

Review

on competition for the academic position of professor in 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences (Sociology - Sociology of Power), announced by the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" with Milena Yakimova Yakimova as the sole candidate

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The candidate

Assoc. prof. Milena Yakimova, Dr.Hab. is undoubtedly a great example of consistent and focused academic growth in the Bulgarian academic environment. After her higher education in Sociology at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (1992), she went on to complete her Ph.D. and successfully defended her first dissertation in Sociology, entitled "Late Modernity and Identity (Sociological Conceptualizations of Modernity)" (2003). The accumulation of research experience continued with a postdoctoral program in urban studies (2006-2007) and logically culminated in the development and successful defense of a dissertation for the Dr.Hab. degree on "Social critique and practice: theoretical dilemmas and practical mechanisms" (2016).

Her academic career also developed as a lecturer: assistant professor at Paisii Hilendarski University, senior assistant professor at Sofia university and in 2010 she was appointed Associate Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University, Sofia. This shows the same focused and consistent work to gain academic experience and grow in the academic environment.

Milena Yakimova has also had a series of international specializations, as a student at the University of Bielefeld (Germany), but also more recently at Dartmouth College (USA). These specializations are also possible due to her good language competences.

The candidate is a member of the Foundation for Humanities and Social Studies - Sofia, and has served on the editorial board of the journal "Critique and Humanism", one of the most important academic journals in the field of the humanities and social sciences.

In short, Milena Yakimova undoubtedly has the necessary academic experience and career track record to be a candidate for the academic position of Professor in Sociology.

Compliance with minimum requirements

In particular, I would like to draw your attention to the report on the compliance with the minimum state requirements for academic positions, according to Article 2b of the Law on Academic Research and Development for scientific field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences. Although I am convinced that not everything is subject to precise measurement, especially with regard to the quality of academic research and publications, the summary presented by Milena Yakimova shows a total of 1240 points. This represents a significant achievement in the academic community, if one considers the data published in the Academic Staff Register of NACID.

Research activity

Of course, a review for a competition for the academic position of professor requires first and foremost to evaluate the research activity of the candidate.

Publications

Milena Yakimova is the author of 3 published monographs and co-author of 3 more collective monographs (1 of which is published in English). She has published 5 studies and 49 scientific articles. She has been a compiler and editor of 7 issues of the academic journal "Critique and Humanism" and of 2 scientific collections of articles and studies. Together with Dimitar Vatsov, Boyan Znepolski and Teodora Todorova, she co-authored the textbook "Civic Education" for 11th grade (published by Bulvest).

Specifically for the competition, Milena Yakimova has submitted her most recently published monograph, "Fear and Propaganda" (Sofia: East-West, 2022), which has the character of a habilitation thesis, as well as 4 studies (in the journal "Critique and Humanism" and in the CAS Working Paper Series), two of them in English, and 20 articles published in academic journals and platforms (2 of them co-authored).

The subject fields of these publications show both a broad competence of the author in the field of sociology, both empirical and theoretical, but also academic preferences towards three main fields:

- Propaganda and Populism.
- Education and civic culture.
- The sociology of the city.

Of course, this attempt of mine to group Milena Yakimova's scholarly interests into three categories on the basis of the publications she submitted for the professorial competition can be reasonably challenged, at least because they could be qualified as reductionism. Nevertheless, I will use this typology to facilitate my assessment of such a diverse body of scholarly work. Moreover, I make my assessments based on my own experience in political science and, in part, political sociology, so my conclusions will in any case be the result of these limitations in my academic competence.

The monograph "Fear and Propaganda" is the main habilitation work and deals with a problem that has been one of the foremost academic interests in the humanities and social sciences for the last 10-15 years. But while many publications in Bulgarian academia deal with the effects of populism and anti-democratic propaganda, this is, to my knowledge, the first comprehensive monograph in Bulgarian social science specifically exploring the contemporary dimensions of propaganda. The book contains two parts, the first specifically devoted to propaganda and the second to manipulation and domination through fear in societies.

In the self-evaluation of the scholarly contributions, Milena Yakimova points out (albeit secondarily), that the monograph develops a notion of propaganda "*which a) theorizes propaganda as a specific modality of representation – the introduction of ideational content into the affective stream of experience, as an orchestration of perceptions of myself and my place in the world; in this sense, b) Jacques Ellul's argument that propaganda is not just a lie is amplified - the thesis is developed that this mode of representation cannot be thought in the logical opposition true-false, but true-plausible.*

Propaganda is thus a representational mode that organizes affective content, organizes the gaze, and does not present pictures to the "pure" gaze or to the reasoning faculty." I have allowed myself this lengthy quotation because it adequately and acceptably presents the monograph's most important scholarly contribution, but also because it essentially explains a concept (of propaganda) that in many different cases, and especially in journalism, has been unsuccessfully conflated with disinformation or outright lying. Milena Yakimova shows in a refined way why propaganda can be so effective, precisely because it is not an outright lie that can be identified relatively easily, even by a not very critical mind. Propaganda works with bits and pieces of the truth, producing an image of reality that is only plausible, but therefore seems more acceptable.

The monograph's second (though in my mind) significant scholarly contribution is its problematization of propaganda as "impression orchestration", which distinguishes it from other types of populist appeals. This distinction also allows Milena Yakimova to develop "empirical indicators for distinguishing propaganda from populist formulas". This achievement has undoubtedly practical benefits, not only for researchers, but also for journalists, analysts and educated people in general, when making public messages and unmasking anti-democratic propaganda.

A third undoubted achievement of the monograph, but also supported by the texts of some of the articles, is the identification of the mechanisms for '*capturing the language of social critique and transforming it for the purposes of an advancing new anti-liberal and anti-globalist propaganda*'. I will note here that to some extent the mobilization of social critique by non-democratic movements is familiar in history – the example of the social demagogy of Hitler's party in Germany is well known. I would be a little more critical, however, of the use of the term 'anti-globalist propaganda', because the word 'globalism' itself is polyvalent: many today equate it with the older concept of internationalism (laden with its Marxist history), but understanding it as the supranational power of corporations. In this case, however, the anti-democratic sense of "anti-globalism" is more along the lines of opposing the national (and everything that can be associated with it) to a globalized world in which we live and from which we benefit. Or, to put it more succinctly, "anti-globalist propaganda" is overtly nationalist when it does not specifically and concretely refer to the global power of global corporations over our lives.

By the way, and this is a fourth contribution of the text, the monographic study provides a criterion for distinguishing "empirical phenomena that deserve to be called 'propaganda.'" The narrative of the future as inevitability, the mode of "call to action" as assumption of power versus following the propaganda rhetoric (and the propagandist himself, though it remains hidden), and the "form of addressing social problems" whereby it becomes a transformation of the idea of justice into an idle expectation of revenge. The latter is also, to some extent, a response to the remark formulated above about 'anti-globalism'.

I believe that the proposed criteria for distinguishing between populist critique of the social status quo and its, as the author calls it, "propaganda metamorphosis" is the most interesting and significant achievement of the monographic study. The first criterion stated is that the populist critic calls "the people" to action, while the propagandist calls "the people" to enrage, leaving the action to him, who understands, who knows. The second stated criterion is that propaganda "sacrifices truth for the sake of plausibility", which allows it a particular "flexibility" in naming the "enemies" of the people's interests – it may be one once, another then, but this goes with the pretense that it is always talking about the

same thing. I agree that the criteria of distinction thus proposed allow us “not to call everything we don't like propaganda”.

An essential part of the monograph is chapter two of part one, devoted to illiberal propaganda in Bulgaria. The study is part of the collective research project of FHSI-Sofia “Anti-liberal Discourses and Propaganda Messages in Bulgarian Online and Print Media 2013-2016”. Finally, this huge empirical research allows to identify four main points of the anti-liberal propaganda in Bulgaria in the period 2013-2016, the essence of which is the disqualification of the West (US, NATO, Europe) as a democratic support, the praise of Russia as the “savior of Europe” and the rejection of the Bulgarian political elites as corrupt.

The empirical study also allows to trace the dynamics of anti-liberal propaganda, as well as to make a typology of the media in which the most frequent uses of the talking points are identified. But the essential conclusion of this study is, and it has a much broader meaning, that the picture produced by anti-liberal propaganda is not the expression of some implicit and widely shared political agenda, but manages to fuse “in one vocabulary, in fact, heterogeneous and even contradictory perceptions of injustice”. This is where its efficacy lies, because it allows people who would otherwise find it difficult, or even never, to accept any kind of unanimity or unity, to recognize themselves in it.

But here it seems to me that there is some ambiguity in the qualification of this propaganda, obviously and strongly linked to the propaganda of the Russian Federation. It qualifies, first of all, as anti-liberal, but also as anti-democratic. My question is, what is the difference? There are numerous studies that treat the difference between liberal and democratic, some even oppose them. On the other hand, we qualify the Western type of democracy as a liberal democracy.

In the same first part of the monograph, we also deal with the very essential issues of the media, their independence, journalistic ethics and the social status of the media in general. In this respect, I do not feel competent enough to truly evaluate the analysis, but I find it perfectly acceptable.

Particularly interesting is the second part of the monograph, entitled simply 'Fear'. It actually analyses the use of anxiety and fears by propaganda, which, in the words of the author, “transforms anxiety into fear”, and hence into the stigmatization of the easily identified “guilty”. The analysis is constructed on four main concepts: social anxiety, fear management, propaganda effect and social governance. Governance through fear is already a pervasive theme in the social sciences, as evidenced by the presence of a Wikipedia article on it in both English and French. But here the interesting part is in the last chapter five of the monograph, based on the analysis of focus groups. This analysis makes it possible to reconstruct the impact of propaganda messages as forming an emotional mood susceptible to anger and to the expectation that “someone will finally fix things”.

Although the themes of propaganda and populism are most visible in the publications submitted to the competition and especially in the monograph as a habilitation thesis, the second thematic area of Milena Yakimova's research interests also deserves special attention. This is generally the subject of education and civic culture. To some extent, this is related to the understanding that an effective shield against the influence of anti-democratic propaganda and populist discourses is what Noam Chomsky calls “intellectual self-defence”, achievable through education.

Two of the articles deal with a particularly sensitive issue in education and it is not so much the content of the curricula, but equal access to a good education. Milena Yakimova analyses the causes, conditions and prerequisites for social inequalities that are generated by the different quality of education, related to the different access to quality education. In one of her articles, she notes: *“Students are measured according to intellectual achievements, which the dominant discourse reduces to educational motivations formed in the family. This supports and legitimizes a process of increasingly early selection of children according to intellectual achievement and has the function of showing desirable families that the school selects its children and legitimizing the reproduction of cultural capital”*. The topic of education and inequalities, although not new in Bulgarian sociology, is becoming more and more up-to-date and is again treated in one of the recent publications on the competition in *“Critique and Humanism”* (issue 57).

In several publications Milena Yakimova declares herself as a sociologist who is systematically interested in social inequalities, their various manifestations and causes. In a study published in the Yearbook of Sofia University (2010) she analyses *“the scene of the city’s social life”*. The city is Sofia, and the author aptly discusses a long process of *“degeneration of the city”*, of the withdrawal of wealth from the center and its enclosure in peripheral *“gated communities”*, which leads to the de facto depopulation of central neighborhoods alongside the deepening segregation of marginalized communities, mostly Roma, in the *“classic”* concentrations of this community – the districts of Sofia *“The Faculty”*, the district of Filipovtsi, Filipovtsi and the quarter *“Hristo Botev”*. It is a remarkable argument that both gated communities and ghettos are practically equally inaccessible to outsiders, but most of all that both essentially privatize public resources.

Another aspect of this degeneration of public (i.e., generally accessible) places in the city as sites of social interaction is the proliferation of malls within the city itself, even in its very center. As Milena Yakimova notes, *“the mall is a private space where the public is invited to spend money, not a public place in which to contemplate power”*. Although not present in the article, the reference to *“The magic of the mall”* (J. Goss, 1993) is evident, especially for its claim that *“shopping has become the dominant type of social life”*. According to him, the mall is now the third place of public life after the home and the school/workplace, but in fact a secured space open only to *“normal visitors”* and closed to deviants or non-shoppers.

Scientific projects

When evaluating an academic activity, publications seem to be the most important, but participation in research projects is also very important. Throughout her career so far, Milena Yakimova has participated in more than 20 projects (Bulgarian and international), and only since her habilitation in 2010 she has participated in 8 projects.

The topics of these projects cover a broad field of sociology, anthropology and political science: populism of course and the risks of representative democracy, anti-liberal discourses, but also again inequalities in education, civic mobilizations and even the topic of immunizations and populist oppositions to science.

Teaching activities

Milena Yakimova already has extensive teaching experience, accumulated since 1996 without interruption until now. In the University of Sofia she teaches *“Political Sociology”*, *“Sociology of Power”*,

“Qualitative Methods in Sociology”, “Social Theory and Pragmatism”, “Sociology of Personality”, “Digital Media and Video Games”, “Civic and Intercultural Education”, etc.

Academic Environment

Throughout her academic career so far, Milena Yakimova has earned a reputation as a competent, focused and methodical researcher, a respected lecturer and a person who communicates easily with colleagues but always stands up for her opinions.

Conclusion

Taking into account Milena Yakimova's overall research and teaching activities, the good reputation she enjoys in the academic community and her undoubted scientific achievements, I am convinced that Sofia university “St. Kliment Ohridski” will gain much, including prestige, when it accepts her into the corps of its professors. I strongly support her election as Professor in 3.1 Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies, Sociology (Sociology of Power).

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