

THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF TELEWORK. THE CASE OF ROMANIA

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Abstract: *In the current context, the phenomenon of teleworking has major implications for both individuals, organizations and society. It is well known that the relative ease of identification and use of information has led to significant changes in organizational structures, but also in the working methods of employees. Among the new working arrangements considered flexible, is, more precisely, telework, work from home, which has been implemented considerably, with the emergence of the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of this paper is to examine the main advantages and disadvantages of this "technological revolution", but also how the authorities have intervened through fiscal measures. Regarding the main advantages of telework, they are represented by the increasing autonomy and flexibility, the reduction of damage to the environment, as well as the development of optimal solutions for populations with special needs. However, the advantages are weighed against the disadvantages, as some employees believe that they are affected by the feeling of isolation and social distancing, and in terms of organization, they feel negative effects in terms of increased costs of the transition process and new working methods.*

The motivation for choosing this theme is to identify the economic and social impact that this change had on employees in Romania during Covid-19. Furthermore, in the light of the case study, it is desired to establish the level of satisfaction among remote workers and why they are satisfied, respectively dissatisfied with this measure. More precisely, this article captures the way in which telework is perceived by employees in Romania, and highlights the possible benefits and pitfalls resulting from this process and the impact of the measures taken by the authorities. Regarding the research method used, it is represented by the descriptive analysis, the dynamic macroeconomic analysis by using graphs, as well as the comparative analysis according to the objectives pursued during the research. Compared to the way of presenting the information from the bibliography used and found at the end of the paper, in this paper are found only the essential aspects, the particularities of the chosen research topic, which finally provides an overview.

Keywords: *telework; impact; transition; costs; measures.*

JEL Classification: J81; O33;

1. Introduction

At the time of the emergence of this concept, the practice of teleworking was known in the literature as "telecommuting". At the time, the telecommunications arrangements concerned the existence of an agreement whereby the employee

operated from his own home, using telecommunications links to have virtual access to the office. More specifically, the term "telecommute" refers to the work performed by an employee with the help of these telecommunications links. Telework is an alternative way of organizing and managing work. It encompasses two sources of competitive advantage in the market, namely, the human resources of each company, namely, the workforce, and new telecommunications and information technologies. From an economic point of view, telework is an arrangement that gives the employee the opportunity to work in another alternative place, but approved by the company, such as at home or in a telework center.

Information processing and telecommunications technology, more precisely, technological progress, is what has facilitated the availability of telework for employees. The main technological innovations that have gradually led to the expansion of this phenomenon are related to the increasing portability of computers, but also data files, the ability of employees to participate in online sessions with colleagues or customers, video applications that offer the possibility of virtual meetings, which occur in real time and without the physical presence of the meeting participants. The concept of telework has grown considerably over the years, but in the context of the onset of the coronavirus crisis, it has left deep imprints on each area of activity. The Covid-19 pandemic was a major blow to the entire global population, and in response to the effects of this situation, most private companies have made the process of transitioning employees into telework conditions. In other words, this phenomenon has caused a number of positive and negative effects for both employees and employers. An example is that working from home can significantly affect relationships between family members and can reduce labor productivity to some extent, as it is difficult for a parent to pay attention to the child during work hours, and in at the same time, to perform their tasks in optimal conditions. However, according to specialized studies, there are people who affirm the need and desire to continue teleworking, even after overcoming this crisis, because they claim that in this way a balance between family life and life can be reached much faster than professional.

This paper aims to study and analyze the economic and social impact of telework on the employed population in Romania as a result of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also the measures implemented by the authorities. This paper is structured in several distinct parts, as follows: (i) in the first part is the introduction, (ii) in the second part the stage of knowledge, (iii) in the third part the research methodology, (iv) in the part the fourth case study, (v) and in the last part the conclusions are found.

2. The stage of knowledge

The term telecommunications was first encountered around the 1970s in the United States as a result of the effects of the oil crisis. Consistent with studies by Avery and Zabel (2001), the term was first introduced by Jack Nilles, who was a recognized engineer due to extensive projects for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. At the time, this idea was to move work to workers, rather than moving workers to work, to reduce energy consumption and alleviate traffic problems. Subsequently, the federal and state governments began to financially support demonstration projects to analyze the feasibility and effectiveness of telecommunications. Thus, "by 1997, approximately 10,000 U.S. government employees worked from home or other remote locations", Avery and Zabel (2001).

At the same time, in 1970, private companies came to the conclusion that the telecommunications service could be used to solve labor problems. Companies such as IBM and Control Data Corporation have recognized that teleworking can help people to some extent in managing work-related and family responsibilities. It should be noted that the evolution of telework is closely in line with technological progress and economic change.

According to a study by Nilles (1994), telework requires more than an employee to work from home and keep in touch with the office through telecommunications tools, because it involves both working in work centers, which is actually an area office space for employees of various companies, as well as working in satellite offices. The satellite office is known in the literature as the company's office located in a certain area where there are a concentrated number of teleworkers. Thus, in this context of large-scale use of telecommunications, it is particularly important to understand initially the adaptation of users, but also the background of the implementation of this type of work. In 2002, Tremblay conducted a survey in Quebec (Canada) to identify the advantages and disadvantages of teleworks perceived by workers in the region. It should be noted that the study was conducted in both the public and private sectors. The authors concluded that there are major gender differences in the perception of employees, but nevertheless, both women and men stated that the main benefit is the flexibility of the work schedule. At the same time, another positive effect perceived by them is the decrease of time in traffic.

Authors Troup and Rose (2012) conducted comparative research on formal and informal teleworking. This study was conducted in the public sector in Queensland (Australia), and the result was negative, as differences were identified between job satisfaction and the distribution of tasks between men and women with children. This aspect highlights the idea that telework can significantly affect work relationships, but also family. However, there is research that has captured the positive effects of teleworking. Authors Mello et al. (2014) demonstrated that in the long run, teleworking aims to reduce costs, increase productivity, and improve the quality of life of teleworkers by reducing travel time, social and digital inclusion of all people. Furthermore, according to a study by Gaspar et al. (2014), there are many factors that increase the chances of adopting and implementing this form of work globally, among them being the incentive for spontaneous telework, continuous employee training, promoting social activities, stimulating creativity, proactivity and innovation, as well as their gradual implementation. However, in the current period, there are still a number of challenges regarding the implementation of telework, among them the difficulty of evaluating the performance, but also of controlling the objectives and results obtained. Another challenge is to define the profile of the employee, because in reality, not all employees are compatible with this form of work, Stavrou (2005). Telework is the form in which work can be organized and carried out, and the employee can perform duties specific to the position held at least one day a month in a place not arranged by the employer and using information and communication technology, in accordance with Law 81/2018 on regulation telework activity, National Institute of Administration (2020). At the same time, in Romania, the telework regime has been regulated since 2018, but employers have been reluctant with this new regime. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic led to a change in the attitude of employers towards this new work regime, as they were constrained by the new economic context, in which they had

to choose between significantly reducing their workload or continuing on a regular basis telework. Most employers have decided to continue their telework activities and even support their employees by providing the necessary equipment.

According to specialized studies, telework is a form of savings for employers, which can save up to \$ 11,000 per employee, Global Workplace Analytics (2020). In addition to these results, teleworking increases the working time by 1.4 days for the employee and reduces by 408 hours the time from home to the office, which leads to a gain of 17 days per year. The study conducted by Eurofound (2020) shows that in Romania less than 20% of employees have made the transition to telework, even if there has been extensive progress on work and digitization. Finally, to support the employees in the fields affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, who carried out their activities in telework during the state of emergency, the Romanian authorities, more precisely the Government issued several normative acts, such as "Law 296/2020 on amending and supplementing Law 227/2015 on the tax code", while the local authorities supported the German Kurzarbeit model, which consists in subsidizing reduced working time by the state, Deloitte (2020).

3. Research methodology

This paper is based on a mixed research methodology, as it includes both the method of descriptive analysis, used to identify studies and introduction to the literature, and a dynamic macroeconomic analysis used to conduct the case study on the impact identification pandemic on the economy, more precisely how the budget deficit and public debt have evolved in the context of Covid-19, which are highlighted in the form of time series, more precisely the graphs. At the same time, this paper includes an analysis of the measures taken by the Romanian authorities to support employees and employers in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also a table summarizing the advantages and disadvantages of telework from the perspective of employers and employees in Romania.

To carry out this work, more precisely the chart of the quarterly evolution of public debt and budget deficit in Romania, we used the database taken from the Eurostat website for the period 2019Q1 - 2020Q1, to highlight the evolution of the impact of the pandemic and the intervention of the authorities. The chart was created using Microsoft Excel software, which is a powerful tool for viewing and analyzing data.

4. Case Study

4.1. Ensuring the continuity of labor productivity in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Given the general framework that affects the well-being of employees and the economic performance of organizations, most companies globally have considered teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic. This measure was considered on the one hand to protect workers from the spread of the virus, and on the other hand to contribute to the government's efforts to flatten the curve of new cases. Moreover, the concept of telework has been and is seen from many perspectives by every organization, especially in view of the fact that ensuring adequate working conditions for remote workers raises major issues. At the same time, traditional management or the methods that are applied in the current context at work may not be suitable for telework, a measure that brings with it a number of challenges,

advantages and disadvantages for employees and employers. An important aspect to note is that the way in which this challenge is addressed has a significant impact on the labor market, in particular on the workplace schedule, rest periods, employee performance and productivity, and the well-being of teleworkers.

According to a study conducted by Eurofound in 2020 on the background of the current pandemic, one of the strengths of telework is that it ensures the flexibility of working time for each employee, thus allowing a balance between work and family life. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, the house has become the office for millions of workers both in the European Union and around the world. In line with Eurofound's estimates for 2020, they show that around 40% of all people currently working in the European Union have started working full-time in telework as a result of the effects of the pandemic. A recent study by the European Commission in 2020 supports the idea that 25% of employment in the European Union is in telework, but given that the current pandemic is ongoing it is estimated that by the end of 2021 the percentage this indicator to double. It is important to note that before the pandemic broke out, only 15% of EU employees had the opportunity to be employed in telework, and the others faced major challenges in the sudden transition from physical work to office to telework. Of course, the magnitude of this phenomenon can vary considerably depending on other external factors, so in this paper we will highlight both the impact of telework socially and economically. According to the latest studies carried out by the European Commission, it is still desired to maintain telework, especially in companies that agree with this measure and can operate in optimal conditions and in real time, because the importance of telework is necessary in maintaining jobs current employment and maintaining productivity in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

Table no.1: Advantages and disadvantages of employers / employees in the context of telework

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Advantages and disadvantages borne by employers	Flexibility	Equipment necessary for the continuation of the telework activity
	More services	Lack of involvement in the company
	Productivity	Loss of informal communication
	More motivated staff	Staff training and guidance
	Contacting the organization easier or even outside of office hours	Adapting the organization to the new economic context
Advantages and disadvantages borne by employees	Flexibility	Isolation
	Autonomy	Arranging the new job
	Productivity	Income and job insecurity
	Lower costs and reduced travel time	Deteriorating working conditions
	Greater opportunities to get or keep a job	Mixing family responsibilities with professional ones

4.2. The social impact of telework

Although technology has evolved considerably, the concept of telework is not as recent as we think. The notion dates back to the nineteenth century, when working from home was the norm for craftsmen and peasants, who carried out part or all of their occupation in a reserved area, more precisely in their homes. At the time of the outbreak of the Industrial Revolution, the factory and office gradually replaced the internal workshop and later became the dominant working environment. However, the notion of telework was brought to the fore much more recently, specifically in 1973, when Jack Nilles, known in the literature as the "father of telework" argued the importance of telework in a world without internet, for the companies of that time in order to compensate for the economic losses due to the oil crisis. In short, we can summarize that this concept has its origins long before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, the harmful effects of the SARS-VOC-2 virus have brought back to work the remote operation of work and have considerably fueled the debate on the social impact and way of life of people, taking into account these major changes that have taken place. One of the greatest benefits felt socially after the application of telework is the existence of a better reconciliation between the professional and personal life of individuals, known in the economic literature as the "work-life balance". At present, amid the pandemic, this topic has become of great interest to both European and global societies, especially in view of the fact that household and childcare tasks are no longer exclusively the responsibility of to a single parent, this time both are involved, and given that working from home has become part of everyday life and facilitated this. Consistent with the meta-analysis by Allen et al. (2015), telework is associated with a much better balance between personal and professional life. However, statistically the relationship is quantitatively weaker. The study highlights the fact that if we asked 100 employees who are in telework, if they see this measure as a benefit, on average only 16 affirmative answers will be obtained.

There is other research that emphasizes the importance of this measure. An example can be represented by the study conducted by Golden et al. (2006), through which the positive relationship between telework and work-life balance gradually increases with its intensity. More precisely, the more an individual works from a distance, the greater the benefits of teleworking in order to achieve a better work-life balance. Furthermore, people who work from a distance of more than one succeed without fail and can get much higher earnings in the balance between work and family life compared to those who work less time. Taking into account the above information, the ratio of 16 positive responses per 100 respondents will increase to 25, which is an important figure, but not statistically overwhelming. Although telework is a well-known form of work at home, its use has been fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, where more than a third of all employees have been forced to make the switch from physical work to office work from home, the share of women being higher than that of men, Eurofound (2020). However, telework involves social isolation in order to reduce the spread of the virus, and from a social point of view, this has a number of negative consequences and can generate major repercussions over time on both mental and physical health. Of course, due to technological developments, there are emails, video calls and many applications through which you are closer to the person you are communicating with, but this

does not replace the physical existence of that person. Sometimes, simple communication through a device brings people into a state of immeasurable sadness by reminding them of the pandemic context in which we have been for so long and the distance that continues to occupy an important place in our lives. At the same time, rather limited communication options can make collaborations between organizations much more difficult, requiring much greater involvement. An important aspect to emphasize about telework is the installation of depression or sedentary lifestyle, because according to specialized studies for many people the only way to move is to physically go to the office. Moreover, one of the most harmful effects resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic triggered in 2020 is the increase in the number of people suffering from depression due to job loss, inability to adapt to work at home, isolation, stagnation of economic and social activity, as well as fear of infection. In short, measures taken to reduce the spread of the virus are seen as actions that isolate and deprive people of the necessary treatments. At the same time, what is difficult to bear for most people, is particularly stressful for people suffering from depression, they are not more afraid of contracting the virus compared to the general population, the statistics being 43% versus 42%. An important aspect to emphasize is the fact that they feel the stagnation of economic and social activity more acutely than other people, specialized studies highlight the proportion by the following data: 74% versus 59%. Specifically, those affected suffer almost twice as much due to the lack of daily structure, the share being 75% compared to 39%. Therefore, it can be stated that teleworking for people suffering from depression and anxiety is not a beneficial solution especially in the long run, on the contrary sedentary lifestyle aggravates this disease.

Another impact of teleworking today is the existence of an increasing number of overtime hours worked by employees of various organizations, which are mostly unpaid. It is important to emphasize the idea that, from a legal point of view, the improper implementation of telework at the level of employers disadvantages especially employees who have a flexible work schedule. The advantages of the flexible work schedule gradually tend to turn into the major disadvantage resulting from the provision of a number of overtime hours, which are not significantly met by the company and which can generate major conflicts related to their compensation. For a large part of the employees, the lack of productivity in the case of telework is a negative factor and with a rather large economic impact, because it can gradually lead to a decrease in the company's efficiency. Many employees have stated that they lack the intrinsic motivation to work in a context where they do not have the necessary resources or space to approach their office colleagues. Another fundamental aspect of remote work, which should not normally affect employees, is the generation of additional costs for a home office. In accordance with the law in force, costs should be reimbursed by employers, but in practice there are quite a few companies that have subsequently developed and implemented internal measures and policies through which to regulate all these aspects related to the concept of telework. Therefore, the existence of additional costs resulting from telework disadvantages employees both economically and socially, as they are demoralized to continue working in these conditions. At the same time, according to a study carried out by Eurofound, teleworking brings with it many opportunities from the perspective of gender equality, including better participation in the labor market, greater flexibility in managing working time while combining responsibilities associated with personal life, increase productivity by improving performance, a

much more accurate correlation in terms of spatial demand and labor supply, thus not requiring physical travel, low costs in terms of eliminating travel and last but not least row, time saving.

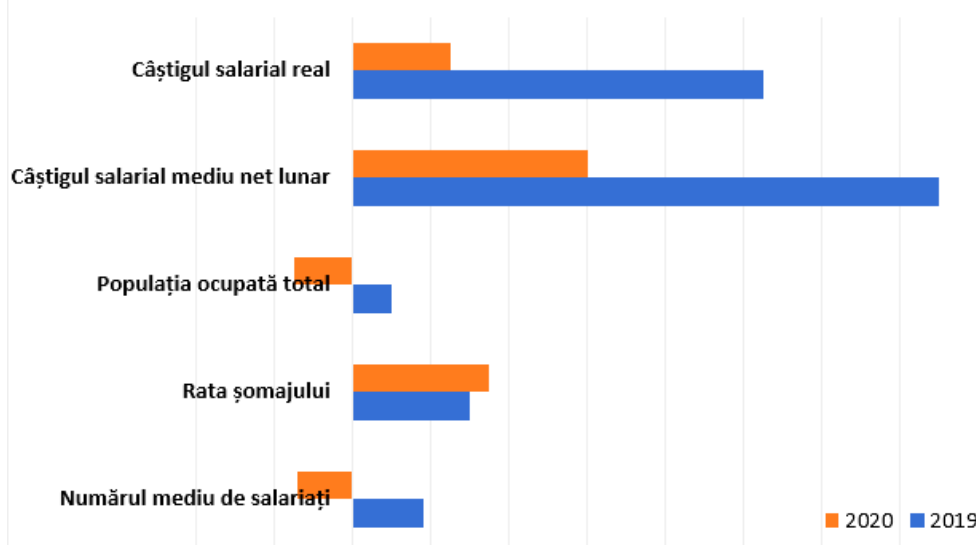


Figure no. 1: Evolution of earnings and employment compared to the previous year (%)

Source: Graphic representation of the authors, according to the data taken from the National Commission for Strategy and Forecast, www.cnp.ro

4.3. The economic impact of telework

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and to date, numerous studies have been developed that highlight the impact of telework from an economic point of view, but there is no consensus in the economic literature to refer to this fact. The recession resulting from the health crisis of 2020 is generally not a novelty in the history of the economy, given that over the years various bottlenecks of economic activity have been identified, they are recorded from the Middle Ages and continuing until Modern Ages. The novelty and difference of the current context is given by the manifestation of this recession in a service economy, which has a high level of globalization and at the same time the penetration of information and communication technologies in the development of socio-economic activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered in 2020 brought major effects on both labor supply and demand. An important aspect to emphasize is the fact that in the acute periods of the epidemic crisis there was a segmentation of the labor supply, in accordance with the role it played in combating the effects of the pandemic, the possibilities of access to current information and communication technologies. lastly, the level of exposure to pathogens. Furthermore, the possibility of teleworking in Romania is closely correlated with the characteristics of socio-economic activities, but also with the professional skills of employees in those activities. In terms of labor demand, the most important and significant recessionary effects were recorded at the level of consumer support services,

administrative and business support services, as well as in the manufacturing industry. At the same time, it was a consequence and a result of both the decrease of revenues and the appearance of significant blockages at the level of international supply chains with raw materials and products essential to the daily activity. As a result of the experience of the functioning of the business environment in Romania during March-April 2020, this aspect highlighted the idea that the negative effects exerted by the COVID-19 pandemic were mainly more prominent in the case of self-employed workers small employers in contrast to people employed in the informal economy.

The main measures that were adopted both in Romania and globally aimed to combat the effects of the recession in order to increase the duration and level of social assistance, as well as active labor market policy measures, such as this is the case for part-time employment. An example can be represented by the case of Romania, where a series of social protection measures and policies specific to social categories were implemented, which were affected by the external shock propagated by COVID-19. The measures applied were in line with the practices of the European Union and were mainly based on a series of innovations related to the expansion of the use of information technologies for the transmission of social assistance, but also to the organization of forms of vocational training, which materialized through -forced digitization in order to reduce the negative impact exerted by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic placed particular emphasis on the expansion of telework, being considered one of the essential methods of organizing the production and performance of companies, and implicitly employment. The degree and level of expansion of telework is in a relationship of dependence with several factors, the most important of which is the agreement between employees and employers. Undoubtedly, in the context of the current pandemic, telework was considered a means of maintaining a large part of human capital, but also of continuity of the implementation of new communication-information technologies.

4.4. Measures implemented by the authorities to support employees and employers

The onset of the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic put unprecedented pressure on world governments, which had to implement unprecedented measures to support the economy at the same time as the population and businesses. All these measures have led to a sharp increase in government spending while declining government revenues, which has led to a deepening of macroeconomic imbalances, more of the budget deficit and public debt.

Among the measures taken in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in Romania, we can see the Emergency Ordinance no. 132/2020, measures to support employers and employees, measures of social distance, but also measures to stimulate employment, which led to the regulation of the Kurzarbeit model in the private sector. By Emergency Ordinance no. 132/2020 the authorities decided the possibility of reducing the working time of employees up to 80% by decision of employers for a period of at least 5 working days, the possibility of changing the work schedule by decision of employers, but also granting employees affected by reduced working time an allowance of 75% of the gross monthly basic salary. This allowance is borne by the employer and can be reimbursed from the unemployment insurance budget, insofar as the employers fulfill the declaratory

and payment obligations in accordance with Law 227/2015 on the Fiscal Code. An important aspect to mention is that in the event that employers fail to recover this benefit from the unemployment insurance budget, they do not have the right to charge this amount to employees.

Other measures implemented by the authorities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and supporting employees and employers include:

- measures to support enterprises;
- granting the possibility for employees to stay at home with children and receiving an indemnity paid by employers and recovered by them from the employment agencies by submitting the supporting documents under the conditions provided by law;
- granting bonuses for the payment of profit taxes;
- granting subsidies to enterprises;
- the possibility of rescheduling payments for certain taxes due by companies facing various difficulties;
- granting loan guarantees and subsidized interest for investments;
- accelerated VAT refund;
- suspension of controls performed by tax authorities;
- postponement of property taxes.

The graphical representation shows the economic impact of the fiscal measures implemented by the authorities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which determined the increase of the public debt and the deepening of the budget deficit. For example, public debt grew from 33.8% of GDP in the first quarter of 2019 to 37.3% of GDP in the first quarter of 2020 and 47.6% of GDP in the first quarter of 2021, while the deficit The budget deepened from -4.4% of GDP in the first quarter of 2019 to -7.5% of GDP in the first quarter of 2020 and -8.3% of GDP in the first quarter of 2021.

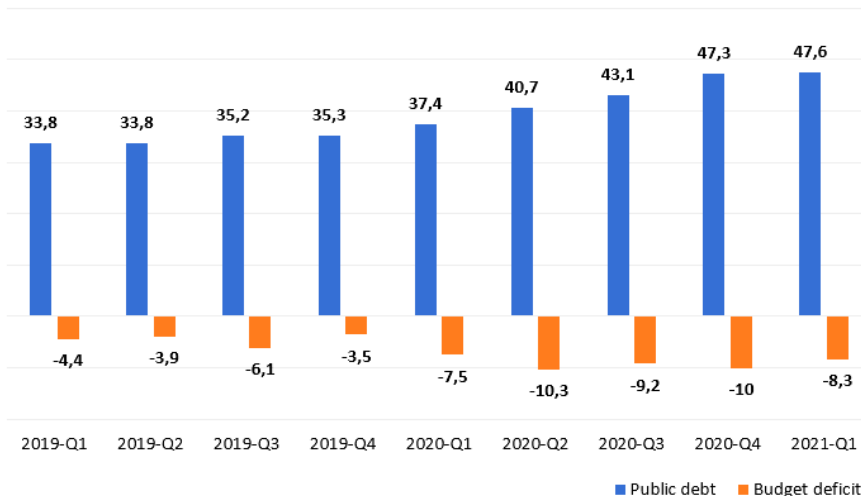


Figure no. 1: The evolution of the budget deficit and public debt in the period 2019Q1 - 2021Q1

Source: Graphic representation of the authors, according to data taken from Eurostat

5. Conclusions

The health crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic has had and still has a strong impact on the entire socio-economic system of countries worldwide, which has led to a change in professional and personal activities. Global companies were also severely affected, and the measures implemented by the authorities led to a deepening of macroeconomic imbalances and a sharp increase in government debt while widening budget deficits. In the new economic context, there was a strong emphasis on digitalization and telework, which until the onset of the crisis were used by only a small percentage of the population and businesses. Thus, resilience, flexibility and agility have become key elements of public and private sector work activities.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the economic and social impact of telework, and following this research it can be said that telework has both positive and negative aspects. For example, a positive impact is the continuation of the economic activities of businesses and the population, which risk losing their jobs and thus increasing the unemployment rate which would have put increasing pressure on the authorities. Regarding the negative impact of telework, it is related to social distancing measures, namely the fact that there is no more physical interaction between employees, which can lead to depression that strongly affects a large part of the population. For businesses, the negative impact of telework is related to increased costs by providing the equipment needed to continue working from home. At the same time, telework involves the possession of computer knowledge and access to the equipment necessary to carry out activities, but also housing conditions, which can lead to economic and social inequalities. Finally, teleworking can facilitate the inclusion in the labor market of the disadvantaged population, namely people with disabilities, pregnant women and members of single-parent families, which can lead to improved living conditions for these categories.

Finally, the budgetary impact of the measures taken by the authorities in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic and in order to support the population and businesses is unprecedented, which has led to a widening of macroeconomic imbalances, and thus an increase in public debt from 35.3% of GDP in 2019, up to 47.3% of GDP in 2020, while the budget deficit deepened from -4.4% of GDP in 2019, to -9.2% in 2020. For 2021, it is anticipated that both the budget deficit and the public debt will increase considerably, amid the measures implemented in the fight for survival and economic recovery.

6. Acknowledgements

This paper is the result of the research within the Institutional Project 932/16.06.2021: 'Economic and social security in Euro-Atlantic space: actors, tools, trends', Funder: Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania.

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