

DISSERTATION REVIEW

From: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Plamen Marinov Ralchev

UNWE, Department of International Relations;

Research field: 3.3. Political Science, Political Science (Foreign Policy and International Relations)

Regarding reviewed doctoral dissertation in research field 3.3 Political Science (Political Science – International Relations) at Sofia University, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Political Science

Reason for submitting the review: participation in the scientific jury for the defense of the dissertation in accordance with the Order No. RD 38-26/16.01.2024 of the Rector of Sofia University

Author of the dissertation: DIMITAR NIKOLAEV IVANOV

Topic of the doctoral dissertation: *ENERGY GEOSTRATEGIES IN THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA*

1. Information about the PhD candidate

The PhD candidate Dimitar Ivanov was trained in the PhD program at the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” in the professional field 3.3. Political Science – International Relations. He holds a Bachelor's degree in International Relations and a Master's degree in European Integration and EU Diplomacy from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. His professional experience at the Diplomatic Institute to the Minister of Foreign Affairs corresponds to and builds on the educational training he received. The candidate has fulfilled all the obligations stipulated in his individual study plan, including passing examinations and publications. He has been granted the right to defend his dissertation and has been referred to a scientific jury in accordance with the relevant decisions of the departmental and faculty councils and the order of the Rector of the University of Sofia No. RD 38-26/16.01.2024.

The PhD candidate meets the minimum national requirements for the award of the PhD degree. The submitted dissertation has been checked with specialized software and no plagiarism has been found.

2. General Overview of the Dissertation

The dissertation volume is 335 pages, which significantly exceeds the average dissertation volume for PhD dissertations. It consists of an introduction, seven chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. The first chapter defines the main concepts used in the dissertation, provides a brief historical overview of the development of the war in Syria and of the Syrian energy sector. In addition, the first chapter gives the reasons why the seven countries involved in the conflict are the subject of analysis. The last sub-chapter of chapter one contains more detailed information on the methods of the research process, their application in previous studies as well as in the present one, and their relation to the hypotheses put forward. The exposition includes seven chapters tracing three main aspects of external actors in the Syrian conflict. A time limit is set until the end of 2022.

Each chapter presents an energy profile of the respective country, including an analysis of the oil and gas sector, major import and export partners, participation in transnational energy infrastructure projects, and key foreign energy policy objectives. The geopolitical interests in the Middle East and Syria of the analyzed external actors in the conflict are also covered in detail. This section includes the foreign policy objectives and geopolitical positioning of the seven countries analyzed in the region, as well as a historical overview and motivation in their involvement in the war in Syria. The third part of each chapter attempts to identify overlapping elements between the first two aspects of each chapter, in order to highlight the seven states' energy geostrategies and their enactment within the Syrian conflict as the primary motive for intervention.

The conflict in Syria is complex and multi-layered, with energy geostrategies playing a significant role. Syria is strategically important for energy security in the region, especially due to its location as a transit country for energy corridors. Various countries and groups are vying for control of areas with energy resources such as oil and natural gas, which is a source of conflict and tension. So, too, various states and regional actors have geopolitical interests in the Syrian region. They seek to promote their strategic objectives, including control over energy routes, diversification of supplies and influence in the region. Syria is important for the transportation of energy resources,

including oil and gas, to various regions such as Europe and Asia. It is essential for various countries and companies to control the transit routes and the infrastructure that serves them.

Energy geostrategies have been accompanied by external interventions and military operations in Syria that aim to influence control over energy resources and transit routes. These interventions often contribute to further inflame the conflict. Energy resources play a key role in Syria's economy and in the dependence of various countries on them. The struggle for control of these resources has significant economic implications and can shape the long-term stability or instability of the region. All these factors constitute a complex web of energy geostrategies that influence the conflict in Syria and have significant implications for regional and global security.

3. Evaluation of conducted research

The object of the study - the war in Syria - seems too broadly formulated. Rather, it is about the complex knot of interests of external powers in the war in Syria, which would have a clearer connection with the otherwise much more clearly and precisely defined subject of the study - the energy geostrategies of seven countries (the US, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel) within the Syrian conflict. The dissertation provides a comprehensive working definition of the term "Energy Geostrategy" which is defined as an investment mechanism for the construction of infrastructure facilities significant to a state's foreign relations, including participation in, obstruction of, blockage of, or competitive alternative spatial duplication of infrastructure projects of regional or global significance. In this regard, the study focuses on oil and gas pipelines, oil and gas processing refineries, natural gas liquefaction terminals, and oil and gas fields.

The author formulates three pairs of alternative hypotheses, whose validity is tested in the dissertation research. The methods he uses - political science, process tracing, interdisciplinary - are appropriate and adequate to the objectives.

The dissertation has clearly defined objectives that serve as a framework for the research. These objectives outline the specific tasks and outcomes that the dissertation seeks to achieve, providing clarity and direction to the research process. Clear objectives help to structure the research methodology, data collection, analysis and interpretation, ensuring that the research remains coherent and consistent with the intended purpose.

In seven separate chapters, the dissertation examines in turn the energy profile and strategic objectives in the energy foreign policies of the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel. It concludes with reasoned summaries and conclusions about the nature of external interests and interventions in the Syrian conflict and debunks the thesis of prioritized energy geostrategic projections determining the policies of various states towards the war in Syria. Without minimizing the importance of energy interests, the author highlights the broader military-political and geopolitical meaning of the war in Syria and the intervention of various external powers. The conclusion presents a correct and well-structured description of the dissertation research's achievements, linking the results and their analysis to the original aims, objectives, hypotheses and research questions.

As a kind of open-ended conclusion, despite the set temporal limitation, the dissertation has included as an Appendix a review and analysis of regional and global trends affecting the conflict in Syria in 2023, which can also be taken as an indication for further future research by the author on this topic.

Overall, the submitted dissertation fully realizes the research intentions, the structure is appropriate and logical, the research methods, sources and academic literature used are relevant and well selected.

4. Evaluation of scholarly contributions

Dimitar Ivanov's dissertation work has definite contributions. Among the indisputable contributions we can accept:

1. Defining the concept of "energy geostrategy" in a broad sense.
2. Systematizing the energy geostrategies and regional geopolitics of the analyzed seven countries - the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel - in relation to the conflict in Syria.
3. Identifies a uniform approach of the analyzed states (five out of seven, excluding Qatar and Saudi Arabia) towards the Syrian oil sector. Hence, the author concludes that regardless of

the state under consideration (democratic/autocratic; global/regional power;), the same tactics are observed - both forceful (through the presence of military and paramilitary groups) and shadowy (through the involvement of small businesses in the Syrian oil sector).

4. For the first time in Bulgarian political science, the means of foreign companies in penetrating the Syrian energy market through the use of relatively small capitalization energy companies are analyzed. Examples are provided for each case, tracing their direct involvement with the military-political elites of the US, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Israel.

5. Overall, Dimitar Ivanov's scientific work provides an opportunity for practical application of the concept of "energy geostrategy" and its operationalization in the work of Bulgarian energy policy and diplomacy.

5. Evaluation of published work in relation with the dissertation thesis

The PhD candidate has four publications related to the dissertation topic, which demonstrates the consistency of his research interests.

1. "Energy co-operation between the EU and Iran - Future challenges and the way forward" in Neykov, S. (ed.) Energy Diplomacy (2019) Sofia: Bulgarian Diplomatic Institute, pp. 106-125
2. "Динамика на американската политика спрямо арабско-израелския конфликт. Ролята на шистовата революция", Докторантски четения, том 3 2019, pp. 275-295
3. "More than meets the eye? The EU Energy and Climate Diplomacy towards the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries", in Neykov, S. (ed.) Energy and Climate Diplomacy (2020) Sofia: Bulgarian Diplomatic Institute, pp. 72-94
4. "Енергийните геостратегии в конфликта в Сирия: руската перспектива", Годишник на Софийския университет „Св. Климент Охридски“ том 5 2020, pp. 377-399

6. Evaluation of the Dissertation Abstract

The presented dissertation abstract in a volume of 39 pages correctly and to a significant extent reflects the content and all important highlights, findings, conclusions and summaries of the dissertation work.

7. Critical notes, recommendations and questions

The dissertation research is not based on an explicit theoretical model, but through political science and interdisciplinary approaches and the process tracing method, the profiles and strategies of different actors and their influence on the war in Syria are descriptively derived. This individual profiling of each actor separately has its advantages for the logical organization of the text, its readability and perception, but leaves limited scope for problematizing issues on which there is a complex interweaving of conflicting interests. This problematized analysis is done in the conclusion after seven separate chapters that somewhat fragment the text, which is itself large in volume. This finding is more in the nature of a recommendation for future research by the author and is not intended to diminish or undermine the achievements of this thesis.

Conclusion

A completed, independently realized dissertation research is presented to the attention of the scientific jury, which demonstrates the doctoral student's skills in formulating and researching scientific problems.

In my opinion, the dissertation is sufficiently developed and satisfies the basic requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its implementation. On the basis of the above mentioned in the review, I give a positive opinion for the award of the degree of Ph.D. in the Professional field 3.3. Political Science (Political Science - International Relations) to Dimitar Nikolaev Ivanov.

02.04.2024/ Sofia

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Assoc. Prof. PLAMEN RALCHEV, PhD