

Review

The dissertation of Dimitar Nikolaev Ivanov

for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

3.3 Political Science - Political Science (International Relations)

Reviewer: prof. d-r Alexander Tomov

Dissertation: "Energy Geostrategies in the Conflict in Syria"

I. Topicality and importance of the topic of development of Bulgarian political science and the theory of international relations.

The topic chosen by the author "Energy Geostrategies in the Conflict in Syria" is undoubtedly relevant for Bulgarian foreign policy, as well as for the theory of international relations. This significance is also caused by the unusual conflict on the territory of Syria since 2011. It should be noted that in the last 13 years, this is one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes that the Middle East region has experienced. Due to a series of severe military and humanitarian conflicts, more than 300,000 people have died in Syria. More than 5 million people. and a half emigrated abroad, which created problems in Europe, and also affected Bulgaria and other Balkan countries.

Undoubtedly, in recent years, the Syrian Arab Republic has become a focal point of rivalry between major geopolitical and regional powers, including the United States, Russia, Israel, Iran. It is because of this, through the analysis of energy geostrategies, that the author has been able to follow the policy of the main global and regional powers in the area. Today, the problem of Syria becomes even more relevant in the context of the war in Gaza and the emerging severe strategic conflict between Israel and most Arab countries, including Syria.

The author has thoroughly studied the situation in the Middle East in the last 20-25 years, focusing on the oil and gas business, sea and oil routes. The importance of this analysis for the theory of international relations in particular for Bulgarian foreign policy and Bulgarian business is undoubted.

II. Contributions of the dissertation.

The dissertation contains a series of interesting theoretical generalizations and an analysis of a sufficiently large volume of literature. The dissertant has taken into account most of the remarks that were made to him during the internal defense, and has largely reflected the literature of most Western and Bulgarian analysts who write on the issue. It can be assumed that the conceptual apparatus has been cleared, which has greatly helped to outline the main processes in the development of the conflict in Syria in recent years.

As the most important contribution of the author can be taken the concept of "energy geostrategy" and the relationship of this concept with the category of geopolitics. Many authors are looking for the link between energy and geopolitics. In this case, the author talks about specific energy geostrategies as structurally determining geopolitical interests. It is characteristic that for some of the analyzed countries the geopolitical factor is dominant, while for others it is subordinated to one degree or another to their energy interests. Undoubtedly, here the author will also meet criticism of individual authors, but I find such differentiation of energy geostrategies and their impact on geopolitics productive. Moreover, I can take this as a contribution of the author with an important impact on the situation in Syria and the region.

An indisputable contribution to the dissertation is the analysis of the energy profile and strategic goals in the foreign policy of the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel. In this part of the dissertation, the most important has been achieved. The strategic objectives in the foreign policy of these countries are outlined. The difference in the energy profiles and goals of the 7 countries was found. A distinction has been made between countries for which Syria is mainly of geopolitical interest and for countries whose strategy is dominated by energy.

Very interesting is the author's summary that the refusal of the government of Bashar Razzad to build the Qatar-Turkey gas pipeline (2009-2010) was the root cause of the conflicts in Syria, and later led to the formation of border buffer zones in the north and east of the country. It should definitely be pointed out that in Bulgarian literature there is no such detailed analysis and in this sense, Dimitar Ivanov's dissertation will be useful for all specialists and experts working on Middle East issues. Of course, there is also the opposite perception in the literature that the Qatar-Turkey gas pipeline was a failed project due to the

intensification of contradictions between global powers in the Middle East and the strengthening of Russia's influence over the government of Bashar Razzad.

The author has devoted his main part to the dissertation not only on Syria, but on the policies of seven major countries in the Middle East. The US energy profiles and strategic objectives are examined consistently; Russia's energy profile and strategic objectives are examined.

At the same time, the author has not underestimated the interests of Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Qatar by considering them in consistency, thoroughness and at the same time in mutual relations. This part of the dissertation is useful both for Bulgarian diplomacy but also for all scientific developments related to the Middle East. I would even say this: from now on in Bulgaria there is a work that is absolutely mandatory for everyone who is engaged in oil and gas business and especially with the situation in the Middle East. In depth with many facts Dimitar Ivanov comes to specific conclusions that are undoubtedly of interest to anyone who deals with detailed issues.

However, another interesting conclusion can be drawn from here. The concentration of the interests of so many countries on Syria and its energy resources speaks of the strategic weakness of this country. The autonomous rule of various sectors in the north and east over Syrian territory is a consequence of these interests. Here, the author has also made a connection with the energy interests of the United States, Turkey, but also of Russia, which has built its own military bases on Syrian territory.

The reader of this dissertation will also understand the dynamics of geopolitical interests in the region, but also the activities of all organizations that are engaged in energy business. Of course, these are the interests of the United States, but also the increasing increase in the role of OPEC+ based on cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Russia. The author evaluates some of the most controversial issues in the world economy and politics:

- The reasons for the rise in oil prices and their possible dynamics in the near future;
- The importance of "OPEC+"
- Iran's policy changes and the growing influence of that country as a new conduit and Russia's goals.
- The consequences of the sanctions against Russia on the occasion of the war in Ukraine and the techniques with which Russia was able to circumvent these sanctions in the field mainly of energy raw materials of oil and gas.

- The participation of Turkey and Syria (separately and relatively) in the circumventions of Western sanctions against Russia.

The author has not been able to cover all recent developments, especially the conflict between Israel and Gaza in the Gaza Strip after October, 2023, and the impact on Syrian issues and energy geostrategies. It could not reflect the consequences of the intensifying conflict between Iran (which supports Hamas and the hosts in Yemen) and Israel. The author has partially taken into account the consequences of the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which, in my opinion, sharply changes the balance of power in the region, and especially the fact that this agreement took place under the patronage of China. I think that in the future the author should pay attention to China's growing diplomatic role in the processes in the region and in Syria in particular.

The consequence of all this is the increased influence of Iran, especially after the beginning of the war in Ukraine and the close military-technical cooperation between Iran and Russia. Joint naval exercises between China, Russia and Iran in early 2024 is a vivid demonstration of the new balance of forces. Obviously, the greater presence of Russia and China in the entire region will affect Syria in only one way. Whether this will lead to a new withdrawal of US forces, which are still in the east of Syria, we can not say, but in any case changes in energy geostrategies the region will affect the entire region. Obviously, Saudi Arabia's ambition to cooperate more intensively than ever with Russia and China and, of course, to look for ways to keep oil prices above \$80 a barrel.

Against this background, the declining role of the EU in the region is obvious. The author has done the right thing by not allocating an independent place in his work the analysis of the policy of Germany or France on Syria.

The contributions that the author has given as a self-assessment correctly reflect the conclusions, conclusions and content of the dissertation.

III. Literature sources and some recommendations.

The use of literature is substantially enriched and made in accordance with the requirements of the law. The analysis of literature and authors working on this issue in the United States and Western Europe has been significantly increased. It can now be said that the author has a more competent analysis for the literature base on the problem under study. The cited literature from over 200 titles has not

been done formally, but thoroughly and analytically. The author has come to important conclusions based on various assessments of the prospects of energy geostrategies and this, of course, has made it possible to highlight the contributing moments of the dissertation itself. Literary sources clearly show the usefulness of Dimitar Ivanov's dissertation. It is clearly seen that the author has found his scientific "niche" and hence his contribution to the theory and practice of Middle Eastern research. Among the many authors who write on these problems, undoubtedly a new name appears, a Bulgarian name with a clear contribution to the study of this so complex and dynamic problematics.

The recommendation that I would allow myself as a reviewer to make is for the author to continue his observation and analysis of the dynamics and connectivity of the **concepts of energy geostrategy and geopolitics**. I believe that this ratio at the current stage of development is in favor of the dominance of the concept of geopolitics, thanks to the clash between global powers the US and the European Union – on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other. This clash is visibly affecting the Middle East in general and Syria in particular. Although this clash is manifested through individual regional powers, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, it is still decisive.

In the regime under study, there is an unusual political dynamic both during the rise of the Islamic State and after its destruction. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, geopolitical dynamics have changed significantly due to several factors:

- Increased interaction and mutual support between Russia and Iran and increased Iranian activity, both in Syria and throughout the region;
- Improving relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the context of their agreement;
- Conflicts in the Gaza Strip and Israel's War on Hamas

I recommend that the author in his future studies pay attention to this dynamic. Next, I would recommend the author to focus on China's increased diplomatic activity, expressed both in the search for new alliances in the region and in the support provided to individual energy projects.

IV. Conclusion.

Despite these recommendations, I find the dissertation of Dimitar Nikolaev Ivanov a serious and thorough work that meets the legal criteria for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 3.3 Political Science - Political Science (International Relations). Beyond doubt, Dimitar Nikolaev's work will be of great benefit to all Bulgarian diplomats and experts working on these issues. I recommend the dissertant to publish his work in a separate book, which would greatly increase its benefit.

Sofia,

April, 2024

prof. d-r Alexander Tomov