

OPINION

from Prof. DSc Pepka Boyadjieva, department “Knowledge Society: Science, Education and Innovation”, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, BAS

concerning the publications of Dr. Veneta Krasteva Petrunova, participant in the competition for the academic position “Associate Professor”, announced by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology for the needs of the department “Public Policies and Social Changes”, published in the State Gazette, issue. 89 / 12.11.2019

1. General description of the materials presented

Dr. Veneta Krasteva is the only candidate for the competition for the position “Associate Professor”, announced for the needs of the Department of Public Policies and Social Change of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The competition is fully in line with the candidate's educational and scientific profile, her professional interests and scientific achievements.

Dr. Veneta Krasteva presents 35 publications, among them two monographs – “Youth employment and precarious jobs: The case of Bulgaria” Sofia: Publishing House of the BAS "Prof. Marin Drinov”, 2019, as well as a monograph in English based on her dissertation thesis. It is noteworthy that Dr. Krasteva is the only author of 18 articles, 15 are co-authored, for many of the papers she is the first author and they are published in English. It is also important to be emphasized that all publications are made after the defense of her PhD thesis.

In quantitative terms, these publications far exceed the requirements set out in the Academic Staff Development Act and its related regulations, including the Regulations of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology. As a distinctive feature of Dr. Krasteva’s publications, I will point out that, as a rule, they combine theoretical analyzes with rich empirical data and formulation of concrete proposals and policies for solving social problems. In this sense, Dr. Krasteva's professional statements clearly reflect an understanding of sociology not just as an academic science, but as a science which should at the same time be developed and practiced as a public and socially engaged discipline.

2. General characteristics of the applicant's scientific, applied and pedagogical activity

Dr. Veneta Krasteva is one of the young Bulgarian sociologists, whose professional appearances are not limited to our national science. At the heart of her scientific career is research, skillfully combined with teaching and expertise. Dr. Krasteva's academic achievements are a very good example of the positive role of participation in international projects and of the work in international teams for the professional development of young scientists. For me, there is no doubt that the high-standard publications, which were presented for participation in the competition, are to a great extent a result of Dr. Krasteva's work in the teams of several international projects, of the opportunity to participate in comparative international research and to use the empirical data obtained in them, as well as to see in practice how high academic criteria and standards are followed and upheld.

3. Analysis of the applicant's scientific achievements

The publications, presented for the competition, outline three problematic fields that concentrate Dr. Krasteva's research efforts: 1) youth employment and job insecurity in the labor market, 2) religious beliefs, Orthodoxy and the Orthodox Church, and 3) educational problems and policies. Among them, undoubtedly, youth employment and labor insecurity in the labor market stand out, to which her habilitation monograph is dedicated.

The monograph "Youth employment and precarious jobs: The case of Bulgaria" is a thoughtful and in-depth study, which is characterized by clearly formulated and convincingly substantiated theses. I think that the most significant contributions of the monograph are:

- Creative use and adaptation of the concept of labor insecurity for development of a theoretical framework for a multidimensional analysis of the situation of young people in the labor market;

- Justification and consistent use of an analytical approach that binds the broader social and institutional context with policies and individual actions in situations of job insecurity, its consequences and the possibilities to overcome it;

- Argumentation and empirical verification of the thesis about the heterogeneous character of the youth group and its increasing fragmentation in terms of the different opportunities and resources that young people have access to and which largely determine their professional and personal realization;

- Identification of the multidimensional effects of job insecurity on different groups of young people, as well as revealing the complex intertwining and mutual conditioning of the effects of unemployment and job insecurity at the individual, group and social levels;

- Problematizing the possibility of young people in a situation of work insecurity to be active actors and highlighting different strategies for counteracting the negative effects of labor insecurity;

- Critical reflection on active and passive labor market policies by analyzing them within the broader social and institutional national and global context and in view of the specific characteristics of young people;

- Identification of good practices among youth programmes in different European countries, as well as the conditions and factors that make their positive impact possible.

I would especially like to point out the analysis and the arguments of Dr. Krasteva regarding the educational policies and the relation between education and labor market needs. With her thesis about the relation education - the labor market (“Youth employment and precarious jobs: The case of Bulgaria”, pp. 91-97), Dr. Krasteva shows a keen desire not to be satisfied with widespread ideas, but to try to “go” beyond the obvious. She argues that not only the quality of education but also the quality of the labor market and, above all, of the jobs offered, are important to make this relationship effective.

I find also particularly important, from both a theoretical and a practical point of view, Dr. Krasteva’s refusal to “focus solely on the instrumental value of education, i.e. as a tool for the creation of skilled workers here and now, and her criticism of “transforming education from a public good into a servant of the labor market” (p. 93). Unfortunately, the instrumental approach to education dominates in our country, where educational role is limited primarily to the vocational training of people. Such an understanding does not reflect the multiplicity of social roles that education has in today’s rapidly changing, digital and mobile societies. It is also far from the trends at European and global level, where the thesis on education not only as a public but also as a common good is being increasingly advocated (see for example: UNESCO. (2015). *Rethinking education. Towards a global common good?* Paris: UNESCO Publishing). In the context of dynamic social transformations and a rapidly changing labor market, education needs changes that make it much more flexible and able to shape young people as independent individuals capable of critical, analytical and responsible thinking and behavior, with broad and portable competencies. From this point of view, I find particularly relevant Dr Krusteva’s thesis that educational reforms “implemented solely with the idea of meeting the current needs of the labor market can have short-term positive effects,

but in the long run lead to insecure opportunities and perspectives because it is unclear whether the only skills that young people have learned today will be needed tomorrow” (p. 93). The new social environment is also changing the demands on people’s general intelligence. Emotional and social intelligence are gaining importance. In this regard, a special attention deserves Dr. Krasteva’s criticism of our education system and her thesis that building young people as active citizens of society requires an emphasis on shaping their emotional and social intelligence (see the article “For the place of the emotional and social intelligence in the reforms of Bulgarian education”, 2012).

4. Recommendations to the applicant

Thanks primarily to her active participation in international comparative projects and surveys, Dr. Krasteva has access to a rich empirical base. In this connection, I would like to make two recommendations. First, I think that it will be very useful for the future professional development of Dr. Krasteva if she continues her efforts in further theoretical understanding of already revealed empirical findings by using the latest theoretical paradigms and ideas. Second, Dr. Krasteva has extensive experience in working with quality data and demonstrates very good skills and aptitude in analyzing them. It seems to me that it would be useful for her to take the next step in this regard by focusing on the use of different software programmes for quality data analysis. This would allow data from interviews and focus groups to serve and to be used not so much as illustrative material but as a reliable basis for highlighting trends, formulating patterns of behavior and building typologies of factors.

5. Personal impressions from the applicant

I have had the pleasure of working with Dr. Veneta Krasteva and I am convinced of her exceptional professional commitment and honesty. Based on my personal impressions of the work and public appearances of Dr. Veneta Krasteva, I firmly believe that she has established herself as one of the promising young Bulgarian sociologists and social scientists who can be trusted. Her high professional responsibility and rigorousness, established international contacts, and initiative are very useful for the development of both our sociological community and Institute of Philosophy and Sociology.

6. Reasoned and clearly worded conclusion

After getting acquainted with the materials and scientific publications presented by Dr. Veneta Krasteva in the competition, an analysis of their importance and the scientific and applied contributions contained therein, I find convincing and sufficient reasons to assess them completely positively and to recommend to the members of the Honorable Jury and of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at BAS to vote unanimously in support of the election of Dr. Veneta Krasteva to the academic position of Associate Professor in the department “Public Policies and Social Changes” of IPS-BAS.

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