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Introduction

Greece is facing multiple challenges under the Covid-19. While public health issues have naturally taken priority in the public policy agenda, the negative economic impact of the pandemic is also part of the debate about post-pandemic Greece. In 2020, economic growth declined by over 8% over the preceding year (Eurostat data), while shops remained closed for long and customers have shifted to ordering consumer goods over the internet.

Meanwhile, unemployed or under-employed Greeks have resorted to various previously unknown or unusual job outlets. For example, in central Athens, at Syntagma square, one sees young people, on bicycles or small motorcycles, working for local restaurants and waiting their turn to deliver food to customers at their homes or offices. Their vehicles bear logos of digital platforms of food delivery, such as the multi-national company “Wolt” or the Greek company “E-Food”. At the same square, one can hire a taxi from among those working with “Beat” (a Greek app bought by Daimler).

In other residential areas of Athens, tutors give private lessons to pupils preparing over the internet through Webex, Zoom, Google Meet, Skype or Viber for the nationwide university entrance examinations. It is obvious that a change in employment opportunities and conditions is under way. Greek research organizations already study the relevant changes (“Dianeosis” research organization²; University of the Aegean project on “Covid-19 and Labour in Southern EU Regions”,³ and the Nicos Poulantzas Institute⁴).

In this Working Paper⁵ we acknowledge the threatening aspects of the coincidence of the Covid-19 pandemic with the emerging trends of employment in gig economy. We interpret such aspects and trends more as opportunities rather than an Armageddon for employment in Greece. We start with a brief analysis of the gig economy and employment, summarizing part of the international literature on the topic. We then sketch the situation in Greece, discussing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and trends in employment. We weigh the problems and prospects of employment transformation in Greece in the wake of the pandemic. Finally, we conclude linking gig employment, higher education and prospects of re-orientation of Greek exports, related to the possible development of gig economy.

² Dianeosis research organization, www.dianeosis.gr.

³ Project on “Covid-19 and Labour in Southern EU Regions”, <https://crl-uoa-youthshare.hub.arcgis.com/>.

⁴ Nicos Poulantzas Institute, <https://poulantzas.gr/o-kosmos-tis-ergasias-tin-epomeni-mera-meta-tin-pandimia-video/>.

⁵ An earlier and different version of this paper has been published in Greek, available at: <https://www.dianeosis.org/2020/06/gig-economy/>.

The gig economy

The Online Labour Index, provided by the University of Oxford⁶, indicates that between 2016 and 2019 in advanced economies there was increased demand for the following types of skilled labour: external associates of companies, “autonomous employees” (or independent workers) and free-lance professionals, capable to deliver services over the internet. They form part of what is usually called “gig economy”. Not necessarily being part-time or periodic work, employment in the gig economy attracts entrepreneurs and professionals who can actually enjoy a stable flow of orders. Mostly developed in the United States, this type of employment has also appeared in Europe. Gig employment denotes work which is performed by individuals and takes the form of measurable deliverables. It is a kind of work which is encountered today not only in the private business, but also in the civil society organizations.

Discussions of such trends have recently coincided with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employment. Questions have arisen over linkages between employment and innovation in the context of the gig economy, namely in the context of activities as diverse as software development, graphic design, the production of videogames, translation of books and reports, and delivery of consumer goods to households.

The task-based model of employment, known as gig employment, and the type of economy which increasingly includes such employment, i.e., the gig economy, pose challenges to the advanced capitalist economies, characterized, among other things, by large-scale salaried employment. Platform-based businesses and non-profits are typical ingredients of the gig economy (Torpey and Hogan 2016, Jacobs 2017, Kobie 2017, Healy, Nicholson and Pekarek 2017, Prassl 2018, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2019, Crouch 2019, Woodcock and Graham 2020).

The multiplication of gig economy platforms that use digital technologies to match workers with clients on a per-task (“gig”) basis has triggered new and topical research (Parker et al. 2018). One view holds that gig economy platforms boost productivity and provide much-needed flexibility to businesses and workers. The increase in productivity may be the result of advantages of gig employment, such as wasting no time to move from home to office and back and focusing more easily on one’s work instead of performing routine tasks. Moreover, gig workers may have more free time or enjoy flexibility in alternating time to work and time to devote to family or other social relations.

A competing argument is that the rise of gig economy platforms reflects the exploitation of regulatory and legal loopholes and undermines labour standards. There are risks related to possible enlargement of job insecurity and restrictions of workers’ rights, for example, rights of predictable working time.

Notably, the European Parliament has considered that there are threats to the “right to disconnect”. This is a basic right that would permit employees to refrain from responding to

⁶ Available at: <http://ilabour.oii.ox.ac.uk/online-labour-index/>.

phone calls, emails and other types of communication outside their normal working hours, which is what they were allowed to do in the past, after physically leaving office, before the spread of digital forms of work. It is telling that in January 2021, the European Parliament called for “an EU law that grants workers the right to digitally disconnect from work without facing negative repercussions” (European Parliament 2021).

Employment protection, based on labour contracts of fixed or indefinite term, and occupation-based social insurance, are two pillars of advanced free markets which will be under challenge, if the gig economy expands. The reason is that gig economy is based on tasks which are tailor-made to the needs of employers and carried out by staff hired to accomplish them remotely.

Gig workers, if highly skilled, such as software developers and accountants, often work from home. Other, unskilled gig workers, such as take-away deliverers or couriers, work on the street. In both cases, workers are often paid by the task, without recourse to labour law requirements, such as 8-hour long shifts, insurance contributions by the employer, paid leaves of absence or conditions of health and safety in the workplace (Eurofound 2018; ILO 2018).

For European Union (EU) and other economies, which periodically reached prosperity in the previous century through salaried forms of employment and Fordist models of production, the challenges posed by gig economy may be greater than for economies in which self-employment and small- and medium business enterprises (SMEs) were common (European Commission 2018 and 2019).

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, types of employment and workers’ rights in gig economy

The Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted on the world economy and the gig economy in particular. Demand for goods and services declined, and jobs, particularly “zero contract jobs”, in the gig economy were lost. However, as some transport companies (Uber, Lyft) saw their annual turnover fall sharply, other companies, e.g., e-commerce companies, saw theirs rise. Nevertheless, such shifts did not prevent very sudden, negative developments in employment. In the USA, the unemployment rate in February 2020 was 3.5%, but in April 2020 it had reached 14.7%. The rate had fallen down to 6.2% in February 2021, but still remained well above pre-pandemic levels.⁷

During the current crisis, such risks for workers should be interpreted in conjunction with pre-crisis criticisms for the downgrading of the working experience itself and the debasement of the welfare state (Crouch 2019). There is anyway an asymmetry of power between employers and employees. This pattern may become worse if gig employment contracts multiply. As already noted, the employee under contract is not legally entitled to a minimum wage, payment for overtime work, social insurance, paid leave of absence. Moreover, businesses in the gig economy

⁷ US Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>.

still function in a deregulated environment. They can be demanding of their employees far and above the usual level of requirements which other companies in regulated sectors.

Still, the negative economic impact of the pandemic is under way in the first half of 2021. For many people, employment in the gig economy may be a way out of the impasse of long-term employment. Among all those involved, obviously low-skilled workers face far more risks than high-skilled workers capable to work from home. Already before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, some private companies, relying on digital platforms (e.g., Instacart, Uber), had slashed wages. As a reaction, workers have turned into joining relatively new trade unions, such as the Gig Workers Collective (GWC). Unionized workers have experimented with shutting down apps at predefined time periods and with collective rejection of certain demands on the part of employers which were deemed excessive (Economist 2020). In pursuing such activism, unionized workers have received support from private investors who have turned to buying shares of companies which perform well not only in terms of profits, but also in terms of “social indicators”, such as the welfare of company personnel. In 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic was spreading, some companies in the gig economy met the increased demand for their services by offering gig employees better terms of employment.

Admittedly, compared to employees in traditional companies, gig employees are far less protected in terms of their workers’ rights. However, there are reports about gig employees which mention relatively high job satisfaction. Furthermore, it is not confirmed that highly-skilled gig employees overall receive less compensation than their counterparts in traditional companies (Telegraph 2019). Finally, women who stay at home, caring for children or older family members, may see gig employment as a source of income which is useful to complement household income. Clearly, however, women would be far better off, if they could rely on public, child-care and similar services, in order to become fully integrated in the labour market.

However, the International Labour Office (ILO) has discovered that, compared to typical company workers, those employed by multi-national digital platform companies in routine gig types of work, on the average are paid comparatively less (Berg et al. 2019). The higher the share of the income of those same under-paid workers which is drawn on routine gig employment, the higher the risks that they remain uncovered in terms of social insurance (health insurance, pensions). Moreover, given the geographical distance between employers and employees, the latter run higher than usual risks of having their deliverable rejected and remain unpaid for work they have completed.

In brief, there is an open question about the pros and cons of gig employment; the fate of gig workers is not sealed.

Greece and employment in Gig economy

Since early 2020, demand for goods and services has also declined in Greece owed to the pandemic. Given that, outside the tourist season, the Greek economy is a domestic demand-driven economy, such a decline has multiple negative repercussions, not only for the unemployment rate, but also for the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) that are widely considered as the backbone of the country's economy.

However, if properly formulated and steered by the government, a policy to promote the so called "platform-based" economy might be a partial cure to the destruction of SMEs. The vulnerability of SMEs is an unavoidable fact; but their size and organization and scale of production could allow them to turn around, i.e., to change and survive, easier and faster than larger-scale industrial or commercial enterprises (much like smaller ships turn and avoid obstacles more quickly than larger vessels). Greek SMEs could be salvaged, depending on how swiftly and suitably they switch from catering to a rather narrow domestic clientele, to accessing larger markets, abroad, through internet platforms.

Such a shift in the sector of Greek SMEs may have already started. Indeed, there is sporadic evidence that platform-based gig economy initiatives in Greece have increased during the crisis years. According to the aforementioned Online Labour Index (OLI) of the University of Oxford, which provides an online gig economy equivalent of conventional labour market statistics, in Greece top gig occupations include software development and technology, creative multimedia and sales and marketing support.⁸ In recent years, incubators, venture-capital schemes, accelerators and technology clusters for sectors like microelectronics, gaming, space and biotechnology, have been set up. Success stories include Taxibeat, a cab-hailing application recently sold to the German company Daimler for €40 million, and Upstream, a mobile commerce platform, which has received €25 million in European Investment Bank (EIB) financing.

Greece stands out among the EU economies because it still has an unusually high share of self-employed (or autonomous) workers. In the last trimester of 2019, approximately 28% of total employment was self-employment (calculations based on ELSTAT 2019). The vast majority (about 97%) of Greek business enterprises are small in size, each employing fewer than ten workers. In that respect, the production requirements and conditions of work in gig economy may not be unfamiliar to large swathes of Greece's labour market. The usually small scale of tasks of gig workers and the long working hours which they put in, are commonplace experiences for Greeks employed in the liberal professions, farming, herding or arts and crafts, and very small SMEs. Thus, for Greek professionals and the self-employed, the gig economy may not be a new challenge to meet, but a familiar opportunity to embrace. The opportunity may in fact become an external constraint or "given" to which salaried employees may also have to adapt, if covid-19 spreads in periodic waves. In that case, office employees, among others, will have to work

⁸ Source: <https://ilabour.oii.ox.ac.uk/online-labour-index/>.

from home, using a variety of platforms and oscillating between common and “gig” types of work, for extended periods of time. On the other hand, one has to factor in the uneven development of the Greek trade union movement which primarily, if not exclusively, caters to the needs of public sector workers. The spread of gig employment may downgrade job security and other aspects of employment protection. Salary levels, working hours, and health and safety conditions leave a lot to be desired in the Greek private sector.

Employment protection before the economic crisis of 2010-2018 was considered to be comparatively rigid in Greece (OECD 2020a). Yet, high levels of such protection were applied to people employed in central and local government, state-owned enterprises and large private businesses, leaving the rest of workers in a state not dissimilar to that of gig workers. Thus, the expansion of gig economy in Greece may signal the spill-over of risks from the unprotected to the relatively protected niches of the labour market.

Employment trends and the production model in Greece

The Greek labour market economist Panos Tsakloglou (2020) correctly notes that in Greece there were trends of diffusion of telework and e-commerce before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Such trends may be intensified in 2020-2021, if employers and employees find the relevant changes in working conditions mutually beneficial and if customers adapt their behaviour accordingly. However, it is too early to claim that such trends will become dominant in the market (Tsakloglou 2020). In Greece, such trends may challenge traditional labour contracts, regarding the type of work and working time, as the country is not advanced regarding the diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs). For instance, in 2018 only 75% of Greek households had access to internet –the worst case in the EU, barring the case of Bulgaria (Eurostat 2019). In 2017, compared to 81% of Europeans (EU average) who regularly used the internet, only 67% of Greeks did so. In the meantime, in 2017, ICT professionals in Greece constituted only 1.4% of total employment, in contrast to 3.7% of the EU average (European Commission 2018). On the basis of the above indicators, Greece still lags behind other EU member-states. Yet, there is room for improvement. Greek state authorities may want to formulate a coherent policy to diffuse the use of ICT among employed people. Such a policy could, of course, be combined with necessary social insurance coverage, so that the self-employed who wish to enter the relevant market niches are not left without social protection (pensions, access to public health care).

State authorities need to formulate specific policies oriented, not only towards the self-employed (or “autonomous workers”), but also towards small and medium entrepreneurs who may wish to enter the gig economy. Greek researchers Marili Mexi and Chara Kokkinou have shown that - after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic - various governments recognized the particular problems of SMEs and supported the digital operation of such businesses (Mexi and Kokkinou 2020). There are relevant examples in Argentina, China, Italy, South Korea and Latvia. One could

see the sudden tragedy of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a point of radical change for Greece's productive model, which already before 2020, did not use to create either many or decent jobs. Salaried employment outside the public sector often became precarious. There was a rise of part-time employment. And new businesses were started in non-tradeable sectors (coffee shops, restaurants, bakeries) and were counting on domestic demand for their services. In other words, the twin problems of anemic job growth and persistent unemployment continued in Greece after the Economic Adjustment Programmes (based on the "Memoranda of Understanding" with Greece's creditors) had expired in 2018. In April 2020, the labour force participation rate in Greece was just 61%, compared to the EU average of 73% (age-groups 20-64, Eurostat employment statistics 2020); while, in November 2020, the unemployment rate in Greece stood at 16.2%, the highest in the EU (EU average: 8.1%, latest available Eurostat data). The above data reflects the low performance of the Greek economy, resulting from chronic structural imbalances of the Greek economy and of course the long Greek crisis of the 2010. It is predictable that the problems of the Greek production model may deteriorate because of the on-going pandemic.

The Greek economist Manos Matsaganis, expert on public finances and social policy, argues that national economies which specialize in small scale, often personally delivered services, are characterized by low taxation capacity of the government, high percentage share of self-employment in total employment and gaps in the public health system. Examples of such vulnerable economies are the Latin American and African ones, as is the Greek economy (Matsaganis 2020).

As it is well-known, in Greece, there were major issues with unemployment, under-employment, precarious employment and shadow employment, long before the pandemic struck. Low-skilled workers, particularly those who just hold a high-school diploma (the Greek "apolytirion"), with no post-secondary education, are prone to fall into such types of employment or remain unemployed for long. The same holds for graduates of Greek universities which offer BA degrees with peculiar titles and no matching with labour market needs whatsoever. Admittedly, a comprehensive solution for these cases of unemployed or under-employed Greeks is not in sight while the gig economy bears further challenges, as we have noted above. Nevertheless, in view of the grave and long-term problems of the Greek labour market, job opportunities in the gig economy may not be discarded. The supply of Greek "autonomous workers" may be one of the forces driving the transition of Greece into a new era of digital economic development.

Stephan Goetz (2014) has claimed that high self-employment rates in total employment should not necessarily be perceived as a drawback. By contrast, self-employment, which is more flexible compared to salaried employment, can better adapt to changing circumstances and external stimuli. It may be a facilitating factor to increase total employment, contribute to rising incomes and declining poverty (this line of thinking may be also be helpful to understand why after so many years of severe economic crisis, the Greek economy and society have not collapsed totally). In brief, for Greece, a possible rise of the gig economy bears risks, but it could also provide opportunities, particularly for the younger generations.

Higher education and prospects of a reorientation of Greek exports

While, in Greece, there is a welcome effort to increase the number of openings in University departments of computer science, what is perhaps needed more is the transversal provision of such training across different University departments, in conjunction with training in business and marketing in schools of Medicine, Law and even the Social Sciences and Humanities. In contrast to the past, after the economic crisis of the 2010, graduates of such schools cannot realistically look forward to setting up a medical or legal practice with the relative ease with which their predecessors did in the twentieth century; nor can philologists or social science graduates realistically hope to be recruited in the public sector in the manner such personnel recruitment was done in the past, in periodic waves of clientelist hiring new civil servants. New transversal training may help Greek university graduates to find gig employment to steer away from precarious forms of work, such as working in food delivery or driving a taxi. The shift away from traditional patterns of higher education and towards transversal training in new skills in demand by the labour market would not damage training in the core of traditional disciplines (medicine, law, social sciences and humanities). It would enrich the skills of students in such scientific skills and would prepare them to seek employment, alone or in the context of a business company, in Greece and abroad. A recent OECD study on Greece points to similar directions (OECDb: 50-51).

In the same vein, until recently, the discourse on Greek exports centered on promotion of traditional products (olive oil, feta cheese, etc.). This strategy was understandable in the past. It may prove counterproductive in the future, as the organization of work becomes more digital and the demand for services, rather than traditional foodstuffs, increases. Promoting exports from Greece to Europe and the world may be re-directed to supporting the export of digital services, offered by highly-skilled Greek workers. Already today there are “autonomous workers” offering service in consulting, graphic design and translation, who are not physically present in the place where their customers are, but work from afar (from Greek cities or Greek islands, while servicing customers in Europe or North America). There is some evidence for such a shift in Greece too. Take the example of the California-based platform [upwork.com](https://www.upwork.com/)⁹, a Nasdaq company worth of US \$ 1.9 billion, establishing linkages between suppliers of gig-type services (independent professionals) and potential customers across the world. Doing a search on that platform, in order to find independent professionals based in Greece, gives interesting results. One locates in Greece the following available specialties: engineers, computer scientists, web developers, 3D visualization experts, marketing graphic designers, expert data analysts, copy editors, and others.

In brief, in Greece there is high-skilled labour, capable to offer many and varied services on the internet to international customers. A government- or NGO-driven nationwide platform,

⁹Upwork website <https://www.upwork.com/>.

providing information on such Greek high-skilled labour would be very useful to diversify Greek exports, namely to promote the exporting of services by Greeks. Greece's central Public Employment Service (the OAED) could assume the task of building and running digital platforms which would help Greek and foreign customers looking for professionals in the aforementioned specialties as well as medicine, law, architecture and civil engineering (in which there is an over-supply of Greek professionals). The larger significance of such a shift of transition to gig employment cannot escape anyone who has witnessed how the Greek economy has relied on a narrow range of externally-oriented services (tourism, shipping) and a wide range of services oriented to domestic demand. The latter proved particularly vulnerable to economic crises, such as the recent, and nearly a decade-long, one (2010-2018). It is high time that Greece, catching the train of digital transformation of the economy and gig employment, diversifies its production model with particular reference to tradeable and exportable services.

In early 2021, Greece approved a digital nomad tax cut bill. Aiming at attracting remote workers, the new law promises to digital nomads –foreigners and member of the Greek diaspora– a 50% income tax reduction for the first seven years of residency in the country (DW 2021). The bill reflects Greece's ambitions to diversify its economy into the digital sphere. However, the impact of this generous incentive is unclear, as several other countries are joining the tax competition. Croatia, for example, has announced that income earned by individuals who are employed or work as freelancers for a foreign company will be exempted from taxation (Enache 2021). Providing incentives for foreigners to change their tax residence is a welcome reform but hardly enough to promote the digital transformation, the rise of productivity and the increase of high-value exports that the Greek economy needs.

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