

REVIEW

From: Prof. D.Sc. Zhelyu Vladimirov, Sofia University *St. Kliment Ohridski*, scientific specialty: 3.7. "Administration and Management"

On: the dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Dr Vasil Kirov on the topic: "Flexibility and insecurity. Sociological analysis of labour and employment in Bulgaria 1989 - 2019" for obtaining the scientific degree "Doctor of Science", Professional field 3.1. "Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences" (scientific specialty "Sociology")

Reason for the review: order of the Director of IFS RD 09-348 / 27.07.2021 for a member of the jury.

1. Information about the applicant

Vasil Nikolaev Kirov graduated in Sociology and Economics at Sofia University *St. Kliment Ohridski* in 1994, after which in 1995 he completed a master's degree in employment management and social development of the enterprise at the Institute of Political Science in Paris. In 2000 he defended his doctoral dissertation at the Institute of Sociology on "Privatization of Enterprises in Bulgaria", and in 2002 he received a doctorate on the same topic from the Institute of Political Science in Paris.

From 1998 to 1999 he was a researcher at the Institute for Social and Trade Union Research at CITUB, and since 2002 he has worked as an associate researcher at the Sociological Laboratory for Institutional Change at the National Centre for Research in Paris (LSCI, CNRS). Since 2000 he has been working at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology (IFS) at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS), and in 2012 he acquired the academic position of "Associate Professor". In 2012-2014 he was a senior researcher in the Marie-Curie program at the University Paris-Saclay. Since 2012 he has been an associate researcher at the European Trade Union Institute.

He has taught courses in Introduction to Sociology, Industrial Relations, Organizational Diagnostics and Development of Enterprises in Central and Eastern Europe in bachelor's and master's programs at Plovdiv University *Paisii Hilendarski*; University College Po à Dijon; Sofia University *St. Kliment Ohridski*; Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Métiers (ENSAM) - Cluny. He has been a supervisor and reviewer of graduates, one postdoctoral fellow and three doctoral students. He has worked as an expert for many institutions and organizations in Bulgaria and abroad. He has participated in over 40 international, national and other funded projects.

Fluent in English, French and Russian. He is a member of the editorial board of the journals "Work, Organization, Labour and Globalization", "European Journal of Workplace Innovation" and correspondent of the magazine "Les mondes du travail" since 2006. He is a member of the Bulgarian Sociological Association, the International Association of Francophone Sociologists and the International Sociological Association.

According to the commission for verification of the applicant's documents, the documents meet the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Law of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations on the terms and conditions for obtaining scientific degrees and holding academic positions at BAS and the rules of IFS at BAS on the terms and conditions for acquiring of scientific degrees and for holding academic positions.

The IFS report shows that the candidate meets the minimum requirements for a "Doctor of Science", collecting 120 of the required 100 points.

2. General characteristics of the presented dissertation

The dissertation presented for the competition consists of an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, appendices and a bibliography of 321 pages, and without the bibliography and appendices - of 291 pages. The dissertation contains 6 figures and 22 tables. The cited bibliography lists 233 sources, of which 52 in Bulgarian and the rest in foreign languages.

The introduction briefly examines the socio-economic change of Bulgarian society after 1989 and research on it, noting that the field of labour and employment has been neglected. This determines the relevance of the offered work. The various dimensions of flexibility are presented, as well as the concept of "quality of work" as a tool for flexibility analysis. The object of research in the dissertation are "changes in labour and employment in Bulgaria during the transition" (p. 16) from the point of view of the manifestations of flexibility and insecurity (p. 24). The goal is formulated as an analysis of the "specific development of labour flexibility and employment in Bulgaria during the post-communist period".

The realization of this goal is specified in five tasks. The thesis defended in the dissertation is that during the period under review the flexibility and uncertainty of the labour market in Bulgaria and in Bulgarian companies increase as a result of privatization, globalization and digitalization. However, their manifestation depends on the norms and their application by the state and the social partners, as well as on the peculiarities and context of the individual sectors and groups of the labour force (p. 23). The study is based on data mainly from in-depth interviews and comparative case studies, although the quantitative methods have also been used. Most of these data are collected as part of European research projects (such as SMALL, WORKS and WALQING), in which Bulgaria also participates.

The limitations of the dissertation refer to the limitations of the qualitative methods themselves, the different periods during which the field researches were conducted and the limited number of analysed economic sectors.

3. Evaluation of the obtained scientific and scientific-applied results

The **first chapter** of the dissertation defines the basic concepts and the research framework for studying labour flexibility and insecurity. Manifestations of flexibility are revealed - such as digital or functional; external or internal (Table 1, p. 34); forced or favourable to workers. The changes in the normative framework (mainly in the Labour Code) are outlined, allowing the development of flexible forms of work such as flexible contracts and flexible working hours. At the same time, numerous violations of labour law have been reported as a sign of weak control institutions, weak trade unions or a "weak state". Strategies of employers to reduce labour costs and achieve more flexibility in the labour market are discussed.

The concept of "quality of work" with its internal (workplace) and external (employment) dimensions is analysed (Table 2, pp. 52-53). The characteristics of the different types of labour organization and their distribution are presented in Table. 3 (p. 55) and Table. 4 (pp. 56-57). It is concluded that in Bulgaria and other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries the traditional (Taylorist) forms of labour organization are still widespread.

The **second chapter** presents the issue of flexibility in the sociology of labour in Bulgaria for the period 1945-1989 and after. The institutionalization of sociology as a science within the framework of Marxist ideology is traced, as well as the various studies in the period before 1989 (pp. 71-72). It is shown that after 1989, sociologists gained academic freedom, but became highly dependent on external resources for their research. In this context, the focus on labour and employment is declining at the expense of new issues such as privatization, the transfer of management models and citizens' political orientations. The sociology of labour is developed mainly within the framework of economic sociology with an

emphasis on topics such as the labour market, the informal economy, the development of trade unions and others. Only later the flexible forms of work and atypical employment were explored by the author of the dissertation (Kirov et al. 2014, 2016).

The development of labour regulations and industrial relations in Bulgaria is analysed in **chapter three**. The main characteristics of collective bargaining, trade union density and the density of employers' organizations in Bulgaria are given in Table. 5 (p. 92). The development of the dual representation of the employees in the enterprises is emphasized. The elements of collective bargaining and their manifestation in Bulgaria are described in detail - such as level and scope; depth; degree of control; main actors and preparation of projects for employment contracts. The most important level of bargaining remains the company level, as long as no national collective labour agreements (CLAs) have been concluded. The number of CLAs for the period 2010-2018 and the tendency for their decrease are given in Table. 7 (p. 115). The expansion of the scope of the CLA with the inclusion of information and consultations on certain issues is indicated (Table 8, p. 122). The development of the main trade union organizations (CITUB and LC "Podkrepa"), the tendency for a decrease in the number of their members (Table 6, p. 96), as well as the reasons for this (p. 98) are outlined.

It is concluded that collective bargaining in Bulgaria is eroding, which is reflected in the declining trade union membership, the weakness of trade unions and the negative attitude of employers to collective bargaining.

The object of study in the **fourth chapter** is the integration of Bulgarian companies in the global economy and the respective consequences for the organization of labour. Several cases of companies are analysed to illustrate the changes related to flexibility and work organization (6 cases in Bulgaria with over 90 in-depth interviews compared to similar cases in Hungary). Enterprises from the garment and food industry, information technologies and public sector organizations were studied.

The results of the analysis of the data for the Employment Agency show that the flexibility of employment is not affected, but the flexibility of labour is increasing (pp. 144-145). Part-time work is not very common in private sector companies in Bulgaria and Hungary, which is confirmed by statistics (Tables 9 and 10, p. 147). Unlike public organizations, in the IT sector there are models of digital flexibility (agreements for flexible working hours, total calculation of working hours, annual reporting of working hours), which are mostly informal. Organizational / functional flexibility is also characteristic of the private sector and to a much lesser degree of the public sector. The two main forms of flexibility in traditional industries such as tailoring and food are weekend work and overtime work during the so-called "strong season".

Some sustainable trends have been revealed, such as standardization and optimization of functions, teamwork, work on many tasks and training opportunities, mainly in private companies in high-tech sectors such as ICT (pp. 171-177). Subcontracting and outsourcing are observed in both traditional (food) and new industries.

It is reported that the combination of different flexibility tools is found mainly in branches of multinational companies (p. 178). The conclusion is that the inclusion in the global value chains until 2010-2011 does not lead to significant flexibility of working hours with the exception of companies in the IT sector. At the same time, unions are not well prepared for the challenges of restructuring and flexibility.

Chapter 5 examines low-paid and vulnerable labour in conditions of forced flexibility and insecurity. The data are from five case studies in two garbage collection organizations, three in construction (Table 11, p. 189) and two case studies of socio-professional groups (sweepers and garbage collectors and builders). The analysis reveals that these economic activities in Bulgaria are dominated by forced flexibility (forms of flexibility that are not desired by the worker), which is mainly in the interest of employers (p. 183). According to the

author, "flexible forms of employment are a measure for the transfer of economic risk from the employer to the employee" (p. 192). Along with weak or absent unions, the lack of adequate social policy, opportunities for skills development and voice expression of workers further impairs the quality of work in these sectors.

In the analysed sectors the working conditions are difficult and the freedom (autonomy) for decision-making of the low-skilled staff is limited. The specific role of the teams (brigades) especially in the construction is revealed; flexibility of working hours in garbage collection (according to temperatures and season); insufficient modern technologies and the reasons for this; the health risks of those employed in these sectors; the existence of mutual support between workers and between them and the management, etc. On this basis, it is concluded that flexibility in the organization of labour may be partly favourable for workers, while contractual flexibility is extremely unfavourable (p. 231).

The object of research in **chapter six** is the flexibility of those employed through online platforms and the challenges related to digitalization for labour market policies. This form of employment is a manifestation of the growing "non-standard" (and informal) forms of employment in the increasingly digitalised economy (p. 246).

The degree of work on internet platforms in five CEE countries is presented in Table. 15 (p. 251). Data for Bulgaria show that only 4.4% of people have ever worked through online platforms. The contradictory consequences of working through these platforms are outlined - the possibility of obtaining additional income, but also the fragmentation of employment.

Based on the author's qualitative and quantitative research on highly qualified work in the field of ICT, problems related to the work-life balance when working in online platforms are revealed (p. 252), as well as the existence of shady practices among those working in this way. These practices include work without a contract, non-payment of taxes and even social security (pp. 258-259). At the same time, many advantages of working remotely are shown, mainly in terms of combining work with parental duties (Table 18, pp. 264-265). Among the disadvantages of this work is the lack of social contacts, the lack of understanding of the nature of work by family and friends; excessive workload; lack of guaranteed monthly income, etc. (Table 20, p. 267). Several hypotheses are confirmed, revealing a significant relationship between gender and satisfaction with this type of work; between the age of the child and the satisfaction of the parents with the achieved work-life balance; between the duration of telework and satisfaction with the work-life balance.

It is concluded that along with some negative consequences of working through online platforms, there are also favourable consequences for people with highly qualified work in the field of ICT (p. 273). It is reported that modern regulations in the field of labour and social security are not prepared to meet the challenges of digital labour (pp. 275-276).

The **Conclusions** summarize the results of the analysis and draws some relevant generalisations. Several topics for future sociological work in this field are outlined, such as the impact of digitalization on employment; adapting work for older people (p. 290); the effects of the so-called "Greening" of economies; the development and specifics of Bulgarian capitalism.

4. Evaluation of scientific and scientific-applied contributions

Based on the results obtained, the applicant has formulated ten contributions, which are his personal achievement. Among the more important ones are the following: (1) Reasoned conceptualization of labour flexibility and its types; (2) Disclosure of the manifestations of digital (internal and external) flexibility and of functional (internal and external) flexibility; (3) Outlining the differences in the perception of flexibility by those working in traditional and new industries; (4) Linking the analysis of labour and employment

with the specific forms of regulation in Bulgaria; (5) Non-compliance with the rules in the conditions of weak institutions as a form of imposing flexibility; (6) The proof that in the high-tech sectors flexibility has more positive consequences for the workers, while in the sectors with low-skilled labour the forced flexibility dominates, which is in the interest of the employers; (7) The eroding over the years syndication and the weak coverage of the collective labour agreements; (8) Revealing a number of advantages of working remotely (mainly in terms of combining work with parental commitments), as well as certain disadvantages of this work (such as the lack of social contacts, etc.).

5. Evaluation of the publications related to the dissertation

Assoc. Prof. Vasil Kirov's publishing activity is significant. The candidate has 60 publications (total monographs and articles), of which 15 are indexed in Scopus with Scopus h-index - 3. The total number of citations according to Google Scholar is over 400.

The publications on the topic of the dissertation are 24, among which: 1 monograph, 2 articles in Bulgarian, and 21 articles in foreign languages (5 in French and the others in English); 10 of these publications are independent and the rest are co-authored. Most of the dissertation has been tested in these publications.

6. Evaluation of the abstract

The abstract is 49 pages long, reveals the main points of the dissertation in a synthesized form and as such meets the requirements.

7. Critical remarks, recommendations and questions

I would like to include the following in my critical remarks. The first chapter discusses a model of the study, which, however, is not visualized. Such a visualization would contribute to a better understanding of the interconnectedness of the obtained results.

Some of the proposed contributions of the author overlap with the previously made conclusions.

In point 3 of chapter one, it is not clear why a comparison is made with Romania as a "weak state" and what this contributes to clarifying the processes related to flexibility and uncertainty.

There are some *technical omissions* in the dissertation (for example, footnote 77 repeats what has been said verbatim in the text above; footnotes 127 and 129 are almost identical and the like), which are, however, insignificant. I would recommend the publication of the dissertation as a monograph, but necessarily after a good editorial and proofreading.

8. Conclusion

Regardless of these remarks, the presented dissertation is an extremely serious and significant work, the result of over 20 years of work of Assoc. Prof. Vasil Kirov. A comprehensive review of leading publications of foreign and Bulgarian authors on the topic has been performed. Very good knowledge of the researched problems, accuracy in the presentation of the theoretical approaches, correctness in the reference of the used sources is demonstrated. A complex approach is proposed for the analysis of changes in labour and employment in Bulgaria during the so-called transition with a focus on flexibility and insecurity. This approach has been tested on the basis of several field studies with the participation of the author, as well as on the basis of numerous statistics and data from other studies. The obtained results are extremely up-to-date and add value to the available knowledge on the topic. They reveal a realistic picture of the flexibility of work and employment in our country and offer an appropriate framework for their explanation and understanding. The contributions made are the personal achievement of the author. With this

dissertation Vasil Nikolaev Kirov demonstrates significant qualities of a leading researcher in this field and contributes significantly to its development.

All this gives me a reason to propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award Vasil Nikolaev Kirov the scientific degree "Doctor of Sociological Sciences" in professional field 3.1 "Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences" (code 05.11.01 - Sociology).

20.09.2021
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