

Review

on the application for the position of professor in 3.2. Political Science, publicized by Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski with individual candidate Assoc. Prof. Romyana Petrova Kolarova, PhD.

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Assoc. Prof. Romyana Kolarova is a long-standing researcher and lecturer in political science in the academic community. She began her research work in 1982, and in 1996 she was already a lecturer at Sofia University after defending her doctoral thesis. In 2010, she was habilitated and was elected to the academic position of Associate Professor. She has been the director of two master's programs in European Studies, and the head of the Political Science Department at Sofia University. I do add to her professional activities in view of this application her work as Minister of Education and Science (2014) and as Secretary of the President of the Republic (2013-2017). Romyana Kolarova is the author of 62 scientific publications, including 2 monographs.

In the current application for Professor of Political Science, Romyana Kolarova presents a complete reference for compliance with the criteria for this academic position: teaching activities and scientific supervision of PhD students (four currently). She also provides 14 scientific works for her application, published after her habilitation in 2010. Among them, the monograph "Democratic Institutions in Bulgaria: A Comparative Analysis (1991-2018)" was published in 2019.

All of the scientific publications presented are in research journals with high academic status, 8 of them in the Yearbook of the European Journal of Political Research, published by the European Consortium for Political Research. These publications are co-authored with Dr. Maria Spirova, a well-known academic researcher from London. The publications presented make an impression of a long-lasting research effort from 2011 to 2019 in the field of the latest monograph, which is the result of this research effort and largely summarizes and completes an ample cycle of research.

The monograph presented is a major argument in this application and therefore this review will focus on it. The chosen topic fits into a considerable volume of research literature on democratic transitions after the end of authoritarian rule, especially after 1989, the year of the end of Soviet-type communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. But it is precisely the presence of numerous published studies that makes a new research, with a comparative perspective declared, particularly difficult. Most of all, because he has to find a new perspective, different from those already proposed and different from those already established as a reference.

When speaking about "democratic institutions" in academic research, there are many different criteria for their content. They can be related to the state, but also outside the state, as elements of civil society. The concept of "institution" in this case deserves a little more attention. The Latin *institutio* is usually translated as a teaching or a rule, and most often as a instruction, ie. prescribing a system of rules to follow. Institutions are a system of rules and regulations, democratic institutions are the normative framework of democracies. In her monograph, Romyana Kolarova accepts to deal with three main institutions of modern liberal democracy: the party system and related electoral institutions, the government as an institution of the executive power and the parliament as an institution of the legislature.

As can be seen, it is a matter of selecting some elements in the chosen topic among many democratic institutions, which, in addition to the above, may also include the system of justice, specifically and separately the system of political elections, but also civil society institutions outside the party system, such as the institutional framework of the media, of non-governmental organizations, as well as of market institutions and more generally of economic activity, of businesses.

Of course, it is quite clear that a research is impossible if it does not self-constrain its subject, there is no “research on everything” unless the goal is a popular science read. In the case of Romyana Kolarova, she chooses those institutions which, in her view, are fundamental to democracy, *conditio sine qua non*, institutions without which one cannot speak of democratic governance. We can accept such a choice, though, of course, it somewhat reduces the very understanding of “democratic institutions”. However, in view of the substantive study of the post-communist transition in Bulgaria, the choice of these three institutional fields seems justified.

The second theoretical choice is about the beginning of the democratic transition in Bulgaria. There are still considerable disputes over the issue, its beginning being postponed from the otherwise important date of November 9, 1989, to subsequent equally important events since 1990 (the adoption of the Constitution), 1991 (first elections won by the UDF), 1997 (January protests that led until early elections won by UDF). Romyana Kolarova makes her choice by referring to Adam Przeworski's criterion of “institutionalized uncertainty” as the beginning of a real democracy. Its implementation allows her to qualify the October 1991 election as a “constituent” election, in the sense of establishing democracy. Whereas all previous events, such as the first multi-party elections of June 1990 and the adoption of the Constitution in July 1991, take place in a situation of “liberalized authoritarianism”. This choice of the beginning of the democratic process can be seen as corresponding to Przeworski's theoretical model. But it can also be justified by the very adoption of the 1991 Constitution, which lays down the broadest institutional framework and, in that sense, justifies the October elections of that year. Such an explanation seems to be made by Romyana Kolarova herself, further, when based on the model of Lijphart and Taagepera, in which the democratic institutions themselves, once established, set a certain direction for the actors' actions.

In fact, the latter stems from the stated basic hypothesis of the study that “institutions set models and trends”. From now on, however, a series of questions arise regarding methodological choices. Lijphart's approach seems to outweigh the political culture approach of Almond and Easton. But is it not productive to think also in the categories of congruence between culture and institutions, a 1960s concept introduced by Harry Eckstein? Because the same democratic institutions, built in societies with different prevailing political cultures, have different efficiency. In this case, it is likely that mobilizing research on Bulgarian political culture may answer questions, including differences over other post-communist countries such as Poland or Hungary, regarding the definition of the beginning of the democratic process.

A second major issue is that of “the efficiency of democratic institutions”. In fact, it can be placed much broader as the effectiveness of the political governance in general. It seems to me that this research has basically a hidden axiology, based on an axiological view of the value hierarchy of political regimes. In such a hierarchy, “full democracies” are at the highest level in the assessment, below are other, underdeveloped and incomplete forms of democracy, and at the bottom are authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. However, if we try to move away from such axiology for a while, can we say that

the basic criterion for the effectiveness of a political system is how it succeeds in appeasing societies, forcing them to accept the established type of domination, to teach them to respect its normative framework. This is a question of the kind of legitimacy that all stable governments have more or less.

The study has repeatedly referred to the “stabilization of democracy” as an implicit goal of the democratic process that began after the end of the “liberalized authoritarianism”. But how does stable democracy fit in with Przeworski's principle of “institutionalized uncertainty”? Is not such a blend of congruence between the new democratic institutions and the new prevalent democratic civic culture? Another question can be seen here: to what extent can societies be really democratic if they are dominated by authoritarian attitudes in the national political culture, although democratic institutions also operate? In short, who is expected to prevail: institutions or culture?

Reflecting on Romyana Kolarova's theoretical choices, I wonder if it would be creative and productive to mobilize the paradigm of social constructivism as well? Are institutions just social constructions that work because we share common perceptions on them and our behavior is in harmony with these perceptions? It would be interesting, for example, to examine the ideas shared by citizens in our society about democracy and its institutions, about their effectiveness, or vice versa, their weakness. However, this is just an idea for another study to build on what has already been done.

I consider the study's argument for the “sustainable nature of left-right socioeconomic cleavage” as a very well-reasoned one. Romyana Kolarova argues for a solid argument in favour of the existence of two political blocs (composed of different parties, but stable as blocs) throughout the post-communist transition in Bulgaria – left and right. But is this enough to understand the dynamics of the party system? Is it not necessary to mobilize at least two other expressions of left-right cleavage, such as “liberal-conservative” and “libertarian-authoritarian”? This would complicate the definition of two major blocks because it would call into question their homogeneity.

Finally, I note that the research presented in this monograph is of high quality. The book undoubtedly broadens our understanding of the Bulgarian post-communist transition, successfully tests theoretical models and defines reasonably specific criteria for the institutionalization of the party system, the parliament and the government. The monograph also offers huge, well-organized and refined empirical material that can be useful in many other studies. Significant theoretical literature, predominantly Anglo-American, to a lesser extent Bulgarian, has been mobilized. Of course, not everything can be covered, but some major texts may be mentioned, such as the French-language large-scale collective monograph “Politique comparée, dir. Yves Déloye et Jean-Michel De Waele, Bryulant 2018” or the German “Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft” by Klaus von Beyme (Springer VS, Wiesbaden 2010). This, of course, may seem like too much as demand.

In conclusion, I will say that given the quality of the scientific publications presented at this procedure, especially the latest monograph, as well as the documented teaching achievements, also based on the obvious compliance of the application with the accepted criteria at Sofia University, as well as the generally accepted criteria for this academic position, I accept as true that the candidature of Assoc. Prof. Romyana Kolarova, PhD, meets the requirements for being elected to the academic position of “Professor” in the field of Political Science.

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