

Chapter 3

The Specifics and Types of Platform Work



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Abstract This chapter explores the nature and diversity of digital platform work, examining its conceptual foundations, emergence, and evolution across global and post-Soviet contexts. It identifies the main drivers of platform work, including technological advancement, labour market flexibility, and economic insecurity, highlighting both the appeal and the risks associated with this employment model. The chapter presents five distinct categories of platform work, ranging from highly skilled developers to gig workers and micro-taskers, and analyses their working conditions, income levels, and challenges. A central focus is placed on the employment status of platform workers, particularly the widespread classification as self-employed contractors, which limits access to social protections and legal entitlements. The chapter analyses typical contractual provisions used by major platforms and examines the evolving role of trade unions in defending platform workers' rights. It further reviews new forms of collective organisation such as cooperatives, guilds, and quasi-unions. Finally, the chapter offers a comparative insight into the specific conditions of platform work in post-Soviet economies, where informal labour markets, weak legal enforcement, and socio-economic instability create both opportunities and vulnerabilities. It concludes that the fragmented legal and social landscape calls for adaptive and inclusive regulatory strategies.

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3.1 The Concept and Emergence of Platform Work

The initial digital platforms for work and services appeared in the mid-1990s, but the sector truly began to flourish from the mid-2000s onwards. This growth was fuelled by increased Internet speeds and the advent of smartphones (World Economic Forum 2020). According to the World Economic Forum (2020), digital platforms are demonstrating rapid growth which confirms their value to individual consumers and business customers. Nevertheless, this business area is linked to a number of controversies, especially when it comes to platform companies which are facing legal challenges in different countries. These challenges are mostly related to the employment status of platform workers, and sometimes even question workers' right to operate. It is important to note that social security law is no longer limited to traditional employees; it now encompasses various categories of workers and self-employed persons, which has relevance for platform workers whose status may differ across legal frameworks. Digital labour platforms have transformed traditional labour relations and provided new forms of task distribution for workers (Vallas and Schor 2020; Rani and Furrer 2021; Umar et al. 2021). It is important to distinguish between labour law and social security law when discussing platform work, as social protection rights may extend beyond traditional employment relationships and apply differently across jurisdictions. This distinction will be further discussed in later sections.

Platforms allow customers to post orders which can be accessed by a large number of geographically dispersed workers who have platform accounts (Huws et al. 2016).

The World Economic Forum (2020) distinguishes between two types of digital platforms:

1. Platforms engaged in asset sharing and monetization (e.g. *Airbnb*). These platforms aim at letting property; payments and customer evaluations (comments) are conducted online.
2. Platforms where individuals can offer their skills and services (e.g. *Uber*, *Up Work*). These are platforms where individuals can offer their skills and labour to business companies and consumers; payments and customer evaluations (comments) are conducted online; tasks can be performed remotely or on-site.

The major platform companies, like *Airbnb* and *Uber*, have been operating for more than a decade. Their emergence coincided with the Great Recession, which facilitated the development of digital companies and involved workers who had recently graduated or who could not find any traditional work and who had not had time to establish themselves in the labour market. Since then, the gig economy has been growing rapidly and conducts many digitally mediated economic transactions, i.e. the exchange of goods and services (Vallas and Schor 2020). The gig economy also covers “temporary work” which is characterised by a defined or limited duration (for instance, freelance contract work and/or consulting which is not performed through digital labour/service platforms, but is provided by temporary workers

offered by recruitment agencies) (World Economic Forum 2020). Thus, while digital platforms are innovative in terms of technology, the idea of intermediation services is not new. Services, like transportation, delivery and design, have been provided for a long time already. Moreover, the development of platform work is taking place in the context of the broader growth of temporary work.

What were the causes of the development of platform work? Kenney and Zysman (2016) and Srnicek (2016) provide two fundamental causes of the emergence of platform work. First, business companies in the traditional economy began to digitalise their internal operations and transactions with other companies. The origins of this trend lie in the advent of minicomputers (1980s), the popularity of personal computers (1990s), and the spread of the Internet (1990s and beyond). Business companies currently have public websites which operate together with internal information systems to perform a company's operational functions. Along with the emergence of Lean management, the internal departments of companies began to view each other as customers with whom business operations were concluded. All of this started promoting a kind of cross-platform work in traditional companies through the spread of applications and mobile devices.

Second, digital content-based businesses made the extensive use of the Internet to capture the existing markets or create entirely new markets. For example, e-commerce platforms partially displaced retail outlets, capital-based platforms were created for renting accommodation, goods or cars, platforms for ride-hailing or housekeeping services entered the service market, video streaming and content development platforms started competing with broadcast or other traditional media companies.

The World Economic Forum (2020) and Cruz and Gameiro (2023) provide the “push” and “pull” factors which tend to raise the number of digital platform workers:

- *The appeal of flexibility and autonomy.* The desire to have more flexible and autonomous working conditions is increasing. Workers can choose the amount of work and tasks they want to complete; they can also decide about their work time and place. Platforms provide an opportunity to earn additional income. Flexibility and autonomy encourage persons to work from home because they provide the advantages for those with health problems or household burdens.
- *Economic insecurity.* In developed markets where real average wages are stagnating and economic insecurity is increasing; casual platform work can help people supplement their income. In emerging markets where the size of the informal economy is large, platform work can become a safer and a more professional alternative.

Although the positive effects of flexibility in time and space are commonly treated as the major advantages of platform work (Anwar and Graham 2021), scientific studies also emphasise that platform work often means insecure working conditions (Huws et al. 2016; Kahancová et al. 2020; Vallas and Schor 2020; Tubaro and Casilli 2022). Some most obvious shortcomings are the lack of regulation of platform work and precarious working conditions for platform workers (World Economic Forum 2020).

To provide a better understanding of digital platform work, we will present the categories of platform work suggested by some previous scientific studies (Vallas and Schor 2020).

The first category of digital platform work covers highly skilled professionals who become independent contractor-developers in professions, such as platform architects and technologists. They design and maintain the digital infrastructure of platforms (Kelkar 2018). They undertake risks and long hours of work in the labour market in the hope of earning a significant amount of income through initial public offerings or acquisitions.

The second category of digital platform work, according to Drahokoupil and Piasna (2019), emerges after answering the question of whether digital platforms promote outsourcing in the traditional economy, or whether they provide a digital infrastructure for replacing temporary employment agencies. This category covers cloud computing consultants or freelancers who offer their professional services through the platforms such as *UpWork* or *Freelancer*. While these consultants, like the workers in the first category of platform work, provide professional services, they are treated more as users than developers. Christin (2018) believes that this category covers the professionals with a high level of technical skills (graphic design, computer programming and journalism). Cloud computing consultants can have a stable source of their income only if they manage to maintain a sufficient number of customers.

The third category of digital platform work covers gig workers whose services are ordered through platforms but performed offline, such as food delivery, home repair work, nursing/maintenance work. These workers get casual work, one-day assignments, and enjoy the benefits of a flexible work schedule and autonomy. Nevertheless, the challenges faced by gig workers are multifaceted and significant. Firstly, unlike traditional employees who often have their operational costs covered by their employers, gig workers must bear these costs themselves. The costs are associated with equipment, transportation and maintenance, and can vary greatly from sector to sector (Rosenblat 2018).

The fourth category of digital platform work covers the assignments which are performed online (microtasking). Workers operating through “Amazon Mechanical Turk” (AMT) or “Figure Eight” (formerly “CrowdFlower”) are representatives of microtasking (Berg 2016). These workers undertake human intelligence tasks which cannot be completed by computers, and which are part of the process of machine learning. Microtasking (e.g. describing or classifying content in images, editing computer-generated text, verifying user accounts on social networks, or transcribing short audio recordings) commonly requires less training and experience than cloud computing consulting and freelance work.

The fifth category of digital platform work covers social media and podcast content creators and influencers. This type of platform work is often performed for free with the hope of achieving a sufficient level of awareness and securing a regular income in the future (Duffy 2017).

The analysis of the similarities and differences of the five major categories of digital platform work has revealed the following aspects which characterise this type of work and distinguish it from traditional work:

1. *Labour market dynamics.* Different groups of platform workers operate in different labour market conditions in terms of labour supply and demand: there is a noticeable shortage of technologists and architects, and currently there is an obvious surplus of micro-taskers and freelance content creators.
2. *Worker-platform relationship.* Worker roles and influence on the activities of a platform may vary greatly: the activities can range from active creation to passive consumption.
3. *Income levels and work attitudes.* Although the level of income earned by different groups of workers may vary greatly, many platform workers, especially content creators and influencers, have entrepreneurial qualities.
4. *Platform work transformations.* Due to the constant changes in algorithm design, market conditions and regulatory policies, platform work tends to undergo constant transformations; therefore, it is necessary to consider the peculiarities of the legal regulation of platform work and initiate the amendments if they are needed for a particular purpose.

Digital labour platforms act as intermediaries between workers and customers (Dunn 2020; Cruz and Gameiro 2023), operate on a global scale and aim to match the supply of and the demand for goods and services, thus allowing customers to find professionals who offer their services/goods. The key feature of digital labour platforms is digital performance of work without an organisational structure of a business (Vallas and Schor 2020). Platform work is coordinated, regulated and monitored through algorithms; it is distributed to stakeholders and the public without the functional authority structure typical of a traditional business. Categorisation of platform workers as the self-employed poses challenges to the traditional models of labour regulation (Stewart and Stanford 2017) because being qualified as the self-employed, platform workers are not entitled to the minimum wage, disability benefits, unemployment benefits, sick or maternity benefits or paid vacation—the social protection measures provided by labour law. It is important to note that social security law no longer applies exclusively to traditional employees. It now covers a broader range of social categories, including self-employed individuals, platform workers, and other non-standard forms of employment. Therefore, social protection systems must adapt to these evolving labour market realities. This condition is very favourable and beneficial to platforms as employers since they evade additional costs, legal or social responsibility. Customers naturally pay less for the services they receive (Stewart and Stanford 2017). According to Cruz and Gameiro (2023), work mediated through digital platforms necessarily requires the involvement of three parties: platform organisers, workers, and customers. Algorithmic management on digital platforms regulates worker behaviour and performance with minimal human intervention, while customers provide the data which are used for platform operations. This allows platforms to accumulate large amounts of data and to build power-based relationships with workers, customers and other platforms.

Although the algorithmic system is designed to ensure control and efficiency, workers can still show their own initiative (e.g. to communicate directly with customer and bypass a platform's mediation), which can be beneficial for both parties—workers and customers (Cruz and Gameiro 2023).

Summarising, it can be stated that a digital labour platform is a form of economic activity aimed at mediating the negotiations and exchanges between the supply (customers) and demand (workers) sides, which contributes to a new configuration of the work and consumption process. Digital algorithms serve for connecting product suppliers/service providers and customers. The biggest problem in the execution of platform work is legal regulation of labour relations, so the next subsection reviews the terms and conditions of digital platform work.

3.2 Terms and Conditions of Digital Platform Work

It is important to distinguish between labour law and social protection law in the context of platform work. While labour law traditionally regulates employment relationships, social protection law has expanded its scope beyond employees to cover a wider range of workers, including self-employed and platform workers. Consequently, social benefits such as unemployment or maternity benefits may be available to categories of workers other than traditional employees, which complicates the analysis of platform workers' entitlements.

Provisions for Self-employed Platform Workers According to De Stefano et al. (2021) platform managers unilaterally set the terms and conditions under which they interact with customers and workers. These terms usually classify platform workers as either “the self-employed” or “independent contractors”. Platforms take the position that a worker-customer relationship is a self-employment relationship. De Stefano et al. (2021) present the examples of the most common provisions for self-employed platform workers:

- Amazon Mechanical Turk (2020): “Workers complete tasks for customers as independent contractors using their personal resources but not as employees of *Amazon Mechanical Turk* (or the affiliates of *Amazon Mechanical Turk*). As a worker, you agree that (i) you are responsible for compliance with all applicable laws and registration requirements, including those applicable to independent contractors and maximum working hours; (ii) this Agreement does not create an association, a joint venture, a partnership, a franchise, or an employer/employee relationship between you and Customers, or between you and *Amazon Mechanical Turk* (or the affiliates of *Amazon Mechanical Turk*); (iii) you do not advertise yourself as an employee or a representative of a Customer or *Amazon Mechanical Turk* (or the affiliates of *Amazon Mechanical Turk*). [...] As a customer, you will not engage a worker in any activities that may jeopardize the status of a worker as an independent contractor completing tasks for you.”

- Doordash (2020): “A Contractor declares that he/she runs an independently established company providing delivery services and that he/she meets all legal requirements necessary to perform the services provided for in this Agreement. As an independent contractor, he/she is solely responsible for how he/she runs his/her business and how he/she provides the contracted services. [...] The parties acknowledge and confirm that this Agreement is entered into between two equal, independent business entities that are separately owned and managed. The parties intend this Agreement to create a principal-independent contractor relationship, but not an employer-employee relationship. The parties are not employees, agents, joint owners or general partners of each other for any purpose. [...]”
- Ola (2016): “Until the end of this Agreement, the Transportation Service Provider will operate and have the status of an independent contractor but not of an agent or an employee of the *OLA*. The relationship between the parties is equal and mutually independent, and no provision of this Agreement shall be construed to create an employer-employee relationship between the Transportation Service Provider and the *OLA* at any time, under any circumstances, or for any purpose.”
- Taskrabbit (2019): “Taskers¹ are independent contractors of customers but not employees, partners, representatives, agents, co-owners, independent contractors or franchisees of the *Taskrabbit*. The *Taskrabbit* does not perform tasks or hire people to perform tasks. Users hereby acknowledge that the company does not direct, control or monitor a tasker’s work and expressly disclaims (to the extent permitted by law) any responsibility for the work and the tasks performed in any respect [...]”
- Handy (2020): “The Service Provider is an independent contractor and is not employed by *Handy* to perform services on *Handy*’s behalf. Instead, the Service Provider has signed this Agreement in order to gain access to the *Handy* Platform, for which *Handy* is paid a fee [...]. The Service Provider declares that he or she is ordinarily engaged in an independent trade, profession or business which provides services to the general public, or the Service Provider declares that he or she maintains a principal residence of business which is related to the Service Provider’s trade, profession or business and which is suitable for deductibility of business expenses for federal income tax purposes. [...]”
- Instacart (2020): “You are entering into this Agreement as an independent contractor in a business relationship between you and *Instacart*. It is understood that by agreeing to perform services under this Agreement, a Contractor shall act and at all times act as an independent contractor but not as an employee of *Instacart* for any purpose, including but not limited to taxes, payments required by law, or any other deductions or transfers to any government agency or institution. [...] You further acknowledge that this Agreement does not create any employer-

¹ The word “taskers” is used on the *Taskrabbit* platform and refers to persons who are registered on the platform to provide various services or perform specific tasks for customers. These persons act as independent contractors but not as employees of *Taskrabbit*. Taskers can provide a variety of services, such as assembling furniture, housekeeping, relocation, gardening, etc., depending on their skills and the needs of their customers.

employee relationship between the Third-Party Retailer and you, and that you are not entitled to any benefits, including but not limited to Workers' Compensation insurance, provided to any Third-Party Retailer employees.”

De Stefano et al. (2021) mention other digital platforms which are trying harder than others to downplay their contribution to the overall transaction. For instance, *Care.com* does not introduce, provide, select, or recommend caregivers to careseekers. Instead, the company offers an online forum which, among other things, allows careseekers and caregivers (nurses) to communicate with each other about the potential job opportunities.

The above-cited agreements of independent contractors on *Instacart*, *Handy*, *Taskrabbit*, *Doordash*, *Ola*, and *Amazon's Mechanical Turk* share several common features which demonstrate the approach of these platforms to labour relations. Firstly, all the platforms recognise the status of independent contractors since all of them categorise workers as independent contractors but not as employees. This means that workers are responsible for their business operations, taxes, insurances and other activity expenses. Second, the contracts do not cover an employee-employer relationship, i.e. the texts of the contracts clearly state that the conclusion of the contracts does not create an employer-employee relationship. This means that the platforms do not provide workers with social guarantees, such as social or unemployment insurance, insurance against accidents at work, vacation or sick pay. However, social protection systems may offer some benefits to broader categories of workers. Access to these benefits varies significantly depending on national regulations and individual circumstances, leading to gaps in social protection for many platform workers. Third, workers declare that they act as self-employed persons providing services directly to customers or but not to a platform. A platform only provides intermediary services by connecting service providers with end customers. Fourth, the platforms waive the responsibility of an owner. The platforms clearly indicate that they do not control how the work is done, do not supervise workers and are not responsible for the quality of the work or compliance with legal regulations. Contractors themselves are responsible for quality performance of work and compliance with regulations. Finally, the agreements emphasize that the relationship between a platform and a service provider is a business relationship based on the cooperation of independent businesses, but not a traditional employment relationship. These common features reflect the characteristics of platform work which differ from the traditional employment relationship and reveal the challenges in terms of workers' rights and social protection.

Provisions for Employees Some platforms hire employees through payroll service companies or third-party staffing providers (De Stefano et al. 2021). For instance, an employee's work agreement on the *Wonolo* (2020) platform is categorised as the work paid through payroll services (the so-called “Payrolled Wonolo Engagement”). An employee agrees that the payroll service company (the “Payroll Company”) will be considered an official employer, but only for the fulfilment of *Wonolo's* obligations—for paying wages. All other *Wonolo's* obligations will be fulfilled through an

independent contractor, i.e. the Payroll Company will assign a client to the *Wonolo* worker, and this client will be responsible for supervising the worker.

The Upwork (2018) agreement includes the “Upwork Payroll” service which allows clients to use a third-party staffing provider to hire freelancers. When a client uses this service, the staffing provider officially employs a freelancer, and the client is responsible for the supervision of the freelancer. A freelancer assigned to a client becomes a salaried employee under the contract, but remains a freelancer under the terms of service. The availability of this service may depend on various factors, such as the location of a freelancer, the duration of the project, the salary, and the nature of work. An application to use the “Upwork Payroll” service can be rejected for various legal reasons.

Platform *Hilfr* allows working as an employee or a freelancer. The *Hilfr*’s collective agreement regulates the working conditions of cleaning assistants who work in private households through the *Hilfr*’s digital platform. This agreement applies only to assistants who work as employees but not as freelancers. The agreement stipulates that freelancers automatically acquire the status of an employee after 100 h of work through the platform and become parties in this contract. Freelancers who want to acquire the status of an employee earlier, must notify *Hilfr* prior to completing 100 hours of work. Those who wish to remain freelancers even after 100 hours of work must notify *Hilfr* of their decision in advance (the Collective Agreement between Hilfr ApS and 3F Private Service 2018).

Summarising, it can be stated that digital labour platforms can offer another option of the employment relationship—they can treat a worker as an employee but without interfering with the quality of service provided to a customer.

3.3 The Role of Trade Unions in Platform Work

The expansion of digital platform work as an innovative form of employment poses new challenges for existing institutional frameworks, including worker representation. The automation of organisational functions, which made it possible to expand the pool of workers beyond the geographical boundaries of traditional labour markets together with the use of algorithmic management and digital surveillance systems, leads to problems in maintaining social dialogue between workers and employers. To maintain well-functioning economic and labour market structures, the issues of collective interest representation and worker mobilisation are becoming extremely relevant.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2024) refers to representation of workers as their right “to seek a union or individual to represent them for the purpose of negotiating with management on issues as wages, hours, benefits and working conditions”. Traditionally, trade unions are considered the bodies which can help organise and represent workers. Recently, they are becoming increasingly active in representing platform workers and making

efforts to equalize the bargaining power of stakeholders—workers and employers. Furthermore, trade unions play a crucial role in advocating for enhanced social protection frameworks tailored to the specific needs of platform workers, addressing gaps left by traditional labour laws and ensuring equitable access to benefits such as unemployment support, health coverage, and pension schemes. Although many authors write about social protection risks augmented by digital work management methods (European Commission 2017; European Parliament 2017; ILO 2017; Van Doorn 2017; Forde et al. 2017a, b; Berg et al. 2018; Aleksynska et al. 2019; Rani and Dhir 2020; Rivera and Lee 2021; Torrent-Sellens et al. 2021, etc.), opaque surveillance practices (Berg et al. 2018; ILO 2018a; Eurofound 2018; Jabagi et al. 2019; Geissinger et al. 2021, etc.) and unfair employee rating systems (ILO 2017; ILO, ISSA and OECD 2023, etc.), these problems could be at least partially resolved through the dialogue between the stakeholders, if such dialogue could take place on equal terms. Thus, the inequality of the bargaining power of the contract parties and the asymmetry of information should be considered the fundamental problems in platform work, since they lead to the situation when decisions are made unilaterally (from the side of a platform manager), and there are no channels to appeal unfair decisions (Wood et al. 2019; Piasna and Zwysen 2022).

According to Vandaele (2018), the very treatment of platform workers as “independent contractors” complicates the collective representation of their interests since the status of “an independent contractor” is incompatible with membership in a trade union. It is, however, believed that certain models of representation of the interests of platform workers are emerging and developing.

The basic actions through which platform workers try to empower their efforts are the unification of workers on the same platform, when *ad hoc* strikes, demonstrations or online campaigns are organised to express the protest or draw attention to certain contentious issues (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018). Being constantly connected through forums, chats and social media groups, workers can mobilise and state their demands (Piasna and Zwysen 2022). Some of the initiatives have turned into unions, allowing to further increase the bargaining power of platform workers.

Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas (2018) notice such forms of collective representation of platform workers’ interests as worker-led platform cooperatives, union-affiliated guilds, grass-root unions, mainstream or longstanding unions, labour market intermediaries as labour mutuals or quasi-unions. These organisations usually represent the interests of high-skilled crowdworkers and on-demand platform workers and are based on either “a logic of membership” or “a logic of influence” (Vandaele 2018). In the first case, the main focus falls on the relationship between an organisation and the needs of its members, while in the second case, the focus is on the relationship between an organisation and interlocutors (Serrano 2014). The logic as well as the major advantages and disadvantages of the abovementioned unions established for representing platform workers are reviewed in Table 3.1.

Platform cooperatives are based on the logic of membership. This means that platform workers are platform owners and participate in the platform; they sell goods/services through websites and/or mobile apps (OECD 2023), thus directly

Table 3.1 Review of the most common forms of collective representation of digital platform workers

Form of collective representation	Logic of functioning	Advantages	Disadvantages
Platform cooperatives	Logic of membership	Prioritisation of members' needs, democratic governance, collective decision-making, favouritising value creation to communities, prevention of worker exploitation	Lack of experience in collective bargaining and social dialogue
Union-affiliated guilds	Logic of membership	Provision of services and resources to members, influence on media profiles, discursive power	Lack of bureaucratic representation structure, weak power to represent workers' interests
Grass-root unions	Logic of membership	Energy, organisational creativity, mobilisation of the young labour generation, low membership fees	Lack of experience in collective bargaining and social dialogue, acting only at the local level
Mainstream or longstanding trade unions	Logic of influence	Multisectoral activities, efficiency in collective negotiations and social dialogue, cooperation with employer organisations, conclusion of collective and cross-border agreements	Anti-trust and competition regulation, exclusion of the self-employed and freelancers
Labour market intermediaries (quasi-unions)	Logic of influence	Represent the self-employed and freelancers, help to gain legitimacy from employers and political authorities	Limited resources to provide additional services

Source: compiled by the authors, based on the literature analysis

competing with venture-capital platforms (Scholz 2016). These cooperatives are established as a counterbalance to the power of digital platform organisers in order to ensure better working conditions. Platform cooperatives prioritize the needs of members (OECD 2023), and, in contrast to traditional platforms, they are characterised by democratic ownership and control (Scholz et al. 2021). Decisions regarding platform management and working conditions are made collectively (OECD 2023). Since workers themselves are platform owners, this prevents their exploitation, and the interest in platform cooperatives is growing, although very few of them have been established so far (some examples are the *Collectif des coursier-e-s/KoeriersKollektief* in Belgium, the *Plataforma Riders X Derechos BCN* in Spain) (Vandaele 2018). Collective ownership and participatory governance help to solve the problem of the asymmetry in bargaining power, promote accountability and transparency (ILO 2021). Scholz et al. (2021) and the International Cooperative Alliance (2022) confirm such benefits yielded by platform cooperatives as enhanced worker retention, worker well-being, improved productivity, better compensation, and greater worker autonomy over labour conditions.

The logic of membership is also followed by *union-affiliated guilds*, which are set up by groups of self-organised on-demand workers (Staunton 2018). They are often supported by longstanding and independent unions that provide legal, logistic, and other resources. Guilds offer their members logistics, consulting, crowdfunding for litigation and other services and resources. They can have a positive impact on media profiles and give their members discursive power, but they lack the bureaucratic representation structure, typical of traditional trade unions (Dencik and Wilkin 2020), and collective bargaining experience, so their power to represent the interests of platform workers against employers is weak. The examples of this type of guilds are the *Collectif Livreurs Autonomes de Paris*, the *Deliverunion* in Germany, the *Deliverance Milano* in Italy, the *Riders Union* in the Netherlands (Lieman 2018).

Grass-root unions are small autonomous organisations founded by activists. They are characterised as having impressive energy and organisational creativity (Joyce and Stuart 2021). They often attract young people, for whom a union helps to go through the school-to-work transition phase more easily and learn to defend their interests at relatively low cost since the membership in such unions is free or membership fees are low. The main objectives of grass-root unions are support for members and member empowerment through mobilisation campaigns (Vandaele 2018). Staunton (2018) adds that grass-root unions succeed in organising high-profile campaigns which attract media attention through creative demonstrations. The *Independent Workers Union* in Great Britain and the *Freie Arbeiterinnen-und Arbeiter-Union (FAU)* in Germany can be presented as extremely successful examples of grass-root unions. Mainstream unions can learn from grass-root unions initiative, dynamism, determination, organisational innovation, mobilisation capacity and the ability to attract a new generation of workers, but grass-root unions will have to learn collective bargaining and social dialogue development methods from traditional mainstream unions (Staunton 2018; Joyce and Stuart 2021). A common shortcoming of the organisations based on the logic of membership is that they usually represent the interests of platform workers at the local level, but they lack a national identity. In addition, the bargaining power of such organisations can be adversely affected by competition among workers within a union (Vandaele 2018).

Mainstream or longstanding trade unions function on the basis of the logic of influence, often operate in more than one sector (are multisectoral) and can fairly well represent the interests of platform workers, in particular, the interests of on-demand and crowdworkers. They are more effective in collective bargaining and social dialogue, compared to the organisations whose functioning is based on the logic of membership, and can even cooperate with employers' associations, federations (Ilsoe 2017), initiate agreement and code signing in the countries with strong traditions of social partnership. For instance, the Code of Conduct, which obliges platform organisers to start paying workers the wages that meet local standards by 2018, was signed by eight German digital platforms (Vandaele 2018). The Danish union 3F signed the agreement with platform *Hilfr.dk*. The agreement established the minimum wages, sick and holiday allowance, and pension contributions for platform workers. This agreement entered into force on 1 August 2018 and was the

first collective agreement on platform work in Denmark. Trade unions supported food delivery bike couriers with setting up works councils in Austria and Germany, and initiated the protests and strikes to draw attention to the precarious working conditions on digital platforms in Belgium, the Netherlands, and the UK (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 2024). According to Piasna and Zwysen (2022), with similar bargaining power, two legitimate parties, sitting at the negotiating table, can easier conclude collective agreements and deals. Cooperation with employers' organisations can be useful in concluding multi-company and multi-sectoral agreements. The first steps have already been taken to conclude cross-border agreements (e.g. the agreement between German *Delivery Hero* and the European Federation of Food, Agriculture, and Tourism Trade Unions in 2018, which established the *Societas Europaea*) (Piasna and Zwysen 2022). Cross-border agreements can particularly serve to protect the interests of platform workers regardless of the country in which a worker operates since they represent a worker in the country where the platform operates. However, the main problems arising in the area of collective bargaining are anti-trust and competition regulation (for example, the minimum wage established in terms of service can be treated as fixing the price of the service). Another disadvantage of mainstream unions is that platform workers, who are members of these unions, have the legal status of an employee, which means that mainstream unions do not represent the interests of self-employed platform workers (Joyce and Stuart 2021).

Quasi-unions are established by the self-employed and freelancers who want to raise their empowerment and representation. They establish membership-based cooperatives which help to gain legitimacy and social protection (e.g. *Société Mutuelle d'Artistes (SMart)* in Belgium). These organisations resemble the associations of professionals and creative persons (e.g. translators' unions, lawyers' unions, associations of artists, associations of cultural workers), for whom it is both a form of collaboration and partnership, and a measure to strengthen their bargaining powers (Gherardini 2017). Quasi-unions help the self-employed and freelancers to gain legitimacy from employers' associations and political authorities and achieve that their professions/occupations have legally established and recognised wages, working time and similar standards. Nevertheless, as noted by Vandaele (2018), they are more attractive to part-time self-employed and workers who do platform work temporarily and are looking for salaried employment, because it is important for this group of platform workers to negotiate more flexible employment terms than to expect the additional services provided by a union (e.g. helping with assignments). However, looking at future prospects, it should be noted that self-employment promoted by the digital economy is one of the promising directions of labour market development. Thus, the representation of the self-employed through unions is an area which requires attention (Conaty et al. 2018).

Among the above-mentioned forms of collective representation of platform workers, traditional (mainstream) trade unions, which accept platform workers, undoubtedly have the greatest power. Although it can be assumed that the share of platform workers in various unions is relatively small (the data by the ILO (2024) indicate that union density in the platform economy stands at 13.4%), their main

advantage is that they can represent the interests of platform workers beyond their actual member base. According to the “Syndicat European Trade Union” (2024), unions of platform workers not only help to set standards, such as the minimum wages, sick pay and other employment protection for the social protection of workers, but also serve in a legal sense by helping to include the presumption of employment with the reversal of the burden of proof when a worker tries to litigate his/her employment status. This means that if an individual worker has to go through a lengthy court process to have the status of an employee recognised, the burden of proof is reversed, and the digital platform has to prove that the worker is not an employee. Piasna and Zwysen (2022), however, note that although platform workers’ unions win quite a lot of legal battles, legal leverage has its limits because application to different jurisdictions can yield different outcomes, which does not reduce platform workers’ uncertainty about their working conditions. In this case, the adequate international labour standards and the adequate regulation of the platform economy can provide more certainty.

Anyway, as noted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2024), despite the increasing activity of trade unions representing platform workers, the majority of platform workers are not represented by any trade union, and the self-employed and those for whom platform work is additional rather than the main one are extremely rarely represented. Piasna and Zwysen (2022) argue that in the absence of physical workplaces, geographical proximity, and opportunities for personal meetings, as well as in the absence of a clearly expressed identity of the company where employees work, the potential for the development of collective bargaining power is quite limited. The common experience of working for the same employer, in the same office or factory and having the usual working time of 8 or 9 h per day creates a sufficiently solid basis for collective unification. However, modern platform workers do not work directly for one employer, their workplace and working hours are not fixed, so it is more difficult for them to establish unions (Staunton 2018). Unionisation is easier when providing on-location services (e.g. transport, delivery), so trade union initiatives are more noticeable in these sectors (e.g. *Collectif des coursier-e-s* worker initiative in Belgium, *Collectif Coursiers Bordeaux* in France, *Liefern am Limit* in Germany). The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2024) also notes that platform workers whose activities are highly visible in society (e.g. the “Deliveroo” riders) have greater potential to mobilise and negotiate working conditions, while cleaners or handy persons have less potential to negotiate. Remote platform work is also not clearly visible in society, so in this case online communication and charismatic leadership can contribute to creating online communities (e.g. *YouTubers Union*, *FairTube*) (Piasna and Zwysen 2022). In addition, the weight and power of platform worker unions is decreasing due to their conflicting interests and incompatible approaches (as, for example, in the cases of grass-root unions and mainstream trade unions), i.e. because of the clear fragmentation inherent in labour activism (Staunton 2018; Joyce and Stuart 2021). Therefore, in order to respond to the needs of platform workers as effectively as possible, trade

unions will have to modernize their structures, unify approaches, fully understand the problems of platform workers, and become attractive to the young generation of workers (Heeger 2023).

Summarising, the establishment of digital platform worker unions shows that trade unions are becoming innovative and adapting to the realities in the labour market (Gebert 2021), and platform workers have stronger pro-union attitudes and are more receptive to union membership, compared to the general population (ILO 2024). Since platform organisers have greater bargaining power in relation to workers and do not want to negotiate with individual workers who are not formally organised, platform worker unions play a significant role in providing workers with the structured network support, financial and material resources, expertise, defending worker interests and leveraging power in relation to other stakeholders, which can facilitate the conclusion of collective agreements. The significant issues of collective bargaining which can be solved with participation of platform worker trade unions are fair pay, decent working time, social protection, and labour rights. Having gained more influence at the national level, unions can contribute to the revision of labour laws, and at the international level—to the conclusion of cross-border agreements which can especially serve in protecting the interests of platform workers regardless of the country in which a worker operates. No less important is the fact that digital platform worker unions can help mobilise non-standard workers and pave the way for union membership for solo self-employed workers, which is not characteristic of traditional trade unions. Nevertheless, as noted by Vandaele (2018), digital platform worker unions still need to get mature to gain more influence, to develop the relevant communication channels for workers, and more clearly formulate and declare their goals and objectives. In this way, the transparency of work through digital platforms will be increased, and the collective representation of workers in the digital labour market will be improved.

3.4 The Specificity of the Conditions for Digital Platform Work in Post-Soviet Economies

Historically, the labour market in post-Soviet Eastern European countries developed somewhat differently than the global labour market. As noted by Aleksynska (2021), national labour markets in these post-Soviet countries have several common features which make them unique and different from other national labour markets. These features are associated with the transition from the planned economy, which these countries followed while under the influence of the Soviet Union, to the market economy, the principles of which began to be implemented after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The literature analysis revealed the main features of the transition which has affected the current economic and labour market situation in post-Soviet countries

(see Table 3.2). The analysis of the features of the transition in post-Soviet Eastern European economies is important because some of the challenges and achievements of the transition period are still affecting national labour markets and shaping the work aspirations of the younger generation, which determines the specificity of the conditions for digital platform work.

Although free market-oriented economic reforms were started in 1987 under the *perestroika* policy initiated by the last General Secretary of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, these reforms were quite chaotic and caused many macroeconomic imbalances, and later the dramatic economic crisis of 1989–1991 (Dabrowski 2023). After 26 December 1991 when the Soviet Union ended its formal existence, the sovereign republics started their national economic reforms.

Table 3.2 shows that the transition of post-Soviet economies is characterised by rapid economic restructuring (Lehmann et al. 2012), but economic reforms are significantly correlated with political reforms, i.e. the direction of economic development largely depends on political decisions (Dabrowski 2023). Since the political and economic conditions varied from country to country, this led to the uneven pace of the reforms. Being pro-Western from the very beginning and having selected the strategy of the radical and comprehensive political and economic reforms, the Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) transformed rapidly, and in 2004 they accessed the European Union, whose funding further stimulated the economic development in these countries. Other post-Soviet economies had political debates on whether to select the cooperation with western or eastern countries, faced numerous institutional and structural distortions, which, in their turn, determined the slow market transition, unattractive environment for business and foreign investment, and continuous macroeconomic disequilibria (Dabrowski 2023).

Deregulation of prices and the elimination of subsidies for producers and benefits to consumers became the major factor leading to fiscal deficits and macroeconomic disequilibria (Dabrowski 2022). With no more subsidies to producers, many previously state-owned enterprises went bankrupt, the overall production volume decreased, which led to a physical shortage of goods in consumer markets. In response to this, some countries (e.g. Ukraine and Turkmenistan) delayed price deregulation for 2 years or even longer (e.g. Uzbekistan until 2016).

The creation of private property and private enterprises promoted market competition, helped to balance consumption demand with supply and to allocate resources more efficiently. Countries used different privatization methods (e.g. initial private offering (IPO), joint ventures with foreign firms, employee and management buy-out, voucher privatization, etc.), depending on their political-economic expectations. Nevertheless, the process of privatization of previously state-owned enterprises was not simple, as stock markets did not exist or were infant. The obstacles to privatization delayed macroeconomic stabilization and led to inflation (International Monetary Fund 1998; Dabrowski 2023). This complex and uneven transition process has had lasting effects on labour market dynamics and regulatory frameworks in post-Soviet economies, influencing the current conditions for digital platform work, social protection coverage, and labour market inclusiveness, particularly

Table 3.2 The main features of the economic transition in post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe

Feature	Result	Author(s), year
Significant correlation of economic reforms with political decisions	Uneven pace of reforms, economic reforms without quantitative objectives	Lehmann et al. (2012) and Dabrowski (2023)
Institutional and structural distortions	Slow transition to the market economy, unattractive environment for business and foreign investment	Dabrowski (2022, 2023)
Price deregulation	Fiscal deficit, macroeconomic disequilibria	International Monetary Fund (1998) and Dabrowski (2023)
Elimination of subsidies for producers	Bankruptcy of companies, reduced overall production volumes, lack of goods in consumer markets	Dabrowski (2022)
Creation of private property and private enterprises	Promotion of market competition, more efficient allocation of resources	International Monetary Fund (1998) and Dabrowski (2022, 2023)
Low efficiency of the financial sector	High capital reserve requirements, poor quality bank loan portfolios, nonperforming loans, lack of capital markets	International Monetary Fund (1998)
Different level of development of the labour markets	In post-Soviet non-EU countries—comparatively high poverty of working persons, low purchasing power of the population, labour force displacement, high level of informal work	Bruck et al. (2010), Lehmann et al. (2012), Lehmann (2015), Lehmann and Pignatti (2018), ILO (2018b) and International Monetary Fund (2019)
Heterogeneity of consumer markets	Countries with larger populations have larger consumer markets	Aleksynska (2021)
Changes in the share of individual sectors in the general structure of the economy	Increase in the share of the service sector in GDP; development of new forms of service provision, non-traditional forms of work using computer technologies	Benešová and Smutka (2016) and ILO (2016)
Differences in the development of social protection systems	In post-Soviet non-EU countries, social protection systems are not very efficient; a lack of social support provided by the state; poor enforcement of labour law	ILO (2019)
Mismatch between labour market demand and education	Overeducation, skills mismatch, attractiveness of tasks where workers are interchangeable (digital platform work)	Lamo and Messina (2010), Roberts (2014) and Kupets (2016)
Diminished influence of trade unions	Low bargaining power of workers	Crowley (2004), Ost (2009) and Kallaste and Woolfson (2009)

Source: compiled by the authors

highlighting challenges in adapting traditional labour regulations and social protection systems to new forms of work such as platform employment.

The development of a stable, market-oriented financial system was one of the biggest challenges in post-Soviet economies. Financial institutions did not play the role of financial intermediaries in the command economy, and there was a lack of capital markets. Many post-Soviet countries adopted the Basle Committee on Banking Supervision's guidelines on capital adequacy, but due to the high-risk environment, a capital requirement of 8% of risk-weighted assets was applied to banks. Many small banks went bankrupt, bank loan portfolios were of poor quality, the banking sector faced the problem of nonperforming loans inherited from the past (International Monetary Fund 1998).

Due to the turbulence of the economic reforms and low efficiency of the institutional and financial sectors, the economic growth in the post-Soviet countries which did not access the European Union has been slow, the labour markets have been underdeveloped, these countries are characterised by relatively high poverty of working persons (Bruck et al. 2010), the intense labour force displacement (Lehmann et al. 2012), high and constant level of informal work (Lehmann 2015; Lehmann and Pignatti 2018; ILO 2018b).

Post-Soviet countries also differ in the purchasing power of their populations and levels of economic development. In accordance with the ranks of the International Monetary Fund (2019), some post-Soviet countries, such as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, are considered advanced economies and members of the European Union. Other post-Soviet countries, including Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine, are non-EU members and developing economies. Table 3.3 depicts the purchasing power parity (PPP) of the population in these selected post-Soviet countries in 2022.

Table 3.3 reveals the significant difference between the purchasing power parity (PPP) of the population in developed and developing post-Soviet Eastern European countries. Sufficiently high wages can be earned in the domestic labour markets in the developed countries under consideration; their developed social protection systems make workers less socially vulnerable. Therefore, traditional work is considered acceptable and desirable, digital platforms are used to earn additional income or enter the labour market for young people who do not have previous work experience or skills, and thus cannot require high wages in traditional labour markets (Berg et al. 2018; Brancati et al. 2020; Rani and Dhir 2020, etc.). Meanwhile, the post-Soviet non-EU countries in Eastern Europe are developing economies with lower per capita income and less equal income distribution. This creates the situation when work with foreign customers (foreign customers are accessed through digital platforms) generates much higher income than work in the domestic market, so from this point of view, the conditions for digital platform work in the developing Eastern European countries are more favourable.

The post-Soviet economies are characterised by heterogeneity in consumer markets, meaning that different countries have different populations and numbers of potential customers in their domestic markets. This factor at least partly determines the situation that the development of digital platform work and mobile applications

Table 3.3 Purchasing power parity of the population in the selected post-Soviet Eastern European countries in 2022

Selected post-Soviet EU Member States	PPP (international dollars)	Selected post-Soviet non-EU Member States	PPP (international dollars)
Estonia	46,080	Russian Federation	35,770
Latvia	39,206	Moldova	15,310
Lithuania	46,790	Ukraine	13,360
		Belarus	21,800

Source: compiled by the authors, based on the data by the World Bank (2023)

is uneven in Eastern European countries: the greatest progress is observed in the countries with large populations and, therefore, large labour and consumer markets (Ukraine, Russia) (Aleksynska 2021). Digital platform work in these countries allows serving a relatively large part of the domestic market, so many digital labour platforms are being created. This type of work also tends to reduce the risk of unemployment.

Benešova and Smutka (2016) emphasize the significant changes in the share of individual economic sectors in the overall structure of the economy. For instance, an increase in the service sector's share of GDP was observed in Moldova and Ukraine in the period 2000–2014: the share of the service sector in GDP reached 68% in Moldova and 62% in Ukraine. According to the authors, the rapid development of the service sector in the countries mentioned above was determined by stronger ties with the EU. After the global economic crisis of 2008–2009, new forms of employment emerged, including the provision of services under contracts. This provided opportunities for the countries of the Eastern European region to expand the non-standard labour market by adopting digital technologies (ILO 2016). With the development of technology, a new generation of the workforce, characterised by IT skills, flexibility, creativity, self-confidence, and a developing entrepreneurial mindset, has grown up. These factors explain the fact that the diffusion of technology, as well as the search for work via the Internet in the Eastern European region has been much faster and more favourably received than in the old European countries, where the workforce is much more conservative and has the enrooted traditional methods of job search and communication; thus, the innovations in the developed economies have been adopted slowly.

Eastern European countries are characterised by different levels of development in their social protection systems. The countries that have successfully joined the European Union (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia) have undertaken significant reforms of their labour laws and social protection systems in line with EU requirements. While these reforms have generally made their labour and social protection systems more sustainable and inclusive, some challenges and gaps remain, particularly in ensuring full coverage and effectiveness. EU directives, regulations, and initiatives—such as the European Pillar of Social Rights—have become important legal frameworks guiding the regulation of digital work and platform economy

practices across member states. Conversely, in countries such as Moldova and Ukraine, social protection systems remain less developed and labour law enforcement is often weak (ILO 2019). As a result, many workers in these countries must rely on multiple income sources, including digital platform work, to meet their employment and social needs. This has contributed to faster growth of digital labour markets in these countries, which cover a broader range of sectors and require diverse skills to generate income. Research by the European Training Foundation (2021) on digital platform work in Eastern Partnership countries (Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan) found that Ukraine recorded the highest number of registered platform workers per capita. Common remote services in these countries include software development and technology, creative and multimedia, and sales and marketing support, while driving, delivery, and home services are predominant in on-location platform work.

Lamo and Messina (2010), Roberts (2014) and Kupets (2016) analyse the problem of post-Soviet economies when national education systems do not take into account the needs of the labour market, i.e. graduates do not have the skills needed in domestic labour markets, so the labour market demand is not satisfied. Only study-related work experience is useful when looking for a job by education (Roberts 2014). The labour force in general is characterised by overeducation (Roberts 2014; Kupets 2016). These features are characteristic not only of economically developing post-Soviet economies, such as Ukraine (Kupets 2016), but also of economically advanced countries (e.g. Lithuania, Estonia) (Lamo and Messina 2010; Roberts 2014). Uncertainty in the labour market further increases the probability of job mismatch, and the mismatch in one's first job has its effect 5 years after graduation (Roberts 2014). The aforementioned factors increase the attractiveness of digital platform work in post-Soviet Eastern European economies since this type of work does not require specific qualifications, and workers to perform the tasks are considered interchangeable (Schmidt 2017). Digital platform work is characterised by skill mismatch ('Cedefop' 2020), which is consistent with job mismatch tendencies in the labour markets in post-Soviet economies. The results presented by the European Training Foundation (2021) propose that digital skills and Internet literacy, technical skills, English and Russian language skills, as well as self-regulatory learning and independent working skills are most needed for digital platform work in Eastern Partnership countries.

The post-Soviet economies are characterised by a noticeably weakened image of trade unions and a reduced influence of collective bargaining (Crowley 2004; Ost 2009). When reshaping the landscape of industrial relations in the transition process, trade unions came to be treated as an aimless legacy of the Soviet Union since they previously used to be an institutional body which functioned only formally but did not actually protect workers' rights. Workers in post-Soviet economies have no previous direct experience of the value or benefits provided by the membership in a trade union. Therefore, trade unions are still facing challenges in proving their relevance to employees in post-Soviet economies. After conducting the research in three Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia), Kallaste and Woolfson (2009) found that 26–28% of employees in the target countries are undecided, i.e. they

would join a trade union if they could see the relevance of collective representation. In the presence of mistrust of trade unions and poor perception of their potential benefits, digital platform work which is characterised by the asymmetry of bargaining power (workers are in a weak bargaining position because the initial terms of a contract are already predetermined by platform organizers) and the disproportionate benefit which one party (platform organizers/managers) acquires to the disadvantage of the other party (workers) (Forde et al. 2017a, b; Benson 2017) has become an acceptable form of employment.

Summarising, the specificity of the conditions for digital platform work in Eastern European post-Soviet economies is determined to a significant extent by the factors related to the challenges of the transition period, which affected national labour markets and shaped the work aspirations of the younger generation. The significant correlation of the economic reforms with political decisions, primarily related to the integration into western or eastern political-economic blocs, led to the institutional and structural distortions, as well as the use of different mechanisms for price deregulation, formation of private property, and promotion of the efficiency of the financial sector. The former post-Soviet countries which joined the EU are characterised by their faster economic development, greater purchasing power of the population, and more developed labour law and social protection systems. However, these legal domains do not always evolve at the same pace, particularly in addressing the needs of platform workers. Workers in these countries feel more socially secure and can earn sufficiently high wages in the traditional labour market, so digital platform work is more often undertaken to earn additional income or enter the labour market for young people with no previous work experience. Meanwhile, the conditions for digital platform work are extremely favourable in the developing post-Soviet countries due to a relatively high unemployment rate, low purchasing power of the population, limited access to social protection for non-standard workers, and weak enforcement of labour-related rights in practice. Favourable conditions for digital platform work are created by the increasing share of the service sector in the overall economic structure, the spread of technology, job mismatch and overeducation, as well as low trust in trade unions and limited practical access to collective bargaining mechanisms in both developed and developing post-Soviet economies. Post-Soviet economies with larger populations have greater potential for the development of digital platform work because larger populations mean larger consumer markets.

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