

Opinion

For the presented dissertation of Anita Simeonova Stefanova on the topic “Mechanisms for controlled voting in the Roma communities in Bulgaria 1991-2021” for the award of the academic degree of PhD of 3.3. Political Sciences

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The presented dissertation has a volume of 246 pages, including an introduction, three chapters of the exposition and a conclusion. The bibliography contains 233 sources in Bulgarian and English languages. It was made under the scientific supervision of assoc. prof. Dr. Stoycho Stoychev. The overall layout of the text, the style of the exposition, the reference to the sources used fully meet the academic standards.

Needless to say, the topic is pertinent, because the problem of the controlled vote has been discussed in the academy and society since the very beginning of the democratic changes, but it seems especially important during the last decade, when there is a visible decline in the general turnout and this controlled vote weighs more in the final results. It is also positive that the research continues the author's work in the previous master's thesis, which shows a consistency of her research interests.

The dissertation is an answer to a well-founded research question, which, although not exactly formulated as a question, can be understood as follows: what are the reasons for the “expanding scope of the phenomenon of vote-buying in the last 30 years in part of the Roma communities” and what the “results of it” are. The main hypothesis is that this is the result of the simultaneous interaction of two trends – on the part of the desirable votes of the political parties and on the part of the community leaders in asserting their power. In a sense, it is also the process of converting political elections into a commodity that is bought and sold. Anita Stefanova rightly looks for the main reasons for this phenomenon in the increasing marginalization of the Roma communities, especially after 1989, which leads to alienation from politics. She even states that “in this text, the primary source of the deepening process of strong alienation and encapsulation of parts of this community will be examined in detail.” The latter is quite ambitious and undoubtedly needs necessary more research, although some studies in Bulgaria exist precisely in this direction. All the same, the main task of the research, namely, the analysis of the expanding controlled vote among the Roma communities, remains central and the dissertation does not deviate from it.

The research is based on three main sources: the academic literature on the subject; the results of the parliamentary and local elections in the sections of the Roma communities and the 10 in-

depth interviews conducted in 2021 with vote brokers. Anita Stefanova demonstrates excellent and thorough knowledge of the academic research on the subject in Bulgarian and English. Her literary sources are used in substance, the references are correct, the theoretical explanations mobilized are adequate to the main research question. The results of the elections are also used competently and the observations provide argumentative support for the main hypotheses of the study. The 10 in-depth interviews are the most amazing because breaking into vote-dealing communities is both a difficult and dangerous business. Actually, my question is, how did she manage to do this when the vote dealers would undoubtedly suspect the researcher of working closely with the police? In any case, I find it not only very original, but also really heuristic to collect, summarize and analyse the information thus collected.

The structure of the dissertation logically corresponds to the set tasks and the answer to the research question. The first chapter introduces and discusses the main concepts of the study: the electoral process and electoral systems, the legal regulation of elections in today's Bulgaria, but mostly concepts such as controlled and bought votes. Here, I find the most interesting from a research point of view, the argumentation of the statement that in the entire long period (1991-2021) of the study of the electoral practices and the behaviour of the Roma communities, the trend of replacing the direct forms of buying votes with more complicated but also more elusive trade with dependences.

The second chapter is dedicated specifically to a general analysis of the Roma communities in Bulgaria. Here the author refers to the well-known studies in this direction by Bulgarian and foreign authors. The general conclusion is that, in general, the market economic transition and the dismantling of the old political structures of the communist state put the Roma people in a difficult situation of almost unbearable adaptation to the new realities and gradually lead to their social marginalization and encapsulation. This is also accompanied by two other processes of changing the identity of significant parts of the Roma communities – Turkification and evangelization, both processes leading to a search for a special identity, of differentiation from the larger community. This also has particular consequences, one of which is the creation of new networks of social control, beyond previous state-dependent mechanisms. A process that some researchers call “feudalization”. A successful attempt has been made here for a typology of the informal leadership in Roma communities, although the most interesting – a comparison of the effectiveness of these individual types of leadership – is left for further research.

The third chapter is the most interesting from the point of view of the research topic, while it is the shortest. It analyses the general dynamics of the controlled vote among the Roma community in Bulgaria on the basis of a systematic survey of the results of the parliamentary and local elections over a large period of 30 years. Here, a typology of five existing models of the “voice market” is made, which should be rightly cited as one of the essential scientific contributions of the study.

The research presented by the dissertation successfully answers the main research question posed. It has been argued that the observed increase in controlled vote practices among Roma communities is the result of turning elections into a kind of trade, where each of the

participating parties has its own specific benefit: the “buyers” get the votes they need; the “brokers” consolidate their positions of power in the community and receive part of the remuneration; the “sellers” of votes receive an actual material benefit, sometimes accompanied by the hope that whoever bought their votes might eventually do something to solve their problems.

In this situation, the way out is not easy, because each of the participants finds their own interest, and this makes it particularly difficult to break down the already established permanent interactions. But I find the attempt to systematically propose possible solutions to this situation to be particularly appropriate, and also important. Anita Stefanova has every right to think that “it would be wrong to think that only changes in the Electoral Code or creation of units that fight corruption can lead to the desired results”. The author makes several proposals for such a solution, some of which have been discussed for a long time. But the most important thing is the education and social integration of the Roma people. Of course, measures aimed at improving the electoral process are undoubtedly useful, but they still refer to the procedure, and not so much to the essence of the problem. The recommendation for active countermeasures by law enforcement authorities against the actions of “buyers” is also important here, because, as in the case of drug distribution, the pursuit of users who are also victims cannot be equated with the pursuit of those who derive direct profit from it.

I would ask a more general question: what is the deep reason for the failure of the integration of the Roma communities in the conditions of the democratic transition? Although this goes beyond the main framework of the dissertation. I would criticize the quite a few typos in the text – a little more diligence never hurts.

In conclusion, given the systematic and in-depth study of the question posed, the academic resources mobilized, the demonstrated ability to reason independently and critically, as well as the obvious academic contributions (on the typology of informal leadership and on vote market models) I believe that the presented text has all the necessary qualities to be awarded the title of PhD in specialty 3.3. Political science to Anita Stefanova.

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