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**Flexibility and Insecurity**  
**Sociological Analysis of Work and Employment**  
**in Bulgaria**  
**1989 - 2019**

AUTHOR'S ABSTRACT

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The dissertation with a total volume of 321 pages consists of an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, annexes and a bibliography. In the bibliography there are 233 references in Bulgarian, English, French and Russian languages. The dissertation includes 22 table and 6 figures.

There are 24 publications of the author on the topic of the dissertation.

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This abstract follows the structure of the dissertation.

This dissertation examines the changes in work and employment in Bulgaria during the transition, focusing on the processes of flexibility and insecurity. In a sense, these two processes are the red thread of fate that allows for understanding the nature and characteristics of the changes that occurred during this thirty-year period (1989–2019).

The research interest in this period is dictated by the insufficient knowledge about the processes of change and their impact. What happens to companies after the liberalisation of markets and the de-monopolisation of socialist combines? How is privatisation carried out, and what does it lead to? How are work organisation and personnel management practices changing in the context of globalisation? What are employers' strategies in the context of insecurity, and how can flexibility become coercive? Or, alternatively, how could it meet the expectations of workers? What do the digital transformation and platform-based work lead to? This long-term analysis raises these key questions and seeks out new knowledge.

Flexibility is a term often used in the context of employment and industrial relations in the European Union (EU), but its meaning is not unambiguous, as emphasised in the definition provided by the Dictionary of Industrial Relations of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound 2017). This is because the concept includes three dimensions.

In the first place, flexibility may relate to employers' desire for variable (flexible) use of labour in terms of the number of hours employed or hours worked in order to match changes in demand for products or services. It can also refer to changing employees' tasks and skills to increase productivity. The former type is sometimes described as "external", "quantitative", or "numerical" flexibility; the latter is known as "internal", "qualitative", or "functional" flexibility.

Secondly, flexibility also refers to employees' desire for variable (flexible) arrangements and working conditions that correspond to their changing needs. For example, flexibility may apply to various forms of contractual arrangements, including so-called "atypical employment"<sup>1</sup>, especially in terms of working hours, in the interests of achieving better work-life balance.

Third, flexibility is often presented in the European Union (EU) context as a political response to "labour market uncertainty". Deregulation policies aimed at increasing flexibility, e.g., facilitating the recruitment and dismissal of employees, can also be seen as a threat to employment security and quality of work. In recent years, flexibility and security have been addressed together in key documents by the European Union. The concept of "flexsecurity" has been widely justified in EU strategic documents as well as in the Bulgarian administration in the field of work and employment (European Commission 2007).

According to the European Commission's (EC) strategy papers, "the flexicurity concept aims to improve flexibility and security at the same time" (European Commission 2007), i.e., flexibility and security should be seen not as opposing but as complementary components ("Bulgarian Path... "2009). This also means that the growing flexibility of labour relations should not be perceived as a one-sided process in which the employer receives bonuses while workers absorb the consequences (Beleva et al. 2009: 16). Flexible and secure contractual relationships should be equally beneficial for both employer and employee (Employment Committee 2009).

Flexibility can be in the interests of workers, in the interests of employers or, as an EU political goal, in the interests of both parties.

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<sup>1</sup> Atypical employment is defined as a legal relationship that corresponds to a non-standard or "typical" model of regular full-time employment and a permanent employment contract with one employer for a long period of time. Eurofound (2017) Industrial Relation Dictionary: Atypical work. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

The introduction of flexibility and its development call into question the models of permanent full-time employment which characterise Western European welfare states as well as the realities of former socialist countries. Since the 1980s, this model of 'typical' or 'standard' employment, usually involving permanent full-time employment, has begun to erode (Piore & Sabel 1984). In Western Europe, the end of strong growth and early-1970s oil crises were already calling into question the way social security was financed by raising the cost of labour. At the same time, social and economic support for victims of the recession in the 1970s increased government spending. Companies, on the other hand, were forced to limit their costs, often by rethinking employment and work organisation models. Thus began a long process of change that has been analysed by many scholars as the transition from standard or typical to non-standard or atypical employment (see Cappelli & Keller 2013). In fact, this process lay in the context of a major change in modern capitalism (Vallas 1999) that "shook off" the bureaucracy and mass production of so-called post-Fordism. At present, however, forms of flexible work and employment are developing that have nothing to do with "liberating and full-fledged work" (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999).

In his analysis, Vallas (1999) makes a critical review of certain flexibility anomalies, such as the increase in non-standard work. In other words, he claims that the quality of work can be characterised differently in the context of these major changes. Here we accept the idea that quality of work is a complex and multidimensional concept (Holman & McClelland 2011; Holman 2013) which includes workplace characteristics related to the quality of working conditions (work organisation), that of employment conditions (wages and remuneration systems, security, and flexibility), and that of empowerment (skills development, collective representation, and the voice of workers).

Quality of work provides an appropriate tool for analysing flexibility and its many forms in different European societies. It is no coincidence that, over the last three decades, discussions of different social models have been gaining

momentum (Esping-Andersen 1990). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the transition from a socialist to a market economy led to a change in the previous model (Kornai 2000). Political change and privatisation paved the way for the development of flexible forms of work and employment. In this new configuration, work and employment flexibility started to be applied in different contexts—whether privatised companies or foreign or local investors. In the three decades following 1989, these forms of flexibility have led to specific configurations.

In this context, the aim of the present dissertation is to analyse the specific development of work and employment flexibility in Bulgaria during the post-communist period. To what extent does this flexibility equate to security or, vice versa, lead to insecurity? Is flexibility in the interest of both parties, employers and workers? Or just one of them?

For this purpose, key empirical research carried out by the author in the field of the sociology of work during the last two decades are systematised; subsequently, perspectives for future development of the discipline are highlighted. Special emphasis has been placed on the manifestations of flexibility in Bulgaria, as they are not always the same as those observed in Western Europe or North America. But the differences are not always "visible" through the prism of national statistics, for example, in terms of the use of atypical forms of employment, which has been quite minimal in the Bulgarian context over the last twenty years. But micro-level analysis reveals the ways in which employers and companies achieve the flexibility they need.

In this regard, it is necessary to solve the following tasks:

- Review of how flexibility and its analysis have been present in the sociology of work in Bulgaria;

- Consideration of the specific characteristics of flexibility in Bulgaria, in the context of the development of a regulatory framework and regulations, for example, through the system of industrial relations;
- Identification of the types of flexibility and their application in the Bulgarian context;
- Analysis of the impact of globalisation on the labour market in Bulgaria in terms of the transfer and adaptation of forms of flexibility;
- Review of the forms of flexibility in the context of the digital transformation.

The dissertation defends the following thesis:

**During the period under review, the flexibility and uncertainty of the labour market in Bulgaria and in Bulgarian companies increased as a result of privatisation, globalisation, and digitalisation. However, their specificity depends on the norms and their application by the state and social partners, as well as on the peculiarities and context of the individual sectors and groups within the labour force.**

In this sense, it is necessary to consider the deployment of forms of flexibility in the context of different sectors in which configurations may be quite different. For example, the manifestations of flexibility are different in sectors with highly skilled labour from those with low-skilled and low-paid labour.

Thus, the main research questions posed in the text are:

- What are the forms of flexibility that are more widely used in the Bulgarian context, and how they can be interpreted from the point of view of quality of work—for example, as favourable to workers, employers, or both—i.e., in other words, to what extent does so-called flexicurity exist in Bulgaria?

- To what extent is the use of certain forms of work and employment flexibility facilitated by insufficient regulations or their incomplete implementation?
- How does the digital transformation affect the flexibility of work and employment in Bulgaria? Is it in a similar way as can be observed in other European social models, or are there differences?

The subject of analysis, the manifestations of flexibility and security in the workplace, determines the field of research. The chosen research approach is based mainly on qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, case-study comparative analysis (George & Bennett 2005), and even action research. In some cases, in addition to qualitative ones, quantitative methods have been used. The focus of most of the presented research by the author is to reveal the importance of what is happening at the micro level, and, in this sense, the use of qualitative methods is most relevant. The bulk of the research used has been conducted in a comparative perspective, in the framework of large European research projects. In all of them, though, the author participated in the development of methodology and research design and tools. These studies highlight the key problem of flexibility and the security of work and employment in post-socialist Bulgaria.

In particular, the SMALL project (Illessy et al. 2007) examines the voices and representation of SME workers in Central and Eastern Europe in the context of problematic working conditions, insecurity, and increasing flexibility. Within this study, six case studies with more than 60 interviews were conducted.

Also based on case studies, the WORKS project analyses the impact of globalisation and the restructuring of global value chains on work organisation and employment in Europe (Makó et al. 2009). In the Bulgarian case, these processes have led to the introduction of flexibility models in local enterprises and organisations. Six case studies were conducted with almost 90 interviews in total.

The WALQING research project analyses quality of work in low-skilled and low-paid services (Holtgrewe et al. [Eds.] 2015). Specifically, the focus in Bulgaria has been on insecurity and so-called forced flexibility in construction and garbage collection (Kirov et al. 2014). Within this project a total of seven case studies of companies and socio-professional groups with 114 interviews were conducted in Bulgaria.

In recent years, the project's analyses have been devoted to the effects of the digital transformation on work and employment. In this research field, a study on work-life balance was conducted via mixed methods—focused on the personal lives of self-employed people working through online platforms—with a quantitative study of 100 people.

The analysis proposed in the dissertation also contains certain limitations.

First of all, there is the limitation associated with the research methods used. Qualitative methods make it possible to either analyse processes in depth or to highlight trends and nuances. At the same time, they do not allow for the conclusions drawn to be considered representative. But it is an approach based on qualitative research that can enable the mechanisms for achieving flexibility to be highlighted.

Secondly, the studies on which this dissertation's analysis has been based were carried out in different periods, and their conclusions can only be drawn for these specific periods. At the same time, they give an important indication of certain changes. There is, for example, the massive inflow of foreign direct investment into Bulgaria which took place in the late 1990s and the first years of the 21st century. On the other hand, it is also clear from the foreign direct investment literature that the investor's background plays a major role in terms of work and employment practices. In other words, it is very likely that if we had analysed cases of foreign investors originating outside Western Europe or North America, the results would not be identical. But this question remains beyond the scope of our analysis.

Thirdly, some of the thematic chapters focus on certain problem areas which are very important aspects of the overall picture. However, this approach excludes phenomena that could also be a legitimate subject of study—for example, specific models for the organisation of work and employment in other sectors, such as retail, tourism, etc. Some of the author’s previous publications have explored the effects of privatisation and post-privatisation restructuring (Kirov 2001; 2005b; and 2011), while the present dissertation gives only limited attention to them. In the context of the digital transformation, in addition to work being conducted through platforms, other key processes are taking place, such as Industry 4.0, which are the subject of other research carried out by the author<sup>2</sup>.

In the **first chapter** of the dissertation, the research framework and theoretical model for the study of work and employment flexibility and insecurity are developed. The theoretical model includes several groups of approaches. First of all, flexibility and its forms are considered in the context of the development of post-Fordism and the growth of ‘insecure’ working patterns. The post-war period (until the mid-1970s) in Western Europe and North America was unusual for its sustainable growth and stability. Prior to this period, employment was largely precarious (Huws 2017). From the late 1970s, however, uncertainty began to increase again. According to Kalleberg (2009), precarious work currently differs in several respects with pre-World War II precariousness. Firstly, it is the result of globalisation and the spatial restructuring of the world economy and labour. Secondly, we are witnessing a very powerful development of services in the modern age at the expense of a declining share of industry and agriculture, at least in Europe and North America. Finally, precarious work is spreading to all sectors of the economy and to all occupational groups, including those of managers and highly qualified experts, as is clear in the context of the digital transformation (Meil & Kirov [Eds.] 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the author’s work on the BEYOND4.0 project: “An inclusive future for Europe. Beyond the impact of Industry 4.0 and the digital transformation”. <https://beyond4-0.eu/>

But companies use different manifestations or forms of flexibility. According to the typology presented below, this concept refers to two important dimensions of the adaptation process (for details, see Table 1):

- Numerical or functional (quantitative versus qualitative). Numerical flexibility refers to the quantitative characteristics of the workforce—for example, the number of employees or the number of working hours—while functional flexibility refers to the skills and tasks of the permanent workforce;
- External or internal. External flexibility relies on the external workforce, which supports key employees in various forms (through subcontracting, self-employment, fixed-term contracts, seasonal work, temporary employment agencies, etc.), while internal flexibility relies on permanent employees. (Flecker et al. 2008: 54).

**Table 1 Types of flexibility**

	Digital	Functional
Internal	Part-time work, flexible agreements, cumulative working hours during the year, working time accounts.	Work on many tasks simultaneously ( <i>multitasking</i> ), enrichment of work, training in many skills ( <i>multiskilling</i> ), team work, project organization of work.
External	Fixed-term employment contracts, self-employment, temporary employment agencies, temporary / temporary employment, work in the informal economy (unregulated).	Subcontracting, outsourcing, self-employed persons.

Source: Author’s adaptation of Flecker et al., 2008

The degree and type of flexibility used are a complex result of companies' strategies, social, economic, and technological contexts, sectoral and regional characteristics, and management decisions. Flexibility can serve the interests of

employers or employees to a greater extent. If flexibility is imposed by employers on workers, it can be defined as "forced" (Kirov et al. 2014). 'Forced flexibility' means flexibility in terms of employment and the organisation of work—for example, employment on fixed-term employment contracts, part-time work, and flexibility in the forms of payment—which are not at the request of the employee but are imposed by the employer, owing to circumstances caused by the economic situation.

On the other hand, flexibility, or certain elements of it, can be beneficial for workers, for example, in terms of working hours, breaks, work-life balance, etc.

Next, so-called regulatory or normative flexibility is considered as it relates to the role of the state. Regulatory flexibility sets the framework within which flexibility implementation processes can take place. The role of the state is important for two main reasons: to provide the regulatory framework for the various forms of flexibility and the capacity to ensure compliance with this regulatory framework. Beleva's research (2017) reviews those elements of flexibility that have been introduced in Bulgaria in order to develop the labour market so that it is able to achieve the goals set by the European Union—for example, the Europe 2020 Strategy and national employment strategies, such as the Employment Strategy 2013–2020. Based on the analysis of Beleva (2017), the specific dimensions of contractual flexibility and working time flexibility are considered.

According to Beleva (2017), the main changes in employment relationships are related to increasing flexibility, providing more opportunities, and encouraging employers to hire, on the one hand, and workers to offer their labour under conditions favourable to each of them, on the other. However, the expansion of possibilities requires that control in their implementation is strengthened, and this is where the role of the General Labour Inspectorate or other institutions can be seen as responsible for this process.

And here we come to the second important role of the state, as guarantor of compliance with regulations. However, in the Bulgarian reality throughout the period under review, numerous and prolonged violations and non-compliance with certain aspects of labour legislation have been observed (Atanasova 2020). This trend seems strange at first glance. How can a Member State of the European Union since 2007 not be able to enforce rules and regulations, including in the field of employment and labour?

That is why it is necessary to pay attention to globalisation and the changes it leads to, not to mention the specific role of the European Union in imposing certain regulations related to the so-called European social model and the extent to which this model is "imposed" in Bulgaria.

In the period leading up to Bulgaria's accession to the European Union, great expectations arose in terms of convergence with and the imposition of the European social model. However, in this complex dynamic of transformation, the processes of European integration and the adoption of EU regulations are an ambivalent force for change that is increasingly "holding back" convergence. The semi-peripheral or peripheral integration of CEE economies in the European and international market and global value chains play a crucial role in limiting the convergence process in the context of competition between territories and institutional frameworks. EU rules aimed at harmonising labour and social norms are also largely ineffective in promoting a process of Europeanisation that recognises the need to fully implement EU labour and social rights and practices. As a result, the EU is reducing its own ambition for a "European social model", and "top-down" Europeanisation in new Member States like Bulgaria and Romania remains partial (Delteil & Kirov 2017b).

Compared to their Central European neighbours, Bulgaria and Romania have been marked by more peripheral (and delayed) integration into EU trade and production chains as well as global value chains controlled by Western multinationals. An additional specificity is their greater dependence on foreign

capital flows, subject to greater volatility (i.e., possibly being redirected to other regions if conditions are more favourable there) as confirmed during the crisis that began in 2008–2009 (Delteil & Kirov 2017b). Finally, these economies have been (and still are) under the structural supervision of international financial institutions since the 1990s: either through the Currency Board in Bulgaria, created under the influence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and The World Bank in 1997, or through the multiple financial assistance programs in Romania that are subject to a number of conditions, for example, with regard to the liberalisation of labour legislation (Delteil & Kirov 2017a).

In addition, "weak states" limit the kind of institutional development which can support economic growth and, in fact, provide opportunities for the expansion of the informal economy, the mixing of business and politics, corruption, and the "seizure" of public resources by private actors and organised crime, which in turn weakens the state and structurally reduces its resources.

This picture of the development of the specific forms of capitalism in Bulgaria and on the Balkan Peninsula in a broader sense is key to understanding these changes in the field of work and employment under the conditions of weak (and easily changing, as a result of the interests of actors) regulation and dependence on the position of international organisations, multinational companies, and foreign experts (Delteil & Kirov 2017a).

As it has already become clear, the specific dimensions of regulatory flexibility in Bulgaria (Beleva 2017) are the result of specific configurations in which employers' organisations are more successful in changing the pace and content of labour market reforms. As noted in the literature (Avdagic 2015), the economic and financial crisis of 2008–2009 caused a wave of significant reforms in the region's labour market. Bulgarian employers' organisations are adding continued pressure to reduce labour costs and increase labour market flexibility as a way to achieve greater competitiveness.

Finally, the **first chapter** discusses the concept of quality of work, which gives us a tool for interpreting the impact of flexibility in a specific context. This concept is not new, but it has been expanded upon over the last two decades with many additional elements (Bothfeld & Leschke 2012). Initially, it was related to specific aspects such as physical and psychological well-being and work intensity. Gradually, the concept has expanded to include elements like skills development, employment security, and the combination of work and personal life in the face of increasing work intensity (Gallie 2007; Royuela et al. 2008). According to these authors, ‘job’ or ‘workplace quality’ in most studies refers to the internal characteristics of the workplace, while ‘employment quality’ refers to macro-social phenomena. That is why the term ‘quality of work’, which includes both internal and external dimensions, is the most appropriate for our research approach. The concept of quality also links employment flexibility with work flexibility, which could be seen as other elements of work quality that might develop in one direction or another, as will be seen later. Our analysis adopts the idea that quality of work is a complex and multidimensional concept that includes the characteristics of the workplace related to quality of working conditions (e.g., work organisation), quality of employment conditions (e.g., wages, pay systems, security, and flexibility), and quality of empowerment (e.g., skills development, collective representation, and voice of employees).

Ultimately, it is this understanding of quality of work that allows us to consider the respective configurations of the use of the various forms of flexibility, as well as to assess the extent to which this benefits the employer, the employee, or both parties, in the spirit of the concept. But, before we apply it to specific sectors and situations, it is important to look at the way this issue has appeared on the agenda in the Bulgarian sociology of work.

The **second chapter** analyses the development of the sociology of work in Bulgaria and the formation of a specific interest in the problems of flexibility and insecurity in recent years. The pre-war contribution of the sociology of work

in Bulgaria was very limited and related to the study of certain aspects of working conditions. The development of the whole sociological discipline stopped completely after the end of the Second World War because it was considered a 'bourgeois' science, incompatible with historical materialism. Its revival in the late 1950s was linked to the ideological dominance of Marxism-Leninism and specific theoretical and empirical research related to the concept of a "sociological system" with both theoretical and applied ambitions. The review of research topics during this period shows the presence of a research interest in the everyday problems of Bulgarian enterprises, including the introduction of new technologies, turnover, etc., which led to certain forms of flexibility in the organisation of work. However, these studies were conducted within specific ideological and thematic constraints. In the context of the need to mobilise staff, sociologists have also been exploring innovations related to the increased participation of employees in management following the changes in labour legislation since 1986.

After 1989, the Bulgarian sociology of labour was emancipated from the ideological monopoly of Marxism-Leninism. The development of the discipline has continued, inspired by various theoretical traditions and approaches such as industrial relations and the perspectives of labour process theories or French traditions in the sociology of work and enterprise.

The research on flexibility in recent years can be grouped into several areas. On the one hand, these are the analyses of the changes that have occurred as a result of the restructuring that took place in Bulgaria during privatisation and when foreign or local investors came on the scene. This has also led to new ways of managing human resources, often by introducing various elements of flexibility. But these processes have also been accompanied by the development of an informal economy and different forms of labour. Deteriorating working conditions and individual survival strategies are additional subjects of research on this period. Finally, the forms of employee representation and participation

are furthermore considered in the context of regulations at different levels—national, sectoral, or enterprise.

The **third chapter** analyses the macro framework related to the production of regulation in Bulgaria. In particular, industrial relations and their role in the (limited) regulation of employment and work are considered here, in the context of the state as regulator and instrument for compliance with the rules. This is the general framework in which work and employment develop and in which specific forms of flexibility are implemented.

Specific configurations in Bulgaria have led to a gradual reduction of social partners' role in terms of drafting and complying with regulations, either through collective bargaining or participation in the drafting of legal norms. Power imbalances, mainly in favour of employers, have also been associated with numerous violations of labour legislation under constant attempts at liberalising on the part of employers' organisations, as shown in Chapter One.

**Table 2 Main characteristics of collective bargaining in Bulgaria**

Key features	2000	2016
Who negotiates the CLA?	Trade unions and employers ' / employers' organizations	
Importance of negotiation levels	Negotiation at company and industry / industry level. Negotiations at company level are dominant.	
Favourability principle / possibilities for derogation from (intersectoral) sectoral agreements	Very limited (only in case of problematic financial and economic situation)	Limited
Coverage of collective bargaining (%)	40 (2002)*	29 (2012)*
Mechanism for extending collective bargaining	No	Yes, introduced in 2001 (but very rarely used in practice)
Trade Union density (%)	26 (2002)**, ***	About 15 (2012)**, ***
Density of employers' organizations (%)	n.a. (low)	50 (2012)*

Source: Own calculations based on Visser (2014), Eurofound, ILO and NIPA.

As shown in Table 2, collective bargaining in Bulgaria takes place between trade unions and employers and their organisations at the industry or branch level, as well as at the enterprise level. However, the most important level of bargaining is at the enterprise level (Kirov 2019), which means that the system is decentralised.

Although it is in a much better situation than other Central and Eastern European countries, collective bargaining in Bulgaria has been eroding for some time. Collective bargaining in Bulgaria is still developing at the sectoral level, but it mostly occurs at the enterprise level. The coverage of Collective Labour Agreements (CLA) is limited: at best, about 30 percent, leaving the majority of workers in the country outside of the agreed regulation. Another question is to what extent this regulation itself is meaningful, or whether it simply reproduces the minimum requirements of the Labour Code. The mechanisms for extending CLAs were implemented for a short period in early 2010, but this is not currently the case. The introduction of a second channel for employee representation since 2006 has had only limited results, as very few companies have set up similar representation bodies (employee information and consultation representatives). The eroding collective bargaining in Bulgaria reflects declining trade union membership. It also reflects the unions' weaknesses in many sectors and companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, where their presence is insignificant. In addition, employers' attitudes towards collective bargaining are not positive; some of them avoid membership in employers' organisations or do not allow these organisations to validate collective agreements at the sectoral or branch level. However, while collective bargaining is still present in a number of "fortresses", it is mainly in the public sector and heavy industry.

The **fourth chapter** deals with the topic of globalisation and its effects on the organisation of work and employment in the country. The opening of the economy and privatisation that began in the mid-1990s allowed for the integration of Bulgarian companies into global value chains (GVCs) and the

inflow of foreign direct investment. This, in turn, led to the introduction and adaptation according to Bulgarian conditions of certain models for personnel management, work organisation, skills development, and relevant forms of flexibility. Based on a study conducted by the WORKS project, differences in the models of flexibility can be observed in business functions within private companies—for example, in Bulgaria and Hungary—but also in the public sector. Thus, large public administration organisations are much less likely to use flexibility tools than private companies that are included in global value chains (GVCs) and, even more so, those acquired by MNCs.

Thus, in the studied cases, different elements of internal functional flexibility (multiskilling, multitasking, and team-work) can be observed, but external functional flexibility was applied in only one instance. Both types of numerical flexibility (internal or external) are limited in the cases studied, in contrast to practices in Western Europe (Flecker et al. 2008).

In private companies, the models of flexibility depend on these companies' policies, "introduced" by MNCs or by the power centres of GVCs. The models of flexibility in public organisations are influenced by regulations. However, in both cases, the analysis shows that the restructuring of GVCs leads to a greater degree of flexibility: increased work intensification (it should be borne in mind that work intensification in the studied sectors in Bulgaria and Hungary is not an exception but part of global processes) and positive changes in the quality of work, work-life balance, and working conditions. The consequences for workers are positive in most cases; however, in all studied cases, the "losing" and "winning" employees can be distinguished.

From the point of view of GVC-restructuring, all the studied cases prove that it leads to increased flexibility—both in traditional and new sectors. Moreover, the restructuring of value chains often aims to achieve greater flexibility as one of the main sources of economic efficiency and competitiveness. At the same time, employees tend to value certain aspects of flexibility (digital internal flexibility)

as giving them some competitive advantage or opportunities for better work-life balance.

The **fifth chapter** analyses low-paid and vulnerable labour in conditions of forced flexibility and significant insecurity. Bulgaria is the country with the greatest inequalities in the EU and, at the same time, with the lowest incomes. Quality of work in Bulgaria for economic activities often associated with a high level of flexibility, job insecurity, low pay, and low skills among the workforce is examined. The examples used are in construction, garbage collection, and urban sanitation. Our analysis shows that these activities in the Bulgarian economy are dominated by coercive flexibility, which is mainly in the interest of employers. By the term 'forced flexibility' we mean flexibility in terms of employment—for example, employment on fixed-term employment contracts, part-time work, and flexibility in forms of payment—which are not at the request of the employee but are imposed by the employer due to circumstances caused by the economic situation. Forced flexibility leads to the dynamic development of a dual labour market and a work organisation that cannot compensate for the negative effects on workers. The lack of opportunities for skills development or for workers' expression of their voice further worsens quality of work in these economic activities. This causes serious vulnerability for certain groups of workers (e.g., workers at the end of their careers, members of ethnic minorities) and can result in discrimination on the grounds of gender (affecting women) and other factors.

Thus, quality of work is the concept that allows us to consider the various components of flexibility. The analysis of the studied cases of low-wage work clearly shows that the freedom of action among low-skilled workers (or workers employed in activities that do not require special qualifications) is limited at the expense of management. In cases where such manifestations of autonomy can be observed, these are minor matters. In many organisations, especially in construction, independent teams actually function as a hybrid between company employees and subcontractors. In some cases, the selection of staff, the

negotiation of workload and remuneration, the performance of work, etc. are delegated to them. In this sense, it would be interesting to study bargaining between management and these teams.

Flexibility in the organisation of work can be partly beneficial for workers. Thus, in garbage collection, it is possible for teams or individual workers to finish work a little earlier. On the other hand, companies adapt their work to changing temperatures as they work outside. Additionally, flexibility within the team may also be in the interest of employees. In some cases, workers can accumulate weekends so that they can use them to visit their loved ones. At the same time, contractual flexibility is extremely unfavourable, especially for employees who have to stop working when the garbage collection concession expires or the construction site is completed. The technologies still being used do not allow for the elimination of manual labour, although there have been some improvements in the researched companies. Work intensity is related to the specifics of the sector, seasonality, and the nature of the activities performed. Low-skilled workers usually work in poor conditions, with serious health risks. At the same time, the presence of emotional and mental risks seems limited. The risks come from working outside, from traffic injuries in garbage collection, from hard physical labour, and so on. These negative trends can be partially offset by support between colleagues or by management. In conclusion, although there have been partial improvements, quality of work in the surveyed companies is low and problematic. Some of the workers surveyed are not sure if they will be able to do the same job when they turn 60.

The **sixth chapter** examines the development of flexibility in the context of the digital transformation. In the last few years, the digital transformation has become a central theme for the social sciences and politics in Europe. There is a consensus in the scientific literature that this process of digital transformation will lead to significant changes in work and employment. For many researchers, the main manifestations of the digital transformation are the digitalisation of production, commonly referred to as Industry 4.0, and the digitalisation of

labour, now often referred to as Uberisation (Warhurst et al. 2019). This is because of their importance in the current academic and political debates and because of their potential transformative power.

There are many definitions of digitalisation. In a narrow sense, it is the integration of digital technologies into everyday life through the digitisation of everything that can be digitised, or "the process of turning everything into digital form" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). In a broader sense, digitalisation is seen as "an economic and social transformation caused by the mass introduction of digital technologies for the generation, processing, sharing and exchange of information" (Katz et al. 2014). However, we must emphasise that this concept is still evolving in both academic and political debates, with no consensus on what should or should not be included. In any case, the overall acceleration of the pace of technological change in the economy is due to the huge expansion of our capacity to store, process and communicate information using electronic devices. In this perspective, new developments in robotics (cobots), the Internet of Things, 3D printing, big data, machine learning, and artificial intelligence, as well as possible combinations of all of these, are considered powerful drivers for change in areas like employment, living and working conditions, and mobility.

If digitalisation is not new in itself, the scope and speed of change that digitalisation has on so many aspects of our lives certainly are: the way we buy, sell, network, communicate, participate, create, consume, and, of course, the way we work. In this sense, digitalisation also adds to the agenda issues of the future of work and employment, e.g., in terms of job creation or destruction (Autor 2015; Brynjolfsson & McAfee 2011). For example, the use of automation, robots, and algorithms can make workers redundant (Frey & Osborne 2013), and a significant percentage of the workforce is at risk of automation.

There is currently a consensus in the literature that digitalisation has a multifaceted impact on the quality of work and employment in Europe (Degryse

2016), but the study of the specific effects of digitalisation on the quality of work and employment is relatively new. Technological changes are inevitably dynamic processes that involve both the destruction and creation of jobs, the transformation of existing jobs, and changes in the organisation of work.

**Table 3. Impact of the digitalisation on work and employment**

<b>Job creation</b>	<b>Job change</b>
<p>New sectors, products and services.</p> <p>Who can be (re) qualified for them?</p>	<p>Digitalization, human / intelligent machine interface, new forms of management</p> <p>How are existing jobs changing and what is needed in terms of skills...</p>
Job destruction	Job shift
<p>What kind?</p> <p>Restructuring of governance in the context of the traditions of the European social model</p>	<p>How does this process, e.g. will the need for skills be affected within the platform?</p> <p>Social skills?</p>

Source: own typology based on Degryse 2016

Later in this chapter, the analysis focuses on the role of digitalisation in the development of digital employment as non-standard employment. De Stefano (2016) argues that “extreme flexibility, shifting risks to workers and income instability have long been a reality for part of the workforce in current labour markets, not just for those employed in the online economy”. Capelli and Keller (2013) emphasise the apparent growth of alternative or "non-standard" forms of employment in recent years, including part-time work, self-employment, and short-term contracts.

Identifying how much and where these elements are increasing is the first step towards understanding their implications for the economy and society. But such steps are difficult due to the lack of appropriate data. This becomes even more obvious with the development of online platforms. Working through online platforms has developed extremely fast in recent years, and it is one of the most important factors for the digital labour shift. This is a relatively new form of organising the assignment of tasks, which would otherwise be delegated to one employee, to a large group of 'virtual' workers (Felstiner 2011). In general, one of the main advantages of working through online platforms is related to flexibility, mainly for "employers" but also in a sense for "employees".

Our research focuses on one aspect of flexibility in working via platforms, namely work-life balance. In the context of the digital transformation, the proliferation of work through online labour platforms is one of the biggest changes in terms of labour and employment for growing groups of workers. In general, platform employment is characterised in the scientific literature as a factor affecting labour fragmentation and an increase in atypical forms of employment. Besides the negative consequences, though, working through online platforms can also be associated with favourable consequences for certain groups of workers, including in terms of work-life balance. This is the case with highly skilled work provided online, for example, in the field of ICT. Therefore, our research focuses on self-employed persons in the Bulgarian ICT sector.

The main reason for switching to teleworking through platforms may be related to the transition to parenthood. The majority of self-employed ICT workers in Bulgaria state that the choice to work remotely is their own. The most common reasons for this are the lack of public services (kindergartens), the lack of alternative care for young children (the model relies on grandparents not as a cultural asset but as an economic necessity), the lack of effective government policies to support young people and families, and the lack of flexibility on the part of companies regarding the employment of workers. In contrast to the results of other surveys in the region (Drahokoupil & Piasna 2019) which claim

that the situation among platform workers in Central and Eastern Europe is much more vulnerable than those working on an employment contract, for the self-employed people surveyed, the income received through these platforms was comparable to that of salaried workers.

Using quantitative research and in-depth interviews, we analyse the relationship between work-life balance, on the one hand, and gender, age of children, and duration of telework, which we consider to be the main factors influencing job satisfaction, on the other. For all three factors, we found that there was a significant relationship between: gender and job-life balance satisfaction, child age and job-life balance satisfaction, and working hours through online platforms and job-personal life balance satisfaction. As almost all respondents have higher education, these findings support the results of previous research, for example, that people with higher education show greater satisfaction with the balance between their personal and professional life. In the case of self-employed people working through online platforms, working remotely leads to better satisfaction with one's work-life balance.

The last part of this chapter examines the challenges for labour market policies in the context of digitalisation. Modern regulations in the field of labour and social security are not prepared to meet the challenges of digital or virtual labour (Meil & Kirov 2017). Many of these regulations, such as employment or civil contracts, social security rules, compliance with legislation (e.g., the relevant control function of labour inspectorates), and systems for resolving labour conflicts, have developed within nation states or—to some extent—in supranational associations such as the European Union. At the same time, digital work through online platforms is globally distributed.

Most likely, this debate will lead to a rethinking of specific regulations in the field of labour and social security, as well as innovations in the field of labour law (Prassl & Rissak 2017). Although the debate on digital labour is not currently on the agenda in Bulgaria or other countries of Southeast Europe, the

practices of working via platforms will inevitably provoke responses from stakeholders. In this process, sociology can contribute by analysing the changes and outlining risks for employees.

The **conclusion** of this dissertation summarises the results of the analysis and formulates several fields for future sociological work.

The following main conclusions stand out:

- Based on the revealed development of the sociology of work in Bulgaria for the period before and after 1989, it can be concluded that only in recent years has research related to work and employment flexibility and insecurity intensified;
- The typologies of flexibility in the literature are supplemented by "regulatory flexibility", which includes both the process of creating flexibility standards and compliance practices. On the other hand, non-compliance can become an additional strategy for providing flexibility. Although the statistics show that atypical forms of employment are rarely used in Bulgaria, the imposition of flexibility in this sense also occurs through non-compliance with the rules, for example, with the use of various informal and hybrid forms;
- The highlighted opportunities for collective action among employees in terms of regulation are limited, as evidenced by the erosion over the years of trade union density and the decreasing coverage of collective agreements. But, in a sense, the problem is not just "quantitative"; even where they are concluded, collective agreements have an increasingly limited role in terms of minimum rules and a level playing field.
- The clarified mechanisms for introducing flexibility in the context of the restructuring of global value chains show that this process somewhat coincides with the post-privatisation restructuring of companies. In the private companies surveyed, models of flexibility depend on firm policies, either "introduced" by

MNCs or already existing in the power centres of GVCs. The restructuring of GVCs leads to a greater degree of flexibility, as well as increased work intensification, which of course is not an exception but part of a more general global process. There is also a clear distinction between types of flexibility and the extent to which they are used. Thus, in the studied cases, various elements of internal functional flexibility can be observed; external functional flexibility to a lesser extent. The restructuring of value chains aims to achieve greater flexibility as one of the main sources for economic efficiency and competitiveness. However, compared to the old EU Member States, all types of flexibility are less used in the studied cases in Bulgaria and Hungary (Flecker et al. 2008).

- In the analysis of the situation in Bulgarian companies, it is necessary to make a distinction between the rules, either formalised (for example, in internal regulations and other documents) or not, and the practices of companies. Research has shown that while formal rules may not be flexible, in reality, practices are because management often takes into account the needs of employees, for example, in cases of illness, maternity leave, continuing university education, and childcare. Flexibility is beneficial for workers and contributes to better quality of work.
- On the other hand, in some cases, employers achieve flexibility not by using forms within the regulatory flexibility but by not following or circumventing the rules. In this case, flexibility is favourable for the employer and negatively affects the quality of work of the employee.
- In general, these processes lead to changes in quality of work and work-life balance as well as improved employment conditions. The consequences for employees are in most cases positive—for example, employees assess some aspects of flexibility, in particular digital internal flexibility, as giving them competitive advantage or opportunities for better work-life balance. In general,

the analysis allows for the groups of "losers" and "winners" in this process to be distinguished from one another.

- However, if most of the consequences of GVC-restructuring are positive for workers, this is not the case for low-skilled workers (or workers employed in activities that do not require special qualification) in the service or construction industries. These sectors are often associated with job insecurity, low pay, and low skills. Here we prove our thesis that these economic activities in Bulgaria are dominated by forced flexibility, which is mainly in the interest of employers. And forced flexibility leads to the dynamic development of a dual labour market and an organisation of work that cannot compensate for the negative effects on workers. The lack of opportunities for skills development and expression of workers' voices further worsens quality of work in the studied economic activities. However, certain aspects of flexibility in work organisation may be partly favourable to workers—for example, the ability to leave earlier, the relative autonomy of construction teams, and individual arrangements like the accumulation of weekends so that workers can use them to visit their relatives in other cities around the country. Intensity of work is related to the specifics of the sector, seasonality, and the nature of the activities performed. Low-skilled workers usually work in poor conditions, with serious health risks. And although there have been partial improvements, quality of work in the surveyed companies is low and problematic. Thus, many of the interviewed workers are not sure if they will be able to do the same job when they turn 60.

- In recent years, the focus of research in the field of work and employment has shifted to the digital transformation and its consequences. The processes of job creation, job destruction, job change, and employment change can occur simultaneously. But if Industry 4.0 is rather the direction in which this change is yet to happen, at least in Bulgaria, then working through online platforms is already part of the overall picture in the country. And if, as we have illustrated with our study, the change leads mainly to positive consequences for work-life balance among highly qualified specialists, this does not mean that negative

impacts are excluded. It is also important that research in this area continues, for example with regard to low-skilled activities that take place across platforms.

Finally, the question arises about the future role and current research trends in sociology regarding the study of work and employment.

We have witnessed tremendous interest in digital transformation worldwide in recent years. Most likely, this interest will continue in the coming years. The big issues are the position of artificial intelligence, the replacement of human labour with technology, the disappearance of old professions, and the emergence of new ones.

Along with these big questions, which will take more time to answer, sociology can mobilise its cognitive power to uncover the changes that are happening here and now. The situation in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic is particularly telling in this direction. Who would have thought that working remotely would turn from an exotic exception into a daily routine for workers in just a few months? But digital change isn't just about flexibility. There are more and more voices that envisage the development of surveillance and control techniques, which are becoming increasingly accessible with digital technologies. That is why the debate is also focused on the right for workers to disconnect (or "exclude" themselves) so that they are not available 24 hours a day.

However, the future of work is not just about technology and globalisation. In the context of aging societies in Europe and North America, work adaptation issues are increasingly relevant to people who choose to end their working lives later and later. Another area is related to climate change and its consequences, as well as the so-called "greening" of our economies.

Naturally, along with the issues of the future of work, the issues related to the present situation of work and employment are still salient. In this sense, the classical topics of the discipline related to the study of the various components of quality of work remain relevant. Finally, the question of the model of

development and the specifics of Bulgarian capitalism is important. In other words, to what extent can we talk about convergence, and to what extent might a specific path of development be discussed? There is no doubt that various future research efforts will be brought together around this issue.

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## Scientific Contributions

1. The dissertation substantiates the need for and develops a **comprehensive approach** to the analysis of changes in work and employment in Bulgaria during the so-called transition, focusing on flexibility and uncertainty.
2. The **conceptualisation of the flexibility of work, its specifics and types is argued**, through the use of the quality of work as a cognitive tool.
3. The specifics are revealed and the main periods and actors in the development of the **sociology of work** in Bulgaria for the period before and after 1989 are identified and it is shown that only in recent years, research related to flexibility is intensifying.
4. Based on data from organisations in the garment, food industry, IT sector and the public sector, **the manifestations of numerical (internal and external) flexibility and functional (internal and external) flexibility have been revealed**. Differences in the perception of flexibility by workers in traditional industries (such as food) and new sectors such as ICT are outlined.
5. The heuristic potential of linking the analysis of work and employment with the development of **specific forms of regulation** in Bulgaria is revealed. The conclusion is substantiated that the models of flexibility in the studied local companies are imposed by the local power centres of GVC, part of which have become these companies. It is revealed how the "weak state" and the low institutional capacity allow companies to circumvent or not follow the rules.
6. It has been shown that if in cases of GVC restructuring most of the consequences for workers are positive, this is not the case for low-skilled workers (or workers employed in activities that do not require special skills) in services or construction. The conclusion is substantiated that in these economic activities in Bulgaria the **forced flexibility** dominates, which is mainly in the interest of the employers.

7. It is shown that the impact of globalisation on the labour market in Bulgaria is realised through the **transfer and "translation"** of forms of flexibility.

8. It is argued that in the context of non-compliance with the rules, the possibilities for collective action of workers are limited. Evidence of this are the **eroding unionisation over the years** and the weak coverage of collective labour agreements.

9. Although according to statistics atypical forms of employment are rarely used in Bulgaria, the dissertation demonstrates that the imposition of flexibility also occurs through non-compliance with the rules, for example with the use of **various informal forms**.

10. Basic forms of flexibility in the context of digital transformation have been identified. Both the **numerous advantages of telework** (mainly in terms of combining work with parental commitments) and a **number of disadvantages of this work** (such as lack of social contacts, lack of understanding of the nature of their activities by family and friends; excessive workload, lack of guaranteed monthly income, etc.) are revealed.

# List of Publications on the Topic of the Dissertation:

## Monograph:

1. **Киров, В.**, Маркова, Е., Пейчева, Д. (2014) *Принудителна гъвкавост и несигурност на заетостта*, София, Издателство: Изток-Запад. (ISBN 978-619-152-546-1).

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2. **Kirov, V.** (2021). **Bulgarie : une condition salariale médiocre et hors de portée de l'action syndicale?** In P. Bouffartigue & J. Vandewattyne (eds.), *Facteurs en Europe. Le syndicalisme face à la libéralisation et aux mutations des activités postales. Belgique, Bulgarie, Espagne, France et Royaume-Uni*; Toulouse: Octares, pp. 145–162. (ISBN 978-2-36630-111-3)
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