

## **STANDPOINT**

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Scientific area 3.3.Political sciences

From Doctor Habil degree dissertation in the scientific area of 3.3 Political sciences

at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski "

Author of the dissertation: **Milena Hristova Stefanova, Associate Professor, PhD**;

Department of Public Administration, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski "

Thesis theme: "**The Public Interest in Local Government**"

### **1. Summary of the presented dissertation work**

From the beginning of my standpoint, I express my support for the presented for public defense dissertation and its author.

The dissertation thesis presented for public defense is undoubtedly relevant to the management theory - systemic experience in the Bulgarian scientific literature for research on the public interest in local government. The topic of the study is formulated correctly and precisely - there is a correspondence between the title and the content of the dissertation. Along with this, the study features a balanced combination of theoretical knowledge and skills for practical analyzes and generalizations. The overall study reveals one of the great advantages of the author - a study of problems, which are also known by the practical experience of M. Stefanova from her work as a municipal councilor in the Sofia Municipal Council.

In terms of content, M. Stefanova's study is characterized by the precision of the analysis, the free interpretation of theses and author's opinions, correctness in references and quotes.

Structurally, the work is balanced and adheres to the "classical" models of a similar types of researches - introduction, three chapters, conclusions, applications, and used literature.

The total volume of the dissertation - 292 pages completely meets the established standards. The literary sources used (122, of which 43 in Bulgarian, 59 in English and 20 normative acts) are fully satisfactory as both timeliness and thematic orientation.

A very good impression in the study makes the illustration of the content of the main text with tables and diagrams.

The main objective ('to be evaluated the work of the authorities in the public interest using the good governance concept') and the sub objectives (the study and the critical analysis of the existing concepts and definitions and the development of a contemporary interpretation of the public interest; the development of a matrix of domains of competence and pointing out the main features of the public administrations at local level, taking in count the threats and risks of the local authorities' activity in defending the public interest; developing a methodology for evaluating the work of local authorities and administration in defense of the public interest on the basis of the operationalization of the principles of good governance and verification of the sampling methodology by the Bulgarian municipalities and for a specific area of competence) are precisely defined.

The tasks of the research, which are to be solved in the process of analysis, are not self-directed and abstract, but determine both the structure of the study and the methods used in it.

The formulated research hypotheses: (1) the quality of work of politicians and administrators in local governance affects the protection of public interest; (2) the clearly defined political majority in the municipal council positively influences the public environment and supports the activity in defense of the public interest; (3) in the municipalities with structured majorities in the municipal councils, the mayor is elected in the first round and there is a coincidence in the political affiliation of the majority and the mayor; (4) a model municipality can't be indicated in the work for protection of the public interest in the management and disposal of the municipal property - are subject to examination in the survey.

Correctly stated and used are methodological tools, adequate to the research objectives. Each of the methods used – desk research, content analysis, comparative analysis, cluster analysis - contributes to the objectives of the analysis.

The content and temporal limitations of the study are precisely formulated.

M. Stefanova demonstrates a high degree of knowledge of the scientific literature on the studied subject, and is adequately and productively using it.

## **2. Content evaluation of the dissertation work**

**The first chapter** clarifies the possible approaches to the defining of the term "public interest". The concepts of "public interest", "public good" and "public benefit" are compared and differentiated; a multi-faceted and integrated approach is presented to define "public interest", while answering the questions: What is the public interest ?; What is in the public interest ?; Who defines the public interest ?; How is the public interest achieved? and How do administrators and politicians work to protect the public interest ?.

**Chapter Two** examines the specifics, the spheres of competence of local authorities, and basic indicators for the protection of public interest in local government. Important and motivated conclusions are made: the areas of competence of the local authorities in Bulgaria are not precisely defined; the governance cycle at the local level has deficits such as lack of involvement of citizens, lack of clear criteria for the development of decision-making projects and lack of choice in choosing a solution; presence of a coalition deficit; ambiguous interpretation and application of non-systematized normative acts; the opportunities for direct democracy double sided, both stimulating public interest and imposing party and corporate interests.

**The third chapter** presents and uses a methodology for assessing the activities of local authorities to protect the public interest. Five principles of good governance are proposed - openness, participation, responsibility and accountability, efficiency and effectiveness, coherence and corresponding indicators. 19 municipalities were surveyed and an evaluation of the activities of the local authorities in them was carried out in order to protect the public interest. Based on the cluster analysis of the studied municipalities through multidimensional scaling, a conclusion is drawn about the distances between them.

**The Introduction and the Conclusion** contain all the main attributes of a dissertation study.

### 3. Evaluation of scientific and scientifically-applied contributions

I accept the contributions of PhD student Milena Stefanova from the dissertation thesis, this is to say: (1) **Theoretical and methodological**: The concept of public interest is considered in a new conceptual framework allowing its use in contemporary theoretical and applied research; An integrated and multi-dimensional approach has been applied in the public interest survey and a new definition of the concept has been given; Public governance at local level is being explored in view of the indicators needed to evaluate the activities of

local authorities to protect the public interest; Problems and deficiencies in legislation and practice have been identified and specific solutions are proposed; A new problem has been formulated through a critical analysis of local democracy measurement and assessment methodologies - the known methodologies can not be reliably applied to assess the activities of local authorities to protect the public interest; Through a new and verified methodology for assessing the activities of local authorities to protect public interest, the problem of evaluating the activities of local authorities in defending the public interest is solved; (2) **Applicable and practical:** By first-degree operationalization of the five universal principles of good governance according to local specifics, a universal framework has been created for their application to each area of competence of local authorities; The second-level operationalization of the principles of good governance to assess the activities of local authorities in the management of municipal property proposes a solution to the problem of specific application of the universal framework; In the analysis and evaluation of the Bulgarian legislation that is regulating the management and disposition of municipal property, problems and deficits have been identified in terms of the indicators of good governance at local level "participation", "effectiveness and efficiency" and "coherence"; The hypothesis that the existence of a structured majority in the municipal council has an impact on the work of local authorities to protect the public interest has been rejected; The hypothesis of the strong influence of the mayor and the municipal administration in local government management has been proved; It has been proven that there is a complete deficit of regulations at central and local level for effective civic participation in the management and disposal of municipal property; In the research of the local referendums held in Bulgaria since 1990, problems related to the implementation of the legal framework and the opportunities for public interest were identified.

#### 4. **Assessment of dissertation publications**

Milena Stefanova presented a reference for the necessary publications - 1 monograph and 7 studies and articles related to the topic of the doctoral dissertation, which reflect essential accents from it.

#### 5. **Authors summary evaluation**

The authors summary contains the necessary elements and information that correspond to and adequately reflect the content of the dissertation work.

## **6. Critical remarks, recommendations and questions**

I have no formal ground for making critical remarks about the dissertation, because they would be the result of my analysis and opinion on the issues at hand. The research is made by Assoc. Prof. Dr. M. Stefanova and her opinions and conclusions are protected fairly and convincingly. In this plan of thought, however, I allow myself to formulate a question: Is the analysis of public interest at a local level through the prism of the theory of political culture (for political subcultures) productive?

## **7. Conclusion**

The dissertation work of Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova contains enough theoretical, methodological, applicable and practical results. The qualities of the dissertation give me basis to conclude that it satisfies the requirements of The law and the Regulations for its implementation. Without hesitation, I propose to the scientific jury to award to Milena Stefanova the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in scientific area of 3.3.Poly sciences.

5.03.2019, Sofia

Signature: .....

(Assoc. Prof. Blaga Blagoeva, PhD)