

DISSERTATION REVIEW
for awarding the Educational and Science Degree “Doctor”
in Professional direction 3.3 Political Science
(Public Administration)

Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Simeon Atanasov Petrov, PhD

Department of Public Administration, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

Author of the Dissertation: Vanya Antonova Ilieva, part-time PhD student in Department of Public Administration, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

Dissertation topic: „Horizontal Policies in the Bulgarian Context”

Research supervisor: Prof. Tatyana Tomova

The review is submitted on the basis of an Order № ПД 38-25/16.01.2024 of the Rector of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” and (2) Decision of the Scientific Jury dated 16.01.2024 to appoint reviewers.

1. Qualification, training and professional experience of the PhD student

Vanya Antonova Ilieva was dismissed with the right of defense as a part-time PhD student in the Department of Public Administration of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. She graduated consecutively from the Bachelor's Program “Public Administration” (completed with honors in the period 2013-2017) and the Master's Program “Public Management and Policies” (also completed with honors in the period 2017-2018) at the Department of Public Administration of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. All Department members recognize Vanya Ilieva as an active and productive student and researcher. She completed her Master's Degree defending the Master's thesis on the topic “Horizontal approach to goal setting: the demographic policy of Bulgaria in the period 2001 – 2017” which according to the opinion of the examination committee and also according to my personal opinion as her research supervisor at the time, carried the scientific research impact to become a serious dissertation study.

Another important and predisposing factor for the potential success of Vanya Ilieva's Dissertation research is her professional training during this period. Her work as an expert in the “Modernization of Administration” Directorate within the Council of Ministers Administration (2018) and in the “Cultural Heritage, Museums and Fine Arts” Directorate in the Ministry of Culture (2019-2021) and as a Project Manager in ESTAT (from 2021) complements her good theoretical foundation with practical experience in the areas of monitoring and impact assessment of policies, programs and projects in the public sector; public opinion surveys; social research design.

2. General characteristics of the Dissertation

2.1. Formal Dissertation Parameters

On December 18, 2023, the Department of Public Administration in the Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” discussed and directed unanimously to defense procedure the Dissertation on „Horizontal Policies in the Bulgarian Context”. The Dissertation is developed into 220 pages (196 pages of text structured in an Introduction, three Chapters, and a Conclusion; Bibliography; and three Annexes - Questionnaire for in-depth interviews; Results of conducted quantitative survey; List of administrative structures to which an invitation to participate in an online survey has been sent). The text contains 12 tables and 16 graphs. The Bibliography includes 119 sources of which 85 scientific publications, 25 normative and non-normative acts of state bodies, and 9 online sources. More than two-thirds of the sources are in English and include the key titles and authors working on Horizontal policies and target setting. A little under 30% of the cited scientific publications are from the last 10 years.

2.2. Justification and relevance of the topic

The topic of Horizontal goal-setting and Horizontal coordination is undeniably relevant both on the theoretical level and the practical level. At the same time, a serious lack of research in this direction can be identified in the Bulgarian governance literature. It will not be an exaggeration to claim that the proposed dissertation text is one of the first targeted attempts to define and analyze Horizontal policies in Bulgaria, and it relies on several separate and large-scale empirical tools. I consider the Dissertation's argumentation on the need for such a study to be convincing. In addition, I would like to add that in the Bulgarian context, it is not simply about identifying good or bad institutional practices and results but also about some unresolved theoretical-applied dilemmas of the general institutional model, which stem from

the fact that the administrative reform in Bulgaria attempted to introduce the practices associated with the traditional (Weberian) model, with the New Public Management and the Good Governance at the same time in the 90s and the beginning of the new century. The three concepts do not contradict each other only on the condition that the introduction of each subsequent one brings corrections to already established practices but otherwise, the effectiveness of goal-setting coordination processes, both between the administrative structures themselves and between them and other participants in the policy process becomes elusive.

2.3 Design of the research (object, subject, goals, limitations, methods)

The methodological design proposed by Vanya Ilieva in the Introduction of the Dissertation is convincing. The object of the research is Horizontal policies. The subject of the Dissertation is Horizontal goal-setting in Bulgaria with emphasis in the third Chapter on demographic policy. The main goal of the research is “to investigate the process of formulating and implementing Horizontal policies within the framework of the Bulgarian public management system, focusing on the example of demographic policy in the country during the period 2001-2020”. The stated goal points to more descriptive efforts, which is evident in some parts of the research but I believe that, especially at the end of the work, there are enough practical recommendations to support not just the "taking" of the picture but also the real improvement of the process and some aspects of the public administration in our country.

In achieving this goal, I consider the specific objectives of the study are fulfilled: to present and analyze the theoretical framework of Horizontal policies; to analyze and adapt the concept of "Horizontal policies" given the capacity for their implementation in Bulgaria; to study the process of formulation and implementation of the demographic policy in Bulgaria with an emphasis on the definition of gaps and recommendations.

The author of the Dissertation poses several important research questions among which I would like to highlight the following: What are the characteristics of Horizontal policies? How does the concept of "Horizontal policies" get into the Bulgarian public administration system? What is the importance of the coordination of the participants in the process of formulating and implementing the policy and through what mechanisms is it implemented? What approach has been chosen to adapt the demographic policy and the sectoral policies with which it is directly related?

Vanya Ilieva details the specific goals of her research in 11 specific research tasks which imply a consistent and complete proof of the thesis. Here again, I would like to note that the

author of the Dissertation underestimates to a certain extent the potential in the entire course of the research to derive specific practical recommendations - only within the last task "deriving recommendations for improving the policy process based on the specifics brought out in Bulgarian conditions" there is a reference to the contribution to the improvement of the practice and in the context of the demographic policy in particular.

The thesis formulated in the Dissertation is that "the process of formulating and implementing Horizontal policies in Bulgaria is centralized, with limited participation of non-governmental participants, ineffective coordination among key participants in the process, and weak adaptation of the objectives of Horizontal policies to the sectors with which they are directly linked". The thesis is challenging because it contains at least three, and only relatively related, statements. I share the latter given the complexity of the research but otherwise, I find the thesis (hypothesis) to be well formulated and fully subject to both theoretical argumentation and empirical verification.

From the theoretical specifications for the future justification of the thesis, it can be seen that already at the beginning of the research, several critical issues for its proof were realized: the institutional (including informal) coordination mechanisms; the political and administrative culture for cooperation and interaction between institutional and non-institutional actors, etc. Six specific research outcomes have been formulated which I ultimately consider to be very largely fulfilled and there may be some pretensions to the presence of the last outcome "formulation and evaluation of options for improving the process of formulating and implementing policy objectives" as some of the recommendations at the end of the text do not seem to have sufficient support in the exposition and insofar as the actual weighing of alternative options for reforms is conditional.

One of the great merits of the Dissertation is the wide range of research and analysis methods. All the tools stated in the Introduction are fully used and methodologically precise. 351 participants took part in a survey. The Respondents are representatives of various administrative structures that have been identified by the author of the Dissertation as engaged in the formulation and implementation of Horizontal policies in Bulgaria. To supplement with qualitative data, 14 in-depth interviews were conducted using the "snowball" method. A formal analysis of the institutional development of the advisory bodies in the field of demographic policy and a substantive analysis of key strategic documents were also carried out. The latter follows a argued author's methodology.

At the end of the Introduction, the author admits that some of the conclusions are limited by the choice of research subject - the demographic policy. Perhaps the biggest limitation is

related to the emphasis on formal state organizations – the demographic targeting in our country is centralized and so even in the research itself the role of non-state organizations remains only hinted. Furthermore, the choice of the object of the study also contributes to this - Horizontal policies, and not Horizontal goal setting in principle which is somewhat debatable.

3. Assessment of the structure and content of the Dissertation

The author of the Dissertation uses the predominant structure approach - three separate Chapters, the first of which contains the theoretical basis of the research. The other two Chapters are more applied-research and step on a set of specific research tools.

Chapter 1 “Public Policies and Horizontal Management. Theories and ideas about horizontality in public governance“ is an academically sound synthesis of the key definitions and concepts related to the topic of the Dissertation. The author shows that she is critically familiar with the leading publications in the field and authors such as Peters, Muller, Borzel, Rhodes, etc. The author theoretically clarifies concepts such as horizontality, sectorality, and networking and makes a modern reading of the problems of coordination in the public sector. Following Peters' understanding of a philosophical clash of the New Public Management with Horizontal coordination, Vanya Ilieva shows that some of the imputed requirements for organizational and personal individualized evaluation of performance in public structures lead to strong fragmentation, short-term goals, and absolutization of efficiency.

This theoretical chapter is a contribution to the Bulgarian governance literature as a targeted attempt to explain horizontality at the level of goal setting. However, some parameters remain underdeveloped. Questions raised by the dilemma of individual organizational rationality versus collective inter-organizational rationality are underrepresented. To the extent that the concluding recommendations directly speak of open coordination and formal forms of cooperation, no theoretical attention has been paid to the modern governance interpretations of procedural rationality, for example, theories of deliberative governance. The latter are part of the collective image of the New Public Governance which in the text is significantly less represented than its predecessor - the New Public Management.

Another raised theoretical question is whether the notion of “Horizontal policy” should be used almost interchangeably with “Horizontal targeting”. The fact that demographic problems are part of a Horizontal policy existing alongside other but sectoral policies should mean that we have, at least to some extent, a distinct policy community with its audience (situational stakeholders) and relatively established institutional rules and relationships. Since situational

stakeholders, however, are usually sectorally established, the notion of “Horizontal policy” implies a centralized process (the latter is a reference to the thesis of the Dissertation). If the existence of Horizontal cross-sectoral goals is possible outside the institutionalization of a Horizontal policy, it would be interesting to assess the advantages and disadvantages of these possibly alternative approaches. I point to the latter, provoked by the idea in the final recommendations of the Dissertation for the existence of “Horizontal principles” which I perceive precisely as somewhat alternative to the centralized demographic policy. On the other hand, at the end of Chapter 1 (pages 72-75), the author also examines the benefits and disadvantages of the „Horizontal approach“. If we take it as a collective for the horizontal coordination approach, it should be noted that the shortcomings are too schematic and underestimated, and it is hardly a universal management “cure” but this is certainly subordinated to the desire to defend the thesis without appeal.

Vanya Ilieva follows all formal and informal standards for referencing and academic language. However, it can be noted that in point 5 of the Chapter 2 “Models of adaptation of horizontal and sectoral policies” (e.g. pages 48-55) there is no reference to theoretical sources on the basis of which the relevant generalizations were made.

Chapter 2 “The concept of “Horizontal policies” in the Bulgarian context” (p. 77-141) reveals the rich instrumental research tools of the author. In this chapter, she made a comprehensive substantive analysis of the content and development of the regulatory framework of coordination and horizontal goal-setting. The results of two very serious field studies are presented and critically analyzed. The survey among 351 civil servants (of which about a third are in managerial positions) leads to the identification of various problems of coordination and horizontal policies. The survey research leads to many interesting concrete findings. I will give just one example. If 59% of all surveyed employees share the statement that horizontal policies are specific and have peculiarities in planning and implementation, there are striking differences in this perception concerning the type of administration - 83% of employees in the Council of Ministers Administration and only 45% of representatives of various ministries. The survey was professionally prepared and duly attached including a list of the identified and addressed administrative structures. The survey is based on the principle of respondents but the author did not explicitly comment on who these administrations are and whether their proportion should be considered as a limitation for some of the conclusions (since for example 3 state agencies, 7 ministries, 7 executive agencies are addressed, and the percentage of actual responses is respectively 27.92%, 27.35%, and 37.61%). As a formal remark, it can be noted that the title of the chapter practically repeats the title of the dissertation itself.

Chapter 3 “Demographic policy in Bulgaria during the period 2001-2020“contains a detailed analysis and the positioning of the demographic policy as horizontal. Both here and in Chapter 2 (where the Administration Act period is considered at least from 1998), the research actually goes beyond the stated period of 2001. The institutional development of the Advisory Councils on Social and Demographic Affairs can actually be traced back to 1995.

I would like to emphasize that the author has her own research methods - in table 11, a comparative analysis of the Councils in the field of demographic policy is made according to the author's criteria, such as the presence of representatives of the scientific community and/or the civil sector, presence of auxiliary structures, number and type of functions, accountability mechanisms, etc. Table 12 reports the link of the demographic policy in the sectoral strategies that have been identified as important. In addition, this Chapter reveals many useful findings, e.g. out of 11 strategic documents examined in detail, only three were found to be directly related to the objectives of the demographic policy.

As a theoretical-practical "hit", I would like to note the linking of the theoretical classification of the types of policy networks with the specific parameters of the demographic policy and its definition as a “bureaucratic network” (p.166).

Point 6 “Recommendations for improving policy coordination and adaptation processes” synthesizes several very promising ideas. This part, although it undoubtedly refers to the improvement of practice, contains some proposals that appear somewhat unexpectedly, without stepping on a sufficient theoretical basis and concrete research. The recommendations related to the Open Method of Coordination (OMC appears as a concept on page 185 in the recommendations) and the horizontal principles are examples of this, and the same applies to some extent to the impact assessment. The findings are very useful and the question is how applicable they are to other policies.

4. Assessment of the Abstract, identification and evaluation of scientific and scientific-applied contributions

The Abstract fully covers the academic standards and creates a clear idea of the research structure and methodology and its recommendations in a concise and synched form. I completely agree with the points of contribution that Vanya Ilieva points out at the end of the Abstract. As I have already noted - this is the first purposeful and independent study of horizontal policies and horizontal goal-setting in the Bulgarian language - the key theories and ideas are summarized and analyzed, and the most significant characteristics that have an

impact on the effectiveness of the policy are brought out. The peculiarities of the Bulgarian public governance system are analyzed in the context of the interweaving of the ideas of the New Public Management and the new public governance. Proposals have been formulated that have the potential to improve the effectiveness of demographic policy and horizontal targeting, etc. Among the contributions, I would include the developed toolkit for the study of advisory councils and the connections between the strategic goals of the demographic policy which seems to apply to other public policies, including sectoral. Field studies contain very rich information, which also gives scope for recommendations beyond the direct objectives of the research.

5. Publications and participation in scientific forums

During the period of her PhD studies, Vanya Ilieva had an impressive scientific and research activity. She is the author of eight scientific articles and has an active participation in several international scientific forums and PhD seminars. All articles have been published in non-refereed journals with scientific review and edited collective editions in Bulgarian language, with one of the articles co-authored:

1. Ilieva, V. (2019) Horizontal Policy – Making Approach in Goal Setting – Specifics and Results within Bulgarian Demographic Policy. Conference Proceedings “Reforms of public management in Central and Eastern Europe”, Sofia, University Press "St. Kliment Ohridski", ISBN 9789540748436, pp. 285-300
2. Ilieva, V. (2021) Theories and ideas about horizontality in public management. Conference Proceedings “Doctoral Readings 2020”, Sofia, University Press "St. Kliment Ohridski", ISSN: 2603–3453, pp 387-403
3. Ilieva, V. (2021) Dimension of intergeneration justice in Bulgarian demographic policy. Conference Proceedings “Administrative fairness as good governance, Sofia, University Press "St. Kliment Ohridski", ISBN 978-954-07-5251-8, pp. 315-332
4. Ilieva, V. (2023) Comparative analysis of Coordination mechanisms in horizontal policies in Bulgaria. Conference Proceedings “Doctoral Readings 2021”, Sofia, University Press "St. Kliment Ohridski", ISSN 2603-3453, pp. 465-483
5. Ilieva, V., M. Vladimirov (2022) The National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria: Deficiencies in the formulation of horizontal policies. Conference Proceedings “Public Governance after the 2020: What do we know when we know nothing”, Sofia, University Press "St. Kliment Ohridski", ISBN 9789540754840, pp. 198-216

6. Ilieva, V. (2021) Mechanisms for Coordination of Horizontal Policies: Nature and Functions of the National Council for Demographic Policy. SPACE - SOCIETY – ECONOMY, Volume 3, Sofia, Atlasi Press, ISBN 978-619-238-200-1, pp. 216-233

7. Ilieva, V. (2023) The advisory councils as tools for coordination of horizontal policies – the example of Demographic Policy in Bulgaria in the period 1995-2020. Conference Proceedings “Public Administration in global crisis: between liberalism and statism. Sofia, University Press "St. Kliment Ohridski", ISBN 9789540757322, pp. 413-428

8. Ilieva, V. (2023) Political network of demographic policy in Bulgaria. Conference Proceedings “Doctoral Readings 2023” - The final revision has been completed, and the accepted text is ready for publication.

For the purposes of this review, I do not consider it necessary to comment individually on the merits of each publication for two main reasons. On the one hand, all the articles have been published in peer-reviewed editions and serious scientific collections, and I was a reviewer and editor of some of them. The second reason is more important and substantive. Following the dominant trend among PhD students, the vast majority of the theoretical achievements of the articles and specific studies have actually spilled over into the dissertation work itself. This suggests that the semantic comments on the dissertation text also cover the articles underlying it. Such an approach has an indisputable advantage - the hypotheses and the research apparatus are gradually verified among the members of the scientific community and give confidence to the PhD student about the direction of the research. On the other hand, however, there is a risk in some places of losing the logical connection between the individual parts of the dissertation work, which, albeit to a small extent, is also noticeable in the work of Vanya Ilieva. In any case, I am convinced of her research potential to expand the field of her scientific interests.

6. Critical remarks and questions

The Dissertation contains some controversial points and unfinished research work most of which I noted in the course of this review. The most important of them can be summarized as follows:

- Some of the conclusions and recommendations at the end do not seem to be sufficiently based on the theory and the results of the various studies;
- To a small extent, the shortcomings of the understanding of horizontal policies are critically examined and various alternative options are weighed;

- Some concrete practical lines for improvements and reforms have been neglected – details of the coordination and advisory methods, the possible need for a new understanding of the competencies in the administration and the possible need for specific trainings, etc.

In this regard, I would like to ask the author the following questions:

1. What changes do you recommend at the level of institutional arrangements and specific procedures to improve the effectiveness of the process?
2. How do ideas of “good governance” affect horizontal goal-setting?
3. Can the logic of collective rationality and coordination around shared goals be embedded while maintaining accountability and clear responsibility?

7. Conclusion

The proposed Dissertation on “Horizontal Policies in the Bulgarian Context” is a serious academic development with concrete theoretical and practical contributions. In addition to the excellent theoretical base, Vanya Ilieva demonstrates an excellent command of different and varied research methods and tools and convincingly proves her research thesis. Such interweaving of multiple-scope qualitative and quantitative research has been rare in dissertation texts in recent years. The text also leaves several unexplained trajectories and controversial directions but these do not negate its contribution.

Therefore, the above-mentioned gives me a reason to express confidently my positive assessment of the Dissertation and I recommend to the members of the Scientific Jury to support a decision FOR awarding the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in Political Science (Public Administration) in professional direction 3.3. Political Science to Vanya Antonova Ilieva.

Sofia,

10.03.2024

Member of the Scientific Jury – Reviewer:

Assoc. Prof. Simeon Atanasov Petrov, PhD