

Opinion
for dissertation work
for obtaining the scientific degree "Doctor of Science"
by professional field 3.3. "Political Science (Public Administration)"

Author of the dissertation: Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova, PhD
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Thesis theme: "The public interest in local government"

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1. General presentation of the doctoral dissertation.

The thesis presented for discussion is part of a very important scientific and practical debate about the quality and content of public governance. The author, Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova, poses the question of the correspondence between the governance and the public interest and thus formulates a substantial research question, whose answer in the existing literature is rather more predefined than empirically proved. The results of the dissertation are mainly in the field of public governance science. They are achieved through a multidisciplinary approach, which is a combination of political science and sociology. The dissertation is based on and supported by current scientific literature in Bulgarian and English.

Due to the above circumstances, the dissertation presented for discussion has the formal qualities of scientific work which is the basis for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Science".

1. Compliance with the state of the art:

The thesis of Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova is compliant to the state of the art from several points of view.

On the one hand, it puts the question of public interest on a theoretical level, considering it as a measure of the quality of public governance at local level. The successful attempt to turn an

abstract category into a measure of concrete practice responds to contemporary social science approach. The theoretical clarification of the "public interest" category is topical in itself, because of its complexity and the existence of multiple approaches to its definition. At the same time, public governance paradigms over the past decades have largely eliminated the gap between the public and private sectors and this way (incorrectly) turned the "public interest" into an almost unnecessary concept. The thesis of Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova not only revives the interest in such an important category but also creates scientific prerequisites for its use in empirical research.

The discussed dissertation is also relevant from the point of view of social practices because it meets the needs of an unfinished debate on local government in Bulgaria. Due to the specificities of the country's policy process, the local government level is often underestimated and is seen as a (political) continuation of central government. In many cases, his role remains hidden for society and public attitudes. It is interpreted in the framework of two extreme assessments - from a implementer of political orders and expectations to a corrupt recipient of public funds. The thesis of Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova simultaneously highlights the formal grounds for the active role of the local government and identifies the public expectations for it. In this way, it brings the local power to light.

As it meets substantial theoretical and practical needs, the discussed dissertation is characterized by a high degree of relevance.

2. Knowledge of the problem and of literature.

The author is very well acquainted with the research problem of the dissertation. It is analyzed in many ways. The basic concepts needed to clarify it are formulated and analyzed. This is done with scientific depth and good faith. An exceptional advantage of the dissertation text is the transition from abstract categories to concepts related to empirical social practices.

The dissertation is based on representative literature. The author knows very well the literature in the field of the subject of the dissertation and rightly uses it in support and as evidence of her own statements and analyzes.

The dissertation as a content and a method has both theoretical and practical dimensions. The main method used by the author is the deduction that is correctly applied to the transition from general theoretical knowledge of the public interest, through the middle-level concept of good governance, to local government practices measure.

3. Scientific and Applied Contributions.

The main contribution of the thesis of Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova is the creation of an indicator of the compliance of the local governance to the public interest. This is a theoretical contribution as the indicator can be used in comparative research at the local level of governance and can contribute to the development of this area of knowledge. In this sense, the contribution can be defined as the **creation of a new scientific fact**.

In addition, the indicator can be used in practical assessments of local government and thus contribute to improving social practices. In this sense, the contribution of the dissertation can be defined as scientifically applied and, as a content, it represents a **development of concrete mechanisms for the improvement of practices** in the field of public governance.

4. Personal contribution.

The dissertation is an original work of its author, based on the achievements of contemporary social science. It links two important categories of modern public governance science, and on that basis builds its own scientific and applied research contributions.

On a meaningful basis, linking "public interest" and "good governance" is an interesting finding, which I do not think is made in the scientific literature. The two categories are usually considered and applied to solve research problems separately. Moreover, these are categories with varying degrees of abstraction. Due to the normative nature of the good governance category, its link to the abstract category of "public interest" is more implicit than explicit. The new in Milena Stefanova approach is the proof of the relationship between the two and the subsequent construction of an indicator that measures simultaneously both of them.

The indicator itself is built on the basis of two theoretical prerequisites - the first of which is proven, and in this is the author's personal contribution, the latter is explicitly contained in the text. The indicator of Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova is developed on the thesis that the observance of the principles of good governance leads to the realization of the public interest at the local level. Arguments have been developed that good governance - a concept that often spreads as a dogma - responds to the public interest at the local level. The above thesis is a direct application of the understanding in the theory of public policies, according to which not content, but the process of formulating objectives and tools is a prerequisite for the quality of public governance. This means that "what" public governance makes is a derivative of "how" the process of its formulation and

implementation runs. In substance, the thesis of Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova starts from a proven scientific fact to make the next step by binding good governance and public interest.

The developed indicator is tested by comparing the results obtained from its application with the results of already existing and repeatedly used in the practices indicators. This is the Council of Europe Label for Innovation and Good Governance at Local Level and the Local Integrity Index. The evidence presented in the dissertation is sufficient to confirm the qualities and applicability of the developed methodology.

On the basis of the indicator Prof. Milena Stefanova has conducted a comparative study, whose main purpose is to test the developed methodology. At the same time, however, it has brought and defended some theses that enrich the existing knowledge about the functioning of the local government level in Bulgaria. Among them, there are a few that deserve to be marked, as they contradict, to a certain extent, the assumptions considered as scientific facts. According to one of these theses, the presence of a majority in the representative bodies of the local government is not a prerequisite for the realization of the public interest. This thesis is a direct step toward understanding that good governance is not dependent (or at least not only) on the political variables. The second thesis, protected by the study that deserves to be noted, is that when something is not a regulatory obligation, it does not apply. It, in turn, leads to the assertion that the introduction of good governance principles also depends on formal institutional change.

On the basis of the above considerations I argue that the personal contribution of Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova is significant and represents a step in the development of the research at the local level of public governance.

Although this goes beyond the immediate criteria for awarding a scientific degree, I would like to emphasize the contribution of Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova for the development of practices of local public administration. This contribution is made on the one hand by her direct involvement in representative local institutions and, on the other hand, through her active expertise. This extends the impact of the discussed dissertation, because of the possibility of the newly formulated knowledge to directly influence the practices in Bulgaria.

5. Evaluation of publications.

In addition to the dissertation, Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova participated in this procedure with 7 publications in Bulgarian. All submitted publications meet the criteria of high scientific quality and are directly related to the main research object - local public governance.

6. Autoreferat

The abstract summarizes the main topics and achievements of the dissertation. Self-identification of contributions is acceptable and generally correctly reflects the merits of the dissertation.

7. Considerations and questions.

As any complex scientific research, the thesis of Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova raises questions. They concern the main contribution of work - the indicator of public interest in local government.

The developed indicator is linked to a concept that has a deep regulatory, prescriptive character. It sets out indicatively the principles to be introduced in the work of local authorities. Like any normative concept, however, it has a temporal dimension - it appears suddenly (in our case in the 1990s) and also disappears at some point, replaced by something else. In this connection is my question:

1. What changes in the public environment can cause a change of the concept of good governance? In this sense, are there any temporal or spatial limitations to its application?

Although this goes beyond the boundaries of the subject of the present work, however:

2. Is the developed indicator applicable to the state level of public governance?

I hope that with these questions I could be useful in the author's future research.

Conclusion.

The dissertation presented for discussion has the necessary scientific and research merits. That is why I give my vote "for" awarding its author - Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova, the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in the professional field 3.3. "Political Science (Public Administration)".

07. 03. 2019

Reviewer:

Assoc. Prof. Tatiana Tomova, PhD