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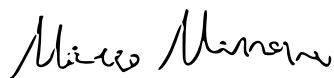
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**COVID-19 IMPACT ON PLATFORM  
ECONOMY:  
A PRELIMINARY OUTLOOK**

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Marrone and Maurilio Pirone**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1. INTRODUCTION ..... 1
- 2. BARCELONA..... 3
  - 2.1 Platform economy urban background..... 3
  - 2.2 Covid impact and institutional measures ..... 3
  - 2.3 Platforms reaction..... 4
  - 2.4 Looking forward ..... 5
- 3. BERLIN ..... 6
  - 3.1 Platform economy urban background ..... 6
  - 3.2 Covid impact and institutional measures ..... 6
  - 3.3 Platforms reaction..... 7
  - 3.4 Looking forward ..... 8
- 4. BOLOGNA ..... 9
  - 4.1 Platform economy urban background ..... 9
  - 4.2 Covid impact and institutional measures ..... 9
  - 4.3 Platforms reaction..... 10
  - 4.4 Looking forward ..... 11
- 5. LISBON..... 13
  - 5.1 Platform economy urban background ..... 13
  - 5.2 Covid impact and institutional measures ..... 13
  - 5.3 Platforms reaction..... 15
  - 5.4 Looking forward ..... 17
- 6. LONDON ..... 19
  - 6.1 Platform economy urban background ..... 19
  - 6.2 Covid impact and institutional measures ..... 20
  - 6.3 Platforms reaction..... 22
  - 6.4 Looking forward ..... 23
- 7. PARIS ..... 24
  - 7.1 Platform economy urban background ..... 24
  - 7.2 Covid impact and institutional measures ..... 24
  - 7.3 Platforms reaction..... 25
  - 7.4 Looking forward ..... 25
- 8. TALLINN ..... 27
  - 8.1 Platform economy urban background ..... 27
  - 8.2 Covid impact and institutional measures ..... 27

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8.3	Platforms response .....	28
8.4	Looking forward .....	29
9.	CONCLUSIONS .....	30



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## 4. BOLOGNA

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### 4.1 Platform economy urban background

Despite their many differences, we have some common features which may help in positioning digital platform in Bologna's context. Firstly, platform economy has rapidly grown in Bologna, especially for what concerns food delivery and short-term rentals, having several active platforms. However, this is not the case of Uber which, due to national legal framework, can't operate on the Italian context, and of Hepling, which seems to suffer the competition of the traditional informal economy. Secondly, the rise of platforms such as Deliveroo and Airbnb seems to have been facilitated (and influenced) by both long term and recent transformation, but also by the specificities of Bologna's urban landscape: during last years, the city registered an increasing tendency by economic actors to avoid the effect of formal regulation (i.e. in terms of short-term hosts registration), but also the impact of the tourism expansion so to label Bologna as the Italian "city of food". All in all, we can say that, while platforms are successfully operating in Bologna's urban market, they lack of redistributing such benefits, increasing precarity and inequality among their workers, but also effecting traditional urban actors and the rest of the city. Nevertheless, the city registered also the attempt of local administration to regulate labour through digital platforms, approving the Chart for Digital Workers' Rights in Urban Context.

### 4.2 Covid impact and institutional measures

Covid-19 outbreak in Italy basically meant the outbreak of Coronavirus crisis in the whole Europe. First cases have been reported at the end of January, but probably the virus circulated before. Generally, the country registered a high number of infections, especially in the North of Italy. Until the 4<sup>th</sup> of June, 234.013 cases of contagion and 33.689 deaths have been officially confirmed even if the number is probably much higher<sup>8</sup>. Bologna didn't have been affected too much but nevertheless suffered the surroundings situation.

Government rapidly adopted several measures<sup>9</sup> of social distancing, with the progressive suspension of many activities (schools, restaurants, office working, public events) in the Northern regions. Since the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, these measures are progressively extended to all the

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<sup>8</sup> Ashleigh R Tuite, Victoria Ng, Erin Rees, David Fisman, *Estimation of COVID-19 outbreak size in Italy*, «Lancet», Volume 20, Issue 5, May 2020, available here: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(20\)30227-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(20)30227-9/fulltext)

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Saglietto, Fabrizio D'Ascenzo, Giuseppe Biondi Zoccai, Gaetano Maria De Ferrari, *COVID-19 in Europe: the Italian lesson*, «Lancet», Volume 395, Issue 10230, April 2020, available here: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30690-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30690-5/fulltext)

country, forbidding the mobility through regions. Prime Minister's Decree of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March (so-called "Chiudi Italia" – "Close Italy") declared suspended all the productive activities but confirming essential services like the long and short-range logistics as "essential activities".

Several economic measures of public support to standard workers and industry sector have been adopted as well as some emergency benefits for autonomous workers but no measures for casual workers – and many platform workers could be listed in such group. Some protests have been registered<sup>10</sup> in logistics and industry as workers complained the lack of PPE and fear of infection. Furthermore, it has been reported how many factories – especially in the North of Italy, never suspended production. Re-opening of some productive activities have progressively occurred since the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, while human mobility restrictions through regions ended the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June. Actually, there is an outlook of GDP decrease<sup>11</sup> around 10%, according to Bankitalia.

### **4.3 Platforms reaction**

In Bologna, as in the rest of Italian territory, food delivery platforms never suspended the service. All major firms declared a positive trend, after a first moment of difficulties: Uber Eats reported +55% of purchases worth<sup>12</sup> in April, while Deliveroo reported +40% of restaurants registered on the platform in March<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, Deliveroo has enlarged its range to some "essential" products and supermarkets to gain some new market segments and raised the fees for the restaurants to 40% of the purchase. Nevertheless, on May 29 Uber Eats has been charged with illegal recruitment and workers harassment<sup>14</sup>.

Struggles promoted by informal riders' unions took place in several Italian cities such as in Bologna, and their protest gained new visibility in public debate. In the first moment, they requested to suspend the service and the introduction of a quarantine income; subsequently, they demanded for a regional regulation of food delivery services and better contractual conditions. According to Government welfare measures, VAT workers could obtain 600 euros of emergency benefit in April and May, but few riders are enrolled in this way. Deliveroo introduced a benefit for workers infected but only if they could prove this with an official

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<sup>10</sup> Into the Black Box and Officina Primo Maggio, *Strikes and invisible mobilizations in the Italian pandemic* (2020), in Workers Inquiry Network, *Struggle in a Pandemic: A Collection of Contributions on the Covid-19 crisis*, available here: <http://www.intotheblackbox.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Struggle-in-a-Pandemic-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Davide Colombo and Carlo Marroni, Bankitalia: stima Pil in calo del 9,2% nel 2020, rimbalzo del 4,8% nel 2021, «Il Sole 24 Ore», 5 June 2020, available here: <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/bankitalia-stima-pil-calo-92percento-2020-rimbalzo-48percento-2021-ADlcvMv>

<sup>12</sup> Ansa, *Coronavirus: Uber Eats, +55% per le vendite nell'ultimo mese*, 9 April 2020, available here: [https://www.ansa.it/canale\\_terraegusto/notizie/a\\_tavola\\_con\\_ansa/2020/04/09/coronavirus-uber-eats-55-per-le-vendite-nellultimo-mese-Of8ff3f1-8111-4f14-9eb2-1966177bbe90.html](https://www.ansa.it/canale_terraegusto/notizie/a_tavola_con_ansa/2020/04/09/coronavirus-uber-eats-55-per-le-vendite-nellultimo-mese-Of8ff3f1-8111-4f14-9eb2-1966177bbe90.html)

<sup>13</sup> Alessandro Vinci, *Coronavirus, food delivery in sofferenza: il lockdown penalizza i big del settore, si salvano i piccoli*, «Corriere della Sera», 26 March 2020, available here: [https://www.corriere.it/tecnologia/cards/app-food-delivery-pronte-ripartire-il-grande-caos-meno-20percento-ordini-ma-ci-sono-segnali-ripresa/deliveroo.shtml?refresh\\_ce-cp](https://www.corriere.it/tecnologia/cards/app-food-delivery-pronte-ripartire-il-grande-caos-meno-20percento-ordini-ma-ci-sono-segnali-ripresa/deliveroo.shtml?refresh_ce-cp)

<sup>14</sup> Valerio De Stefano and Antonio Aloisi, *Are we Managers or Corporals?*, «Rivista Il Mulino», 5 June 2020, here available: [https://www.rivistailmulino.it/news/newsitem/index/Item/News:NEWS\\_ITEM:5256](https://www.rivistailmulino.it/news/newsitem/index/Item/News:NEWS_ITEM:5256)



diagnosis (not so easy because of swabs' scarcity). No PPE has been furnished to workers by platforms, apart from the ones by Riders Union Bologna – that obtained them from local administration.

Impact of Covid-19 on Airbnb was quite opposite. Tourism collapsed. From around 127.000 new booking in Italy at the beginning of February, the platform passed to around 42.000 at the end of March<sup>15</sup>. In Bologna rental activities saw at the 1<sup>st</sup> of March a cancellation rate “up to 90%” in that month<sup>16</sup>, that reached the 100% just few weeks later. Host of Local Pal – Bologna small hosts association – claimed support by municipality asking for cutting local taxes on reservation through platforms. Italian Government announced an “holiday bonus” that goes up to 500 euros to support the tourism sector, but it will not be valid for short term rental platforms, rising the protest of Airbnb Italian County Manager<sup>17</sup>.

Few information are available on Helpling. The platform kept working during the lockdown. Nevertheless, cleaning workers didn't receive many offers because of customers fear to be infected. As for Airbnb and Deliveroo, Helpling workers couldn't benefit from social welfare programs.

## 4.4 Looking forward

In general terms, we see the sector of platforms as one of the best positioned on the market after the pandemic. Digital services, data processing and last-mile logistics gained more influence. Nevertheless, we may highlight a split between commodities mobility and people mobility with platforms furnishing second typology of services in crisis.

While Deliveroo has a positive outlook for next months, Airbnb will go through a deep redefinition. Food delivery workers seem to be more publicly recognized as essential workers and this open up for a better recognition in terms of income and welfare. Nevertheless, companies do not seem in favor of a change in labour relations and contractual forms. At the same time, riders report new hirings in the sector, with workers previously engaged with other jobs changing their profession. On the other side, short term rentals could be directed towards a more stable market, from tourists to local dwellers. This will have undoubtedly an effect on all the tourism sector and the economic fabric of the city. Helpling workers can go back to work without mobility restrictions but have to respect protocols<sup>18</sup> and risk to face an

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<sup>15</sup> Data taken from Airdna: <https://www.airdna.co/covid-19-data-center>

<sup>16</sup> Bologna Today, *Coronavirus, gli host scrivono al sindaco dopo il crollo delle prenotazioni: "Sospendere la tassa di soggiorno"*, 1 March 2020, available here: <http://www.bolognatoday.it/economia/coronavirus-richiesta-sospensione-tassa-soggiorno-airbnb-.html>; Paola Dezza, *Affitti brevi nella morsa del coronavirus*, «Il Sole 24 Ore», 11 March 2020, available here: <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/affitti-brevi-morsa-coronavirus-AD0j5JC>

<sup>17</sup> Fabio Savelli, *Il bonus vacanze da 2,4 miliardi che esclude Booking.com ed Airbnb*, «Corriere della Sera», 14 May 2020, available here: [https://www.corriere.it/economia/consumi/20\\_maggio\\_14/bonus-vacanze-24-miliardi-che-esclude-bookingcom-ed-airbnb-77e0af12-95eb-11ea-b0dc-2b898cb19b15.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/economia/consumi/20_maggio_14/bonus-vacanze-24-miliardi-che-esclude-bookingcom-ed-airbnb-77e0af12-95eb-11ea-b0dc-2b898cb19b15.shtml)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.helpling.it/coronavirus>

increasing flexibility of their job (with last time cancellations and less job offers). Furthermore, closed spaces have been addressed as the most dangerous in terms of infection potentialities. In all three cases, the lack of social protections and standard contracts will expose these workers in next month to great uncertainty.

Finally, it is possible that new platforms will emerge in next months especially around urban delivery with opportunities for public services or workers cooperatives.