

Issues of Uncertainty: Insecurity and Precarisation as a Life Experience

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In the late twentieth century, social theorists described late modernity as an age and world of “risk and uncertainty” (Beck, 1992; Sennett, 1998). Ulrich Beck defined the society we live in as risky, marked by “endemic uncertainty”, and in 2013, Sigmund Baumann said: “What is novel is not uncertainty. What is novel is a realization that uncertainty is here to stay... we are challenged with a task, which I think is unprecedented – and the task is to develop an art, to develop an art of living permanently with uncertainty”. The subsequent decades confirmed their words. The COVID-19 pandemic, which paralysed the lives of people around the world in 2020, has also affected Europeans, increasing their sense of insecurity. In fact, the crisis caused by the pandemic has deepened and made visible trends that existed in previous years, provoked by and become characteristic features of the global neoliberal market order: loss of status or property (dispossession), increasing share of work with reduced employment time and use of telework, rising poverty and inequalities, – processes which are described by the term precarisation. Shortly after this crisis, wars in Ukraine and the Middle East have not only caused new crises and insecurity for the people in these countries, destroying their lives, but have also increased the senses of insecurity, fear, anxiety, and uncertainty globally.

The aim of this thematic issue of the journal *Slovenský národopis / Slovak Ethnology* is to address some of the local answers of the global process of spreading uncertainties and to analyse them through the tools of ethnology and anthropology.

Uncertainty is multidimensional and has different manifestations – such as economic or employment insecurity (precarity), social, existential, related to feelings of fear and anxiety. The precarious conditions of work and life, denoted as precariousness and precarity, expanded its scope in the global North with the end of the Fordist economy, after a relatively long period of economic security and prosperity.

Pierre Bourdieu was among the first social scientists who problematised the new economic regime in France, marked by flexibilization of work and precarisation of broad social strata, concluding: ‘*La précarité est aujourd’hui partout*’ (precarity is everywhere) (Bourdieu, 1998; see also Barbier, 2002).

From the beginning of the new millennium, there has been a theoretical turn to precarity and precarisation as a generalized condition of human interaction (Butler, 2004; Kallenberg, 2018; Standing, 2011; Choonara, Murgia, Carmo, *Eds.*, 2022). Two main fields of thematisation of the concepts of precarity, precarisation and precariousness are formed. The first one follows Pierre Bourdieu’s line of thinking and analyses precarity as a precarious employment and its consequences. So, Arne Kallenberg defines precarious work as “work that is uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which employees bear the risks of work (as opposed to businesses or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory entitlements”. Kallenberg also highlights another important aspect of precarious work: it reflects both changing employment conditions and the loss of conditions held or aspired for (*ibid.*). The latter, precarity as loss, is very much present in the biographical narratives of Bulgarian workers who lost their jobs in the years of the post-socialist transition as a result of privatisation of the enterprises where they had permanent jobs and benefited from social services related to it, as the example in Luleva’s article in this issue shows. For others, the loss is experienced as a loss of perspective, as was the expectation of a democratic and just welfare society after the end of the communist regime, but instead has come disillusionment with the reality of transition; or the loss of the prospect of professional fulfilment and upward social mobility that was possible in the previous regime, but instead is the disappointing reality of precarious work and life and unfulfilled life plans.

From an anthropological perspective, precarity is regarded not simply as a feature of the labour market, but in a much broader sense, as a social reality linked to instability and risk that affect all life experiences as people struggle to make a livelihood. The anthropologist Anne Allison describes precarious life in Japan, stressing that precarity it is not only a condition of precarious labour but a more general existential state – a state where one’s human condition has become precarious as well (Allison, 2013: 9). As the studies of Kallenberg and Allison have shown, a broad social stratum in the rich democracies is living with widespread concern about the lack of predictability, concerning uncertainty, and insecurity in work, the family, and society. Much of this

insecurity and uncertainty is rooted in precarious work, which has far-reaching consequences for people's lives (Kallenberg, 2018; Allison, 2013).

The second line and approach to precariousness and precarity is that of Judith Butler, who analyses precarity situations as "existential, following from our social existence as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance and who, therefore, are at risk of statelessness, homelessness, and destitution under unjust and unequal political conditions", and also claims that "our precarity is to a large extent dependent upon the organization of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions" (Puar, 2012). "Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency", writes Butler (*ibid.*). Precarity is a relational concept – it denotes belonging to a particular social group and causes a (new) negotiation of the family relations, depending on the stage in the life course and roles of the family members, as our investigations have shown.

By analysing precarisation in a Southeast European context is important to historicizing it. This means paying attention to the social actors' past experiences and reflections on the past in order to understand the choices and coping strategies of generations that lived under state socialism or have survived the Yugoslav war.

In the countries of the former socialist bloc, the problems related to insecurity and precarisation appeared especially sharply in the process of post-socialist transformation. In Serbia – one of the topics of investigation in this issue – uncertainty and existential precariousness were caused by the Yugoslav war and the subsequent forced migration of ethnic populations. In Bulgaria, it manifested itself as poly-uncertainty, caused by a combination of various crises in time: economic, political, ecological.

The specificity of precarisation in the context of post-socialist transition in Bulgaria stems from the fact that the transformation of the economy from a state-regulated to a free market economy is taking place in the context of neo-patrimonialism, a high degree of institutional uncertainty and social distrust, corruption and clientelist networks, most often linked to political parties and local "feudalism" (Chavdarova, 2021; Luleva, 2021). The remapping of broad social strata is in the context of neoliberal discourse that affirms the value of autonomy, individual initiative and ability, enterprise and individual responsibility for success or failure. The series of crises referred to give people of different generations the feeling of living in a permanent crisis, which gives rise to existential insecurity. Uncertainty due to precarisation applies to the unemployed, those working on temporary contracts or without contracts, as well as those in permanent employment and in public sectors. As Petrova's research in this issue shows, small family businesses in Bulgaria are also precarious. Uncertainty is shared by the villagers in the beautiful villages in the Rhodope Mountains, threatened by ecological catastrophe. Other faces of precariousness and uncertainty and their relation to ethnic and religious identities are revealed in the analyses of Benovska and Boberić. All investigations, included in this issue are based on ethnographic research in different contexts: urban and rural, among different ethnic

and confessional groups, among refugees and local people, jobless people, employees and employers, protesters and apolitical villagers, family members from different generations, men and women.

Although not planned, these contributions outline the links between uncertainty and post-socialism in Southeast Europe / the Balkans (Bulgaria, Serbia). The conclusion is that in the world of post-socialism (however controversial the latter term may be in the context of the decades that have passed since the end of socialism), precarity continues to be a major source of uncertainty in the region. Strategies to deal with precarisation range from informal economic activities and retraditionalisation (combining small-scale domestic agricultural production for subsistence by families in small towns and villages in Bulgaria); through self-exploitation and resilience (Serbia) or building dense social networks among family entrepreneurs; to organising local environmental protests.

At first glance, the similarities between combining different forms of informal and formal employment as a strategy for coping with precarity among former refugees in Serbia and as a strategy for economic success among family businesses in Bulgaria seem surprising. Indeed, this parallel is not without merit, insofar as the comparison with former post-Yugoslav refugees is indicative of the degree of instability in the sphere of family entrepreneurship in Bulgaria. The high levels of embeddedness of economic activities (Chavdarova, 2014) and their strong intertwining with family structures are characteristic of all these heterogeneous examples.

But uncertainty is not caused only by precarisation. One of the cases presented in this issue shows that even when high levels of precarity are being overcome, uncertainty in the realm of identities remains. The analysis reveals the complex links between the traumatic memory of experienced repression on the one hand, and fluid, uncertain identities among a religious minority in Bulgaria – the Bulgarian Muslims. This example leads to conclusions of broader significance: precarious identities are not only determined by the combination of minority status and official policies of non-recognition. In a context of global uncertainty, identities in the contemporary world – not only minority identities – are increasingly marked by fluidity and instability, and ‘monolithic’ identities appear to be the product of intellectual and political construction.

In post-socialist contexts, social actors respond to the state of precarisation with different forms of resistance and resilience. In this respect, ‘our’ examples differ, for example, from the situation of unemployed young people in Southern Europe who do not work, do not study and, in many cases, do not seek employment (Eriksen, Visentin, 2024: 47–56). This difference is probably due to the insufficient intervention of social protection systems in Southeast Europe: facing insecurity alone, individuals and small groups can rely mainly on themselves and to some extent on ‘traditional’ solidarity derived from kinship and friendship networks.

Ana Luleva presents *Family Strategies for Coping with Precarisation in Post-socialist Bulgaria – Between Retraditionalisation and Transformation*, but also provides

a theoretical framework for the study of uncertainty in general. The theoretical findings are supported in the second half of the paper through descriptive analysis. The author presents three cases, highlighting three main trends, based on autobiographical interviews. In line with the method, social processes are shown through the prism of personal biographies. The precarisation in all three cases is economic and social, in the broader context of post-socialist development, including the neoliberal management of economies in post-socialist societies.

On the other hand, personal coping strategies for precarity are closely related to family constellations. Informal work and retraditionalisation in two of the cases were found to be largely successful coping strategies to deal with precarity. The third case shows that post-socialist uncertainty is not only associated with economic contexts, but with the widespread practices of administrative violence and arbitrariness under post-socialism in labour environments that completely deprive the individual of control over his or her own life.

Uncertainty is a sure companion of small family businesses in Bulgaria – this is shown in Ivanka Petrova's study *Uncertainty in Small Family Enterprises in Bulgaria. Socio-cultural Strategies for Stabilisation and Economic Development*. Three examples from the life of small firms in Bulgaria, one of them based in the capital and two in small towns in the country, show major trends in the development of small entrepreneurship. The factors of uncertainty are “external”, over which economic actors have no control (economic and political instability in the country as a whole; uncertainty in the sphere of legislation – its frequent changes); and “internal”, inherent in family firms, dependent on the structure of family relations.

Family businesses in Bulgaria are highly embedded and intertwined in family structures. In this intertwining we find both their advantages (high group trust, emotional identification with the business, readiness for mobilization and self-exploitation for the sake of success) and their potential weakness. Changes in family structures (family member's withdrawal from the business, illness or even death) are a destabilizing factor in the development of family entrepreneurship. The strategy for success or survival involves combining and switching between different economic activities, initiatives and sources of income. These observations are consistent with the observations on individual and family strategies for coping with precarisation and managing one's own life presented by Luleva. The picture is dynamic: family firms experience their development through phases of stabilization and stagnation.

Based on ‘uncertainty-identity theory’ (Hogg, 2012: 44–66) and the concept of ‘unstable identities’ in the context of global accelerated social change in the contemporary world (Eriksen, Visentin, 2024: 47–56), Milena Benovska presents her view of uncertain identities on the example of Bulgarian Muslims in Bulgaria (*Uncertain Identities: Bulgarian Muslims between Historical Trauma and Resilience*). Accelerated changes in the contemporary world create the perception of unstable identities. Uncertain identities are not a temporary condition that is bound to certain

contexts and can be overcome through the actions of social actors. Uncertain identities are the product of an open non-linear process. An analysis of the changes that have occurred in the identities of Bulgarian Muslims in recent years serves to test this hypothesis. The uncertain identities of Bulgarian Muslims have been influenced by at least three factors: the definition of the 'others' for them; second, the traumatic memory of the collective repression experienced; third, the prolonged state of precarity throughout most of the twentieth century. Uncertain identities are not an anomaly but are experienced in this way under the influence of an idealized notion of monolithic identity increasingly contested in the modern world.

In his article *Social (De)precarisation in the Context of Post-Yugoslav Forced Migrations: Narratives from Vojvodina*, Filip Boberić explores adaptation and de-precarisation among people who experienced forced migration during and after the break-up and war in the former Yugoslavia, their personal trajectories of integration to their new environment in Vojvodina – Serbia. Former refugees travelled the path from a situation of a total loss of material, status and symbolic resources to (relative) integration in their 'new homeland'. The theoretical contribution of the article is the adaptation of the notion of 'shared spaces of discourse' (Werbner, 2002; 2019; Jansen, 1998; 2005) to the post-Yugoslav reality. An observation on the causes of precarisation is worth noting: in the context of the refugee problem, precarity is not a primary issue, yet it contributes to the complexity of the daily struggle through which migrants pass. The adaptation and integration of migrants in their new environment is presented as de-precarisation in the context of 'post-Yugoslav shared spaces of discourse'.

Zlatina Bogdanova (*Grassroot Activism and Resistance in the Rhodope Mountains*) examines the forms of local environmental protest in five villages in southern Bulgaria located near Plovdiv, the second most important city in Bulgaria, including population size. The author situates local environmental resistance within the theoretical framework of mass social movements. The case studied is interesting in that it is located in relatively small villages that are, however, situated in an economically active region. The local contexts are strongly related to the national macro context, to the uncertainty in the sphere of legislation, and on the other hand to the low social trust and institutional weakness in the context of neoliberal economic policies (Luleva, 2021). The course of the protest movements shows that a significant level of economic and political uncertainty also exists in settlements whose economic situation is relatively favourable (compared to other regions in the country). In the macro-context of global uncertainty, the post-socialist situation is key to understanding the uncertainty outlined through the examples of Southeast Europe. Uncertainty is not a "privilege" of post-socialist worlds, but post-socialism is still marked by uncertainty, and in this sense 'post-socialism' is a concept that has not yet exhausted its meaning.

Reading these texts, it can be concluded that precarity is not simply an analytical concept; it is also a critical and political one. Its absence from Southeast European

public discourse is indicative of the lack of political sensitivity to social justice in the post-socialist countries of the region.

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