

REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elitsa Dimitrova – Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski”
of a dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific degree “Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)” in
the field of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional direction: 3.1.
Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences, Doctoral Program of "Sociology"

Author: Darena Dimitrova Hristozova

Topic: “Youth life transitions in the conditions of globalization”

Research supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Siyka Kostadinova Kovacheva – Plovdiv Univesrity “Paisii Hilendarski”

1. General description of the presented materials

By Order No. PD 21-645 as of 23.03.2023 of the Rector of Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski” (PU) I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury of a procedure for the defense of a dissertation on the topic “Youth life transitions in the conditions of globalization” for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)” in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional direction. 1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences, Doctoral Program of “Sociology”. The author of the dissertation is Darena Dimitrova Hristozova - a full-time doctoral student at the Department of Applied and Institutional Sociology, with a supervisor Assoc. Prof. Dr. Siyka Kostadinova Kovacheva from Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski”. The materials presented by Darena Hristozova are in accordance with Article 36 (1) of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski” and include the following documents. Darena Hristozova has submitted for review a 226-page dissertation, a summary of the dissertation in Bulgarian and English, CV, a declaration of originality and credibility of the dissertation, a declaration of originality of the contributions, a report for referral to defense by the supervisor, a request for opening of the procedure for acquiring a scientific and educational degree “Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)”, a protocol for referral to the defense of the dissertation by the Department of Applied and Institutional Sociology, a certificate of fulfillment of the minimum national requirements for acquiring the scientific and educational degree “Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)”, a statement of the scientific supervisor to start the procedure for the defense of the dissertation, four scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation, two of which are published in peer-reviewed international journals.

1. Brief biographical note

Darena Hristozova earned a BA degree in Sociology and a MA degree in Human Resource Management at Plovdiv Universit “Paisii Hilendarski”. Darena Hristozova was enrolled in the doctoral program of Sociology at PU and was dismissed with the right of defense in 2022. The doctoral student has accumulated teaching experience – Darena Hristozova led seminars in Empirical sociology, Sociology of youth and Methods and methodology of social research in PU. She participated in nine training courses, incl. and in courses on work with data from international sociological studies, research methods in the field of empirical sociology, etc. Doctoral student D. Hristozova has participated in five scientific forums in Bulgaria and abroad. A very good impression is made by her publication activity, which includes six articles, four of which are in English, incl. in international peer-reviewed journals. Four of the articles are on the topic of the dissertation and are part of the documents submitted for the present procedure. D. Hristozova also has three contributions to scientific monographs.

3. Relevance of the topic of the dissertation and appropriateness of the goals and tasks

The dissertation of Darena Hristozova is focused on the topic of youth life course transitions in the conditions of globalization. The dissertation consists of an introduction, the first chapter, which presents the theoretical framework of the study, the second chapter, which describes the methodology of the dissertation, the third chapter, which presents the analysis of the results of quantitative and qualitative empirical studies, conclusion, contributions and limitations of the dissertation and appendixes. The volume of the dissertation is 226 pages, and the bibliography includes 166 titles, of which 47 are in Bulgarian and 119 in English.

The topic of the dissertation focuses on the social group of young people and the specificities of the unfolding of life course transitions (in particular, the transition from education to employment) in the context of recent Bulgarian society. Growing uncertainty observed in modern societies is accompanied by a process of destandardization of the life course trajectories of young people, which makes it difficult to achieve lasting economic independence and autonomy. The life course transitions in the stage of youth are the subject of many studies. In this context, the main advantage of D. Hristozova’s dissertation is that it focuses on the interaction between global trends related to growing uncertainty, and the specifics of post-socialist societies, in which social transformations and accelerated integration into a new type of geopolitical entities interact and cause important changes in life course transitions. Destandardization of life course transitions brought about by the extended period of education, the increasing insecurity of job positions in the labor market and the flexibilization of labor, the changing value orientations associated with the growing consumer culture and the liberalization of societal norms regarding personal choices come

into interaction and impose the need to conduct an in-depth and multifaceted study of the changes in the transitions to adulthood among young people in Bulgaria. The transition from education to employment is very important, as it is the basis for the acquisition of economic independence, which is a prerequisite for other life course transitions, such as leaving parental home, forming a partnership, transition to parenthood, etc.

It makes a very good impression that the author brings out the limitations of the study, mainly related to understudied subgroups of young people. This strengthens the focus of the dissertation, and at the same time opens up new research horizons that the author could develop in her future research activities. Potential future topics are the particularities in the life course transitions of “youth from small towns, minority groups, early school leavers, NEETs, and upper-class youth studying abroad and relying on financial support from the family” (p. 9).

In order to defend the main thesis of the dissertation, that as a result of modern dynamic living conditions, highly educated young people in Bulgaria develop new models and strategies regarding the transition from education to employment, D. Hristozova conducts an empirical study in which she reveals the variety of factors through which destandardization unfolds in the life course of young people. On the basis of the conducted empirical analysis, the main factors that she uncovers are related to the family environment and family origin, as well as to the institutional context and social inequalities in recent Bulgarian society.

In scientific and applied perspective, the results and the conclusions of the conducted research can serve as a basis for studies of other key transitions in the lives of young people and the specifics of their unfolding, such as the transition to family formation and parenthood. The conclusions of the dissertation can also be used in the context of the implementation of policies aimed at supporting young people in making the transition to employment.

4. Competencies in the field of the dissertation

Darena Hristozova demonstrates a very good knowledge of the concepts that problematize the specifics of globalization processes, the main theories of life course transitions and the way in which the theme of youth transitions is studied. A very good impression is made by a good style and consistency in the exposition of the main theses and conclusions of the authors working in the field of globalization studies, sociology of life course transitions and sociology of youth.

The systematization of the main conclusions in the youth studies conducted in Bulgaria after 1989 until today, as well as the description of the recent social context in Bulgaria based on data from national and European statistics, including indicators related to youth educational and labor activity, very well describe the context in which the processes of destandardization of the life course of young people in Bulgaria are developing. In the theoretical part of the thesis (first chapter), D.

Hristozova demonstrates a very good knowledge of the subject area of the dissertation, as well as the ability to synthesize the main theories and to bring out the interrelationships between them.

5. Research methodology

In the second chapter of the dissertation, the research methodology is presented, which is based on mixed methods study, including an online quantitative survey, in-depth interviews and case study). The chosen methodological approach allows the thesis and hypotheses of the dissertation to be empirically verified, as well as to outline the specifics of the national context and the factors that influence the process of destandardization of the transition to employment among highly educated young Bulgarians. Strength of the dissertation research is precisely that D. Hristozova carries out her own empirical research, which allows her research ideas and hypotheses to find empirical verification through the methods of empirical sociology. The fieldwork, analysis and processing of the data from the quantitative and qualitative study show very good organizational and analytical skills of the author, which are reflected in the presented dissertation.

In addition to the online quantitative survey, the empirical analysis in the dissertation is based on in-depth interviews with young people. This includes 6 young people with completed secondary education or students, 6 young people with completed higher education, and 1 employee from the “Center for Social Innovation” of the Plovdiv Municipality. A very good impression is made by the variety of specialties in which young people are trained. This allows for more detailed analyses to be carried out regarding the opportunities for professional realization, the difficulties and barriers that young professionals from various specialties experience when making the transition to employment.

In this chapter of the dissertation, four cases (case studies) are also presented and analyzed. These cases typologize the models of transition from education to employment among young people.

6. Characterization and evaluation of the dissertation

The dissertation uncovers the existence of structural discrepancies between education and employment among young people, which create barriers to their entry into the professional sphere. At the same time, there is a willingness among some young people to make compromises with the desired type of work, which speaks of the limitation of their life choices, especially among young men. As the author notes, “women, unlike men, are more inclined to continue their education as one of the options to access better employment, as well as to wait for a job that matches their acquired qualifications. Unlike women, men are most willing to rethink the type of work they wish to do, and quite a few are even willing to take any job at all” (p. 92).

Another important conclusion formulated in the dissertation is that family support and family background are important in determining educational and work careers among young people. Uncertain transitions to the labor market are observed mostly among young people from low material status families. This shows that the socio-economic inequalities in the Bulgarian society have a significant impact on the life course trajectories of young people and have a negative impact on the transition to employment and finding a satisfying job.

Several important typologies outlining four models of transition to employment are also presented in the dissertation: flexible employment as an opportunity for self-improvement; investments in education as a way to reach the desired employment; work through training as a path to quick and successful employment; “trapped” in temporary and precarious employment.

7. Contributions and significance of research and practice

The dissertation convincingly demonstrates the potential of mixed methods research in the field of sociology of life course transitions and sociology of youth. The outlined models of transitions to employment among young people have been empirically verified and can serve to inform policies for the employment of young people. The presented case study demonstrates the potential of this research method and presents opportunities for repeated observations of the life trajectories of the selected cases. This method is less often used in empirical studies, but the author demonstrates its strengths in applying it to her research on youth and life transitions.

To the contributions of the dissertation, I would add the identification of the structural barriers that prolong the transitions to employment among young people in Bulgaria, namely the discrepancy between the education received and the requirements of the labor market, the weak practical orientation in vocational training, the strong influence of the material status of the family on the educational achievements of the children and their working careers, the ineffectiveness of the programs to support and ensure employment of young people in Bulgaria, etc.

8. Assessment of the publications on the topic of the dissertation

The author has presented four articles on the topic of the dissertation (three in English and one in Bulgarian). Two of the articles are in prestigious international peer-reviewed journals, which in itself is an excellent prove of D. Hristozova’s scientific competences in the field of the dissertation.

9. Personal involvement of the doctoral candidate

D. Hristozova prepared a dissertation that includes an empirical sociological study based on mixed methods, the results of which she analyzed and summarized in the thesis.

10. Summary of the dissertation

The summary of the dissertation is prepared in accordance with the requirements of the relevant regulations of the PU and reflects the main results achieved in the dissertation.

11. Critical remarks and recommendations

My recommendation to D. Hristozova is to investigate in greater depth the effectiveness of policies related to youth employment in Bulgaria, which can be carried out in her future scientific work.

12. Personal impressions

I had the opportunity to work with D. Hristozova on a study on the attitudes to the transitions to adulthood among Bulgarian youth in the context of the contemporary social changes, based on data from the European Social Survey. I have an excellent impression of D. Hristozova's work. D. Hristozova analyzed the survey data and prepared a publication in a scientific journal.

13. Recommendations for future use of dissertation contributions and results

The results of the dissertation can be used for development and implementation of policies that aim to support young people in their transition to employment.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation contains scientific, scientific-applied and applied results, which represent an original contribution to science and meet all the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for the Implementation of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the relevant Regulations of the Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski.

The dissertation shows that PhD student Darena Hristozova possesses sufficient theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific field of Sociology, demonstrating qualities and skills to conduct independently scientific research. Based on this, I confidently give my positive assessment to the above-reviewed dissertation, abstract, achieved results and contributions, and I propose to the honorable scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)" to Darena Dimitrova Hristozova in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional direction 1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences, Doctoral Program of Sociology.

4.05.2023

Reviewer:

(signature)

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elitsa Dimitrova