



Faculty of Economics, University of Niš, 16 October 2015

International Scientific Conference

CHALLENGES IN BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS:  
GROWTH, COMPETITIVENESS AND INNOVATIONS

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## EMPLOYABILITY AS A REFLECTION OF INDIVIDUAL'S COMPETITIVENESS IN THE LABOR MARKET

Biljana Dorđević \*

Sandra Milanović\*

**Abstract:** *In a situation where turbulent changes in the labor market have compromised the myth of secure employment in exchange for adequate performance and loyalty, as well as when the problem of unemployment has become one of the most important in many countries, the contemporary theory offers new solution regarding this situation: if someone wants to decrease job insecurity or to obtain employment status he/she should adopt the concept of employability. The basic assumption of this concept is that employment is based on the competitiveness in the labor market. Consequently, individuals who want to decrease the possibility of losing their jobs or to increase the possibility of getting ones, should constantly acquiring competitive competencies and skills and updating previous ones. Having in mind that nowadays unemployment is one of the biggest challenges in many economies, the aim of this paper is to emphasize the most important characteristics of this concept. Also, some of the measures that the European Union (EU) and the Republic of Serbia (Serbia) are undertaking in order to increase the employment rates in these regions are presented.*

**Keywords:** *employability, workforce, competitiveness, labour market.*

### 1. Introduction

Organizations always had two options to become more profitable: they can either increase their gains or decrease their costs. Since the second strategy is much easier to implement, many organizations during the 1980s and 1990s laid off many employees through the process of downsizing or other forms of restructuring. During the 1980s and 1990s more than 3 million jobs were eliminated in the United States in these ways, but the situation in Asia and Europe was not much different (Sverke et al. 2006, 3). Employees realized that no matter how they perform, they might lose their jobs only because an organization has changed its strategy. In other words, the job insecurity has become the common characteristic of today's employer-employee relationship.

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\* University of Niš, Faculty of Economics, Serbia;

✉ biljana.djordjevic@eknfak.ni.ac.rs\_sandramilanovic89@yahoo.com

UDC 331.5

The question that arises here is: how in such circumstances employees can improve their chances to keep their jobs or to become employed at all? The answer could be found in the implementation of the concept of *employability*. Employability is a construct which consists of two words: “employment“ and “ability“ and thus concerns the ability to be employed. In other words, employability refers to the likelihood of obtaining or retaining a job.

Although the concept of employability has gain a significant attention of the researches over the last two decades, this concept has a longer history during which it evolved. The concept firstly had *macro* perspective, but *meso* and *micro* perspectives were also added later on. However, the *micro* perspective of employability has become prevalent in today’s literature. The main message of the employability seen from this perspective is that the individual himself is the key generator of his/her own employability. Therefore, the individual himself should engage in activities and take measures to become more competitive in the labour market. This will increase his/her chances to retain or obtain employment status. However, employability is not only determined by the factors which are within the control of the individuals, but also by the factors which are beyond it, such as the labour market characteristics, interventions by the government targeted at specific groups of people, situation in the global economy such as economic crisis etc. In other words, although the employability seen from the *micro* perspective promotes the idea that individuals should take care of their attractiveness in the labour market, the events and actions on the *macro* level still can significantly influence the employability of the individuals. Therefore, after a theoretical review of the concept of employability, this paper will deal with the measures (recently created on the *macro* level in the EU and Serbia) aimed at decreasing high unemployment rates and increasing individuals employability.

## **2. Three Levels of Generating Employability of Workforce**

The concept of employability was initially formulated during the 1950s but did not receive real attention until the end of the 1990s. Employability as a term was originally introduced as a part of the UK government policy during the 1990s, mainly as a strategy to enhance workforce mobility against rising unemployment. After that period the term “employability” was generally adopted for explaining mechanism for protecting employees in the labor market by possessing skills and knowledge that are wanted (Apel et. al 2008, 3).

Employability as a concept evolved over time and in its conceptualization could be identified three perspectives: (a) socio-economical perspective, (b) organizational and (c) individual perspective (Nauta et al. 2009, 235). All these perspectives do not exclude one another, but reflect a different focus in terms of who is the key subject that generates the employability of an individual. This suggests that there are three key generators of the workforce employability: government, organization and individual himself.

Employability was primarily viewed from the *socio-economical perspective*. From this perspective under this category was assumed the possibility of certain categories of population, such as minorities, the young, those who are long out of work, etc., to gain the employment status. The main generator of employability from this perspective was the government which, through appropriate measures in the labor market, tried to stimulate the listed population groups to become part of this market. The basic premise on which the government intervention in the labor market was based is reflected in the following fact:

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the unemployment of working population, as well as redundancies, is not just the problem of individuals or organizations, but it is a problem of society as a whole. On the one side, society remains without revenues generated from salaries of the employees (taxes), and on the other side, this situation creates a strong pressure on social funds. Therefore, the promotion of employability among young people, the unemployed and other potentially disadvantaged groups in the labour market, remains an important goal of every national employment strategy.

The conceptualization of the employability from the *organizational perspective* arises in the 1980s. From this perspective employability is associated with an individual's capacity to demonstrate competencies that organizations need. Employability from this perspective is defined as a range of "soft" skills and personal attributes, such as loyalty, commitment, enthusiasm, reliability and adaptability, as well as the relevant and up-to-date technical competencies (ACCI, 2002). The key generator of the workforce employability from the organizational perspective is the organization itself. In this case organizations, in fact, enhance employability of the existing employees. The key role in that has the function of human resources management which through appropriate practices, primarily by training, can expand the portfolio of competencies of existing employees and therefore increase their employability in an organization. Consequently, organizations may become more flexible in dealing with the changing demands of the market as well as can adequately use the potential of the existing employees (Stefanovic, Đorđević 2011).

The *individual perspective* of employability arises in the 1990s. In this perspective the key generator of employability becomes the individual himself. Since employers do not offer any more life time employment in exchange for adequate performances and loyalty, individuals are encouraged in career self-management rather than relying on the organization for career planning, and to look for ways to maintain and enhance their attractiveness in the labour market (Clarke, 2008).

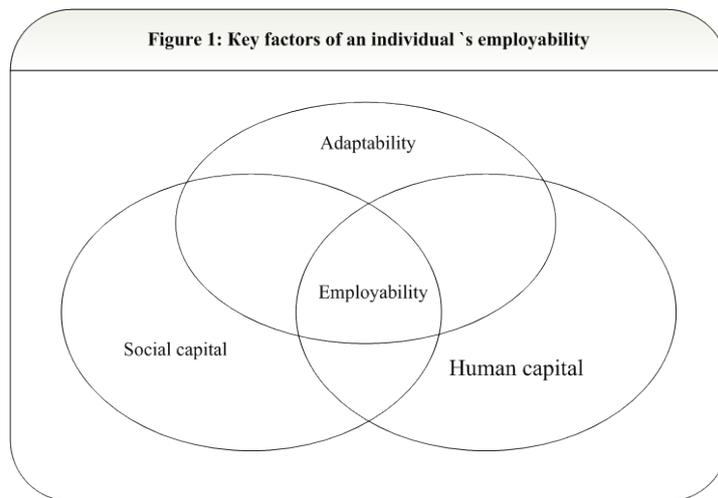
Since the individual perspective of the employability has gained prevalence in the recent literature, there are many definitions of this construct. Some of them are as follows:

- Employability is "the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment" (Hillage, Pollard 1998, 2).
- Employability is "a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Knight, Yorke 2004, 5).
- "Employability refers to an individual's ability to find a job, retain a job and move between jobs and/or industries" (Clarke, 2008, 262).
- Employability is "a form of work specific active adaptability that enables workers to identify and realize job opportunities" (Fugate et al. 2004, 16).

It can be seen that almost all definitions of the employability from the individual perspective stress that this construct consists of more or less identical employees' attitudes, behaviours and competencies. These attitudes, behaviours and competencies could also be seen as factors which influence an individual's level of employability. Therefore in the next section the key factors of the individual's employability will be analyzed.

### 3. Factors of an Individual's Employability – *Micro* Perspective

In the attempt to summarize all crucial attitudes, behaviors and competencies, e. i. factors that influence an individual's employability from *micro* perspective, Fugate et al. (2004) identified the following: (a) identity of an individual's career, (b) personal adaptability, and (c) social and human capital. Later the same authors revised their previous opinion, and identified new preconditions for employability, such as: openness to changes at work, resistance of work and career, proactivity, motivation and work identity. On the other side, some other authors all the factors that affect the employability classified into two groups: individual equity and adaptability (de Vos, de Hauw 2010). However, all the factors that determine an individual's employability from the *micro* perspective identified in literature could be summarized as follows: (a) human capital, (b) social capital and (c) adaptability of the individual.



In the literature, there is almost a consensus that the level of *human capital* which an individual possesses (knowledge, skills, experience) is a key determinant of his/her value in the labor market. However, from the aspect of employability, it is important that the individual possesses the elements of human capital for which there is a demand in the labour market. If the human capital of the individual is sought in the labor market, his/her employability will be higher, and vice versa.

*The social capital* of an individual refers to the set of resources arising from the network of interpersonal relationships that the individual has built with others. Numerous studies have shown that social capital can provide an individual with a significant strategic advantage in the advancement and career development. However, social capital has a major influence on the employability in general, too. Information, contacts and support achieved through social contacts can contribute to opportunities for re-employment or for employment at all.

*Personal adaptability* refers to the willingness and ability of employees to change their behavior, way of thinking or feelings according to the changing environmental requirements. It is believed that persons characterized by a high degree of adaptability have

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more predisposition to gain or retain employment status. In other words, those individuals who are more adaptive to the changed demands in the labour market have a greater level of employability.

All aforementioned factors of employability are not isolated in their influence on an individual's employability. All of them are interconnected and have synergic influence. In other words, their connection characterizes the so-called *reciprocal determinism*.

## **4. Employability Measures in the European Union and the Republic of Serbia**

In spite of recent literature promoting individuals as the key subject that can and should generate their own employability, the employability interventions created at the *macro* level still have the potential to enhance the employability of people, especially of some special groups of population. Therefore, in the following text the emphasis will be on the measures created on the *macro* level of the EU and Serbia in order to enhance employability in these regions in the condition of high unemployment rates.

### **4.1. Employability as a Target of Europe 2020 Strategy**

The global economic crisis has left millions of people out of work and created the need for programs created on the *macro* level that will increase employment and quality of life of people in general.

The global economic crisis hit strongly the region of the EU, too. This can be concluded from the data contained in Table 1.

**Table 1. Unemployment rate for the period 2006-2015, in %**

Unemployment rate (%)	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	I/ 2015
EU-28	8.2	7.2	7.0	9.0	9.6	9.7	10.5	10.9	10.2	9.8
Euro area	8.4	7.5	7.6	9.6	10.2	10.2	11.4	12.0	11.6	11.3

*Note:* Unemployment rates represent unemployed persons as a percentage of the labour force. The labour force is the total number of both employed and unemployed people. The unemployed comprise persons aged between 15 and 74.

*Source:* Eurostat, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>, (10.6.2015.)

The European Commission saw the global crisis as a wake-up call and recognized the need for an international strategy, among all, to enhance employability in this region. Therefore, in 2010 the European Commission adopted Europe 2020 Strategy with the priority for a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in order to increase employment, productivity and social cohesion. After that, the EU targets were translated into national targets and every state had the obligation to define its own targets considering its possibilities to reach the EU targets.

There are five headline targets in the global Europe 2020 Strategy. They are as follows (Europe 2020 Strategy 2010):

- employment rate of the population aged 20-64 should increase from the current 69% to at least 75% through the greater involvement of women, older workers and the better integration of migrants in the work force,
- investing 3% of GDP in research and development,
- the "20/20/20" climate/energy targets,
- share of early school leavers should be under 10% and at least 40% of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree,
- lift over 20 million people out of poverty.

All these targets are connected and fulfillment of one aim helps realizing the other one. "For instance, better educational levels help employability and progress, and increasing the employment rate helps reducing poverty. A greater capacity for research and development as well as innovation across all sectors of the economy, combined with increased resource efficiency will improve competitiveness and foster job creation. Investing in cleaner, low carbon technologies will help our environment, contribute to fighting climate change and create new business and employment opportunities." (European Commission 2010, 10).

In order to achieve the priority goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Commission formulated two policies specially directed at increasing employability and developing competitive skills in the labour market. The policies are:

- **"Youth on the move"** – The aim of this program is to enhance students and researchers' mobility, to modernize higher education and improve the employment situation of young people through entrepreneurship, to recognize non-formal and informal learning and promote entry into the labour market through other programs.

- **"An Agenda for new skills and jobs"** – This program's aim is modernisation of the educational system and training programs that will provide acquiring new skills for better adaptation to new conditions and potential career shifts and life-long learning requirements.

Although there's still no strong evidence of the effects of the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy, since the unemployment rate since 2013 started to decrease, indirectly we may conclude that this strategy reached at least one of the targets – increasing employment. However, this target could not be achieved without the increased employability of people, partly, we believe, due to the measures formulated in Europe 2020 Strategy.

#### **4.2. Employability measures of the Republic of Serbia**

Since Serbia's aim is to join the EU and deal with the high unemployment rate resulting from the global crisis as well as its own process of transition, the government of this state adopted the National Employment Strategy for the period 2011- 2020, which is modelled on the Europe 2020 Strategy. The main aims of this strategy are to increase employment and reduce differences between the main indicators of the labour market of the EU, whose fulfilment would lead to the achievement of the convergence between them.

The following table illustrates the current and targeted employment rate of Serbia and the EU, with the emphasis on the differences between the employment rates in the Republic of Serbia and the EU at the time of the adoption of the strategy.

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**Table 2. Employment rate in Serbia and the European Union, in %**

Targets	European Union		Republic of Serbia		<i>Difference</i>	
	2010	2020	2010	2020	2010	2020
Employment rate (15-64 years)	66	73	48	61	-18	-12
Employment rate (20-64 years)	68	75	52	66	-16	-9

*Source:* Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, National Employment Strategy for the period of 2011-2020.

It can be noticed that there is a significant negative deviation within the employment rates in Serbia in 2010, which led to lower targeted values compared to the employment rate in the EU. This can be explained by the fact that Serbia was hit by the global economic crisis, but also by its own process of transition which generated high level of unemployment, too.

The world economic crisis, upgraded with the domestic process of transition, has a strong negative influence on all main indicators in the labor market, such as the rate of activity, the rate of inactivity, the rate of employment and the rate of unemployment among the working-age population in Serbia (Table 3). This is the main reason why the employability measures created at the *macro* level were needed. In other words, it is insufficient that individuals alone try to enhance their employability (although it is always necessary) in the case where many factors that influence their employment status are beyond their control. Although the world economic crisis is beyond the control of the government of Serbia, the transition process which generates the significant part of the unemployment is not. Therefore, there is a huge responsibility of the government to create and implement measures that will improve the situation in the domestic labour market.

**Table 3. Trends in the labour market of the working age population (aged 15-64 years) from 2008 to 2015, in %**

Year	Inactivity rate	Activity rate	Employment rate	Unemployment rate	Planned unemployment rate
2008	37,3	62,7	53,7	14,4	-
2009	39,4	60,6	50,4	16,9	-
2010	41,0	59,0	47,2	20,0	18,64
2011	40,6	59,4	45,4	23,6	17,95
2012	39,9	60,1	45,3	24,6	17,28
2013	38,4	61,6	47,5	23,0	16,49
2014	38,2	61,8	49,6	19,7	15,63
2015 I quarter	37,7	62,3	49,9	19,9	-

*Source:* Reports of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, <http://webrzs.stat.gov.rs> (5.7.2015); National Employment Strategy for the period of 2011-2020, [http://www.nsz.gov.rs/live/digitalAssets/0/302\\_nacionalna\\_strategija\\_zaposljavanja\\_2011-2020.pdf](http://www.nsz.gov.rs/live/digitalAssets/0/302_nacionalna_strategija_zaposljavanja_2011-2020.pdf) (4.7.2015).

The measures of an active employment policy that the government of Serbia created within the National Employment Strategy are specifically focused on the vulnerable

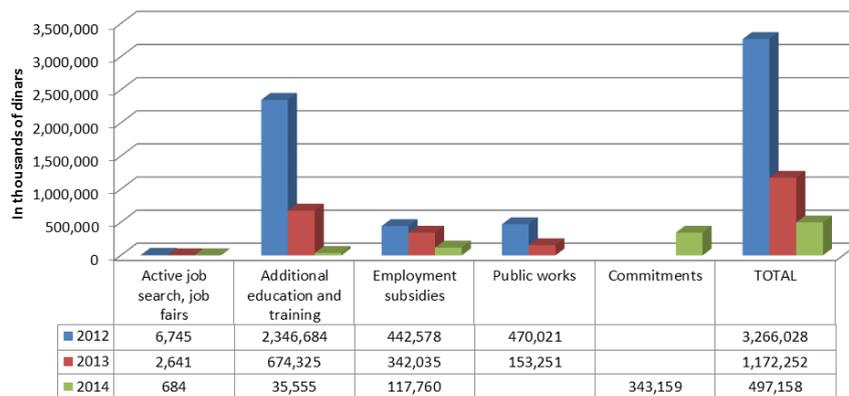
groups in the labor market of Serbia. Some of these groups are the Roma, refugees and internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, rural population, uneducated people, women, young adults (aged 15-24) and the elderly (aged 50-64). On the basis of the National Employment Strategy, the Action Plan has been adopted which defines concrete programs and measures of active employment policy. The main carrier of the active employment policy is the National Employment Service, which in co-operation with other institutions, implements the defined projects.

The main measures of the active employment policy implemented by the National Employment Service are:

- mediation in the employment of job seekers,
- vocational guidance and career planning advice,
- subsidies for employment;
- support for self-employment;
- additional education and training,
- stimulations for unemployment benefit recipients,
- public works,
- measures of active employment policy of persons with disabilities, etc.

All these measures, however, require significant investments. Investments in the implementation of the active employment policy measures in Serbia for the period from 2012 to 2014 can be seen in Graph 1.

**Graph 1: Trend in payments for programs and measures of active employment policy for the period from 2012 to 2014, in thousands of dinars**



Source: Reports of the National Employment Service of the Republic of Serbia, <http://www.nsz.gov.rs/> (4.7.2015.)

It can be concluded that in 2014 a significantly smaller budget was invested in training programs, active job seeking, acquiring professional knowledge, public works programs, trainee programs and professional training for people without work experience. Although significant resources were invested by the local governments, there was a lack of funding in the state in 2014. This can be explained by the measures of savings which government had implemented, but was it a good decision?

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The following table illustrates the number of people (including people with disabilities) who have used the services of the National Employment Service for the period from 2010 to 2013.

**Table 4. Number of people (including people with disabilities) who have used the services of the National Employment Service for the period from 2010 to 2013**

Program/Year	2010			2011			2012			2013
	P	R	R in %	P	R	R in %	P	R	R in %	P
Public works	5.200	5.604	107,77	5.700	6.696	117,47	6.000	6.127	102,12	5.100
Professional practice*	16.000	17.175	107,34	20.300	17.602	86,71	2140	2765	129,21	4.040
Acquisition of practical knowledge	-	-	-	-	-	-	300	174	58,00	450
Subvention for self-employment**	2.187	2.818	128,85	3.005	3.926	130,65	1.550	2.037	131,42	2.630

Note: P - plan, R - realization

Source: Reports of the National Employment Service of the Republic of Serbia, <http://www.nsz.gov.rs/> (4.7.2015.)

\* Professional practice as a program also includes the program „The first chance“.

\*\* Includes subventions of National Employment Service and Local Action Plan for Employment.

It can be noticed that within the previous period most of the unemployed people who have used the services of the National Employment Service to enhance their employability were involved in the programs of professional practice and that over the time the total number of the unemployed covered by the above-mentioned programs decreased. The decrease in the number of people in the program of professional practice is especially noticeable because since 2012 there were not enough funds for the program “The first chance“ which provided opportunities for young people to gain their first work experience.

The region of Southeast Serbia leads when it comes to the highest unemployment rate in Serbia. Unemployment rates by regions in Serbia are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5. Unemployment rates (age 15-64) in the regions of Serbia in the period 2010-2014, in %**

Region	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Belgrade	15,1	20,0	21,6	18,1	17,6
Vojvodina	20,9	23,9	26,7	24,3	20,3
Šumadija and Western Serbia	20,5	23,8	23,7	23,8	18,7
Southern and Eastern Serbia	23,3	26,7	26,2	25,3	22,6
Kosovo and Metohija	...	...	...	...	...

Source: Reports of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, <http://webrzs.stat.gov.rs> (5.7.2015)

Since the Southeast region of Serbia has the highest unemployment rate, it is interesting to see how many people from this region have used the services of the National Employment Service in order to improve their employability in the labour market (Table 6).

**Table 6. Number of people (excluding people with disabilities) who have used the services of the National Employment Service for the period from 2010 to 2013**

City/Year	2010			2011			2012			2013
	P	R	R in %	P	R	R in %	P	R	R in %	P
Smederevo	247	340	137,65	424	334	78,77	60	71	118,33	95
Požarevac	189	157	83,07	195	230	117,95	50	55	110,00	90
Bor	212	332	156,60	410	295	71,95	55	71	129,09	100
Zaječar	240	311	129,58	367	603	164,31	65	76	116,92	105
Niš	1.312	1.711	130,41	1.873	1.824	97,38	190	228	120,00	400
Prokuplje	310	330	106,45	393	247	62,85	65	81	124,61	100
Pirot	304	284	93,42	347	303	87,32	60	75	125,00	90
Leskovac	885	859	97,06	1.069	647	60,52	80	109	136,25	135
Vranje	449	356	78,29	403	411	101,99	60	76	126,67	100
<i>Ukupno</i>	<i>4.148</i>	<i>4.680</i>	<i>112,83</i>	<i>5.481</i>	<i>4.894</i>	<i>89,29</i>	<i>685</i>	<i>842</i>	<i>122,92</i>	<i>1.215</i>

*Note:* Data for 2010 and 2011 includes the number of people in the program “The first chance” and Professional practice. Data for 2012 and 2013 includes the number of people in the program Professional practice and Acquisition of practical knowledge.

*Source:* Reports of the National Employment Service of the Republic of Serbia, <http://www.nsz.gov.rs/> (4.7.2015.)

The data from Table 6 shows that in the Southeast Serbia there is a declining trend in the number of people included in the programs of the National Employment Service for enhancing employability, probably due to the restrictions in the budget for these purposes. But, since the unemployment rate in this region is still the highest in Serbia (Table 5), the imperative for the government in the next period should be investing more financial resources and taking other employability measures to enhance employment especially in this region.

## 5. Conclusion

Turbulent changes in the labor market indicate that the myth of secure and lifelong employment in exchange for adequate performance and loyalty has become compromised. However, in the situation where employment contracts have gained predominantly transactional nature, literature offered a new solution - the implementation of the concept of employability. The basic assumption about this concept is that job security in today's turbulent times could be achieved through competitiveness in the labour market. Therefore, in this paper we analyzed the main characteristics of this concept. Firstly, we pointed out that the concept could be defined from three perspectives, socio-economical, organizational and individual. Secondly, we introduced the main factors which can contribute to one's employability: human capital, social capital and adaptability. Consequently, there are three key generators of an individual's employability that can be identified : state, organization and the individual himself.

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Although the contemporary literature promotes the individual (micro) perspective of employability, where the key generator of employability is the individual himself, other subjects, such as state or organization, could also enhance the individual's employability even in today's circumstances. Namely, there are still many factors which could inhibit individuals to realize their employability in practice (world economic crisis, process of transition etc.). In such circumstances states still have the possibility to enhance employability of people by implementing certain measures especially toward vulnerable categories of population. Accordingly, in the paper we presented the main measures created on the macro level of the EU (by the European Commission) and in the Republic of Serbia (by the Government) in order to enhance employability and reduce unemployment rates in this regions. However, in Serbia in the last year budget funds for financing these activities were reduced so many programs aimed at increasing the employability of less employable persons were left out. This situation should be changed as soon as possible, especially in the region of Southeast Serbia where the unemployment rate is the highest.

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## **ZAPOŠLJIVOST KAO ODRAZ KONKURENTNOSTI POJEDINCA NA TRŽIŠTU RADA**

**Rezime:** U situaciji kada su turbulentne promene na tržištu rada stavile van snage mit o sigurnom zaposlenju u zamenu za adekvatne performanse i lojalnost, kao i kada je problem nezaposlenosti postao jedan od najznačajnijih u mnogim zemljama, savremena teorija nudi nova rešenja u pogledu ove situacije: ako neko želi da smanji nesigurnost posla ili da zadrži status zaposlenosti on/ona treba usvojiti koncept zapošljivosti. Osnovna pretpostvaka ovog koncepta je da se zaposlenost zasniva na konkurentnosti na tržištu rada. Shodno tome, pojedinci koji žele da smanje verovatnoću gubitka posla ili da povećaju verovatnoću dobijanja njega, trebaju konstantno sticati konkurentne kompetencije i veštine i unapređivati već postojeće. Imajući u vidu da je nezaposlenost danas jedan od najvećih izazova u mnogim ekonomijama, cilj ovog rada je da naglasi najvažnije karakteristike ovog koncepta. Takođe, predstavljene su neke od mera koje Evropska Unija (EU) i Republika Srbija (Srbija) preduzimaju u cilju povećanja stopa zaposlenosti.

**Ključne reči:** zapošljivost, radna snaga, konkurentnost, tržište rada.