Public policy at times of pandemic

Policies on teleworking as a tool to achieve territorial redistribution of human resources and narrow down unequal distribution of wealth and development

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to analyse the benefits that remote work could bring in the development of the country. It is organized in three parts. In the first part it engages with the concept of public policy, how it is shaped and should be done to make visible problems that need to be addressed. The second part analysis the benefits of teleworking and potential models for city organization and population distribution to support country development. The last part analyses the case of Albania to discover that remote work, demography, and country development are concepts not yet analysed in connection for exploring the benefits they could bring. The paper concludes that government should invest in developing human resources in the field of digitalisation, so that the number of employees who could telework and companies that could use that expertise is increased. In this way, companies and staff do not necessarily need to locate in the capital or big cities but could locate in medium size cities and periphery. This would contribute to the development of currently neglected areas and decrease living expenses in big cities, making thus more affordable the life for the low-income workers. In doing so, not only the living conditions will improve but the gap between centre and periphery will narrow down and lead to a better distribution of economic benefits across country.

I. Introduction

Teleworking work became widespread during the pandemic. The Eurofound survey showed that 34 per cent of employees surveyed teleworked full time and almost half part-time (ILO, 09 March 2021). The International Labour Organization Homework Convention attempts to offer a framework for understanding and applying work done not at the work site. Since the focus of this paper is teleworking it is important to distinguish between remote work, telework, work at home and home-based work (ILO, 5 June 2020). Tele-working is work fully or partly carried out at an alternative location other than the default place of work and a work that has as an essential part the use of electronic devices such as computer, tablet, or telephone (mobile or landline) to perform the work (pp.6).

The application of teleworking during the pandemic revealed the advantages that it offers for companies and employees. If side effects of teleworking are adequately addressed, teleworking has the potential to get embraced by all, companies, public and private institutions, and employees. It has the potential to offer solutions to high density populated areas by re-allocated human resources more equally throughout the country. In doing so, it could revitalize economies of medium sized cities and remote areas and contribute to better living and working conditions for people.

Albania should explore this opportunity, but to do so it should first evaluate what is the percentage of workers that could benefit from teleworking and relocate in cities and areas other than the capital. Government has not yet addressed this issue. By applying the concept of the mobilisation of bias in public policy and the third dimension of power, we contend that unless concerns for human resources distribution across country, in terms of numbers and expertise are not analysed, it will not be possible to address the opportunities of teleworking.

The paper seeks to understand how remote working could address social inequality in Albania, across class and are? The paper sees remote working as an opportunity to relocate resources from centre to periphery for a better distribution of wealth and resources. Remote working, if duly and properly applied could be the solution to narrowing down the level of inequality in country.

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II. Public Policy and the Policy Process

The study of public policy has long attracted scholars due to the importance of policy making in and for the public sphere. According to Dewey, 'Public policy focuses on the public and its problems. It is concerned with how issues and problems come to be defined and constructed and how they are placed on the political and policy agenda' (in Parsons, 1995, XV). Cochran et.al. (1999) comments that "public policy always refers to the actions of government and the intentions that determine those actions" or that "[it]is the outcome

of the struggle in government over who gets what". Dye (1992) considers as public policy actions and non-actions of government "whatever government choose to do or not to do". Cochran and Malone (1995) emphasise that public policy is done to achieve societal goals and Peters (1999) that it is "the sum of governmental activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the life of citizens" (in Birkland, 2011, pp 8). In a nutshell, we may conclude that public policy is needed and designed in response to problems and on behalf of the public. It is made by government and implemented either by public or public institutions and agencies. Another important aspect is that even when government chooses not to take actions towards a certain problem, it is still public policy. Non-actions, similarly like actions do have impact on the public.

Laswell defined politics as "who gets what, when and how". In his seminal work "Who Governs", Dahl (1966) adopts a pluralistic approach to public policy, where public policy was the outcome of a free competition between ideas and interests and that power was widely distributed in society. Dahl contended that "in an open pluralistic system, where movement into the political stratum is easy, the stratum embodies many of the most widely shared values and goals in the society [end] any dissatisfied group…finds a spokesman in the political stratum' (pp.91-93). According to him power is widely distributed in society and no particular group has more power than others. However, the approach of Dahl has been criticized because it cannot explain all government actions but first and foremost because it cannot explain government non-actions.

Mobilization of bias in policy making is of paramount importance to discuss here. It was first introduced by Schattschneider in his seminal book "The Semi-Sovereign People" and it describes as a process which put emphasis on a limited number of problems in society by hiding others which might be equally or even more important. Mobilisation of bias has brought a new dimension in analysing the distribution of power and conflicts between different groups in a society. As Hogwood and Gunn (1984, pp.71) mobilisation of bias plays a very important role in the agenda setting process. Schattschneider comments "All forms of political organization have a bias in favour of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others because organization is the mobilization of bias. Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out' (1975, 71).

However, even though the concept tells a lot about the covert conflict within society, it fails to tackle the latent conflict, which cannot be observed because people are not even aware that it exists. That's why the concept was taken further by Bachrach and Baratz, who developed the concept of 'non-decision'. According to them power may confine the scope of decision making to relatively 'safe'

issues (1962, pp.948) and thus enabling 'non-decision making' (1962, pp.948). The nondecision-making is a process which aims at suppressing conflicts and preventing them from entering the political process (Ham and Hill, 1993, 67). Examples of the different forms of nondecision-making could be: 1) The use of force to prevent demands from entering the political process; 2) cooptation used to deter the emergence of issues; 3) rules and procedures could be used to deflect unwelcoming challenges (e.g. delaying them by referring to committees for "detailed" study or even labelling as unpatriotic or immoral); 4) reshaping of rules and procedures so that they could block demands which challenge the *staus quo* (Ham and Hill, 1993, 69).

Another approach to 'non-decision making' is the "third dimension of power' of Lukes. He argues that 'decisions are choices consciously and intentionally made by individuals between alternatives, whereas the bias of the system can be mobilized, recreated and reinforced in ways that are neither consciously chosen nor the intended result of particular individuals' choices' (2005[1974], 25). Lukes comments that the bias of the system is sustained mainly by the values, ideology, culture, structure and institutions of a given group. Consequently, the rest of the population is not even aware that its interests are shaped by others, that its interests are structured according to the values and beliefs of the society (Lukes, 2005[1974], 26). Therefore, the conflict is not observable. Luke sees as a 'crucial point that the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place' (2005 [1974], 27). Such power shapes peoples' perceptions in such a way that they agree with the actual situation, order of things and their position in life.

The elaboration of the covert and latent conflict which as consequence is not manifested in the government actions, was of paramount importance when analysing remote work during pandemic. Which is the public policy that government pursued when addressing work from home? In order to trace back this policy we will refer to the definition of Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram on public policy: "Policies are revealed through texts, practices, symbols, discourses that define and deliver values including goods, services as well as regulations, income, status, and other positively or negatively valued attributes" (Birkland, 2011). Therefore, it is important to inspect laws, practices and public speeches for remote working in Albania during the pandemic and more than anything else how the problem was defined. As discussed above public policy is necessary to offer solutions to existing problems and hopefully preventing new ones emerge. Therefore, it is important to investigate which problems were identified during the pandemic and whether remote working was tackled or not during the policy-making process.

III. Policy making during the pandemic – Remote Working, Demography and Territory

III.1 COVID-19, remote working and the emerging problems and solutions

Remote working, working from home and flexible working arrangements are not a novelty. They have been applied for the last 40 years (Chiru, 2017). With the increased access to personal computers emerged the concept of 'telecommuting' (Olson, 1983). With the increase in home computers, internet connectivity, smartphones and the wide arrow of internet- based platforms it became possible the team work through documents sharing and video-conferencing (Chiru, 2017). However, it has never been applied at such immense amount, so extensively as it happened during pandemic as a result of social distancing efforts and stay at home orders due to COVID-19 problems. Nonetheless, the crises paved the way to make remote working a permanent feature of the working landscape (Lavelle, 2020).

According to an OECD policy paper on remote work at G7 countries remote work has reshaped the work-space relationship. It has made visible the benefits of the remote working as well as its disadvantages. The study shows that digitalisation and working from home might improve the attractiveness of low-density populated areas and increasing adoption of remote working can reduce the appeal of cities (OECD, 2021). It is important to emphasise that remote working and teleworking will be used interchangeably because, when referring to remote work, experts have referred to work done via phones, computers or tablets.

COVID-19 has radically changed the approach towards working space. The strong relationship between the worker and the working space and the concentration of the economic actors in cities, has turned these last ones into the collecting point of the labour forces. However, COVID-19 by imposing social and physical distancing rules influenced the relationship of worker-workspace: with the help of digitalization, it made possible the distancing of the worker from the traditional physical working space. Workers continued their activity without disruption from their home. Since remote working is highly linked with the use of technology, those who could "afford" distance working were the well-educated and with incomes (Mongey, S. et.al., 2021). Because most of the well-educated people live in large cities due to the larger share of well-paid work, there was a better opportunity to apply distance-working models in cities (Althoff, L. et.al, 2022). While opportunities for teleworking were more pronounced in large cities, the pattern gave way to new ways of thinking about where to work and live: a new scenario for re-dimensioning work-space relationships has emerged. This scenario is highly related to issues of population density in large cities and de-population

of rural, remote areas and small cities. Since remote work breaks the relationship worker-space, companies might relocate outside high densely populated areas, without negatively impacting the quality of work. (Althoff, L. et.al, 2020).

Evaluation of remote working has identified economic, social, and environmental benefits. Among the economic benefits we might highlight enlargement of skilled workers pool for firms: firms can attract skilled and talented workers who live in places far from the physical space the firm is located and cannot commute (Degbey and Einola, 2020). Without any doubt this has contributed towards the improvement of the quality of work. Moreover, teleworking has reduced the costs on office space, utilities, or services. While beneficial to companies and firms, teleworking has proved beneficial to employees as well, because it has reduced time and expenses to office and back home (Hayes, Sh.W. et.al. 2021, pp.3; Davis, M.A. et.al. 2022, pp.1) it has created better opportunities for women and people with disabilities; it has opened the possibility for multiple jobs as well as the possibility to relocate to periphery or smaller towns to reduce housing and living costs (OECD, 2021). At macro-level, it is thought that – even though it is soon to see the results – that teleworking help in re-distributing wealth to the benefit of periphery. In terms of the social aspect, remote working is thought that has contributed to a better social life of the workers. By having the opportunity to spend more time at home and with family, workers can have a better work-life balance. Finally, less polluted cities because of decreased gas emission are another positive impact that remote working might have on society at large (OECD, 2021).

While benefits are great indeed, challenges are present for firms, workers, and society as well. Remote working poses challenges to firms in terms of team managements, and increased expenses for application of digital technologies which at the beginning might outweigh the reduced costs for office rents and utilities. The size of the company is important here. Small companies might have more difficulties in adopting digital technologies to help in remote working. Thus, they might be more prone to preserve work-space relations than the bigger companies (OECD, 2021). As per workers, teleworking is more available to those with high expertise and well paid, than to those with less expertise and lower incomes (Mongey, S. et.al., 2021). Moreover, career progressing is more difficult in this setting. Employees and employers need to adapt to the new scenario and develop new ways for career progression, since the old ones, where and employee is spotted among his/her colleagues who work in the same space, do not apply in this case. Company culture is highly affected in teleworking; thus, companies should explore new ways to help keep or re-invent its organizational culture (Althoff, L. et.al., 2020, 2022). Finally, working from home might not always be the best option for employees. Barriers such as isolation, difficulties in managing time when performing work and home tasks might influence performance and psychological health of employees (Hayes, Sh.L, 2021).

Several surveys conducted in G7 countries have shown that due to lockdown during COVID-19, people have re-shaped their expectations for their living and working space and location. Placing more importance on having a garden at home, on having a more indoor space for homeworking, on moving in areas with less density. They would move in city peripheries, or even in remote areas with bigger spaces if remote work would be available to them (OECD, 2021).

It is clear now that COVID-19 offered 'an opportunity' to rethink the space people would like to live and work in the future. Four scenarios are possible:

One of course, is to continue as it is, perhaps with application of hybrid forms of work (OECD, Four Scenarios).

The second one is what is called the "doughnut effect" (Ramani & Bloom, 2021). According to this scenario there will be shifts in urban structures where people "will commute to work on less days per week [and] more people will flock to areas further from city centres, which increases the need for spread of public transportation networks". If that is going to happen, state and local government must intervene to ease the transition for making possible a more balanced real estate prices across country which will result in a more affordable city centre and outskirt and rural regions face new demand for services and land

The third scenario has to do with the rise of intermediate cities in terms of attractiveness for workers and firms: in this scenario high skilled workers, able to telework will move in intermediate cities where co-working spaces will get increased and prices for houses and office' premises will either stagnate or decrease becoming thus more affordable (Ramani & Bloom, 2021).

The fourth and last scenario is that of the "City Paradox" where a permanent movement of high-skilled workers outside city centres will be observed. The authors derive this model, because the cities of the 21st century exhibit the paradox of 'despite being the densest and most expensive places to live, a disproportionate fraction of their inhabitants work jobs that could be done from anywhere'. The paradox is that the denser the city the more work can be done remotely. The typology of the job that could be done remotely are those that provide skilled services such as information, finance and insurance, professional services and management of companies. Even though the jobs could be performed remotely, employees didn't benefit from this opportunity until the pandemic hit. However, once tried the remote work landed itself successfully and is likely to continue. In the "City Paradox" scenario nomad workers will spread across the territory of the country and there will be a greater use of hotels and touristic areas as workplaces. Furthermore, small cities and rural regions face greater demand for services and land. Co-working spaces in non-metropolitan areas are in demand. Employees will make longer commutes even though less frequent (Althoff et.al., 2020; Althoff et.al., 2022).

Whatever strategies prevail, and regardless of the end of pandemic, the greater acceptance of teleworking will result in a greater consumption of resources at home and new commuting patterns. Therefore, governments should establish policies to accommodate and ease the changing patterns of living, working and travelling.

III. 2 Albania – Policies during COVID-19 and workforce

Government of Albania reacted rapidly to contain the spread of the virus. It took numerous measures in terms of social distancing and financial support for people and business as well as measures in the health sector. Actions related to social distancing included measures in judicial area (Normative Act, 25.03.2020), closures of public and private education institutions and subsequently procedures to follow their opening (Order No.135, Order No.135/1, Order No.91, Decision No. 208, Order no.190, Order no.216, Order 289, Guidelines no.18), measures that organized work schedule in the public administration (Decision No.237).

Albania has ratified the International Labour Organization Convention on Home Work on 6 June 2002 (entry into force on 24 July 2002), with law no.8909. The Home Work Convention (1996, entry into force on 22 April 2000), recognizes that home work is any work done at home or in other premises of worker's choice, other than workplace of employer and work done for remuneration which results in a product or service as specified by the employer, irrespective of who provides the equipment, materials or other inputs (Article) 1. The Convention stipulates that each member state that has ratified the Convention should adopt, implement and periodically review a national policy on home work aimed at improving the situation of homeworkers (article 3). Article 4 provides guidelines for equality of treatment between those doing home work and those working on site, in terms of payment, protection against discrimination, remuneration, social security, training, and maternity leave.

However, even though teleworking as a concept has existed and even applied to a certain extent -it has indeed increased five-fold in the last decade (ILO, 09 March 2021), it was COVID-19 which made visible whether companies were ready to adopt remote working and whether employees were equipped with the necessary skills to perform remotely. Recognizing the importance of teleworking, organizations such as ILO, OECD and the like has offered practical guidelines how to adapt to the new situation, how to make home-based telework as healthy, safe and effective as possible, how to measure remote work (ILO, 09 June 2021) and how important it is to focus on the human dimension while applying it (ILO, 09 March 2021).

While the literature on remote work is wide indeed, in Albania little is known about it. However, the focus of this paper does not address the remote work *per*

se, but rather the implications, benefits, and advantages it brings in the physical distribution of the workforce and consequently of the population.

According to INSTAT, out of the 166,386 enterprises working in Albania, 54, 276 (32.6%) were located in Tirana (Table No.1).

TABLE 1: Geographical Distribution of Enterprises in 2020

Regions	Active enterprises	Registered during year	Active Local Units
Tiranë	54,276	6,933	56,743
Fier	23,420	1,952	24,581
Korçë	14,531	1,248	15,374
Elbasan	13,906	1,189	14,963
Durrës	12,684	1,410	13,521
Vlorë	11,656	1,293	12,364
Shkodër	10,959	981	11,674
Berat	9,616	852	10,190
Lezhë	5,314	536	5,758
Gjirokastër	4,841	349	5,212
Dibër	3,023	323	3,325
Kukës	2,160	253	2,511

(Source: INSTAT)

Concentration of business goes hand in hand with the population of each county. According to INSTAT in 2022, Tirana hosts 32.9 of the total population, followed by Durrës with 10.4%, Fier 10%, Elbasan 9.3% and Korça 7.1%. The counties with the smallest number of population are Gjirokastra with 2.0%, Kukës with 2.6% and Dibër with 3.9%. The internal migration from periphery to the capital has been consistent over the years. It has created a vicious cycle where initially people migrate to capital or nearby cities to benefit from the facilities and job market it provides and then business are established in capital or nearby areas were labour force could be accessed.

The largest share belongs to the categories of farmers 49,053 enterprises (29.5%) and trade 43, 668 enterprises (26.2%). The category "other services" follows suit with 30,906 enterprises (18.6%) (Table 2). It should be noted that the highest percentage of the enterprises (149,772 or 90%) have 1-4 employees. Therefore, the window of those companies which might offer teleworking is narrow indeed. It is conditioned by the number of employees and the kind of services it provides. The likelihood is that companies which have more than 4 employees and do teleworking are the ones who could offer remote work. Teleworking could be applied to jobs in those occupations that can be performed remotely using ICTs, such as those

found in most managerial, professional, technical, sales, and clerical occupations (ILO, April 2021, pp.3). Jobs such as supermarket workers or those who work in construction or farms could not benefit from the benefits of teleworking.

TABLE 2: Active enterprises by economic activity and size

Economic Activity	Total	Group by the number of employed			
		1-4	5-9	10-49	50+
Total	166,386	149,772	7,583	7,052	1,979
Producers of goods	65,042	60,403	1,704	2,177	758
Farmers	49,053	49,053	-	-	-
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	1,358	1,186	86	74	12
Industry	9,571	6,714	1,042	1,282	533
Construction	5,060	3,450	576	821	213
Producers of services	101,344	89,369	5,879	4,875	1,221
Trade	43,668	39,367	2,330	1,748	223
BTransport and storage	5,708	5,177	248	235	48
Accommodation and food service activities	17,713	15,572	1,357	735	49
Information and communication	3,349	2,858	216	220	55
Other Services	30,906	26,395	1,728	1,937	846

(Source: INSTAT)

Consequently, if we analyse the nature of the enterprises in Albania, the number of enterprises that could use teleworking is indeed small. Only categories such as "information and communication", "trade", "transport and storage" are the ones who could perform telework and benefit from its advantages. The data offered by INSTAT has not taken into account the academic institutions, which indeed have teleworked by allowing that teaching classes could take place online permitting thus students to study from their place of residence.

In terms of the job sector according to EU Albanian Progress Report 2021, in 2020, job creation and job preserving remained a major cross-sectoral priorities of the government. The report indicates that "between December 2019 and December 2020, the number of registered jobseekers increased by 34.5% from 68,589 to 92,236 and it continued this also in 2021, when there were 94,529 registered unemployed jobseekers… The profile of registered jobseekers tends to be the one of lower educated people, having at most primary education (55.4%), with a lower proportion of people having upper secondary education (36%) and a very low coverage of unemployed having university education (9%)".

The available data are not sufficient to understand what the numbers of workers are who teleworked and which were the businesses – in terms of size and category - that used teleworking and where they were distributed. However, they clearly show that unemployment is hight among low-educated workers. Therefore, even though the number of enterprises who could employee low-educated workers is high (the highest) the unemployment number of people who fall in this category is high indeed. Consequently, government should design policies that address this problem by investing more on IT education and boosting the job sector that could offer teleworking.

IV. Conclusions

In order to propose solutions for the future, it is important to know what is the percentage of the people who have teleworked fully or partially, who think that their current job could be carried out or not by teleworking (Dingel, J.I. 2020), the percentage of those who believe in a hybrid model of teleworking and face-to-face, whether companies have policies at place to organize remote work, whether managers are ready to lead teams remotely, whether fixed working hours will persist even when working remotely or smart working is a better option and whether people increase or not efficiency when teleworking.

Nonetheless a public policy for addressing internal migration, unequal distribution of qualified expertise, disparities in wealth distribution should be taken. By applying the concept of mobilisation of bias we should uncover the latent conflict within Albanian society, in order to offer solutions for addressing these problems. Teleworking looks an important approach to rediscover periphery, relocate resources and contribute to sound development of country. Investment in digitalization, good internet connection, capacity building should become a government priority.

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