

OPINION

on the dissertation of Plamena Dinkova Papazova, entitled "BUILDING POLITICAL IMAGE IN BULGARIA: PERCEPTIONS AND IMPACT IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATION", proposed for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 3.5. Публиц Communications and Information Sciences (Media and Communications - Psychology of Communication),

prepared by corresponding member of BAS Anguel S. Stefanov

The text of the dissertation submitted by Plamena Papazova for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" is structured in Introduction, three chapters, organized in paragraphs, Conclusion, References and Appendices.

The topic of the dissertation is quite relevant as it envisages as survey period of 2020-2023, with the focus of the study on 2021, the year in which the social and political situation in Bulgaria was characterized by rapid dynamics of the parties political life and a series of extraordinary elections that brought to too short-lived successive parliaments. The dissertation research presupposes a good familiarity with the role and functions of contemporary public communication in the field of political activity, which is rapidly settling into the digital sphere.

I would like to point out from the outset that although the object of the study is clear, its thematization through the proposed title is not easy. This is because the topic itself is relational in nature. On the one hand, the construction of the political image of a contemporary Bulgarian politician depends on his or her mentality and affiliation to a certain political family, as well as on the skill of his or her PR agents. On the other hand, however, this image is actually shaped and supported only by the perception of him or her as a political figure. This, however, is a process played out within the framework of public communication and depends on the dynamically shaping evaluations of his voters and opponents. Plamena Papazova therefore properly directs the weight of her analysis towards

making sense of the significance of public communication in political life, and has included her own four studies in this regard.

In the first chapter, the author has found it necessary to make an extensive explanation of the concepts included in the title of the dissertation - those of political image, its construction through the perception of different communities of a given political figure, as well as the role and contemporary features of public communication. For this purpose, opinions and definitions of different authors are presented and commented. It is noted that "perception plays an extremely important role in the construction of political image" (p. 41), clarifying the concept of "perception" from a psychological rather than an epistemological perspective for the purposes of the dissertation analysis. This chapter draws a useful analogy between the creation and enhancement of the image of a business organisation or a particular company and the creation and maintenance of the political image of a political figure. In this regard, it is noted that "an organization interacts with different publics simultaneously, with some interactions having a stronger impact on the organization in certain situations and other interactions having a stronger impact in other situations" (p. 57). Special attention is paid to the role of digital communication in contemporary political life in Bulgaria, stating that "to a certain extent we could consider an overlap between the image and the media image of politicians" (p. 73).

The content of chapter two is fully in line with its title "Contemporary Politics and the Role of Social Media in the Shaping of Political Image Perceptions". Plamena Papazova has demonstrated clearly that the emergence and increasing informational influence of web-based social media over the last two decades has established new communication channels beyond those of the traditional media. And this fact has implications for public communication in the overall sphere of contemporary political life. An extensive review of experts' opinions and arguments about the informative and interactive possibilities of

social media for exchanging messages and initiating practical responses in the political sphere is provided.

My remark here relates not only to the usefulness of such a presentation, but also to the need for a more systematic authorial analysis of the views put forward on the possibilities of social media in the construction of the political image.

In the end of the chapter P. Papazova reports the results of her research aimed at measuring the activity of political leaders on the social media Facebook, with the research period being the whole year 2021. She justifies her interest in this year because it is the first time in the history of Bulgaria that three elections for the National Assembly and two rounds for the election of the president have been held. The study is interesting due to the fact that the activity of political leaders on social networks during election periods has a direct link to the construction of their political image. The profiles of Boyko Borisov, Slavi Trifonov and Kiril Petkov are compared. For this purpose, the author focuses on the manifestation of measurable parameters in the content and visual characteristic of the profiles of the mentioned political leaders. Thus, their political activity for the period of the study acquires a correct qualitative comparability. The latter would not have been possible without a clear description of the measurable parameters in the politicians' profiles and their precise quantification. This research is accompanied by the formulation of preliminary hypotheses, most of which have been confirmed. The overall conclusion is that the study "shows that the leaders of the leading parties in 2021 have also realised the power of Facebook. All three candidates show increased activity during the election campaigns" (p. 154).

The aim of the third chapter is to outline the results of three surveys related to the perception of the image of and trust in the Bulgarian politician in 2021. "The underlying thesis of the three surveys is that public perceptions of the political image of leaders in Bulgaria are a significant factor in the success of their

political careers. "The first survey has the working title "The Image of the Ideal Politician in Bulgaria", the results of which are important for illuminating the topic of the thesis. The key and general conclusion from this survey is that "Voters seek political representatives who are both well-educated and exhibit honesty, and these are the most important qualities that voters look for, without placing much importance on the candidate's gender or appearance" (p. 182).

The second survey is entitled "Perception of political image in the context of the 2021 elections in Bulgaria". It is interesting because it aims to discover how a political image of a politician is formed by the public, who choose which sources of information are most relevant and credible. In this way, the ways in which people are informed about a politician's qualities can be identified. The results of the poll are commented on in detail and with competence.

The third survey is entitled "Trust in the political image in 2021 in Bulgaria" and its aim is to investigate this trust as a result of the meeting of the reputation of politicians, based on their value attitudes, with the value system of the evaluating public.

All three surveys have been very precisely conducted, both in terms of the type of questions asked and the subsequent analysis of the results ranked by age, gender and education. In some cases, a joint analysis of the responses to two interrelated questions is made to establish dissimilarity or harmony between them. The systematised results of the surveys can be useful for PR-agents of leading political figures, as well as for psychologists, sociologists and political scientists interested in the way political image is built in Bulgaria.

Finally, I would like to make the following recommendation to P. Papazova, if she wishes to continue the research done in the dissertation. She notes the fact that "the impossibility of forming a government, together with low voter participation, leads to a negative perception of voters about politics and politicians in Bulgaria, which reduces the level of trust in them" (p. 156). However, is the lowered image of Bulgarian politicians only due to disapproval related to their

visible qualities - appearance and behaviour, failure to fulfil promises made, suspicion of corruption and the like, pointed out in social media? Or are some of the non-voting Bulgarians influenced by other considerations in their assessment, which are not related to the qualities visible in the politicians' public behaviour, but by the suspicion of deeper reasons determining their activity, such as external influence. Some people with a broader culture and who have more information about geopolitical realities are likely to share a negative image of some politicians mainly for this reason.

I agree with the Statement of scientific contributions of the dissertation presented on page 60 of the dissertation abstract.

The dissertation abstract accurately reflects the topic, aims and contributions of the dissertation.

I have no joint publications with the author of this dissertation.

After all that has been written so far, I will vote "YES" for awarding Plamena Dinkova Papazova the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences (Media and Communications - Psychology of Communication).

Sofia, 10.08.2023.

