

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Faculty of Philosophy
Department of Political Science
Area: 3.3 Political Science

REVIEW OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ON:

Radicalisation and deradicalisation of ISIS foreign fighters (2013 - 2019)

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Reviewer. Dr. Momchil Badjakov

1. Relevance and significance of the research problem in scientific and applied terms

Dora Stoyanova's PhD thesis is undoubtedly topical and significant. This, according to the dissertation, is due to "the numerous cases of bombings in different European countries during the period under study. As a member state of the EU, Bulgaria is obliged to react both politically and in the development of various scientific studies and analyses that come up with ready proposals to achieve greater effectiveness in the fight against terrorism and organized criminal networks".

However, the topicality and importance of the topic is not only determined by the growing number of terrorist attacks in the territories where terrorist organisations mainly operate, but also in the territory of a number of European countries, including Bulgaria. The fighters who become terrorists are recruited from Islamic and non-Islamic countries, communication and recruitment networks are being built up, and the opportunities for action of extreme Islamists are being expanded through the radicalisation of ever wider sections of the population.

The focus of this dissertation is the process of radicalization and deradicalization. The dissertation analyses the most common and widely used definitions in academic and normative texts. It clarifies the scope of each of them, its limits, nature and main characteristics. This includes an analysis of the basic concepts of

"radicalization" and "deradicalization" in their binary, with all the resulting peculiarities and specificities.

The topic of the dissertation also has a practical and applied aspect. It is particularly significant in view of Bulgaria's membership in NATO and the EU, especially in terms of national security.

2. Accurately formulated aims and objectives of the dissertation.

The main research question that the dissertation poses is what are the main factors that determine the process of deradicalisation and how could they be properly classified and systematised for further research. In order to answer this question she examines the process of deradicalisation in close relation to radicalisation. Her basic hypothesis is that the two processes are in constant dependence on each other and that the latter is impossible to proceed unless the former is observed. It is also hypothesized that in order to achieve a sufficient degree of effectiveness in the deradicalization process, it is necessary to consider this process in its stages.

The author expands the terminology by emphasizing the need to consider specific steps that can be scientifically identified as such, based on predefined criteria and characteristics. The development of such a theoretical toolkit helps to further develop concrete plans, measures and strategies in the fight against terrorism and this would greatly facilitate the process of deradicalisation.

This study advocates that distinguishing the stages in the process would help to diagnose the phenomenon earlier and thus create the necessary conditions for intervention and counteraction in its earlier stages. In this way, it is possible to avoid reaching extreme forms of radicalisation involving the identified behavioural patterns. This would help to avoid the use of so-called 'harder' measures.

The author proves, relying on research and documentary material, that "at present, there is no evidence of a single profile of ISIS recruits". This means that the approach to the processes of radicalisation and deradicalisation studied cannot be uniform, but according to the dissertation it should be holistic.

In this sense, it posits that the creation of such a general profile could only be possible subjectively, i.e. from the point of view of the already radicalized individuals. In her view, a scientific construct could be created that includes a finite number of characteristics that make up the image of a 'desirable' ISIS foreign

fighter. In this way, the aim would be to reach, through subsequent deconstruction, the individuals most vulnerable to this process. Profiling is the basis and should form part of the further development of a toolkit for accurate diagnosis of the stages and forms of radicalisation.

3. Degree of knowledge of the state of the problem and relevance of the literature used

The author knows the current state of the problem and makes adequate use of the available literature.

The structure of the PhD thesis is logically structured: chapter one discusses the basic conceptual apparatus to be used, followed by chapter two with the models of radicalisation in the scientific literature. In order to build the general profile of the radicalised, as a scientific contribution, according to the author, is the construction of the so-called "Radicalisation Wheel", which symbolises the closed circle, the cyclical nature, the circularity of the radicalisation process. This is followed by a study of the process of deradicalization, an analysis of the formation and development of the Islamic State as a successor to Islamized militants, finally analyzing their profile. Finally, the work concludes with an empirical study of radicalisation cases in Bulgaria.

4. Conformity of the chosen methodology and research methodology with the set aim and objectives of the dissertation.

In order to meet the aims and objectives, the dissertation uses qualitative methods - in-depth interview, ethnographic research and secondary empirical-research analysis of previously conducted interviews and other documents. Based on these methods, the main factors that influence the radicalisation and deradicalisation process are derived, making it possible to relate each of them to the different stages of the radicalisation process. A secondary analysis should be made in more depth on some normative documents. The main interest for this paper is the security strategies prepared by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, and in particular the Strategy for Countering and Combating Terrorism, because the research is aimed at proposing new more detailed measures, based on proving the thesis of the gradual development of the radicalisation process, and it is carried out in the context of an already existing legal and normative environment.

I was personally impressed by the use of the modelling method, which adequately describes the stages of radicalisation, and accordingly I would like to see it applied more widely to the process of deradicalisation. The scientific and applied interpretation is also impressive, which is in line with the set research task.

5. Correctness in citing a representative number of authors.

The dissertation correctly cites a total of 129 references and 15 normative documents. This is in accordance with the requirements and quite sufficient in view of the theoretical task.

6. Availability of a substantiated and developed theoretical model of the study.

Thus, the methodology and methodology of the study described above fully corresponds to the stated aim and objectives of the dissertation. There is an own contribution in collecting and analyzing and summarizing the empirical data.

7. Description of contributions:

The nature and assessment of the reliability of the material on which the contributions of the thesis are built are undeniable.

1. The dissertation proposes its own model of radicalization process description. It is an abstract and generalized scheme of the stages of the radicalization process. The distinction and delineation of these specific stages is based on a scientifically grounded hypothesis.

2. The model allows for a practical assessment of the extent to which a person is radicalised, at what stage of the radicalisation process he is, and this helps to achieve a higher degree of specificity in taking de-radicalisation measures, which is also a major task facing our national security.

3. The study analyzes the relationship of radicalization with the development of the Islamic State in the context of a specific historical period and comparison with other terrorist organizations, analyzing what is common between them and what is new in the phenomenon of the Islamic State.

8. Impacts of the thesis on the external environment.

Publications on the dissertation are quite sufficient in number. The nature of the journals in which they have been published raises no doubt about their reliability. The publications and public media appearances are also sufficiently representative and satisfactory.

9. Opinions, recommendations and comments.

My opinion is that the dissertation should be revised, supplemented and published as a scientific monograph. Noted typographical and spelling errors, especially in the abstract, should be avoided.

In conclusion:

The dissertation demonstrates that the candidate possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge of the relevant specialty and the ability for independent research.

The dissertation to contain valid theoretical generalizations. The contributions described are relevant real contributions. The proposed solutions have scientifically applied aspects that can be used in practice. The degree of personal involvement of the dissertant in the contributions is beyond doubt. The abstract correctly describes the main points and contributions of the dissertation.

The scientific results achieved by Dora Stoynova in her dissertation work give me the grounds to state that I give her a positive evaluation and propose that she obtains the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education - 3. "3.3. Political Science; scientific speciality.

Date 22.04.2024.

Signed: