

NEW FORMS OF EMPLOYMENT IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES: PLATFORM WORK – BELARUS

Country profile

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SETTING THE SCENE

Platform work in Belarus is emerging in the context of political, socio-economic and labour market developments.

Labour market and employment. The size of the Belarusian labour force¹ was 70.7% of the working age population (aged 15–74) in 2019, with higher activity rates among men (75.5%) than women (66.3%). Self-employment amounted to only 4.3% of total employment². Limited data are available on the percentage of informal employment in the country, but experts estimated in 2016 that this rate should not exceed 8%³. The ETF estimated that only 3.4% of employed persons were active in vulnerable work in 2019, which is low compared to the other EaP countries⁴. The employment rate for people with VET education was 75% in 2017 and reached 81% for those with higher education. The highest employment and activity rates are among those with higher levels of education, which is likely due to the state-led Belarusian distribution system. This system ensures that all graduates (who wish to participate) from specialised secondary, higher education, and vocational education and training (VET) institutions are employed in public or state-owned companies⁵.

Unemployment rates for the population aged 15–74 have remained low and stable over the past 10 years, reaching 4.2% in 2019. In contrast to the situation in other EaP countries, female unemployment (3.2%) was lower than male unemployment (5.1%). In 2019, 6.9% of young people were classified as NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training), which is lower than in other EaP countries⁶. Despite the state-led job distribution system within employment services, 49% of young people use their personal connections to find employment, meaning that informal networks are the most common way for young people to find jobs in Belarus, followed by online sources⁷. Reliance on public employment services (PES) for finding employment is low because in Belarus PES only publish vacancy information from the public sector⁸.

The service sector accounts for more than half of all employment (61.2%). The industry sector covers 30.1% of employment, and agriculture provides only 8.7% of all employment⁹. The IT, transport and logistics sectors seem to be the fastest growing in the Belarusian economy¹⁰. Labour regulations have become more flexible and recent amendments to the Labour Code¹¹ allow new forms of work to develop.

¹ The labour force participation rate is a measure of the proportion of a country's working-age population that engages actively in the labour market, either by working or looking for work; it provides an indication of the size of the supply of labour available to engage in the production of goods and services, relative to the population at working age (ILO).

² ETF (2020). Key Indicators on Education, Skills and Employment 2020.

³ Vankevich, A. (2016). 'LMIS and Skills Anticipation in Belarus', *ETF, Torino*.

⁴ ETF (2020). Key Indicators on Education, Skills and Employment 2020.

⁵ Vashko, I., & Ermsone, D. (2018). Youth Transition to Work in Belarus. European Training Foundation. p. 12–16.

⁶ ETF (2020). Key Indicators on Education, Skills and Employment 2020.

⁷ Vashko, I., & Ermsone, D. (2018). Youth Transition to Work in Belarus. European Training Foundation. p. 14.

⁸ Ermsone, D. (2019). Policies Supporting Youth Transition to Work in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. European Training Foundation. p. 20.

⁹ ETF (2020). Key Indicators on Education, Skills and Employment 2020.

¹⁰ Nordeatrade (2020). The economic context of Belarus. Retrieved from: <https://www.nordeatrade.com/fi/explore-new-market/belarus/economical-context#:~:text=The%20tertiary%20sector%20accounts%20for,are%20the%20fastest%20growing%20sectors>.

¹¹ Sidorenko, A. and Kazakevitch, M. (2020) Belarus: Top 10 Amendments to the Labour Code 2020. *Rödl & Partner*. Retrieved from: <https://www.roedl.com/insights/belarus-amendments-labour-code-remote-work>

Education and skills supply. Generally, education levels in Belarus are high and ensure employability. The gross enrolment rate¹² in tertiary education in 2018 was 87%¹³. In 2018, 41.7% of all upper secondary school students was enrolled in VET programmes¹⁴. This increases the opportunities for people to reskill or upskill at different stages in their working life. Women in Belarus tend to have higher educational levels although they often have lower paid positions and tend to be concentrated in a few sectors. All of this can be explained on a national level by the tradition of family obligations and gender stereotypes associated with certain occupations¹⁵.

Belarus has one of the highest lifelong-learning rates with a high level of adult participation in VET¹⁶. However, the skills mismatch is of great concern in Belarus, as companies consider the inadequately educated workforce as one of the direct barriers to their growth. More than half of Belarusian small and medium enterprises (SMEs) recognise an unskilled workforce as an impediment to their business. In 2014, a survey found that 65% of firms reported having difficulties filling vacancies. A survey of young workers showed that 27% of them worked outside their speciality, but in the same area, and 23% worked in a profession that is different from their education¹⁷. In the IT sector, the skills gap is not related to technical knowledge (which is more than sufficient) but rather to soft skills and cross-cutting skills. A major contributor is the lack of practical training and the lack of cross-cutting disciplines being taught in the education system.

Connectivity and digital skills. The CISCO Digital Readiness Index ranks Belarus at 58 out of 141 economies. Belarus is the highest scoring EaP country in terms of its technology infrastructure and adoption. However, its start-up environment is ranked as the lowest in the region¹⁸. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) noted that 82.9% of Belarusians used the internet in 2019¹⁹.

The importance of digital skills and competences for all levels of education is highlighted in the State Programme for the Development of the Digital Economy and the Information Society for 2016–2020 and in the Strategy of Informatisation of the Republic of Belarus for 2016–2022. The latter stipulates the necessity of ensuring the modernisation of VET qualifications ‘with the purpose of training workers and ICT specialists for jobs in various branches of the economy that do not require higher education’²⁰. In 2017, 33.2% of all tertiary education graduates completed STEM programmes, thereby facilitating the human capital potential for the IT sector²¹.

The ICT products and services sector is the fastest growing in the country, doubling every 3–4 years over the past decade. The IT sector was barely affected by economic contraction. About 70% of IT services are exported due to the small domestic market. Additionally, while the percentage of IT

¹² Gross enrolment ratio is the ratio of total enrolment, regardless of age, to the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the level of education shown.

¹³ The World Bank (2020). School enrollment, tertiary (% gross). Retrieved from:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR>

¹⁴ ETF (2020). Key Indicators on Education, Skills and Employment 2020.

¹⁵ Vashko, I., & Ermsone, D. (2018). Youth Transition to Work in Belarus. European Training Foundation. p. 17.

¹⁶ ETF (2021, Forthcoming). Belarus. Education, training and employment development 2020. *ETF, Torino*.

¹⁷ Vashko, I., & Ermsone, D. (2018). Youth Transition to Work in Belarus. European Training Foundation. p. 16–17.

¹⁸ Cisco (2019). Cisco Digital Readiness Index 2019 - Belarus. Retrieved from:

https://www.cisco.com/c/m/en_us/about/corporate-social-responsibility/research-resources/digital-readiness-index.html#/country/BLR

¹⁹ ITU (2020). Percentage of Individuals using the Internet. Excel data set retrieved from: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

²⁰ nmo.basnet.by (2015). Strategy for the development of informatisation in the Republic of Belarus for 2016–2022. Approved by the Resolution of the Board of the Ministry of Communications dated September 30, 2015 No. 35, Retrieved from: <http://nmo.basnet.by/concept/strategia2022.php>

²¹ ETF (2020). Key Indicators on Education, Skills and Employment 2020.

workers is 2.2% of the total labour force, it is one of the best paid sectors and the number of IT engineers is growing steadily²².

The Belarusian government is proactive in adopting measures to create a favourable IT climate and promote IT export. For example, in 2017, the Decree on the Development of the Digital Economy was introduced, with the purpose of creating favourable conditions for the IT industry. Belarus has large tech parks and ICT clusters, and attracts a high number of international investments. However, the highest skilled IT professionals are leaving the country at high rates²³, contributing to an acute brain drain. The recent protests and turmoil following the 2020 presidential elections are perceived by various sources as a turning point in the success of the IT sector in the past decade. Some IT companies and international IT staff were planning to relocate abroad either partially or completely^{24, 25}. The World Bank forecasts continuing contraction and recession in the whole Belarusian economy in 2020 and 2021²⁶.

THE PREVALENCE OF PLATFORM WORK²⁷

Although the institutional structure and legislation in Belarus is relatively slow to adjust to the digitalisation of labour, online platform work seems to be increasingly prevalent based on available online discussions on the topic (e.g. news portals, relevant articles²⁸). Nonetheless, as of yet, there are no available statistics to provide a reliable quantification of the extent of platform work for freelance work. If the region of the former Soviet Union is considered, according to an interview with FreelanceHunt (one of the more significant digital labour platforms in the country), the prevalence of platform work in Belarus is lower than for example in Ukraine. Reasons for this include in particular the legislative and political challenges in Belarus. A business management expert from a Belarus State University also confirmed in an interview that the popularity of online platform-based work is lagging behind for these reasons. Nevertheless, the manager of Kabanchik, another important digital labour platform in Belarus, sees a clear and growing trend in the interest of Belarusian workers to use online labour platforms.

‘The main problem is the lack of statistics [on online platform workers]’, according to the business management expert, and the small amount of data available on remote work and freelance work are the only indication of the potential demand for and prevalence of platform work²⁹.

²² Civitta (2018). ICT Industry analysis report: Establishment of a new ICT capacity-building program in Belarus. *World Bank, Washington*.

²³ Civitta (2018). IT Skills Gap in Belarus. Establishment of a new ICT capacity-building program in Belarus. *World Bank, Washington*.

²⁴ Furlong, R. (2020). Hit Escape: The IT Companies Leaving Belarus. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/hit-escape-the-it-companies-leaving-belarus/30845897.html>

²⁵ Tétrault-Farber, G. and Makhovsky, A. (2020). Tech firms threaten to quit Belarus after crackdown, internet outages. *Reuters*. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-tech-idUSKBN25M1MO>

²⁶ The World Bank (2020). Belarus. Overview. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/belarus/overview>

²⁷ For more detailed information on the methodology used for this country profile, please, consult ETF (2021, forthcoming), *New Forms of Employment in the Eastern Partnership Countries: Platform Work*, ETF, Turin.

²⁸ Tut.by (2020). ‘Каждый девятый работодатель против. Трудовой кодекс разрешил работать дистанционно’ (Every ninth employer is opposed. Labour code allows for distance work). Retrieved from: <https://finance.tut.by/news671118.html>

²⁹ Remote work encompasses both, those who have regular employment at a company and work remotely, and those who work remotely as freelancers. Within the freelancing category, there might be those who use labour platforms and those who do not (This study is only concerned with platform-based labour activity. Given the shortage of data about this particular category of employment, assessment of freelancing and remote work may be complementing our understanding of platform-based work.

Overall, the general increase in freelancing activities in Belarus is supported by various analyses. According to the only existing comparative source, the share of freelancers per capita in Belarus was 0.65 per 1 000 inhabitants³⁰ in 2018, ranking as average among the EaP countries. However, another source suggests that two-thirds of Belarusians are ready to become freelancers,³¹ and further surveys demonstrate a similar tendency. In February 2020, a questionnaire was sent by Rabota.tut.by³² to 2 515 workers from 151 companies, 56% of the workers expressed the wish to work remotely, and 15% wanted to work as freelancers. Furthermore, 46% had searched for remote work opportunities, and 32% had moved to freelance work after some time. A survey of young adults born in the 1980s and 1990s revealed that over half (54%) consider freelancing as part of their career³³. The same study also revealed that only 20% of Belarusian employers are willing to cooperate with freelancers, suggesting that many freelancers work for companies abroad or provide their services via online platforms. Similarly, according to a survey conducted by Tut.by³⁴ when the Belarusian Labour Code was recently changed to allow remote work, one in every ninth employer opposed this regulation, while 70% of survey respondents wanted to work remotely or as freelancers³⁵.

Furthermore, the aforementioned survey by Rabota.tut.by³⁶, also revealed the reason why many choose freelance work: it is primarily due to working preferences and particularly highlights the importance of flexibility and independence (see Figure 1 below). Thus, for some professions, most notably the IT industry, freelancing has become a lifestyle.

³⁰ Analyticshelp.io. (2020). Global internet freelance market overview for 2018. Retrieved from: <https://analyticshelp.io/blog/global-internet-freelance-market-overview-2018/>, based on data from the World Bank and freelancing sites, includes only digital freelancers who work via online marketplaces.

³¹ Kolyosova, S. (2020). Ты не такой, как все, ты не работаешь в офисе (You are not like others, you don't work in an office). Retrieved from: <https://souzveche.ru/articles/community/51001/>

³² FINANCE.TUT.BY (2020). Почти треть нанимателей перевели сотрудников на «удаленку» из-за коронавируса. Некоторые сократили штат. *Finance.tut.by*. Retrieved from: <https://finance.tut.by/news678251.html>

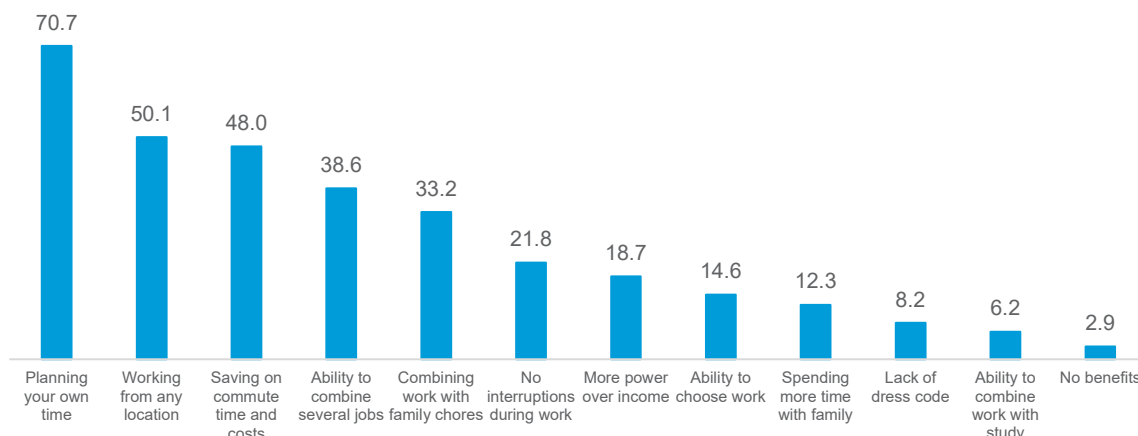
³³ Mojazarplata.by (n.d.). Фриланс в Беларуси: как, становясь свободным, не остаться бесправным? (Freelancing in Belarus: How not to lose your rights when becoming free?). Retrieved from: <https://mojazarplata.by/kak-naiti-rabotu/frilans-v-belarusi-kak-stanovjasq-svobodnym-ne-ostatqsja-bespravnym>

³⁴ Tut.by - Minsk-based independent news, media and internet service portal.

³⁵ FINANCE.TUT.BY (2020). 'Каждый девятый работодатель против. Трудовой кодекс разрешил работать дистанционно' (Every ninth employer is opposed. Labour code allows for distance work). Retrieved from: <https://finance.tut.by/news671118.html>

³⁶ Tut.by (2020). 'Каждый девятый работодатель против. Трудовой кодекс разрешил работать дистанционно' (Every ninth employer is opposed. Labour code allows for distance work). Retrieved from: <https://finance.tut.by/news671118.html>

FIGURE 1. MOTIVATIONS OF BELARUSIAN WORKERS FOR ENGAGING IN FREELANCING (ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION ‘WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF REMOTE/FREELANCE WORK?’), %



Source: Tut.by (2020). ‘Каждый девятый работодатель против. Трудовой кодекс разрешил работать дистанционно’ (Every ninth employer is opposed. Labour code allows for distance work). Available at: <https://finance.tut.by/news671118.html>

Even though according to the Freelance Bureau ‘Homo Linguisticus’, a ‘typical Belarusian freelancer’ works in the Commonwealth of Independent States’ (CIS) market³⁷, the United States and Europe seem to be described as the most popular markets for freelancers. For example, the ‘BSB Payoneer’ – a banking service targeted at Belarusian freelancers who work for international clients - is available in Belarus. It includes a preferential payment plan for international transactions, focusing on payments from major digital capital and digital labour platforms and marketplaces³⁸. The service seems to target Belarusians working for USA clients³⁹. Nonetheless, in an interview with tut.by, the Director of development of BSB Payoneer suggested that this service will soon expand to Europe and the UK⁴⁰, which indicates that there are Belarusians working for clients in these countries.

Significantly, the case of the BSB Payoneer service also illustrates that international online work in Belarus is widespread enough to trigger the development of such ancillary services for freelancers. These services, in turn, further promote freelancing and platform work as one which ‘allows Belarusian contractors to be closer to foreign clients, compete on equal terms with local (foreign) contractors, while receiving funds from clients and various platforms directly to an account in a Belarusian bank without having to open an account abroad’⁴¹.

³⁷ Kv.by (n.d.). ‘Фрилансеру в РБ нужно потратить более 1,6 млн, чтобы работать легально’ (A Freelancer in Belorussia must spend more than 1.6 million to work legally). Retrieved from: <https://www.kv.by/content/frilanseru-v-rb-nuzhno-potratit-bolee-16-mln-chtoby-rabotat-legalno>

³⁸ Onliner (2010). ‘Сейчас мой доход составляет несколько средних зарплат белорусов. Четыре истории фрилансеров, которые решили уйти на свои хлеба’ (My current income now is equivalent to several median Belorussian incomes. Four stories of freelancers). Retrieved from: <https://people.onliner.by/2019/11/29/frilansery>

³⁹ See more at: <https://payoneer.bsb.by>

⁴⁰ TUT.BY (2019). ‘Как организовать фриланс в США из Беларуси легально и выгодно? Ответы экспертов’ (How to organize freelancing in the US from Belarus legally and profitably?). Retrieved from: <https://naitews.tut.by/economics/660842.html>

⁴¹ Ibid.

Speaking about specific platforms, the global platform Upwork is considered the most popular labour platform in Belarus based on the number of orders⁴². In addition, other English and Russian language international labour platforms are also popular in Belarus, such as TopTal, Crossover, Guru, Fiverr, as well as sites that list freelancer vacancies, Angel List, Stack Overflow Jobs, Working Nomads, Flexjobs, WeWorkRemotely, Jobspresso, Freelancer, Remote.co, RemoteOK, Remotely Awesome Jobs, Who is Hiring, Github Jobs, Global Freelance, Remote Python and others⁴³.

Many on-location labour platforms that are popular in EU countries, such as Uber, Bolt and Yandex Taxi, are also active in Belarus. However, the political turmoil and ongoing protests in the country, police crackdowns on technology companies (including Uber/Yandex⁴⁴), which started in August 2020, have brought a lot of uncertainty to the market, and it is difficult to predict how these platform activities will develop further.

There are also regional online labour platforms, such as Kabanchik, acting as a market and intermediary for both on-location and web-based platform work. The platform was launched in Ukraine in 2012 and expanded to Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus in 2015. The Kabanchik.by provides a platform for service providers to find projects, assignments or tasks that they wish to undertake, ranging from delivery and cleaning tasks to renovation works, logistic tasks, IT and marketing projects, tutoring help, and even 'lending a husband for an hour' (handyman services)⁴⁵.

However, employment opportunities on online platforms do not seem to be getting sufficient attention from policymakers. For example, in the Presidential Decree No 8 from 2017 on 'Developing the digital economy', the national strategy on digitalisation for the 2016–2022 period does not discuss labour issues. The lack of policy framework may also be illustrated by the general lack of comprehension, at times even recognition, of platform work as a growing part of the Belarusian economy. Indicative of this unawareness is, for instance, the absence of any discussion of the platform economy in economic literature, which primarily focuses on labour market digitalisation in terms of introducing flexible working conditions, remote work opportunities (i.e. home office), and new professions⁴⁶. More recently, the UNDP and the Belarusian government launched a project in early 2021 to stimulate digital employment services and to create a functional digital environment in the labour market. The support for distance work, the digital labour market and digital public services is expected to benefit Belarus in its post-COVID-19 economic recovery⁴⁷. However, digital labour platforms as such were not identified among the measures designed to extend remote employment opportunities to citizens generally, including socially vulnerable groups.

⁴² Proskalovich, R. (2018). В каких сферах работают белорусы на международных биржах фриланса? (In what sectors do Belorussians work on online labour platforms?). Retrieved from: <https://elib.bsu.by/handle/123456789/215748>

⁴³ Shulyakova, N. (2019). 15+ сервисов, на которых можно искать удалённую работу. Не только UpWork (15+ services for remote work, not only UpWork). Retrieved from: <https://dev.by/news/remote-search>

⁴⁴ ZDnet (2020). 'Belarusian police raid Uber and Yandex offices in Minsk'. Retrieved from: <https://www.zdnet.com/article/belarusian-police-raid-uber-and-yandex-offices-in-minsk/>

⁴⁵ See more at: <https://minsk.kabanchik.by/all-categories>

⁴⁶ Vankevich E.V., Zaitseva O.V. (2020). Online Job Portals: the Future of Labor Market Regulation in the Republic of Belarus. Digital Transformation. (In Russ.) Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.38086/2522-9613-2020-2-33-42>, (2):33–42.

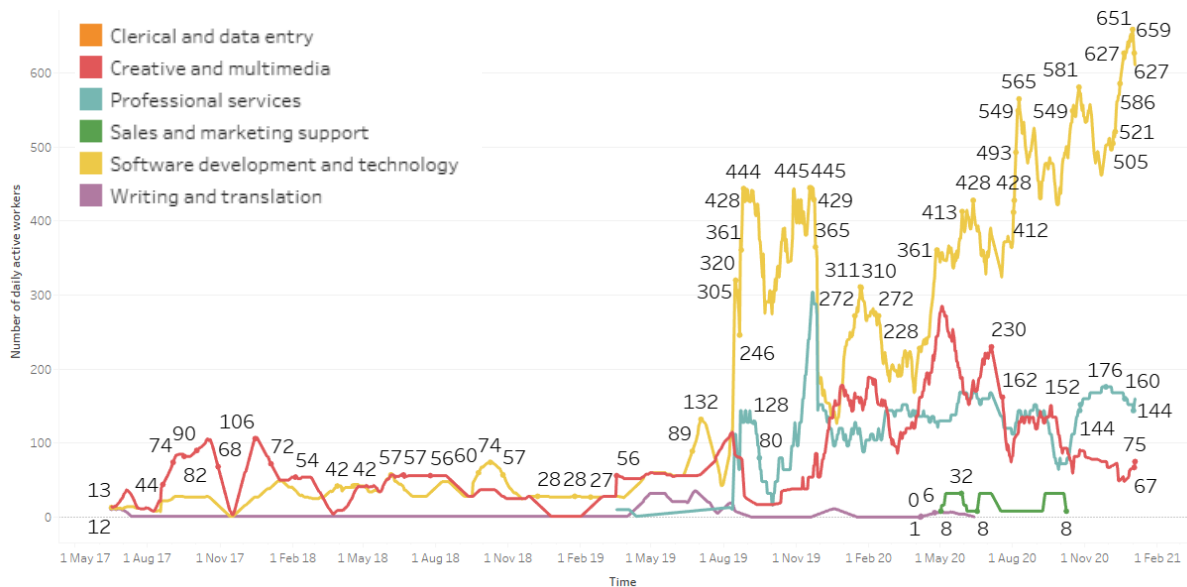
⁴⁷ UNDP (2020). Digital employment and environment for efficient labour. Retrieved from: <https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/BLR/Digital%20Employment%20and%20Environment.docx>

TYPES OF ONLINE AND PLATFORM WORK

The exploratory analysis indicates that web-based freelancing is more prevalent in Belarus than on-location platform work, although both types of platform work exist in the country.

A significant percentage of Belarusian platform workers are specialists in the IT sector. This is confirmed by the fact that the majority of available online sources (newspaper articles and blog posts) regarding online labour platforms address these specialists as their primary readership, and the tendency among labour platforms to highlight software, web services and related services on their listings. According to the Online Labour Index data, which measures the use of online labour across countries and occupations by tracking the number of projects and tasks posted on platforms, Belarusian workers mostly engage in software development and technology assignments on international English-speaking platforms, followed by working in professional services and creative and multimedia jobs (see Figure 2 below)⁴⁸.

FIGURE 2. ONLINE LABOUR INDEX DATASET: NUMBER OF DAILY ACTIVE BELARUSIAN PLATFORM WORKERS ON THE FOUR MAIN INTERNATIONAL FREELANCE MARKETPLACES IN TIME



Source: Online Labour Index, iLabour dataset.⁴⁹

A study by Upwork based on its own statistics verified that online platform workers in Belarus predominantly represent these three sectors: just over a half (51%) of Belarusian freelancers provided services in software, mobile applications, and website development, while 15% did design and creative work, 8% worked as interpreters, and 7% were occupied in IT and network technologies⁵⁰. Similarly, according to the head of Kabanchik.by⁵¹, in 2020 42% of all orders from

⁴⁸ The Online Labour Index. Retrieved from: <https://ilabour.oii.ox.ac.uk/online-labour-index/>

⁴⁹ <http://ilabour.oii.ox.ac.uk/online-labour-index/>

⁵⁰ Proskalovich, R. (2018). В каких сферах работают белорусы на международных биржах фриланса? (In what sectors do Belorussians work on online labour platforms?). Retrieved from: <https://elib.bsu.by/handle/123456789/215748>.

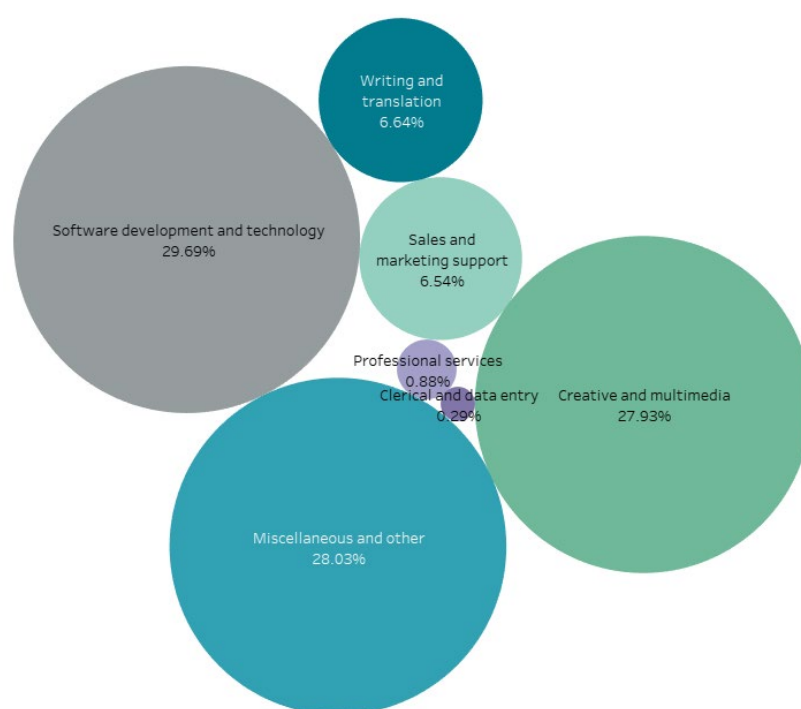
⁵¹ Kolyosova, S. (2020). Ты не такой, как все, ты не работаешь в офисе (You are not like others, you don't work in an office). Retrieved from: <https://souzveche.ru/articles/community/51001/>

Belarusian workers were in programming, while other sectors included editorial work, translations, marketing and others.

Another relatively popular category of projects (but considerably less prevalent than IT work) among Belarusians is administrative tasks, and, more precisely, data entry projects. These types of work require little or no specialised skills and are considered to be simple tasks ⁵².

Data from Weblancer, Freelancer and Guru.com show similar trends: software development and creative work were the top remote platform work occupation of Belarusian workers (see Figure 3 below).

FIGURE 3. SERVICES OFFERED BY ACTIVE FREELANCERS FROM BELARUS ON WEBLANCER, FREELANCER AND GURU.COM



An interesting potential trend described by several platform workers in news media is the outsourcing of platform work. When platform workers earn credibility and a professional profile over time (by successfully securing and completing tasks and getting good reviews), they are more likely to get further projects which they outsource. In fact, the analysis of data from selected platforms identified a number of collective accounts or accounts with extremely high numbers of reviews (indicating very high levels of activity) on the reviewed platforms. This is common in all EaP countries. If a successful platform worker has many offers, they can outsource them to others and supervise their work⁵³. Another working scheme seems to be when services are offered or taken up by organisations ‘that

⁵² Proskalovich, R. (2018). В каких сферах работают белорусы на международных биржах фриланса? (In what sectors do Belorussians work on online labour platforms?). Retrieved from: <https://elib.bsu.by/handle/123456789/215748>

⁵³ Shulyakova, N. (2019). 15+ сервисов, на которых можно искать удалённую работу. Не только UpWork (15+ services for remote work, not only UpWork). Retrieved from: <https://dev.by/news/remote-search>

connect groups of freelancers' with labour platforms⁵⁴. In these instances, the business strategy is one where the manager of the organisation collects orders, possibly divides the labour into simple tasks, and allocates work among freelancers. This set-up may be attractive for those who do not have all the necessary qualifications and/or do not speak foreign languages.

Indeed, language barriers are a challenge for Belarusians to be able to globally participate in the opportunities offered by digital labour platforms, as many lack a good command of English. According to a study from 2018, at least 15% of freelancers do not speak sufficient English⁵⁵. The business management expert also highlighted in the interview that a knowledge of English is particularly important for engaging in international labour platforms, which might intimidate some platform workers, especially those who are middle-aged or older.

The prominence of digital on-location work was also growing, with the following jobs/services being most popular: cleaners, electricians, plumbers, construction workers, carpenters and various types of manual labour. The manager of Kabanchik also identified these jobs as being most popular on on-site platform work. The diversity of these jobs and tasks is virtually unlimited. There are some idiosyncratic job offers too, that range from finding a person's missing passport in their apartment, to arranging a birthday party for a pet⁵⁶. The status of ride-hailing and delivery services in Belarus since the start of protests in the second half of 2020 is not clear and is assumed to be still in development at the time of the analysis.

In the sector of professional/ high complexity on-site services, according to the interview with a representative of FreelanceHunt, the main activity is photography. These on-site services, however, constitute an insignificant percentage of platform work compared to the remote work opportunities that the platform offers, which predominantly consist of web design and programming jobs.

WORKER PROFILES

Freelancing in general seems to be an attractive choice among young people in Belarus. Although there is no information about platform workers per se, most freelancers in Belarus seem to be young people. Young people are commonly depicted in media coverage of both freelancers and platforms workers as the age group that is willing to assume risks to have a chance of a high income, the ability to work independently, and an opportunity to build their own career. Based on the interview with FreelanceHunt, their recent survey confirmed that the majority of their platform workers – which includes approximately 250 000 workers from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, with about 10 000 workers from Belarus alone – are young people, as follows:

- 44% of poll respondents were between 25–34;
- 21% of poll respondents were between 18–24;
- 17% of poll respondents were between 35–44.

⁵⁴ Proskalovich, R. (2018). В каких сферах работают белорусы на международных биржах фриланса? (In what sectors do Belorussians work on online labour platforms?). Retrieved from: <https://elib.bsu.by/handle/123456789/215748>

⁵⁵ Proskalovich, R. (2018). В каких сферах работают белорусы на международных биржах фриланса? (In what sectors do Belorussians work on online labour platforms?). Retrieved from: <https://elib.bsu.by/handle/123456789/215748>

⁵⁶ Proskalovich, R. (2018). В каких сферах работают белорусы на международных биржах фриланса? (In what sectors do Belorussians work on online labour platforms?). Retrieved from: <https://elib.bsu.by/handle/123456789/215748>.

Similarly, an analysis of Belarusian freelancers registered on Weblancer.net indicates their average age is 32. Another testament to the prominence of youth on online platforms is a newly available labour platform described as 'student freelance platform' Global Freelance⁵⁷ which has gained popularity in Belarus.

Further analysis of Belarusian worker profiles on Russian and English language online freelancing platforms showed that they are predominantly male. As in other countries in the EaP region and globally, the data from selected platforms showed that Belarusian men are at least twice as likely to engage in web-based platform work than women⁵⁸. This is even more likely in some on-location services, such as driving and delivery, in which women are almost absent.

No reliable data exist on the qualifications of platform workers. However, the type of services provided suggest that platform workers are rather high skilled in the case of remote platform work. There is no indication about skills training initiatives on existing platforms, and it can be assumed that professional development and training are the responsibility of individual workers.

Furthermore, according to the interview with FreelanceHunt platform, the majority of their platform workers are full-time 'freelancers'⁵⁹ (i.e. do not have other full-time jobs and use platform work as an extra income) but they are not 'orthodox freelancers' and will accept a well-paying job 'for example in the US', should an opportunity arise. This observation may not be universal across other platforms, but it does imply that platform work offers an opportunity for a relatively adequate income.

Based on freelancers' profiles published in news media, the ultimate goal is to become an independent freelancer, as this working format allows for flexibility and higher earnings. Indeed, according to the head of Kabanchik.by, the average Belarusian freelancer's earnings stood at BYN 1 500–3 000⁶⁰ (approximately USD 580–1 120), which includes all sectors within freelancing. Compared with national statistics, a typical freelancer can earn at least the average wage, and probably more: based on the data of the National Statistic Committee of the Republic of Belarus, average earnings in Belarus in September of 2020 were BYN 1 264 (approximately USD 490)⁶¹.

With regard to the IT sector, the average earnings of freelancing IT professionals are significantly higher. Based on estimates by dev.by, they earn around USD 2 050, or four times as much as the average national wage. Among those engaged in online platform work, to estimate their earnings, especially to provide an average income, is very difficult. An analysis of the online labour market in

⁵⁷ Dev.by (2019). 'В Беларусь пришла студенческая фриланс-биржа Global Freelance. Можно выполнять заказы со всего мира' (A student freelance platform is available in Belarus, Global Freelance. Now it's possible to take work from all around the world). Retrieved from: <https://dev.by/news/global-freelance>. The main specialisation of this platform is IT; the platform aggregates projects and tasks and makes them available for freelancers; there is no opportunity to publish one's own project or task. Clients are usually beginner programmers or students from the US and Europe, who need help in learning programming skills.

⁵⁸ More information is provided in the Regional report.

⁵⁹ During the interview, 'freelancer' was used by the interviewee as synonymous with platform worker. The poll that the mentioned statistics and observations refer to were made among the platform users, primarily from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus.

⁶⁰ Myfin.by (2019). Посетители с ноутбуками снижают доход белорусских кафе (Visitors with laptops lower the income of Belorussian coffee houses), *Myfin.by*. Retrieved from: <https://myfin.by/stati/view/14471-posetiteli-s-noutbukami-snizhayut-dohod-belorusskih-kafe>

⁶¹ Smirnov, I. (2020). 'Средняя зарплата в Беларуси' (Average wage in Belarus). Retrieved from: <https://myfin.by/wiki/term/srednyaya-zarplata-v-belarusi>

Belarus⁶² shows that income fluctuates widely in the most popular sectors of freelance work, namely photography, illustrators and managers, web-designers, IT specialists and programmers.

For example, a novice photographer can charge USD 10/hour, while an experienced one between USD 50-100/hour. Monthly earnings depend on the number of orders. Similarly, there is a huge variation in the earnings of programmers – a specialist can charge anywhere between USD 150 to a few thousand dollars for a website. An earlier (2017) study of freelance IT prices in the region concluded that Belarusian freelancers were less expensive than, for instance, Ukrainian or Moldovan freelancers. 58.7% of Belarusian IT freelancers earned more than USD 20 per hour (as opposed to 65.5% of Ukrainian and 75.7% of Moldovan IT freelancers), whereas 29.5% of Belarusian freelancers earned USD 21–30, and 7.4% earned USD 31–40/hour⁶³.

A business management expert from a Belarusian State University provided an additional factor for understanding the pay gap between platform work and traditional work. According to the expert, ‘in Belarus there isn’t much difference in terms of pay when it comes to “our platforms”, where ‘our platforms’ refers to the regional, Russian language labour platforms that are popular in the country (e.g. FreelanceHunt, Kabanchik). ‘When it comes to Upwork,’ the expert continued, ‘higher pay is more likely.’ In other words, international platforms with clients from around the world provide better paid work for Belarusian platform workers.

Overall, as the analysis of Belarusian freelancer profiles on selected platforms shows, most platform workers come from the Minsk area. For example, based on the ‘freelance map’ developed by Freelancehunt.by, the majority of platform workers active on this platform are based in the capital⁶⁴ (see Figure 4 below). The same trend is noticeable in the data from Guru.com, presented in the Regional report. Platforms similar to Kabanchik, which offer both on-location services and web-based services, tend to be more popular in major cities also (according to Kabanchik and Freelancehunt interviews).

⁶² Onliner (2010). Сейчас мой доход составляет несколько средних зарплат белорусов. Четыре истории фрилансеров, которые решили уйти на свои хлеба (My current income now is equivalent to several median Belorussian incomes. Four stories of freelancers). Retrieved from: <https://people.onliner.by/2019/11/29/frilansery>

⁶³ FINANCE.TUT.BY (2017). До 40 долларов за час. Сколько зарабатывают программисты-фрилансеры из Беларуси (Up to 40 dollars an hour. How much do freelance programmers earn in Belorussia?). *Finance.tut.by*. Retrieved from: <https://finance.tut.by/news556917.html>. See also Onliner (2020). ‘Сколько реально может зарабатывать фрилансер? Анализируем рынок труда’ (How much does a freelancer earn in reality? We analyze the labour market). Retrieved from: <https://people.onliner.by/2020/01/31/frilansery-4>

⁶⁴ Freelancehunt (2020). Карта Фрилансеров По Всему Миру, Карта Фрилансеров, Карта с Количеством Фрилансеров. Retrieved from: <https://freelancehunt.com/freelancers/map>

Source: FreelanceHunt. Note: markers indicate freelancers active in that area.

STATUS OF PLATFORM WORKERS

There is no current overall policy framework for platform work in Belarus. Belarusian legislation does not regulate freelancing activities more generally either⁶⁵. According to legal specialists, there are several forms of legal declaration of freelance work, including platform work⁶⁶:

- Signing a work agreement (*Договор подряда*)⁶⁷, according to which a party undertakes to perform certain work on the instructions of another party and hand over its result to the customer, while the customer undertakes to accept the result of the work and pay for it. These relations are regulated by the Civil Code. If a freelancer acts as an individual, then the role of tax agent in this case is performed by the customer.

⁶⁵ Onliner (2019). 'Как правильно оформиться и платить налоги, если ты фрилансер? Разбираемся в нюансах' (What is the proper way of registration and taxation if you are a freelancer? Sorting the details). Retrieved from: <https://people.onliner.by/2019/12/23/freelanserv-2>

⁶⁶ Onliner (2019). 'Как правильно оформиться и платить налоги, если ты фрилансер? Разбираемся в нюансах' (What is the proper way of registration and taxation if you are a freelancer? Sorting the details); also see Kolyosova, S. (2020). Ты не такой, как все, ты не работаешь в офисе (You are not like others, you don't work in an office). Retrieved from: <https://souzveche.ru/articles/community/51001/>. **Note: this article compares Russian and Belarus cases.**

⁶⁷ Not to be confused with Employment contract (*Трудовой договор*).

- Registering as an individual entrepreneur (*Индивидуальный предприниматель*). The main difference between individual entrepreneurs and other workers engaged in business is the complete economic and legal independence, i.e. an entrepreneur has no senior management⁶⁸.
- Becoming self-employed (sole proprietor; *Самозанятость*). These are individuals who work independently and carry out activities that are not business activities. For example, photography and video filming, translations, designer services (interior, clothing, furniture, etc.), website development, tutoring, etc. The full list of eligible economic activities is defined by the State authorities⁶⁹.

The majority of Belarusian platform workers register as self-employed, according to the interview with the business management expert. However, in the interview with the economist, it was claimed that a significant percentage of platform workers operates in the 'grey sector'. However, with no statistics to rely on, it is virtually impossible to account for platform workers and their legal status.

According to interviewees from Bolt and Kabanchik, Belarussian law requires the platforms to check the workers who are registering and to require them to provide their tax registration number. For example, Kabanchik checks the passport numbers of everyone who wishes to register in Belarus either as workers or clients, or, in the case of platform workers, it also requires a sole proprietor's registration number. However, this concerns only the platforms that provide a 'localised service' in Belarus (i.e. limited to operations and transactions within the country, and mostly on-location platform work).

In most cases, especially as regards international platforms, this process of registration is the sole responsibility of the freelancer. Although freelancers in Belarus are required to register and pay taxes, not all of them do⁷⁰, probably due to their being unable to navigate the complicated legal procedures and regulations of registration, or of their own choice. Without a legal status, freelancers may easily find themselves in a precarious position⁷¹. Without legal registration and a clear contract with the client, freelancers are virtually defenceless in the case of non-payment⁷². Even with the existing legal protection, freelancers are in an ambiguous situation: for instance, insurance against work-related injuries applies to freelancers, but their definition is more unclear than for traditional office workers⁷³.

If platform workers are legally registered as one of the categories listed above, they pay social security contributions that are usually paid by the employer in traditional employment relationships (e.g.

⁶⁸ Myfin.by (2020). ИП в Беларуси, Виды Деятельности Для Индивидуальных Предпринимателей в Беларуси, Классификатор, Единый Налог. На Главную Myfin.by. Retrieved from: <https://myfin.by/wiki/term/ip-v-belarusi>

⁶⁹ Available at: <http://nalog.gov.by/ru/fizicheskie-litsya-krome-in-grajdan/>

⁷⁰ TUT.BY (2019). 'Как организовать фриланс в США из Беларуси легально и выгодно? Ответы экспертов' (How to organize freelancing in the US from Belarus legally and profitably?). Retrieved from: <https://news.tut.by/economics/660842.html>; see also: Lavnikovich, D. (2011). 'Почему белорусские фрилансеры работают вне закона?' (Why are Belorussian freelancers work illegally?). Retrieved from: <https://zautra.by/news/news-9102>

⁷¹ Mojazarplata.by (n.d.). Фриланс в Беларуси: как, становясь свободным, не остаться бесправным? (Freelancing in Belarus: How not to lose your rights when becoming free?). Retrieved from: <https://mojazarplata.by/kak-naiti-rabotu/frilans-v-belarusi-kak-stanovjasq-svobodnym-ne-ostatqsja-bespravnym>

⁷² Mojazarplata.by (2012). Фриланс в Беларуси: как, становясь свободным, не остаться бесправным? (How not to lose rights by becoming free?). Retrieved from: <https://mojazarplata.by/kak-naiti-rabotu/frilans-v-belarusi-kak-stanovjasq-svobodnym-ne-ostatqsja-bespravnym> or <https://finance.tut.by/news295042.html>; Kolyosova, S. (2020). Ты не такой, как все, ты не работаешь в офисе (You are not like others, you don't work in an office). Retrieved from: <https://souzveche.ru/articles/community/51001/>.

⁷³ Legina, P. (2019). Отпускных у фрилансеров всё-таки не будет. Юрист о новых поправках в Трудовой кодекс (Freelancers will not get vacation time, after all. A lawyer's opinion about the new Labour Code). Retrieved from: <https://dev.by/news/freelance-zikracki>

pension contributions, social security, health insurance contributions)⁷⁴. The extent of taxation and social contributions depends on which of the above-mentioned categories applies, and the income. In this way, freelancers qualify for benefits such as sick (medical) leave, but other benefits such as paid holidays would still not be applicable to freelancers. However, undeclared workers – which could constitute a major percentage of Belarusian platform workers – are not entitled to any of these.

MAIN CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Platform work can bring significant **opportunities** for Belarus and Belarusian workers.

Firstly, platforms may be seen from a **job creation** perspective as an opportunity to mitigate labour market challenges and reduce outward migration. As in other EaP countries, Belarus faces an oversupply of graduates and a lack of graduate-level jobs⁷⁵. In this sense, international freelancing platforms open up new job markets for qualified workers, often with competitive salaries.

Belarus suffers from high outward migration and a brain drain. Opportunities for highly skilled and well-paid work for international clients without leaving Belarus (through platform work or other types of outsourcing) could contribute significantly to addressing these issues⁷⁶. Meanwhile, on-location work platforms can provide full-time or part-time employment opportunities for the lower-skilled in cities.

Furthermore, easy access to global job opportunities may contribute to a better match between the demand and supply in the labour market and contribute to on-the-job skills enhancement. Some of the existing research suggests that platform work results in both an improvement of acquired skills through deploying them and in the development of new skills necessary in traditional labour markets – which could improve job-seekers' efforts to find employment in the future⁷⁷.

Nevertheless, the further development of platform work in Belarus as an option for accessible employment opportunities also faces a number of **challenges**.

Firstly, the competition in international marketplaces for the highest-paid platform jobs requires a good command of **English**. As of 2020, Belarus was classified in the English Proficiency Index as having moderate proficiency⁷⁸. As described above, the lack of language skills prevents some workers from working on international labour platforms independently (and probably for better pay). Therefore, attention should be paid to the development of foreign language skills. Its educated workforce with a willingness to engage in lifelong learning activities gives Belarus a strong competitive advantage. In addition, the fast-growing IT sector and wide pool of IT specialists can contribute to the creation of new business models at local level.

⁷⁴ Onliner (2019). Как правильно оформиться и платить налоги, если ты фрилансер? Разбираемся в нюансах (What is the proper way of registration and taxation if you are a freelancer? Sorting the details). Retrieved from: <https://people.onliner.by/2019/12/23/frilanservy-2>

⁷⁵ Ermsone, D. (2019). Policies Supporting Youth Transition to Work in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. European Training Foundation. p. 18.

⁷⁶ Novikova, O. S. (2018). Outsourcing as an opportunity option for labour migration.

⁷⁷ Lehdonvirta, V., Margaryan, A., & Davies, H. U. W. (2019). Skills formation and skills matching in online platform work: policies and practices for promoting crowdworkers' continuous learning (CrowdLearn), p. 11.

⁷⁸ Education First (2019). EF English proficiency index: A ranking of 100 countries and regions by English skills

Secondly, the **brain drain** and exit of companies from the ICT sector has intensified in the context of the political turmoil that started in August 2020. The prolonged period of unrest is likely to have dire consequences for the country's labour market and economy.

Finally, policy action in the area of new forms of employment and platform work should be built on **evidence**. Currently, only fragmented and incomplete data are available on the prevalence of different types of platform work, worker demographics and worker motivations in Belarus.

Where to find out more

Website

www.etf.europa.eu

Online platform

<https://openspace.etf.europa.eu>

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