

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN BULGARIA: AN AMBIGUOUS CONCEPT WITH FRAGMENTED PRACTICE

VASSIL KIROV

Associate Professor, PhD

*Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria
vassil.kirov@gmail.com*

Abstract: This short paper is part of a project in preparation for a White Paper addressed to the Hungarian government defining social innovation.¹ Its aim is to add the specific experience of social innovation in Bulgaria to this discussion. The concept of social innovation has been almost absent from public debates and policy agendas in Bulgaria since the country's European Union accession. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper but certainly do deserve special attention from the academic community in the future. The paper includes a short presentation of the specific Bulgarian context, followed by a section on social innovation and a final section focusing on workplace social innovation.

Keywords: *social innovation, workplace social innovation, Bulgarian aspects*

1. THE BULGARIAN CONTEXT

Bulgaria is the poorest member of the European Union (EU). It has experienced a difficult economic and political transition and faces substantial demographic and social challenges. The Bulgarian state could be characterised as weak in Bohle and Greskovits' typology (2012), as it tends to postpone reforms or impose them without domestic consent, further locking the fragile economy into 'low-road' competitiveness policies. In this context, policymakers are not particularly interested in innovation, not to mention social innovation. Secondly, any emphasis on social innovation is very often put in advance by the European Union. In Bulgaria, which joined the EU in 2007 along with Romania, the imprint of the European references seems to be losing ground (Delteil and Kirov, 2017).

2. SOCIAL INNOVATION: DEFINITION AND USAGE

During the last years, social innovation emerged in the European public policy debates as a vehicle to developing innovative and efficient solutions to addressing societal needs (Sinclair and Baglioni, 2014). In the EU social innovation has been understood as "a solution to both old and new social risks" (Nicholls and Edmiston,

¹ It was presented at the online conference "Strategy of Social Innovation Workshop", organized by Tinlab Project and the University of Miskolc on 7 May 2021.

2018). While at the beginning, the European Commission was not willing to provide a definition of social innovation, already in 2010 the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA) stated that social Innovation relates to the development of new forms of organisation and interactions to respond to social issues (the process dimension). As claimed by Nicholls and Edmiston (2018). It aims at addressing (the outcome dimension):

- 1) Social demands that are traditionally not addressed by the market or existing institutions and are directed towards vulnerable groups in society.
- 2) Societal challenges in which the boundary between ‘social’ and ‘economic’ blurs, and which are directed towards ‘society as a whole’.
- 3) The need to reform society in the direction of a more participative arena where empowerment and learning are sources and outcomes of wellbeing. (BEPA, 2010)

But despite the overall European push for social innovation-based policy, Bulgaria has remained outside this process. The term social innovation has not been defined either in legislation or within particular policy documents in Bulgaria. At present, there are multiple strategies focused on innovation in the country. However, only sporadic programmes and policy documents ever mention the term social innovation, usually with different meanings. In her recent study on innovations in Bulgarian schools, Kachakova (2021) concludes that the imperative of innovation has been embedded in different policies without sufficient justification. In this way, innovation turns into a commonplace phrase which means different things to different people (teachers, principals, politicians, researchers).

Most often, social innovation is used in the context of social services and social entrepreneurship by the public authorities and NGOs. For example, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy has launched a competition for social innovation in the social economy.² More precisely, three categories have been advanced in this competition: social innovations related to employment; social innovations related to social inclusion and social innovations related to the provision of social products and services.

In parallel to such national programmes, there are some actors at municipal level also promoting social innovation in the domain of social services. One example is the Bulgarian capital city of Sofia and its programme “Social innovations”,³ in which NGOs in the sphere of social services compete for project funding. By Resolution No. 292 of 8. 6. 2017, the Sofia Municipal Council approved an Agreement on Cooperation for Achieving Social Protection and Inclusion through Social Services between the Sofia Municipality and Civil Society Organizations, which includes the establishment of a funding program for social innovation projects. This programme aims to improve the quality of life, social inclusion of vulnerable groups by stimulating the implementation of short-term social innovation projects by the active participation of civil society. Social innovation projects are accepted for activities aimed

² <https://seconomy.mlsp.government.bg/page.php?c=2&d=119> (Accessed: 25 April 2021).

³ <https://www.sofia.bg/program-social-innovation> (Accessed: 25 April 2021).

at the creation, implementation or realisation of new ideas or processes for Sofia Municipality that address the needs of vulnerable groups and are significant for the social policy of the municipality. Practices and models that are applied for the first time in the territory of Sofia Municipality are accepted as new ideas. Eligible applicants are non-profit legal entities and people's cultural institutions 'Chitalishtes', based in the territory of Sofia Municipality. However, the available funding is really limited: in 2021 this programme provides funding from the municipal budget for social innovation projects up to BGN 5,000 per project. Despite the scarce funding, the interest has been large as 22 project proposals were received by Sofia Municipality.

In addition, social innovation has been associated with the so-called social entrepreneurship, and various associations and non-governmental organisations have been launching contests for 'social innovation' projects. A case in point is the Junior Achievement Bulgaria,⁴ which organises an annual competition among high school classes as well as social innovation camps in partnership with different schools. The competition encourages participants to come up with a solution to a social problem by developing their idea for a social innovation business. The call for the competition says: "If you are a student between the ages of 15 and 18 and you have an attitude towards the environment around you and what is happening in it, this competition is your opportunity to create improvements in it." As a result, for the 6th consecutive year, Junior Achievement Europe and the company NN Group have partnered through the Social Innovation Relay to empower young people to tackle societal challenges by using innovation and entrepreneurship.

Finally, some civic platforms have been advocating the need for social innovation of the future, for example, in explanation of European trends. Move.bg⁵ was established by the former CEO of HP Bulgaria and assigns smart cities, the shared economy, and others the label of social innovation. According to this organization, "social innovation is the process of inventing, providing support for and implementing new solutions to social needs and problems, as defined by Stanford University. It is a process that is not the privilege of a single country, entity or organisation, because to be successful, social innovation needs cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary efforts". Move.bg underlines that, according to European experts' assessment, there are several radical social innovations that will develop in the following 20 years: such as sharing economy, basic income, Body 2.0, smart cities without cars, alternative currencies, shared innovation spaces, gamification, life recording, local food cycles, new journalism networks, new ways to store and share health data, new reading/writing culture and reinventing education.

As it could be visible on the basis of these examples, social innovation in Bulgaria is mostly associated with social economy and social services

⁴ http://www.jabulgaria.org/category/iniciativi/social_innovation_relay (Accessed: 25 April 2021).

⁵ <https://move.bg/socialni-inovacii-budeshte> (Accessed: 30 April 2021).

3. WORKPLACE SOCIAL INNOVATION

Workplace social innovation also takes up marginal space in Bulgarian policymaking and societal debates. Already in 2012, Pot et al. (2012, p. 161) argued that “workplace innovations are social both in their ends (quality of working life, well-being and development of talents together with organisational performance) and in their means (employee participation and empowerment)”.

But again, as in the case of social innovation in other spheres, the workplace is still not a centre of efforts of the relevant stakeholders (company managers, trade unions, employers’ organisations). After some experimentation with self-management in the 1980s, and following the start of the transition in Central and Eastern Europe, the workplace social innovation was left behind in the public interest. For a long time, privatisation and the question of property distribution mobilised efforts among different stakeholders in various enterprises. However, in the context of massive foreign direct investment flows and a search for rationalisation and efficiency, the workplace has taken importance again. But what is the position of innovations in the context of transferred management models and, in some cases, ‘retaylorization’ (Kirov, 2001). In the same time research and development (R&D) units are being transferred more and more often to the West.

Deficits of social innovation have not been filled by ‘good practice’ transfers. In some cases, the interest has been heavily focused on (isolated) cases of good practices resulting from different experiments or corporate social responsibility (CSR) approaches in the region (Koleva et al., 2010).

The question of these social innovation deficits in the workplace in the new member states of the European Union is still on the agenda. In recent years, there have been some programmes supported by European Social Fund (ESF), for example, the Operational Programme Human Resource Development, that have funded projects introducing social innovation (mainly understood as organisational innovation) in Bulgarian companies.

4. CONCLUSION

The Bulgarian experience has demonstrated the limited use of the concept of social innovation. The concept itself is not defined within legislation and is often ambiguous with different meanings for different actors. The actors involved in supporting social innovations are mainly concentrated in the social services and social entrepreneurship areas, underlining the way in which the policy value of social innovation is limited in the contemporary Bulgarian context. Some civil society organisations have attempted to introduce into the debate a larger range of social innovations, aligned with the technological innovation of the contemporary Technological revolution (Perez, 2002).

On the basis of the Bulgarian example, a few recommendations could be drawn for Hungary. First of all, social innovation should be contextualised and defined in connection with Hungarian realities. Secondly, a common understanding of social inno-

vation should be adopted by actors (such as by regional and national authorities, companies and their organisations, universities, and NGOs). Thirdly, social innovation should be featured in the country's policy documents and operational programmes for the structural funds. Fourthly, while foreign practices might be inspiring, Hungarian actors should find their own policy approaches based on social innovation in order to address challenges on the ground related to development and societal change.

REFERENCES

- [1] BEPA (2010). *Empowering People, Driving Change: Social Innovation in the European Union*. Brussels: Bureau of European Policy Advisers.
- [2] Bohle, D. – Greskovits, B. (2012). *Capitalist diversity on Europe's periphery*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press.
- [3] Delteil, V. – Kirov, V. (2017). Européanisation versus déeuropéanisation sociale: le sort des économies périphériques bulgare et roumaine. *Relations industrielles/Industrial Relations*, Vol. 72, No. 4, pp. 785–807.
- [4] Kachakova, V. (2021). *Innovation in school education in Bulgaria: Sociological Problems and Perspectives*. Unpublished manuscript at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Sofia (in Bulgarian).
- [5] Kirov, V. (2001). La privatisation des entreprises bulgares: de la contrainte exogène à l'adaptation locale. *Communisme, Numéro spécial 'Communisme et post-communisme en Europe centrale et orientale'*, No. 64, pp. 143–166.
- [6] Koleva, P. – Rodet-Kroichvili, N. – David, P. – Marasova, J. (2010). Is corporate social responsibility the privilege of developed market economies? Some evidence from Central and Eastern Europe. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 274–293.
- [7] Nicholls, A. – Edmiston, D. (2018). Social innovation policy in the European Union. In: Heiskala, R. – Aro, J. (eds.). *Policy Design in the European Union: An Empire of Shopkeepers in the Making?* Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 161–190.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64849-1_8
- [8] Perez, C. (2002). *Technological Revolutions and Financial Capital: The Dynamics of Bubbles and Golden Ages*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- [9] Pot, F. – Dhondt, S. – Oeij, P. (2012). Social innovation of work and employment. In: Franz, H. W. – Hochgerner, J. – Howaldt, J. (eds.). *Challenge Social Innovation*. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-32879-4_16
- [10] Sinclair, S. – Baglioni, S. (2014). Social innovation and social policy – promises and risks. *Social Policy and Society*, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 469–476.