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CONTEMPORARY ASPECTS AND CHALLENGES RELATED TO EMPLOYMENT AND LABOUR MARKET IN BULGARIA IN THE COVID-19 SITUATION

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Abstract

During the last couple of months, the labour market and employment in Bulgaria encountered a new recession and took a quick downturn. Reasons for that are related to the spread of the COVID-19 contagion. All the efforts by the part of the state have been aimed to preserving the employment and supporting the employers to provide pays for their employees. Regretfully, the pandemic situation proved serious and the labour provisions are, in fact, helpless with regard to the growing unemployment. Employment increase and preservation are of a significant importance for all the Bulgarian industrial enterprises. The lack of adequate policy for employment and labour market is a huge barrier to the preservation of employment and puts a number of obstacles to the organisational structure of the enterprises. The main objective of this article is to analyse the issues related to the spread of COVID-19 contagion and its impact on the development of the labour market and preservation of employment. It studies in details the factors influencing the drop in employment, the actions undertaken by the state and employers to handle the problem.

Keywords

Employment – Labour market – COVID-19 – Enterprises – Employers

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Introduction

COVID-19 has a huge negative impact on the economy of Bulgaria, incl. on employment rates and labour market. The situation of a large number of enterprises has worsened, most of them encountered recession, and the restoration of the economic branches will be difficult without an actual support provided by the state. The pandemic situation has managed to change the lives of a large part of the population of the country and introduced new challenges to the labour market and employment. A significant part of production has been seriously affected. Many enterprises have been put in a situation making them decrease their production rates and even close doors. The economic uncertainty has significantly increased and thousands of employees lost their jobs and were left without means of support and income. Bulgarian economy shrank. The impact of pandemics on the production rates has proven to be among the major issues faced by each employer and entrepreneur nowadays. An inadequate policy conducted by the entrepreneurs at the moment has a negative impact on the labour market and this way affects adversely the increase of employment rates. COVID-19 has brought to a considerable collapse in national economy. In such unfavourable economic circumstances, the formation of the labour market and social defence policy shall encounter a large number of turns¹. An appropriate differentiation of the system of indicators to determine the scope of employment, the reason and relation between the occurrence of unemployment and vacant jobs shall determine the impact of the policy conducted by the government with regard to the labour market and employment in general.

Analysis and discussion

At the present stage, the state is not able to establish a recognised policy and system of assessment of labour market in the situation of COVID-19, in order to define the efforts of all the stakeholders on the labour market for decrease of unemployment rate. The intensive emigration waves on the threshold of pandemics had a significant impact on the spread of the disease, as well as on a considerable part of the active workforce of the country, incl. many young people, diligent and motivated to start a better job. All these made the country face an unsecure and undetermined social market economy, inconsistency in changes, being deprived of unity of thinking for a long-term development and of a political will for reforms. During a period of difficult, huge and excessive changes, the loss resulting from the decreasing workforce is becoming more and more unsurmountable. Therefore, the search for potential solutions for reducing the adverse trends through adequate policies in the field of labour market is a major goal and an important stage². The need for continuous, purposeful government acts aiming at the development and implementation of efficient and adequate actions is also of importance. The enterprises should adopt important strategic priorities, a prerequisite for making additional profits, preservation of employment rates, as well as preservation and increase of the market share³. All these are characterized by advantages, which, on their part, have a long-term character and provide their efficiency⁴.

¹ V. Terziev, "Social policies of influence on the labour market and on the formed vulnerable groups", A collection of an annual university research conference (Veliko Tarnovo: Publ. complex of "Vasil Levski" National Military University, 2015), 17.

² I. Beleva, Reverberation of demographic crisis on the market labour in Bulgaria (Sofia: Institute of Research of Population and Humans, "Prof. M. Drinov" Acad. Publ., 2014), 675.

³ V. Kyurova, "Research on the impact of the innovation potential on the competitiveness of furniture enterprises", Entrepreneurship Vol: 3 Issue 2 (2015): 204-205.

⁴ M. Filipova, "Leadership a potential of the efficient organization", Entrepreneurship, Vol: 4 Issue 2 (2016), 246.

The issue of salary has the largest impact on employment, as the amount of the remuneration paid to a worker stimulates the latter's motivation to be fully active in his/her social life. This way, the backbone of an efficient system of motivation of workers is the significance of labour, the recognition of their achievements and the justice in applying the system of payment for labour⁵. K. Vladimirova reckons that the best means of achievement of sustainability by industrial enterprises without resorting to dismissal of staff or reduction to some extent, are contained in the strategies of flexible systems for pay and stimulation of labour. In her opinion, the strategies are aimed at the attainment of flexible cost of labour depending on the situation of the enterprise, covering the use of similar systems with regard to the structure of the gross remuneration as a correlation between the basic salary, the extra and stimulating benefits depending on the outcomes achieved, formation of the base salary, stimulation for achievements, providing for the employees, social benefits for employees⁶.

The impact of COVID-19 on temporary employment above all demotivates people to seek permanent and steady employment on the labour market. Flexible forms of employment are another significant problem affecting employment and the efficient careers of the economically active population. A large part of employers in the area of industry at present do not hire workers, and that, on its part, brings to a particular degree of uncertainty in the demand for new jobs, uncertainty in earned income, career development options, etc.

The adverse aspects existing at the present stage if studied from the entrepreneurs' point of view, are related to their restricted abilities and to the decrease of their compassion and loyalty to the occurring situation. The lack of hiring of employees is predetermined by the legislatively established circumstances, as well as by a complex parity of interests of the enterprises and the actual options for choice of employees⁷. The economic factors have an adverse impact on the labour market, expressed by the level of salary within the country. A large share of the workers employed in the field of industry, are paid minimum wages and this fact additionally demotivates them for their performance at work. The impact of COVID-19 did not skip Bulgaria, characterized by its recurring restructuring of economy, decrease of productivity of labour, drop of salaries, etc.

Corona virus pandemics has had a serious impact mainly on the smaller enterprises producing products of a low added value⁸. The social factors have also brought pressure on the work motivation of the economically active population, the need for employment of unemployed, the standard of living, the re-qualification and development of society. The ruling circles in Bulgaria have undertaken furtive measures to support business and employees in the situation of COVID-19 pandemics.

⁵ B. Brankova, "Motivation of personnel as a tool for the increase of success of a business entity", Yearbook of "St. Ivan Rilski", Humanitarian and Economic Sciences, Vol: 53 Sv. IV (2010): 21-25.

⁶ K. Vladimirova, Strategies and policies for employment management at crises (Sofia: University of National and World Economy, accessible at: http://www.bgtextiles.org/files/custom/konferenzia/KVI_Strategii%20i%20politiki%20za%20upravlenie%20pri%20krizi.pdf), 1-8.

⁷ V. Terziev and A. Dzhumalieva, On some issues of discrimination by "sex" with regard to the flexible forms of employment (Sofia: A collection of reports of the research conference of the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2016), 7-8.

⁸ Short-term forecasts of the development of the labour market in Bulgaria, Sofia, 2014, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, "Human Resources Development" OP 2007-2013, Investing in Your Future", Report for analysis of the situation of the enterprises in Bulgaria with a view to the development of human resources, 86-87.

The initial major measures with regard to the enterprises in the country undertaken by the part of the state were to cover the part of the salaries of people working for the companies affected by the corona virus, as well as of the people threatened by laying offs. Flexible hours of work have been introduced, as well as work in shifts and other forms in order to reduce the number of employees working in one room. Organisation of work has been established to avoid gathering of many people at one place in the enterprise, in order to decrease direct contacts among workers. Varying hours of work have also been introduced, as well as the use of vacant work premises, avoiding simultaneous presence of all the works in the working premises, etc. The state announced strict measures for work, necessitating the use of personal protective equipment by the part of all the employees, regular disinfections of the work places and hands, etc.

The Industrial Capital Association analyses that the entire industry shall be affected severely due to the difficulties in supply of materials and in shipment of ready products, and extremely severe measures against the virus by the part of the state would have a boomerang effect on long-term basis⁹.

The development of social factors is related to uncertainty and risks at the labour market. The situation, both in the country and in Europe, is hard and complicated, influenced by many different factors related to the challenges of the new epidemics¹⁰. The establishment of various shortcomings in the programmes of social defence of the population of the country proves that there lacks an efficient programme and target approach to resolving the social problems, incl. of insufficient funding, lacking legal and information support, absence of legislative mechanisms for the development and implementation of target programmes, functioning of a united mechanism of social defence, as well as support of the employment in the country¹¹. There exists a huge difference between the industrial enterprises in the country and in the EU in terms of financial support and natural resources. The suspension of a large number of significant industries, the cuts of jobs, have resulted in the return of the population from the better developed and working regions abroad back to the country. While the developed countries of the EU are building their strategies for managing the COVID-19 pandemics and are spending huge amounts of funds to control the epidemics, in Bulgaria the opposite is happening, the funds of employees have been cut down, price specula occurred on the market, etc. The foreign investments shrank mainly in the sector of industry.

The epidemics affected mainly the smallest industrial enterprises, where throughout the recent years nothing has been done for facilitating and opening new jobs, and there the main problem is represented by the administrative and regulatory burden on labour, which, in practice, personify the “hidden” cost of labour in Bulgaria. Within that sense, the labour norms in the country are such that any employer in industry is always subject to inspection and there is always a possibility for the establishment of at least one administrative violation that would entail fines or even unregulated payments¹².

⁹ Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association, <http://bica-bg.org/>

¹⁰ A. Andreeva, *Legal regulation of the social and solidarity economy and its influence on employment rates* (Varna: Economic University, 2019), 27-31.

¹¹ V. Terziev, *Impact of the policies on the labour market for providing employment* (Plovdiv: scientific magazine “Novo znanie”, Acad. Publ. of the Higher School of Agribusiness and Development of Regions, 2013), 58-59.

¹² P. Ganev, *Employment at times of crisis: Policy for opening new jobs. A look to the social security and administrative-regulatory burdens on the labour in Bulgaria* (Sofia: Institute of Market Economy, 2012), 11-21.

The corona virus situation influences employment rate in three directions: number of jobs, incl. of unemployment and insufficient employment, quality of work, incl. of the amount of salary and reflection on particular specific groups being more vulnerable to the disadvantageous labour market, as self-employed or temporarily employed persons, migrant employees, etc.¹³.

In future, the increase of illiteracy shall have unfavourable impact on the quality of workforce, as well as the worsening of educational capacity of young people, the main reason for which lies in the distant lessons not providing sufficient quality of the learning process. This is expected to subsequently bring to social risks, unemployment, poverty, lack of education, thus resulting in the absence of motivation for higher qualifications and professional career, for adequate participation in the social life¹⁴.

Among the issues discussed nowadays is the relationships at work in a period of pandemics, the stress and the consequences thereof, the stress affecting the physical and mental state of the employed population. The effect of COVID-19 pandemics on the performance of assignments at work, the daily information overburden to that regard, the lack of development, the conflicts and tension in relations, the duration of the work day, the fatigue, etc., are all reasons and manifestations of the individual for entering the labour market¹⁵. The spread of corona virus has its effect on the unbalance of the labour market and exerts “pressure” on the human defence mechanisms, which on its part causes behavioural, emotional and physiological responses providing directions for gaining control on the external factors creating stress and brings to mental and physical weariness¹⁶.

It is necessary to implement a timely and adequate policy with regard to the labour market, support for the small and medium enterprises, short-term schemes for preservation of employment within the country. For that reason, most of the industrial industry fails to conduct an adequate policy for the improvement of the situation, for stimulation, for safe behaviour of employees, for investments in human capital, for fostering and integration of the persons who are long or permanently unemployed, etc.

There are huge contingents of illiterate, uneducated or unqualified people, people lacking courage, and that has its influence on the level of income from employment and social payments. That also causes a negative shrinking of the labour market and leaves deep traces on the outlooks for its restoration and development. At the same time, the number of enterprises with 0 employees has increased, the quality of the existing and newly opened jobs has worsened, the sectoral structure of employment has worsened and become unfavourable. There is also a pointed drop in investment activity, in direct foreign investments, the legislative regulation for adopting and using tools for flexible employment is also restricted, there occurs slowing of remuneration from employment, income and social payments¹⁷.

¹³ “Assessment of the effect of COVID-19 on the economy of Sofia (Sofia: Metropolitan Municipal Agency of Privatising and Investments, 2020), 10.

¹⁴ Analysis of the initial position and trends of the labour market and workforce (Sofia: Bulgarian Business Chamber, 2010), 36-38.

¹⁵ G. Mihova; D. Kergoat; M. Nikolova and D. Donev, Hours of work, conditions of work, demographic behavior (Sofia: Acad. Publ. “Prof. Marin Drinov”, 2007), 137-138.

¹⁶ Occupational Stress in a situation of transition (Sofia: Institute of social and syndical researches of the Confederation of the Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria, International Labour Organisation, 2002), 1-6.

¹⁷ Labour Market, State and Trends (Sofia: Bulgarian Business Chamber, 2011), 3-5.

At the same time, due to many economic and social reasons brought by COVID-19 situation, the human resource employed by industrial enterprises, experiences a growing sense of helplessness manifested by fear of losing one's job, dead-lock, etc. There is also a high level of dissatisfaction with regard to people's professional needs, which, on its part, brings to growing internal tension. Employers have the chance to involve employees in the situation and make them show commitment with the enterprise and the necessary changes in it, at the same time establishing a sense of belonging and loyalty in workers, which is a challenge to the management and organisation of the enterprises, and a great part of them are not sufficiently prepared to meet such a challenge. A large part of the managers do not understand fundamental concepts, such as corporate values, human system of values and value-related aspects of work, internal motivation and external motivating, and without that, it is impossible to achieve compliance of the actual management of the company's human resources, as the absence of diplomacy to the employed resources of the enterprise results in poor motivation and has a demotivating impact on the human resource employed with the company¹⁸.

In this situation being difficult for all, unemployment is becoming a major problem, it deepens further every day, and concerns the majority of Bulgarian citizens. The state and the EU provide financial resources for the integration of the concerned group of population on the labour market. Some of these people will lose their skills, qualifications and later on shall encounter social exclusion.

In order to solve this problem, it is necessary to conduct a coordinated policy among all the parties involved with the labour market, it is to involve the legislative and executive authorities, employers and trade unions, as well as a large share of the economically active persons. The factors having the largest influence are the absence of the connection with the business, the insufficiency of practical experience for overcoming similar situations, reforms, need for an appropriate strategy by the part of the state¹⁹.

The implementation of a timely policy in employment has a tremendous and defining significance for an efficient support of changes in the trends of the labour market, so that preventive actions could be developed for early response. The decrease of the period during which the effects of crises on employment are transferred onto the labour market, affects the flexibility of the policies implemented. The acquittal of the specific factors of economic development and of the possible impacts on the labour market is becoming a linked element of the process of establishment of policies on the labour market²⁰.

The main goal is to bring the focus not so much on the money spent, but rather on the alleviation of regulations and burdens on labour, and the main objective is to build up a proper base for lesser obstacles to the entrepreneurs and jobs²¹. It is also important to provide and exercise certain established norms, through which adaptability and eligibility for

¹⁸ Y. Iliev, Human resources management – the necessary transition of Bulgarian companies from science into practice (Sofia: 2006), 149-152.

¹⁹ D. Belchev, Results from an inquiry regarding the awareness and usefulness of the policies in the field of youth employment (Sofia: Collection of reports "Youth employment in Bulgaria and the countries of Central and Southeast Europe", Institute of Economic Politics, 2015), 9-21.

²⁰ V. Terziev, Development of the labour market in Bulgaria and influence of the policies conducted in the area of employment and unemployment (Sofia: Economics Magazine, No. 21, 2016), 23-24.

²¹ P. Ganev, Employment at the time of crisis: Policy of new jobs. A look at the social security and administrative-regulatory burdens on the labour in Bulgaria (Sofia: Institute of Market Economy, April 2012), 3.

employment is ensured, in particular with regard to the most vulnerable groups, the implementation of efficient policies that help the employees to overcome the change in the situation of pandemics, modern social security systems ensuring adequate financial support, fostering employment and facilitating the mobility on the labour market²².

The changes that have occurred in the course of the recent months in Bulgaria and throughout the world, contain direct and deep consequences related to the policies applied on the labour market. Security is a problem realised not only with regard to the preservation of employment, but also to the establishment of a better life, adequate salary and compensations. The main goal is related to the improvement of the status of human resources employed in unsustainable forms of employment²³.

Fighting against unemployment and fostering employment in the pandemic situation of COVID-19 are challenges occurring for resolving and control by the part of the government and employers. It is required to undertake more measures and programmes for active policies on the labour market, for fostering and preserving employment, financial and social stimulation, increase of investments, etc. Although there exist various measures and regulations on the increase and preservation of employment, in our country there are no actually working programmes offering support during the period of corona virus.

Regarding the factors influencing the decrease of employment, the main problems are related mainly to the personnel's dissatisfaction with the opportunities and remuneration received for the job they do, with the job itself, with the obscure situation and insecurity in near future. Last but not least, it is necessary to undertake particular steps to improve both the economic and the managerial intercompany conditions for the preservation and development of employment²⁴.

Conclusion

The emergency situation in Bulgaria resulting from the COVID-19 shall leave a durable, unpleasant and adverse effect on the employment rates and on the population in general. The development of pandemics has been happening at a dynamic and fast rate and the timely response and support by the part of the governing circles shall be decisive for the restoration of economy and favourable impact on the preservation of employment. This issue is a significant topic of discussions in the course of the recent months. During the period of transition and adaptation and management of pandemics, the enterprises need to adopt lasting and favourable measures to support and preserve employment, as well as timely payment of the remuneration due, preservation of the employees' living standards.

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²³ C. Hristov, "Flexible security – outlooks... 90-91.

²⁴ R. Madgerova; V. Kyurova; A. Atanasova and B. Koyundzhiyska-Davidkova, B., "Intercompany conditions for development of family business", Entrepreneurship, Vol: 4 Issue 2 (2016): 200.

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