

## REVIEW

by Assoc. Dr. Daniel Mihailov Smilov (Sofia University, Department of Political Science) on a dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor" at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Faculty of Philosophy, Department of "Political Science"

Scientific field: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, Professional direction: 3.3. Political science, Political science (Comparative Bulgarian politics) Author: Anita Simeonova Stefanova, Topic: *"Mechanisms for controlled voting in the Roma communities in Bulgaria 1991-2021."*

### **1. Education and qualifications of the doctoral student**

Anita Simeonova Stefanova graduated with a bachelor's degree in Political Science (2012-2016) at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of St. Kliment Ohridski". In the same department, in 2018, she defended her master's thesis on the topic "Trends in controlled voting in Bulgaria 2014-2017" in the master's program "Political Consulting" of the same faculty: this MA dissertation is also the starting point of her doctoral dissertation.

Anita Stefanova is a scholarship recipient of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (2015), and in 2017-2018 she is the vice-chairman of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation Scholarship Club.

Anita Stefanova is a full-time doctoral student at the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Philosophy at the University of St. Kliment Ohridski" (order RD-20-202/22.01.2019). She got the right of defense by rector's order RD 20-577/7.03.2022, based on the decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Philosophy from 2022.

The doctoral student has passed the necessary exams, she has met the conditions of her doctoral studies, stipulated by law and by the SU. Her dissertation has successfully passed internal defense. I.e. the conditions for external defence are met.

### **2. The dissertation and the abstract**

The focus of this review is on the PhD student's proposed dissertation for defence and its summary in the Abstract (Autoreferat). The abstract corresponds to the text of the dissertation. It contains 246 pages, including an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. Literature comprising 233 titles in Bulgarian and English is cited. There are also three appendices to the dissertation: I.10 in-depth interviews conducted in 2021 with vote brokers in the cities of Sofia, Pleven, Burgas, Pazardzhik; II. Tables with results of local elections 2007-2019; III. Tables with results of the parliamentary elections 2005-2021. There are 16 graphs in the text.

The main hypothesis that the dissertation proves is that the trading of votes in the Roma communities is generally a hard-to-eradicate "market", driven by the strong impulses of "demand and supply":

*"In the present work, we assume that the political market of bought votes in the Roma communities is the result of the demand by the political parties and the organized supply by some of the Roma community leaders, who use their authority and mechanisms to control individual groups of voters. These mechanisms and authority itself are based on social, economic, cultural, etc. preconditions, the effect of which is amplified by the actions or inaction of the state, and in particular of the law enforcement authorities, which fail, for whatever reasons, to establish the application of the relevant legislation to a significant part of the ghettoized population in the Roma communities."*

The task that the doctoral student sets herself is to research this market, focusing mostly on the socio-economic and cultural factors that make the Roma communities in the country susceptible to vote trading. Therefore, the dissertation examines the character of the Roma communities in a rather long period that began even before the fall of communism. The aim of this review, which builds on the published literature, is to trace the genesis of the conditions that make Roma communities susceptible to vote buying. The researched factors are numerous, but the main ones are the impoverishment and marginalization of these communities, especially in the last three decades, as well as the imposition of "authorities" of a powerful, criminal and even religious nature on them.

The research methodology combines an analysis of existing literature on the issue, in-depth interviews conducted in Roma neighborhoods, which in itself is an achievement because the author has predisposed his respondents to talk openly about essentially illegal practices. In the third chapter, an analysis of the real electoral results in several sections with Roma voters is made, on the basis of which different models of vote buying are distinguished.

The author is aware of the limitations that the chosen approach implies. The idea of the dissertation is to illustrate the existence of certain patterns of vote buying, to support them with in-depth interviews and voting analysis. This methodology is not representative of the country, however, and cannot give a good idea of the scope and size of the phenomenon.

*"The research is focused on some of the largest hamlets in the regional cities, but also sections in the small settlements, some with 100% Roma population, also voting homogeneously and in this regard are of interest to the research...It is important to clarify that the research does not aim to be representative at the national level... A main problem that appears before the dissertation is the impossibility of determining the exact scale (scope/size) of the phenomenon, since the process of preparing the organization takes place outside the framework of the law and the participants skillfully manage to conceal their actions. The lack of a rich body of theoretical and empirical research on the topic is an additional challenge."*

The part about the Roma communities, their marginalization and cultural peculiarities is, from my point of view, rich and informative, but since I am not a specialist in these matters, I cannot give it a very precise assessment. Despite

various revisions, some disturbing and perhaps controversial statements remain in this section. For example, regarding Roma evangelization:

*“Initially, the preachers tried to “educate” various qualities in the Roma, so that they would be “good” Christians. After assuming the leadership role, however, they began to rule the churches in their own way and to practice and preach the rules and dogmas of the religion as they saw fit.”*

It is not very clear what the meaning of these statements is and how useful they are to the main argument in the dissertation. The idea that the author imposes is that Roma issues are directly influenced by “informal” leaders, whose role can be both negative and positive:

*“In fact, if informal leaders are recognizable and authoritative, there is a possibility that their behavior and opinion will positively influence the change of attitudes towards education and integration in the Roma community itself...”*

An interesting question is to what extent the Roma communities in the state are different in this respect from other communities with a similar material status. Illiteracy and poverty probably have a similar effect on communities. They push certain “informal” leaderships of people with resources forward and lead to dependencies that facilitate practices such as vote buying.

Anyway, according to the author, the characteristics of the Roma communities are an important reason for the spread of vote buying. Moreover, this socio-cultural foundation makes these practices difficult to eradicate:

*“Despite the positioning of various observers to be carried out in risky sections, there is no real result. Brokers over the past 30 years have gotten better at inventing the best and most underhanded vote buying schemes. In this regard, only findings are made after the end of the election day, but the practices are not stopped, on the contrary, specifically in this minority group, the voting control mechanisms spread more and more from election to election.”*

Particularly valuable in the dissertation are the reconstructions of the corrupt practices based on the in-depth interviews. They are dense and convincing and provide a solid empirical basis for the analysis:

*“In the “Faculteto” quarter, after the meeting of the political representatives with the local leaders, the preparation process was started. The conditions of both parties are agreed upon (number of voters and financial dimensions, and other non-material agreements are also possible) and the work on the organization of the votes is started. Subsequently, a network of people with certain tasks is created: going around the houses and creating lists by sections, distributing money, checking whether voters vote on election day, transporting voters, paying the rest of the agreed amount. In different cases, different numbers of people participate, depending on the size of the neighborhood or the existing organisational structures. In the smaller hamlets, the organization is carried out by a few people*

*("Obelya" quarter), while in the larger ones ("Faculteto" quarter) by a network of the pyramidal structure type, also known as "network marketing"....*

*It depends on the people in the committee who have a direct influence on the conduct of the election day, but also the counting of the ballots. In this regard, if any of the voters requests a new ballot, it immediately becomes known to the entire sectional election commission. This can be taken as a sign that the particular voter has not kept his promise. However, it is not always possible to track the vote and for the mediators to have clarity as to who exactly did not keep the agreement. In most people, fear prevails, and in order not to have problems, they keep the promise and do not show self-will in this regard."*

In-depth interviews also provide good information about the motivations of voters who sell their votes. The main thing here is the material need, as well as the understanding that traditional political representation will not bring anything to these communities:

*"People are poor and they realize that if they take 4 people from a family for 50 BGN each, they will take 200 BGN. Do you have any idea how long a family here can survive with this money? They immediately go shopping for months. So that's how we look at elections as something to make money from." (Quarter "Faculteto").*

Although the main thesis that the dissertation imposes is that the "market" of bought votes is almost inevitable in certain socio-economic conditions, nuances appear at times that show that certain state actions can "shrink" this market significantly:

*"However, the interviews were taken in the period before the regular parliamentary elections in April 2021, when there were no real actions by the law enforcement agencies against electoral corruption practices. In the next two consecutive parliamentary elections in July and November 2021, actions were held throughout the country, and this was a prerequisite for a serious drop in voter turnout in the studied Roma sections. The fear of the brokers to respond to the interview invitation only a few months later is also evident. In this regard, we could assume that the measures to reduce the bought vote... in the period 2021-2022 have a positive effect and we are witnessing a significant change in the activity in the Roma sections"*

The third chapter of the dissertation offers a study of selected Roma sections, where there is high volatility in voting – different parties win or turnout is very different. The precincts are well chosen and it is undeniable that the behaviour of the voters in them can hardly be explained by factors other than bought votes or discarded opponents' ballots. Based on this empirical picture, the author concludes:

*"In a large part of the sections, one can see an approach of consolidating several sections in one Roma neighbourhood, where a single party takes the vote, and this can happen throughout the studied period. In some of the sections, an approach of dividing the vote mainly between two parties is observed. As the two switch places from winner to runner-up and vice versa. Interesting phenomena are those political*

*formations that are poorly represented at the national level, but manage to situationally win a winning result in one or two sections, and this result is not repeated in subsequent elections. There are settlements where deviant behavior is not observed and it is as if the national vote for the specific election is multiplied. There is also a model in which maximum volatility with always a different winner in the studied period. However, these examples are few."*

These observations are summarized in several patterns of vote buying in Roma sections: Minimally volatile sections with one dominant party in all elections; Maximum volatility with always a different winner in the period under study. Minimally volatile sections with two dominant parties; Dominated by local initiative committees; Nationally marginal - locally dominant parties

In general, the work is informative, the methodology is adequately selected and the study expands our knowledge of the phenomenon of "bought and controlled" vote. Especially valuable, as it was said, are the summaries based on the in-depth interviews and the analysis of the voters' behaviour in the Roma sections. Despite my overall positive assessment, the work has weaknesses that could be addressed upon publication of the thesis or in future research:

- 1) The impossibility of assessing the scale of the "bought vote" phenomenon sometimes leads to the assertion that almost all Roma communities vote in this way. It would be good to have "control" sections with Roma voters who do not demonstrate such behavior. This would also make it possible to weigh the weight of various additional factors that make Roma vote in one way or another. It would be useful to have "control" sections with ethnic Bulgarian poor and marginalized voters to see, if their electoral behavior is similar;
- 2) Socio-cultural factors are a bit too general and they should concern the Roma as a whole - a little more detailed breakdown of individual cultural, economic and social factors is needed. For example, it is not clear whether evangelism helps or hinders vote buying - much is said about it, but its connection with the "bought vote" phenomenon is not sufficiently clarified;
- 3) The thesis is mainly focused on the "supply" and does not deal in detail with the vote-buying parties. After all, these parties must also possess certain "socio-cultural" characteristics in order to get involved in practically organized crime. Obviously, not every party is equally capable of bargaining of this kind. This is an interesting question because the "market" for bought votes may actually be a product of a specific political "demand";
- 4) The dissertation does not systematically examine the role of the state in the regulation of this "market". After all, in the presence of inspections, sanctions and the imposition of these sanctions, the "market" can quickly close. The dissertation hints at this possibility, but does not explore it, remaining focused on the presence of a "supply";
- 5) The vote buying models discussed in part 3 are undeniably useful. But the author seems to underestimate the fact that, in general, the parties in power (at the national and/or local level) tend to be the leaders in vote buying. This is not a particular surprise, because they are the ones who, through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and other bodies, could control the corrupt practices. It is

unclear why this conclusion has not been more strongly drawn—the empirical evidence supports it.

### **3. Scientific contributions**

The above-mentioned criticisms do not detract from the originality and relevance of the study. Both in terms of the analysis of the socio-cultural conditions of the bought and controlled vote, and the modelling of bought vote based on voter behaviour and in-depth interviews, the work contains sufficient scientific contribution for a successfully defended doctoral dissertation. The contributions formulated by the doctoral student are correct. The work is an original study and the result of an independent creative process, without signs of plagiarism

### **4. Publications and participation in scientific forums**

The doctoral student reports the publications required for defence: four publications, the result of her participation in three doctoral academic forums, issued in the period 2020-2021.

Anita Stefanova has participated in three academic projects related to the topic of the PhD.

In the period 2014 - 2022, the doctoral student participated in the preparation, conduct, monitoring and reporting of the election process at the various levels of the election administration (SEC, RIC and CEC). She also participated in conducting exit polls during election day in various elections.

### **6. Conclusion**

Based on the above analysis, I find that Anita Stefanova meets all the conditions for awarding her the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in political science. I call on the esteemed jury to support her by congratulating her – both her and her scientific supervisor – for the results achieved.

Daniel Smilov