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REVIEW

by Prof. DSc Karamfil Manolov, Member of the Scientific Jury, according to Order № RD 09-348 / 27.07.2021, concerning a Dissertation for acquiring the Scientific Degree "Doctor of Science" in the Field of Higher Education 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences, Scientific Specialty "Sociology"

On the topic:

Flexibility and Insecurity. Sociological Analysis of Work and Employment in Bulgaria 1989 – 2019.

Author: Associate Professor PhD Vassil Kirov

The dissertation is dedicated to an extremely important problem - flexibility and insecurity of work and employment in Bulgaria. This is a problem that, on the one hand, is not new, but on the other hand, it is extremely topical. It has become particularly relevant in the current processes of globalization and digitalization, but has become even more relevant in the last two years in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has taken the issues of flexibility and insecurity of work and employment extremely seriously. All this outlines the relevance of the dissertation and the problems to which it is dedicated, not only from a research and purely scientific point of view, but also from a social, economic, political and practical point of view. The value of the present dissertation is determined by the proposed comparative data and analysis of the state of the problem in different European countries, the result of international comparative studies in which the author has participated. That is why I consider as an indisputable merit of the present work its scientific and practical significance and commitment. The fact that Associate Professor Vassil Kirov has decided to dedicate his research work to such a topical and at the same time practically important problem shows that his research has its deep scientific-theoretical and practical-applied grounds, which is also an indicator of their seriousness and significance. Moreover, for him this is not a random choice, but the result of more than 20 years of work, which began with his doctoral dissertation for acquiring the scientific and educational degree "Doctor" and continues to this day with extreme intensity, judging by the number of scientific researches in which he has participated and the

number of prepared scientific publications based on them in renowned international publications. All this is evidence of the permanence of research interest, accumulation of knowledge and experience, which allows the analysis to move to a new qualitative level - generating new knowledge and contributions. This explains the multilayered nature of the results obtained and the multifaceted nature of the proposed analyzes, which in turn is indicative of the author's scientific competence in this so complex matter, in which he has managed to formulate his own authorial contributions.

The dissertation proposed for defense consists of: introduction, six chapters, conclusion, appendices and bibliography in a total volume of 321 pages. The cited bibliographic sources contain a total of 233 titles in Bulgarian, English, French and Russian.

As a merit of the dissertation I would note the existence of a balanced structure combining theoretical development with empirical results of author's research and as a consequence the successful combination of theoretical and empirical approach to the subject of research, which allows penetration into the depth of research processes and phenomena and validity of the conclusions. An indicator of the author's scientific competence is the skillful combination of different, predominantly qualitative, but also quantitative methods in the research process. The research approach chosen by the author is based mainly on qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and comparative analysis of cases, but in some cases the qualitative methods are skillfully supplemented with quantitative methods. Regarding the methodology, I would add that the main part of the research used in the dissertation was conducted in a comparative perspective, in the framework of larger European research projects. But in all of them the author of the dissertation has participated in the development of the methodology and research tools. It is also impressive the presence of clearly formulated in the dissertation work, subject, purpose, tasks and research questions, main thesis and research methodology, which can be said that the author has observed the "canon" for dissertation work. The various limitations of the analysis are correctly derived - first of all, the limitations related to the research methods (as far as the qualitative methods allow for analysis of the processes in depth and for highlighting trends, nuances and mechanisms, but do not allow for definite summaries and representativeness of the results) and, secondly, the limitations related to the

different periods in which the different studies were carried out (therefore their results can only be attributed and summarized to these periods), and the issues that remain outside the scope of research and analysis

As an indicator of the scientific and professional competence of the author should be noted the richness of the literature used - 233 titles in Bulgarian, English, French and Russian.

As follows from the very title of the dissertation, the author focuses on changes in labor and employment in Bulgaria in the years of transition after 1989, analyzed through the prism of changes in the flexibility and insecurity of work and employment. From the perspective of flexibility and insecurity, the author reveals important aspects of the changes that occurred in this thirty-year period from 1989 to 2019. According to the author himself, the research interest in this period is dictated, first of all, by the insufficient knowledge about the processes of change and their impact, despite the numerous publications in this field and the neglect within the scientific debates of such important aspects of change as changes in the field of work and employment; secondly, the fact that these changes have affected a number of important processes in society since 1989, such as mass emigration, impoverishment and unemployment; thirdly, since from the perspective of more than three decades after 10 November 1989 it is possible to analyze the nature of the changes in the long run and to deduce regularities. All this categorically confirms the scientific validity of the choice of the topic of the dissertation. On the other hand, the sociological analysis of work and employment, carried out by the author in the present work and his numerous empirical sociological studies allow to highlight specifics in the manifestations of flexibility and insecurity of work and employment in Bulgaria, which are not analogous to observed in Western Europe and North America and which are not always visible through the prism of national statistics. The analyzes presented at the micro level within the dissertation allow to reveal the ways in which the individual employers and companies achieve the necessary flexibility and thus reveal the advantages of the sociological analysis, showing how what remains hidden for the statistical analysis becomes visible through the sociological analysis. This outlines the main contribution of the dissertation - the sociological analysis of labor and employment in Bulgaria during the transition period (1989-2019) through the prism of flexibility and insecurity of employment and work. This main contribution is decomposed into

different chapters of the dissertation, each of which contains its own specific contribution elements.

In this regard, the **first chapter** of the dissertation is key insofar as it is dedicated to clarifying the theoretical foundations of flexibility and insecurity and developing a theoretical framework and model for their explanation, introducing another social phenomenon - quality of work. The concept of work quality, which is not new in itself, is considered by the author as a tool for interpreting the impact of work flexibility in a specific context. This allows him to use the quality of work as the main cognitive tool for conceptualizing work flexibility and for linking work flexibility with employment flexibility, considered as elements of work quality, which expresses the main theoretical contribution of this chapter of the dissertation. It is this author's understanding of the quality of work and the linking of employment flexibility with work flexibility, which, however, can develop in one or different directions, allows him to analyze the different configurations of use of different forms of flexibility and to deduce when this is to the benefit of the employer, when to the benefit of the employee, and when to the benefit of both parties, in the spirit of the concept of "flexicurity".

As a continuation of the analysis in Chapter One, the **second chapter** of the dissertation traces how and to what extent the issue of flexibility is present in the previous sociological literature in Bulgaria. The main contribution of this chapter is the discovery of the beginning of the formation of a specific interest in the problems of flexibility and insecurity in the history of labor sociology in general in Bulgaria and the finding that only in recent years, research on work flexibility is intensifying. Sharing the understandings developed within the concepts of "path dependency", according to which history is important for understanding what is happening in the present, and "path dependency" expresses the interaction between inherited (from the previous system and period) and prescribed by international organizations and expert transitologists (which is why, more than thirty years after the change of system in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, they have not yet lost their specificity and have not met the challenges they have inherited or faced in later, in the processes of transition and integration in the EU), the author pays special attention to the macro framework related to the production of regulation in Bulgaria. It is the subject of a special analysis in the **third chapter** of the

dissertation, which examines industrial relations and their role in the (limited) regulation of employment and work, in the context of the state as a regulator and instrument for compliance with the rules. The main conclusions here point to establishing the existence of specific configurations in Bulgaria, which lead to a gradual reduction of the role of the social partners in terms of elaboration and compliance with regulations through collective bargaining and through participation in the development of legal norms. It is also shown that power imbalances, mainly in favor of companies, are associated with numerous violations of labor legislation, which is under constant attempts to liberalize by employers' organizations.

The **fourth chapter** analyzes the role of globalization and its effects on the organization of work in the country. It is shown how the opening of the economy and the privatization started in the mid-90s allow the integration of Bulgarian companies in the global value chains and the inflow of foreign investments, which in turn leads to the entry and adaptation in Bulgarian conditions of various forms of flexibility of work and employment. The author's contribution is the derivation on the basis of data from local organizations from the garment and food industry, the IT sector and the public sector of the specifics of the manifestations of digital and functional flexibility in our country, outlining the differences in the perception of flexibility by employees in traditional industries and new sectors. It has been shown that large public administration organizations are much less likely to resort to flexibility tools than private companies that are involved in global value chains. The conclusion is substantiated that the models of flexibility in the surveyed local companies are imposed by the local authorities of the global value chains, part of which these companies have become, and the low institutional capacity allows the companies to circumvent or not follow the rules. Thus, the dissertation substantiates the heuristic potential of linking the analysis of work and employment with the development of specific forms of regulation in Bulgaria. As a contribution to this chapter can be deduced the established fact that the impact of globalization on the labor market in Bulgaria is realized through the transfer and "translation" of forms of flexibility.

As a contribution to the dissertation work should be noted the dependence stated in **fifth chapter** that although in the restructuring of global value chains most of the consequences for workers are positive, this is not the case for low-skilled workers (or workers engaged in

activities that do not require special qualification), as shown on the basis of examples from the service and construction sectors in Bulgaria. The conclusion is substantiated that in these economic activities in Bulgaria the forced flexibility dominates, which is mainly in the interest of the employers. To this we can add that the dissertation clearly shows that the establishment of flexibility can happen through non-compliance with the rules, using a variety of informal methods and forms.

The last **sixth chapter** of the dissertation raises the issues of work and employment in the context of the digital transformation. Given that the study of the specific effects of digitalization on the quality of work and employment is relatively new, the main contributions of the dissertation can be linked to identifying new forms of flexibility in the context of digital transformation, deriving the role of digitalization in development of digital employment as non-standard employment and outlining both the numerous advantages and disadvantages of teleworking.

In conclusion, I would say that I think that the author has proved his main thesis, laid down at the beginning of the dissertation, namely that during the thirty-year period the flexibility and insecurity of the labor market in Bulgaria and in Bulgarian companies increase as a result of privatization, globalization and digitalization. But the specificity of the manifestation of this flexibility and insecurity depends both on the norms and their application by the state and the social partners, and on the peculiarities and context of the specific sectors of the economy. Associate Professor Vasil Kirov has written a serious and commendable work. Of course, some recommendations could be addressed to it, mainly in the direction of future expansion and inclusion of new problem areas, which modern development poses and additional economic sectors and activities, in order to achieve even greater completeness and representativeness of the analysis. However, I intend to limit myself to this most general remark, as in the introduction the author has very clearly stated the limitations of his analysis and what will not be included in it, and in the conclusion he has outlined many fields for future sociological work in the field of work and employment, in particular in terms of flexibility and insecurity (digitalization and technological change, the future of occupations, changing skills needs, collective and individual forms of bargaining between employers and workers, digital labor platforms, artificial

intelligence, aging societies and adapting work to people who end their working lives later on, climate change, green economies, etc.). Which of them he will focus on is a matter of his personal choice, especially since he demonstrates high scientific competence in this field, which is why he could easily orient himself in the prospects of future research.

In summary, I would say that the proposed dissertation is a serious scientific development with a definitely innovative and practical focus. To this I will add that as a positive element in the structure of the dissertation can be assessed the presence at the end of each chapter of a summary paragraph, which summarizes the main conclusions of the analysis, thus making more visible the main scientific results. And the numerous international studies included in the dissertation, on which the main theoretical analyzes are based, are proof of the European relevance and applicability of its results. I also accept the contributing moments in the dissertation formulated by associate professor Vassil Kirov. In addition to everything said about the qualities of the dissertation, I will add that the author has presented 24 publications on the topic, incl. a collective monograph, given that most publications are in English in prestigious international publications and publishing houses. In the collective works the texts of Assoc. Prof. Vassil Kirov are delimited by his own name and the respective separation protocols are presented. The reference to the citations of Assoc. Prof. Kirov is a proof of his visibility and representation as a researcher in the international scientific space. His multifaceted international research and teaching activities, membership in international scientific organizations and editorial boards speak for the same. It also fully covers the minimum national requirements for obtaining the degree of "Doctor of Science".

After all that has been said so far, I would like to express my firm belief that the proposed dissertation with author Assoc. Prof. Vassil Kirov meets all the requirements for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences, Scientific Specialty "Sociology".

10.10.2021

Prof. DSc Karamfil Manolov

Sofia