



REVIEW¹

of the submitted works for participation in a competition for the academic position of ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR in professional field 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences (International Journalism), announced by Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” in SJ, issue 99 / 11.20., 2020

Reviewer: Prof. Maria Neikova, PhD – pensioner

Candidate: Ralitsa Tsvetanova Kovacheva, PhD

I. Summary of applicant (research, teaching and akademik activity)

The research, teaching and academic activity of Ralitsa Kovacheva is active, significant in volume and quality. In her teaching work she combines the academic approach with her experience as a professional journalist, which is very useful for the students. In the interest of training, she develops courses that reflect many current evolving issues in the field of communication – such an example is the discipline “Fake news and disinformation”. The study load of Ralitsa Kovacheva is 596 hours. She also leads the Master's program in International Journalism.

Ralitsa Kovacheva is the initiator, organizer or co-organizer of a number of initiatives, including some initiatives of the Department of History and Theory of Journalism, which challenge students to develop their creative abilities and knowledge, such as the essay competitions “I choose Europe” and the video "Europe – this is me, discussions about the future of journalism, lectures by visiting lecturers from abroad.

She participates as a lecturer in events of the EC Representation and the EP Bureau in Bulgaria, of the European Council on Foreign Relations, of the Student Diplomatic Club. She is among the authors of a guide for young people how to create content for social networks.

Ralitsa Kovacheva's research work is in the field of international journalism, with two prominent accents so far – the EU, incl. Brexit, and disinformation (fake news).

Ralitsa Kovacheva is an active member of AEJ - Bulgaria, the European Communication Research and Education Association, the Coalition for Media Literacy.

¹ Note: Recommended review volume - about 6-7 standard pages



II. Characteristics of the scientific and scientific-applied production of the candidate

I accept all the works submitted by Dr. Ralitsa Kovacheva: two monographs, chapters from two books, 18 scientific articles, which include the 13 publications submitted for the competition. Due to the limitations of the volume of the review, I will examine in depth only some of the publications, and I must point out that I know all of them, as I have been a reviewer for a significant part.

The main work presented is the monograph “News of the world. On the meaning and value of international journalism” (216 pages). It is dedicated to international journalism, which, however, is viewed in a new challenging context, from a political, technological, social point of view. The monograph significantly builds on existing knowledge with an analysis of new phenomena such as transnationalization and – in a continental perspective – the Europeanization of the media, identity politics, the whirlwind of populism, post-truth, political polarization, social media, etc. Developing the thread for the disappearing border between domestic and international, R. Kovacheva points out that the definition of “internal” news as more important than “external”, due to nationality and physical proximity to the audience, leads to distortions in the news agenda, as well as in their framing, which prevents the real significance of the events from being assessed and presented to the audience.

The main question that Ralitsa Kovacheva is looking to answer is what are the challenges facing international journalism, as well as what are its opportunities. To answer it, she outlines the importance of five factors that she finds decisive in relation to current challenges and possible horizons for international journalism: post-truth; political polarization; identity politics; populism; the propaganda that displaces journalism. These issues are considered in terms of their importance for international journalism.

At the beginning of the book R. Kovacheva introduces basic concepts and theories in a sufficiently dense canvas, on which further new developments are located. The connection of international news with the political elites in the world, or more generally, the connection between media and politics, is quite rightly derived here.

The presentation and analysis of Hallin's spheres – consensus, legitimate contradictions and deviation, lead R. Kovacheva to the important observation in connection with the role of media and journalism in maintaining the boundaries between them: “distribution” of topics and participants in public debates in different spheres under the influence of the political status quo.

At the core of the analysis R. Kovacheva weaves the information values, in which two interconnected processes take place – a process of selection and a process of distortion; the different perspective that international news may have; the importance of ethnocentrism, the transnationalization of public spheres and Europeanization, the influence of ideologies. Here, in the case of ideologies, takes place the smooth and logical transition to new developments.



With the complexity of the definitions of ideology R. Kovacheva explains the difficulty of studying the influence of ideologies on the media and journalism.

Through the formally and bureaucratically developing European integration of the former socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, R. Kovacheva naturally came to populism and identity politics. To illustrate, she uses the latest events in different countries and in Bulgaria, as well as the latest academic and sociological research. Here I would like to highlight one of her essential conclusions, which directly affects journalism, including international journalism: “the legitimization of participants in public debates according to their identity, instead of according to the strength of arguments”.

The analysis continues with a discussion of the problem of whether human rights are universal; populism is considered, including in its Bulgarian version, as well as the relations of the media with populism. Both the media and the populists strive for a larger audience and thus become natural partners, as a result of which negativism as an information value and the conflict framework set the style of most news, incl. international.

Through the “post-truth” and the post-Habermas situation, R. Kovacheva enters into the very important interaction between journalism and truth. She noted the objective difficulties faced by journalists, both in their daily work and in general professionally.

Audience behavior, along with its growing preference for social media, is another cause for concern. R. Kovacheva defends the thesis that the placement of social media as the main mediator between the media and the public is perhaps the most serious contemporary problem for the media and journalism.

Political and media polarization go hand in hand and reinforce each other. Last but not least, it opens the field for the entry of false news and disinformation, for hybrid threats and for the penetration of Russian propaganda and Russian influence in Bulgaria and other EU countries. R. Kovacheva takes a close look at the forms and channels of Russian propaganda, as well as the “information operations” of Cambridge Analytica, which came to light during two landmark events in 2016 – the referendum on Britain's EU membership and the US presidential election.

Based on the rich panorama of modern developments, the ideas and concepts that underpin them, R. Kovacheva comes to the essential question of what is the image of the world in the media. What kind of world we see largely depends on how the media shows it to us.

Ralitsa Kovacheva's book “News from the world. On the meaning and value of international journalism” is a summary of the important processes that have developed in the modern world in the last 30 years, after the watershed of 1989. It is also a summary of trends in media development, incl. of Bulgarian international journalism. Her long professional journalistic practice has a strong positive influence on reaching this summary. R. Kovacheva's style is very pleasant to read, dynamic, fascinating and colorful.



“Center and Periphery of the Europeanized Public Spheres” (276 pages) is a very well-structured book, arranged clearly and accessible to the widest audience. It is accessible despite the very serious academic theoretical part of the work. The book bears all the hallmarks of Ralitsa Kovacheva's extremely conscientious approach.

Seriously defended is the choice to interpret the problem through the concept of the European public sphere based on its real manifestations as a process of Europeanization of the national public spheres. With this choice, the book is a contribution to existing research, even if only by presenting current empirical data from Bulgaria – a new EU member state.

The theoretical part, which presents the key stages in the process of European integration, the development of dedicated research, basic theories, schools and approaches, ends with the clear message that for most Europeans Europe continues to be primarily a media image. The main difference is that a lot has been said about Europe since 2008, so it is important now to answer the question 'What is being said?' This is also a major question to which R. Kovacheva seeks an answer in her book.

The concepts essential for the research are introduced in the theoretical part. They are: European public sphere, Europeanization of the public spheres, center and periphery of the Europeanized public spheres. The process of Europeanization of national public spheres is the subject of the study. In the introduction, the author points out that she interprets the European public sphere not as an ephemeral “cover” of the national public spheres, but as a network of communicating Europeanized public spheres. And more importantly, R. Kovacheva not only states, but also does not approach in a normative way, but focuses on measuring and interpreting what is really happening during her empirical research. She clearly highlights the main problem – the lack of European debate to bring people closer to the decisions taken at Union level and its institutions.

The last chapter of the book contains a comparative analysis of empirical research. It is worth noting very seriously the volume of the study – R. Kovacheva personally registered 3356 units (information and analytical texts) for five months in 2014. I emphasize this because who did not do it, even in much smaller amounts, it will be difficult for him/her to imagine what a huge effort it is. (Here is the place to note that almost all of Kovacheva's scientific output is based on her own extensive empirical research.) In registered publications, the EU is the object of attention or the subject of action, not just mentioned. In this regard, she accepts as “European topics” those that directly relate to the EU and Bulgarian membership in the Union, as well as a wider range of topics from various areas in which the Union plays a role or Bulgaria has a relationship as an EU member.

“Sanctions against Russia” in the 2017 election campaign – political (mis)uses” is an article in which Dr. Kovacheva uses a not very popular or widespread in our country, but in this case extremely appropriate research method – analysis of political allegations. The method is



presented briefly. In addition, a framing analysis is presented, which contributes to a full understanding of what is happening in the election race in the field of foreign policy.

The author creates a solid basis for comparing foreign policy claims, clarifying what exactly the term “sanctions against Russia” means, and based on available statistics shows how much Bulgaria is affected.

“Brexit – could we have foreseen it?” is an article in which is shown a very good knowledge of current literature on the Europeanization of the public sphere(s). The actual analysis was based on empirical observation of the online editions of four British newspapers.

I would like to emphasize the well-established and well-argued connection between the media and the political agenda. At the same time, the characteristic features of the handwriting on the topic of the separate media are clearly pointed out. The author's research has been skillfully compared with similar current studies in the UK itself. The end of the article is very strong with the prognostic elements embedded in it about the nature of the debate until the actual departure of Britain from the EU.

In her latest publications, R. Kovacheva contributes to the study of disinformation (fake news) by summarizing and systematizing the latest research, studying the nature of social media, analyzing the uses of “hybrid threats” and “hybrid warfare” in political discourse.

III. Major contributions in science, applied science and teaching minute activity of the applicant

Ralitsa Kovacheva's scientific, applied and teaching activities invariably include the most current social processes in the world, viewed through the prism of their importance for international journalism and in the light of the specifics of the Bulgarian context.

She analyzes and adapts established concepts and theories to the new conditions. Her approach is multidisciplinary, but always from the point of view of international journalism. A contribution of the monograph “News from the world. On the meaning and benefits of international journalism” is the highlight of the five factors most important for the current state of international journalism: post-truth, political polarization, identity politics, populism and propaganda. These phenomena are theoretically substantiated, backed by data, illustrated by case studies and discussed from the perspective of the work of international journalists. These topics are discussed in varying degrees of depth in other publications of R. Kovacheva, which testifies to her consistent and lasting research interest.

The contribution of the habilitation work is to draw attention to the multifaceted impact of social media on media organizations and journalism – social media as a source of news for the public, as a source of information for the media, as a main arena for disseminating disinformation. The study concludes that the placement of social media as a major mediator between the media and



the public is perhaps the most serious contemporary problem facing the media and journalism – a contribution that is important for both media science and journalism practice.

R. Kovacheva introduces the value dimension as a new phenomenon, which cannot be established in previous election campaigns in connection with foreign policy topics. A conclusion she reached based on her research on the EU's media image.

The monograph “Center and Periphery of the Europeanized Public Spheres” is the first study in the Bulgarian scientific literature, which examines the European public sphere through the theory of the center and the periphery. The paper deals with the question of how the process of differentiated integration in the EU affects the process of Europeanization of national public spheres. The formulated working definitions for “center”, “periphery” and “peripheralization” (as a process opposite to Europeanization) can be singled out as contributions to the research, as well as the substantiation of criteria for analysis of the process of Europeanization (considered as a special case of the process of transnationalization of public spheres). The large-scale empirical research (content analysis) of 3356 registered and analyzed information units from eight media is also contributing.

I would especially like to emphasize her own empirical studies, which have a contributing character – with them R. Kovacheva simultaneously confirms existing theories, but receives and proves new facts, studies processes, phenomena and development trends.

IV. Notes and recommendations

I have no notes on the scientific activity of Dr. R. Kovacheva. I would rather suggest that she expands it and deepens her research into other fields outside the EU.

V. Conclusion

Ralitsa Kovacheva was my student, later I was the scientific supervisor of her dissertation for the educational and scientific degree "Doctor". Therefore, I would like to point out that she is a candidate with high morals and scientific integrity, with responsibility to students – who like her very much, and with great potential for development in research.

Based on my knowledge of her research, teaching, academic and – I would add – public activity, I give an unequivocally positive assessment of Dr. Ralitsa Kovacheva and recommend the esteemed scientific jury to award her the academic position of ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR in professional field 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences (International Journalism).

Reviewer:

Date: March 11, 2021