



REVIEW

from Prof. D.Sc. Lubomir Stoykov, UNWE

(scientific position, academic degree, name, surname, educational / scientific institution) for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 3. Social, economic and legal sciences and professional direction 3.5. Social Communications and Information Sciences (Psychology of Communication).

with a dissertation on a topic: **"Building a political image in Bulgaria: perceptions and influence in public communication"**

presented by Plamena Dinkova Papazova, full-time doctoral student in the **Department of "Communication, Public Relations and Advertising"** of the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication

with supervisor: **Prof. Diyana Petkova, PhD.**

I. Presentation of the doctoral (PhD) student on the basis of the submitted documentation

Plamena Papazova is a doctoral student in the Department of "Communication, Public Relations and Advertising" of the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication (FJMC) of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". She has a master's degree in "Advertising and Public Communication" and a bachelor's degree in "Journalism" also from FJMC. Her additional qualification includes a number of certified courses, including two at the Council of Europe. Plamena Papazova has professional experience as deputy director of the Center for Personal Development Support, as well as as an Expert in Youth Activities at the Municipality of Stara Zagora. From 2015 to 2018, she worked as an expert in an advertising house, and before that she gained experience as a manager in a telecommunications company. She is part of the author collective of the monograph "Religious Identities in the Postmodern World: Intercultural and Communication Aspects" (2020) and has published five articles in various scientific journals. With professional and collegial respect, I will also highlight my excellent impressions of Plamena Papazova, whom I taught in the discipline "Culture and Media" in the bachelor's program in "Journalism" at FJMC years ago.



II. Assessment of the qualities of the text of the dissertation

Before offering an opinion and assessment of the merits of Plamena Papazova's dissertation, I must clearly and categorically point out that the image of a politician is not only an image, idea and impression of his actions, appearances and public behavior, but also an extremely important factor and means of achieving political goals, a prerequisite for achieving leadership success. Any disparagement of political communication and, in particular, the good construction and maintenance of the personal or group image is capable of causing divergence with the desired results. Such disparagement is also a serious prerequisite for political defeat. There is no doubt that image in politics can contribute to a dizzying career rise, but also lead to a quick and irreversible professional sunset, even a communication disaster.

Plamena Papazova has focused on a key area of political communication and political PR, including and to digital forms and means of their effective implementation. The topic is hot and extremely relevant today - especially against the background of the brutal political opposition and the years-long political crisis. That is why I admire both doctoral student Papazova and her supervisor, Prof. Diyana Petkova, PhD. The author has made her time limit for building the political image and justifying the role of public perception with a focus on the year 2021. This rather narrow framework is a real challenge for any analyst and doctoral student, since on the one hand it allows a very deep and penetrating analysis, but on the other hand it also contains the risk of overexposing and exaggerating the importance of this period, which could turn out to be insufficient for reliable and legitimate summaries. The object of the research is clear - an analysis of the perceptions and psycho-social attitudes of Bulgarian citizens towards politics and politicians in the context of the 2021 elections. However, the goals of the dissertation are broader and include the analysis and processing of information about the political situation in our country between 2020 and 2023. The research tasks are clearly and correctly stated, which, along with everything else, also contain several own studies - the Facebook profiles of three influential politicians (Boyko Borisov,



Slavi Trifonov and Kiril Petkov) and capturing and interpreting the psycho-social attitudes towards the Bulgarian politician and his public image.

In the first chapter, "Political Image, Perception and Influence: An Analysis of Theories in the Context of Public Communication" Plamena Papazova confidently and competently points out some of the most important foundations in the theory of political communication and political image in modern Bulgarian social reality. Justifiably, she pays due attention to the communication process and its elements in the communication model; dwells on public communication and connections (nature, role and technologies); examines the factors influencing PR effectiveness without going beyond the audience-perception correlation; gives due consideration to political influence in the context of the media environment; delves into the peculiarities of the political image in the context of public communications (on the one hand – in the interrelationship between different audiences and image formation, and on the other hand – in the specifics of the political image).

Quite logically, the accent in the **second chapter** falls on contemporary **politics and the role of social media in shaping perceptions of the political image**. Thoroughly, Plamena Papazova goes into even greater depth on the topic of her dissertation work and fixes a number of serious aspects of political communication and political image: Internet and politics; the power of social media; social media and politics; Memes; fake news; the interaction between social media, civic activism and politics; the digital age of transparency; the activity of political leaders in the social network Facebook: an analysis of the year 2021 (author's research). In the final part of the second chapter, the author rightly recommends that political leaders use the potential of social networks more purposefully as a means of constructing a positive image and, together with that, emphasizes the importance of a good tone and the quality of the information they publish (p.155). .

The doctoral student deepens and refines her analysis in the **third chapter "Political image in Bulgaria: analysis of psycho-social attitudes and trust in politicians**



(research in 2021)", in which she competently and reasonably follows and interprets significant trends in Bulgarian society and the attitude towards politicians in recent years. Plamena Papazova's three own studies are indicative of the qualities of the peer-reviewed dissertation work, respectively: **Psycho-social attitudes for the Bulgarian politician in 2021**; „**Perception of political image in the context of the elections in Bulgaria in 2021**”; „**Confidence in the political image in Bulgaria in 2021**". The conclusions that the author makes correspond to a number of particularly important findings about political life, political communication and the image of a politician in our country. The author comes to the conclusion that the most important quality of a politician, according to the respondents, is honesty, and that the risk of destroying trust in the political system is quite real. Education has the most influence on respondents' answers, while the least influencing factor is respondents' gender. Among other important conclusions from these studies is the generalization that the opinion dominates that the electorate, in this case - the respondents, prefer active rather than passive and silent politicians, as well as that they do not share firm and consistent ideas about politicians and would be easily influenced by proven negative cases related to one or another leader; her hypothesis about the shaken trust in politicians, and together with that they do not confirm the assumption that the respondents would change their attitude towards a person they know if the respective person is engaged in politics.

In the conclusion of this dissertation, the analytical skills and abilities of the doctoral student, who reliably systematized the main results of her research, are clearly visible. I agree with Plamena Papazova's statement that "**...Bulgarian society shows less and less trust in politicians, which is due to associations with lies and personal interests. This fact has been confirmed by the repeated parliamentary elections in which parties with large support collapse in the subsequent elections. To be successful, politicians must be well-educated, active in the public sphere and, above all, convince the people that they do not pursue personal interests and always be honest. They should not try to cover up their mistakes, as the digital**



"aquarium" we live in makes this virtually impossible. Being caught in a lie, even about small things, can cause serious and hard-to-repair damage to the political image." (p. 232).

III. Contributions to the dissertation research

I acknowledge all the author's claimed contributions to her dissertation. At the same time, I will highlight the following more important achievements:

- Study of the perceptions and attitudes of the audience in Bulgaria and their role in political communication and image construction.
- Delineation of the psycho-social and cultural prerequisites, specific to Bulgaria, which differentiate the political space of our country from other cultural and social zones in the world. This specificity is seen as a necessary base on which to build messages in public communication.
- Study of the effect and resulting consequences of digitalization in political communication and the construction of political image.

IV. Notes and recommendations

In some parts of the dissertation text, the descriptive beginning dominates the analytical one, which is at the expense of the depth of the research. I expected a stronger part in the psychological interpretation of the political image, including the more thorough examination of the psycho-emotional means, techniques and arguments used by today's politicians for the faster and, at the same time, more manipulative, construction of their image. Technical and stylistic errors and omissions are noticeable in separate places in the work. I will emphasize, however, that the remarks made in no way detract from the value and excellent impression of Plamena Papazova's dissertation, and that these flaws are of a secondary nature and can easily be remedied in the author's subsequent research and publications.

My questions to Plamena Papazova are:

1. *To what extent does the communication and social phenomenon of politainment*



affect the construction and development of the image of the three politicians - Boyko Borisov, Slavi Trifonov and Kiril Petkov?

2. Which of the digital techniques and means were neglected and underestimated in the construction of the image of the three political leaders analyzed in the dissertation?

V. Publications and participation in scientific forums

The author has attached a list of her four publications on the dissertation topic, two of which have already been published (resp. "The image of the ideal Bulgarian politician in 2021" and "Perception of political image in the context of the elections in Bulgaria in 2021"), and two others have been approved and are about to be published ("Trust and politics: survey of public opinion in Bulgaria in 2021" and "The role of social media in the formation of political image: analysis of the profiles of Boyko Borisov, Slavi Trifonov and Kiril Petkov on Facebook in 2021"). These publications are a good certificate of the scientific and professional merits of the doctoral student and clearly present significant arrays of the dissertation work.

VI. Conclusion

The dissertation contains a valuable and representative analysis of political communication and political image, based on the careful study of perception and influence in public communication. The author has followed academic standards in writing scientific papers and has demonstrated self-demandingness and consistency. Her work will certainly be of use to journalists and PR specialists, politicians and political scientists, media researchers and national psychologists. I strongly recommend the respected scientific jury to vote "For" the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Plamena Dinkova Papazova in scientific field 3. Social, economic and legal sciences and professional direction 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences (Psychology of Communication).

Date: September 11, 2023

Reviewer:

Prof. D.Sc. Lubomir Stoykov