

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boris Petrov Popivanov, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”,

Department of Political Science

for the dissertation work of Dora Yaroslavova Stoyanova

on the topic:

“Radicalization and Deradicalization of Islamic State Foreign Fighters (2013 - 2019)”,

for awarding the educational and scientific degree “Doctor of Political Science”

The work proposed for public defense has a volume of 154 standard pages and is structured in an introduction, five main chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. Separately, in the form of appendices, without being expressly indicated, four schemes are included. The bibliography consists of 129 sources, a significant part of which are used without being directly cited in the text. The topic is important and significant for contemporary research in the field of international relations and security policies. The dissertation is devoted to problems that are relatively widely analyzed in the scientific literature. The PhD student’s intention, which should be applauded, is to offer her own original conclusions, but also to collect and interpret empirical information from Bulgaria, a country outside the center of the academic debate on the Islamic State and the effects of its existence.

All the necessary elements of a successfully realized dissertation research are present. I will focus on three of them.

First, an in-depth discussion was made on the concepts building the conceptual apparatus of the study. Radicalization and deradicalization are of leading importance. By themselves, they suggest an innumerable number of approaches. That is why the author rightly focuses on two main aspects. One aspect concerns the secondary, derivative nature of deradicalization, which cannot be understood without a clear view of radicalization. The second aspect is related to the understanding of radicalization and deradicalization not simply as processes, but as processes distinguished by certain stages. Each of these stages can be analytically separated and studied, in this sense it can be deconstructed to assist both in a more accurate analysis of the factors for the involvement of foreign fighters in the practices of the Islamic State, and for the prevention of their involvement. Guided by such considerations, the doctoral student devotes the second

chapter of her research to the stages of radicalization. There she also offers her author's own model - the so-called wheel of radicalization, illustrated in the diagram on p. 137. The wheel of radicalization reveals the sequence of stages through which the radicalization of the respective foreign fighters passes to reach a certain point where the stages begin to repeat themselves, but at a new level, with increased motivation to participate.

Another essential feature of the dissertation, proposed in the fourth chapter, concerns the reconstruction of the political structure of the Islamic State. With the help of this approach, the status of this unusual actor in international relations has been clarified, especially in relation to the disputes whether it belongs to the group of terrorist organizations. An important observation here is synthesized in the view of the internal unity of the Islamic State, which allows a hierarchy of participation, but also stimulates the self-perception of the participants as part of a whole.

A third essential characteristic of the dissertation is expressed in the ambition to formulate a profile of the foreign fighters who have found a place in the Islamic State. In the fifth chapter, the author insists that such a profile is impossible from the point of view of traditional approaches relying on socio-demographic indicators (poorer, richer, more educated, less educated, etc.), but requires focus on similar situations shaping the path of the individuals in question. In practical terms, this means that the effectiveness of deradicalization measures is determined by the correct assessment of social situations, not so much by attempts to construct some ideal type of foreign fighter. Of note is the empirical research the author conducted on court records for individuals involved in the actions of the Islamic State. This study also represents a specific, unreflected contribution of the dissertation.

My criticisms of the dissertation research mainly boil down to the apparent haste and sometimes sloppiness with which it is presented. Technical and spelling errors, clumsy phraseology and stylistic imperfections can be noticed in too many places. The text would benefit from a thorough and careful editing.

The research design also raises questions. The hypothesis stated in the introduction (pp.3-4) actually incorporates four different hypotheses, some of which are vaguely formulated and could even be perceived as research tasks. Further, it remains unclear what it means for the dissertation to have a subject and an object, where the subject and the object are "part of and represent the living constituent unit of the larger subject of the study - the Islamic State" (p.5). It would be useful to specify how the object becomes some kind of subject, but also how

something is both part of the whole and represents the whole. If the subject is understood as the subject of the research, then why does a specific subject appear a little later in the text - the profile of foreign fighters. How does this subject relate to the subject of the study? If we go further, such shortcomings characterize the objectives of the study. They are formulated in one grammatically vague sentence (p.6) and follow the extremely vague desire to bring out the “relevant features” describing the “relevant stages.” The research tasks do not follow from the objectives, and although there is an obvious connection to the structure of the dissertation, this connection is not explicated. I have no objections to the selection and reasoning of the methodology used. All that I note is not the result of some pedantic vigor, but seems to me essential.

References in the text also need clarification. The citation approach is strange, where the bibliographic description of the source is given in parentheses in the main text. However, there are also authors whose views are commented on at length and in detail, but without specific quotations.

The abstract reproduces the main points of the dissertation work. I think that the observations and conclusions of the individual chapters could be presented more clearly and concretely. The mentioned (p.23) author’s contribution - the wheel of radicalization - is real and important. Along with this, the dissertation definitely offers other contributions to the scientific study of these problems. I would score at least two. First of all, in scientific-theoretical terms, is the view of stages of the radicalization process as a mandatory prerequisite for any prevention policy. In second place, empirically, is the research on court records.

The author has presented four publications, all on the topic of the dissertation. The first of them unfortunately has no bibliographic description and it is not possible to find out if it was published and where. The same goes for the fourth, though it could be guessed there. In general, however, the publications show a sufficient degree of popularization of the research results in the academic circles in Bulgaria and abroad.

I know Dora Stoyanova as a serious and conscientious doctoral student who has been involved in a number of initiatives and projects of the Political Science Department, including under my supervision. I have no doubts about her potential and qualities as a researcher and scholar.

In conclusion, and based on the above considerations, I will vote “FOR” Dora Yaroslavova Stoinova to receive the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in Professional field 3.3. Political Sciences (Political Science - International Relations).

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Author of the Opinion:

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