

OPINION

from Prof. DSc. Pepka Boyadjieva, department “Knowledge Society: Science, Education and Innovation”, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, BAS

concerning the publications of Associate Professor DSc. Milena Yakimova, participant in the competition for the academic position “Professor”, announced by Sofia University “St. Kl. Ohridski”, for the needs of the Faculty of Philosophy in professional field 3.1 Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences (Sociology – Sociology of Power), State Gazette no. 65 / 28.07.2023

1. General description of the materials presented

Assoc. Prof. Milena Yakimova is the only candidate for the competition for the position “Professor”, announced for the needs of the Faculty of Philosophy at the Sofia University in professional field 3.1 Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences (Sociology – Sociology of Power). The competition is fully in line with the candidate’s educational and scientific profile, her professional interests and scientific achievements.

The materials for participation in the competition are presented in a lawful, correct and precise manner. Assoc. Prof. Yakimova attached two lists of publications – the first presents all her publications in their entirety, and the second – the publications with which she participated in the competition. For her participation in the competition for the academic position of “Professor”, Assoc. Prof. Milena Yakimova presents one monograph, 4 studies, two of which are in English, and 20 articles, of which 6 are in English and 4 are co-authored. I would like to especially note that in 2016 Assoc. Prof. Yakimova successfully defended her dissertation “Social Criticism and Practice: Theoretical Dilemmas and Practical Mechanisms” and obtained the scientific degree “Doctor of Sociological Sciences”.

Assoc. Prof. Yakimova’s professional profile and academic and public appearances impress with the upholding of the highest professional criteria. Assoc. Prof. Yakimova successfully combines sincere dedication to her pedagogical activity with constant commitment to serious and deeply theoretically thought-out scientific research.

2. Analysis of the applicant's scientific achievements

Assoc. Prof. Yakimova is a scientist with a very clearly recognizable professional appearance and creative “handwriting”. I consider this to be an indicator of high professionalism achieved and perception of the academic cause as a vocation. I especially highly value Assoc. Prof. Yakimova's indisputable competence for in-depth theoretical analyses, her ability to make seriously argued critical analyses, her rejection of hasty and obvious explanations at the expense of the desire to reveal the complexity, the multidimensional determination and the dynamics of the studied social phenomena, as well as her sharp sensitivity to acute and even crisis phenomena and processes in social reality.

The monograph “Fear and Propaganda”, published in 2022 by “Iztok-Zapad” publishing house, undoubtedly stands out among the publications of Assoc. Prof. Yakimova, submitted for participation in the current competition.

I believe that the main contribution of Assoc. Prof. Yakimova, realized mainly in this monograph and further developed in some of her articles and studies, is related to the development not simply of the concept of propaganda, but to the delineation and conceptualization of a relatively independent sociological field – I will tentatively call it “social criticism and propaganda”. It includes not only an original understanding of the concept of propaganda as a specific method of representation and its distinction from other concepts (such as populism, lies), but also the development of a relatively complete complex of other concepts, approaches and mental figures that allow to reveal how propaganda works in today's complex and tension-filled societies. Assoc. Prof. Yakimova's thesis that “[p]ropaganda is not a game of words”, although it can be analyzed as a language game, is convincing, but implies “getting closer ... to the practical game moves” (monograph, p. 167).

As a contribution, I also appreciate the thesis of the propaganda effect as “the organization and channeling of social anxiety”, “‘packaging’ it into simple repetitive figures that transform anxiety into fear”, which – in turn – creates ways and mechanisms to transform society into “manageable by means of people's expectations” (monograph, p. 157).

I want to especially emphasize the contribution of Assoc. Prof. Yakimova to the development of the sociology of fear. The thesis of the distinction between anxiety and fear, and also between social anxiety, mythic figures of fear and rationalizable forms of fear, is convincingly defended. Anxiety is understood as a vague feeling of uncertainty and danger, while fear is seen as a directed concern towards a specific object. This distinction is particularly important because it is used to explain how populist propaganda unfolds – precisely because it is an affective flow associated with wandering and uncertainty, anxiety “stimulates the search

for and the finding of ... such explanations of the world – which are as simple as possible, maximally reductive in relation to the complexity of the world, but which produce – even if fleeting and deceptive – a sense of complete security” (monograph, p. 161). Assoc. Prof. Yakimova’s analysis leads to the definition of a specific conceptual network, which includes four notions – anxiety, fear, propaganda effect, social controllability. This network of concepts becomes a working heuristic tool for studying the propaganda effect, understood as the transformation of undirected anxiety into controllability.

In the conceptual network thus defined, all transitions are important, but undoubtedly the most important is the transition to social manageability. In this connection, Assoc. Prof. Yakimova develops her thesis about turning fear into resentment, i.e. in resentment, thereby creating a readiness for action or inaction.

I appreciate the self-assessment of her contributions by Assoc. Prof. Yakimova as well-argued and reflecting truly actual theoretical achievements. Upon a more careful reading of the presented publications, other contributing points can be highlighted in them.

I think that to the contributions of Assoc. Prof. Yakimova, her analysis of educational inequalities should be added, and more specifically, her thesis about Bulgarian education as both creating and reproducing inequalities, but also counteracting social exclusion, and also the well-argued conclusion that some Bulgarian schools perform social instead of educational functions. I also appreciate as a very heuristic for future research the hypothesis formulated by Assoc. Prof. Yakimova that “the driving cause of educational inequalities in Bulgaria is the weakness of the social welfare system” (article 2, p. 12). These ideas are convincingly defended in two of the publications presented: article 2: Education and Inequalities: Problem Nodes and Public Speakers, Bulgaria, 2017-2020, *Critique and Humanism*, 2022, 57(2): 9-24 and article 8: Whose this child? The responsibility of the family in education as a generator of social inequalities, *Sociological Problems*, 2019, 52(2): 466-482.

3. Comments to the applicant’s publications

Assoc. Prof. Yakimova has always demonstrated a bias towards scientific discussion and an ability to turn it into a stimulating intellectual pleasure. I believe she will maintain her constructive critical attitude in the future.

Besides her indisputable sociological and philosophical erudition, Assoc. Prof. Yakimova has extremely sharp sociological “senses” and an impressive sociological flair. This allows her to do in-depth analyzes of qualitative data from interviews, focus groups and observations. I agree with Assoc. Prof. Yakimova that in many cases it is qualitative methods,

for example, “focus group discussions are not the only one, but they are the most suitable method for entering this type of problem” (monograph, p. 162). However, since she clarifies that she uses semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to test formulated hypotheses (monograph, p. 148), I allow myself to draw attention to the limited reliability of data collected with qualitative methods as a basis for testing hypotheses. More and more authors in the social sciences accept that even data from large-scale representative quantitative studies are not sufficient to test hypotheses, and experimental studies and data processing with much more complex statistical and mathematical methods than regression analyzes are needed.

My second comment concerns the use of the term “type of school” in the analysis of educational inequalities. From the way vocational education is considered in Bulgaria, the impression is created that this term distinguishes vocational from general education school. I believe that a much more differentiated approach is needed when studying the types of schools in our country. In recent decades, Bulgarian education, including secondary education, has become highly differentiated and even stratified. Not only general education, but also vocational high schools differ significantly in their prestige, selectivity at entrance, quality of the education offered, etc. That is why generalizing conclusions such as the one that “[v]ocational education in Bulgaria is actually a social activity in which business is not particularly interested” (article 8, p. 480) can hardly be defended, as in practice they refer only to part of vocational high schools, and also to part of general education high schools.

My third comment is more of an attempted stimulus for future analysis. In her monograph, Assoc. Prof. Yakimova uses the term “audacity” in two cases: in the analysis of the ambivalence of risk, concluding that “[t]aking risk cannot be ontologized as audacity” (p. 186) and in the analysis of data from the conducted focus groups, which is defined as “paresis without audacity” (p. 204 et seq.). I consider this attempt to sociologize the concept of “audacity” very interesting, and I would be very happy if Assoc. Prof. Yakimova would continue her work on its clearer sociological definition.

4. Personal impressions from the applicant

Based on my personal impressions of the work and public appearances of Assoc. Prof. Dsc. Milena Yakimova, I can say with conviction that she established herself as one of the most intriguing and prominent Bulgarian sociologists and social scientists. Her creative performances, dedication to teaching work, constructive attitude, collegiality and civic commitment are an honor and contribution to the development of both our sociological community and the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia University.

5. Reasoned and clearly worded conclusion

On the basis of everything said above about the high scientific achievements, rich research and teaching experience and active expert activity of Assoc. Prof. Dsc. Milena Yakimova, I find convincing and sufficient reasons to assess them completely positively and to strongly recommend the members of the esteemed jury and the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University to vote unanimously in support of the election of Milena Yakimova at the academic position “Professor”, professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences (Sociology – Sociology of Power). The election of Assoc. Prof. Yakimova to the academic position of “Professor” will not only be a well-deserved recognition of her scientific achievements, but also essential for the future development of the Faculty of Philosophy and the Department of Sociology as leading educational and scientific centers in the field of social sciences.

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