

PhD in Sociology

Benchmarking for Social Inclusion?

Everyday realities of joblessness in EU-funded Activation Work in
Bulgaria

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Abstract

Why does Bulgaria, despite formal compliance with the European Union's social policy governance, remain at the bottom of key social inclusion rankings? This dissertation takes this paradox as its starting point, shifting attention away from deficit-based framings of post-communist states and towards a critical interrogation of the EU's own governance mechanisms. Rather than treating Bulgaria as a policy failure, it asks how EU benchmarking and activation policies construct knowledge about 'good governance' and shape the design and implementation of social policy in ways that overlook local needs and disregard lived experiences as a basis for policy learning.

To address this question, the dissertation advances a conceptual framework that brings together scholarship on quantification, bureaucracy, and neoliberal governance. It demonstrates how international performance metrics function as instruments of power, legitimising norms of efficiency, productivity, and individual responsibility, while restricting and redefining what counts as social inclusion within EU governance. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative mixed-methods approach, combining document analysis, interviews with EU and Bulgarian officials, and ethnographic fieldwork. This traces how EU governance operates in practice, with particular attention to the European Semester and the role of benchmarking indicators in shaping activation policies. The empirical analysis centres on the 'Parents to Work' project, part of Bulgaria's Human Resources Development Programme and funded by the European Social Fund, as a key site where these dynamics become visible.

Findings demonstrate that social inclusion cannot be meaningfully captured through compliance or benchmarking, as metrics erase the structural barriers to employment that shape everyday experience.

Instead, the project's limited effects are sustained by discretionary, informal, and often invisible labour, mainly by women who must navigate complex administrative processes with little support. Moreover, the programme inadvertently reinforces gendered divisions of labour by relying on women as both the primary users and providers of care work, while failing to address deeper gendered or socio-economic inequalities. This empirical work shows that the EU's reliance on compliance, benchmarking, and activation norms prioritising market-driven reforms overshadows the everyday experiences of those subject to its policies. It therefore argues for a recentring of lived experiences in social policymaking as essential for achieving genuine social inclusion.