

## **THE LABOR MARKET DURING THE MEDICAL CRISIS**

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### **Abstract**

*This article aims to analyze the current situation in the light of the way of managing human resources under crisis conditions, on the one hand, and of the way of adapting labor resources to the new conditions, on the other hand.*

*The national and European welfare depends on the way people adapt themselves or are helped to adapt to the economic and social environment imposed by the new living conditions. We find ourselves in the midst of a crisis imposed by the pandemic that broke out in December 2019 and unfortunately, far from being resolved too soon, given the emergence of new mutations of the virus. Given this socio-economic situation, we intend to sum-up the way in which human resources have been affected and changed and how they have succeeded or not in adapting to the new working conditions.*

*We will consider the analysis of the evolution of the government policies on the wage system, the conditions of compensation during the non-working period, the health system and the way the reforms in industry, education and health are taken over.*

**Keywords:** *human resource management, structural reform, health system, social security, public policies.*

## Introduction

The health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact suffered by a sudden and almost generalized deterioration of the macroeconomic context and the business environment, have severely<sup>1</sup> affected the extremely fragile balance of the global labor market. It can be said that the enablers of supply and demand of labor have undergone unexpected mutations and transformations.

Abolition of global value added chains, total or partial closure of international trade flows and borders, temporary bans on economic activity in most sectors, hygiene and social distancing rules, restriction of the right to leave home, except in well-defined situations, bans on leaving localities and in some cases even quarantine of localities, punctual opening of air and ground transportation lanes for seasonal work and offers that sometimes came unexpectedly from EU Member States, etc. are just some of the factors with significant influences.

These factors have affected, especially in Romania, all members of the society, not only those active with legal forms on the labor market or operating in a “gray” area of it, but also important segments of the population dependent on them.

The Romanian labor market which is not limited only to the processes specific to employee turnover, has also particular features, in addition to the general features of market employment condition. The peculiarities lie, on the one hand, in the structure of the economy and, on the other hand, in the level of its development. In this background, two important aspects emerge, respectively:

- high share of unpaid activities, directly on a contractual basis, respectively of family workers
- high share of wage labor without written and registered labor contracts, namely informal and untaxed wage labor.

Statistics show that these categories of employed persons, along with self-employed workers, are the categories most vulnerable to the crisis, but also the categories often

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<sup>1</sup> The Romanian Academy – Department of Economic, Legal and Sociological Sciences, “Costin C. Kirişescu” National Institute for Economic Research Vulnerabilități ale pieței muncii și ocupării în contextul pandemiei Covid-19. Posibile soluții. Coordinators: Dr. Luminița Chivu Dr. George Georgescu.

neglected in public strategies and policies to mitigate the effects of the health crisis. In what concerns social services, the opinions expressed by Robert Palacios and David Robalino can also be taken into account and by analyzing the ways to reduce labor market distortions<sup>2</sup>, who argue that the integration of the social benefits and social services systems is becoming more important given future characteristics of labor market, where jobs will be maintained by requiring a low level of qualification and even subsistence.

### **The reaction of international bodies and national governments to health crisis. The first lockdown (February – May 2020)**

A study of the International Labor Organization shows that concerns are mounting about the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on more vulnerable groups, persons with informal jobs, those<sup>3</sup> in occupations and industries most affected. Furthermore, it should also be noted that the classic form of employment, respectively wage labor within companies, entails a variety and complexity that require appropriate approaches to each category.

Furthermore<sup>4</sup>, recent conclusions of the European Commission on the impact of Covid19 on the labor market highlight a series of aspects that could also be identified in Romania. Among these, we mention that the following are important from the perspective of future developments on the Romanian labor market:

- it is difficult to make long-term forecasts, especially in terms of adverse externalities on the labor market, due to the fact that the prolongation of the pandemic will exacerbate the shortage of the medical staff;
- the already precarious employment will be increased, especially for the areas of activity with high risk of labor contagion. On the other hand, the space for promoting policies to mitigate adverse effects will be narrowed, especially due to insufficient financial resources.

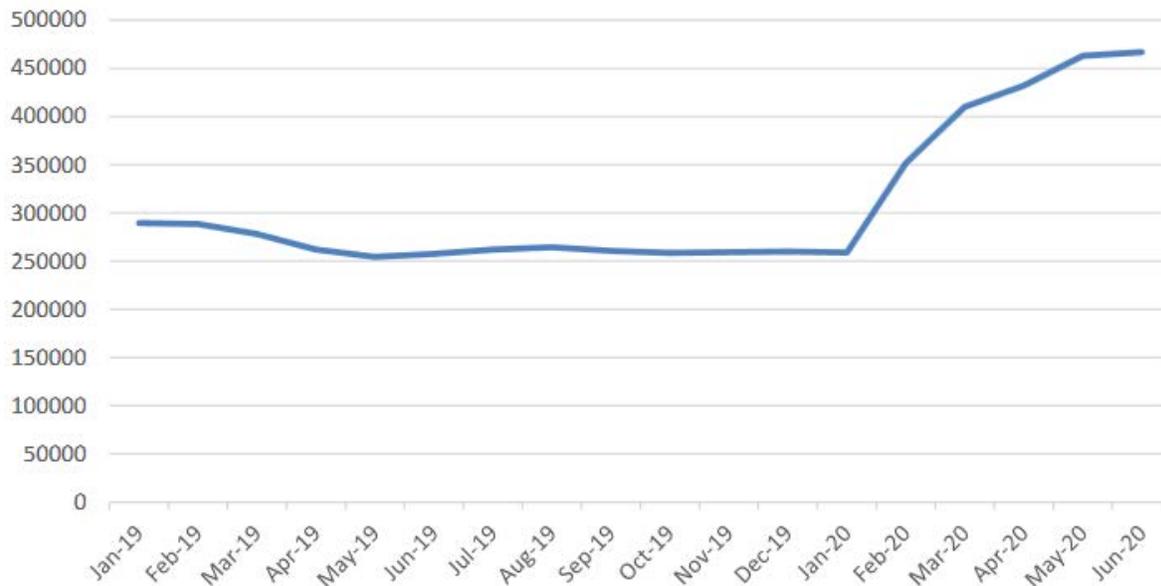
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<sup>2</sup> Palacios Robert J., Robalino David A., Integrating Social Insurance and Social Assistance Programs for the Future World of Labor, IZA Discussion Paper No. 13258, May 2020, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> International Labor Organization, Essential labour force survey content and treatment of special groups, ILOSTAT, 30 April 2020, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> The Romanian Academy – Department of Economic, Legal and Sociological Sciences, Institute of National Economy - Efectele pandemiei Sars Cov 2 asupra ocupării. Rolul politicilor publice și reziliența pieței muncii în contextul adaptării mediului de Afaceri. Coordinator: Valentina Vasile. Collective work of authors: Cristina Boboc, Simona Ghiță, Simona Apostu, Florin Marius Pavelescu, Raluca Mazilescu, Bucharest, May 2020.

Chart 1: The evolution of the unemployment index in Romania – January 2019 – June 2020



Source: <https://ro.gigroup.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2020/09/Impactul-Covid-19-pe-piata-muncii.pdf>

As we can see in the previous chart, if in January 2019 the number of unemployed was less than 300,000 persons, representing 3.32%, it can be ascertained that in June 2020, the number of unemployed increased substantially under the pandemic conditions, by reaching almost 500,000, respectively a percentage of 5.2%.

Throughout 2019, the increase of the unemployment is almost linear, starting from January 2020, a steep increase is recorded in January – March.

Two important aspects<sup>5</sup> are highlighted by the European Commission in this stage analysis, namely: on the one hand, the risk of increasing development/relaunch divergences between Member States if national policy responses are not sufficiently coordinated or if there is no strong common response at EU level, respectively an incomplete recovery in one country would spread to all the other countries and would die out the regional economic crisis; on the other hand, the pandemic period could trigger more drastic and lasting changes in global value chains and international cooperation, which would adversely affect the labor market especially of open economies, less developed and heavily dependent on the international trade, such as Romania.

<sup>5</sup> Dorine Boumans, Sebastian Link and Stefan Sauer 2020 -COVID-19: The World Economy Needs a Lifeline –But Which One? (EconPol Europe, ifo Institute), [https://www.econpol.eu/publications/policy\\_brief\\_27](https://www.econpol.eu/publications/policy_brief_27).

Table 1 Worldwide impact of health crisis on areas of activity

| IMPACT     | low                               | medium - low | medium               | medium - high           | high                                  |
|------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| ACTIVITIES | health and social services        | agriculture  | constructions        | art and entertainment   | accommodation and food services       |
|            | education                         | breeding     | financial activities | recreational activities | real estate and commercial activities |
|            | public administration and defense | fishing      | insurances           | transport               | manufacturing and retail trade        |
|            | public services                   | forestry     | mining               | communications          | means of transport repairs            |

Source: Organizația mondială a muncii, apud – <https://ro.gigroup.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2020/09/Impactul-Covid-19-pe-piata-muncii.pdf>

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO)<sup>6</sup>, the isolation measures that were to be adopted as a result of the emergence of Covid-19 already affected almost 81% of the global labor force, respectively 2,700 mio workers. Notwithstanding, the impact varies greatly depending on different sectors of activity. If we take a look at the report prepared by the International Labor Organization (ILO), the impact of Covid-19 crisis is estimated to be low in the sectors of health, public administration and defense, education and public services; low – medium in agriculture, breeding, fishing and forestry; and medium-high in constructions, finance and insurance activities, as well as in mining. On the contrary, the sectors where the impact will have a high level will be those in connection with arts, entertainment, recreation and transport; while the sectors that will see dramatic declines will be those that include accommodation and food services; real estate activities, administrative and commercial activities; manufacturing industries, retail trade, as well as those dedicated to vehicle repair.

In general terms, this crisis has shown us the importance of the digital transformation and the actual need of all those companies that have not started the digitization processes to start them as soon as possible. The labor world is immersed in a process of irreparable change where the experts of digital marketing, online training, data analysis or experts in cybersecurity and in various areas of health can find a wide range of possibilities. For many

<sup>6</sup> <https://ro.gigroup.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2020/09/Impactul-Covid-19-pe-piata-muncii.pdf>

others, the time to reinvent themselves has come. In fact, according to the competence forecasts of the European Center for the Development of Vocational Training, in sectors with medium-high and high impact of the coronavirus on the economic activity, between one fifth and a quarter of new jobs expected to be created until 2030 bear the risk of being automated.

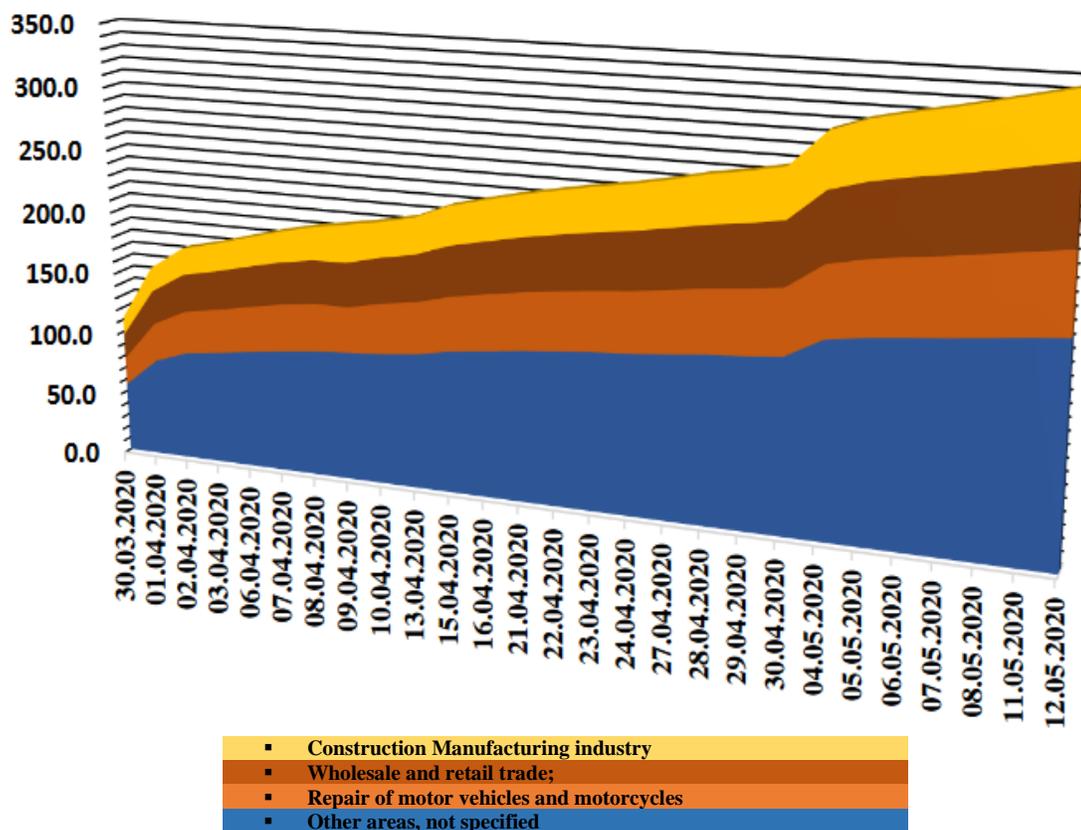
According to the data of the International Labor Organization Observatory, young people have been more affected by COVID-19 crisis, by suffering its consequences in several areas: the interruption of the educational or vocational training program, due to the loss of jobs and, consequently, of income and greater difficulties in finding a job. Specifically, as reflected in ILO statistics, a total of 178 mio of young workers worldwide, in proportion, more than four out of ten young people employed worldwide, have worked in the sectors most affected by the crisis. On the other hand, both technical and vocational education and on-the-job training have been severely affected, especially in what concerns younger population. According to a recent joint survey conducted by ILO, UNESCO and the World Bank, approximately 98% of the technical and vocational training centers have partially or completely closed their centers. Although there are some programs that have been able to continue online, there are many others that, either due to lack of resources or impossibility, given the high practical content, it has not been possible to continue their work. A new global survey conducted by ILO together with several partners of the Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth, shows that more than one in six young people interviewed have stopped working due to the employment crisis caused by COVID-19. For youths who kept their jobs, their working hours decreased by 23%.

The organizations and professionals face constant changes that require new ways of thinking and acting. In an ever-changing future, the agility seems to be the key to success. But it is important to wonder what agility means for a company? It is not enough to use certain agile techniques or methodologies, the real confrontation goes much further: it entails giving continuous value to the customer, in addition to empowering people to work more collaboratively, efficiently and in a more stable environment. Placing people at the center, making them real managers of change. This implies the need to change the way of thinking within corporate culture. In this background, temporary work companies and

service outsourcing companies are real drivers of the economy, as they facilitate the flexibility needed by the organizations which have seen their scenario changed overnight.

According to the analysis performed by ILO, at the international level, the most affected activities were accommodation and food services, while according to the analysis performed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection<sup>7</sup>, the most affected activities in Romania, between March – May 2020 were construction and manufacturing.

Chart 2: The distribution of terminated labor contracts per sectors of activity, in Romania 30.03.2020 – 12.05.2020 thousands of employment contracts



Source: [https://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/101676/1/MPRA\\_paper\\_101676.pdf](https://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/101676/1/MPRA_paper_101676.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <http://mmuncii.ro/j33/index.php/ro/comunicare/comunicate-de-presa/5951-situatia-contractelor-individuale-de-munca-suspendate-incetate,-la-data-de-20-mai-2020>.

## **National measures to control and prevent the effects of the pandemic**

All the states of the world<sup>8</sup>, followed quickly enough by Romania, adopted budgetary, political and liquidity measures to increase the capacity to respond the adverse effects entailed by the pandemic. The main concern was to keep the income of the population at a certain threshold that would not allow a drastic decrease in living standards.

By means of Law Decree no. 18/2020, Italy approved social depreciation measures to compensate income reduced as a result of the downturn in economic activity.

Germany launches the largest package of economic recovery measures, aimed mainly at supporting enterprises. Furthermore, a separate aid fund has also been set up for medium-sized enterprises and self-employed workers.

In Belgium, self-employed workers who can demonstrate that their activity was affected during the pandemic by having their income reduced, they can claim a reduction of the taxes to be paid and can benefit from payment deferral or exemption of social security contributions.

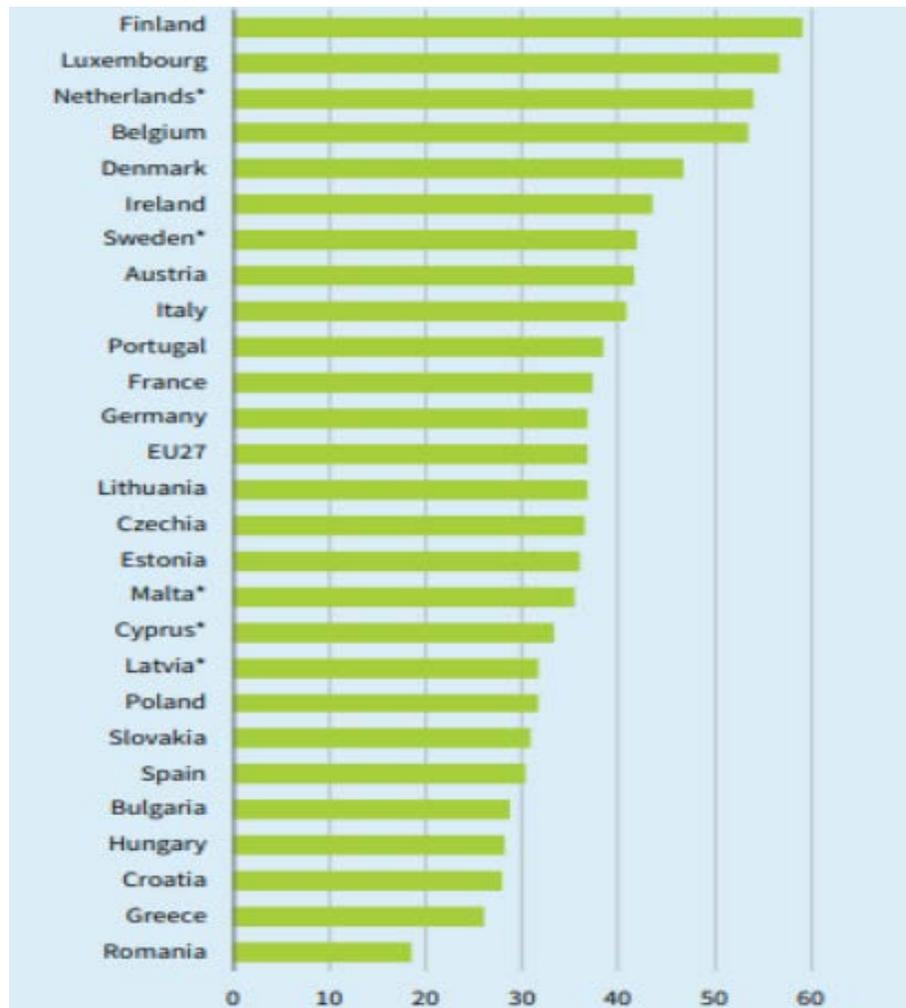
In the US, the aid program includes funds for households, loans for SMEs and large companies. Obviously, in addition to these, substantial funds have been allocated in the health sector. Furthermore, the amount of \$ 1,200 was granted to each person earning less than \$ 7,500 per year. Unemployment benefits are increased by \$ 600 per week. In France, 100% of the technical unemployment benefits are paid by the state, and payments for social security contributions and taxes were deferred from payment.

In Spain, a guaranteed minimum income is introduced to compensate for lost income.

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<sup>8</sup> Labor market vulnerabilities under the COVID-19 impact in Romania, Luminița Chivu and George Georgescu June 2020 MPRA Munich Personal ReEcArchive.

Chart 3: Proportion of workers who started teleworking as a result of Covid – 19 by country (%)



Source: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2020/living-working-and-covid-19>

In our country, the way to support technical unemployment both for employees with labor contracts and for liberal professions and self-employed persons was established by means of GEO 30/2020. Furthermore, certain monthly expenses were rescheduled/deferred, mainly those for utilities, such as reduction/cancellation/exemption of budgetary obligations. The Government has adopted the measure of granting tax breaks for those who pay taxes within a certain period of time.

Globally speaking, in relation to the number of active employees on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, namely 5,569.6 thousand persons, between March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and up to date, under the impact of the crisis, there is a dramatic increase in the number of terminated and suspended labor contracts. As we have already pointed out, areas such as manufacturing, wholesale and

retail trade, construction, vehicle repair and hospitality industry are constantly among the activities with the greatest number of suspended labor contracts, with all the activities related to them both upstream and downstream. Those who have gone into unemployment are constantly suffering from serious financial insecurity, thus entailing increased social protection measures<sup>9</sup>.

In Romania, there are 1.5 mio employees without labor contracts. Many of them work either for natural persons or carry out daily work. This category also includes work under the table, undeclared and untaxed work. The lack of labor contracts means that these persons cannot benefit from technical unemployment. In 2017, in Romania, there were 7 million persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion, but after the impact of the pandemic their number increased dramatically. Among those affected, the largest share is represented by young people aged between 25 and 49, namely exactly those who could work. An alternative to the termination or suspension of the labor contracts is represented by the work from home or telework.

Work from home<sup>10</sup>, long considered an advantage in the benefit packages of top employees, is starting to gain ground within more and more companies the business of which allows this. But for the employees who, due to the specific of business, cannot work remotely, the impact of the pandemic has added an excess of stress due to health risks. On the other hand, the work from home brings into question the impact on labor productivity, from the perspective of the employer, respectively on the employees' motivation and general well-being. Furthermore, even those who have benefited from this possibility have considered that, over time, labor productivity decreases substantially. On the other hand, the work from home raises a series of challenges.

Eurofound Report "Living, working and Covid – 19" published in April 2020 states that 37% of human resources in the European Union worked from home during the period with the most drastic restrictions in the health crisis (chart 3). On this background, Romania had a percentage of 30% activity from home – below the European average, being very far from

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<sup>9</sup> Eurofound, Living, working and COVID-19 First findings, April2020.

<sup>10</sup> Market study conducted by Happy Recruiter.com through Dora, the recruitment robot, on a national sample of over 2300 persons.

the leaders of work from home (Nordic countries – 60% and Germany, France or Italy). This fact indicates that Romania is not well prepared entering the digital era.

Table 2 Flexible working hours and supportive work from home for parents

|  |  |      |
|--|--|------|
| How will you properly manage workforce planning to continue work during the pandemic <sup>11</sup> ? | By flexible working hours and/or work from home  | 79 % |
|  | By granting leave to less busy employees during this period                                      | 38 % |
|  | By alternative leave of employees with children  | 25 % |
|  | By communicating in advance, for a longer period, the days of leave to be requested by employees | 21 % |
|  | By financial incentives to remain totally and / or partially in activity                         | 11 % |

Source: [https://www.pwc.ro/en/PeopleandOrganisation/Raport-HR-Barometru\\_Martie-2020.pdf](https://www.pwc.ro/en/PeopleandOrganisation/Raport-HR-Barometru_Martie-2020.pdf)

Along with this, the closure of schools and the relocation of classes into the online environment has added extra emotional and logistics pressure for employees in families with children. The work-family balance was strongly marked by the most common form of challenge, working from home. For employees without children, the lack of social interaction, imposed by the telework, represented the second common challenge. The employers consider and try to compensate for the psychological effects of work transformation by moments of online socialization, well-being and mindfulness programs. Obviously, the great fear of employees is related to the decrease of income due to the severe economic downturn. As the entertainment related fields and HoReCa field substantially reduced the activity and the number of employees, production, logistics and retail jobs began to expand. However, it is wrong to look at the labor market only from the perspective of big cities. For large companies, the process of transferring activities in the digital area is one of the strategic objectives in banks, financial services, FMGC (Fast Moving Consumer Goods), logistics. For these, the location in areas close to the cities but affected by the lack of staff, the pandemic can add extra opportunity by the possibility of getting out of the localization bubble and widening the pool of candidates, already over-requested in big cities. Therefore, companies can expand their recruitment area in small and medium-sized cities. Companies such as IT,

<sup>11</sup> HR Barometru – PwC Study (March 23<sup>rd</sup> -26<sup>th</sup> 2020), based on data from 91 companies in Romania. The scope was to provide up-to-date data on the impact of COVID-19 virus on human resource management policies.

BPO or call-center can hire candidates located outside their usual area. Therefore, for employees in small urban area, there may be the opportunity to access large companies, for which it was necessary to change their address to big cities.

At the same time, small and medium-sized companies, the financial flows and domestic processes of which are not as organized as in case of large companies, try to survive by having the advantage of flexibility, but the disadvantage of the employees' lack of experience adds extra pressure on existing employees. In rural areas, the pandemic has rather generated modifications in the field of logistics, due to the need to change transport flows to and from work. The changes in the workflows of companies, caused by digitalization, which is often forced, along with the emotional pressure of health risks already have a strong impact on employees' motivation. On this background, many people working in a certain field are seriously considering changing jobs after a year of pandemic.

### **Conclusions**

A peculiarity of Eastern European countries, including Romania, is represented by the massive influx of emigrants returning to their countries of origin.

After the outbreak of the pandemic and up to date, workers who went to work in Western countries tend to return home. The austerity measures imposed in developed European countries discourage the desire of those working in the respective countries. In Romania alone, over one million people returned in the first months of 2020<sup>12</sup>. Many of these persons return permanently, not wanting to leave for a long time. If the Romanian authorities succeeded in managing this wave of unemployed people, by directing them to the labor market, we could reduce quantitative and qualitative gaps in human resources. The sectors that require less skilled labor force, such as agriculture or food industry, could absorb the exodus of migrants. Otherwise, there will be great tensions on the labor market with severe economic and social impact.

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<sup>12</sup> Luminița Chivu, George Georgescu (coordinators) - Vulnerabilități ale pieței muncii și ocupării în contextul pandemiei Covid-19. Posibile soluții. The Romanian Academy – Department of Economic, Legal and Sociological Sciences, “Costin C. Kirițescu” National Institute for Economic Research.

Alongside these issues, the existing employees faced the obligation to comply with hygiene measures and social distancing, change of work regime (telework) and worst of all, termination or suspension of a large number of individual labor contracts.

In Romania, in addition to the affected employees, the labor market faces three more categories of issues:

- the high share of activities which are not directly paid, namely family workers;
- high share of wage labor without registered labor contracts, namely informal and untaxed wage labor;
- self-employed workers.

These categories severely affected by the crisis, are often neglected by public strategies and policies within human resources.

The persons who have gone to work abroad and returned to the country along with disadvantaged persons are categories extremely exposed to the current crisis. Furthermore, in Romania, as in case of other East-European states, low-skilled persons are not found in state aid schemes. This shock on the labor market will cause resonance waves in all sectors of the national economy. Romania is threatened by the decrease of the country rating granted by the international agencies. A potential transition to the junk category (not recommended for investments) would lead to a sudden and significant increase in the costs of financing the budget deficit and refinancing public debt.

Notwithstanding, according to the study of the Romanian Academy from the first part of the health crisis called „Punct de vedere: România în și după pandemie” (Point of view: Romania in and after the pandemic), considers a series of economic and social recovery measures<sup>13</sup>. These measures focus mainly on the following issues:

- reconsideration of the economic and social role of the state and of the public-private partnership. During the pandemic, it has been demonstrated that the appropriate government intervention can mitigate the adverse effects of the crisis;
- mindful investigation of the issued related to population migration and alarming decrease in the number of jobs in certain geographical areas;
- ensuring the necessary premises for the relaunch of the economy starting with the improvement of the population health condition;

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<sup>13</sup> <https://acad.ro/mediaAR/pctVedereAR/2020/d0731-Romania-dupa-pandemie-PunctVedereAR.pdf>.

- mindful capitalization of all opportunities granted by the European Union for the economic and social development of the country in the medium and long term;
- commissioning of the national strategy for sustainable development by 2030 starting from the reduction of social inequity and extreme poverty;
- set up a governmental commission for the analysis of the way of managing the bank capital, intended to cover the interest rate, the facilities for the grace period and the repayment of loans, interest subsidy, etc.

These measures emerge on the background of an optimistic situation expected by the European Commission which, in 2020-2021 winter economic forecasts<sup>14</sup> published on 11.02.2021, projects the following:

- the euro area economy will grow by 3.8% in both 2021 and 2022. The forecast projects that the EU economy will grow by 3.7% in 2021 and 3.9% in 2022;
- the euro area and EU economies are expected to reach their pre-crisis levels of output earlier than anticipated in the Autumn 2020 Economic Forecast, largely because of the stronger than expected growth momentum projected in the second half of 2021 and in 2022.

At the time of documenting this material, the world is facing the third pandemic wave. Notwithstanding, the European Commission considers that, after an economic contraction imposed by measures to limit the spread of the virus, the economic growth is to be resumed in summer and accelerated as national vaccination programs advance. The improvement of the world economy perspectives which comes to support the economic recovery is also expected. The economic impact of the pandemic remains uneven from one EU Member State to another, which means that the pace of recovery also varies significantly. In respect of the above, the European Commission has activated, for the first time, the general derogation clause of the Stability and Growth Pact, as part of its strategy to respond quickly to the epidemic caused by coronavirus. This measure allows national governments to provide a better support to their own economies, as budgetary regulations have been much relaxed. On this background, on 30.03.2021, the European Commission adopted a communication providing EU Member States with general guidance on budgetary policy for the following period. The derogation clause proposed by the European Union is extended until 2023.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/jobs-and-economy-during-coronavirus-pandemic>

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