

**Opinion by Associate Professor Dr. Daniel Mihaylov Smilov on  
the doctoral student Stanislav Valeriev Todorov and his  
dissertation on the topic:  
Direct democracy as a tool for activating civil society (the case of  
Bulgaria 2013-2017)  
/The role of information on civic activity in the three national  
referendums /**

The dissertation by Stanislav Todorov meets the formal requirements for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in political science. The presented dissertation is an original independent study of a significant social problem, which has sufficient contributing elements to lead to the award of a doctoral degree. In addition, the doctoral student has the necessary publications and has met all the requirements of the doctoral program at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski ". These are prerequisites for successful public defense of the dissertation.

The following notes are a brief assessment of the achievements in the dissertation, and in the last part there are some criticisms for omissions that can be corrected and eliminated by the doctoral student. In general, the dissertation is well thought out and covers an impressive field - the author has become acquainted with the ideas of many scientists (from antiquity to the present day), and has managed to integrate them into a coherent and interesting narrative. In addition to an overview of theoretical issues related to direct democracy, civic participation and awareness, the dissertation also contains an empirical study of the three referendums held in Bulgaria and the debates on them. The research uses the methods of content analysis and is based on media publications. In the introduction the author describes in detail the goals and objectives of the dissertation:

"The aim of the dissertation is to establish how direct democracy affects civic activity - informed or misinformed activity produces the messages in the explanatory campaigns for the three national referendums. What information do the participants in the awareness campaigns offer about the direct consultations of the citizens and what civic activity does this information produce. The information provided as a tool for conducting an informed vote, whether it empowers today's citizen or the power of citizens is limited by the field of activity. The aim of the study is also to show that civil actions are dependent on the information provided to citizens. And here is the main thesis in the study that disinformed, not informed activity, determines the outcome of the three national surveys. " Page 8

One of the main advantages of the dissertation is that it tries not to be enslaved by widespread myths about the functioning of democracy. From the very beginning, the awareness of the citizens and their readiness to devote time and resources for full participation in public policy are questioned. And by participation the author does not only mean traditional voting methods, but, as it

turns out, he also discussed non-traditional ones, including the instruments of direct democracy and protests. Based on such intuitions, the author sets the following tasks in the dissertation:

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1. To study the theoretical formulations and concepts regarding the realization of an informed vote in a referendum. Can the citizens participate in an informed manner without discussing the voting proposals made, as they have been spared information on them.
2. To identify which unconventional activities, such as attempts to directly interfere in political activity, imply civic participation not only in the understanding of the activity.
3. To analyze the campaign information (113 articles) in the three national referendums and to establish what type of information determines the outcome of the national polls - the information in the sense of the proposals made or the emotions, the manipulations and the irrelevant information.
4. Outline the role of populism in the referendum in 2016 as a mechanism that divides society on the voting proposals made, without offering meaningful information about them.
5. To present the possibilities for mitigating the consequences of the uninformed vote in the context of the three national referendums and to propose a recommendation for shortening the path to informed participation. " Pp.8-9

These tasks also explain the structure of the dissertation itself. The first two chapters are theoretical and are in fact an overview of the debates in the scientific literature on civic participation and the role of awareness in it. The author has studied considerable literature on the subject and has managed to form his point of view and maintain a critical distance from the views of recognized authorities. Impressive is the discussion of authors working in different traditions - from rational choice and economic theories to different types of institutionalism, as well as supporters of deliberative democracy. It is not always clear to which intellectual tradition the author's position belongs, to which of the disputing camps he belongs to, but the two chapters are a useful overview of the topic and can stimulate both the student and the specialists to go deeper into the issues under consideration.

The main contribution of the first chapter is to address the issue of awareness through the role of the citizen in democracy. The dissertation examines the basic theories of civil society and the requirements of the citizen in a democracy in an interesting way contrasting highly optimistic republican and deliberative theories with more skeptical, realistic conceptions of democracy. The tension between the requirements of the ideal and the real possibilities of the citizen is in fact the semantic center of this part of the dissertation. The author even has suggestions on how to improve things: how to raise awareness without significantly limiting democracy. The proposals can be debated, but their arguments are interesting and worthy of attention.

The second chapter deals with non-standard forms of political participation, which include protests, "counter-democracy" (in Rosanvalon's terms, although

the author does not formulate the problem in the same way), as well as forms of direct democracy (referendum). Again, the discussion, although eclectic, is educational and shows a desire in the author to address issues from many different angles. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the 2013 protests and returns to the topic of the active citizen. The message of this chapter is that citizen activity may change and take other forms, but it remains an integral part of democracy. At the same time, the focus on "non-traditional" forms of participation carries serious risks, such as the instrumentalization of the "friend-enemy" dichotomy, for example. As Levitsky and Ziblatt point out, presenting the opponent as an enemy can lead to the end of democracy itself.

The third and fourth chapters of the study represent the empirical analysis of the three Bulgarian referendums. In them we find three case studies of each of the referendums, which are organized so as to make the comparison between them possible. While Chapter Three describes the context in which referendums take place, the main positions of political forces, and the results, Chapter Four is an original study of the messages in these referendums. It is based on qualitative and quantitative content analysis and seeks to establish to what extent the campaign for these referendums has been rationalising or manipulative. The general conclusion is that politicized, manipulative messages and arguments dominate, with the author claiming that the selection of media materials he relies on is representative of the campaigns in the three referendums as a whole.

Along with the mentioned positive elements of the dissertation, there are some omissions and weaknesses in it, which I briefly list:

1. It has already been mentioned that the review of literature is highly eclectic and extends from Plato and Aristotle to Colin Crouch and *Democracy for Realists*. Unexpected jumps from Aristotle to Sartori, and then to Foucault and Ivan Krastev are common. This way of writing sometimes leads to a good essay form, but it is not recommended for a dissertation. It is good to "discipline" the first two chapters and to outline the main theoretical and conceptual camps - say deliberative democrats and rational choice realists - around which to structure the discussion;
2. The author states: By "democracy" Aristotle meant the literal exercise of democracy, but his views preferred the idea of mixed government (democracy plus aristocracy) (1: 105-121). In modern democracy, Aristotle's idea finds expression in the representative government (aristocracy) chosen by democracy (the power of the people). In the conditions of representative government, the citizens are placed in the conditions of interaction with the democratic procedures and have the opportunity to influence the political processes. " (Page 18) Aristotle's presentation here is not entirely correct. The author, for example, on the same page claims that according to Aristotle there are three forms of government (and they are actually six), and the term "politeia" is not mentioned. The difference between "democracy" and "politeia", according to Aristotle, is that in the former the majority rules in their own interest, and in the latter the majority rules in the interest of all. If Aristotle is used, it is good that this is done in a correct fashion.

3. Eclecticism is sometimes excessive. Along with classics of the theory of democracy, authors such as Alvin Toffler and Jose Ortega y Gasset are included, without it being very clear why this is necessary. For example: "Such an author is Jose Ortega y Gasset, he is skeptical that the proposals made below will have the beneficial effect that A. and H. Toffler predict. He describes the pursuit of direct participation as hyper-democracy and sees a danger in it, "because most no longer believe that politicians (the elected minority), despite their shortcomings, understand more than public affairs and begin to think they have the right to impose their nonsense created over coffee "(45:52). Alvin and Heidi Toffler set out their treatment based on the idea of multiple minorities, and Jose Ortega y Gasset sets out their concerns based on his concept of a table, one of the hallmarks of which is direct action. " Page 25 A theoretical discipline of analysis would undoubtedly be useful here;
4. Sometimes critics and defenders of deliberative democracy are confused and it is not clear who is defending what. For example: "There are also grounds in favor of deliberative democracy, which are based on the view that democracy focuses on the concepts of dignity and respect. According to Charles Larmore, citizens should be able to consider the decisions that may affect them (160: 599-625). For Ronald Dworkin, dignity presupposes that people have an equal intrinsic value and, based on that value, must bear personal responsibility for the decisions they make (18: 26-27). " Page 39 Ronald Dworkin is certainly not a supporter of deliberative democracy, and Charles Larmore is a supporter of Rawls's *Theory of Justice* rather than his later years as Rawls got closer to Habermas through his notions of "overlapping consensus " and "public reason ";
5. Regarding the empirical analysis of the Bulgarian events there are some inaccuracies. The author is right to criticize the "Dinko" phenomenon as an emanation of populist vigilante action, which leads to deinstitutionalization. But in some of the qualifications more attention is needed. For example: "Their manifestations are beyond the competence of the institutions they represent. Such examples from our reality are Valeri Simeonov in Sunny Beach - the noise checks in the restaurants [10]; and Volen Siderov's night quarrel in front of a 24-hour shop selling alcohol and cigarettes, which Siderov explains with his fight against smuggling and drugs and accuses the store of selling drugs and cigarettes without excise labels [11]. "p. 81 Valeri Simeonov did not act outside his powers as Deputy Prime Minister with tourism as a part of his portfolio. Another question is whether his policy was appropriate or not;
6. The "manipulative" and "rationalizing" messages and discourses of Chapter Four should be clarified. It is not entirely clear how the author assessed these aspects;
7. The main weakness of the study is the lack of conclusion. "Instead of a conclusion" there is again an essay with quotes from interesting authors. Although repetitive, it is good that the main conclusions of the study are present at the end of the dissertation. More essayistic forms can be used in publishing the work as a book.

Despite the critical remarks in the text of the opinion, it is clear that I consider the dissertation and the doctoral student to fully meet the requirements for the award of the degree "Doctor" in political science. I intend to vote in favor and call on my colleagues - on the basis of absolutely sufficient arguments - to do the same.

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