

STATEMENT

By: Assoc. Prof. **Alexander Ivanov Valkov**, PhD
University of National and World Economy
Professional field 3.7. Administration and Management

Regarding: Dissertation for the award of PhD degree
Professional field 3.3. Political Sciences

Author of the dissertation: **Vanya Antonova Ilieva**
Dissertation thesis: **Horizontal policies in the Bulgarian context**

Grounds for presenting the statement: participation in the scientific jury for the defence of the dissertation according to Order № ПД-38-25/16.01.2024 of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Training in the PhD programme and PhD student data

Vanya Antonova Ilieva (18/05/1994) has been accepted for part-time doctoral study at the Department of Public Administration at the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in 2019 with a study period from 01.02.2019 to 02.01.2023. Prof. Dr. D.S. Tatyana Tomova.

Vanya Ilieva received her higher education at Sofia University. In the period 2013-2017, she completed her studies in the Bachelor's program in "Public Administration" (she obtained her Bachelor's degree in 2017), and in 2017-2018 she studied in the Master's program in "Public Administration", led by the department of the same name. In 2018, she defended a master's thesis on the topic "Horizontal approach to goal setting: the demographic policy of Bulgaria in the period 2001-2017" and obtained a master's degree in "Public Administration". The topic of her master's thesis is the basis for future studies and research in the doctoral program of the department, which she enrolled in 2019.

The interest in scientific research and the topic developed within the framework of the doctoral studies are also confirmed in the professional positions she holds, first (during her master's degree) as a "junior expert" in the Directorate "Modernization of the Administration" in the Administration of the Council of Ministers (2018) and in the same position for the next two years in the Directorate "Cultural Heritage, Museums and Fine Arts" in the Ministry of Culture. Since 2021, she has been working as a project manager at the ESTAT research agency.

Fluent in Spanish (level C1) and English (level B1).

The choice of a topic in the field of public policies is based on sustained interest and is the result of systematically accumulated knowledge during her studies at Sofia University. The key moments of the biography of the PhD student show that the doctoral study and the choice of research topic are a natural continuation of the educational profile built up from the previous educational levels.

General characteristics of the dissertation

The dissertation consists of 220 pages, of which 199 pages represent the main text, structured as follows: an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. In the main text of the study, 16 figures and 12 tables are included, which present summarized results of the empirical

research on the dissertation. Lists of figures and tables, as well as a list of abbreviations used in the text, are not specified in the dissertation manuscript. The questionnaire developed by the researcher for in-depth interviews (the qualitative research using the unstructured interview method), includes 24 questions, divided into 6 blocks, is specified in an appendix at the end of the text. In another appendix, summarized data from the conducted quantitative research (online survey in 22 administrative structures) are presented in the three main sections - administrative experience, position, type of administration. The two studies provide the necessary (and sufficient) information to fulfill the PhD student's intention to derive and analyze the practical dimensions of the work on horizontal policies in our country. There is a correspondence between the empirical arguments and the obtained results in the context of the adopted research strategy, which ensures scientific integrity and completeness of the researched problem.

The main method of conducting the research, in accordance with the stated theoretical-methodological goals and results of it, is the desk study. It is based on the scientific basis provided by the sources indicated in the bibliography - a total of 119, of which: 85 scientific publications, 11 normative acts and other acts of state bodies, 14 strategic and program documents, 9 internet portals and sites. The bibliography is presented in a structured way. The time span of the cited scientific literature is from 1978 to 2023, which allows the study to stand on a broad and stable scientific basis. Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the sources are in English. All sources are relevant to the thesis topic. They fully correspond to the subject area of the research and emphasize the significance of the topic, the theoretical-methodological nature and contributions of the dissertation. I have no doubts about the correctness of the PhD student in using the sources indicated. The sources are indicated with an in-text index and "underline" citation. The PhD student has worked correctly with the indicated literature and data. The literature is presented correctly and in a uniform style.

The language is clear, the style – with author's signature, understandable and convincing. My acquaintance with the text and the review of the literature give me a reason to characterize the dissertation research as a scientific product with theoretical-methodological and scientific-methodological significance.

Relevance and research approach

The topic of the dissertation is original and represents a request for research on a major scientific task, relevant to the theory and (even more) the practice of modern public administration. The leading societal problems of today arise from multiple and interrelated (not yet studied) causes, require long-term and multi-directional but converging efforts for their solution, integrated in different systems and levels, and finally find multiple manifestations in different spatial and temporal horizon. Major societal challenges are complex in nature (with a high degree of complexity) and this implies a change in the understanding and paradigm of public management. Successfully dealing with (or adapting to) this type of challenges/tasks requires overcoming the restrictive and partial nature of "tunnel" hierarchies as a (management) coordination mechanism and expanding the horizontality inherent in modern public administration. Horizontality (placed as a leading emphasis and in the thesis topic) seems simple as a solution/instruction; but it also remains a mystery regarding the answers to a number of questions such as the practical ways to achieve it, to the processes that realize it, to the elements that can support it, to the results that order will bring. etc. Horizontality is a fractal characteristic, an objectively existing system-forming parameter for the organization (complexity) of social life. It redefines the understanding of public management and is therefore reflected in all its aspects (structures, processes, people, communications, etc.). This is how I would sum up in other words, the stated and well-emphasized in the first chapter and understanding of the PhD student. The evidence for this is present in all elements of the dissertation research and in the entire text of the provided manuscript - in a theoretical plan (Chapter 1), in a methodological plan (Chapter 2) and in a practical-applied plan (Chapter 3).

In Bulgarian theoretical science, there are still very few studies devoted specifically to the topic of horizontality in management (respectively, for horizontal public policies) and for their inherent structures (networks) and processes (coordination) in goal setting and in the actual functioning of the authorities and administrations, at central and local level. It can be argued that the topic fills a "white spot" in the Bulgarian science on this topic and brings benefits for the administrative reform in Bulgaria. And insofar as horizontality refers to large-scale and endemic social problems, there are also pragmatic arguments for analyzing demographic policy through the prism of its features as a horizontal policy.

A specific perspective on the subject, highlighted as a leading scientific and applied problem, is that of the coordination of policies, both horizontal and sectoral (and between them), in an inter-institutional and internal perspective, on the solution of which depends to the greatest extent the effectiveness of public administration. As suggested by the title, this problem can be defined as the main field of scientific research in the dissertation, the focal point of the research strategy applied and the improvements sought. In connection with the peer-reviewed dissertation, it should be noted that the topic of coordination of public administration (policies) is a fundamental problem of public administration, the study of which is a central task in the research program of the Department of Public Administration at Sofia University. I would like to point out the scientific project completed last year on the topic "Research of coordination mechanisms in public administration" in which the scientific supervisor of the PhD student (Prof. T. Tomova), Associate Professor S. Petrov - head of the scientific team and as part of the - the wide circle of participants in it of the PhD student V. Ilieva. The PhD student's participation in this project is in sync with her dissertation work, and the results between them are congruent. One of the publications on the project is a publication of the PhD student, indicated in the abstract (#7). The work on the dissertation finds confirmation in the achievement of the main goal of this project - in theory, supplementing scientific knowledge about the coordination of many heterogeneous participants and processes in the formulation and implementation of public decisions (policies) and, in practical terms, making recommendations for improving the effective mechanisms for coordination in the formulation and implementation of public decisions. It can be summarized that the dissertation is a significant secondary result of the focal research carried out in the department on this topic. This speaks to the sustainability and significance of the scientific results. Such research and in the outlined context is new to our scientific literature, which outlines it as timely and with well-defined practical benefits.

Study design

All the basic elements of the research infrastructure visible in the introductory part of the dissertation (the introduction) are present. The research design is well thought out and prepared, which is decisive for the validity of the research and the results. I find that overall, the PhD student has succeeded in this task.

- The definition of the object of the dissertation is presupposed by the topic - horizontal policies. The analysis and clarification of the characteristics of horizontal policies - in the process of their formulation and implementation are embedded in a specific, i.e. national context. This focus sets the research problem of the dissertation, which the subject of the dissertation should reflect. Demographic policy is only the concrete "case", the example on the basis of which the deficits in policy making and implementation are drawn. In this context, demographic policy is not the subject of the dissertation, but only an example/case (as correctly stated in the definition of the objective) through which features that can be called "national context" are summarized.

- The objective network of the dissertation is elaborated in several sequentially related elements: objectives, research questions, objectives, thesis and research results. They outline the research idea and structure the logic of the study. The main goal is the solution of the (mentioned above) scientific problem (i.e. the subject of research): "the process of formulating and

implementing horizontal policies in the conditions of the Bulgarian public administration system" (p. 7). Demographic policy is only the concrete example on the basis of which this goal is achieved. It is not correct that when defining this goal, the PhD student does not formulate it as a concrete, expected, verifiable "result", but as the research process itself ("to study the process"). The disaggregation of the main objective into three "specific objectives" corresponds to the logic and structure of the development: the first, theoretical framework and main characteristics of horizontal policies", the second, institutional conditions and capacity to implement horizontal policies in the country, and on this basis, third, identifying deficits and improvements in the planning and implementation of demographic policy in the country. This research triad incorporates a wider range of specific questions (10 in total) and research tasks (11 in total) within the timetable. To achieve greater consistency and persuasiveness of the target network (the research questions - tasks - results), it is necessary to structure them in the three-unit logic of the work outlined by the PhD student and to look for their concrete/specific description (I find that in the text they are mixed). In conceptualizing the goal network, the working rule is: tasks are described as a process, while results are described as specific achievements.

- The indicated "defect" is compensated by a very well thought out and developed thesis of the dissertation, which is "facing" the solution of the scientific problem and presents a convincing generalization of the research result. The thesis makes a clear assessment of the horizontal policies in the country, bringing out the main problem areas and guidelines for their solution.

- A significant place in the plan (pp. 11-16) is devoted to the methodology of the dissertation research. The desire for a detailed argumentation of the methods used, on which the research is based, should be evaluated positively. Also, the combination of extensive and in-depth theoretical analysis and empirical research (desktop and 'field') through quantitative and qualitative methods deserves admiration. However, I find that the two parts "i.e. 9 Research methods' and 10. Methods of analysis' are incorrectly titled and there is overlap between them. Item 9 deals with the argumentation of the research approach used, and item 10 focuses on the specific methods used in the dissertation. Argumentation in the selection of specific methods must follow the set tasks according to the described research logic.

Scientific achievements

The dissertation is structured in 3 chapters. The structure is logical and grounded. Chapter One is tasked with theorizing horizontality as a defining principle of policy governance. The second chapter is methodological in nature and is dedicated to the study of the capacity for horizontal management in the country. The third chapter pursues a scientific-applied function by identifying deficits and solutions to improve the demographic policy, viewed as a horizontal policy. The main achievements of the dissertation can be briefly summarized as follows:

- Chapter one ("Public policies and horizontal management. Theories and ideas about horizontality in public management") outlines the broad theoretical framework of the study. Relevant to the dissertation research are the following theoretical summaries: (1) Horizontality is a (management) approach to shared and coordinated decision-making, policy formulation and implementation applicable to solving complex/complex problems; (2) As a defining parameter for synergy, horizontality expresses the mutual dependence in the entire management process and at all levels in the field of public policies - internally organizational, inter-institutional and inter-sectoral, between the state, business and civil society; (3) Horizontality is an integrating and building management concept that replaces hierarchical and centralized coordination mechanisms with cooperation, cooperation, partnership, non-hierarchical structures in management, consensus-based shared decision-making (power), responsibility for them and for the results of them; (4) Horizontal policy is a tool for integrating power and resources of public administration aimed at solving problems that affect different sectors and levels of government,

which requires the coordination of policies and actions in different sectors to achieve common goals; (5) The practical interaction between (institutional actors of) horizontal and sectoral policies is determined by their dominance in the coordination/decision-making process and the applicable model of mutual adaptation; (6) The Horizontal Policy Network is a decision-making platform based on promoting stakeholder participation and engagement, enabling better policy planning and implementation.

- The second chapter ("The concept of "horizontal policies" in the Bulgarian context") seeks answers to questions related to the entry of horizontal policies into public administration in the country. Contrary to the title of this chapter, horizontal policies are the object of interest not as a concept, but at an applied level, which directs the dissertation in the search for empirical confirmations of the conditions, factors and capacity of public administration in formulating and implementing horizontal policies. This is the right decision. It was done the right way – by combining quantitative and qualitative methods. On this basis, the following achievements are more important: (1) The ideas and practices of management through public policies in the country are the result of socio-political and economic changes in the last 30 years (democratization, market economy, EU membership); (2) Three decades later, against the background of the growing need for horizontal policies, there are systemic gaps related to the construction of the institutional mechanisms for coordination, the adaptation of horizontal and sectoral policies, the evaluation and monitoring of the policy, as well as the overall organizational and administrative culture to work on this type of policies; (3) Coordination procedures and institutional forms and coordination mechanisms specifically created and focused on the nature of horizontal policies are lacking, which leads to ineffective work on horizontal policies; (4) The capacity to work on horizontal policies in the country is not built on the basis of a unified state approach within the system of public administration; (5) Key challenges to horizontal policies in a national context are coordination between different administrations; the adaptation of sectoral and horizontal policies; the coherence of the objectives and their implementation; the monitoring and evaluation of these policies; increasing stakeholder interest and engagement.

- The third chapter ("Demographic policy in Bulgaria in the period 2001-2020") is a detailed "case analysis" of the example of the demographic policy applied in the country over the last two decades. The PhD student arguments justifying demographic policies as a typical example of horizontal policy are acceptable. As a continuation of the analysis in the previous chapter, the dissertation focuses its attention on key management aspects for policies: institutional coordination mechanisms, political networks and strategic decisions. More important generalizations illustrating the results of the analysis are: (1) Poor institutional architecture and poorly functioning coordination mechanisms of demographic policy. There is a weak reflection of the demographic goals in the target sectors related to the demographic policy (an explicit approach to defining the policy and a hybrid approach to integration with the related sectors); (2) Bureaucratic network of the demographic policy (weak participation of non-state actors) and explicit setting of specific demographic goals to the actors involved at the national level; (3) Main management problems: lack of a complex (demographic) strategy to guide the various sectoral policies; medium-term planning; absence of mechanisms (indicators and indicators) to measure the success or impact of the demographic policy; (4) Sustainable improvement of the coordination process and the binding of the sectoral with the demographic policy can be achieved by: implementing the principles of the Open Method of Coordination, adapted for the demographic policy; introduction of the demographic policy as a (mandatory) horizontal principle in the implementation of (sectoral) policies; introduction of demographic policy as a mandatory element in impact assessment.

Scientific and scientific-applied contributions

I accept the scientific results summarized by the PhD student, indicated in the abstract (p. 40). A total of 6 scientific contributions are indicated. The first (according to the numbering in the

abstract) has theoretical significance, the next three (2 - 4) are methodological in nature, and the last two (5 - 6) have scientific and applied significance.

The stated results and contributions are the work of the author of the study. There are opportunities to expand and continue scientific research.

Publications

There is a very high general and regular publication activity of the doctoral student on the topic of the research. On the last page of the abstract (p. 41) there are 8 (eight) scientific publications in the period 2019 - 2024. All publications are during the period of the doctoral studies (the last one has undergone a review process and has been accepted for publication, therefore it should be accepted and reported in the Report on compliance with the national minimum requirements - table 2, group D, item 7). The total number of points from publications are 80, i.e. their number is 2.66 times higher than the minimum national requirements for publications by the doctoral student. Only one of the publications is co-authored, the rest are entirely authored. All publications are scientific reports, seven of which are published in collections published by the University Publishing House of Sofia University. The PhD student is an active participant with her publications in the department's annual scientific conference (and proceedings).

The publications are regular and their sequence reflects the individual stages and achievements of the dissertation research. The reports "The horizontal approach to goal setting - specifics and results of the demographic policy in Bulgaria" (2019) and "Theories and ideas about horizontality in public administration" (2021) are dedicated to the horizontal approach in public administration and to the peculiarities of the process of goal setting within of horizontal policies. The publications "Dimensions of generational justice in the demographic policy of Bulgaria" (2021) and "Mechanisms for the coordination of horizontal policies: nature and functions of the National Council on Demographic Policy" (2021) outline the challenges facing demographic processes and the interdependence of demographic policy with sectoral policies. The scientific reports - "The National Plan for Recovery and Sustainability: Deficits in the Formulation of Horizontal Policies" (2022) and "Comparative Analysis of Coordination Mechanisms for Horizontal Policies in Bulgaria" (2023) are devoted to questions about the mechanisms for the coordination of demographic policy. The last two reports - "Advisory councils as instruments for the coordination of horizontal policies" (2023) and "Political network of demographic policy in Bulgaria" (2024) present an analysis of the political network of demographic policy and, on this basis, a key approach aimed at improving coordination.

Abstract

The abstract is a total of 41 pages. It is provided in both Bulgarian and English language. It is an independent text that can be defined as a summary of the main parts of the dissertation research. The content of the dissertation is presented synthesized, in the logical connection of the individual parts, the main conclusions for each stage of the research are highlighted. The text is clear, concise, readable and understandable. References are available for scientific novelties/contributions and for publications on the topic of the dissertation.

Critical notes and recommendations

The dissertation testifies to the author's high competence on the subject, precision, and independence in conducting the research. In the course of her work, the PhD student demonstrates skills in the analysis of empirical data and in theoretical generalizations. Some notes and recommendations were made above regarding research planning. The following can be added to them:

- An opportunity to improve the composition of the submitted manuscript is the additional internal structuring of the text within the specific points (e.g. when summarizing the

theoretical concepts and models or when presenting the empirical results). This would help to avoid some repetitions in the theorizing of the problem (in ch. 1 et seq.) and the presentation of the results (ch. 2, item 3);

- The recommended directions for improving the demographic policy seem to be multidirectional: on the one hand, the open method of coordination (it appears as a solution only at the end of the dissertation) with its inherent emphasis on cooperation, understanding the role of each participant, dialogue and convergence of positions, etc., and the mandatory nature (subordination) of the demographic policy when conducting sectoral, monitoring and evaluation;

- None of the author's publications present the results of her empirical studies. All of them summarize the results of desk research on the topic of the dissertation. Participation in scientific forums is important, but publications in scientific periodicals (scientific articles) and sharing the results of empirical research is an opportunity (and a necessity) that will present the doctoral student as a perspective researcher in the scientific community of public administration.

The remarks do not detract from the overall and very positive impression of the presented dissertation and of the convincingly demonstrated qualities of a researcher on the part of the dissertation student.

Questions

a) A central issue developed in the dissertation (quite rightly), in detail and with arguments, is that of coordination between horizontal and sectoral policies. However, according to the PhD student, how does the issue of coordination between the horizontal policies themselves stand?

b) In the conducted survey, on p. 118 and on p. 129, two generalized "profiles" are shown, respectively, of the most frequently encountered personal problems and of the most important areas of improvement (measures) in the already described problems. It seems logical that priority improvements should address the most important issues. Except for the first two - coordination with other administrative structures and communication and exchange of information, the specified convergence is not present. What, according to the Phd student, could be the reason for this "discrepancy"?

Conclusion

The dissertation is original research on a current, scientifically, and practically significant topic. The author shows her competence on the given problem, proves that she has in-depth theoretical knowledge, can conduct independent scientific research, and generate original theoretical-methodological and scientific-applied solutions. The research thesis has been proven, and the tasks have been solved. Concrete contributions of a scientific and scientific-applied nature have been received, which are a basis for the sustainability of the research and which outline opportunities for development.

The above gives me the reason to give a positive assessment of the dissertation. I recommend to the respected members of the scientific jury to support a decision **FOR** awarding the PhD degree in "Public Administration" in Professional field 3.3. Political Sciences of VANYA ANTONOVA ILIEVA.

14.03.2024 г.

Sofia

(sig):

Assoc. Prof. Alexander Valkov