

REVIEW

By Professor Dr. Petya Lyubomirova Kabakchieva, Department of Sociology at Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski",

Regarding: a competition for the academic position of "professor" in the Professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology, and cultural sciences (Sociology - Sociology of power).

1. Information about the competition.

The competition was announced for the needs of the Department of Sociology at Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia University in **SG No. 65 of 28.07.2023**. I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury by order of the Rector of SU "St. Kl. Ohridski" No. RD 38-555 / 26.09.2023 on the basis of Art. 4 and Art. 29a of the ZRASRB, Art. 60 et seq. of the Regulations for the Implementation of the ZRASRB, Art. 118, para. (1) and para. (3) by PURPNSZADSU and decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Philosophy, protocol No. 1 / 12.09.2023

2. Brief information about the candidates in the competition.

The only candidate in this competition is Associate Professor DSC Milena Yakimova Yakimova, working in the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of St. Kliment Ohridski. The submitted documents fully meet the requirements for participation in the competition.

From the point of view of her biography, it is evident that Associate Professor Milena Yakimova has a classically consistent academic career. She graduated with a master's degree in Sociology in 1992 at SU. Since 1996 she has been an assistant at PU "P. Hilendarski", since 2002 - a chief assistant, but in SU "St. Kl. Ohridski", Department of Sociology, and since 2010 - Associate Professor in the same Department. In other words, associate professor Yakimova has a 27-year academic career, 21 of which in the Department of Sociology at SU. I will comment on her lecture courses and seminars later. In 2003, she defended a PhD on the topic "Late Modernity and Identity (Sociological Conceptualizations of Modernity)", and in 2016 she became a Doctor of Sociological Sciences with the thesis "Social Criticism and Practice: Theoretical Dilemmas and Practical Mechanisms". She has many academic publications, a total of 61 – 3 independent books, 3 co-authored books, 5 studies, 49 articles, one textbook and 9 compilations. She has participated in numerous research, as well as in a

number of scientific forums, has specializations abroad, was a member of the editorial board of the Critique and Humanism academic journal, and is a member of the Foundation for Humanitarian and Social Research - Sofia.

This is a biography of a serious scholar devoted entirely to academic activity. Here I must say that I have known Milena Yakimova since her student years, and I specify that I have no conflict of interest with her. So I can with a pure heart confirm the above conclusion made on the basis of the indicated facts from her biography, but completely in unison with my personal impressions of her work in the department, of the books and articles read, of her presence in academic life. I would add - Milena is not only a serious, but also a thorough scholar, with original ideas and constant curiosity about the social world, an excellent professional, with very broad knowledge not only in sociology, but also in humanitarian studies.

3. Fulfillment of the minimal national requirements for holding the academic position of professor.

The technical verification of the documentation provided for the competition clearly states that the candidate meets the minimum national requirements for holding the academic position of professor. From the presented by Assoc. Prof. Milena Yakimova scientometric tables, it is evident that the set minimum number of points, mandatory for holding the position of professor, have been met and repeatedly exceeded. This means that the competition is completely legitimate and complies with the Regulations of the SU on the terms and conditions for holding this academic position at the university.

4. Evaluation of teaching and learning activity.

As it became clear, Associate Professor Yakimova has been working in the Department of Sociology for 21 years. During this period, she has developed and conducted the following lecture courses: Political Sociology, Sociology of Power, Qualitative Methods in Sociology, Social Theory and Pragmatism, Sociology of Personality, Sociology for Non-Specialists (Bachelors in Political Science, Ethnology, Majors from MF, etc.); as well as lecture courses in several master's programs (Political Sociology, FF; Digital Media and Video Games, Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication; Civic and Intercultural Education in Faculty of History). The courses are highly professional, the ones I know are authored and show both the great erudition of Associate Professor Yakimova, and the wide range of her interests. She is respected by her colleagues and loved by her students for her responsiveness, competence and full of original and interesting ideas that she is always ready to share. That is why many

PhD students want her as their supervisor, and they are not lied to - she works diligently and timelessly with them, that's why they defend successfully. I should note that Associate Professor Yakimova is also the head of the MP "Political Sociology", which may not have many students, but they are all very active and many of them become doctoral students.

5. General description of the presented materials.

For the participation in the competition, associate professor Yakimova presented 25 publications, 20 articles, 4 studies and one monograph:

Milena Yakimova (2022) *Fear and Propaganda*. Sofia: East-West ISBN:978-619-01-1014-2

The focus of most publications is on propaganda, but there are also serious publications on education, national identity, civic activism.

6. Analysis of the candidate's scientific achievements.

I will comment on the scientific achievements of the monograph "Fear and Propaganda" for several reasons. First, in it we clearly find the main approach of Associate Professor Yakimova, characteristic of almost all her publications - the linking of rich empirical material with a deep theoretical framework and reflection, sometimes even provocative. One could say that this should be the norm for any serious professional sociological text. Yes, it is, but it is difficult to achieve, we witness, often, not constantly, self-speaking empirical studies, but also, less often, self-sufficient theoretical analyses. This is not the case with the texts of associate professor Yakimova. She often derives from the empirical material unexpected theoretical findings, the result of linking the respondents' voices to the specific social context. Such, in my opinion, are the explanations of the "mercenary-entrepreneur" in the analysis of the protests, of the project-entrepreneurial line in education, of the parents' responsibility discourse regarding learning and health of their children; and many others, which we find in texts submitted for participation in the competition, but also included in one or other version in the book. This is the second reason for not commenting the articles and studies - we find some of the topics and problems discussed in them analyzed in their interconnection in the monograph. The book is a summary of many of Milena's researches in recent years - not only about the specifics of propaganda and its relationship with anxiety and fear, but also about the pride of victimization, the fear of delocalization and the longing for relocalization, the mimetic "milling" and the virtuosity of everyday rationality, etc.

So, I begin with my comments on Milena Yakimova's monograph "Fear and Propaganda". The book is not a simple description of propaganda messages, on the contrary, it looks for the interrelationship between messages, genres, mechanisms for the "breakthrough" of propaganda and the reasons for its success. Therefore it is logically organized into two parts named "Propaganda" and "Fear", focused on the action and causes of the impact of anti-liberal and anti-globalist propaganda. Before proceeding to comment on the main conclusions and theoretical findings in the book, I will present the vast empirical material processed and analyzed by the author, as well as the applied empirical methods.

The first part analyzes the results of a content analysis of 3,305 publications in eight print and online media in the Bulgarian language, engaged in the firm conduct of anti-liberal propaganda. The analysis is author's, based on the research "Anti-liberal discourses and propaganda messages in the Bulgarian print and online media 2013-2016", carried out by a team of the FHSI - Sofia. The third chapter of the first part analyzes 13 semi-structured interviews with journalists. The second part is based on two field studies - 19 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2017 with people of three age groups and from all types of urban settlements, to varying degrees identifying with their work; and six focus group discussions – two with students and 4 with older participants from 4 major cities. Milena Yakimova has great merit in developing the methodology for the content analysis of the publications; the guides for the interviews and focus group discussions are elaborated by her, consulted with Tsvetozar Tomov, Veronika Dimitrova and Boryana Dimitrova.

The analysis of the propaganda messages in the Bulgarian print and online media is carried out in several steps, the methodology is precisely described, and, if I had to follow the requirements for listing contributions in a dissertation, I would have noted that the research definitely has a methodological contribution. And all her studies have contributions regarding the acquisition of new knowledge - the empirical data are very rich and interesting and it would be good if they could be used for further research.

But let's see the theoretical achievements in the book. The author singled out the first chapter as strictly theoretical, but I would say that theoretical hypotheses and concepts are implicitly present in all chapters of the monograph. However, the influence of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe with their notion of "chains of equivalence" is clearly felt both in the definition of propaganda and in further conclusions concerning the "fusion" of different experiences into one. Here is the original definition of anti-globalist and anti-liberal propaganda: The merging of various challenges to institutions and forms of the political "into

one in a specific and definable way, so that each of these challenges can mean any other and in the same time each one to mean the whole set of these challenges" (p.9). According to the author, this definition may also be valid for any modern propaganda, but she correctly specifies that this hypothesis should be further checked. Using notions of Harold Lasswell, Jacques Ellul, Edward Bernays, Howard Becker, Milena Yakimova lays out the various aspects of propaganda - its figures and techniques; the relation lie - propaganda - truth - plausibility; disinformation and propaganda; "white" and "black" propaganda, etc. Propaganda aims at emotional impact, it is "not so much a set of techniques for persuasion as a set of techniques for directing impressions". Its main mechanism is "that it creates the suggestion that the categories it provides are not actually provided from outside, but are personally won, authorially crafted, expressing one's own, individual position."

Milena Yakimova's thesis is that populist criticism and propaganda are related but different. She offers a clear criterion for distinguishing them: "the populist critic calls on the people to take power, the propagandist categorically does not want that. The former calls for action, the latter calls us to be angry but leave the action to him". This is a key hypothesis, proven by empirical research - after all, anti-liberal propaganda does not lead to action as suggested by Lasswell, but transforms negative victim attitudes into a refusal to act. The second distinguishing feature of propaganda, according to Yakimova, is that it "sacrifices the truth for the sake of plausibility.... its claim is to name and point to reality. And it does so by circumventing and blocking the action of elementary logical laws in the name of pointing out one enemy today, another tomorrow, pretending to always be talking about the same thing." These theoretical hypotheses are tested in the other chapters of the book.

The second chapter presents precisely and in detail both the methodology and the conclusions of the large study of the publications in 8 Bulgarian media, determined after a pilot study as carriers of anti-liberal and anti-globalist messages, and according to the degree of saturation with these messages classified as "propagandists, propaganda tabloids and mixed - hybrid ones". These media form an overall picture of the world, including the following recurring 4 ideological pillars:

1. The US and NATO are a global hegemon and puppet-master which is pulling the strings of both Brussels and national governments;
2. The EU is an enemy of the European peoples. Europe is dying because it is united – its unification is a tool of American hegemony, which inflicts a cultural decline ("liberasty") and unleashes a migrant avalanche upon it. The single European value that matters is the nation-state.

3. Russia is rising. And although it is a victim of aggression, it is Europe's true saviour. 4. Bulgaria's political elites are venal all the way down. In the end, these pivots are reduced to 3, as 1 and 2 merge into "The sunset of the West, of Europe", second is "Russia is a savior" and "Bulgarian elites are venal".

I was surprised to learn that these messages have been launched since 2013, since they are so popular now, it turns out that they are props of Kremlin propaganda launched from 10 years ago. As expected, a large part of the publications is anonymous or in the form of reports, the author's articles are few. The conclusion from this chapter is that while "there are no pre-formed unified nor shared senses of injustice that this picture packs, its surplus value comes from the fact that it fuses in one vocabulary actually heterogeneous and even opposite feelings of injustice, it creates the feeling of homogeneity of heterogeneous experiences of injustice".

The third chapter is dedicated to journalists. Interviews with journalists, according to the author, show at least two things: the media field has disintegrated as a field of communication and battle, "it has lost its specific capital - journalism as empowering the public to make informed decisions on the topics of the day, as professional work partially autonomous from the strong of the day". From here follows the second conclusion - "the story of the terrible solitude and uncertainty of journalists, in which the only solidarity is the solidarity of collective humiliation."

The second part of the book seeks an answer to the question "what makes propaganda effective" and finds it in the relation anxiety - fear - propaganda effect - social surveillance. The propaganda effect relies on the transformation of an abstract anxiety /defined as "diffuse objectless anxiety"/, into "concrete, albeit mythical, figures of fear" which in turn are repeatedly replicated in the media. This is how "tracks" are laid, writes Milena Yakimova, along which society becomes manageable through the feelings of injustice and the created negative expectations of the people for the future as already packaged anxiety in concrete fears. And the ground for populist policies and anti-democratic messages is already set up.

In this part, in the analysis of interviews and focus group discussions, interesting theoretical views are also formulated - about the disintegration of the different dimensions of the future; about the negative understanding of freedom; about the fear of delocalization (understood as lack of connection between social space, social recognition and normative principles); about rallying around victimization and the offended sense of justice as the basis of collective identity that calls for revenge, beyond participation, but as retribution, etc. And here we are

back to the beginning - propaganda creates and relies on all these feelings, each one of which can mean any other, and at the same time each one means the whole multitude. Or to quote Milena Yakimova: "Propaganda stirs the feeling of injustice into resentment and calls resentment justice, while at the same time carefully cultivating the belief that acting is pointless." (pp. 224/225/.

I hope that the presentation of the main conclusions of the book has convinced the readers of the review of the very interesting theoretical conclusions of the author, which insightfully explain trends in our present.

7. Recommendations.

I have no significant remarks on the book. However, I think, considering the theoretical precision of the text, that the work would gain a larger readership - and this seems important and necessary to me, by a certain relief of the text from repetitions of concepts and unnecessary complication of phrases, especially in the second part of the book. In my opinion, the propaganda effect should be defined more broadly, as transformation of anxiety *into action or inaction*, because in the monograph it is well argued that in Bulgaria its implication is inaction. But in several places in the book, the propaganda effect is defined as "transformation of anxiety into readiness for action" /p.165/, "transformation of pure negativity into readiness for action" /p. 166/. Its broader understanding opens the possibility of distinguishing different types of propaganda effects, which will be important in comparative studies.

I am looking forward with hope and curiosity to the continuation of the very interesting research "Antiliberal discourses and propaganda messages in the Bulgarian print and online media 2013-2016", referring to 8 media, in the direction of researching the degree of penetration of the established propaganda messages in the mainstream media, as well as testing of /not/supporting such formulated propaganda pivots in the mass consciousness through representative sociological survey. I strongly recommend the funding of two such sociological studies. I also think that it is important to do a comparative international study of the propaganda effects of anti-liberal publications. The hypothesis is, logically, that they are similar in a global world, and yet it is curious to check if there are also different types of anxieties transforming into different fears.

8. Conclusion

Everything written so far emphasizes the academic merits of Milena Yakimova, her high professionalism, the originality, and thoroughness of her theoretical research. That is why I fully support and vote positively for holding the academic position “Professor” of associate professor Milena Yakimova Yakimova in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology, and cultural sciences (Sociology - Sociology of power). I also call on my respected colleagues from the jury to support such a vote.

20.12.2023

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