

APPLICATION OF SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF SOCIAL SECURITY IN BULGARIA

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Abstract: In nowadays complexity and uncertainty are the norm – they are the context, not just growing risks (OECD, 2017). The social innovation agenda is becoming more important for countries which high risks that lag behind with the modernization of social systems while facing limited public resources. The European commission identifies social innovation as a tool for an adequate and effective response to growing social risks.

The aim of this report is to outline growing social risks that require a new approach and that trigger the development of social innovations with a focus on increasing social security. The current report analyses the application of social innovations for improvement of social security in Bulgaria with a reflection on the specific social risks that trigger new approaches and practices. Nowadays, Bulgaria is experiencing accumulating crises and growing social risks that put more pressure on every individual and the social sector as a whole. In Bulgaria, this problem is of great importance due to the superimposing social risks associated with poverty and deepening inequalities, the aging of the population, as well as low trust in public institutions. What is obvious from the analyses of the social risks is that there are new growing risks to social security related with social exclusion and poverty, health and digital inequalities. In the context of an increased pressure for reforms in the social services and worsened demographic characteristics, it is becoming very important to develop and apply innovations that improve people’s lives.

The applied methodology of the study includes analyzing specific social risks in Bulgaria that pose threats to social security and at the same time revealing good examples of social innovations that can reduce social insecurity. For the purposes of defining social innovation practices with importance for improving social security the author identifies three key areas for the implementation of social innovation, such as the improvement and integration of social services, new social entrepreneurial initiatives and public innovations related to improving health, education and quality of life. Furthermore, the report looks into the human and institutional factors that support and challenge the development of social innovations while reviewing three examples of some practices of application of social vouchers, new organizational model for integrated and distance health services and GPS devices that improve the personal security of people with dementia.

Keywords: social innovation, social security, social risks, integrated social services

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Bulgaria has seen an increase in public interest in social security as an element of the concept for national security. This is because of the increasing number of processes and trends that pose risks to social security and fuel the feeling of individual insecurity. At the same time, society perceives social security, rather as an abstract concept related to the general socio-economic situation and the factors that increase poverty and social inequality. The dynamics of social security in relation to the changing global context and the growing social risks stimulate the search for innovative solutions and practices to improve social security. An assessment of the degree of stability of social systems shows rather an unstable Europe, where social risks are increasing, social systems are shrinking and individuals are increasingly sinking into poverty and social insecurity. The aim of this report is to outline growing social risks that require a new approach and that trigger the development of social innovations with a focus on increasing social security. The author builds on the hypothesis that increasing social risks reduce individual social security and increase the feeling of group insecurity. The applied methodology of the study includes analyzing specific social risks in Bulgaria that pose threats to social security and at the same time revealing good examples of social innovations that can reduce social insecurity.

2. CONTEMPORARY REVIEW OF SOCIAL SECURITY

In contemporary research and scientific discourse, social security has been revealed in strong correlation with national security by adopting the approach that a high degree of security of the individual, community and state increases opportunities for development and improved personal well-being. The concept of "security" has different dimensions and we can certainly assume that it refers to society as a whole and to the individual. The concept of social security is placed at the heart of a multi-layered system of social rules, institutions and policies, which, through their specific manifestations, provide an opportunity for a dignified existence for every person in an unusual living situation. Social security is at the heart of national security by taking the view that the high level of security of the individual, community and state increases their opportunities for development and well-being

At the same time, social security can be seen as a complex of activities to support individuals under threat or risk to their lives and daily routines, by supplementing income, support and access to care. Regardless of what aspect of this relationship can be defined as an area of social security and falls within the scope of the study, it is most important whether, depending on the dynamics of social risks, innovative solutions and practices can be applied to improve social security.

The National Security Policy of the Republic of Bulgaria considers social security as a unity of high quality in education, healthcare, material and spiritual living conditions, employment, social security and social assistance and overcoming the demographic collapse. The modern model of social security can be considered as a set of social rights, principles of social protection and interaction of policies, measures and institutions to predict and limit the risks that arise for individuals, with a fair distribution of public and individual responsibility for actions that enhance personal well-being. Social security in Europe is not a static concept, but on the contrary a dynamic and complex system of policies, instruments and institutions, united by maintaining the pillars of the European social model and guaranteeing the social rights of citizens.

The importance of the social risks for the national security is highlighted by the yearly report for the status of national security in Bulgaria. The report outlines as main social risks for Bulgaria related with the external environment and geopolitical context related with the health sector and its capacity to respond adequately to the growing health needs of the population and the increasing migration wave to Bulgaria. Another major risk for Bulgarian national security recognized at strategic level is the deepening demographic crises and the negative demographic trends related with the dramatic decrease of the population. The population of the country as per the results from the last counting from 2021 shows a current population of 6 519 789 people and a drop down of 11,5% compared with 2016.

3. GROWING SOCIAL RISKS IN BULGARIA

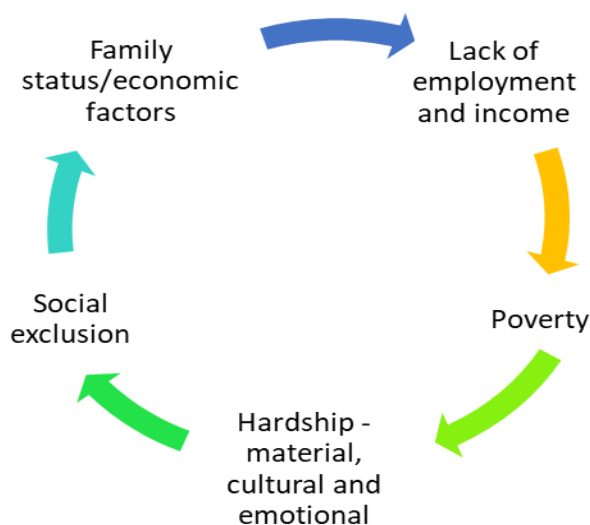
Deepening inequalities between countries, regions and individuals, and their diversity and different forms of manifestation, are one of the greatest social, economic and political challenges of our time. They are also a major risk factor causing threats to social security. As a result of the current study, identified are three main social risks with a growing impact on the social security at individual and community level, that trigger a new approach and application of social innovations.

The first risk with a high potential for a threat to social security is social exclusion. According to the Joint Report on EU Social Inclusion, this is a process in which certain individuals are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from full participation by virtue of their poverty, lack of basic competences, lifelong learning opportunities, or discrimination. This puts them at a difficult distance in terms of employment, income and education, as well as social and public networks and activities. According to Sen, social exclusion is due to limited access to resources (material, cultural, emotional) that allow people to acquire abilities. It highlights the lack of 'capabilities' as a key component of the exclusion process (Sen, 1992).

Social exclusion is increasing in proportion to growing crises, leading to a deepening of social inequalities. According to a number of international analysts, the crises are multiplying tensions in areas that have generated serious social inequalities in recent years, such as accessibility of the health system, access and skills to use technology, fair incomes that provide a decent quality of life. These are new and growing risks and threats, but they can exacerbate social inequalities and put to the test social security at the first level of security of the individual. It is becoming more and more at the forefront because it is directly related not only to the right to life, but to the right to a better quality of life, to respect for basic human rights and obligations, including the right to social security and protection.

Poverty is one of the most important social problems. This social problem leads to a sharp decrease in income, a decrease in purchasing opportunity and savings, a decrease in the birth rate, an increase in mortality, health problems, etc., an increase in migration movements. The level of poverty is directly correlated with the levels of socio-economic inequalities, which are also one of the main factors determining the deepening of poverty. That is why the efforts to increase social security must be focused on preventing the causes that give rise to poverty and social exclusion with a view to their permanent overcoming. The percentage of people living in poverty in Bulgaria is still very high, and income inequality is increasing. Statistics from recent years show a steady trend of increasing poverty and social exclusion rates (32.5%), which remains significantly above the EU average of 22.5%. Income inequality has been increasing continuously in recent years, which has been driven by the gradual decline in the income share of the poorest households.

Figure No1: Relationship between poverty and social exclusion



The second serious risk with a strong impact on social security is related to health status and access to health care. The global COVID-19 pandemic not only focused public attention on existing health inequalities, but also highlighted the negative trend of disproportionate deepening inequalities on certain social groups.

The World Health Organization defines health inequalities as "systematic differences in health between social groups that are inevitable and unfair." (WHO, 2021). There is a conditioned regularity that the higher the socioeconomic status of people, the better the state of health. Health inequalities have a direct impact on every individual, nation and social group, and in practice affect the health of all. The "social gradient" or "socioeconomic gradient in health" demonstrate this. The term social gradient describes the phenomenon that for each step down the socioeconomic ladder there is a corresponding decrease in health status. In other words, the higher the level of disadvantage, the worse the state of health and the shorter the life expectancy.

It is an indisputable fact that people born in countries with high human development have 19 years higher life expectancy, compared to people in countries with low development (UNDP, 2022). Just to illustrate, according to the latest UN Human Development Index for 2021, Bulgaria fell out of the group of the most developed countries in the world, occupying 68th place, which is four places down on 2021. Bulgaria is already overtaken by countries such as Serbia, Montenegro and Georgia and is the only EU country that does not find a place among the most developed countries in the world (UNDP, 2021).

Digital inequality is emerging as a growing threat to social security. Digital inequality is often defined as stratification in terms of access to Internet use, and in this regard, the digital divide is inevitably linked to the concept of social inequality. The size of the digital divide can be understood as a dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that articulates the levels of digital and other resources that people have available within the social divide of society. This means that people have unequal levels of opportunity to develop digital skills to participate in education and the labour market (Garnham, 2005).

In the age of digitalization, when an increasing part of the global economy and public services are carried out electronically, inequalities are further exacerbated when they stem from limited access to the internet and digital devices and a lack of digital skills. The main factor for this is that access is not equal and there are many social groups with a lack of digital skills, which leads to an increase in digital inequality. Unfortunately, the population of Bulgaria is also seriously lagging behind in terms of digital skills, with 29.4% of the population having basic or above basic digital skills.

The main factors influencing the changes in the number and structure of the population are the demographic processes – birth rate, mortality, migration. Overall mortality rates in Bulgaria remain too high, with the overall mortality rate for 2021 being 21.7%.

4. TYPES OF SOCIAL INNOVATIONS THAT IMPROVE SOCIAL SECURITY

Within the European Commission, a widely used definition of social innovation is "new ideas, products, services and models created and applied to meet social needs that create new social relationships and collaborations. Social

innovation is good for society and at the same time fosters the capacity of communities to act."(Murray, CAulier-Grice, Mulgan, 2010). This definition focuses on the subject, purpose and process of social innovation, emphasizing its social nature in terms of:

- implementation of new ideas, services, products and organizational models addressing social needs;
- creating new social relationships;
- responds to social demand and needs.

For the purposes of defining social innovation practices with importance for improving social security, it is appropriate to identify three key areas for the implementation of social innovation, such as the improvement and integration of social services, new social entrepreneurial initiatives and public innovations related to improving health, education and quality of life. Applications of social innovation to improve social security are presented, and the wider area of application of social innovation is the field of social services, mainly related to the need to integrate social services.

Improving social security is associated with strengthening the integration of social and health services. Institutional weaknesses in the social services system and the lack of integration between social and health services is one of the key factors for improving social security and achieving shared prosperity (WB, 2022). The ongoing reforms in the social services sector and the health system aim to lead to a comprehensive and sustainable reform by improving access and ensuring adequate health care for the least developed regions, where there is traditionally a concentration of vulnerable populations.

The process of reforming the social services sector aims to improve the quality and access to social services, including through the provision of personalized and mobile services. The integration of social services aims to provide people-centered and integrated support through a single contact point, such as a one-stop-shop, or through personal case consultants. Integrated service delivery can improve both the effectiveness and efficiency of social services, while providing increased quality and access for a greater number of individuals. Integrated services can provide ongoing care, avoid duplication and fill gaps in the service delivery process as well as in waiting times. A recent OECD study on social innovation confirms that improved access to integrated services such as health, childcare, housing and others for the elderly and people with disabilities can contribute to a significant reduction in inequality in society, reduce the level of poverty across different social segments, and thus increase social security (OECD, 2023). The main directions in which the introduction of social innovations in social services should be considered can be summarized as follows:

- Emergence of new needs or the search for new solutions to existing needs. Innovation is reinforced on the demand side, most often due to socio-demographic and socio-cultural change. It is also supported by the supply side, where technological innovation, diversification and specialization of social services are encouraged, as well as the introduction of a protocol for the operation of professional services;
- Need to address the accessibility of the social protection system. These are challenges in the context of contemporary structural changes in the individual-state relationship, as well as the existing tension between the need to increase social services, as well as the increasing pressure to reduce public spending;
- Growing need for policy effectiveness as a result of an increased focus on an inclusive approach, as well as increasing business orientation for inclusion in social policies

The third type of innovations is associated with the implementation of new digital tools and technological innovations to increase social security. Possible applications of information technology in the social sector are aimed at meeting the European challenges in relation to an ageing population, reinforcing the use of information technology for prevention, diagnosis and rehabilitation.

5. GOOD PRACTICES OF APPLICATION OF SOCIAL INNOVATION TO IMPROVE SOCIAL SECURITY

An example of the use of information technologies for the provision of health and social services is a social innovation for the implementation of telemedicine of the Municipality of Burgas. The social innovation that is gaining popularity among Bulgarian municipalities is offering access to health services through information technologies, or so-called telemedicine. Burgas Municipality is one of the pioneers in Bulgaria in providing remote health services through telemedicine to hard-to-move and lonely elderly citizens who are users of social institutions in the city. The motives for this initiative are the increasing number of disabled and lonely elderly people using various social services in the municipality of Burgas, their need for consultations with specialist doctors and difficult access to medical care due to their health condition or pandemic restrictions.

On the other hand, telemedicine will allow the necessary access to special care to be provided, even if the specialist concerned is located at a great distance. It offers a convenient way of communication between doctor and patient, eliminating the need for a physical visit to the doctor's office, especially in the period of influenza epidemics, bad

weather conditions or difficult mobility of service users. Users of social services usually need help in adjusting drug doses, determining diet and physical activity, prescribing prescriptions for medications that have already been prescribed to them once. Therefore, telemedicine is a good solution for tracking patients with chronic diseases such as diabetes, high cholesterol or arterial hypertension.

The benefits of implementing this social innovation are the improved access to health care for more than 100 elderly people and users of social services, which might be critical for their secure life. Furthermore, this social innovation is providing an option for an integrated care for elderly people, which is crucial for their personal security. The implementation of this social innovation involves three partners – local authorities in the face of Burgas Municipality, lecturers from the Faculty of Medicine of the University "Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov" and University Hospital Burgas. An important prerequisite for the realization of the social innovation are the installation of equipment, the purchase of a telemedicine station located at the University Hospital in Burgas and equipment providing quality remote audio-video communication between a doctor-patient and the transfer of health data on health status in real time.

With remote access to equipment, doctors can monitor and control patients and respond as needed. The advantages of applying the social innovation are access to consultation with medical specialists beyond the limitations of specific medical fields, shortening the time between the occurrence of a health problem and primary consultation, improving the quality of health services, especially when tracking patients with chronic diseases, security for patients in epidemic situations, etc.

In the context of ageing populations and urbanization, many European countries are challenged as to how to ensure access to adequate medical services for all, and in particular for people living in rural and remote areas. The shortage of general practitioners, specialist and emergency care has led to the development of medical deserts, a term used to describe regions where the population has insufficient access to health care.

Another example of social innovation with a contribution to improvement of social security are the so-called "social vouchers". As OECD acknowledges social vouchers have gained momentum as tools to offer innovative solutions for achieving social and economic goals. They are used to improve the quality of employee working conditions providing access to healthy food, ensure service delivery to specific groups and boost local economies by promoting consumption with a social, economic or environmental goal (OECD, 2021). A typical example for social innovation is a social voucher for personal and household services to the elderly that contributes to local development by creating jobs and supporting formalization and better conditions for workers, while also supporting social inclusion of the elderly.

The last example of social innovation with a contribution to the security of people with dementia and mental problems is the provision of GPS devices for avoiding orientation problems and risk of losing. The Sofia Municipal Council adopted a decision to provide 250 GPS devices of people with dementia or a disease expressed in problems with orientation and the risk of losing. The security devices are provided to children and young people with orientation problems for time and space caused by mental retardation or mental disorders. With this social innovation, the local government provide support for both those immediately affected by dementia and their relatives, striving to improve their quality of life and reduce the likelihood of getting lost. The characteristics of dementia underline its societal importance – both sufferers of the syndrome and caregivers are affected, however with the GPS device the personal wellbeing and security can be improved.

6. CONCLUSION

In modern scientific discourse, the concept of social security is placed on the basis of a multi-layered system of social rules, institutions and policies, which, through their specific manifestations, provide an opportunity for a dignified existence for every person in an unusual state of life. At the same time, social security can be seen as a complex of activities to support individuals under threat or risk to their lives and daily routines, by supplementing income, support and access to care. The concept of "security" has different dimensions and we can certainly assume that it refers to two levels - society and the individuals. Social security is the main deficit that manifests itself in modern societies, especially in times of crisis (Ilcheva, 2022).

In Bulgaria, this problem is of great importance due to the superimposing social risks associated with poverty and deepening inequalities, the aging of the population, as well as low trust in public institutions. What is obvious from the analyses of the social risks is that there are new growing risks to social security related with social exclusion and poverty, health and digital inequalities. Poverty and social exclusion are complex problems of many dimensions that have an inextricable link with the security and dignity of each individual. Poverty is a key social problem that negatively affects both the income and material well-being of the population, the quality of human capital and the opportunity for active inclusion in society. In addition, poverty is defined as a basic prerequisite for achieving social security at both individual and societal level. In the age of digitalization, when an increasing part of the global

economy and public services are carried out electronically, there is a major threat of increasing digital divide of the society where people with fewer resources have limited opportunities.

At the same time, governments and policy makers must continue to invest in social innovations to enhance the personal capacity to improve quality of life and individual security, which underpin public welfare, solidarity and inclusive economic growth. Social innovations can contribute to improved social security through three key areas, such as the improvement and integration of social services, new social entrepreneurial initiatives and public innovations related to improving health, education and quality of life. Furthermore they can provide new momentum for reforming the social services sector aiming to improve the quality and access to social services, provision of personalized and mobile services which can enhance the wellbeing of every individual especially disadvantaged people. We can highlight the crucial role of social innovations to improving social security through some practices of application of social vouchers, new organizational model for integrated and distance health services and GPS devices that improve the personal security of people with dementia.

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