

# EMPLOYMENT, UNEMPLOYMENT AND INEQUALITIES – CURRENT CHALLENGES <sup>76</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Observing current world events from the economic point of view, it can be concluded that unemployment and inequality are two problems, which are more relevant than ever before. Namely, two major crises in the 21<sup>th</sup> century – the world economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, has put these issues in the focus of policy-makers and researchers. Each disturbance, whether caused by war conflict, social crises, migration or poverty, has triggered significant transformations on the labour market (i.e. a decrease in employment and an increase in unemployment) and an increase in inequality. Resolving the issues of unemployment and inequality, widely seen as acute problems of almost each country, requires the permanent activity of governments and their institutions, as well as of all other market participants. Serbia is also faced with addressing these two challenges, besides changing demographic picture compared with fifty years ago (population aging), economic crisis caused by COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine.

**Keywords:** unemployment, inequality, employment, security, Serbia.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The labour market is the place where the supply of and demand for labour meet. It is the regulator of employment and unemployment in an economy and has foothold in the real sector and in all other sectors. The problem of employment represent a very important issue of macroeconomic policy. The unemployed are not in the same position as the employed; they do

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not have income, feel rejection and their leisure time increases, which reduces the value of human capital. It is very important to single out that unemployment is not a new problem. It started to be concern at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This problem was especially pronounced during the Great Economic Crisis of 1929-1933 (known as the Great Depression), then, after the Second World War (several small crisis), with 1973 Oil Crisis until these last two crises, Global financial crisis of 2008-2009 and the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, we will present the conceptual definition of employment and unemployment, the types of unemployment, as well as a brief overview of this problem in Serbia nowadays. Inequality will be also observed in such way. The aim of this paper is to show the change in the rate of unemployment, employment and inequality in Serbia during the last two decades.

## **THEORETICAL DETERMINATION OF THE TERMS EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT**

In order to have a more complete understanding of the concept of employment and unemployment, it is necessary to precisely define these two categories. Definitions of international institutions and national legislation can be found in the literature. Only a few will be mentioned here. Employment (flow) is “the consumption of human energy and time in the production process“ and it represents the minimum of labour supply and demand (Jakšić 2011). Employment (fund) can be measured through the number of people who have a job, i.e. the number of workers that employers are looking for, and who are willing to work for a given wage. Therefore, a person who does not have a job, but is actively looking for one, is considered as unemployed. Employment is easy to determine in terms of the working age population, which is actively involved in the work process. On the other hand, “registered unemployed are those persons who are able to work, but do not have a job, because there is a lack of availability of work, and they are registered with labour offices and/or public employment services” (OECD 2011). According to the definition of the International Labour Organization (ILO), there has been three unemployment criteria: “without work”, currently available for work” and “seeking work” during the reference period. Therefore, unemployed is a person above a specified age who during the reference period was: (a) “without work”, i.e. was not in paid employment or self-employment; (b) “currently available for work”, i.e. was available for paid employment or self-employment during the reference period; and (c) “seeking work”, i.e. had taken specific steps in a specified recent period to seek paid employment or self-employment (ILO 2022). According to the Employment Act of the Republic of Serbia (2018), Article 5 “an employee is a natural person employed by an employer”. According to the same Law, Article 24 “An employment

relationship may be established with a person who is at least 15 years old and satisfied other requirements to work at specific jobs as specified by law i.e. rule book on organization and systematization of jobs”. Article 25 states that “An employment relationship may be established with a person under 18 years of age with the consent in writing of a parent, adopting parent or a guardian, provided that such work does not put at risk his health, morality and education, i.e. provided that such work is not prohibited by law”. In the same Article, it is stated that “a person under 18 years of age may establish the employment relationship only with a competent medical certificate attesting that he is capable to perform the activities of the job he is getting, and that such activities do not harm his health” (Zakon o radu 2018).

When considering the types of unemployment, it is stated that *full employment* – as the other side of the unemployment coin, exists under condition in which virtually all who (possess knowledge and skills) are able and willing to work are employed. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has given very interesting definition of full employment. Namely, he defines full employment as a situation in which no one who loses the job do not need to look for a new one longer than a year. This would actually represent a reduction in long-term unemployment. Previously, the limit of full employment was 1%, and then it was raised to 2%, while today “full-employment unemployment rate” amounts to between 2% and 4%.

Illustration 1: The example of the full employment and labour shortage

Already at the beginning of the sixth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany, a one long dream has become a reality since the full employment was achieved. Namely, anyone who wanted to work could find a job; there was even a labour shortage. In 1955 there was an agreement with Italy regarding the targeting the arrival of foreign labour (so-called guest workers), and then agreements were signed with other countries, among them was former SFR Yugoslavia. As a results of this agreements, in 1964, Armando Rodriguez from Portugal was solemnly welcomed (with music) at the railway station in Cologne, as the 1 millionth „guest worker“. He received a moped as a gift, and festive welcome was broadcasted live on the radio. Source: DW 2011

*Frictional (inevitable) unemployment* – the production possibilities of society have been used, and only those workers who switch from one job to another are unemployed, which makes about 5%-6% of total labour force. Keeping employment at this frictional minimum is also related to non-accelerating inflation (NAIR – *non-accelerating inflation rate unemployment*). Thus, frictional unemployment is short-term and temporary, and can exist even under conditions of full employment. This includes workers who seek jobs for the first time, workers who are looking for jobs after losing their old ones, and those who are re-entering the workforce after a period of economic inactivity. Thus, workers are looking for new jobs due to subjective reasons, and employers are trying to replace workers who retired or quit a job in search of

another (EFST 2011). *Underemployment* – can refer to certain sector, individual workers and those potential workers who are off their labour supply curves (students, domestic helpers), but they can start working if demand for work increases. *Cyclical unemployment* is a type of unemployment, which occurs due to cyclical fluctuations in gross domestic product (GDP). Thus, these fluctuations trigger changes in the aggregate labour demand which in period of recession, leads to layoffs (due to rigid wages) and increase in unemployment. *Seasonal unemployment* – occurs due to strong variation in certain activities and can be induced by climatic, traditional or institutional conditions. *Technological unemployment* – technological changes and product innovation can lead to an increase in unemployment in certain sectors. This type of unemployment can be seen as a part of structural unemployment, given that technological development initiates structural changes and forces structural adjustments, which cannot be realized completely, even in the short term (FFZG 2011). *Concealed unemployment* - there is a certain number of people who do not register as unemployed and who would start actively looking for work again under a more favourable economic situation. This group includes, for example, discouraged workers. *Structural unemployment* – is a gap between the supply and demand of labour, when the demand for one type of work increases, for example, information technology professionals, while demand for other type of work decreases and the supply can not adjust quickly. It shows the existence of upper limits of labour supply that an economy can absorb in the short term. This phenomenon is mainly caused by a change in the economic structure, technological production or market demand. Structural and cyclical unemployment are of a long-term nature, so these two types make up natural unemployment (frictional + structural = natural unemployment). For these reasons, the cooperation between state, employers, educational institutions and workers is required (Šuković 2009).

It is necessary to highlight that until the eight decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was a common practice for people to spend their entire working life with one employer. This was possible because in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there functioned a certain number of large concerns with employed workers who spent their entire working life at the same place. However, due to globalization and other changes (shocks) in the labour market, there have been transformations in the mode of employment. The flexibility of work has increased and people started to work from home (which has proven effective during the COVID-19 pandemic). People are in position to change employers due to their own personal accomplishments or because of claims for higher salary, but also due to the company transformation. However, in certain economies, such as Germany and Japan, there are still employees who, in large companies, during their working life, cannot visit all the subsidiaries of one company and work in them (Maksimović 2021).

## INEQUALITIES THREATEN THE WEAKEST

The stability of many economies around the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as by the war in Ukraine. Economic and social inequalities are more pronounced due to the crisis, and countries, in such way, are moving away from the democratic principles of inclusive societies<sup>77</sup>. On the other hand, unemployment is a socioeconomic phenomenon, characterized by the inability of the working-age population to find suitable employment with adequate wages. It is interesting that in the definitions prevail the term „reference period“, setting apart from deadlines, such as, for example, that the unemployed person „has taken certain steps to find a job in the last month“ or „in last four months“. The reason for this are major changes in the regulation of labour legislation, but also the development of the labour market in the context of the global economy. The solution was found in a flexible work model that actually represents a way of balancing between, on the one hand, flexibility and fluctuation, and security and protected employment relationships, on the other hand. A high level of labour market flexibility *per se* does not offer a definitive solution to the problem of unemployment, but it is certainly a solution for workers without possibility to achieve permanent employment and certainty to be re-employed (ILO 2022). Dialogue between governments, workers and employers is certainly very helpful in this regard. It is important to emphasize that unemployment has never been a constant category. It varied over time, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There were also drastic decline in employment and increase in unemployment, but also the situations of full employment in certain countries. However, full employment and flexible forms of work are possible only if there are competitive companies, capable of employing a certain amount of labour under market conditions, and, thus, contribute to strengthening employee performance.

On the other hand, inequality consists of inequality of outcomes (income and wealth) and inequality of opportunity. While income inequality refers to how unevenly income is distributed throughout a population, wealth inequality is seen as real estate wealth. Inequality of opportunity is measured by the opportunities provided to the individual at birth and those, which resulted from his life choices and luck. This category of inequality is more difficult to measure, although inequality of opportunity can contribute to income inequality and vice versa (Rješavanje problema nejednakosti 2022, 2). Inequality is measured through the GINI coefficient that ranges from 0 to 100. A coefficient of 0 means a perfect equality of income, and the closer the index

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<sup>77</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic increased gender inequality, but also violence in society due to isolation and reduced communication since many people felt rejected, insecure and lonely.

is to zero, inequality is low, and vice versa. The closer the index is to 100, then inequality is high (the more unequal the distribution of income).

Namely, „economic inequalities lead to unequal living conditions, endangering the safety of a large number of people and causing social problems, which are most often expressed in raising poverty and unemployment“ (Jevtić 2014, 114). The gradual elimination of the middle class led to a greater gap between the rich and the poor. The increase in poverty puts individuals at risk of survival, but also provoke other risks up to the individual safety risk. It also calls into question state security, since poverty causes state weakening, both economically and in other forms (Jevtić 2014). Poverty also leads to an increase in corruption, crime, prostitution and similar social anomalies. „Structural inequalities can result in larger increase in depression among people and fear of loss of life chances and social marginalization. The most serious forms of crime, such as organized and violent, are most present in societies characterized by large social differences, as well as in societies with a high poverty and unemployment rate. Inequality in access to political and any other power, education, health care and legal protection are characteristic forms of structural violence, which is usually invisible. It originates from the social structure itself that determines the position of people according to their economic, ethnic, gender, cultural or political characteristics. The increase in economic inequalities, poverty and unemployment reduces solidarity between people, destroys social cohesion and the normative system. The state of social disorganization is characterized not only by the collapse of the informal value system, but also by the weakening of the formal system, which causes even greater disorganization. As a result, society is faced with increasing crime rates and the overall level of violence. This violence arises because of material frustration, social inferiority, feeling inadequate, poor social promotion of broad strata and groups of the population (Jevtić and Miljković, 2021, 61). In impoverished societies, it is crucial to strengthen the state and its actions, because it has been shown that countries with developed economies and built social systems have less pronounced economic and social inequalities.

## **EMPLOYMENT AND HIRING IN SERBIA**

The labour market in Serbia has been affected by the broader events – the emergence of the national crisis and transition since 1989. Serbia went through a stormy period of transition, war conflicts, the 1999 NATO bombing, the introduction of sanctions, crucial change of government in 2000, as well as a period of recovery that began in 2012. Namely, in the period from 1989 to 2000, there was a drastic drop in employment, i.e. unemployment growth, due to the UN Security Council decision to impose sanctions on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and NATO bombing, a change in ownership structure

and economic system. During this period, the unemployment rate ranged from 21% in 1991 to 29, 2% in 2000 (Stojanović 2006).

That is when a critical mass of long-term unemployed was generated, consisted mainly of persons with a lower level of education (persons with higher education belonged to the category of short-term unemployed). Despite the new legal solutions in this area, the establishment of the Labour Market Office (1992), then today's National Employment Service (2003), and series of active and passive employment measures, there were no significant results on this field<sup>78</sup>. In 2000, there were many crucial changes in the field of work and employment, and one of them was related to simplification of procedures for hiring and firing workers. In that period, Serbia was faced with long-term and structural unemployment. However, the encouragement of investment projects began since 2012, both domestic and foreign.

In Serbia, as well as in the majority of the neighbouring countries, unemployed occurred as a consequence of changes in ownership relations and structural reforms, companies' closure, while at the same time, the private sector was not able to accept large number of unemployed<sup>79</sup>. As a result, there was a mismatch between labour supply and demand, and reduction in the number of employees. However, the biggest problem was long-term unemployed workers and elderly unemployed persons. Encouragement of employment of the long-term unemployed has improved the social inclusion of these persons, but also provided livelihood support through flexible forms of work.

Flexibility occurred as a response to the crisis, both in terms of wages and employment and work effectiveness improvement. Flexibility itself should represent a stimulus for the reduction of the grey economy with the principle of the long-life education. It actually represents a strategy for flexibility adaptation on the labour market and work resources to a dynamic environment. Serbia was faced with difficult and demanding task to reduce the unemployment rate in the upcoming period, as the main indicator of the state of the labour market, but also of the economy in general<sup>80</sup>.

Nowadays, the situation regarding unemployment and inequality has significantly changed, which can be seen from tables 1, 2, 3, and 4. We

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<sup>78</sup> The quality and quantity of the workforce are of crucial importance for a labour market. The quantity of the workforce is affected by migration, while the quality is influenced by education.

<sup>79</sup> Developing countries generally record surplus labour and lack of technological innovation, and „In order to trigger its own robotic revolution, a developing country needs a excess capital, a large supply of engineers and scientists, and a labour shortage...“ (Kenedi, 1997, 111).

<sup>80</sup> A market economy implies the establishment and functioning of an integral market, i.e. besides market of goods, services and capital, labour market also functions – the market of knowledge, dexterity, skills, abilities that individuals possess. „The labour market, like any other market, besides numerous other functions, also performs an allocative function, that is, the employee work allocation in territorial, branch and every other aspect.,, (Radovanović, Maksimović 2010).

observed the following years: 2004 (the implementation of economic reforms during the government of Vojislav Koštunica), 2012 (change of the democratic regime), 2020 (beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic) and 2021 (the last year).

According to the Labour Force Survey, the employment rate declined from 45,2% in 2004 to 35,5% in 2012 (see Table 1). Numerous controversial and annulled privatizations occurred during this period, which resulted in the deindustrialization of the country, a significant decline in economic growth and deepening of regional inequalities. In connection with the massive reduction of jobs, the number of employees in the period from 2007 to 2014 decreased from 2 to 1.7 million people (Zvezdanović Lobanova, Lobanov, Zvezdanović 2021). The official data on unemployment rate before the start of the global economic crisis in 2008 was 18,1%, but by the end of 2012, it had risen to 23,9%. Strengthening entrepreneurial activity and gradual macroeconomic stabilization contributed to a noticeable reduction of this rate – up to 9,7% in 2020 (according to Labour Force Survey 2021). The growth of the total employment rate is the result of strengthening of the private sector, primarily service companies and the manufacturing industry.

**Table 1. Total employment and unemployment rate in 2004, 2012, 2020 and 2021 in Serbia**

Year	2004	2012	2020	2021
Employment rate (%)	45,2	35,5	49,1	48,6
Unemployment rate (%)	18,5	23,9	9,7	11

Source: LFS 2004, 2012, 2020 and 2021.

In the period from 2013 to 2020, the unemployment rate decreased, but due to the spread of the corona virus disease, in 2021, it increased by 1,3% compared to the previous year. The negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were first felt in the informal market of labour, where most of the jobs were lost. According to the authors of the “Quarterly Monitor”, this crisis did not have a deep impact on the labour market in Serbia because there was not a significant drop in GDP, while government’s measures to support the economy and the labour market were effective.

**Table 2. Unemployed by age groups in 2004, 2012, 2020 and 2021 in Serbia (in %)**

Years	2004	2012	2020	2021
25-29	27,2	35,3	16,4	15,26
30-34	18,7	27,9	9,97	11,81
35-39	16,7	20,9	8,66	11,71
40-44	14,7	19,1	7,52	9,37
45-49	13,6	20	6,36	9,71



<b>50-54</b>	<b>12,6</b>	<b>19,4</b>	<b>6,62</b>	<b>8,35</b>
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Source: LFS 2004, 2012, 2020 and 2021.

The analysis of the unemployment rate by age composition showed that the unemployed in the 25-29 age group are the most vulnerable. The biggest increase in unemployment is among people at beginning or in a relatively early phase of their career, who can still rely on their parents support. However, despite the high unemployment rate for this age group, it should be pointed out that they get work done faster, while older people without knowledge necessary to meet new technological requirements have a much bigger problem (Zvezdanović 2012). Based on the data from the Table 2, it can be concluded that unemployment rates for all age groups reached their peak in 2012. The lowest unemployment rates were recorded in the 50-54 age group, since there is a smaller number of people of this age who are actively seeking job and ready to engage at work.

The unemployment rate for young people aged 15–24 years, as a large demographic group, also remains extremely high, although it has decreased from 48,1% in 2004 to 26,4% at the end of 2021 (see Table 3). Unfortunately, the share of employed youth in total population is also alarming. This can be explained by the fact that many of them are still full-time students, or unemployed (those who did not enrolled at college and university). According to the youth employment rate, Serbia is still in the group of the most problematic countries in Europe.

**Table 3. Youth unemployment (15 – 24) in 2004, 2012, 2020, i 2021 in Serbia**

<b>Year</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
<b>Youth unemployment rate</b>	<b>48,1</b>	<b>51,05</b>	<b>26,6</b>	<b>26,4</b>

Source: LFS 2004, 2012, 2020 and 2021.

According to Eurostat data, the inequality has been gradually decreasing since 2016. The Gini coefficient was reported at 38 in 2013, then it rose to 40 in 2015, and it amounted to 33.3 in 2020 (see Table 4). Although the values of the Gini coefficient are low and make up about 30-35% (ranked in 140<sup>th</sup> place out of 160 countries), the income of the richest 20% and the 20% poorest differs as much as nine times (Zvezdanović Lobanova, Lobanov, Zvezdanović 2021). Unfortunately, Serbia still lags behind the European Union, among other things, due to the lowest disposable income of population<sup>81</sup>. During the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a third of the

<sup>81</sup> Due to a lack of interrupted time series data from 2000, we are unable to analyze the period before 2013.

population was below the poverty line, but by 2003, the level of absolute poverty was about 14%, while by 2010 it was up to 7% (in the second half of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, growth of 9-10% was recorded again). A quarter of the population receives less than 60% of the average monthly income (so-called relative poverty) (Љобанов 2019).

**Table 4. Inequality in Serbia in the period 2013 – 2020**

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<b>Gini coefficient (scale from 0 to 100)</b>	<b>38,0</b>	<b>38,3</b>	<b>40,0</b>	<b>39,8</b>	<b>37,8</b>	<b>35,6</b>	<b>33,3</b>	<b>33,3</b>

Source: Eurostat (2022).

The general characteristics of the labour market from 2009-2012 were unchanged. It was burdened with high unemployment, decrease in employment due to deterioration in the private sector's business conditions, low labour force mobility, a mismatch between the labour supply and demand, the lack of new jobs, a large share of the long-term unemployed, unfavorable age and qualification structure of the unemployed, high youth unemployment rate, large differences between regional labour markets, a large number of unemployed belonging to hard-to-employ categories, as well as significant number of persons engaged in the grey economy (Nacionalni akcioni plan zapošljavanja za 2011. godinu, 2011).

In addition, it is also important to mention the quality of education. Namely, before individuals became ready to join the labour market, they should be given full access to quality education. „When discussing inequality, education is important not only because a higher level of education increases the probability of finding a better-paid job in the future, but it also should prevent the reproduction of inequality. By equalizing the students' achievement who come from different socioeconomic environment, it enables children in lower-income households to have equal chances to get a job with a decent salary<sup>82</sup>“ (Arandarenko, Krstić, Žarković-Rakić 2017). The research of inequality in Serbia was initiated at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Milanović 2003, Krstić and Sanfey 2011, Randelović and Žarković Rakić 2011, Šuković, 2013) and it is still a topic of current interest for researchers. These studies have shown that there is a high-income inequality in Serbia due to a low redistributive capacity of taxes and social benefits, on the one hand, and the low employment rate and high labour market duality, on the other. Until then, the topic of inequality was not at the top of the decision-maker's

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<sup>82</sup>For example, the results of the PISA test in Serbia show that there are twice as many functionally illiterate children in families ranked among 20% of the population of the lowest socioeconomic status than in the 20% of families with higher well-being. Children from the first group fall behind their peers whose parents belong to higher social classes by two school years (Arandarenko, Krstić, Žarković-Rakić 2017).

agenda (Arandarenko, Krstić, Žarković-Rakić 2017). It should be pointed out that such practice is slowing changing, especially after 2020 when pandemic caused the instability on the labour market<sup>83</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Observing the labour market and the changes in the field of labour relations, it was concluded that a lower unemployment rate requires market stability. Every crisis, be it from the 20<sup>th</sup>, or the one from the 1<sup>st</sup> century, causes disruptions in the market. There is a danger that there could be high unemployment, a high percentage of long-term unemployment, a large youth unemployment rate, increasing pronounced structural unemployment, youth unemployment and low labour force participation rate for women, which occurs due to slow changes in the field of industrial and overall economic environment. In addition, there are still significant questions such as the creation of better quality jobs, social inclusion, raising the level of formal and informal education, achieving better youth employment outcomes, harmonization of the labour market, further investment in human capital, the fight against discrimination, because every person has the right to fair employment. Emphasizing the problem of unemployment and inequality, the authors tried to underline the importance of their resolving, give insight into their connection, as well as to show how Serbia improved in the last ten years in terms of employment and unemployment reduction, youth employment growth, occupational structure of employees and inequality.

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<sup>83</sup>In addition, there is also the concept of work within the green agenda, which should actively act against poverty and inequality, as well as to ensure inclusion by providing access to work without discrimination (Stojković – Zlatanović 2020, 229).

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