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OPINION

From: *Assoc. prof. Veneta Krasteva Petrunova, PhD, in department "Public Policies and Social Changes", Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences*

Regarding: *Dissertation thesis for acquiring the Scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences",
Higher education area: 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences,
Professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural studies,
Scientific specialty „Sociology“*

Author of the dissertation thesis: *Assoc. prof. Vassil Nikolaev Kirov, PhD*

Dissertation thesis title: *„Flexibility and Insecurity. Sociological Analysis of Work and Employment in Bulgaria 1989 - 2019“*

Grounds for presenting the opinion: *member of the scientific jury for the defense of dissertation thesis according to Order № ПД 09-348/27.07.2021 by the Director of IPS-BAS*

1. Information about the dissertation defense procedure

The dissertation was presented and discussed at extended scientific seminar according to article 39 of the Regulations for the Application of the Act for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and according to article 9 (1) of Regulations of IPS-BAS on the Terms and Conditions for Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and for Occupying Academic Positions. The grounds for opening the procedure are decisions by department "Knowledge Society: Science, Education and Innovation" at IPS-BAS and by the Scientific Council of IPS-BAS (Record № 13/13.07.2021).

The materials submitted by assoc. prof. Vassil Kirov show that with 373,33 points when required 350 he exceeds the minimum requirements set out by BAS for acquiring the Scientific degree of "Doctor of science" in Professional Area 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural sciences.

2. Analysis of the scientific achievements of the applicant

The dissertation represents systematization of long-standing active work of assoc. prof. Kirov in the field of Sociology of work and organizations. Such studies are particularly important in an era of rapid changes of work and employment related to globalization, digitalization, but also to a number of changes in the legal framework that have begun since the 1970s. For the countries of the former Soviet bloc, in addition to the impact of these global processes, the influence of the communist past must also be taken into account, "the path dependence" as assoc. prof. Kirov

correctly points out. Unfortunately, social sciences, and the sociology in Bulgaria in particular, lag behind these changes and there is shortage of in-depth analyzes on important issues such as: how the work is changing and what is the link between flexibility and insecurity. The dissertation, developed by assoc. prof. Kirov, not only focuses on these issues and enriches the knowledge of these topics, but it also sheds light on important for Bulgarian society issues that need further research. These are for instance the issues related to the quality of work, the specificities of the Bulgarian capitalism, its influence on labour development etc.

The theoretical framework conceptualizing the link between flexibility and insecurity gives opportunity significant aspects of the labour to be described – both from individual and organizational point of view. This enriches the analysis and allows the research issues to be explored from both position – that of employees and of employers. Kirov does not fail to indicate, although more schematically in comparison with the other two participants in the labour relations, the significant role of the state in these relations – once as creator of regulations related to various forms of flexibility and after that in its control role that should lead to decrease of insecurity. It can be said that flexibility discourse emphasizes on economic optimization and insecurity discourse underlines the negative effect on quality of work and on labour rights.

Merit of the dissertation is the systematization of types of flexibility and its various forms of manifestation in a context in which elements inherited from the socialism, informal practices and new EU rules for labour regulation co-exist. The last one are imposed as an answer to the growing competition of the global markets and are widespread on global level. Assoc. prof. Kirov contributes to this topic analyzing how forms of flexibility applied in other countries occur in practice in the Bulgarian context and in which cases flexibility is a positive change for the employees and in which it is used in benefit of the employers.

Very important is the analysis of the macro context in Bulgaria that creates specific framework and affects greatly the changes in work and employment. Significant processes are discussed such as: privatization and industrial restructuring in Bulgaria, the influence of foreign investment and related to these processes power imbalances in tripartite relations and eroding of syndicalism. Decreasing the collective bargaining power is a global tendency, but exactly the functioning of powerful syndical structures that can influence on decisions – those of employers and of politicians – is a significant prerequisite for quality of work and reduction of insecurity.

It's worth to be mentioned that assoc. prof. Kirov does not use a formal approach for studying of flexibility and insecurity relying only on statistical data for types of labour contracts but uses an instrument that gives much more realistic picture – the quality of work. This allows hidden aspects of the impact of flexibility in a concrete context to be discovered. In Bulgaria for instance the number of temporary employment contracts is much lower than the EU average and the permanent contracts prevail. However, this does not mean that the work is more secure and with better quality. As a consequence of his analysis the author discovers the presence of “forced flexibility” which serves only for the employers interests. Statement with important consequences is Kirov's observation that insecure work is widespread in all sectors of the

economy and among all professional groups including those of managers and high qualified experts.

I find especially valuable the study of insufficient studied aspects in the Bulgarian labor market, such as the impact of digitalization of work and employment, characteristics of work in online platforms and how they can contribute to the work-life balance. Positive as well some negative consequences of the remote work are discovered.

3. Scientific contributions of the dissertation thesis

The dissertation contributes to knowledge enrichment on exclusively actual and important topic – the changes in work and employment in Bulgaria during thirty-year period (1989–2019). The choice of this time frame is a contribution to the understanding of the problem, as the author manages to capture the specific aspects of the Bulgarian context, which have influenced and continue to affect the situation in Bulgaria.

Placing the research problem in the discourse of flexibility and insecurity is a scientific achievement, which allows changes in work and employment to be considered from the position of different actors in the labor relations.

An important scientific contribution of the dissertation is the conceptualization of labor flexibility, its specifics and types, as well as the differences in its perception and manifestation in distinct economic sectors.

The connection between flexibility–institutional capacity – use of informal forms of employment – insecurity, that the author makes in his analyzis should also be mentioned as a merit of the dissertation.

Last but not least, the contribution to development of sociology of work in Bulgaria by highlighting prospects for future development of the discipline should be noted.

Conclusions from the studies presented have the potential to contribute to the formation of policies concerning: labor relations in various forms of employment (including remote work and through online platforms); quality of work; insecurity of work and employment, etc. Insecurity is related to work and working conditions, but it goes far beyond them and affects every area of the life. The danger that seems real to our country is the flexibility of work to become synonymous with insecurity.

4. Publications related to the dissertation theme and their reflection in the scientific literature

In addition to the dissertation assoc. prof. Kirov has presented eight publication related to the subject matter of dissertation thesis – one in a journal referenced and indexed in world-famous scientific information databases; two articles in journals with scientific review and five chapters in collective monographs part of which published in prestigious international publishers (Palgrave Macmillan, Routledge).

Some of the publications are co-authored and separation protocols have been provided, certifying that in a number of publications assoc. prof. Kirov is the leading author. In another he has equal

contribution with the co-authors. In my opinion, working in co-authorship, especially with foreign scholars, is a recognition of the candidate's abilities and deserves high evaluation.

The citations presented of author's publications have been quoted by foreign researchers in publications referenced and indexed in world-famous scientific information databases. This is a testament to the recognition of assoc. prof. Kirov among scientific community at international level.

5. Critical notes

I think that the concept „regulatory flexibility“ needs additional explanation. For me is unclear whether it refers to the potential of the regulatory framework to be changed or rather, it includes its capacity to absorb informal practices? If the latest is correct than what is the difference between „regulatory flexibility“ and just breaking of norms?

What is poorly addressed in the dissertation, but is essential in terms of changes in work, flexibility and insecurity, are the policies that set the direction and frame these changes. It would be valuable if in the dissertation was examined in more detail the link: flexibility – dynamics of public policies in the field of labor – insecurity.

The literary awareness of the candidate is very wide. The dissertation includes a total of 233 bibliographic sources, of which 52 in Cyrillic and 232 in Latin.

6. Personal impressions from the author of the dissertation

Assoc. prof. Kirov is one of the leading researchers in the field of sociology of work not only in Bulgaria but also in the international scientific community. Proof of this are the high number of international projects he manages or take part in, high quality publications in renowned publishers and high-ranking journals, co-authorship with foreign scientists.

7. Conclusion

The dissertation of assoc. prof. Vasil Kirov and the materials submitted in the competition are a proof of systematic and in-depth work in a clearly defined scientific field (sociology of work and organizations) in which he has been established as a leading researcher with thorough knowledge (this is in accordance to article 6 in Regulations of IPS-BAS on the Terms and Conditions for Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and for Occupying Academic Positions). Therefore I find convincing reasons to give positive assessment and to support assoc. prof. Vassil Nikolaev Kirov, PhD, to be awarded the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences” in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural studies.

04.10.2021

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Signature:.....

assoc.prof. Veneta Krasteva, Phd