

**REVIEW**  
**of the dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Milena Hristova Stefanova**  
**entitled "The Public Interest in Local Government"**  
**dissertation in the scientific area of 3.3 Political sciences**  
**for awarding the Doctor Habil degree**

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**I. Overall review of the procedure**

Associate Prof. Milena Hristova Stefanova is quite well known to the Bulgarian scientific community both in the political and administrative sciences. The reason for this fact is her long experience as an active researcher in European and national projects, a lecturer on several fundamental teaching subjects in few Bulgarian universities, a municipal councilor in the Sofia Municipal Council, an advisor in the practical implementation of administrative and managerial activities, a leading participant in trainings of public management staff and most of all the author of few monographs, articles and reports accumulated throughout several decades. In my opinion, the procedure for awarding the Doctor of Science degree in her case is overdue.

From a formal point of view the dissertation presented fulfills all quantitative (298 pages) and qualitative criteria for dissertation (structure, thesis, balanced theoretical and empirical analysis). The theses, hypotheses, objectives and methods of analysis are well outlined. The scientific apparatus of more than 100 titles in English and Bulgarian (approximately equal in number) is systematic and effectively used in the dissertation without "hollow volumes". The text of the authoress presents the content and ideas in the dissertation. The scientific publications on the topic of dissertation research are of sufficient volume and are written after the dates of the previous procedures in the scientific career of the candidate and are related to their subject. Of these, 1 is a monographic study directly on the topic of the dissertation in accordance with the requirements of the scientific legislation that a significant part of the dissertation being defended should be published in advance. All publications used are of scientific character, and that the respective publishers are prestigious according to the formal requirements. I find the report about the contributions to the dissertation work accurate and consistent with the analytical efforts.

The procedure until the last moment of the defense of the dissertation is absolute.

**II. Overall assessment of the dissertation:**

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Milena Hr. Stefanova's Doctor Habil. thesis possesses all qualities of form and content required for a dissertation: (1) formal - there is a real thesis, a complete system of its elements (object, subject, thesis, hypotheses, goals); (2) content - a review of leading

complementary theories, a large amount of clear and meaningful own opinion, proven or rejected hypotheses, effective and efficient exit to management practice by creating an in-depth and pre-tested toolbox to measure the effective functioning of the subject of the overall survey. I confirm the thesis of Milena Stefanova about the relevance of its research, as my arguments are about the unceasing value of research of public interest, underdeveloped in Bulgarian science, which are useful for (management) practice. To that, I add the undeniable importance of research to the quality of teaching an important course in the focus of public-administrative sciences.

The research has a rapid rhythm, it is following a clear logic composed in the sequence of closely connected themes. In this way, the dissertation achieves the final goals, taking into account the hierarchy and the interdependence of the individual conclusions.

The whole dissertation manifests the self-confidence of its author. It reveals the relationship of many years of research and teaching experience with the experience of a practitioner as a researcher, adviser and participant in the management. What Professor Milena Stefanova actually does is to demonstrate a multifaceted understanding of the eternal problems of the middle and senior echelon of the local government and its willingness to help by highlighting innovative conclusions. At the same time Prof. Stefanova has another target group - the administrative scientists in our country. In front of them, she demonstrates a leading position in the knowledge of her long-standing object - the local government, and this time from a new point of view - the functioning of civil society through the local government.

Thus, in general terms, the dissertation work represents the public interest as a function of "good" operational administrative management. For this general objective, Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova develops a methodology for measuring the effectiveness of local authorities in protecting local "public interests" through indicators of good governance. The combination of this idea is a convincing basis for evaluating its author as a follower of leading theoretical schools (among them Bulgarian Political Studies Need-Interest-Actions model) and expert-reformer of management practice. The dissertation work falls entirely within the field of the stated scientific field 3.3 Political Sciences.

I find it most important in the general assessment of the dissertation to pay attention to the its structural features:

The *first chapter* puts a solid foundation on the overall study with the analysis (and not as "review") of basic and interrelated theories of the leading category of "public interest". The success in this respect is largely due not to the theoretical sources selected by Milena Stefanova, but to the broad methodological approach she follows, interweaving philosophical (philosophy of politics), sociological (sociology of politics) and own political arguments. The scientific genre dissertation necessarily requires a demonstration of a common discipline culture that Milena Stefanova makes successful. The problem, as far as I find it exists, is that it is impossible to use effectively the combination of such divergent highways of scientific analysis (including jargon) to forge one's own working concept of "public interest". In fact, Stefanova reaches a much more direct path to the conclusion that, in fact, what matters is how the authorities work to protect the public interest, understood as a full application of the rules of

expertise and professionalism, on the one hand, garnished by responsiveness. I agree with the thesis, "The more the degree of abstraction in the definition of public interest decreases, the more the opportunity to develop reliable methodologies for measuring and evaluating processes and results." In other words, I think that for Milena Stefanova the accent is more on "how" the administration works, not on "what" it works in relation to the public interest.

The pragmatic approach to morally pervasive, variable and ambiguous topics, such as the protection of (local) public interests, leads directly to a number of interesting and useful lessons about what and how to measure by applying what toolbox, in terms of how it is defined managerial efficiency - all of this, Milena Stefanova is tirelessly doing in its nearly 300-sided work. However, the moral and partly political and legal aspect of the public interest phenomenon, which cannot be justified by logical arguments, is lost somewhere. In my view, the pragmatic and moral beginnings in the context in question must be combined in the most balanced way. Management technology cannot by itself determine the meaning of public interest.

The *second chapter* gives a description of the areas of competence in defending the public interest, as well as the definitions in the administrative framework of the country in this respect. I find all this justifiable, necessary and related to the further analysis. Milena Stefanova introduces here an instrumental notion of a "local issue" (i.e. issue of local importance and origin) against which the local authorities mobilize their own resources and reaches the technological principal ambiguities of public governance (1) in relation to the blurring between the levels of delegation of power in the vertical and (2) connection with the establishment and operation of "floating majorities". These phenomena are essential for the analysis of management practice and, in this respect, the dissertation research makes an important step forward.

The *third chapter* develops the methodology for assessing local authorities to protect the public interest. The sociologist, and more precisely the research talent of Milena Stefanova speaks out openly here. I appreciate her critical analysis on the merits of the far-neutral fundamental measurements of democracy imposed by a foreign experience that cannot be directly transferred to us. At the same time, however, one cannot deny the impossibility (at least unsolvable hardships) of comparisons between regions. Empirical methods by definition are not intended to measure the synergy in the vertical of the hierarchical structure of the administration. It is totally lost in the a la Likert rocks, as is done in the dissertation. Milena Stefanova introduces a similar scale "for the degree of application of the principle of good governance" ranging from 0 to 4 (i.e. practically 3 steps). In my opinion, however, such methods work to assess the "good management" technology, but not the "good governance" that the aim is to target. Furthermore, the verification of the toolbox is superb in measurable areas such as property management. There are enough cases included in it so that numbers can speak convincingly through statistical accumulations.

### **III. Contributions**

Milena Stefanova's dissertation has a practical orientation towards measuring the work of local authorities in the public interest based on the degree of coverage of the principles of "good governance". That is why I find the most important contributing moments to the achieved definition of public interest, the instruments created to measure the distance to it in the practice of the local authorities and the comparative picture of the Bulgarian municipalities in this respect. All of this has undeniable value, it is original, necessary, and provides the basis for a whole series of further analyzes that would not otherwise be challenged and would not even be possible.

As an experienced researcher, Milena Stefanova does not use "pre-proven" hypotheses, i.e. hypotheses, which from the outset are known to be confirmed. One basic hypothesis in her dissertation thesis, which does not find an unequivocally satisfying confirmation during the dissertation, is that a clearly formulated political majority in local parliaments plays the role of a major tool for administrative efficiency in protecting the local public interest. The other hypothesis is that "quality of regulation" plays a fundamental role in meeting local public interests. Obviously, the two hypotheses are interconnected. They could not be overturned, and their very formulation and tied use in a single conceptual and research apparatus is in itself a scientific contribution. Hence, the more specific objectives of the survey are - what is the definition of (why not the concept of) the public interest, the matrix of competences, the methodology of the assessment of local authorities and administrations in defense of local definitions of public interest.

In the self-assessment of contributions Milena Stefanova has presented her contributions divided into 2 groups:

"(A) Theoretical and methodological:

1. For the first time in the Bulgarian scientific literature an in-depth study of the concept of public interest is made.
2. An integrated and multi-dimensional approach to defining the concept of "public interest" has been developed.
3. In-depth public governance research has been carried out at the local level with regard to the indicators needed to assess the activities of local authorities in defense of the public interest.
4. A critical analysis of methods for measuring and evaluating local democracy has been made.
5. A verified methodology for evaluating the activities of local authorities to protect the public interest has been developed and applied.

and (B) Practical:

6. Analysis and evaluation of the Bulgarian legislation regulating the management and disposal of municipal property in terms of good governance indicators at local level.
7. Operationalization of five universal principles of good governance according to the specifics of the local government - first level operationalization, which can be applied to every area of competence of the local authorities.
8. Operationalization of the principles of good governance was carried out to assess the activities of local authorities for the management and disposal of municipal property.

9. 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.

10. It is proven that there is a complete deficit of regulations at central and local level for effective civic participation in governance.

11. An in-depth study of the local referendums held in Bulgaria since 1990."

I have a varying degree of support for these contributions, and I generally agree with them all.

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

In my re-introduction to the final version of the dissertation work of Milena Stefanova I came across some critical moments, namely:

1. Stefanova does not discuss the so-called local public interests in their relative context. The impression that is from the first moment and is reaffirmed by any subsequent analysis is that if interests are public (the definition of "public" is in itself correct) they are therefore inevitably legitimate. The interests of different publics cannot be a priori "good" (notwithstanding the limitation that they are better or less just for the local audience, which are not related to other communities), nor are they necessarily parallel to public interests at a higher level. Therefore, it is difficult to assume that the only thing to do is to onscientiously and fully promote such interests - although, of course, somehow balanced with the more centralized state interests, of course. It does not help, however, that, unlike most "higher (and more political) interests, such interests are "close to the people ", " to their everyday life", to "life" in general. Here the Concordia omnium principles should be considered as the basis of the public interests.

2. Public interests are contrasted to private ones, forming a couple of concepts. Local interests, if not private (collective), but public, should be considered as a specific version of the general one and explored as such. They may be a matter of group egotism, cast in collective forms with a view to higher success rates of multiple personal interests that are imposed. Rather, they should be defined as special forms of the general level of interests that are realized through political forms - "raising the peculiar as universal" rather than "imposing private as common". Such a statement justifies the basic thesis of Milena Stefanova that the political stability of the local parliaments is of fundamental importance for the realization of the local public interests and there is no collision with its analysis, on the contrary.

3. The study could benefit from broadening the definition of political culture - national or even local. The lessons learned in this work are hardly applicable to Japan and China, for other reasons - for Britain and the places of customary law that are based on precedents, far away from the Scandinavian model, but quite coincident with the situation in Central and Eastern Europe and the nearest East. There are also regional political cultures that are not really explored, but hypothetically strongly influence the definition of public interest on the ground.

4. The study could also gain by involving the context of leadership - especially leadership in defining local public interests. As is well known, the audience hardly "thinks" alone.

5. The following two issues appear in the table of the results of the comparison cases: (1) Why were the cases at issue so different and how they made comparability between them; (2) the values of one of the criteria which are systematically very low (clustering to 0) indicate that this criterion needs to be reformulated; its isolation would in no way alter the positive conclusions Stefanova made.

6. The treatment of "good governance" as good management and the adoption of the European definition as a guarantee of accuracy and exhaustiveness is incorrect regardless of the fact that in the final form of the study other "recipes" for the content pouring into the political good governance concept. Local authorities can do something good that is given to them (good management), but it is even more important what they do. Criteria for good leadership (not instrumental leadership, but local strategic thinking, visioning with the appropriate authority to define the problem as public, and balancing it as a special version of universal problems) are needed. The fact that European bureaucratic institutions have defined several otherwise unrelated qualities of political management as "good governance" should not be subject to critical scientific insight, especially when it is the focus of a dissertation research in a European context. I also recommend courage in this regard, since this quality is manifested in not one and two places in the study.

#### **V. Personal impressions of the applicant.**

I am the witness of the fact that Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova is not only a highly competent lecturer, researcher, counselor and trainer, but also an active advocate of the norms and rules of functioning of the academic institutions over 25 years of work.

**VI. CONCLUSION:** Considering the undisputed competence of Milena Stefanova in a specific and poorly researched field, her theoretical and practical expertise in the wide field of the specific dissertation research, resulting from nearly two decades of active activity which is known to both the scientific community and many representatives of all levels of local self-government, the direct significance of the conclusions for the development of administrative theory and practice in our country, the value of the acquired through the new concepts, methods, approaches and know-how for other researchers, as well as the act of reviving a whole branch of the political science in Bulgaria, and above all due to the contributions made in the dissertation, I propose to the honorable scientific jury to offer convincingly awarding of the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" (Doctor Habil.) in scientific field 3.3 Political Sciences to Assoc. Prof. Milena Hristova Stefanova for her dissertation thesis "The Public Interest in Local Government".

04.03.2019

REVIWER:

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