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EMPATHY AS A DRIVER OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: INSIGHTS FROM THE BULGARIAN CONTEXT*

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Abstract. Social entrepreneurship, understudied as a business and social phenomenon, hides its potential, and what drives those involved in a social activity still needs to be clarified. The paper's authors assume that empathy is the basis of starting a socially significant business and seek confirmation of this thesis in direct communication with social entrepreneurs from Bulgaria. The research methodology is based on the author's conceptual framework, which includes two groups of results – quantitative and qualitative – that aim to confirm or reject the formulated hypotheses. The results show a positive relationship between empathy and starting a socially engaged business. The analysis identifies empathy as a vital catalyst for the social entrepreneur, along with communication skills, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking. The research shows that empathy is a prerequisite for starting a socially engaged business and can significantly contribute to the organisation's success. At the same time, there is a subjective conclusion that Bulgarian social entrepreneurs are not responsive enough, which may hinder social changes and the development of social enterprises in the country. Future research will explore that topic.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship; empathy; social activity; social economy

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1. Introduction

Business and entrepreneurship are at the heart of progress and are associated with active citizenship, a continuous drive for action, and innovative and creative thinking. Undoubtedly, entrepreneurs are the driving force of innovation and progress, drivers of growth and competitiveness of any economy. At its core, entrepreneurship is creating and shaping the future. Entrepreneurs seek new combinations of scarce resources in the present, but their discoveries become a product of the future. The desired result of their activities and initiatives is profit and an increased standard of living (Pavlov & Ruskova, 2023).

Nevertheless, in recent years, ambitions to increase corporate profit or market share have been partially eclipsed by the drive to overcome acute world problems such as climate change, social inequality, poverty, infant mortality, illiteracy, and discrimination (Xiaobao et al., 2023). Today, there are various new spheres or forms

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of business – entrepreneurship in the digital sector, social entrepreneurship (SE), and eco-entrepreneurship. The commonality between them is that they seek and find solutions to current social, environmental, educational, and consumer problems (Lückenbach et al., 2023). In a broader sense, SE is defined as an economic activity aimed entirely at creating, functioning and developing social enterprises. It is related to the concept of a social economy, which is guided by the community's interests. Profit is not its primary goal but a means to achieve the main mission – universal well-being (OECD, n.d.).

On the other hand, Taylor (2023) argues that the core of a mentally balanced society lies in an individual's empathic connection, fostering characteristics like compassion, accountability, justice, equity, and parity. Conversely, a psychological state marked by excessive individualism and disconnection leads to self-centeredness devoid of empathy, compassion, and ethical awareness. Consequently, these features contribute to societal injustices, disparities, intolerance, harshness, and subjugation.

Similarly, Shepherd et al. (2023) define empathy as a primary driver of SE and entrepreneurial action. Their research explains how empathy-driven entrepreneurial action manifests through creating and managing social enterprises. It is assumed that empathic entrepreneurs generally try to reduce the suffering of the defined target group by positively changing their lifestyle. This gives the researchers reasons to consider empathy as the core characteristic of social entrepreneurs and, as such, a vital antecedent of the social aspect of SE intentions.

The reason for emphasising empathy as a predictor of starting a social business, but not a traditional one, is that empathy allows people to identify social problems, understand the needs and wants of others, and develop innovative solutions to address those problems. In particular, empathy is described as an individual's ability to understand another person's emotions and the tendency to respond emotionally and systematically to their mental state. Large-scale studies show that people with higher levels of empathy are more likely to have a strong desire to positively impact society, which can motivate them to engage in social entrepreneurial activities (Duong, 2023).

The deepening global interest in SE and empathy and its supposed role in forming the social economy raises the question of whether this is also the primary trigger of Bulgarian social entrepreneurs. The present study's authors assume that such a discovery would answer how authentic and sincere the Bulgarian social initiators are in their social intentions. It would refute or deepen the widespread mistrust of the civil organisations that partially form the sector of social entrepreneurs in the country (Alpha Research, 2022). At the same time, it would lead to new aspects in improving the performance of SE and the socio-economic condition of Bulgaria.

The material is structured as follows: In the *Theoretical background* based on current research, the authors analyse the presence or absence of a relationship between empathy and entrepreneurs' social commitment. Based on the purpose of the study and the literature analysis, the main hypotheses of the research are formulated. The *Methodology* presents the conceptual model of the study and the way of forming the sample. In *Results and Discussion*, the obtained quantitative and qualitative data are analysed and interpreted, as well as the main limitations of the study and the applicability of the results. A *Conclusion* summarises the key findings.

2. Theoretical background

For decades, economies worldwide used the rising corporate profit and gross national product to measure national achievement. However, the well-being of a nation should not be measured solely by national income. Economic growth is synonymous with a nation's overall quality of life. Focused on people and the environment, armed with empathy and solidarity, a number of civic associations are alarming the outbreak of a crisis with a scale that threatens the existence of civilisations and the survival of species – a world of rapidly increasing inequality, the erosion of relationships of trust and care, and a culture that encourages greed and materialism (Helliwell et al., 2021).

This has led to a new type of entrepreneurial wave – social entrepreneurship- combining business practices and tools with passion and empathy to solve pressing social problems. SE is a process in which a specific type of participant – social entrepreneurs – creates and develops organisations that can be social enterprises or other associations (Pavlov & Ruskova, 2023; Taylor, 2023). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, n.d.) defines SE as any private activity carried out in the public interest, organised with an entrepreneurial strategy, the main objective of which is not profit maximisation but the achievement of specific economic and social goals and which can bring innovative solutions to the problems of social exclusion and unemployment.

The Bulgarian Law on Enterprises of the Social and Solidarity Economy (Lex bg, n.d.) defines the concepts of social and solidarity economy as a form of entrepreneurship aimed at one or more social activities and social goals carried out by enterprises, including through the production of various goods or the provision of services, in cooperation with state or local authorities or independently. The Law describes cooperatives, legal entities with a non-profit purpose for carrying out socially beneficial activities and social enterprises as the subject of the social economy. The stakeholders define this fact as a considerable step in clarifying the SE but think the regulation needs to be more comprehensive. The complete clarification of its essence proves impossible at this stage since the unknowns are more than the knowns (Stoyanova, 2021).

The lack of an appropriate legal structure, uniform standards and, above all, the freedom for each entrepreneur to define himself as "social" is a prerequisite for generating tension and mistrust around the activities of social initiators. Stress may also exist within the social enterprise due to the markedly dual nature of such organisations. Combining two seemingly mutually exclusive goals – the generation of social value, on the one hand, and economic value, on the other – is a prerequisite for ambiguities and deepening the misunderstanding of how social initiators should actually function. However, it is also a criterion for distinguishing traditional from social entrepreneurship (Saebi et al., 2019).

Empathy, on the other hand, is the ability and desire to be aware of and understand the feelings, thoughts and experiences of others. In its various forms, empathy includes caring for others and experiencing their emotions, and in broader definitions, it also encompasses more distant stakeholders and non-human entities, such as the environment or ecosystem. Several SE studies emphasise the importance of empathy as a motivator for pursuing socially meaningful goals. In this context, empathy is more of an emotional catalyst, evoking compassion and a desire to help someone in need (Korte et al., 2018).

Another similar study among Malaysian students revealed that university students were more socially oriented than traditional entrepreneurs (Pangriya, 2019). Education as a characteristic of the socially oriented person is advocated as an outcome in several studies analysed on the subject. That should not oppose the two business concepts – traditional and social, along the lines and degree of their education but should be seen as an opportunity for educational institutions to find their place in the process of forming the social economy by promoting the social commitment of entrepreneurs, improving and adapting the learning processes in the field of business education and entrepreneurship education (Kunev et al., 2020). However, in addition to education, Pangriya (2019) identifies emotional intelligence – which includes empathy as competence – and creativity as a more significant predictor of SE intention formation.

A 2018 study (Bacq & Alt, 2018) of 281 students participating in two different SE courses at a research university in the northeastern United States also identified empathy as a critical trait distinguishing social entrepreneurs from traditional entrepreneurs. It explained social initiative intentions through two complementary mechanisms: self-efficacy and social value. What is specific in this case is that he interviewed students who were studying rather than developing SE. The results are more likely to meet society's (respectively students') expectations of what social initiators should be as individuals, which is separate from the authentic personality traits of those engaged in social causes. Rauchbauer et al. (2023) also present evidence that empathy increases prosocial behaviour, charitable giving and willingness to help. Two aspects of empathy-related traits, namely empathic concern and perspective-taking, have been identified as particularly related to an individual's social and, in particular, prosocial behaviour. Empathic concern is an inherently other-oriented

emotional response to feeling for someone rather than feeling like the other, which is the dominant common claim. Motivates the improvement of the condition of the other without self-focus or desire to alleviate personal suffering. Empathic perspective-taking involves accessing and understanding another's particular needs or situations while recognising that they are different and separate from one's own. It also supports prosocial behaviour when it is realised that the other needs help or assistance.

Freeman's stakeholder theory is also in this context and postulates that to effectively address the problems related to the creation of values, ethics, and management, it is necessary to analyse the relationships with all groups that influence or are influenced by the business. Managing a company based on these principles implies a search for solutions that do not require a compromise between stakeholders' interests but strive for the satisfaction of all (Stojanović et al., 2021).

In a large-scale content analysis of speeches given by various social entrepreneurs at a 2018 social business conference organised by the Yunus Center and Yunus Social Business, Pangriya (2019) found that education, global exposure, previous work experience, creativity, empathy, community, roots, and satisfaction are the main characteristics of SE. According to the report's author, empathy and belonging to a particular community make social entrepreneurs different from traditional (business-oriented) entrepreneurs and conclude that empathy is a vital characteristic of social initiators. To become a successful social entrepreneur, one needs to understand the community and its problems and only then seek a solution to the issues identified. Through empathy, social entrepreneurs can ensure they stay connected to their community and their cause. At the same time, considering culture when debating entrepreneurial intentions and actions is vital because culture shapes people's values, beliefs, and behaviours about entrepreneurship. In addition, culture can enhance or hinder individuals from having entrepreneurial intentions or performing entrepreneurial actions in their societies, as it is considered one of the most important factors for entrepreneurs (Kayed et al., 2022).

At the same time, there are indications that social entrepreneurs' prosocial, altruistic motivations should not be taken for granted, as it risks viewing social entrepreneurs as well-intentioned ethical heroes driven by decency and morality. Indeed, quite a few social entrepreneurs may be motivated by benefits accruing to them personally, including personal pleasure, freedom, fame and recognition. In a qualitative study examining the motivations of budding social entrepreneurs, researchers found that personal enjoyment and achievement orientation were among the primary motivations for social entrepreneurs. A similar but quantitative study found a direct and positive relationship between the pursuit of status and SE and a negative relationship between empathy and the intention to initiate a social enterprise (Tucker et al., 2019).

As stated earlier, Bulgaria lacks a clear understanding of the concepts of SE and social enterprise (Glasnews BG, 2019). The only clear thing is that there are significant differences between traditional and social entrepreneurship (OECD, n.d.), which implies a difference in motivation between conventional and social entrepreneurs. The literature review shows that although there is a wealth of literature on the specific, non-financial characteristics that define SE, there is *significantly less understanding of the personality of the social entrepreneur and their personal motivation for starting a social enterprise or cause*.

Drawing on existing theory and empirical data generated from similar studies in other countries, the authors of the present research assume that a social entrepreneur is a person who combines business ingenuity with social commitment and empathy, seeks a balance between social and economic goals and strives to improve living conditions in society. Although there is also some debate about the precise definition of empathy, most scholars agree that it is a process oriented toward understanding and sharing the internal experience of another individual or group of individuals (Shepherd et al., 2023). Therefore, a central thesis in this research is that *an individual's empathy is critical to a social entrepreneur's motivation and effectiveness in meeting the needs of others*. Based on this, the authors put forward the following first research hypothesis:

H1: Empathy plays an essential role in the motivational profile of social entrepreneurs in Bulgaria, influencing their decisions to create, develop and manage social enterprises.

Most researchers include empathy in the composition of an individual's emotional intelligence (Alabbasi et al., 2023) or soft skills (Galster et al., 2023). That provokes some questions: If empathy is the supposed motivator for social entrepreneurs, do they appreciate their team members' or partners' hard or soft skills more? Do social initiators prefer cooperating with people with similar motivators – empathy and compassion? Thus, the present study proposed the second hypothesis as follows:

H2: Social entrepreneurs in Bulgaria are more motivated to hire and partner with people who share their values and have developed soft skills than to look for people with high technical qualifications.

3. Research objective and methodology

The current research focuses on the role of empathy in initiating and managing a socially engaged business model. The methodology combines quantitative and qualitative data, aiming at the respondents' answers and confirming or rejecting the formulated hypotheses to fill in specific gaps regarding the personality of the social entrepreneur, the motivation for starting a socially significant business and the choice of employees and partners. The research covers the following stages:

1. Building a conceptual framework of the research methodology (Table 1.);
2. Selection of criteria for participation and surveying Bulgarian social entrepreneurs;
3. Analysis of the results, formulation of relevant conclusions and recommendations.

Table 1. Conceptual model of research methodology

№	Survey item	Justification
1	General and restrictive conditions	The survey is aimed at social entrepreneurs operating from or outside Bulgaria but registered as an organisation (company, cooperative, enterprise, non-government organisation, etc.) in Bulgaria. Study period April 12 – April 30 2022.
2	Purpose and tasks of the study	The purpose of the research is to establish the role of empathy in SE and how much it influences decision-making by setting: • what influence does empathy have on the motivation of social entrepreneurs; • how social entrepreneurs perceive empathy; • how crucial emotional and social competence (as soft skills and bearers of empathy) is for social initiators and their relationships with employees and partners.
3	Object of research	The object of research is Bulgarian social entrepreneurs.
4	Development of a questionnaire	The survey form is anonymous and was prepared with the Google Forms web application toolkit. The survey card contains 7 questions – 5 closed and 2 open-ended. The form contains 6 questions relevant to the purpose and tasks of the survey, and the last one allows the respondents if they wish to introduce themselves and the organisation they represent.
5	Approval of the survey card	The survey form has been tested by five experts, two of whom are social entrepreneurs. Recommendations were received for: • reducing questions; • building a better sequence of questions; • redundant explanatory texts have been removed; • adding a question "Where do you think acts of empathy are more helpful?".
6	Formulation of the final survey card	After the testing, the number of questions was not changed because it is considered that the survey constructed in this way contains the necessary number of questions, guaranteeing the objectivity of the research. It was decided to present emotional and social competence in the context of the more widespread theory of soft and hard skills.
7	Data processing approach	Data processing was performed using Excel tools for mathematical and statistical functions.
8	Results analysis	The analysis is presented in the Results section.
9	Conclusions and recommendations	Summaries of the results have been made, and relevant conclusions have been formulated. Findings and recommendations are presented in the Discussion and Conclusions sections.

Source: Authors' development

In theory, the Law on Enterprises from the Social and Solidarity Economy in Bulgaria defines specific conditions for which enterprise falls within the scope of the normative act. However, the study "Social entrepreneurship in Bulgaria on the path of growth" (Valley of Growth, 2021) is indicative of the problem with (self-)determination and the legal framework of social enterprises and initiators, according to which the number of social enterprises in Bulgaria varies between 29 and 4,000 organisations, and according to National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria (NSI) data (CLSDP, 2024) – by 2021, 2,442 organisations have defined themselves as social entrepreneurs or enterprises. This is an impressive difference and an undeniable indicator that the country lacks clear, consistent, and comprehensive data on SE and what falls within its boundaries.

For this reason, the authors of the present study defined the specific criteria for selecting social enterprises and social entrepreneurs in the survey as an essential element of the methodology and the implementation of direct communication with self-identified social entrepreneurs and social enterprises in Bulgaria. The selection of social enterprises and entrepreneurs to participate in the research is based on three main criteria:

- registered and/or self-identified as a social entrepreneur/enterprise (according to the registers corresponding to the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy in Bulgaria and the National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria);
- the presence of a clearly expressed social mission in the organisation's representative website or social channels;
- reflected activity in the direction of realising the stated social goals of the organisation;
- combining the stated social mission with the development of actual economic activity.

Based on the described criteria, 150 active social entrepreneurs were identified. The sample is significantly smaller than those who self-identified as social entrepreneurs (2,442) but considerably higher than those officially registered (29) in the register of social enterprises in Bulgaria. Although with a population size of 2,442 (self-identified social entrepreneurs), the recommended sample size should be 333 (at a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%), the authors of the present study consider that precision has been achieved with these sample criteria, and the identified 150 entrepreneurs correspond to the maximum extent to the general definitions of SE proposed in the Theoretical Background.

These three criteria, in turn, are associated with three limitations:

- 1) the presence of a clearly expressed social mission in the representative channels of the organisation is not a guarantee that the latter can be defined as a social enterprise;
- 2) the reflected social activity is not an exhaustive criterion for a socially engaged company since it is not possible to follow, based on a preliminary selection, whether these are campaigns with short-term or long-term impact;
- 3) due to the adherence to the principles of anonymity and allowing the respondents not to publish their identifying data (such as personal names or the name of the organisation), it is not possible to restrict the filling in of the survey form by third parties that are not related to SE or do not fully meet the formulated criteria. However, the personalised communication approach chosen and implemented minimised the risk of the involvement of disinterested parties.

During the survey implementation, a personalisation effect was sought – a personal address to the relevant social entrepreneur to obtain an indirect answer to how responsive the respondents are. The survey was carried out by distributing the link for the survey form:

- through personal and personalised messages by e-mail and on social networks to social entrepreneurs (according to their professional business cards on LinkedIn, Facebook, and X);
- personal contacts with social entrepreneurs.

4. Results and discussion

Of the 150 social entrepreneurs invited to participate in the study, 50 people (or 33% *response rate*) responded, which can be seen as a sign of a lack of empathy on the part of the socially engaged towards other people's causes. Although it is only partially correct to draw a general conclusion based on this data alone, the general impression is that social entrepreneurs express a weak readiness and willingness to participate in the research. It is also confirmed by the received feedback of the sent messages – only 7 (or 5% *response rate*) of 150 social entrepreneurs demonstrated interest in the research topic and the possible results and shared that they also have to do similar studies and rarely meet responsiveness among society.

When asked, "*Do you agree with the statement that 'soft' skills (critical thinking, teamwork, empathy, emotional intelligence) are more important than 'hard' skills (programming, business analysis, blockchain) to your success as social entrepreneurs?*", 28 (56%) of social entrepreneurs strongly indicated soft skills as more key, and for 22 (44%), they were equally important. None identified hard skills as significant.

The survey indicates that for the respondents, the diploma and the study's success are not among the leading criteria when hiring employees from those involved in SE. If more than one answer is possible to the question "*When hiring a new person to your team, are you most interested in...?*":

- 49 (98%) of the respondents define as more important: teamwork, emotional intelligence, social relationships, empathy, critical thinking;
- 22 (44%) of the respondents choose communication skills and teamwork;
- 14 (28%) indicate design, business analysis, and blockchain;
- 7 (14%) value practical experience;
- 1 (2%) social entrepreneur believes that the degree and success of the study as an indicator of the knowledge of the employees is essential;
- 1 (2%) respondent associates the diploma and the study's success with the candidate's persistence and tenacity. From this point of view, they are of interest to him in selecting personnel.

To the question, "*Empathy has been identified as a key competence. How much do you agree with this statement?*", 40 (80%), or slightly more than half of social entrepreneurs, strongly agree with the statement, 8 (16%) somewhat agree, and 2 (4%) have no opinion.

When asked, "*Where do you think Empathy is most helpful?*", 50 (100%) or all social entrepreneurs expressed that empathy is helpful in their personal and professional lives. The data shows that empathy in life and work is essential for social entrepreneurs. The claim that empathy is essential to the realisation of social causes is also reinforced by the respondents' open-ended opinions to the question "*Would you give an example of this skill [showing empathy] in your work?*" in the survey form.

In support of the formulated statement, a comment to the survey can be indicated, in which a respondent social entrepreneur shares that, in his opinion, SE is synonymous with empathy. Otherwise, it is not social but a scam masquerading as empathy. The statement is particularly telling since pure logic says it should be correct, but is it so in reality? If we go back to the number of people who participated in the survey, there is a slight disappointment in the lack of responsiveness among social entrepreneurs. That is the sector that most depends on the goodwill and responsiveness of society to realise its causes. Social enterprise could only realise its goals if it attracted a severe dose of citizen support. Confirmation of this statement can be found in two of the responses, according to which filling out the survey form is a form of empathy on the part of people since social entrepreneurs also constantly have to conduct surveys to apply for various projects. Socially engaged people see a manifestation of empathy in society when it helps them achieve their causes.

Unfortunately, most representatives of SE asked to participate in the survey clearly do not share this opinion and do not show responsiveness to a sufficient degree. Does this mean that many self-described social entrepreneurs lack this essential competency – empathy? Moreover, if we go by the definition put forward by

the anonymous respondent, that if there is no empathy, then *"entrepreneurship is not social, but a scam disguised as empathy"*, can we conclude that a large part of the NGO sector and other forms of SE are a scam?

In support of this conclusion is another opinion of a respondent who defines himself as a social entrepreneur and states that he is a former participant in an NGO. He shares that he could not give an example of empathy, but he could provide an example of the lack of it. According to him, his NGO chose to apply for projects which were not considered in terms of how they could be helpful to society and bring about social change. The projects are selected according to the association's potential benefits, and the project's income is subsequently distributed as profit between the partners.

Of course, from one anonymous comment, one should not draw a definite conclusion about the nature of SE, but it opens up many questions for reflection. It also reveals one of the fundamental problems in S, namely the mistrust of society. The suspicion of the citizens is not entirely unfounded, as another social entrepreneur survey respondent, who wished to remain anonymous but would have liked the survey results to be published, pointed out. The participant preliminarily concludes that because he knows the sector in depth, the results will probably not be satisfactory and in favour of social entrepreneurs.

Another anonymous social entrepreneur's assessment of the fight against drug addiction sounds quite correct. According to him, if a person communicates poorly or does not feel emotions towards other people's pain, there is no way to become a social entrepreneur. The very choice to fight for specific social causes is an act of empathy, but it does not necessarily apply to all social entrepreneurs. The statement supplements his opinion that quite a few fictitious NGOs have entirely different incentives for their work. In this statement, the phrase *fictitious* NGOs makes an impression and gives food for thought. Is there a developed and active sector of social enterprises in Bulgaria, and isn't it wrong to equate every NGO, civil association, or civically active person to the group of social initiators? The lack of an adequate regulatory framework allows everyone to define themselves as social entrepreneurs and leave a negative imprint on the sector.

Despite the gloomy appearance, the definition of another social entrepreneur sounds interesting, according to whom compassion is a more precise and pleasant word and, from the point of view of the Bulgarian language [compassion = *съпричастен*], describes the meaning of this skill much more accurately:

"You accept to be a part of something outside of you – in their work, social entrepreneurs get to be a part of the pain of others and try to heal it to the best of their ability. Undoubtedly, this acceptance requires empathy, proving that true social entrepreneurship is an example of empathy."

The following short quote gives a complete picture of the role and importance of empathy in SE:

"All of our work with minority groups is the epitome of empathy; there is no other way to do this. It does not."

Social entrepreneurs themselves understand that their hallmark is authentic empathy. In their view, no other way or means would support their work with the target groups they seek to help.

"We solve people's problems – and many others do – but they are looking for material gain. We empathise with their problems and seek solutions that alleviate, not aggravate their current condition."

"I think empathy, in general, is what separates social entrepreneurs from the average. I do not mean that people in business are driven by self-interest; they probably feel empathy, too. The difference is that with us, every decision, every action, is the result of empathy."

"Our foundation works with troubled children or children who are victims of violence. Sometimes, we observe how the parents of these children accuse them, sometimes aloud, sometimes silently, of being problematic or weak physically and mentally. Would you probably blame the parents for their behaviour? We do not. Moreover,

we believe that is what we owe to empathy. We do not blame anyone; we do not judge anyone; we try to help, even when we do not fully understand why a situation has happened."

Empathy is a catalyst or internal motivator for starting or participating in a social initiative, i.e. it is perceived as an emotional commitment to a specific target group. The following statements support what has been said:

"Empathy is at the heart of our motivation to fight for our cause."

"Empathy guides us in the search for initiatives that are within our power. Although they are visible at first glance and with the naked eye, it is not more important to know what you can be useful with and not just to get into something you do not have the strength and capacity."

In addition to empathy, social entrepreneurs also pay significant awareness to communication skills. That is confirmed both by the quantitative results of the conducted survey and by some of the freely expressed opinions among them:

"You cannot become a social entrepreneur if you are a bad communicator or insensitive to other people's pain. So, the fact that we choose to fight for some social causes (in our case, fighting drug addictions) manifests empathy. It does not necessarily apply to all social entrepreneurs; of course, we looked at fictitious NGOs with entirely different incentives in their work."

The many other comments in the survey deserve attention, but it is impossible to quote in full. The opinion of Polina Harizanova, executive coordinator of the Social Teahouse Foundation – Varna, Bulgaria, summarises them all. According to her, empathy in SE is a leading quality, and she adds that the principle of work of the foundation she manages is precisely that. The Social Teahouse helps young people deprived of parental care, and the team has realised that it is essential to show young people how important they are. For this reason, they perceive the people in the organisation and the young people they work with as a family united by the cause. From the opinions received, the following points can be synthesised regarding the social initiators:

- to the greatest extent by empathy, they understand mutual help – whether to a stranger, a colleague or a relative;
- see empathy as a primary motivator for starting a social enterprise or NGO;
- they also liken it to social commitment and the desire to contribute to the good of society with every action;
- empathy for social initiators is also engagement with the problems of different social groups and active work towards their resolution;
- define empathy also as the ability to accept another's point of view and realistically conclude that they could not get support for everything from everyone and at all costs;
- associate empathy with non-judgment, overcoming fears and prejudices, and others.

From the freely expressed opinions of social entrepreneurs, it is clear that, although they perceive empathy differently, it is generally agreed that it is a motivating catalyst for starting and developing a social enterprise or engaging in a socially significant initiative. At the same time, 80% of the respondents strongly agree that empathy is crucial for success. The results confirm the research's first hypothesis (H1) that *empathy plays an essential role in the motivational profile of social entrepreneurs in Bulgaria, influencing their decisions to create, develop and manage social enterprises.*

The study unquestionably confirms the second hypothesis (H2) formulated in Section 2.3 – *Social entrepreneurs in Bulgaria are more motivated to hire and partner with people who share their values and have developed soft skills than to look for people with high technical qualifications.* More than half of respondents (56%) agree with the statement that soft skills, including empathy, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence, are more crucial to their success than hard skills. Almost 100% of survey respondents are much more interested in the soft skills of their potential employees, only 28% cite hard skills as necessary, and only 4% (or 2 respondents) consider a degree and academic success to be essential to the success of those involved in social causes.

In summary, the research results strongly suggest that empathy is a motivator for starting socially engaged business initiatives. This is consistent with the findings of Korte et al. (2018), who read empathy as an emotional catalyst of socially oriented behaviour and attitude towards a person or group in need. The data confirm the claim of Shepherd et al. (2023) on empathy as a core driver of SE. At the same time, the formulated generalisations correspond positively to what was expressed by Rauchbauer et al. (2023), who view empathy as a trigger for prosocial behaviour, charitable giving, and willingness to help.

The answers to both types of questions confirm that for socially engaged entrepreneurs, soft skills, including empathy, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, etc., are significantly more decisive for their relationships with customers and partners. This is consistent with Freeman's stakeholder theory – empathy, communication, and commitment to building positive relationships with all stakeholders and continuous adaptation to the changing environment are necessary for the success of any business, including socially engaged ones (Stojanović et al., 2021).

Limitations and Future Research

A problem in implementing the study is the formation of the sample since, as stated earlier, there needs to be a clear definition and a comprehensive list of social entrepreneurs in Bulgaria. The authors of a similar study in Belgium faced a similar problem, choosing to select social enterprises based on convenience sampling (Lambrechts et al., 2020). For the present study, the authors set a list of specific, measurable, and objective criteria for selecting respondents, but this does not guarantee the precision of the sample.

Another significant limitation of the study is the need for a basis for comparison. To date, there has yet to be data on a similar survey conducted in Bulgaria, and the latter makes it difficult to interpret the obtained results objectively and adds an element of subjectivity on the part of the authors. It is possible to conduct a similar study in another country or again in Bulgaria after a certain period and discuss how the attitudes of social entrepreneurs in Bulgaria have changed or be compared with social entrepreneurs from other countries.

With few exceptions, the studies cited in the Theoretical background, like the presented study among Bulgarian social entrepreneurs, share a common problem. By their very nature, they reflect societal assumptions, and the questionnaires are built around that. Society assumes that social entrepreneurs are motivated by empathy, and the survey questions are explicitly asked along these lines: *Do you think that empathy...? Empathy is considered a critical competency; how much do you agree?* Therefore, the interviewer sets the tone of the conversation, which can be considered incorrect to some extent. Although on the one hand, the authors of the report share the opinion expressed by the respondents that empathy is the essence of SE, and on the other hand, the quantitative and qualitative results confirm the hypotheses formulated in this sense, more in-depth studies and a targeted study of the personality of the social initiator are necessary, *ignoring the expectations of society*, including and researchers.

Part of the limitations of the survey among Bulgarian social entrepreneurs is the lack of information on the gender and age of the respondents. Some studies suggest that empathy is inherent to a much greater degree in women (Lambrechts et al., 2020), which is likely to change or enrich the results obtained. Nevertheless, the authors aim to study the general picture of SE in Bulgaria and its readiness to participate actively and effectively in developing its social economy. It is possible in future research to seek an answer to the question of whether gender and age influence the empathy and attitudes of entrepreneurs towards starting social initiatives.

The limitations of this study are a prerequisite for further research on the topic.

Theoretical and practical implications

The research conducted regarding the motivations of social entrepreneurs is fundamental, at least from two perspectives. First, the need for a developed social economy of individual countries and socially engaged enterprises to solve local social problems is increasingly being discussed. Second, although this research does not aim to draw a line between social and traditional entrepreneurship, empathy and the presence of a clearly expressed social mission are vital characteristics of social enterprises. The latter, as knowledge, would make it possible to multiply the social catalyst in more than existing or newly created traditional startups, thus significantly supporting the development of an effective social economy.

At the same time, the study contributes significantly to the literature on SE and the main driving motives of social initiators, as it is one of the first academic studies on the subject in Bulgaria. The article enriches the accepted theoretical basis for social enterprises by finding correlations between the organisation's social mission, the individual's empathy and the socially significant initiatives he implemented.

The results suggest that individuals with developed empathy are more inclined to engage in socially entrepreneurial activities, which raises the question of the need for purposeful development of empathy in people from an early age. It is also essential to actively include the concepts of emotional and social competence, in the context of which empathy falls, in the educational programs of universities and the promotion of social entrepreneurial activities at the school or university level, similar to the Entrepreneurship Center of the University of Ruse Angel Kanchev, Bulgaria (Pavlov & Ruskova, 2023).

Kayed et al. (2022) argue that an individual, mainly a student, must have a solid background in entrepreneurship education to realise himself professionally and successfully as an entrepreneur. Therefore, university entrepreneurship education should include relevant courses and practical experiences to generate their intentions to become entrepreneurs positively. In addition, the present study highlights the need to teach not only economic and management disciplines closely related to entrepreneurship but also those aimed at developing social skills and empathy.

Conclusions

The present study represents the first in-depth study of the role of empathy as a motivational factor for Bulgarian social entrepreneurs. By analysing data from questionnaires with founders and representatives of social enterprises in Bulgaria, the authors identify the key role of empathy in the decision-making process, development of business models and interaction with stakeholders. Although these concepts are relatively well studied internationally, the current research provides data that supports their applicability in the specific Bulgarian context. Results complement the existing theoretical models of SE and provide valuable information for the development of policies and programs to support social enterprises in Bulgaria, such as training future social entrepreneurs in emotional intelligence skills, in the construct of which empathy is most often placed.

An essential conclusion of the present research is that the success of social initiatives and social change is directly dependent on the ability of social entrepreneurs to understand and regulate their emotions and build and develop their social communication based on empathy and mutual assistance. Success is unpredictable, and the turbulent and dynamic present mercilessly proves that rational intelligence alone is insufficient to solve severe conflicts, global crises, social problems, and business challenges.

The study shows that social entrepreneurs define empathy as an essential element for starting and developing a social initiative. For the respondents, empathy is, above all, engagement with the problems of different social groups and active work towards their resolution. To the greatest extent, social entrepreneurs, under empathy, understand mutual aid, social commitment, a motive to start a social enterprise or NGO, and the capacity to accept other people's opinions without judgment.

In addition, authentic empathy and responsiveness are required to accept another's position and opinion nonjudgmentally; self-awareness and motivation are required to outgrow the ego and stimulate prosocial behaviour. In this sense, it is imperative to cultivate the empathy and soft skills of the individual from an early age to talk about a modern, intelligent society oriented to solving social problems and not deepening crises.

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