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REVIEW

on: defence of a Dissertation by **Assoc. Prof. Dr. VASSIL NIKOLAEV KIROV**

on the topic: **"Flexibility and Insecurity. Sociological Analysis of Work and Employment in Bulgaria, 1989 - 2019 "**

for: acquiring the Scientific Degree of **"Doctor of Science"** in Professional Area 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural sciences, Scientific Specialty **"Sociology"**

from: **Prof. Tanya Boycheva Chavdarova, Dr. Sc.**, Department of Sociology, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", appointed as a member of the scientific jury by order RD 09-348 / 27. 07. 2021 of the Director of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

1. General description of the presented materials

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vassil Kirov presents for defence a dissertation in a total volume of 321 pages. It consists of an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography, which lists 233 titles in Bulgarian, English and French. There are 22 tables and six figures.

Assoc. Prof. Kirov's dissertation is dedicated to one of the most important problems of contemporary sociology of work - that of the growing global flexibility and its connection with work insecurity. It focuses on the way in which this phenomenon manifests itself in Bulgaria in the period 1989-2019. The author's thesis is that in this country the flexibility and uncertainty of the labour market increased in this period as a result of "privatization, globalization, and digitalization" (p. 23). According to him, the specific manifestation of the phenomenon "depends both on the norms and their application by the state and the social partners, and on the peculiarities and context of the individual sectors and groups within the work force" (ibid.). In order to prove his thesis, Assoc. Prof. Kirov unfolds in the first chapter the theoretical framework

by clarifying the concepts of flexibility, insecurity and quality of work. In the second chapter the research is placed in the historical context of the development of the sociology of work as a discipline in Bulgaria. The next four chapters contain an analysis of individual manifestations of the growing flexibility and insecurity of work in Bulgaria through: changes in industrial relations (Chapter III), the restructuring of global value chains in specific sectors (Chapter IV), the counterpoint between vulnerable low-skilled work (Chapter V) and digital forms of employment (Chapter VI). The last four chapters are based on data from four international European studies involving the author, each of which used the "case study" method through in-depth interviews. In total, the dissertation is based on over 16 case studies and over 260 interviews. The last chapter also uses quantitative methods by conducting online surveys. The dominance of qualitative methods leads to the analysis of work flexibility mainly at the micro level.

For defence purposes, 24 publications have been presented. They include one book co-authored in Bulgarian and 23 articles. The majority of the articles (21) are in a foreign language (16 in English, five in French) and two are in Bulgarian. Chapters in collections in prestigious international publications dominate (15), and six are articles in international journals. Eleven of the submitted articles are author's, and 12 articles are co-authored. Ten separation protocols are presented, indicating the author's shares.

All publications are in the subject area of the dissertation. Sociological analyses of phenomena related to industrial relations are prevailing (16): The process of collective bargaining and social dialogue and the relationship between working conditions, quality of work and the nature of industrial relations. Other topics discussed are: flexibility and job insecurity (one book and one article); regulation of the minimum income (two articles) and one article is devoted, resp., to problems of sociology of work, organization of work, vocational training and methodological issues. In most cases, the publications are dedicated to the Bulgarian case or place Bulgaria in the comparative perspective of other Eastern European countries. This impressive production has been created in the last nine years.

2. General characteristics of the candidate's scientific activity

The dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Kirov is a natural result of his successful scientific development. In 2015, he obtained a Master's degree in *Employment Management and Social Development of the Enterprise* from Sciences Po, Paris. In the period 2000-2002 V. Kirov defended his doctoral thesis on: "The Privatized Enterprise in Bulgaria" before both Bulgarian and French juries (respectively: Institute of Sociology at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS); Sciences Po), for which he received the "Marin Drinov" award of BAS for young scientists. V. Kirov has been working at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at BAS since 2000, where he received his habilitation as an associate professor in 2012. In earlier periods, he held a research position at CNRS in Paris and in CITUB Institute for Social and Trade Union Research in Sofia. Since 2012, Assoc. Prof. Kirov has been an associate researcher at the European Trade Union Institute in Brussels.

The complete list of publications provided, including 60 titles, testifies to an extremely active publishing activity. Assoc. Prof. Kirov is the author of a monograph and co-author of four other books, one of which was published abroad. He is a co-author of a special issue of the journal *Sociological Problems* and four books in English, three of which were published in the prestigious editions Palgrave and Routledge. Assoc. Prof. Kirov has 16 articles in international indexed / referenced journals and 18 chapters from books published abroad. The large number of co-authored publications testifies to a remarkably good involvement of Assoc. Prof. Kirov in international scientific networks.

The high involvement of Assoc. Prof. Kirov in scientific life is eloquently evidenced by the many forms of his scientific activity:

- Participation in 44 research, expert and educational projects, in six of which Assoc. Prof. Kirov is the leader of the Bulgarian team. A relatively large part of the projects are international and funded by European institutions;
- 80 papers at conferences / seminars in various European countries, including 18 academic lectures as a keynote speaker;

- Participation in the organization / scientific committees of over 15 conferences at home and abroad.
- Significant specialization as a senior researcher in the Marie Curie Program at Evry-Val-Deson University (2012-2014); and three other shorter specializations in Luxembourg and Paris.

The expert and consulting activity of Assoc. Prof. Kirov is also very rich. He has had expert functions for a number of national and international institutions, incl. for the European Commission on The Impact of Digitalisation on EU Labour Markets (2018-2019), as well as for the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2013-2018: European Company Survey, European Working Conditions Survey). Assoc. Prof. Kirov is a member of the editorial boards of the journals *Work, Organization, Labour and Globalization* and the *European Journal of Workplace Innovation* and has been involved as an evaluator of high-level international projects, as well as a member of scientific juries.

The intensity of research work and the coherence of scientific interests, which are constantly centred over time on the sociology of work and organizations and industrial relations is impressive. Obviously, this is the basis of the systematic and definite research rise of a talented and ambitious scholar.

3. Teaching activity

In different periods after 2006, Assoc. Prof. Kirov has taught in several universities and has given individual lectures at universities in Sweden, Luxembourg, France, Belgium, Spain. In the period from 2005 to 2013 he led a course "Organizational Diagnostics and Consulting" in the Master's program "Labour Markets and Human Resources Development", Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", which I'm coordinating. The course enjoyed an excellent reception by the students, with which he contributed to the development of the program, including as a supervisor of three master's theses. He also taught an Industrial Relations course in the Bachelor's program in Sociology at Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" (2014); "Introduction to sociology - the example of postcommunist societies" in Sciences Po à Dijon (from

2008); Master's course "Evolution of the enterprise in Central and Eastern Europe" at ENSAM - Cluny, France (2006-2010).

Assoc. Prof. Kirov's teaching career closely reflects his research interests in the field of sociology of work and organizations. In these fields, he has been the supervisor of three doctoral students and one postdoctoral student at IFS-BAS. He has also organized a Summer School for PhD students in sociology from the Balkans (2005) and a Summer School under the COST program (2012), and has been involved in advising PhD students in several summer schools in Europe. This is a respectful contribution to the growth and development of a new generation of scientists in these fields.

4. Nature of scientific achievements and contributions

The research work of Assoc. Prof. Kirov in the entirety of the presented publications is a contribution to the development of the field of sociology of work. This is even more important in the Bulgarian context, as contemporary research by Bulgarian authors in this field is not abundant, especially against the background of the development of the discipline before 1989. It would not be an exaggeration to say that with his systematic effort Assoc. Prof. Kirov defends the importance of this sociological field in Bulgaria. I will point out a few more specific contributions, which in my opinion give the best idea of the qualities of the defended dissertation.

First, the application of the conceptualization of Flecker et al. (2008) on the types and kinds of flexibility in individual empirical studies. Numerical and functional flexibility are analyzed (both as internal and external flexibility) and the theoretical framework is applied to the analysis of forms of flexibility in a series of specific sectors. This analysis makes it possible to highlight the importance of sectoral specifics as a very important factor for work flexibility. The comparative analysis of the perceptions of the employer and the employee of the different forms of work flexibility and their interests in this regard is also contributing.

Second, the problems of work flexibility and job insecurity are highlighted through the extremely important counterpoint between low-skilled and digital work; between traditional industrial sectors and new high-tech sectors. This makes it possible to highlight the differences in the

perception of flexibility and insecurity among workers with radically different qualifications and to prove the thesis that flexibility largely depends on the content of work. The analysis of the forced flexibility of the low-skilled employees raises the question what is the dominant nature of the work flexibility in Bulgaria. A multi-layered analysis of remote work was carried out through the prism of the pros and cons of the forms of flexibility that it allows.

Third, the problems of weakening trade unionism and the declining importance of industrial relations, in particular of collective bargaining in Bulgaria, have been clarified in detail and their role as a factor for the growing work insecurity has been convincingly emphasised. In particular, this role is highlighted through some informal practices of companies linked in global value chains, bypassing institutional rules in the area of labour legislation. This underlines the more general effect of globalization as a "lever" for the transfer of unwanted flexibility (especially in atypical forms of work) and insecurity in the labour market in Bulgaria.

In the light of the above, the dissertation has, in my opinion, an indisputable cognitive and practical value. The empirical data analysed in it are a valuable source of information and theoretical reflection and can help current and future research on the problems of work.

5. Reflection of the candidate's publications in Bulgarian and foreign literature

The scientific results of Assoc. Prof. Kirov are quantified in h-Index = 11 of citations. Google Scholar counts 402 citations against its name, which determines I10 – index = 11. The reference for cited works, prepared by Assoc. Prof. Kirov, shows that he has been cited by established authors in prestigious international journals and publishing houses. These results indicate that the author's publications have found a very good reflection and acceptance in Bulgarian and foreign scientific literature.

6. Critical notes

Like any other research, this dissertation naturally raises a number of questions and remarks that cannot be fully explicated. Here I would like to limit myself to two main comments that arose while reading the dissertation.

Firstly, it seems to me that the place of conceptualization of the so-called "regulatory or normative flexibility" is not sufficiently clarified in the overall logic of the dissertation. The normative regulation of flexibility is presented only in general terms in Chapter I. However, it suggests a more detailed macro-level analysis, which is lacking. In some places in the text, the administrative capacity of the state to enforce the rules is discussed, but this is a sporadic rather than consistent element of the dissertation.

Secondly, the claim for a meaningful analysis of the interest in work flexibility in the Bulgarian sociology of work in Chapter II (pp. 27, 62) does not seem to me as fulfilled. The chapter is rather focused on an institutional review of the development of the sociology of work in Bulgaria. This is in itself a valuable undertaking, but, in the context of the dissertation's objectives, it seems to me that it goes beyond the logic of the text.

The comments made do not detract from the high value of the dissertation. I would be happy if they would be useful to the author in his future work.

7. Personal impressions

I have excellent impressions of the work of Assoc. Prof. Kirov as a lecturer in the mentioned Master's program at Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski". At a number of conferences, I have had the opportunity to closely observe his approach as a researcher. Assoc. Prof. Kirov is distinguished by his high professionalism and enviable efficiency. His achievements are widely recognized internationally.

Conclusion

The dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vassil Kirov "Flexibility and Insecurity. Sociological Analysis of Work and Employment in Bulgaria, 1989-2019" meets the requirements of *Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act* and the *Regulations* on its implementation, as well as the *Regulations on the Conditions and Order for Acquiring Scientific Degrees and for Holding Academic Positions* in IFS-BAS for acquiring the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" in the Professional Area 3.1. "Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences" and, as a member of the Scientific Jury, I will vote **FOR** the award of the author of this scientific degree.

October 7, 2021

Sofia

REVIEWER:

(Prof. Tanya Chavdarova, Dr. Sc.)