

Online labour consultations as a space for everyday civic engagement in modern Bulgarian society

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Abstract. This article highlights the results from a research of modern alternative forms of civic engagement in the area of labour that emerge, manifest themselves and develop with no in-betweens such as unions, companies, employers', non-governmental or any other organizations. The subject of this research are the free consultations in a Bulgarian Internet forum on labour matters. The analysis shows that an individual labour case would give rise to some acts of civic behaviour (free consultations) as it generates informal voluntary social relationships connected with standing a certain position supportive to another/the others. The thesis defended herein is that such relationships would transform the virtual space into an efficient space of everyday civic engagement and civic culture.

Keywords: everyday civic engagement, online consultations, labour

Introduction

Over a quarter of a century upon the beginning of democratic changes and a decade upon Bulgaria's accession to the European Union (EU), the Bulgarian society still feels a deficit in effective policies in the area of labour. Classical collective subjects of political action (i.e., parties, unions, state institutions or legitimate participants in the tripartite dialogue) have proved their incapability to resolve social issues. No spontaneous manifestations of civic action may find a sustainable solution to inefficiency demonstrated by institutionalized policies. While some scarce yet robust non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been involved in activism, the majority of Bulgarian citizens have been wandering between empathy and indifference to common affairs. If labour is concerned, the situation seems even more paradoxical. Unions, which managed to get a foothold on the political scene throughout the period after 1989 to this day, some of them transformed, others newly established, have been increasingly losing membership and influence. On the other hand, the post-industrial epoch where also falls the transforming Bulgarian economy has been modifying the labour related problems rather than alleviating them.

How are labour related problems solved when they are not manifested as a union concern or when the union as such is absent? Does the solution boil down to the mere employee-employer relationship only? Is a legal procedure the only option to resolve a conflict between an employee and an employer? How are problems concerning self-employed people solved? Does the search for solutions in the field of labour take forms of the so-called everyday citizenship, i.e., civic self-initiative, which is emerging and developing outside the institutionalized channels of collective action observed over the last decade in various areas, such as environmental protection, education, health, urban environment and public works (Koleva 2013; Koleva et al. 2013; Koleva 2014; Koleva et al. 2014)?

These are the main questions this text will try to search for answers to. The exposition consists of three parts. The first provides a presentation of the labour situation in Bulgaria in the context of the problems, which are common to Eastern European countries in the period after their accession to the EU and the global crisis. The second part is dedicated to the concept of “orders of worth” and “modes/regimes of engagement” authored by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, through whose theoretical spectacle, the studied case, i.e., the labour consultations in the lex.bg forum, is interpreted as acts of civil behaviour in the third part. The thesis defended here is that the consultations on labour issues in a free online forum put the participants (inquirers and respondents) in a relationship in which different values are engaged according to their importance (“orders of worth”) and different competencies according to how these values are used to justify and substantiate actions and decisions (“regimes of engagement”). Such informal and voluntary social relationships, relative to taking and standing a certain position to help the other/others, transform the virtual space into an effective space of everyday civic engagement and civic culture.

Situation of labour in Bulgaria upon its accession to the European Union in 2007

While trying to describe the situation of labour in the Bulgarian society after 2007, at least two circumstances need to be taken into account: first, the fact that Bulgaria, together with Romania, made part of EU’s fifth enlargement, i.e., it made part of the second wave of accepting countries from Eastern Europe¹, and second, that Bulgaria’s accession coincided with the onset of the 2008 crisis.

Institutional transformations aim at joining the European social model (which implies active dialogue and effective social protection), but economic reforms take place on the basis of a neoliberal doctrine, which does not provide for measures to offset the social cost of reforms².

¹ As Mr Krastyo Petkov mentioned, in 2004, ten countries that were declared “functional democracies” and “emerging market economies” were accepted in the EU and therefore the European community in the East became an institutional and legal fact (Petkov 2015, 47).

² “European social model” here would mean the aggregate of principles and objectives, around which the European Member States are united, along with the diversity of approaches

Given such conditions, the European social partnership mechanism may hardly survive, and even less so develop. What are the dimensions of the post-industrial labour situation and the related trade union crisis in modern Bulgarian society? As a result of the neo-prebendial³ post-communist capitalism (Szelényi 2013), typical for the Bulgarian transition to a decentralized market economy, since the beginning of the 21st century, the Bulgarian society has featured several lasting trends: high and rapidly growing inequalities, generalization of deprivation, impoverishment, leading to chronic poverty (Mitev, Koleva 2016), “new poorness” (Szelényi 2013), working poor.

Logically, social dissatisfaction will presume necessity of boosted union representativeness; however, empirical data outline a different picture of reality. According to a study undertaken by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), Union density in Bulgaria plunged from nearly 37.3% in 1998 to 17.9% in 2007 (Daskalova 2010). While according to the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB), the drop experienced during the period 2003-2008 was 16.5% (Daskalova 2010), according to Confederation of Labour “Podkrepa” (Podkrepa CL), this index is 13.7%. CITUB 2016 data show around 16% of union density in waged work and the expectations for the drop in 2020 versus 2016 to be around 7-8%⁴. Podkrepa CL expects a drop of around 4-5% for the same period. While union membership is appreciated as affecting positively on the labour climate, 20% of the employees covered by the unions have terminated their membership as of 2007 (Daskalova 2010).

and the implementation thereof in the individual countries. While the characteristics of the social model may vary from country to country within EU, the principles and objectives of the European social cohesion society model, solidarity and competitiveness are universally valid. This is the basis for drafting directives on development in various areas, including the area of labour and industrial relationships.

³ The term *neo-prebendalism*, introduced by Szelényi, stems from Weber’s analysis of Catholic tradition, where “prebend” means the right of members of the governing body of the church to have revenue from the temple. In secular life, public office positions can be seen as “prebend” given away by the power holder against loyalty and appropriated by “loyal” officials.

⁴ According to a CITUB expert a string of sectors shows more prominent union membership resignation, which is the example in metal working, chemical industry, timber processing and furniture production, paper mills, light industry (especially, in leather and footwear), some sectors in services (mostly in those private services, i.e., trade, restaurants, etc.) as well as in construction, unlike those in construction industry. However, this drop came earlier, even prior to 2008, as a consequence of privatisation and crises. While some federations (public sector entities, including higher education institutions, energy, transport) have shown a slight trade union membership rise, this rise may not compensate the drop observed in the other sectors. There has been some expansion in trade union membership observed in banking where there is an already associated federation comprising the unions in UniCredit Bulbank and United Bulgarian Bank (UBB). The Union of Bulgarian Actors has also become an associated CITUB member; there is also a new union in the IT sector, with a still low membership level, which for the time being is a member of the Federation of Trade and Services. Another point of focus should be taken into consideration and it is that there has been some exchange on record between individual federations within CITUB, which would allow to find out which sectors have suffered the biggest drop and where there has been some growth, however slight it may be.

What are the ways to act and counteract any instances of violations of labour and employment rights or moral standards of principles of social justice against a background of growing union membership resignation, liberalization and deregulation of labour management relations? In the field of labour, can we expect civic actions that would take place beyond the traditional interaction of citizens with institutionalized representatives of their interests, such as trade unions, professional organizations or associations?

The problem of everyday citizenship seen through the lens of the concepts of the “orders of worth” and the “regimes of engagement” authored by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot

In a number of different areas of research, including the political sciences, sociology, clinical psychology, social activities, etc., the new forms of civic engagement observed since the beginning of the 21st century were defined as ordinary or everyday citizenship (Berger 2008; Duchesne 2009; GRAC 2009; Koleva 2014). These have their genesis and manifestation beyond the institutionalized structures of political, professional or associative activities. An individual would contact and unite with the others of his/her own free will, invests voluntary time, energy and knowledge to act together with others, whether this individual is affected or not by a certain problem.

Insofar as in defending and defending principles, interests and rights citizens are faced with the need to publicly articulate and justify their positions and actions, we find a possible analytical framework of the forms and manifestations of everyday citizenship in the theoretical model of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot on the two interrelated concepts, the “orders of worth” and “regimes of engagement” (Thévenot 2007; Thévenot 2006). If we take the concept of these two sociologists, the notion of “orders of worth” would mean the standards individuals refer to present their actions and decisions as justified and legitimate. This is about those ultimate general principles (Rousseau), as commonly accepted by the public, which are defined by Boltanski and Thévenot as “principles of equality” (equivalence).

Boltanski and Thévenot distinguish six “orders of worth” (market, industrial, domestic, civic, inspiration and fame) in their quality of logics to justify actions, behaviours and decisions in modern society. They analysed the behaviours that are not prepared to express in the public space or for the type of sharing required by their public presentation. This is about communication in a public environment and the two sociologists distinguish three groups of communicative actions.

The first group is relative to the action in public space: by definition, the audience looks at others, although the meaning of this view may vary across theories. This type of communication would suggest reflected behaviours meaning that individuals would take into account the influence of their own behaviour on the others in the public space.

The second group of actions is relative to what builds solidarity with regard to a common good. The audience is who influences the evaluation and

preparation of an action for such a critical assessment. *Grammar of the common good* directs the legitimacy of the “orders of worth”, which serve the assessment. In this grammar, there is an everyday sense of fair and unfair in relation to power inequalities and inequalities of abilities.

The third group of patterns of action is close to “non-reflexive and incorporated habits”. Here, by means of the term *coordination*, Boltanski and Thévenot designate the conventional forms defining actions prepared for public criticism, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, “localized and personalized adaptations, including conventions and inconveniences of less limited importance” (Thévenot 2007, 138). The connection with the surrounding world is determining both in understanding a specific behaviour and in the choice of appropriate behaviour. It may be adequate only if there is right rational perception of respective elements of the situation and if the behaviour of others is accurately interpreted/construed. This means that what is important is the coordination with and within the surrounding world, where a primordial significance is laid on the *way of perception of the surrounding world*, rather than placing the emphasis entirely on the actor. *In addition, it is precisely the way of perception that is so instrumental to behaviour.*

Three “regimes of engagement” are outlined based on this conceptualization of dynamic adaptation in communication within a public environment (Table 1). These are the regime of justification, the regime of familiar and the planned

Table 1. Regimes of engagement

Regime of the familiar (Régime du proche)	Regime of the plan (Régime de l'action en plan)	Regime of justification (Régime de la justification)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal forms of participation / engagement in the world • Convenience, cosiness • Familiar, usual, pleasant environment • Simplicity • Ordinary world • Close environment • Immediate relations and communication, direct contacts • Affection, close relationships and connections • A person completely integrated into his/her environment • Close things are an extension of the human body • Adaptation to the near space, living in the near space • Adaptation of personal space for living and daily use • Care, empathy, attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional action • Instrumental action • Target action, intention • Individual, project holder • Autonomous individual • Independent individual • Responsible individual • Rational subject • Strong-willed and determined person • Will • Individual plan, individual goal, strategy • Strategic rational choice • Calculation, planning • Mutually beneficial contract • Functional scope of reality • The environment as a functional resource • Functional, instrumental use of things/objects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public actions • Public justification / justification • Public actors • Conventional, legitimate assessments • Conventional behaviour and interaction • Mediation • Generally significant higher valuation principles • Common good • General interest

Source: Koveneva 2018, 18.

action regime. In the case of the first regime, people and things engaged in a justified action are assessed according to the “orders of worth”, which allow making some assessments based on some common goods. In the case of the planned action mode / the regime of the plan, a personality is viewed as an autonomous individual, who would be independent from their environment, as the “author” of an action plan, versus which anything that is important would be assessed. In the case of the third regime, the regime of familiar, “personality and all that surrounds it are engaged versus some specific ties and their adjustment is seen as a convenience that remains paramount to the maintenance of personality” (Thévenot 2007, 139).

The main axis against which the three regimes are distinguished is the relationship of the individual with the world to which his/her activity is directed. It is on their basis that the mutual engagements connecting the behaviours of different individuals can subsequently be identified and clarified. The variable (varying) geometry of engagement, in which citizens are constantly moving from closeness to publicity, would require not only flexibility of behaviour, but also specific knowledge and competencies. For the agents (initiators and participants) of everyday citizenship practices, the geometry of engagement is complicated. First, because they would generally operate outside the structures of institutionalized activities, which would automatically mean that they would not benefit (directly) from the support and/or mediation of their official representatives, i.e., traditional, or, conventional actors. Second, being doers engaged in an activity that is not subject to traditional models of organized civic action, they continue to operate in a social space, functioning in a conventional way, to one extent or another.

Main characteristics of the labour issues forum at the website lex.bg

The portal lex.bg self-identifies⁵ as the most visited website dedicated to legal themes in Bulgaria. It has created an open and free online forum dedicated to labour issues, whose participants are anonymous and whose information may be consulted and used by the public. The portal has a comprehensive reference system for legal information in electronic form, but we consider only the labour forum, which provides legal practitioners, law students and Internet users in need of legal assistance and advice, useful information and the opportunity to exchange experiences and knowledge in the field of labour law.

The main hypothesis in the study of the forum is related to the idea that in an environment populated by ineffective institutional actors for protection of labour and employment rights (unions) and with neoliberal restructuring of the economy in place, individual strategies for seeking protection of labour and employment rights by workers and unemployed through online platforms transform into subjects of civic activity. Moreover, these strategies, due to the

⁵ <https://lex.bg/about/reklama>

way they are organized, constitute others (consultants, professionals) into active citizens and turn the virtual space into an interactive space for the formation of civic knowledge and skills in order to provide labour protection. Therefore, through the virtual space, the participants in the online consultations create new forms of civic behaviour, despite remaining in the traditional roles of employment (with inquirers seeking consultations on issues of their daily work and the consultants being labour law experts).

Some quantitative and qualitative methods were used to empirically verify this hypothesis. Labour cases and related discussions were studied as registered in the forum of *lex.bg* for the period 2007-2016. The processed 256 cases out of a total of 4,500 were selected from the archives of the labour forum on the Internet (*lex.bg/forum*) applying a random principle in the order in which they were published during the string of years covered by the reference period. Labour consultations were processed by means of a questionnaire and systematized in MS Office Excel. The questionnaire contained the following questions: problem posed; who poses the problem; who answers the question asked; whom does the question concern; type of rationale of the purpose and action of the inquirer (financial, legal, moral or other grounds should be indicated); type of rationale of the consultant (strictly legal, moral grounds, use of arguments of a variety of value ranking). In addition, ten interviews were conducted with consultants in the forum, selected according to the frequency of their consultations (e.g., a consultant who posted more than 100 opinions in the forum), who agreed to participate in an interview. The semi-standardized questionnaire based interviews were made through the feedback form of *lex.bg*, via the email of the author of the article, by phone or live in 2017. The related survey of inquirers and consultants allows to analyse 1) the problems, motives and reasons to those seeking employment assistance; 2) the coincidences and differences in the positions of the consultants; 3) “regimes of engagement”/disengagement regarding a problem; 4) opportunities (lack of opportunities) in terms of formation and acquisition of skills for protection and assertion of rights by individuals acting autonomously outside and independently of institutional forms of association.

Participants in the labour-and-employment law consultation forum

For the purposes of this research, the participants in the above labour forum were divided into two groups of counsel seekers, with inquirers seeking counsel on questions to do with labour related problems and answerers/consultants interpreting the problem in question, seeking solutions and suggesting some action options. Due to the fact that communication in this forum is anonymous, we have been unable to draw any division lines between experts and people sharing their own experience only.

The analysis of the collected empirical data shows that most often the question in the labour forum is asked by an employee, with 176 cases (68.7%); followed by questions from another, unidentified person (participant), with 40 cases (15.6%); a lawyer, with 13 cases (5%); employer, with 9 cases (3.5%); a close (relative, friend) of an employee, with 7 cases (2.7%); an accountant, with 4

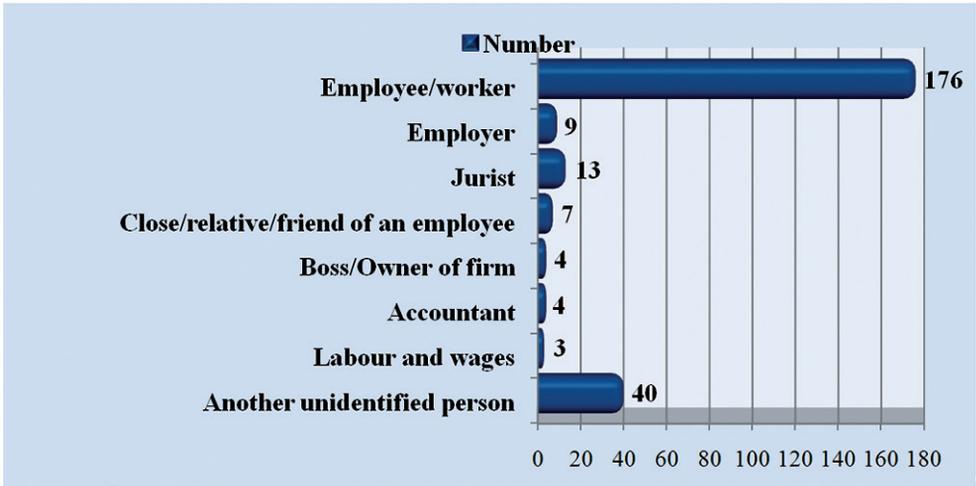


Fig. 1. Who poses the problem?

cases (1.56%); a boss or an owner of a company, with 4 cases (1.56%); a head or employee of the payroll administration, with 3 cases (1.17%). The share of cases in which the questions were asked by a person defending the employer's positions was relatively small, with only 20 cases (7.8%), in which the question was asked by the employer, accountant or employee in the payroll administration, versus 183 cases (71.4%) where the question was asked by the interested person (an employee, friend/relative of an employee) (Fig. 1).

This data give grounds to claim that the forum is used for individual search and solution of personal problems, rather than for company consultations or for collective actions.

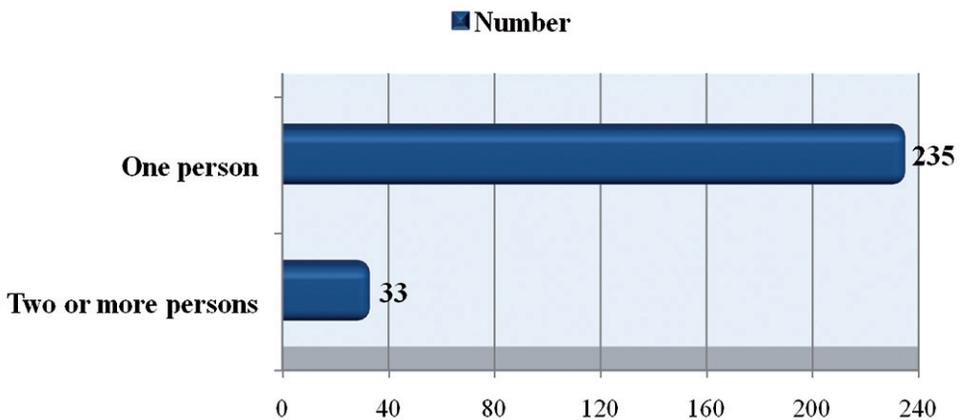


Fig. 2. Who answers the question asked?

Data processing concerning answerers yields the following picture. Prevalently, in 143 cases, an answer would be provided by lawyers, where 111 answers were given by one lawyer; then comes the group of answers given by an individual participant (whether such an individual participant is legally qualified remains unknown), with 93 cases, out of which there was more than one answerer in 21); 13 were the cases where answers were given by an accountant, and in 7 cases the answerers were others. In other words, the vast majority of answers, 235 (91.7%), were given by one person, versus answers with two or more persons participating in a dialogue string: 33 (12.8%) (Fig. 2).

Profile of questions asked

The question most often concerned one person, with 207 cases (81%) in which the formulated question was presented as referring to the inquirer only, i.e., concerning an individual/personal problem in a specific work situation; 44 were the cases (17%) in which the inquirer claimed that the problem was important for two or more employees, and only in 5 cases the question was formulated as a problem in principle (Fig. 3).

The questions asked by the forum participants refer to a number of different aspects of labour and employment rights. The description of each specific case shows the conditions of uncertainty and harmful environment where people work, or disrespect to human dignity, or violation of the principles of remuneration agreed for full time or overtime. Driven by a sense of trampled justice, inquirers wanted to know how to assert their rights or how to obtain

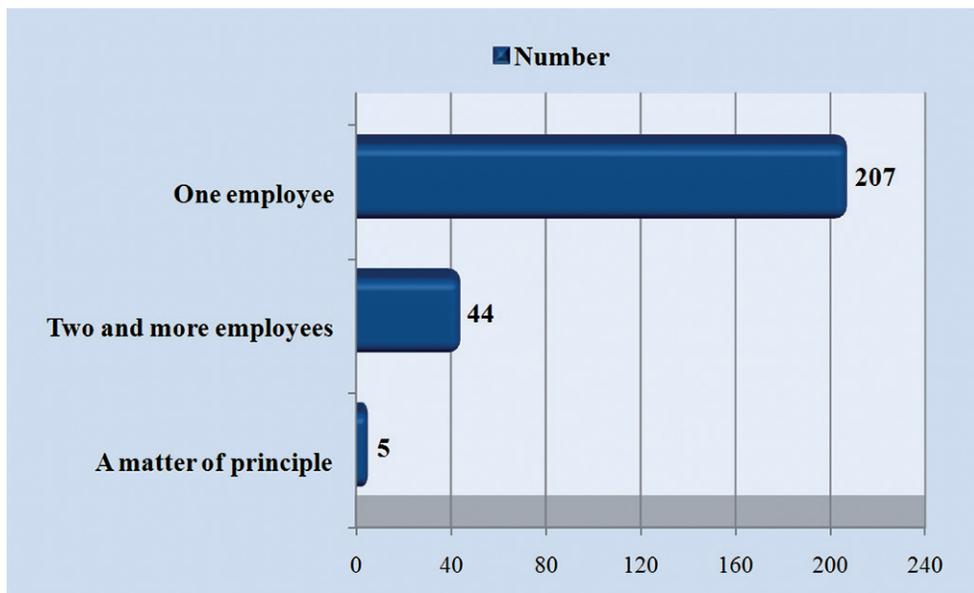


Fig. 3. Whom does the question concern?

redress for their violation. The questions of the inquirers would reveal hesitations or doubts related to the knowledge of their rights and obligations arising from them. This indirectly puts forward the question of the trade unions, of how they interact in the defence of labour and employment rights along with the question of what training and information there are in place regarding labour and employment rights of a whole variety of categories of employees in different situations. A considerable part of the cases reveals that the inquirers would need some information on what the legal requirements are in different cases and how these inquirers are supposed to observe them.

Way of reasoning of the issue raised and of the interpretation thereof

In 122 of the cases (48%), the issue raised was argued by the inquirer by putting forward the necessity of reimbursement due to financial and/or physical damage incurred by the employer; in 86 of the cases (34%) the justification by the inquirer would contain some moral categories such as justice and dignity; in 48 of the cases (19%), the reasoning was strictly juridical, i.e., based on some legislative principles and texts (Fig. 4).

Conversely, in the case of the majority of consultants (173, or 68%) the reasoning was strictly legal. Both in absolute (77 cases) and in relative (30%) values, in their frequency moral reasons approximated the reasoning of the inquirers (Fig. 5).

The feeling of injustice or disrespect to human dignity and non-recognition make the bulk of the main elements that could be observed in the questions of inquirers. In response to such frustrations, counsellors who voluntarily took on this role would seek and provide tools to resolve the conflict situation in which the inquirer finds him/herself, as described by him/her.

Viewed through the lens of Boltanski and Thévenot’s regimes of engagement, labour consultations reveal that reasoning of inquirers and counsellors unfolds

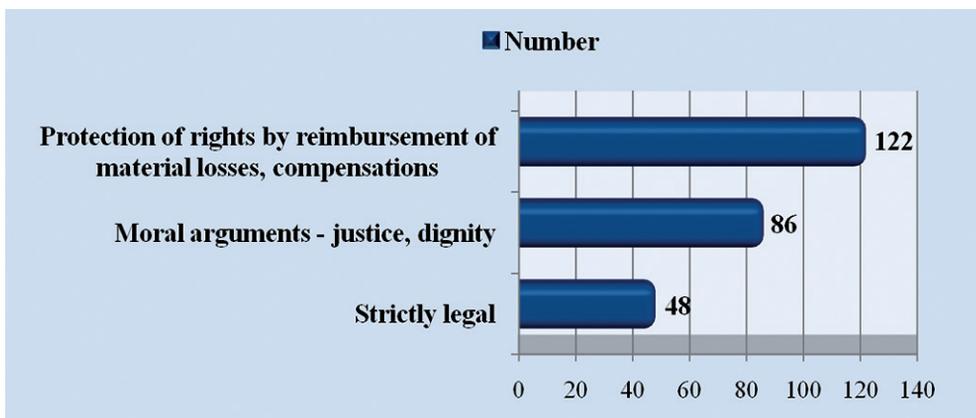


Fig. 4. Reasoning of the inquirer

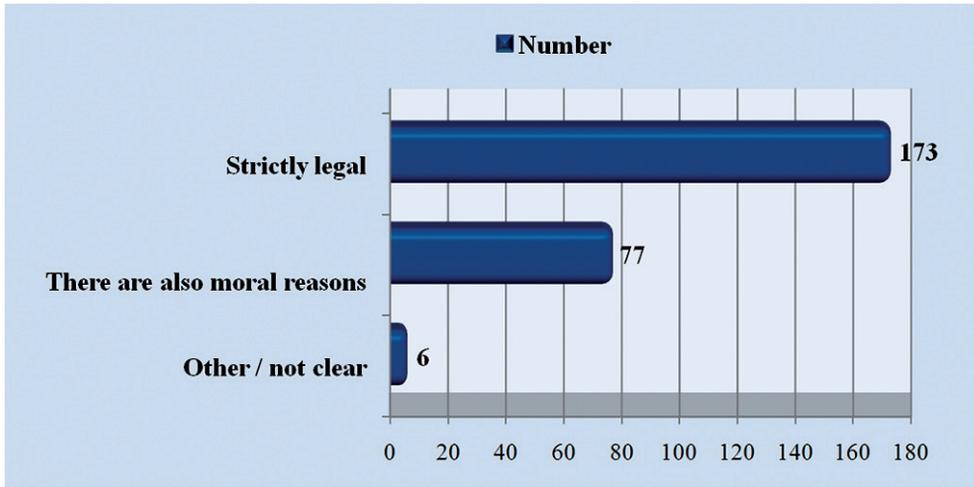


Fig. 5. Reasoning of the consultant

in the regime of justification and criticism. People and things that are referred to in the substantiation of a given case refer to those accepted as common goods and conquests. The forum as a platform turns out to be the space (environment in Boltanski and Thévenot's terminology) in which inquiring citizens can coordinate their actions first with themselves - by putting their problem in public, and then with others - by trying to describe it so as to make it understandable to them in order to obtain some support, advice or decision. The answer to a question is already a beginning of an interaction, which may be joined by anyone having a position or an opinion or any knowledge on the question.

Below are displayed the comments of the answerers who, always departing from the legal standards, interpret the cases from a moral perspective, too. This is how is manifested a number of different dimensions of the issues under discussion in the forum⁶.

These are some sheer smart arses who distort the meaning of such clauses!

(Counsellor diki)

How are you supposed to sign <some paper saying> that you have been notified of circumstances that have not been brought to your attention?!

(Counsellor, legal adviser ivanski)

The employers are no dairy (i.e., 'gold mine', Translator's note), so you can't do what you want... When they hired you as a replacement, you did care, now that there is a better offer - it's like you couldn't care less. All of you who are writing in this forum, why

⁶ This is about answers to the questions as per their wording by the inquirers. The original orthography and syntax were preserved.

and how come you think that all of us will show empathy to you, and in this case - that we will clap our hands and spew variations on the topic "How to fuck my employer...?"

(Legal adviser tribe)

These examples demonstrate that when counsellors substantiate a position they rely on legislation as a starting point. It is quite often that in the reasoning, legislation is also considered through the lens of the moral principles of justice and equity on the employer-employee relationships. In their interpretation, the unequal position of the employer (capital) and hired staff (labour) give way to general, higher principles of justice in human relations. The legal embodiment of the norm is diffracted through the understanding of equality and justice for everyone, regardless of his or her position of power. While the consultants are not in their capacity as officials and in this sense are not obliged to interpret the law in favour of certain institutional interests, they would give advice based on the law and the moral imperative of justice. Therefore, the cases in which the consultants argue among themselves about how professional (legal) and moral (legitimate) the advice they give are not an exception.

The forum as viewed by the counsellors

In addition to analysing the questions raised, the study of the lex.bg also includes interviews with consultants, i.e., those who have voluntarily agreed to provide free advice. This means that the dialogue space covers different categories of participants and through their interaction shows the dynamics of argumentation and related problems and deficits in civic culture.

Counsellors were selected on a random basis among those who had provided more than 100 consultations at lex.bg. The interview invitations were sent to 30 counsellors by means of personal messages via the platform of lex.bg. This form of communication was selected as the only viable as the individuals at the forum are active using their anonymous avatars (profile photographs) and nicknames. A typical invitation provided some information on the research, on the author and their institutional affiliation and contained a call for an interview (live, on the phone or in writing) with 18 open questions associated with the motives for participation in the forum, the method of counselling and the results from their experience as counsellors hitherto. Out of the sample of 30 consultants, only 10 responded to the invitation during 2017. 10 interviews were conducted, of which four via the contact form on lex.bg, three via the doctoral students' emails and continuous communication by e-mail, one by phone and one live, and it is the most comprehensive of all, with the most examples of specific cases, although not always from the forum itself. And one free-form opinion was also expressed. While the interview questionnaire does not contain an explicit question concerning the sex of the counsellors, the answers of those interviewed showed the answerers were three women and seven men.

All the counsellors, who accepted to be interviewed, were people with experience in the forum, who had provided their opinions for 10 or more years

(four of the counsellors), between 5 and 10 years (two) and more than three years (two). The councillors' experience in the forum is closely interrelated with their periods of service as lawyers/professionals. The interviews with the consultants showed that the highest number of them made those with 10-15 years of length of service as professionals (six), two had over twenty years as professionals, one had 16 years and there was no information on one of them. Those interviewed were mostly employed as pleaders (six), one of them was employed as a private bailiff, one of them was an attorney, one was an internal auditor and one was employed in a metal processing enterprise. They belonged to different age groups: two were under 40, three were in the 40-50 age group and four were in the 50+ age group. At the time of the interview, they lived in Sofia (three), Plovdiv (one), Varna (two), Gabrovo (one) and in a settlement of under 30,000 people (two). Those interviewed did not self-define as counsellors. Four of them emphasized they did not provide consultations in the legal sense of the term; they claimed they would rather provide an opinion or a recommendation or share experience of theirs. They would claim that a reason for that would be the fact that most questions in the forum were either pleaders or lawyers in general and "those would not require a standard type of a consultation as is provided to a customer" (K008). One of the respondents shared that he/she would usually give opinions; however, if he/she were asked in a personal message to represent the inquirer in Court, they would refuse and forward such an inquirer to a lawyer, as he/she could only represent companies he/she was a legal adviser of. Another respondent specified that the law "prohibits pleaders providing free consultations. We would sometimes give a piece of advice but hardly ever in details. It would be rather a general framework thereof" (K009).

Most often, the people interviewed would provide consultations on individual cases. "A main topic is how salaries are to be paid, or pregnancy leaves, or maternity leaves or re-employment, quite often lower paid, when the probationary period has already expired and the employer is supposed to increase the salary" (K007). While in the labour forum of lex.bg employees would be looking for a way to solve their own labour problems mainly, these individual strategies would lead to an online discussion between participants in different situations - people who would have already dealt with similar cases; others for whom getting out of such situations would be a matter of professional honour; inquirers who would face legal ambiguities, conflicts in the workplace and would need advice. From the point of view of the consultants, the ongoing discussion would seem contradictory. While it could be quite "amateurish", on the other hand, some cases would be very serious and require some professional touch.

The completely free forum, in which everyone can seek help and advice on labour law issues, turns out to be a double-edged sword. Freedom of expression and access to different opinions and comments in the absence of control over the information and the adequacy/validity of the advice given may be misleading to the inquirers. If such an inquirer has not the capability to sift or juxtapose or judge whatever information he/she might be given, there is a real risk for him/her to choose the wrong actions to solve his/her problem. Forum participants' personal experience, those participants not being experts in labour

and employment issues, provides no warranty for orientation in a specific case and making out an accurate judgement thereof. “Very often questions are asked about probation, basic salary, leave, etc., and this requires at least consideration of the terms of the specific contract (when they differ from the main provisions of the Labour Code)” (K003), i.e., the judgement of an expert. Discussions would quite often get intertwined with disputes over who of the counsellors has what qualifications, whether it is appropriate for experts to participate in such discussions in a forum, whether an accountant or a legal adviser can give advice on cases where a lawyer’s opinion is required, and so on, with all of this being mixed with insults, threats and fruitless disputes.

According to the consultants, the main problem in the consultations would be the low communication culture of the inquirers. They would find it difficult to formulate the question they are looking for, “they would fail to ‘sift the wheat from the chaff’ and the questions would be cluttered with unnecessary and useless information, which for some reason, especially emotional, the inquirers would consider particularly important, but [they would be] irrelevant to the solution of the problem” (K007). At the same time, many key details would stay out of the description of the problem and the real situation becomes clear only when some clarification questions are asked.

Whether a discussion passes into a professional dialogue between lawyers (who would quite often inquire their colleagues’ opinions on a case) without the participation of the inquirers would be difficult to find out. From a purely professional point of view, the “benefits” for counsellors would be in sharing and gaining experience, including “orientation among the asinities that are invented in labour law”, or the acquisition of knowledge to solve various cases. “If the question is not quite simple it involves thinking or searching in professional practice, especially in cases where a question is asked and there is intervention by other colleagues or inquirers in the question” (K010). From the perspective of the research question about the existence and forms of manifestation of civic activity in the area of labour, the work of the consultants in the forum lex.bg is interesting in at least two aspects. Consultants would place their professional competence for the benefit of others free of charge, guided by both professional and civic duty.

I continue because I cannot accept that a person who has turned and asked for an opinion can be misled. The moment I see that he is not receiving adequate help, I immediately intervene (K001).

[...] I believe that the existence of such a forum, although it cannot in most cases lead to the resolution of the case, provides a good basis for inquirers to find their way and find the shortest way to achieve a satisfactory result (K010).

The assistance provided by counsellors is as much a self-initiative action directed at others to resolve injustice related to their work, as an act, professional and civil, through which counsellors restructure their own professional field, “exporting” legal experience and culture in a public environment, however

limited it may be. Through advice to people who “enter” the public space without knowledge and experience in reasoning and argumentation, consultants, in interaction with the questioners, indirectly influence two labour environments - that of the questioners and their own professional environment. Participation in the forum for both inquirers and counsellors was marked by “transitions from one engagement regime to another” (Thévenot 2006, 220).

The Labour-and-employment law consultation forum at the portal *lex.bg* as an everyday civic engagement space

At the labour-and-employment law consultation forum at the portal *lex.bg*, everyone would be entitled to ask a question and everyone may express their personal position while defending a labour or a civic or a social right. The interaction with the other/others goes through the interaction with the environment (the forum with its requirements, possibilities or rules); moreover, it starts with this interaction, which allows to show the “active attitude to the world” (Thévenot 2007, 139). In their argumentation, both the questioner and the counsellor engage a regulated (entitlement) and perceived common good (e.g., right to decent work, decent pay, healthy working conditions), regardless of whether the case concerns only the questioner or a larger group of people. The significance of “engaged good” can be of different order (market, industrial, civil, etc.), what is important is the way in which the good is articulated and used in presenting and interpreting the problem.

The abilities and competencies on a given problem, on its definition and communication in the space of the forum are unevenly distributed between questioners and consultants. However, the justification regime in which they are engaged voluntarily leads to an interaction in which each country complements the other with its empirical experience and specific knowledge. While the various cases of the inquirers expand the experience and competencies of the legal advisers, the consultations help the citizens to get competent information about the specific case or about the possibilities of action and the effective ways of protection and assertion of rights.

The study of the labour-and-employment law consultation forum on the Internet portal *lex.bg* confirms the hypothesis of individual strategies of working and unemployed for dealing with violations of rights, moral norms and principles of justice when institutional actors are ineffective to protect labour and employment rights (trade unions). However, cyberspace - due to its structural features (wide access, interactivity, ever-increasing opportunities to take, defend and argue a public position and mobilize for a cause) - constitutes all participants in the subjects of new forms of civic behaviour, although they remain in the traditional employment parts (inquirers would seek advice on issues of their daily work, consultants would be experts in labour law). The questioner and the counsellor would participate in the “dialogue” on their own initiative, engage in their argumentation regulated (entitlement) and perceived as common (moral) good, exchange unevenly distributed abilities and competencies on a given issue and thus mutually create opportunities for the formation of civic knowledge and

skills in order to provide labour protection. However, such interactions between private active citizens will not entail any collective cause-defending actions. In the context of neoliberal restructuring of the economy, these new forms of mutual assistance between citizens, regardless of their positions in labour, would raise the issue of civic activity as a means not just to change a separate/individual work situation, but also to improve the situation of large groups. It is this type of communication that transforms the labour-and-employment law consultation forum into a space of interaction between citizens, who have equal right to express and stand positions.

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