

## Opinion

*by Assoc. Dr. Daniel Mihailov Smilov on the competition for the academic position of "professor" in professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences (Sociology - Sociology of power), announced in SG No. 65 / 28.07.2023.*

The competition announced by SU "St. Kliment Ohridski", is for the academic position of "professor" in sociology of power. The only candidate is Assoc. Ph.D. Milena Yakimova. This opinion reviews the publications submitted for the competition, as well as the compliance of her candidacy with the legal requirements for the position of "professor".

Prof. Yakimova is a prominent sociologist who has participated in numerous innovative and contributing scientific projects that are of great importance for the Bulgarian public sphere. In recent years, her research related to propaganda and Russian influence in our country deserves special attention. Associate Professor Yakimova's work is extremely thorough, combining very serious theoretical knowledge with a good understanding of practical problems. Her empirical research has a very well-developed methodology, leading to solid and intellectually intriguing results.

The documents presented by associate professor Yakimova for the competition demonstrate that she meets absolutely all the formal criteria for holding the position of "professor". The submitted publications are on the topic of the competition and contain serious contributions to the study of sociology and, in particular, the sociology of power. The necessary number of publications meeting the requirements of the law are available. The same applies to the citations of Associate Professor Yakimova's works and the number of her doctoral students with defended dissertations. Prof. Yakimova's long-term teaching work in the department of "Sociology" is also exemplary.

In terms of content, in this opinion I will dwell in more detail on the main monograph presented by Associate Professor Milena Yakimova - "Fear and Propaganda", East-West, 2022. The monograph is entirely on the topic of the competition and concerns the issues of key importance for the exercise of power in Bulgaria and citizens' perceptions of power. The monograph contains 238 pages and is divided into five chapters. The scientific apparatus that Associate Professor Yakimova uses meets academic standards. In addition, the book is written in an engaging way and with a pronounced civic stance, without this reducing its scientific value.

In the first chapter of the paper, Prof. Milena Yakimova examines the various established theories about propaganda, focusing more on the work of Harold Lasswell and Jacques Ellul. Assoc. Prof. Yakimova's analysis is very useful because it introduces precise definitions of the phenomenon under consideration - propaganda - as well as distinctions with related phenomena such as disinformation and ideology. Within the discussion, it becomes clear that propaganda differs from ideology in a number of ways, such as the shift in focus from rational coherence to emotion. Propaganda is generally an attempt to influence people's behavior and it can only use rational arguments if this would be effective in a particular situation. Ideology, however, claims to influence people's behavior primarily through arguments. Also important is the distinction between propaganda and disinformation and lies: obviously these are related concepts, but they do not overlap to the extent that good propaganda usually requires some amount of truth in itself for credibility.

The question to what extent propaganda is just a side effect and a necessary development in a modern, pluralistic and sufficiently complex society is very interesting. In communicating with large masses of people, there is obviously a need for communication techniques to direct people's behavior towards certain goals. From this perspective, the tools of propaganda could theoretically be used for legitimate and justifiable purposes as well, leading to the debate about "white" and "black" propaganda. Prof. Yakimova rather advocates the thesis that the suspension of the audience's critical abilities, which propaganda requires, generally makes it an unacceptable tool in a democratic modern society. In it, the bar should be raised higher and social coordination should not be achieved through tools of direct manipulation of public

opinion. But the question of the instrumental utility of propaganda techniques remains largely open.

Based on the theories of authors such as Laswell and Ellul, Associate Professor Yakimova places the issue in the modern context of the rise of political populism. Following the theses of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, Associate Professor Yakimova notes the tendency of modern politics to be perceived as an agonistic opposition between political opponents, disputes between which cannot be resolved purely rationally. Even if we do not agree with Mouffe's approach to politics, which she borrows from Carl Schmitt, even if we accept Cas Mudde's more widely shared view of populism, according to which populism is a minimalist ideology, it should still be noted that populism is exceptionally suitable to be the basis of mass propaganda. Simplistic theses about the primacy of the popular will and the corruption of the political elite can easily become the "fulcrums" of mass media and communication campaigns.

From chapter two onwards, the monograph of Prof. Yakimova actually empirically demonstrates how similar theses have been propagandistically imposed in Bulgaria in the last ten years. Chapter two focuses on anti-liberal propaganda in Bulgaria in the period 2013-2018. The research on which the chapter is based contains content analysis and coding of the publications in 20 print and online publications, based on which keywords are developed, which then are checked in 3080 information sites and blogs through the Sensika system.

The study is methodologically solid and it describes well the picture of anti-liberal propaganda in Bulgaria, tracing its temporal dynamics. The research makes a typology of media sources in view of their propaganda functions. The resulting picture is extremely clear: messages about Europe's weakness, Russia's strength, the venality of the Bulgarian and European ruling elites, NGOs, etc., are circulated en masse.

The contributions of this study are twofold: on the one hand, it demonstrates the volume of propaganda messages, which is impressive. Second, it demonstrates the relationship between the dynamics in propaganda volumes and key events in international politics related to Russia – such as the annexation of Crimea, for example (p. 63).

The interpretation of these empirical facts points to the close connection between propaganda in our country and the political calendar of Russia. The chapter is extremely informative because it reviews various media outlets that most widely circulate Russia-related propaganda theses. Finally, the chapter ends with a useful summary of the world picture according to populist propaganda: the imposition of a specific understanding of "sovereignty", of a "people" that is the bearer of deep values that, however, need an authoritarian leader to protect, and the idea of predestination of history in which the West as a whole is doomed. On the basis of this scheme, friend-enemy and hero-traitor distinctions are constructed and imposed on Bulgarian and European politicians and civil organizations and activists.

The third chapter of the monograph contains another empirical study that focuses on journalists in Bulgaria. It is based on 13 semi-structured interviews with journalists. The purpose of the research is to present the profession's self-understanding of concepts of "good faith", "professionalism", "the vicissitudes of free speech", etc. The idea of the study is to trace the processes that lead to the introduction of propaganda practices in the media. The research is valuable in that it reveals the "internal point of view" to the problem and dwells on the rationalization schemes of the actors' own behavior. In the course of the discussion, some of the objective factors contributing to the penetration of propaganda practices are also revealed, such as the shrinking market and the availability and low cost of propaganda information.

Chapter four of the monograph clarifies another key concept of its title: "fear" and the related "anxiety" as engines for achieving propaganda effect. The chapter is useful in that it provides an overview of various theories that elucidate the propagandistic utility of creating fear and anxiety. This chapter is actually a preparation for chapter five, in which, on the basis of 19 semi-structured interviews, an analysis of the "anxieties" of three age groups in urban settlements in Bulgaria is made. Figures of fear such as "refugees", "war" and "interference in Bulgarian affairs" are explored.

The monograph ends without a conclusion, which is unfortunate and one of its few weaknesses. However, in the final text, important conclusions of the research are brought out. The author argues that the propaganda under investigation stirs feelings of injustice into

outrage and calls outrage justice, while carefully cultivating the belief that action is futile (p. 225)

Overall, the monograph is a dense and coherent study that goes deep into the subject of propaganda and fear as its important resource. The text is theoretically well-grounded and the empirical studies are methodologically sound and with valuable results. In the future work of the author, it would be advisable to have a comparative analysis with other propaganda situations (historical and in relation to other countries), which would highlight even more precisely what is new and specific about modern populist propaganda and its Bulgarian variety.

In addition to the monograph, Prof. Yakimova has also attached numerous other publications for the competition. As has already been said, all of them are about issues closely enough related to the sociology of power. Without going into a detailed analysis of these publications, I would mention some of them, such as Yakimova, M. 2022. How we, lay people, talk about its national history. National narrative, the showcases of the cultural heritage and the mysticism of the distant past, *Criticism and Humanism*, volume: 56, issue: 1. It examines the ideologies of national history in the context of modern Bulgarian society: these ideologies are, of course, refracted through media propaganda by certain political entities.

Prof. Yakimova also develops the topic of fear in the following scientific text Yakimova, M. 2018. *Propaganda Clichés, Fear-Mongering and Resentment in Bulgarian Society, 2016–2017*, CAS Working Paper Series, no.10, pp.1-33 15 10B, 11, 16.

Populist propaganda is the subject of a separate study by the author in Yakimova, M. 2018. *Populist Propaganda in a Context of Social Solitude, Critique and Humanism*, Volume:49, Issue:1, 2018, pp.:293-312 15 10B, 11, 16 (which was translated and published in a Bulgarian version)

Of particular importance are the numerous studies of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria, which Associate Professor Yakimova is conducting with the team of Prof. Dimitar Vatsov. An

important publication based on these studies is Yakimova, M., D. Vatsov. 2018. Co-opting Discontent: Bulgarian Populism. Local Interests and Russian Propaganda, Critique and Humanism, vol.:49, no.:1, 2018, p.:233-248 5 10B, 11, 16; Yakimova, M., D. Vatsov. 2017. Co-opting Discontent: Russian Propaganda in the Bulgarian Media, Eurozine, October 18, 2017 5 10B, 11, 16;

This concise overview of the works of Associate Professor Yakimova demonstrates that she not only formally meets the criteria for the academic position of "professor", but she is also an established scholar with very serious theoretical and empirical contributions in the field of the sociological study of power. Her work demonstrates a fine balance between abstract theory and empirical embeddedness of research. The studies are in an extremely socially and politically sensitive field and she manages to maintain academic standards in their conduct in a very professional manner.

On the basis of the presented documentation and above all on the basis of my overall knowledge of the academic activity of Associate Professor Yakimova, I strongly support her appointment as a professor at Sofia University.

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