

## OPINION

by Prof. Dr. Daniela Lubenova Koleva,  
member of the academic jury in a competition for the academic position of Professor  
in the professional field 3.1 Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies  
(Sociology. Sociology of Power),  
announced in State Gazette No. 65 of 28.07.2023

*Subject:* The scientific production and academic activities of the participant in the  
competition Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sc. Milena Yakimova

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sc. Milena Yakimova is applying for the position of Professor in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies (Sociology. Sociology of Power), announced in State Gazette No. 65 of 28.07.2023, with the monograph *Fear and Propaganda* (2022), four studies and 20 articles, of which four co-authored. All of them were published in recent years, after the candidate's habilitation.

The main areas of research interest developed in Assoc. Prof. Yakimova's publications are: the protest waves in Bulgaria since the 1990s, educational inequalities, everyday rationality, techniques of governmentality, representations of risk, etc. All of these fall within the thematic field of the competition, with the monograph having as its focus its narrower theme, Sociology of Power. A number of the studies and articles submitted to the competition are preparatory works for the monograph, which is why I will focus on it in more detail.

The monograph *Fear and Propaganda* deserves special attention both for its topical subject and for its original approach and the depth of the analysis. Indeed, some of the conclusions reached by the author (especially in the first part of the book) are perhaps not unexpected; to some extent they may correspond to intuitions of social scientists and political commentators. Yakimova's unquestionable and unassailable contribution is to prove in a methodologically uncompromising way and explain in depth the phenomena of the propaganda/media 'primordial broth' in which we are all immersed.

The first part of the monograph is based on the large-scale study of the Foundation for Humanitarian and Social Research 'Anti-liberal Discourses and Propaganda Messages in Bulgarian Online and Print Media 2013-2016'. After defining the criteria for propaganda media, Yakimova selects eight print and online media from this empirical corpus, from which she analyses an impressive sample of 3305 publications according to

various indicators (genre, source, topic). The content analysis is based on her notion of propaganda as ‘a rational scheme for generating irrationality’ (p. 41), elaborated through a critical reading of authors such as H. Becker, H. Laswell, J. Ellul et al. I particularly appreciate the way in which the author de-banalyses the otherwise well-worn concept of propaganda, unpacks it and methodically applies it to the corpus of empirical material, guiding readers through her research process with admirable reflexivity. She uncovers the structure of propaganda (villain-helper-victim) and extracts several distinct anchors that dominate the propaganda media: the collapse of Europe, the ‘puppeteer’ US, the rise of Russia, corrupt elites. Yakimova convincingly demonstrates that while the anti-liberal propaganda draws extensively on the Kremlin experience, its goals are primarily domestic: inculcating Euroscepticism and delegitimising certain political and civic actors. Another important observation, which I think deserves further elaboration on its own, is about the appropriation of the critique of liberalism and capitalism for the purposes of governmentality and its populist repackaging, parasitic on a sense of injustice.

This first part includes a chapter on the role of journalism as an amplifier of propaganda. The rationale for this is the author's thesis on the articulation of diffusely existing grievances and anxieties in familiar and shared stereotypes. Unlike the previous study, this chapter relies entirely on qualitative methods, namely semi-structured interviews with journalists. ‘Giving a voice’ to members of this important guild undoubtedly has its value, but this chapter – especially in comparison to the previous and subsequent ones – leaves some impression of empathetically reproducing their judgements. This, as well as the very principle of the sample (the interviewees used to work in propaganda media) makes the conclusion of a decaying media field seem somewhat predictable. The doubtless contribution of this module of the study is in revealing the process and the experience of decay, a consequence of the interweaving of propaganda and social critique, whereby the former ‘eats up’ the latter, i.e. turns the critical vocabulary into a vocabulary of governmentality (p. 114). No less importantly, the fundamental idea of *paresis* as a myth-making technique is introduced here, that will be developed in an original and fruitful way in the second part of the book.

The second part reverses the perspective to look for the resonance of propaganda messages in public frustrations and anxieties, a research task made possible as a consequence of understanding propaganda as a technique of directing impressions rather than a technique of persuasion; moreover, it does not simply change opinions but prompts action or inaction. This understanding allows the author to ask ‘how “ideational content”

enters into the affective stream of social experience' (p. 159) and to prove her hypothesis that 'anxiety is the affective stream into which propaganda clichés become embedded, with which they resonate' (p. 161). The propaganda effect, according to one of Yakimova's central insights, consists in turning diffuse anxiety into fear, that is, associating it with imagined or real dangers. These fears are in turn articulated in cultural representations, a key thesis that takes one beyond the psychic/emotional content to the cultural matrix. Or, in the author's words, 'fears as represented dangers are social' (p. 173). Such a sociological rationalization makes the next step possible, namely the discovery of (auto)victimization as a compensatory identity politics. Paradoxical as it may seem, the propaganda offers victimization as a ground for collective pride, and pure negativity as a starting point for value judgments. Thus, Yakimova arrives at her most significant insight: propaganda is not merely an instrument of social control through the shrinking of legitimacy; its 'most poisonous' effect is 'the construction of an opposition between morality and public action' (p. 163), and hence the call for the refusal of civic participation.

The understanding of auto-victimization as a compensatory identity politics resonates clearly with the theory of victimhood nationalism, which conceptualizes the consequences of the transnationalisation of the memory of twentieth-century conflicts and the uses of this memory to consolidate collective identities around the victim-injustice-perpetrator axis. I find this parallel between findings based on different methodologies and making sense of different empirical corpora particularly revealing.

The model of internalisation of propaganda messages developed by Yakimova is tested in the last chapter through interviews and focus group discussions, which allow to establish a differentiation of the propaganda effect depending on the degree of 'fragmentation in mass', which in turn is operationalised for the purposes of the study as a 'context of socialisation', dependent on the place of residence in a city or a small town, and the degree of identification with one's profession/occupation; the presence or absence of social recognition; the sense of time/future. One might question here whether/why it is the identification with the profession which is taken to be most important, rather than, for example, the social validation that so-called 'informal publicity' might offer. (I am aware, of course, that the latter is much more difficult to capture and operationalise.) What I would single out as particularly interesting and worthwhile, is the tracing of the dynamics of communication in focus groups, where it is shown how propaganda myths 'take over' the discussion and impose 'the moral superiority of the victim' (p. 202).

*Fear and Propaganda* is undoubtedly a significant contribution to the social sciences, offering a serious, multifaceted and innovative study of a significant phenomenon in all its depth and complexity. Milena Yakimova demonstrates in this book her unique research style, combining empirical density with bold and insightful conceptual constructions, and the logical cogency of argumentation with the rhetorical persuasiveness of the author's presence. One can only regret that such a rich and innovative work has been left without a proper conclusion to summarize the argumentation and the results.

Assoc. Prof. Yakimova is a proven and authoritative lecturer who enjoys the respect of colleagues and students. She is part of the teams of several bachelor and master programs at Sofia University. She teaches the following courses in the BA programme in Sociology: Sociology of Power, Political Sociology, Qualitative Methods in Sociology, Sociology of Personality. As is evident, two of them correspond directly to the topic of the professor competition. Assoc. Prof. Yakimova also has experience in supervising theses and doctoral dissertations. Five PhD students have successfully earned their degrees under her scientific supervision.

All of the above gives me reason to confidently and strongly support the candidacy of Assoc. Prof. Milena Yakimova for professor in PhD 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies (Sociology. Sociology of Power). The professor position will be not only a recognition of her achievements, but also an advantage for the Faculty of Philosophy and the University.

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