A SILK ROUTES PARTNERSHIP
FOR MIGRATION

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A snapshot of some trends and aspects of the Gig economy in Budapest Process countries

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Executive Summary

In this briefing we look at some aspects of the Gig economy across the Budapest Process countries, with a particular focus on migrants from the Silk Routes countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan[1]. This briefing aims to explain the rising phenomenon that is the Gig economy while highlighting some of the benefits and drawbacks as well as framing some of the impacts of the Gig economy on Silk Routes countries. While the Gig economy does afford migrants some advantages in the form of the ability to earn money - and flexibility in when and how to work - the majority of high-skilled jobs are found off-platform. Locals with good personal networks are the ones who take these tasks. Migrants - particularly those from the Silk Routes region - are primarily low-skilled Gig workers, but much depends on labour market regulations in the countries concerned. In some countries, the Gig economy is becoming synonymous with irregular employment since the regular employment market is becoming harder to enter. Migrant Gig workers are also often some of the most vulnerable people in society with no social security safety net, no access to finance and limited training/opportunities for advancement.

This paper is not intended to be an exhaustive study of the rise of the Gig economy and its exact impact on migrants from the Silk Routes countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan. Neither is it intended to cover all the implications for countries of destination in Europe. Rather the goal of this paper is to highlight a few trends, draw out a few examples and underline where further research is needed and what further issues related to the Gig economy need to be looked at.

1 The terminology "Silk Routes" is used for those countries in South and West Asia who were invited to join and participate in the Budapest Process as of 2010.

What is the Gig economy?

The term "Gig work" has its origins in the US of the 1920s. This was originally used to refer to jazz club musicians who went from performance to performance and were paid accordingly. However, the term "Gig economy" became popular in the Great Depression as a way to describe workers juggling several part-time jobs or "gigs." Nowadays the term refers increasingly to app-based jobs or where those needing workers find those needing work on digital job centres/platforms. The tasks involved are also time-limited, and one-offs, so the relationship is transactional. While the origins of the term are Anglo-Saxon, in mainland Europe "precarious employment" is used as a synonym.

The Gig economy therefore refers to various forms of temporary work whereby organisations and independent workers engage in short-term work arrangements. The definition covers freelancers (independent people hired to work for different companies on particular assignments), consultants, independent contractors and professionals, as well as temporary contract workers (temps). Some work through online platforms, while others work with partners and contacts off-platform.[2] This reality is affected by very different regulations across Europe, for example. Gig work is often found through temporary staffing agencies while online job platforms - which are becoming more popular in the US and other parts of the world - are illegal in countries such as Germany[3] and Austria[4].

As we define the Gig economy, an important sub-division is between local and remote gig work. Local gigs require the worker to be present in person, while remote work, also known as the "human cloud", allows tasks to be done anywhere in the world.

Being such a broad category, the situation of Gig economy participants is particularly varied. Some people are earning a good income while others are struggling to survive. Some workers treat their gigs as their main source of income, while others treat them as secondary. Some Gig workers are highly educated experts and they actively choose this lifestyle, while some have few skills or qualifications and see no alternatives to Gig work. The Gig economy can also cover formal as well as informal work. When we speak about migrants from Silk Routes countries, however, the tasks involved are mainly low-skilled, time-limited, one-offs that are poorly paid.

2 World Bank. "World Development Report 2019: The Changing Nature of Work." 2019. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/195101548767451651/pdf/WDR2019-Overview-English.pdf

3 Pesole, A., Urzí Brancati, M.C, Fernández-Macías, E., Biagi, F., González Vázquez, I., Platform Workers in Europe, EUR 29275 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2018, ISBN 978-92-79-87996-8, doi:10.2760/742789, JRC112157. https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC112157/jrc112157_pubsy_platform_workers_in_europe_science_for_policy.pdf

4 Vitaud, Laetitia. Freelancers in Germany: Why Global Gig Economy Platforms Find It So Hard to Succeed. Medium.com. https://medium.com/switch-collective/freelancers-in-germany-why-global-gig-economy-platforms-find-it-so-hard-to-succeed-134ccdff651

Background to the Gig economy: its specificities and its links to migration flows

The Gig economy in a digital era

New information and communications technologies, such as smartphones and tablet computers, combined with ubiquitous high-speed broadband networks have revolutionized everyday work and life in the 21st century. Internet penetration stands at 69% in the Middle East[5] while this figure rises to 87% in Europe[6]. Within this figure, the population of nations like Denmark, Luxembourg, Sweden and Germany enjoy almost universal internet access. This increased digitalisation would be expected to produce a ripe environment in which the Gig economy can be facilitated and grow. The reality is more complicated since labour market regulation also plays a role here and is preventing expansion.

From an employment perspective, digital labour platforms are a new form of coordinating the provision of labour services through technology. Authors and commentators who claim that digital labour platforms have the potential to disrupt the world of work are split into two camps[7]. The first camp highlights the positive angle of boosting participation in the labour market through better matching procedures between potential employers and employees, while the second camp underlines the negative viewpoint by presuming that operators will circumvent national labour regulations and lower the quality of employment.

Figures on migration and the Gig economy

When we look at the number of total migrants from the Silk Routes countries, exact figures are challenging to attain and very fluid. By way of a sample there are believed to be 450,000 Iraqi migrants in the UK[8], 300,000 in Germany[9] and three million[10] in Turkey. Similarly, there are estimated to be over 500,000 people born in Pakistan living in the UK[11], 76,000 in Germany[12], 1.5 million in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)[13] and tens of thousands in Turkey[14], many of whom are aiming to travel to Europe and the Gulf[15]. Not all of these migrants are Gig workers, however, and some groups are very successful at finding jobs in the regular economy. Pakistani migrants, for example, often use their local network in the Pakistani community to find work and 40% have found a job in Germany[16]. Similarly, 40% in UK are skilled and working as health professionals, scientists or engineers[17]. Sending money back home as well as seeking the social respect of the Pakistani community are strong drivers to find paid work.

Figures on the Gig economy are even more difficult to attain since they are constantly changing and because many Gig workers move in and out of the Gig economy with great regularity. That said, we can highlight some general trends. Globally the Gig economy is worth over USD 200 billion, while it is projected to grow by 17% per year to over USD 450 by 2023[18]. This figure includes workers on formal gig platforms as well as through informal channels.

When we look at the ethnicity of Gig workers, many are from different ethnic backgrounds: much more than the average of the population. In addition, a McKinsey study found that 30 percent of platform-based workers do Gig work out of necessity or because their other income leaves them financially strapped. Meanwhile, 19% say the main reason they have a Gig job is to make extra money or cover day-to-day expenses. 55% of Gig workers actually maintain full-time or regular jobs in addition to their gigs[19].

As a result, quite naturally, people who actively choose their working style report greater satisfaction than those who feel forced by circumstance to become Gig workers.[20]

5 https://www.statista.com/statistics/265171/comparison-of-global-and-middle-eastern-internet-penetration-rate/

6 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20200127-1#:~:text=In%202019%2C%2087%25%20of%20people,and%20in%202013%20at%2075%25.

7 OECD Future of Work employment outlook.

8 Iraq Mapping Exercise. International Organization for Migration (IOM). March 2007. https://web.archive.org/web/20110716163637/http://www.iomlondon.org/doc/mapping/IOM_IRAQ.pdf.

9 ECRE Questionnaire on the Treatment of Iraqi Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Europe. European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). April 2004. https://web.archive.org/web/20070807230323/http://www.ecre.org/positions/Iraq_Quest_Summary_Apr04.shtml.

10 International Organisation for Migration estimate.

11 Office for National Statistics.

12 German Office for Migration and Refugees.

13 Global Media Insights population data.

14 https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/606909-gateway-toeurope#:~:text=According%20to%20Ministry%20of%20Foreign,12%2C000%20Pakistani%20immigrants%20were%20repatriated.

15 Prof Russell King and Dr Aija Lulle. Research on Migration: Facing Realities and Maximising Opportunities for the European Commission
Page 44. Table 6 - Top 15 countries of origin of asylum-seekers in the EU
http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/policy_reviews/ki-04-15-841_en_n.pdf

16 https://www.dw.com/en/why-are-pakistanis-so-successful-at-finding-jobs-in-germany/a-44083455

17 Fernández-Reino, M. and Rienzo, C. (2019). Migrants in the UK Labour Market: An Overview. The Mi- gration Observatory.
https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-labour-market-an- overview/.

18 Mastercard and Kaiser Associates figures.

19 McKinsey Global Institute. Independent work: Choice, necessity, and the gig economy.
October 10, 2016
https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/independent-work-choice-necessity-and-the-gig-economy

20 McKinsey figures.

Different regulatory frameworks

The Gig economy is different from country to country[21]. In some Budapest Process states there is a culture of informal work, while in others there are highly restricted labour markets characterised by corporatist structures[22], collective agreements and strong trade unions. The barriers to entry are therefore higher in the latter case. In addition, mainland Europe has a very strong welfare state and labour market rules - involving permits, restrictions and business licenses - while this is more limited in the UK, Gulf states and South East Asia.

Gig economy companies like Uber, Helpling and Deliveroo need to abide by different legislation in each country that they operate in. There have been many examples - from Uber to airbnb - where Gig ecoomy companies have not followed local laws and have been fined or even had their license to operate removed as a result. This difference between laws, policy, regulations and culture will continue to have an impact on the development of the Gig economy. Countries with a more laissez-faire approach to regulation and a soft regulatory touch to the labour market will be more attractive to Gig economy companies and workers. At the same time, the potential for exploitation, low pay and a lack of social and job security will be increased for migrant workers.

21 Bodies like the ILO recognise this, but feel that basic universal labour standards need to be set.

22 The countries of Northern Europe and Scandinavia are characterised by economic tripartism which involves negotiations between labour and business interest groups and the government to establish economic and labour policy.

Labour migration, the Gig economy and Budapest Process regions

Low-skilled work

The majority of migrants from the Silk Routes region end up in low-skilled work in the Gig economy. The ability of migrants to find low-skilled work through the Gig economy has both benefits and draw backs.

Positive elements for immigrants

Gig economy jobs can be deemed as positive for two reasons. First, the cost of entry is low. If you sign up, undergo a few checks, and own often inexpensive equipment – such as a bicycle for delivery services or tools for contractor apps – migrants can hit the ground running and find a job relatively quickly. Such apps in the Budapest Process countries include UberEats, Yemeksepeti, Delivery Hero, Upwork and Taskrunner. Second, Gig economy jobs can offer more flexibility.

Competition plays an important role here and both high-skilled and low-skilled workers from Silk Routes countries are not at a particular advantage or disadvantage vis-a-vis other nationalities.

The negative elements

On the down side, migrant Gig workers might have volatile incomes and, in most cases, very limited access to benefits, such as health care insurance and private retirement funds. Frequently, available jobs have significant related safety issues, as well as no training or career advancement possibilities. These negative elements are substantially more pronounced when we consider Gig workers who have entered the labour market through irregular channels.

Types of Gig work

Looking at current trends, while reports state that 70% of Gig workers have lost their income since the start of the COVID-19 crisis[23], there are increasing demands for food delivery, transportation and healthcare work, to name but a few. This includes companies like UberEats, Foodora and Talabat in the Middle East. A huge percentage of the Gig economy is made up of migrant workers. Iraq, Syria, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan are common origin countries.

The work is hard and time-pressurised, hours are long since pay is low and these Gig workers are exposed to dangers. While higher skilled workers have generous furloughing packages and can work from home during the Coronavirus pandemic, Gig workers have no safety net so they need to work and are often in the frontline when it comes to the risk of infection. Yet if they do not work, they do not get paid.

Despite the claims of Gig economy advocates that it allows people to be their own boss and choose when and where to work, there is a huge pressure to accept everything offered. If Gig workers don't accept jobs consistently, then they can be penalised and eventually barred from the app. This often means long hours and extensive control from a machine/algorithm with no human contact.

It should be underlined that the Gig economy offers more opportunities for migrants who are already within a destination country. While some employers in Europe and the Gulf states will look for seasonal workers to carry out specific jobs, there is currently no strong evidence that potential migrants in origin Silk Routes countries are finding more opportunities due to the Gig economy.

Digital risks for migrants

In addition to the physical risks that migrant Gig workers face, there are technology-related risks too. Third country nationals working in the EU, Turkey and Russia for example, are more vulnerable to challenges posed by digital transformation relative to non-migrant workers. Migrants are more likely to be employed in jobs that have high automation potential, and are thus at risk of disappearance, compared to non-migrant workers[24].

The following table shows that third country nationals make up the vast majority of workers in low-skilled elementary professions.

23 AppJobs figures

24 BIAGI Federico, GRUBANOV-BOSKOVIC Sara, NATALE Fabrizio, SEBASTIAN LAGO Raquel
Migrant workers and the digital transformation in the EU. JRC Report. 2018 https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/news/digital-transformation-challenge-and-opportunity-migrant-workers

Table: Table 2 Distribution of workers by nationality and mean values of abstract, manual, routine and RTI indexes across occupations in EU

ISCO-08 1-digit	Share		
	Nationals	EU – MCs	TCNs
Skilled agricultural, forestry & fishery workers	3,79	1,17	1,31
Managers	6,15	4,97	3,58
Clerical support workers	10,02	6,18	5,25
Plant and machine operators & assemblers	7,22	8,48	7,69
Technicians	16,79	10,55	7,62
Craft & related trade workers	11,39	14,26	12,60
Service & sales workers	16,79	16,82	22,43
Professionals	19,80	17,06	12,41
Elementary occupations	8,05	20,51	27,11

A recent European study found that non-EU migrants are about three times more likely to work in jobs with high automation potential than nationals[25]. Higher levels of education would massively reduce this likelihood, but third country nationals also have lower access to professional training. In Gig work there is virtually none.

After looking at the threats posed by digitalisation, it is important that we look further at the impact of the Coronavirus on Gig workers.

Covid-19 and the impact on Gig workers

While we have already underlined the fact that Gig workers are more exposed to COVID-19 on account of the jobs that they take, in times of extreme uncertainty the trend of companies employing Gig workers is likely to strengthen rather than diminish. Businesses will want people with specific skills for particular, time-limited tasks without all the administration and responsibilities which come with employing full-time staff. The first signs of such a movement can already be seen as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, a similar development in previous economic downturns is noticeable: the number of freelancers and the size of the Gig economy has increased in every economic crisis since 1991[26].

25 European Commission/JRC figures

26 Roland Berger figures

Because of the precarious nature of Gig work - with no pension or social security cover, and the worker standing for all costs themselves - the COVID-19 crisis hits migrants hardest.

Moreover, given lockdowns and public concern, work permits are scarce and layoffs in the hotel, restaurant and construction branches, for example, are common. An integral part of economic growth in the good times, migrants have now become an inconvenient problem for many destination and transit countries across Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East. This means increased unemployment and no protection for Gig workers.

National responses to dealing with the rise of the Gig economy

Regulation is being considered in many destination nations. Some countries like Sweden are planning to bring industry, unions, the tax authority and other decision-makers and stakeholders together in order to establish a way forward. Governments want to have clarity on the status of Gig workers - are they employees or independent contractors - and many politicians are worried about companies "hiding behind an app", not paying tax and handing out very low salaries.

At the same time, trade unions are looking at Gig workers too. The German Service Workers Union has created a branch of self-employed workers, for example, while IG Metal has initiated a Faircrowdwork campaign for workers in the Gig economy. Trade Unions realise that the Gig economy is developing and that they need to attract new members in this growing sector.

In countries like Turkey - where the concept of part-time jobs is less established, and employers generally do not want to invest in workers who will leave after a short time - the Gig economy is not as developed and will take longer to enter the mainstream. This fact aside, platforms like Hemeniş (a location-based app which allows people to find side jobs close to where they live) are growing in popularity. The positions offered range from cleaning and teaching jobs to driving and positions in the medical sector.

Conclusion

While work arrangements within the Gig economy may not give people the security some of them desire, it may increasingly be the only option for many. Immigrants in particular find it difficult to enter the labour market and the Gig economy allows them to find work while the closed, unionised traditional economy shuts them out in many destination countries. With more job-seekers on the market as a result of COVID-19, immigrants will likely find it tougher to find traditional work. This will have a significant impact on Silk Routes countries since many workers in the Gig economy come from Bangladesh, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, for example.

There is an extended likelihood that low-skilled immigrants will find themselves confined to a parallel world of unstable, low-paid Gig work separate from the regular economy which will be occupied by nationals and those with connections and high or specific skills. Increased unemployment will mean that local workers will likely be chosen first for jobs in the regular economy, and increasingly the Gig economy will be the only option for migrants. With less strong language and cultural skills - as well as a limited network - they will be able to download an app and begin working and earning money almost immediately. This could be a double-edged sword, however, since these migrants can be locked in and find it difficult to enter the regular economy. It will be important that the principles of the ILO's Future of Work agenda are covered, as well as the specifics of the Violence and Harassment Convention[27]. There are also still negative connotations around the Gig economy in many countries. Quite unfairly, it is seen as something inferior and shady, despite workers having specific skills and carrying out roles that society needs. This means that local workers tend to shun it in favour of regular activities and the mainstream job market if they have a choice.

When it comes to the Silk Routes countries, there is an opportunity to work via the internet, carrying out tasks from programming to translation, service support and copywriting remotely. In this way talent will be able to stay within the Silk Routes countries without the requirement to leave. At present, however, there is too little work for those seeking opportunities in the Gig economy, yet this is likely to change over time. This is an area which requires further study, bearing in mind that many Gig workers can be both informally and illegally recruited in the Silk Routes countries by recruiters, crowd sourcing companies and manpower agencies. Their role and responsibilities in this process should be looked at since they are very active in the Silk Routes countries. Some act legally while others operate illegally.

Companies in destination countries cannot get workers to fill open positions in the delivery, construction, cleaning and healthcare sectors, for example. As a consequence, there is a strong risk that migration may become something shadowy and irregular to meet the labour market need in destination countries. The result could be even more difficult, unsafe and insecure situations for those forced into the Gig economy as they face a double lock to enter the regular labour market.

27 ILO Violence and Harassment Convention.

More research is needed into these topics. Since the Gig economy is relatively new, empirical evidence is in short supply. Moreover, since the nature of the Gig economy is changing all the time more study, debate and dialogue is needed to ensure that it is allowed to grow and offer opportunities to migrants while protecting them from abuse and securing basic rights.

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