

## OPINION

by Dr. Ivan Hristov Chalakov, Professor of Sociology at Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski", member of the scientific jury, appointed by Order of the Rector No RD-21 645  
23.03.2023

of a dissertation on the award of the educational and scientific degree "**Doctor**" in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences, Doctoral Program Sociology

**Author:** *Darena Dimitrova Hristozova.*

**Theme:** *Youth life transitions in the context of globalization.*

**Assoc:** *Prof. Dr. Siika Kostadinova Kovacheva, Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski".*

### 1. General presentation of the procedure and the doctoral student

Darena Hristozova is a full-time PhD student in the doctoral program in sociology at the Department of Applied and Institutional Sociology at FIF, headed by Assoc. Dr. Siika Kovacheva from the same department.

The PhD student has presented the necessary for the protection set of materials in paper and electronic form, which is in accordance with Article 36 (1) of the Rules for the Development of the Academic Staff of the University of Plovdiv. The kit includes:

- application to the Rector of Plovdiv University for disclosure of the dissertation procedure;
- CV in Bulgarian and English in European format;
- Report of the Scientific Supervisor from 21.01.2023 for referral to internal protection and protocol of the Department Council of 23.02.2023 for discussion of the dissertation;
- dissertation and autoreferat;
- a list of scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation and copies of four scientific publications (four scientific articles);
- declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents;

– reference for the fulfillment of the minimum national requirements for PhD students with a total score of 230 points, of which 85 points for a total of 6 citations of three of the doctoral students' scientific publications.

Darena Hristozova graduated from the "St. Knyaz Boris I" in Plovdiv. Asenovgrad, with an English language profile in 2012, then became a student in Plovdiv University, specialty "Sociology of Law, Economics and Innovation". She graduated as a bachelor in 2016 with a qualification "sociologist". During the period November 2016 – June 2018 he was a student in the Master's program "Human Resource Management" at the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences of the University of Plovdiv, graduating as a Master with the qualification "Human Resources Manager". She was enrolled as a full-time PhD student at the Department of Applied and Institutional Sociology at the FIF of Plovdiv University in March 2019 and was withheld with the right of defense in March 2022.

## 2. Topicality of the topic

For defense is presented a dissertation on the sociology of youth – a traditional and well-developed field of Bulgarian sociology, and the studied problem – the transition from education to employment as the most important part of the life trajectory of young people is extremely topical. The reason is that is why the new phenomena and processes in this area, determined simultaneously by the practical completion of the transition to a market economy and the establishment as a whole of a democratic type of government in Bulgaria and its integration into the ongoing global processes in Europe and the world. Today, young people in Bulgaria live in the conditions of an invaluable domestic and international mobility, a change in inherited rhythms and deadlines for separation from the family and transition to independent life, liberalization of access to higher education, insecurity in labor markets and the associated higher levels of youth unemployment, and hence changes in the family and reproductive behavior of young people. The PhD student manages to find a specific research perspective on these problems and applying a thoughtful and well-grounded methodology to reach results that contribute to the existing research in our country.

## **3. Knowledge of the problem**

The in-depth study of theoretical approaches to the problem of youth transition and applied research in this area, developed and implemented in Bulgaria and abroad, is clearly demonstrated in the first chapter of the dissertation. Darena Hristozova shows a literate handling of theory both in the sociology of youth and related scientific fields such as demography, psychology of development, economics and others, justifying the need for an interdisciplinary approach to the problem and carefully defining the concepts used in her research and the theoretical traditions on which she is based.

#### **4. Methodology of the study**

The chosen methodology of the study is justified and developed in the second chapter of the dissertation and is a direct consequence of the theoretical choices justified in the first chapter. I am impressed by the precise and logically sound formulation of the goals and objectives of the empirical study, its object, subject and main hypotheses, the operationalization of concepts to empirical indicators and the appropriate combination of qualitative (online survey) and quantitative (in-depth interviews) methods for data collection. I am particularly satisfied with the considerable amount of work on the data obtained from the quantitative study which has been carried out after the preliminary discussion of the dissertation work in the department and has undoubtedly led to their more balanced and I would say heuristic comparison with the results obtained from qualitative methods of research.

#### **5. Characterization and evaluation of the dissertation and contributions**

I define the presented dissertation as an original achievement of the doctorate, where she synthesizes the theoretical approaches to the problem and the preceding empirical studies and develops her own theoretical perspective, on the basis of which she develops an adequate conceptual apparatus, operationalizes it to relevant empirical indicators and the corresponding toolkit empirical research. Within a relatively limited financial and organizational resources, the PhD student chooses accessible and effective research methods - the online survey and in-depth interviews, surveying 121 pupils and students and doing interviews with 6 active students and 6 graduates of their higher education, all of which are selected from among the respondents online.

The quantitative study, after processing and analyzing the resulting one-dimensional and two-dimensional distributions, highlights several key problems, among which the most important are 1) the imbalance between the quality of education provided in schools and universities in Bulgaria and the real needs of the labor market and 2) the role of the family both as a support for young people in the stage of transition to work and as a source of social inequalities that complicate this transition. The PhD also arrives at an original definition of the current life position of young people as a combination of their life experience and life strategies that they seek to realize and from which position becomes the definition of the set of future perspectives.

The qualitative research conducted after the quantitative has allowed these problems and definitions to be detailed and brought into depth. This aspect is important for the study, as it reveals in their entirety the patterns of life transitions followed by young people, clarifies their nature and how successful they are as a way of dealing with the limitations of context. Thus, for example, she found that "support from family and parents reduces the impact of other social inequalities, such as

suppressing the influence of ethnicity and any possible limitations that context may create based on ethnicity," as well as the possibility that "... the family environment to influence to a large extent also the individuality and work aspirations of young people – those who grew up in entrepreneurial families acquire independence earlier ... are willing to experiment (combine their training with temporary employment in several places), have plans for their own business in the future". In-depth interviews have identified important institutional opportunities and constraints that shape youth behavior in this transition period. Particularly important here are "the opportunities offered by universities for additional trainings such as international internships and practices in the specialty", while "official practices in the specialty, part of the official curricula... [are perceived] rather as a formal source of grossly insufficient initial work experience."

The PhD student has reason to define her scientific contributions mainly as

- 1) *methodologically* – the above-mentioned methodology of the empirical research mentioned above (the combination of an online survey and in-depth interviews based on common indicators, as the toolkit of the interviews is specified on the basis of the data from the quantitative survey) and the followed strategy of "case research" as expressing in detail the "life situation, past experience and future prospects" of the studied typological selected representatives of young people with unfinished and completed higher education. I agree that these results can serve as a basis for a future longitudinal study of the lives and life situations of the surveyed persons;
- 2) *applied sociologically*, as far as the study manages to derive concrete but relevant definitions of "opportunities and difficulties in the transition from education to employment, sources of support, as well as future life prospects for the... graduates of secondary and higher education"

However, I believe that scientific contributions are also available in the theoretical part and the doctoral student and his supervisor should make efforts to clearly formulate and indicate them.

## **6. Evaluation of publications and personal contribution of the doctoral student**

Darena Hrisozova has four publications on the topic of her dissertation, all four of which are in serious refereed scientific journals, three of them in journals with impact factor and included in international science data bases. Three of the publications are in English, two of which are co-authored with the supervisor. Statitie was published in 2021 and 2022 and already has 6 citations from Bulgarian and foreign authors. The articles make available to the scientific community important theoretical and applied results of the research carried out in the dissertation and are an example of good interaction between the doctoral student and his supervisor.

Darena has another scientific article in English co-authored with her supervisor, published in 2019 in the nearby field of youth migration, which, however, she has not presented as related to the topic of the dissertation. This is a manifestation of scientific correctness that deserves to be noted.

### **Personal participation of the PhD student(s)**

The theoretical analysis, the developed methodology of empirical research, as well as the research itself, the analysis of the results and the conclusions and recommendations made are an original achievement of the doctoral student.

### **Critical remarks and recommendations**

My main critical remarks are two and they concern mostly the selection of respondents and the methodology of processing the results of the survey.

Despite the author's efforts to select respondents with different social and ethnic compositions, the empirical study primarily concerns urban youth mainly from the Bulgarian ethnic group, representatives mostly of the "middle class". This is undoubtedly the largest group of Bulgarian youth, but the limited number of representatives of other ethnic groups, as well as representatives of the poorer and wealthier strata, does not allow the data from the study to extrapolate to Bulgarian young people in their diversity.

My second point concerns the lack of more sophisticated methods of handling quantitative data. Although there are only 121 respondents, the table that the PhD student gives on page 87 of the dissertation shows that the studied population can be differentiated several more aggregates with a sufficient number of cases in each of them, which allow the application of statistical methods for expressing the differences between them the indicators of the study. For example, those living in a large (68.3%) and small town (26.7%), those tied to a partner (a total of 47.6% and single (52.4%), unemployed people who are not looking for work (45.6%), unemployed jobseekers (19.3%) and those employed in some form (29.9% in total). This would allow for the manifestation of important statistically significant differences between these groups and would significantly enrich the analysis.

## **7. Autoreferat**

The autoabstract adequately presents the dissertation – the results of the theoretical study, the methodology of the empirical research, the analysis of its results and the conclusions and generalizations made. These contributions reflect the actual achievements of the author, and to them I

would add the real achievements in the theoretical part, which perhaps from too modesty are not formulated as contributions.

## **8. Recommendations for future use of dissertation contributions and results**

The dissertation has all the merits after the respective revision to be published as a scientific monograph.

The results of the theoretical analysis, the developed methodology for empirical research and its testing in the conducted online inquiry and in-depth interviews are a good basis for the development of research projects in this area, where, with the help of more serious financial and organizational resources, the hypotheses of the study and the results obtained can be checked on a larger aggregate and further developed.

## **CONCLUSION**

With the presented dissertation, her publications and her overall behavior as a researcher and lecturer Darena Hristozova demonstrates serious theoretical training and professional skills in the preparation and conduct of empirical research in the field of sociology of youth and related socio-scientific disciplines. Based on the analysis and conclusions on her dissertation made above and its indisputable scientific contributions, I conclude that they meet the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on the Implementation of the Law on Implementation of the Law on Combating Organized Crime "Paisii Hilendarski". That is why I propose to the honorable scientific jury to award to Darena Dimitrova Hristozova the scientific and educational degree "Doctor" in sociology - of a dissertation on the award of the educational and scientific degree "**Doctor**" in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field, 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences, Doctoral Program Sociology

11 May 2023

Prepared the opinion:

(Prof. Dr. Ivan Hristov Tchalakov)