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**YOUTH LIFE TRANSITIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF  
GLOBALIZATION**

**ABSTRACT**

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## **2. INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC OF THE RESEARCH. THESIS, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

Young people are the most sensitive to the dynamic nature of modern reality and the uncertain context of the present, as they are in a life stage that confronts them with making important life decisions and assuming responsibilities and choices that predetermine their transition to adulthood period and their future life development in the various areas of life. Sociological research in the field of youth reinforce the notion that, under the influence of globalization processes, today changes are observed in the life transitions of young people (Du Bois Reymond, 1998). There is their de-standardization, which is mainly associated with the extended period of training, economic change, increasing uncertainty in the labor market and the flexibilization of labor (Wallace and Kovacheva, 1998). Research in the field show that, as a result of the individualization and de-standardization of the life course, an increasing number of young people remain longer dependent on the financial support of their parents, which slows down their aspiration for permanent realization in the labor market and taking of more responsibilities typical of adults. Age and life events lose their significance as markers determining the individual's transition to another life stage or the realization of a given life transition. Today there is talk of a new type of youth (Jones, 2009), whose life transitions are defined as non-linear.

In the last three decades, a complete transformation of the values and the demographic profile of Bulgaria has been observed (Dimitrova, 2009). The self-realization of the individual is no longer reduced to marriage and the creation of a family. These events increasingly begin to compete with other life choices characteristic of the youth phase – investing in education and striving for professional growth. Gradually, there are changes in the marital, family and reproductive behavior of young people (Kotseva and Kostova, 2007). The presence of high levels of youth unemployment after the 1989 changes, which remain relatively constant, combined with the liberalization of access to higher education in public and private universities creates the conditions for a greater focus on youth issues in the labor market. The dissertation focuses specifically on the youth transition from education to employment as part of the youth's life course and as one of the most important transitions in the youth period.

The study of the youth transition from education to employment in Bulgaria is particularly important today, at the end of the second decade of the XXI century, due to: the affirming of distance learning forms, their necessity and effectiveness; the precarious place of young people

in the labor market; the unstable political situation in the country, which, in addition to a feeling of general social insecurity, leads to a negative impact on the preparation and implementation of necessary reforms in the fields of education and employment; the global economic processes shaping the Bulgarian context as well; the health crisis from the beginning of 2020 and the political tension in the region from the beginning of 2021.

The transition from education to employment turns out to be a problem for the majority of Bulgarian youth. On the one hand, for the most vulnerable groups among young people – those with low or without education, minority groups, living in villages and smaller towns, where access to quality education is difficult and depends to a large extent on the financial resources of the parental family, and employment opportunities are mainly limited to low-skilled work, characterized by low remuneration and lack of opportunity for career development. On the other hand, highly educated young people living in larger settlements with more opportunities for education and employment are faced with the difficult task of finding employment in the studied specialty and gaining work experience with which they can be competitive on the labor market. The desire to separate from the parental family and gain greater independence often pushes them to permanent residence in various temporary, precarious and low-paid forms of work.

A specific feature of the current dissertation work is the focus placed only on young people, located in the middle of the social hierarchy. Focusing only on young people with higher educational achievements (secondary, secondary vocational and higher education) can give a more detailed picture regarding their youth situation – behind the apparently successful transition to secure employment, specific prerequisites can be defined, creating barriers to young people's career development and creating a sense of failure in employment (Roberts, 2015). The dissertation examines the contemporary youth transition from education to employment as placed in the specific context of the Bulgarian reality three decades after the change of the political regime in our country and 15 years after the country's accession to the European Union. The study examines and analyzes the current social, educational and labor policies in Bulgaria as a factor for the available opportunities and limitations of the institutional environment in which young people make their educational and labor choices. Their interaction with the existing structural inequalities, which continue to shape the set of life chances for the youth, has been studied, but through the prism of the actions taken by young people more and more actively to guide their life transitions.



The main thesis of the dissertation supports the idea that today, as a result of modern dynamic living conditions, there are new models and strategies that highly educated young Bulgarians (those still studying and those who have acquired higher education) follow when making the transition from education to labor. There is a variety of factors that can influence the unfolding of life trajectories and the specific way youth life transitions proceed. Their presence and power of action lead to the definition of different models of transition – some of which are more linear, and others rather non-linear and de-standardized. The role of both the family environment and the support received within the family, as well as the current institutional context, is key. In addition to this, the availability of higher education is becoming increasingly valued by young people, recognizing it as a resource that can facilitate their situation in the labor market.

The two more general aims of the dissertation work are: first, to outline the main problematic aspects accompanying the transition from education to employment according to the attitudes of the young people studied; secondly, through the analysis of specific cases, to discover typologies of new models of transition from education to work, which will help for a deeper and adequate understanding of it. Achieving the goals implies that the dissertation work should solve the following several objectives: to evaluate the degree of upgrading of the educational trajectory; to assess the degree of satisfaction with the education received and the availability of opportunities for employment based on the acquired professional qualification; to trace the work experience gained by young people and its influence on the formed current life strategies in terms of career development; to emphasize the family environment of growing up and its influence on the choices made and future prospects for development; to assess the degree of individual activity of young people and awareness in making important life choices concerning their future (in terms of choosing an education, choosing a job, starting a family).

### **3. STRUCTURE AND SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION**

The dissertation is divided into three chapters:

In *the first chapter*, a theoretical overview of the main concepts and notions used in the study is made. The major scientific achievements in the field of youth research are systematized, presenting both some of the established ideas and some new approaches emphasizing the influence of social changes on the life course and specifically on the youth period and its characteristic life transitions. The chapter continues with a focus on the tradition of youth

research in Bulgaria and a description of the current social context in the country, presenting brief national and European statistics concerning some key indicators related to the youth educational and employment situation.

*The second chapter* is devoted to the research methodology: the research problem, main thesis, aims and objectives are formulated. The subject and the object of research have been clarified, and three main hypotheses have been formulated. Special attention is paid to the selected methods for collecting the necessary empirical material, and the choice of approach and applied research strategies – quantitative and qualitative – are thoroughly argued. A detailed description of the tools used to collect empirical data – an online survey and an in-depth interview – is attached.

*Chapter three* contains the analysis of the empirical data. First, the conclusions and generalizations made as a result of the quantitative research are presented, and then the analysis of the conducted qualitative research is presented. Data from the qualitative research is systematized in three points. The first two points provide general information about the two groups of young people interviewed (high school graduates and university graduates) based on the applied thematic analysis – the main opportunities and limitations in their transition from education to employment, the sources of support and the future prospects are summarized. The third point contains a complete analysis of four selected cases of young people who participated in the research, whose life stories help to define new models of transition from education to employment, followed in the current social and living conditions in our country.

### **3.1. CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The theoretical framework of the dissertation is based on the relevant sociological terminology in the field of the research topic, and the concept and the conceptual apparatus forming the scientific direction *sociology of the life course* are clarified. *The concept of the life course* emerged in the first half of the 20th century, when in the field of social and psychological research the existence of a connection between the life experience of individuals and the specific social conditions in which they live was increasingly clearly affirmed (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918-1920). The idea is also gaining recognition in the field of sociology. Conducted by Glen Elder longitudinally (long term) study “*Children of the Great Depression*” (Elder, 1974) reflects precisely the importance of social changes and their connection with individual life development. The sociological perspective on the life course is based on the

following several concepts: *life course*, *biography*, *life trajectory*, *life transition*, *status transition*, *social transition*. The available rich empirical material is of particular interest to researchers from different scientific fields, which reinforces the interdisciplinary nature of this research field. Karl Ulrich Mayer (Mayer, 2003) had the idea of making a stronger connection between the two scientific directions – *sociology of the life course* and *developmental psychology*. If *the sociology of the life course* concentrates mainly on interpreting social structural constraints and institutional regulators and their impact on the course of life development, *developmental psychology* focuses on the way in which an individual's identity and personal growth are formed, and hence on their impact on individual activity and behavior in the construction of life strategies and future development plans.

As a result of industrialization, the establishment on the capitalist ones relations in the classic modern industrial society, the large-scale educational and social reforms of the 20th century, there is a gradual change in the understanding and experience of the youth phase as a stage of the individual's life course, there are new social roles that the individual fulfills in the different communities of residence (family, school, work ) (Mitterauer, 2004). On the basis of social changes creating value and worldview pluralism, youth becomes a phase of more significant personal decisions related to life planning, of a more differentiated choice of education, of professional and family fulfillment, which leads to the complication of the course of this life stage and its characteristic life transitions (Mitterauer, 2004). Setting clear boundaries between individual life phases is becoming an increasingly difficult task today. The boundaries of youth increasingly depend on the economic, educational and social policies pursued in the particular country (Heinz, 2009). Youth is a social phenomenon that can no longer be measured by age or by the occurrence of certain life events, but depends on the respective place of the individual in different groups.

The modern route of individual development is increasingly uncertain and less and less tied to the predestination of tradition (Bauman, 2013). We are witnessing a gradual replacement of a social paradigm with a new, as yet unknown, which is the result of multiple factors such as: the economic forces at work, the growing power of international regulatory organizations, as well as the growing interconnectedness of nations (Lagrée, 2002). Ulrich Beck (Beck, 2013) supports the idea that the new phase of social development must be perceived as a risk society in which the individual himself forms his individual life styles of development, which are increasingly independent of the inherited social class, but also increasingly determined by the universal uncertainty of life. Individuals can think more

critically about themselves, no longer inheriting, but achieving their identity themselves (Vandenberghe, 2015). Processes of individuation lead to the replacement of *the standard biography* with the so-called “*biography of choice*” (Giddens, 1991), in which life is more like a planned project. Individualization is also attributed to employment relations (Castells, 2004), which further increases the sense of insecurity among young people (Haikkola et al., 2022).

The dissertation emphasizes two alternative perspectives concerning the problem of the influence of the existing social structures of inequality and their importance in the process of constructing the individual life trajectory. The first group of researchers supports the idea that today there are rather processes of weakening of existing social structures of inequality (class, gender, race), and there is a greater opportunity for upward generational mobility (Beck, 2013; Giddens, 1991; Goldthorpe, 1996). The opposite opinion is held by another group of social scientists, who believe that, under the influence of globalization processes, social inequalities rather intensify, market risks are transferred to already damaged social groups, and the inheritance of educational inequalities and life chances is preserved (Breen, 2007; Bourdieu, 1986; Kogan et al., 2012). The life transition of contemporary youth from education to employment would be difficult to interpret without a focus on both the increasingly pronounced processes of individualization and the structural inequalities (gender, class, race) that retain their impact on the individual and his/her constructed life course. The dissertation also steps on several new concepts, taking into account the intertwining between structure and individual activity – “*situated activity*” (*bounded agency*) (Evans, 2002), “*structured individualization*” (*structured individualization*) (Roberts et al., 1994) and “*opportunity structures*” (Roberts, 2022).

The growing uncertainty accompanying the youth stage also complicates the transition of young people to greater independence and separation from parental dependence (Cote, 2014), which can delay their settling into the labour market and taking on more responsibilities (caring for their own family and raising children). This leads to a postponement of some of the youth transitions, which increases their complexity and which can lead to their inconsistent occurrence (Aaltonen, 2012). Today, they are defined rather as non-linear (Jones, 2009). The study of youth transitions in different social contexts enables a wide range of types of youth transition regimes to be formed (Raffe, 2014). One of the most popular typologies, based on European international comparative studies, derives four types of youth transitions, examining youth trajectories as a result of the interaction between the individual and the available social

structures in the sphere of the labor market, education and applied social policy – universalist, oriented towards employment, liberal and sub-protective (Walther, 2006).

Exploring contemporary types of transitions from education to employment, it is necessary to trace, on the one hand, changes in the social role of the educational institution, and, on the other hand, the evolution of views on work. Common perceptions support the idea that education is gradually evolving from a means of equalizing and achieving equality among people to a means of increasingly illuminating and affirming social inequalities (Mitev and Kovacheva, 2014). Regarding labour activity, apart from being a source of income, today it is more and more clearly perceived both as a means of forming a certain social identity in people, and as a prerequisite for social inequalities (Shopov et al., 1997). The challenges facing modern work are mainly related to the transformation of the labor activity itself, which today is already increasingly dependent on high computer technologies, in some cases it is carried out outside the organization and in unregulated time and in various forms of cooperation. Although digitalization and new forms of work can be perceived as factors favoring the balancing of work and family care (Yordanova and Kirov, 2020), they can also lead to a mixing of professional and private life, which would have negative consequences for both the individual employee and the labour organization (Kaur, 2021).

Until the beginning of social transformation in Bulgaria in 1989, the strict state regulations shaped the life course of young people and provided the necessary security in their transition to employment. The followed period is characterized by high levels of unemployment and ever-increasing inflation, with the youth becoming one of the most affected social groups, whose problems and challenges were rather ignored by the authorities. Things take a turn during the stage of preparation for the country's accession to the European Union, when the preparation of specific youth policies becomes a major objective for the achievement of European integration (Staevska, 2011). The problems on which contemporary youth studies in Bulgaria focus most often are in the field of youth transitions and their delay in recent decades, as well as the continuing influence of structural inequalities and institutional restrictions on the life course of young people (Mitev et al., 2019; Krasteva, 2019; Boyadzieva and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2019). Research in the field also emphasizes the attitudes of young people regarding the work of official institutions in the country. It turns out that often those who are in the most vulnerable situation and most in need of employment support remain the most excluded from assistance programs (Krasteva, 2019). For recent school/university graduates and youth without labor market experience, family and parents are the main source

of support during periods of potential unemployment (Biggart and Kovacheva, 2006).

Difficulties in employment are also a prerequisite for the later occurrence of the other events characteristic of youth period – the permanent commitment to a partner and the creation of a family and children. These trends testify to the disappearance of the normative sequence of “occurrence” of life events and to the prolongation and postponement of transitions in the life of a young person (Kotseva and Kostova, 2007; Stoilova and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018). A main conclusion from recent studies of Bulgarian youth (Mitev and Kovacheva, 2014; Mitev et al., 2019) reports that one of the main prerequisites for the more difficult transition from school to work is the discrepancy between the preliminary work expectations of the youth and the real opportunities for professional development. Lifelong learning programs are proving to be the necessary intermediary that provides an opportunity for young people to develop or even change their qualifications, as well as to gain initial experience and start building their work habits (Milenkova & Kovacheva, 2020).

The policies in Bulgaria aimed at helping young people on their way to maturity and secure employment are strongly influenced by European practices and initiatives and rather ignore and do not emphasize the statistically established problem areas in youth transitions in our country (Kovacheva, 2020). They focus more on increasing the employability of young people than on providing them with opportunities for further training and retraining (Jeliazkova et al, 2018; Angelova and Boyadjieva, 2020). One of the European initiatives promoted through the national youth policies is the “Youth Guarantee”<sup>1</sup> operating since 2014. The program is available to a wider group of young people between the ages of 15 and 29, and it also targets young people with high educational achievements (university graduates). All interested parties (employers, local authorities, employment offices) are included in the initiative. The program relies on the understanding that the problem of finding employment is rather a problem of the education system and of the youth themselves, and not so much of the current structure of the labor market.

### **3.2. CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The dissertation makes an attempt to bring out the emerging and followed by the modern Bulgarian youth new models of preparing and following life strategies to successful realization

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<sup>1</sup> Youth Guarantee' (2014) - European Commission (EC). The Youth Guarantee country by country – Bulgaria. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1161&langId=en&intPageId=3333>

in the labour market, as focusing on the interaction between existing structural inequalities and the increasingly individualized lifestyles observed among young people, and seeks an answer to the research question: *What are the new patterns and strategies, which young Bulgarians follow in the transition from education to work in the contemporary dynamic conditions of life?*

The *subject of the research* is the actual experience on the youth transition from education to work, which is examined from the point of view of its location within a particular social context (Bulgarian). Its adequate study presupposes taking into account both the influence of institutional possibilities and constraints, and the influence of the existing social structures of inequalities that inevitably “embedded” it. *The object of the study* is the persons between the ages of 18 and 33, who are in the transition stage between childhood and adulthood and are making the first relatively independent and important choices regarding education, work and family. The low age limit is respectively associated with the stage of completion of compulsory education and the acquisition of more rights and obligations, and the high age limit corresponds to the achievement of job security, the creation of a family and children – events that are now increasingly occur in the late 20s to mid-30s of the individual life course (Dimitrova, 2009). The age range allows to cover both young people at the beginning of their working careers and those with extensive work experience.

In formulating the hypotheses, the dissertation emphasizes the family environment, additional forms of learning and flexible forms of work, seeking to understand their importance for young people in constructing their life strategies for the future and the educational and work choices they make:

1. *First hypothesis:* In the case of more vulnerable groups of young people, the support from the family and surrounding friendly environment is perceived as the main factor forming their life strategies for career development. Whereas youth with more family resources who grew up in a more inclusive environment are more likely to benefit the most of the context's institutional opportunities.
2. In contrast to young people who have already achieved some degree of work fulfilment, young people who are still in the transition stage between their secondary and tertiary education are more likely to make plans for further education to support their transition to work in the future.

3. Flexible employment is preferred more by young people who are still learning and tend to be more experimental in their transition to employment. While young people, who have finally formed their professional orientation and are thinking about creating a family and children, are more likely to prefer secure and long-term employment.

As the most appropriate method for collecting the necessary empirical material, the survey method was applied. A so-called *mixed method approach* was used (Genov, 2013), applying two types of research strategies – quantitative (online survey) and qualitative (in-depth interview). The study took place in two phases within two years and covers the same units of study (young people who once participated in the quantitative research, and after about a year some of them were re-explored through an in-depth interview). The first phase is more descriptive in nature, while the second phase aims to give a larger density on the conclusions drawn.

In order to specify the research field, the quantitative strategy was first applied, by conducting an anonymous online survey according to the respondent method, distributed among the target group mainly in social networks. The structure of the survey covers the following several research areas: attitudes towards education and career development opportunities, youth mobility, relationship between young people and family, formed values and lifestyle. Quantitative data were collected in the period May-September 2020. The total number of pupils and students surveyed was 121 (52% high school graduates and 48% university graduates). The research conducted can be defined rather as a pilot study. The obtained and summarized data can not serve as a basis for drawing general conclusions, since, due to the small sample and the lack of representativeness, complex statistical analyzes can not be correctly applied and statistical relations between the studied variables can not be established. The inferences drawn result from the use of bivariate statistical distributions, which rather helps to formulate key problem areas to be further explored through qualitative research.

The qualitative research was carried out in the period July 2021 - January 2022, with a total of 12 in-depth interviews with young people – 6 interviews with young people who have obtained their secondary education and are currently studying at universities (in Bulgaria and in abroad), and 6 interviews with young people who have already completed their higher education. The interviewees were aged between 19 and 33 and an attempt was made to



maximize the diversity of cases in terms of gender, ethnicity, place of residence and educational qualifications. One in-depth interview was also conducted with a staff member from a *Center for Social Innovation*, which was used to outline the social context in the country in terms of the youth educational and employment situation. The conversations with the interviewees have followed a pre-developed guide with 5 blocks of questions on topics relevant to the set research aims and objectives: introductory block with questions; relations with parents and friends; education, professional qualification and opportunities for employment; current form of employment and labor market experience; future life strategies. The realized sample achieved the main aims of the empirical data selection stage – to cover the variety of life situations of young people making the transition from education to employment. It allows us to derive different types of life strategies and to confirm or reject the formulated hypotheses at the stage of research preparation. The conducted in-depth interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, which gives more information regarding the problematic aspects defined at the survey stage. As the second stage of the analysis, aimed at deriving new models of youth transitions to employment, the life stories of four cases of young people were studied.

### **3.3. CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS OF THE EMPIRICAL DATA**

The dissertation is based on the empirical data collected in the two phases of the research work – quantitative and qualitative research. First, the conclusions of the quantitative research are presented. Then conclusions of the qualitative research are presented, as a result of the applied thematic analysis of the conducted in-depth interviews and the analysis of four cases of interviewed young people.

#### **3.3.1. QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH**

The opinions of the two groups of surveyed young people (high school and university graduates in the spring of 2020) overlap the most in terms of the degree of satisfaction with the quality of the education received in Bulgaria and the assessment of the opportunities for success in the labor market in our country. First, given the rather neutral assessment of the quality of the education received, there is a clear desire to obtain a higher (university) education. This is evidenced by the high expectations that, according to the respondents, their parents have for their educational achievements. The results confirm that nowadays higher education is perceived as a mandatory stage of the life course – a necessity and a prerequisite for better work

and life opportunities for young people. Second, young people share a feeling of insecurity regarding the possibilities of finding satisfactory work in Bulgaria. According to the majority of respondents, the knowledge and skills acquired during their educational training rather do not meet the expectations of employers and are not in line with the demand and supply of labor in our country. A key problem in the youth transition from education to employment is the lack of connection between education and the needs of the labor market.

Regarding the differences between the two studied groups (high school and university graduates), they can be explained by the life stage in which the young people are. In the case of young people who are at the end of their educational trajectory (they have acquired a higher education) and the expectations for them to permanently establish themselves in the labor market are already greater, there is a desire for greater independence in making important life decisions. Despite maintaining high levels of parental influence, unlike youth with secondary education, university graduates show greater freedom to experiment and form life views and values, as well as greater personal responsibility. The data report aspirations towards permanent integration into the labor market and avoidance of long-term unemployment among the more highly educated youth, even if the available employment opportunities do not correspond to their educational achievements and acquired professional qualifications.

The results of the online survey put a focus on several main problematic aspects, on which the qualitative research tries to put a clearer emphasis by exploring them in depth:

- highlighting both the more specific problems accompanying the training stage and the specific difficulties in the process of finding the desired employment;
- positioning the family among other sources of support, determining to what extent it is a factor in the formation of youth life strategies;
- defining a set of future perspectives for young people which reveals in their entirety the patterns of life transitions they follow and clarifies how successful they are as a way of coping with contextual constraints.

### **3.3.2. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Based on the data from the in-depth interviews conducted with *young people who have completed secondary or secondary vocational education*, several conclusions can be drawn to briefly describe the factors shaping young people's individual actions in terms of educational

choices and attitudes towards the working career. The family environment stands out as the strongest factor, forming in young people both certain qualities that guide their life trajectories (educational and work), as well as specific attitudes about the future, which help them to more definitively fix the future prospects. It can be argued that support from family and parents rather reduces the impact of other social inequalities. An example of this is the successful educational trajectories of the interviewed young people belonging to ethnic minorities. In some cases, the family environment can also greatly influence the individuality and work aspirations of young people – those who grew up in entrepreneurial families acquire independence earlier and tend to experiment in education and work.

The institutional opportunities and constraints that “fence” the activity of young people in their transition to employment are focused in the educational system, in the form of the officially offered opportunities by universities for additional training such as international internships and internships in the specialty, but also in the form of insufficiently modernized and flexible learning environment. Internships under European programs offered by higher education institutions are perceived as an opportunity to get acquainted with a foreign social context, which can lead to a “turnover” in the educational and work aspirations of young people. In parallel with this, the limitations of formal practices in the specialty, part of the official curricula, which are perceived by young people rather as a formal source of grossly insufficient initial work experience, should be highlighted.

*The group of interviewed young people who have completed higher (university) education and are at the end of their educational trajectories, some of them at the end of their transition to employment, gives a clearer idea of the variety of problems with which the institutional context limits their choices. Facilitated access to education in the desired field does not prove to be a sufficient factor for quick and successful employment. It is necessary to claim that the educational system does not meet the needs of the labor market, producing too many personnel without a perspective for job development, and the adequacy of the knowledge and skills obtained at the university remains questionable. The lack of sufficient information at the stage of applying to educational institutions can create prerequisites for making hasty educational choices, which later turn out to be wrong and complicate the life situation of young people. In addition to these conclusions, a significant difficulty in the transition from education to employment, as well as in periods of unemployment, is created by social institutions. The lack of an individual approach in working with young people facing various difficulties in their working careers tends to discourage them and leads to distrust in the effectiveness of official*

support programs. Strategies for finding employment rely heavily on established contacts and acquaintances in the specific professional field.

For this group of young people, the family environment is also a factor shaping their life course to a large extent. Young people with greater family resources orient themselves much earlier in terms of education and profession, which leads to making adequate educational and professional choices and to greater entrepreneurship in life choices. While for young people from families with material difficulties and a financially unstable situation, the life chances at the training stage, and also in the transition from education to employment, are limited to the early start of low-skilled temporary employment, combined with the appropriate form of training, which gives them provided some independence. The influence of the family environment and the traditions supported by the community should not be overlooked, which, especially for youth from minority groups, is a decisive factor in determining their life course and the set of future prospects for life development.

### **3.3.3. CASE STUDIES**

The case-study is one of the most widely applied strategies in qualitative social research and aims to study in depth (in great details) a particular social unit, group or phenomenon in its natural environment (Yin, 2009). The study of the four selected cases of young people in transition to employment supports the in-depth acquaintance with the characteristic features of their life course to the moment and the importance they attach to the strategies they follow in the transition from education to employment. The main criterion by which the cases were selected is the status of the youth in education. First, two cases are presented, reflecting the life trajectories of two young women who have not yet completed their educational trajectories, but have experience in the labor market and are relevant to the researched problem. Two case studies are then presented of a young man and a young woman who have completed their educational trajectory and are at the end of their transition to employment. To preserve the anonymity of the young people, pseudonyms were used.

*Flexible employment as an opportunity for self-improvement – “A person is a product of himself”*

High school education		Higher education		
Moving from village to city	Erasmus training in the Czech Republic	Office Assistant	Erasmus training in the Czech Republic	Teaching of creative writing
				Teaching of financial literacy
				Czech Language Club Administrator
13	18	20		22
Critical events		Temporary employment		Training

Chart 1. Timeline of life transition - first case studied

In Petya's life trajectory, the key importance of family resources is taken into account, in relation to the values transmitted in the family, which shape to a high degree the life chances for the young girl. Regarding her professional realization, her life strategies are aimed at the idea of creating her own business. The structural limitations of village life in combination with the institutional opportunities of the training stage have created for Petya the need, through active initiatives on her part (studying abroad, temporary and flexible employment), to constantly upgrade herself, accepting this strategy as a possible means for her self-realization, accumulation of the necessary initial work experience and opportunities to more easily find and even create satisfactory employment in the future (Nielsen et al. 2019). For Petya, the experience gained from the foreign context can and should be applied in the native one, which she again perceives as a means to improve both her personal and professional qualities, as well as the social environment around her. Petya's transition from education to employment is not yet complete, but it can be said that it is clearly oriented towards lifelong learning, regardless of the forms of employment relationships she finds herself in or is about to find herself in, because she realizes the value of this strategy both for herself and for the people around her, with whom she actively works (Kovacheva, 2020; Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2022). The model she follows can be associated with the acceptance of flexible employment not as a precarious form of work, but rather as a means by which young people can reinvent themselves and define more clearly their professional interests, which places them in a constant stage of development.

*Investing in education as a way to achieve the desired employment – “You have to unlock your luck somehow”*

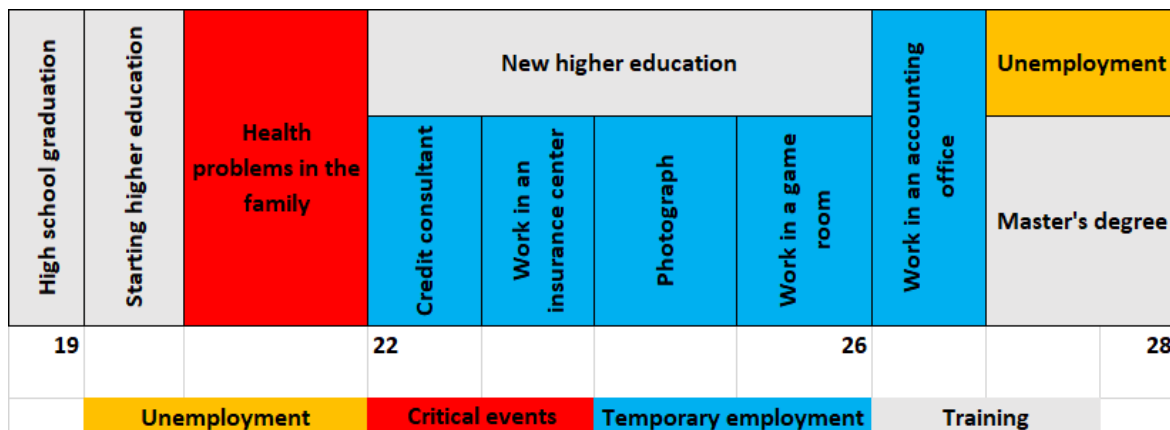


Chart 2. Timeline of life transition - second case studied

Elif's life course is laid both within and outside the framework of tradition – if her family environment is rather a conduit for community prejudices that limit her life strategies, actions and choices, then informal contacts with people of her age and in a similar her life situation motivates her to take a more individualistic position regarding her future and to look for opportunities for development specifically in education and work. Elif's educational trajectory was significantly influenced by a critical event in her family that led to a change in her life course (Elder, 1998). Forced to interrupt her education, she decided to put her studies on the back burner and devote herself to taking care of her family. Desiring to gain economic independence and job security, and determined to reinvest in her studies by completing a new, different degree of education, Elif faces difficulties in finding any employment in her graduated specialty. Thus, her current precarious situation in the labor market turns out to be influenced by her past experiences and decisions (Tomanović, 2022). Educational achievements for Elif are a way for her to free herself from the life constraints imposed on her by the ethnic community to which she belongs and which shape her individual life activity. The model he follows in his transition to employment is clearly aimed at professional retraining and an overall focus on acquiring knowledge and skills, with the aim of getting out of the period of unemployment and ensuring greater chances of finding suitable employment (Krasteva, 2018), which would correspond to her acquired educational level and make her economically independent from the family on which she is currently forced to rely on (Biggart and Kovacheva, 2006), receiving the extremely insufficient support for unemployment provided by state institutions.

*Work through training as a path to quick and successful employment – “Everything I have achieved, I owe it to myself”*

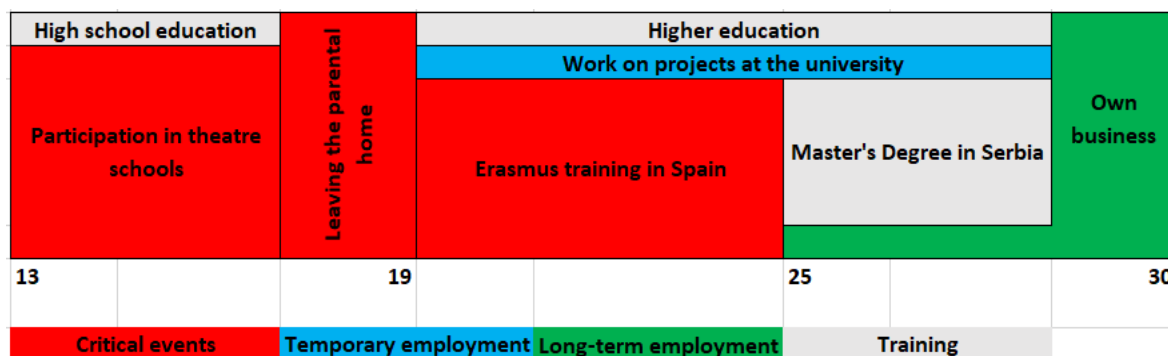


Chart 3. Timeline of life transition - third case studied

Kalina's life course is the result of the successful intertwining between the positive influences of her family environment, which gives her the opportunity for greater self-expression from an early age in search of her individuality, and the opportunities offered by the educational institution (university) for studying abroad and participating in university projects. Taking the best of these two living communities of residence, Kalina manages to successfully guide through active actions (adequate choice of education and use of available institutional opportunities) her transition from education to employment, following a model that allows her to assess in time how far the undertaken educational choices are correct and to what extent professional realization in the chosen specialty is possible (Mitev and Kovacheva, 2014; Mitev et al., 2019). She perceives her studies and the projects she earns herself during her higher education more like a job, relying more on the knowledge she will receive and valuing the professional skills and experience she will gain, not so much on the financial receipts (Kovacheva and Popivanov, 2021), which are too symbolic to ensure her early economic independence. Early leaving the parental home was assessed as a turning point that taught her to be disciplined and helped her in her professional realization, because it taught her independence and responsibility.

*“In the trap” of temporary and precarious employment – “This field is very difficult to enter unless you have formal experience”*

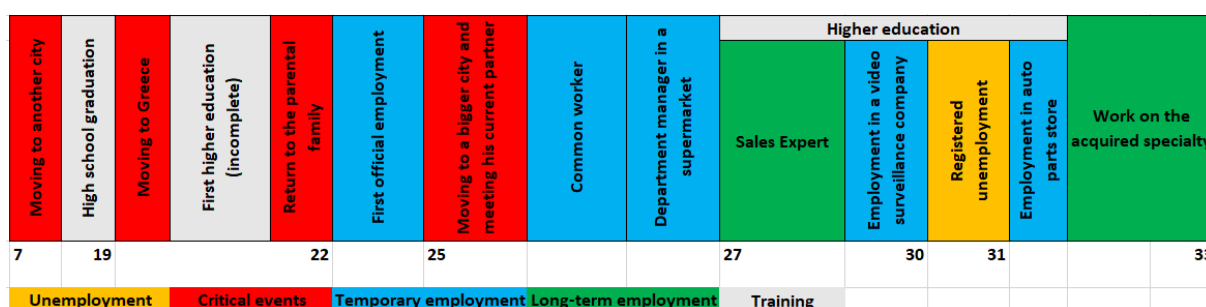


Chart 4. Timeline of life transition - forth case studied

Philip's life course was greatly influenced by the weak resources of the parental family combined with the limitations of the social environment in terms of opportunities for education and higher career development. His life trajectory shows that he is put in a position to create life chances for himself, and most often they are possible after experiencing a significant life event such as: leaving the parental home and family, changing the place of residence, tying up with a partner. His individual actions are severely constrained by the existing structural inequalities. First, they are often aimed at solving the current difficult situation in which he finds himself (Leccardi, 2012) – for example, starting any low-skilled employment. Second, they lead to temporary solutions to the difficult economic situation in which he and his family are placed, which is constantly worsening, given the lack of clear prospects. Philip's applied model of transition from education to secure employment is based on his longer stay “in the trap” of precarious employment, in which he recognizes a strategy (Krasteva, 2018) that can provide him with the opportunity to invest the necessary time in acquiring of education, which for him is the only way to gain access to more satisfactory employment in the desired field. The institutional limitations in his life course are also associated with his period of unemployment and his discouraging experience from the supporting and mediating activities of state institutions (Mitev et al., 2019; Krasteva 2019).

The presented four cases of young people in transition from education to employment illustrate the variety of factors that can influence the unfolding of their life trajectories and the specific way their life transitions unfold. The presence and power of these factors lead to the definition of different models of transition that young people undertake. The family environment and the support provided by the parents play a key role in the formation of the educational, work and life aspirations of the young person. More liberal and materially better settled families are a source of both moral and financial support for young people, giving them security and the opportunity for more experimentation in work. Greater family resources provide youth with greater freedom in making life choices as well as access to more life chances. Young people with greater family resources are more likely to experience a linear transition to employment, recognizing in flexible forms of work a means of acquiring work experience and faster and adequate professional orientation already at the training stage. On the other hand, more conservative families devoted to tradition, as well as families in a more precarious financial situation, can significantly limit the life prospects for young people, which negatively affects their life transitions. The difficult financial situation and the incorrect early career orientation hide many challenges for young people at the beginning of the transition to



work – falling into and permanently retaining low-skilled, temporary and insecure employment, as well as often experiencing periods of unemployment. Rather, a non-linear transition to employment is observed for them, which is characterized by a return to the field of education for the purpose of retraining, as an opportunity for better future employment.

The institutional context is also perceived as an active party in the youth transition from education to employment. The lack of coordination between educational institutions and the labor market creates significant barriers to the implementation of the training and professional development strategies formed by young people and significantly problematizes their transition to work. It is necessary to emphasize the positive role of international exchange programs of pupils and students, which provide access to young people to a different context, whose practices can “overturn” their life strategies in terms of education and career development. Young people's shared experiences of contact with official government institutions and support programs points to the need for additional and deeper research into the specifics in this area, taking into account the experience and position of state institutions and intermediaries.

### **3.4. CONCLUSION**

On the basis of the conducted interviews, several more specific conclusions should be drawn to confirm or reject the formulated hypotheses of the dissertation work:

*The results confirm the first hypothesis* – indeed, young people in a vulnerable situation (belonging to ethnic minorities, as well as those from families living in material deprivation) are highly influenced in their life choices and trajectories by the family environment and friends. For them, they are both a major source of support and a major source of limitation. Young people with more family resources can invest more in developing their personal and professional qualities and experiment in their studies and employment. For them, support in their transition to employment consists in making the most of the institutional opportunities of the context.

*The life stories of the young people interviewed do not confirm the second hypothesis*, according to which young people who are still at the stage of transition from education to employment are more likely to undertake plans for further education, compared to young people who have achieved work realization. Further education is a life strategy undertaken equally by all young people, regardless of their employment situation. If for young people who are still looking for secure employment, additional training is a means of acquiring additional

knowledge and skills and increasing life chances for employment, then for young people who are already employed, additional training is a means of increasing qualifications and obtaining of new opportunities for success and development in a labor.

Regarding flexible employment, *the data confirm the third hypothesis*, according to which young people with different employment situations have different attitudes towards flexible forms of work. Flexible employment is preferred more by young people who are still learning and tend to be more experimental in their transition to employment. While for young people, who have finally formed their professional orientation and focused their future perspectives on creating a family and children, secure and long-term employment is preferred.

The four cases of young people studied are a basis for deriving four different models of transition, which reflect the intertwining of different factors of the context (structural and institutional), creating opportunities and limitations in the life course of young people, but at the same time stimulating their individual actions and activity in making important life choices and the formation of specific strategies for a successful transition from the training stage to finding the desired workplace:

- *Flexible employment as an opportunity for self-improvement* – the model is oriented towards lifelong learning, flexible employment is not seen as a precarious form of work, but rather as a means by which young people can reinvent themselves and define more clearly their professional interests, which places them in a constant stage of development. The structural limitations are suppressed by the available institutional opportunities for travel and study abroad, which proves to be a stimulus for the subjective activity of the young person and for the more individualistic attitudes he/she applies to flexible employment.
- *Investing in education as a way to achieve the desired employment* – educational attainments are perceived as a means by which life constraints imposed by the community of residence can be avoided. The model is clearly aimed at professional retraining and an overall focus on acquiring knowledge and skills. The limitations of ethnicity and community traditions collide with the desire to rise in the social hierarchy, and education is recognized as the means by which the youth, through purposeful subjective action, can assert himself freely before and in spite of the community.
- *Working through training as a path to quick and successful employment* – the model is

focused on the perception of training and the learning environment as a job and a working environment, respectively, allowing a timely assessment of the educational choices made and the opportunities for professional realization in the chosen specialty in the future. Subjective activity is placed among the available institutional opportunities, which are well known to the young person and which shape his/her work prospects. Individual actions are the result of the interplay between the context of growth and the current institutional context, taking for themselves the best.

- *“In the trap” of temporary and precarious employment* – the model perceives a long stay in temporary and precarious employment as an opportunity to invest time in the acquisition of education as the only way to gain access to more satisfactory employment in the desired occupational field. Youth activity has long remained surrounded by the structural barriers of the family environment and the limitations of the institutional context. Subjective actions towards mobility provide the youth with access to more opportunities for development and a chance to overcome the constraints of social origin.

The conclusions and findings lead to the general conclusion that the youth transition from education to employment in Bulgaria is increasingly problematic, uncertain and dependent both on the existing social inequalities and on the constraints and opportunities of the institutional context (Elder, 1998). At the same time, the transition is becoming more and more individualized – young people, increasingly proactive in their life choices and strategies, are ready to turn difficulties and shortcomings into opportunities for their development. The life course of young Bulgarians has been laid in and shaped by the social, economic and political changes taking place in the country over the past few decades. The implementation of the youth transition from education to employment, which in most cases precedes the other transitions characteristic of youth, depends on the interaction between different participants in this process (Roberts, 2022) – the individual actions of young people are the result of and reaction to the social and educational policies, the dynamics of the labor market, the characteristics of the institutional context.

Returning to the typology of youth transitions defined by Walther (Walther, 2006), and based on the overall analysis of, on the one hand, the social context in Bulgaria and the outlined main problems in the youth situation by reviewing some of the implemented social policies and initiatives, and on the other hand, referring to the analysis and results of the independently

conducted research (quantitative and qualitative), the transition from education to employment of the Bulgarian youth can be attributed to one specific type – the sub-protective one.

#### **4. CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DISSERTATION:**

1. *The mixed method approach* was applied, and an attempt was made to combine a quantitative with a qualitative strategy for the selection of empirical data. This allowed the more general youth attitudes, resulting from the conducted online survey, to be supplemented with the more detailed arguments of the interviewed youth regarding their position towards the studied problem. The application of a qualitative strategy, through the use of an in-depth interview, allowed to get acquainted in detail with the life course and biography of the subject of research, identifying the cause-and-effect relations of the investigated phenomena and problems. In the course of the conversations and the analysis of the results, the data also refer to the formulation of new problem fields that can be subjected to additional research in the future.
2. The application of the “case study” strategy in the analysis of the qualitative data allows for a comprehensive introduction to the life situation, past experiences and future perspectives of the interviewees. The data can be used to conduct a repeated longitudinal study, which will provide information on whether, how and under what conditions the life course and life situation of the studied persons change, as well as their attitudes regarding the studied problem.
3. The research methodology and the subsequent analysis of the empirical data create a basis for defining the opportunities and difficulties in the transition from education to employment, the sources of support, as well as the future life prospects for two groups of young people interviewed (high school graduates and university graduates). This adds to the picture of the precarious and increasingly complex youth situation today, expanding the research field considerably.
4. The research succeeds in answering the research question, by deriving specific typologies of models of transitions from education to employment, which the interviewed young people in Bulgaria follow. This is a good basis for future quantitative or qualitative research on the topic, which could “verify” the findings made and enrich this research area.
5. The correct systematization of the theoretical perspective of the research allows the

research field to be very well defined, which is a prerequisite for a well-constructed research methodology and adequately applied methods for collecting and analyzing empirical data.

## 5. PUBLICATIONS ON THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION THESIS:

1. Kovacheva, S., **Hristozova, D.** (2021). Work Careers of Bulgarian Migrants in the European Union. *Sociologija*, Vol 63 (4), pp: 603-623, <http://www.sociologija.org/books/issues.php?lng=English> .
2. Kovacheva, S., **Hristozova, D.** (2022). Striding on a Winding Road: Young People's Transitions from Education to Work in Bulgaria. *Societies*, 12, 97, <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12040097> .
3. **Hristozova, D.** (2022). Young Bulgarian Graduates in the Process of School-to-Work Transition. Youth Between Individual Agency and Family Support, *Sociological Problems*, Vol 54 (1), pp: 383-397, <https://www.sp-bg.eu/en/issue/content/10?issueId=14>
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