

REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boris Petrov Popivanov, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski "

on the PhD. dissertation of Mr. Stanislav Valeriev Todorov

on the topic of "*Direct Democracy as a tool for activating civil society (the case of Bulgaria, 2013-2017) /The role of information on civic activity in the three national referendums/*"

The submitted work consists of 158 standard pages, apart from which there is a bibliography, two appendices (in fact three, as the list of publications for content analysis is of a similar character) and notes. It meets the formal requirements for a PhD. dissertation.

The relevance of the topic is beyond doubt. The base for the doctoral student's analyzes are the three national referendums held in Bulgaria in a relatively short period (less than 4 years), as many in number as in the entire previous post-liberation history of the country. These forms of "direct participation of citizens in state power" (as defined by law) tend to generate new stakes in the political process, reformulate public debate, reposition political forces. Their influence is not limited to the time immediately before and after their holding. Even today, the issues at stake remain one of the central motives for political division.

The topic of civic participation is usually considered with positive connotations. Both researchers and politicians emphasize the importance of two processes - the activation of citizens and the democracy's getting closer to the people. I will add that they are sometimes seen as a counterpoint to the situation described as 'democratic deficit'. The doctoral student suggests that we look at this issue from another angle - according to the meaning of these processes. In his view, the meaning of the activity is not quantitative, it is not simply expressed in some mobilization of civic inclusion, but in awareness, in the appearance of the figure of the informed citizen. While the meaning of democracy is not in the mechanical observance of its procedures, but in its functioning as a culture, as a rational understanding of the benefits of discussion and common decision-making.

The questions to which the dissertation seeks answers arise on the mentioned basis. Does the information provided in referendum campaigns produce informed political participation? Does increased activity make the democratic political process more effective?

What are the forms of informed participation alternative to referendums? What are the primary factors eroding informed participation?

The text is structured in four chapters. The first theoretically interprets the figure of the citizen in the democratic process. The second chapter, which also has mainly theoretical and overview significance, focuses on unconventional forms of civic participation (with an emphasis on protest). The third chapter is directly dedicated to the three national referendums in Bulgaria, the one on nuclear energy in 2013, the one on electronic voting in 2015 and the one on majority voting and party subsidies in 2016. The fourth chapter examines the messages in the referendum campaigns through a serious empirical study by the method of content analysis, conducted by the author on 113 units of media information.

Four hypotheses were formulated, and all four were confirmed by the data from the empirical study. I will summarize them briefly here. 1. The information provided in information campaigns stimulates uninformed political participation. 2. The pursuit of victory over the political opponent determines the information provided in the campaigns. 3. The emotions caused by the manipulations and the rationalization determine the result of the three national referendums. 4. The large amount of unnecessary information fills the campaign space at the expense of the meaningful information on the voting proposals made. I have some hesitations about the correctness of the methodological tools used in connection with the third hypothesis - to what extent the analysis of media content can explain to us the motives of voters to vote. The proof of the hypothesis (pp. 131-135) actually leads again to the nature of the information. It really leads in the direction in which the author claims, but without sociological surveys of public opinion it is difficult to conclude with certainty that it was the information that produced the electoral result. So to speak, in the stimulus-response chain, the stimulus is indisputable, but we cannot be sure whether the response is due (only) to this stimulus or to any other stimuli (as well).

The referendum as a form of political participation is interpreted by the doctoral student in direct interaction with the problem of awareness. In itself, no form of participation guarantees positive results for the democratic process, which is a thesis systematically defended in the course of the research. The citizen as a participant in the democratic process is the one who can give or take away meaning of the various institutional forms. The author emphasizes activity only as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for achieving a democratic result: "Citizens are the tool that can bring real democracy closer to the ideal one."

(21) Hence an important conclusion about the need to make sense of the relevant institutional form. : "The referendum demands civic participation and reinforces the need for Robert Dahl's criterion of enlightened understanding." (28)

The initial definition of referendums is neutral: "a particular instrument of direct democracy, a variant of it, in which citizens decide instead of mediating institutions, i.e. referendums are an expression of direct democracy in the representative system. '(12) In practical terms, however, a referendum creates polarization and divides public opinion. According to the author, this is embedded in the very nature of the poll, which divides voters into two large groups, completely opposed to each other - those who answer "YES" to the question and those who answer "NO": "In the context of impossible cooperation and discussion between citizens with different views, referendums as a tool for direct participation in modernity do not pacify a nation, but divide it by promoting conflict instead of consensus. "(44) The author does not accept the basic idea of a referendum "against" and devotes a lot of effort to explicating the "discourse for the discourse pro and con" (eg p.66). The position regarding one or another form of civic participation is often determined according to this indicator - whether the given form implies a decision yes / no or unites around a cause. Thus comes a critical view of the protests: "The protest assembly does not prefer debates, but simply prefers not to agree. Protest is a politics without debate of those convinced of their own infallibility. In most cases, the politics of protest is a politics against politics. '(69) Conversely, a subscription is a form that enjoys a positive assessment because it is a 'positive' civic activity that does not attack the 'enemy'.

In this situation, it turns out that instead of a widely accepted solution to the existing problem, the referendum simply registers the supremacy of one group over the other group, and that supremacy is due to purely quantitative criteria and not to rational or expert ones. In other words, the referendum is a form that feeds the well-known, since Tocqueville's time, phenomenon of the tyranny of the majority: "Referendums in our country are majoritarianism instead of deliberation!" (56).

I will focus on two other weaknesses of the referendums as highlighted in the dissertation.

One weakness is that referendum practices replace the functions of democratic leadership and create what I would call "reverse leadership": 'It [the poll] urges institutional actors to assume a new role: from leaders of political parties and representatives of society

into leaders of referendums. The second type of leader aims to show that he trusts society when it does not trust him. In this type of leadership, trust is in the opposite direction - from political representations to society. '(104)

Another weakness is related to the fact that referendums and the campaigns preceding them focus public attention on a single issue (rarely more) and overshadow the variety of issues on the public agenda: "Our experience with direct participation in the period 2013-2016 shows us that referendums limit the power of the people by forcing them to focus on a specific issue at a specific time, instead of giving them the opportunity to look at politics on a larger scale and vote on complex priorities and multiple issues. '(104) This is in principle an anti-referendum conclusion. A delicate point with it is that in this way the right of the people to focus on "specific" problems is not recognized, but the obligation to look "on a large scale" is imposed on them.

Based on the above considerations, it is not surprising the author's view that the Bulgarian referendums are not a real civic activity. The first from 2013 is partisan, the second from 2015 institutional (presidential), the third from 2016 of a show ("the civic initiative of a small circle of citizens who are part of a certain organization and are consistent with the interests of the same organization" , 13) The introduction of the Bulgarian topic would benefit in my opinion from a more detailed and in-depth argumentation. Controversial summaries stand out, as well as missing information. For example, it is debatable whether the very idea of a referendum precludes deliberation because there is a parliament. Furthermore, the author speaks in a Bulgarian context of "parliamentary sovereignty" (104), which does not exist in Bulgaria. The legal basis of the information campaign is not sufficiently clear. It is commented on as something self-evident, and not as a normative requirement based on certain legal texts.

In the long run, the dissertation presents us the author's own solution to the problem of non-informed activity: "I propose the following combination of 'two in one' - a certain time before voting in a referendum the voters should fill in a test related to the meaning of the proposed voting topics." (49) However, this implies the possibility of objective information, i.e. the thesis that the correct knowledge of the problem exists, but the participants in the political process hide or distort it. But on some issues (say, nuclear energy), the opinions of specialists and experts are so divided that it is difficult to judge what "science" says in order to be fully informed as decision-makers.

The author is a strong supporter of deliberation as a procedure. That is why he developed the concept of "citizenocracy" instead of "peopleocracy". This means that in the analysis of democracy, we should focus on "demos" as a dynamic structure, and not on "kratos" in the sense of exercising power. The citizen must analyze and evaluate the decisions that affect him, not the people. "Citizens" are opposed to "the people" in the field of the referendum, which is the will of the "people", not the "citizens". The dynamic "demos" in question is embodied in "civil society". It should be noted that this creates a risk of confusion between a member of civil society and a citizen. The citizen is a relationship between an individual and a state, and the meaning to which the author's literary review tends is in the collective organized form (not individualized) of civil society. "Citizens can be thought of in two ways - one is in the idea of awareness, and the other is in the idea of power that democratic forms of government give to them. The idea of power brings us closer to the field of peopleocracy. However, can power be fully exercised without awareness? My answer is that it is impossible - civic activity expresses the desire to exercise this power, and awareness is the argument in favor of this power. "(58) But does "the argument" (singular) mean that this awareness legitimizes the civil right to exercise power? Then what happens to popular sovereignty, which is based on a social contract, not on awareness? Or?

The doctoral student has selected impressive literature in terms of volume and quality, within which he contextualizes his analysis. However, the abundance of sources consulted in the process of working on the dissertation raises some problems with their compatibility. First of all, I would like to highlight the consistent use of the concepts. It is quite understandable that different authors, schools and trends in different times and on different occasions use different concepts to denote their views on similar phenomena. The author of a literary review is obliged to comply with this stipulation and to present the terminological multilingualism in its inherent historical, theoretical and conjunctural contexts. In the dissertation this is not always a fact. I will give an example related to one of the leading concepts, democracy. When we read the work, we learn that in addition to being direct and representative, democracy is also "procedural", "pluralistic", "enlightened", "negative" (against an opponent), "thinking", "autonomous", "institutional", "participatory", "governing", "attending", "mass", "street", "liberal", "mosaic", "strong", "confused", "deliberative", "parliamentary", "consensual" and "majoritarian", "conventional" and "unconventional", "macro" and "micro", "hyper", "discussion", "real" and "ideal", "referendum" one. There is no attempt to systematize the series of "labels" of democracy. The review is presented in the form of a specific story,

"deliberation", where a concept is developed, different people appear to give arguments in one direction or another and then disappear. Theoretical paradigms dissolve in an endless movement from issue to issue. It is not possible to fully understand whether certain concepts have shortcomings, nor are there any concepts that are more applicable to the topic of the dissertation than others, and why. There is overconceptualization at the expense of decontextualization. For example, the question may arise as to what is the difference between discussion and deliberative democracy and whether it exists at all. The terms are sometimes used indefinitely. Alternatively, the text starts from someone's definition and goes with it, but then implies meanings taken by other authors. From there, we face the second problem, chronological compatibility. In many cases we are left with the impression that the authors in the literary review live in the same epoch and argue not only with some general ideas and views, but each with the specific statements of the other. For example, it turns out that Jose Ortega y Gasset of the first half of the twentieth century was skeptical of the conclusions of Alvin and Heidi Toffler in the second half of the century. Or that John Stuart Mill of the mid-nineteenth century complained against Robert Dahl's criteria of the late twentieth century. The transition from the problems of contemporary democracy in the present century to Gustave Le Bon 100 years earlier, and from him to Timothy Snyder again in our day, seems quite easy, with each arguing with the other. And in third place comes the genre compatibility. It is known that the author has the right to choose what sources and from what field to take, but still arguments from academic works should be compared with arguments from other academic works, not political science with essays or sociology with fiction. Such is the case with the Diaries of Leo Tolstoy as a source of statements in support of specific academic theses.

There are some other minor problems that could be easily corrected when editing the text for possible publication. In the first and second chapters, for example, there are no brief summaries of the conclusions made. Here and there in the text there is repeated information (e.g. for the 2016 referendum on p.95 and p.147)

The conclusion of the dissertation is presented under the title "Instead of a conclusion". It emphasizes the author's thesis on the principles of self-defense of democracy. At the same time, however, there are new opinions and quotations from new authors, which supplement the argumentation of the main text, instead of summarizing it. In my opinion, the dissertation would benefit from a more concentrated conclusion, summarizing the most important conclusions from the study itself.

The abstract reproduces in great detail the content and main conclusions of the dissertation. The author has presented three academic publications on the topic, each of which deals with key aspects of the relationship direct democracy - rationality, related to the Bulgarian political reality. We can assume that the work of the doctoral student is popularized, and the academic community is familiar with the central theses of his work.

In the abstract, according to the requirements, an author's reference for the scientific contributions in the dissertation is attached. Contributions 3-5 concern the originality and conclusions of the author's empirical research. Contribution 7 has immediate practical significance because it summarizes the specific recommendations for improving civic participation in Bulgaria in the form of a model. Contribution 6 is somewhat unconventional and provocative, as it emphasizes the author's thesis about the political value of the "passive citizen", developed from different angles throughout the dissertation. In my opinion, this is one of the leading conclusions of the work, which expands the perspective of the academic debate on civic activity. Closely related to this is Contribution 2, which contains the author's original definition of democracy as "citizencracy" as an emphasis on individual (informational and motivational) resources for civic participation as opposed to the effects of collective divisions. Contribution 1, which has a theoretical character, in my opinion, requires reformulation, as far as the value theories of democracy have a long enough tradition. Rather, the Bulgarian case should gain weight here as an example.

Finally, I would point out that the text makes a very positive impression with several things: the unusual but consistent critique of the referendums; the original approach to social polarization; the excellently performed empirical study of media information; the successful entry of the Bulgarian tendencies in the international processes.

In conclusion. I believe that despite some significant structural and substantive shortcomings, the dissertation has serious merits that allow it to be successfully defended. I will vote "FOR" Mr. Stanislav Valeriev Todorov to receive the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the scientific specialty "Political Science".

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