

PH.D. THESIS EVALUATION REPORT

Thesis Evaluation Report of Dora Yaroslavova Stoyanova

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Tatyana Dronzina, Professor, Dr. Habil.

“Radicalization and De-radicalization of ISIS Foreign Fighters (2013 – 2019)”

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I. THEORETICAL RELEVANCE AND EMPIRICAL FEASIBILITY OF THE STUDY.

The topic of this study introduces a highly relevant aspect of IR studies – non-traditional security threats and terrorism. The radicalization of foreign fighters is among those political pathologies that arise from the actions of non-state actors, such as cross-border terrorist networks, and that are still the subject of serious debate given the fact that there is no universal model to analyze the profiles of radicalized foreign fighters. The title of the manuscript defines the historical period that the doctoral student considers essential to her research. Although it covers only six years, it is important to clarify that during this period, the dynamics and nature of the processes of radicalization and de-radicalization have changed so much that the indicated years provide us with even more empirical material for research than the decade after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. These changes are associated with the emergence of ISIS, which is still the subject of less scholarly work than its predecessors, such as Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, or the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, I believe this study holds a high degree of theoretical relevance and empirical feasibility, which presupposes its contributions.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE MANUSCRIPT.

The submitted manuscript comprises 157 standard pages: title page, table of contents, introduction, five chapters, conclusion, appendices, and references. The study's bibliography includes 147 sources: books and monographs in Bulgarian and English, articles and empirical studies in Bulgarian and foreign publications, normative documents, media publications, and several video sources. The tables/figures include up-to-date statistics on foreign fighters fighting in Syria and Iraq and quantitative data on their nationality. The rest of the diagrams graphically depict the student's model in the study. Sources cited are listed directly in the text. However, the manuscript meets the technical requirements for writing a dissertation work only partially since the citations do not follow a standard formatting system, and the individual sub-chapters in the introduction and other parts are not separated from the main body of the text. This makes it difficult to systematize the empirical part, essential to summarizing the academic contributions.

III. ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RESEARCH.

The author shows a high degree of objectivity, which is the leading academic standard for writing a dissertation on security studies and the main criteria for the content of its contributions, especially in the security field.

The scientific contributions of this research are in the following directions:

1. In her work, the student builds a theoretical model for the process of radicalization. The model is five-dimensional, and its design on existing theory demonstrates academic continuity with existing work in the field. Its design combines the author's vision of radicalization as an open system and complex process, combined with several approaches from the field of psychology that have been applied to explain the motivations of radicalized foreign fighters. In this sense, the model can be applicable in analyzing individual cases and radicalization at the group level - the level of organizations, communities, etc. Another very important contribution is that the author defines radicalization as a conscious reality, reaffirming the dominant view in scholarship that terrorists are rational actors who radicalize consciously, and in this sense, their choice is a product of their own choice and not psychopathology.

2. Among the academic contributions is the empirical research that Dora Stoyanova is doing to confirm her hypothesis. It involves two stages – in-depth interviews with radicalized individuals and a profound assessment of existing anti-terrorism and anti-radicalisation legislation. I believe the conclusions drawn have a high degree of practical applicability and, in this sense - can serve as a starting point for elaborating already existing measures and strategies in these two spheres. It gives the impression that unlike most studies in this field - in Bulgaria, there are no more than two or three - the doctoral student examines the motivation of radicalized persons and the consequences of their actions in the context of already existing sanctions. This empirically proves the low effectiveness of the currently existing legal framework in radicalization, which equates this pathology to several theoretical propositions and mechanically formulated recommendations contained in the Bulgarian Strategy for Combating Terrorism and Radicalization from 2015 to 2020.

3. The author introduces a new perspective on the theoretical debate in radicalization and de-radicalization by introducing a two-dimensional approach, including in the typology of the existing literature those authors who explain these two pathologies psychologically. On this issue, the academic debate is still divided, as one group of scholars believes that this approach risks psychological variables displacing the objectively rational goal of contextualizing radicalization and de-radicalization processes in the field of security rather than psychopathology. An excellent point of this research is the reconciliation of these two approaches since the student delineates the border between the rational actions of radicalized persons and their awareness. Similarly – in the context of de-radicalization – a red line is drawn between authors who see this process as 'curable' and those who objectively believe that the rational nature of both processes should see terrorism as political rather than psychological pathology.

I can summarize that the contributions made in this way give the research a high degree of dissertationability, and in this sense - the presented text meets the substantive requirements for writing a doctoral dissertation.

IV. CRITICAL REMARKS TO THE RESEARCH.

Several recommendations could be addressed in this study:

1. The dissertation's introduction examines the study's main parameters, but they are presented chaotically, although numbered. The doctoral student presents the content of his research but leaves less space for the methodology, which briefly outlines the field research and how it relates to the problem. Although much empirical and research work has been done, it is good that the main guidelines in this direction are presented in more detail in the introduction. Although this harms the study from a technical rather than a scientific point of view, the deficiencies in the methodological part speak of difficulties in structuring the study itself.

2. The overview of the academic debate in the subsequent chapters of the dissertation is extensive, but in the writing of such studies, it is accepted that the authors and their theories are grouped according to the subject they study or based on the variables they operationalize. Thus, for example, psychological theories could be grouped into one group, with authors considering radicalization and de-radicalization as political pathologies in another group. This always gives order to the research and makes research contributions to the field of theory even more visible. The doctoral student correctly notes that the two types of theories do not contradict each other, but if they are regrouped - this will be even more obvious.

3. Considerably less space in the work is devoted to the de-radicalization process. This is the most significant shortcoming of this study, although, in his research, the author makes many arguments that are relevant to this process. They just need to be systematized. The author argues that de-radicalization is still the subject of serious scholarly debate and cannot be analyzed in as much detail as radicalization. This is the challenge of such a scientific work – to expand the field of research. Moreover, the topic's title makes a clear connection between radicalization and de-radicalization as problems of this study. Although the conclusions in this direction are present in the text, the de-radicalization process is not given enough attention, which may call into question some of the doctoral student's findings.

4. Regarding the main contribution of the dissertation – building a theoretical model – although constructed successfully, the model should be tested. This is done by the author in the empirical study he presents later in his paper, but it is good to draw parallels between it and the model. In academic texts, it is accepted that arguments from empirical research should prove the theoretical part that has to do with the models. In this text, the author has completed her task, but she has not distinguished her conclusions at a substantive level.

5. I seriously advise the author to pay attention to his style and spelling if he intends to engage in academia. Dissertation research's value is not measured in citations or well-ordered sources, but meeting basic academic standards guarantees that the text is recognizable. I attribute the inaccuracies made by doctoral student Stoinova to her tireless work, while at the same time, I consider that the presence of such gaps in the text of a dissertation with such fieldwork is not sustained.

V. TEACHING CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE CANDIDATE.

In summary, I would like to say a few words about the teaching contributions of Mrs. Dora Stoinova since I had the opportunity to follow her development as a doctoral student in the Political Science Department of Sofia University and, before that - as her teacher and research supervisor in the master's program "International Relations" and security issues.

Dora regularly participates in the doctoral readings organized annually by the Faculty of Philosophy of the SU, presenting different segments of her dissertation work. During his work with her academic advisor - Prof. Dr. Tatyana Dronzina, the doctoral student participated in several academic conferences in cooperation with international scholars. Dora attended several doctoral summer schools on Radicalization and Terrorism Studies. She authored two publications on her study – one of them is a product of a joint conference with the departments of "European Studies" and "Public Administration." The other is a publication process in the form of conference proceedings of the joint conference with the Institute of Mediation doctoral students at the Eurasian National University of Kazakhstan. This is the place to share my good impressions of the teaching

activities of the author, who worked with our team as the head of seminar classes in the discipline of Conflict Management for one academic year.

In addition, I can mention her support in the organizational work for the joint online seminar between Political Science students from Sofia University and our American undergrads from the LBJ SCHOOL at the University of Austin, Texas, and the assistance provided in connection with the accreditation procedures of the Master's program "Political Pathologies of the global world". Based on the efforts made, I believe that doctoral student Stoinova follows the activities presented in her plan, which is also one of the main prerequisites for successfully completing her doctoral program in the Department of Political Science.

VI. CONCLUSION.

In conclusion, critically considering the presented work's shortcomings and academic contributions, I believe that the given text of the doctoral student meets the conditions for writing a dissertation. With this text, the doctoral student proves that she has the potential to become part of the young scientific community researching conflictology and security. At the same time, I believe that all the procedures for this defense have been completed according to the regulations on the terms and conditions for acquiring scientific degrees and holding academic positions at Sofia University. I advise the respected academic committee to support this young scholar and state that in the case of a plausible defense of the presented study, I will vote "for" the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Philosophy" under academic profile number 3.3. (Political Sciences) of Dora Yaroslavova Stoyanova.

April 17, 2024

DR. ISKREN IVANOV

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