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**Independent workers and industrial relations in Europe:
evidence from the literature review**

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Research topic

The paper presents the preliminary and exploratory findings of the literature review regarding the phenomenon of professional self-employed, the so-called I-Pros, carried out within the framework of the European Project ‘I-WIRE – Independent Workers and Industrial Relations in Europe’ funded by the European Commission (DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion). The project, coordinated by the University of Milan and involving other nine international partners, aims at disentangling the complex relationship between solo self-employed workers in the advanced tertiary sector and the sphere of the employment relations and of the collective representation of interests. The focus on such category of workers is particularly relevant when scrutinized through the lenses of the professions and of the professionalisms. In fact, the population of I-pros, defined as ‘independent workers without employees engaging in a service activity and /or intellectual service not in the farming, craft or retail sector’ (Rapelli 2012), upsets the traditional divisions among the different professions. Looking at professional workers from the perspective of their autonomous contractual arrangements led to a transversal and new consideration of such figures in the labour market.

Research background

Across European countries, the population of I-Pros has known a remarkable growth over the last decade, especially in the advanced tertiary sector. The rise in the number is especially relevant when compared with the trend in other contractual categories. Between 2000 and 2011 the increase in I-pros reached the peak of +82.1% while over the same time lapse the number of dependent workers and of independent non-professional workers has respectively experienced a much limited increase of 7.2% and 5.6% (Eurostat data). The growth followed a similar trend also in the most recent years, confirming the trend.

As an expression of post-fordist work and of developments in the advanced tertiary sector across European countries, I-Pros can be considered as a bridge between the internal labour market and external labour markets, linking strategies of internalization of human resources and practices of outsourcing of services and skills. In other words they embody an intermediate labour force category that is located halfway between the hierarchical structure of the firm and the market, since they respond to labour demand coming from both sides. Given such intermediate position within the regulatory and institutional frameworks, the condition of I-Pros reflects a peculiar discrepancy between their acknowledged high and specialized professionalism and the relating low social status (including low income, precarious working conditions, lack of universal welfare protections). The renaissance of I-pros in such a background has raised three main policy implications that deserve a deeper investigation. A first issue concerns the regulatory framework of I-Pros: an up-to-date regulation of professional self-employment is necessary, consistent with the current socio-economic content in which they operate. A second problem deals with the new emerging demand put forward by I-pros, ranging from social security to employment protection. Thirdly, the collective representation of I-pros' interests represents a further thorny problem.

Research design

Against such backdrop, the paper has a threefold objective. The analysis starts from the definition of the I-Pros category in the international literature. Given the complex and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon, the definitional task represent per se a first cardinal goal and the starting point for the following investigation. Secondly, the paper aims at providing a theoretical overview of the I-Pros phenomenon, by investigating the main theoretical approaches dealing with this new type of autonomous work and analysing how I-pros are portrayed in the international literature. Thirdly, it explores the main contributions relating to the regulation of independent professional workers, their demands in terms of social and employment rights, and to their collective representation in the labour market within the European framework.

In order to provide a comprehensive overview, a desk research is carried out through document analysis and analysis of the comparative literature on the new professional autonomous work, issue little developed in the public sphere and in the political debate, that presents many aspects of ambiguity requiring a deeper scrutiny.

For instance, the literature on labour market transformations, flexibility, neo-liberal reforms and the evolution of the capitalist societies have focused mainly on atypical workers, in particular temporary workers, on which most policy makers concentrated their attention. Similarly, employment relations literature has concentrated on atypical employment, rarely investigating self-employment as a distinct cluster in the labour market. Overall research attention has neglected other forms of work, such as new autonomous workers and freelancers and their emerging demands into the labour market.

Preliminary results

The article sheds some light on the renaissance of I-Pros, focusing on the underpinning motivations and socio-economic drivers of the trend. The expansion in the share of the professional workforce experiencing self-employment has undergone multifaceted and overlapped interpretations, overall symptomatic of a socio-economic transformations of societies.

Regarding policy implications, a first set of reflections deals with the urgency to update the legislative framework and the social protection system to their emerging demands. In an evolving socio-economic context, the raise in the share of I-pros has not been accompanied by a congruent definition of the regulatory framework to fill the gap between the high professionalism and the low social status attached to I-Pros. Their demands seem to shift from a corporatist- professional organization interests – such as deduction of expenses of training, time of payment, fiscal treatments – towards a broader universalistic social protection including maternity and parental leave, injury and illness protection, pension schemes.

On this point, the European Parliament has recently approved the resolution “Social protection for all, including self-employed workers” 2013/2111(INI)-14/01/2014. This resolution invited the member States to: guarantee the social protection to all the workers, including the self-employed workers; to provide mutual assistance to cover accidents, illnesses and pensions; to guarantee the continuous training for all the workers; and to oppose the “bogus” self-employed workers.

The inherently individual nature of their contractual arrangement, the multi-employers relations they established and the peculiarities in their professionalism make the collective representation a problematic task. The traditional industrial regulation model based on collective bargaining, through a triangular employment relationship, cannot be applied to growing sectors and new forms

of employment. Trade unions have become less successful in attracting new workers with different types of employment contracts (nonstandard jobs, economically dependent self-employed, independent professional workers- I-Pros). Such trajectory is symptomatic of the necessity to find also new forms of representation, by moving from an individual representation towards a collective one, involving both traditional (trade unions) and non-traditional organizations of representation (quasi unions and labour market intermediaries).

As preliminary conclusion, the increasing trend of I-Pros cannot be considered neither a cyclical effect of the employment and financial crisis nor simply a phenomenon limited to false-self-employment. Conversely it configures as a structural phenomenon which seems to respond to the exigencies of the advanced economies and to their contemporary socio-economic needs.