

STATEMENT

by Assoc. Prof. Dobrin Hristov Kanev, NBU, Political Science (3.3)

on the dissertation "The Public Interest in Local Government" for awarding a Doctor Habil degree in the scientific area 3.3 Political science

to Milena Hristova Stefanova

Milena Stefanova's thesis "Public Interest in Local Government" is a large-scale and comprehensive study of major issues of local politics in Bulgaria. It is a matter of serious research work, the result of his author's long-term research work, of a complete, in-depth and independent study of high quality, which responds in all its aspects to the high scientific criteria put forward in a dissertation for awarding a Doctor Habil degree.

The focus of the dissertation thesis on public interest and its protection (in the case at the local level) has been a key issue for political thought for centuries. Nowadays, it retains its significance also in terms of erosion trends of the democratic political system, as a result, apart from other factors, of policies that diverge from the public interest.

The author's intent to evaluate local policies with a view to protecting the public interest is an ambitious research goal that requires first of all a "lowering" of abstractness in defining the public interest and related issues in order to reveal reliable measurement and evaluation paths to the processes, actions and results in this respect (see p.51). Having achieved this by treating the public interest as a set of multiple dimensions outlined by the answers to five key issues, Milena Stefanova reveals the main characteristics of local government in Bulgaria, where the protection of the public interest so defined will be sought.

It is then to define criteria that can be used to assess the work of local administrators and policy makers - one of the previously identified public interest dimensions. After a critical analysis of the methods used so far, Stefanova points out their shortcomings, ultimately justifying her choice in favor of the concept of good governance as the most suitable for the evaluation of the actions of politicians and administrators. From there, the author draws on five principles that serve as peculiar criteria when assessing local policies in their area of competence.

On the basis of the operationalization of these principles Stefanova has developed her own methodology for evaluation of the activities of the local authorities and administration in favor of the public interest. This methodology was ultimately verified for a sample of Bulgarian municipalities to protect the public interest in the area of management and disposal of municipal property. This has enabled the author to analyze the existing rules and practices in this respect and to make a reasonable assessment of their compliance with the public interest.

These three main steps of the study - first, in-depth and thorough analysis of public interest to define it in a way that makes operationalization possible; secondly, a management survey at the local level in terms of protection of the public interest, and third, the creation of a critical assessment of different methodologies for assessing the activities of local authorities to protect the public interest in order to create her own model and verify it - structure the whole study as separate chapters and give it logical power and completeness.

These undoubted qualities of the dissertation have been achieved thanks to the successful application of various methodological approaches. The first chapter demonstrates the author's ability to analyze critically significant number of theoretical literature from various social sciences, to define important concepts for her work, and to set a reliable theoretical basis for her next analytical steps. In particular, its approach to the aforementioned new definition of 'public interest' can be emphasized.

In the second chapter is presented the "case" local government (in Bulgaria), which shows the long-term accumulation and solid knowledge of the author, that came into effect in the perspective of the theme of protection of the public interest at this political level. In the third chapter, Milena Stefanova uses different methodological approaches in view of the specificity of the problem and of the research results sought. We can find documentary analysis, comparative approach, cluster analysis, multidimensional scaling, etc. A central place here, of course, is the development and verification of a new methodology for assessing the activities of local authorities to protect the public interest. It is based on five principles of good governance derived from local authorities, which are then operationalized so that they can also be applied to any area of competence of local authorities and especially to the important from the view point of research aim – the management and disposal of municipal property.

The author has undoubtedly approached this part of her work professionally and with precision, which provides the necessary reliability and validity of the results obtained. This is confirmed by the huge amount of primary sources surveyed in the work - data on the results of the local elections in Bulgaria in the period 1999-2015, reports from the National Audit Office, central and local legislative documents, strategic and program documents from the European, central and local level, data from municipal budgets, minutes of meetings of municipal councils and others.

All that has been pointed out here proves that the dissertation text contains a number of new ideas supported by the necessary empirical evidence and that there are significant contributions to the study of the problems of the local government. This applies to the methodology itself, as well as to the results obtained from its application. Confirmation or rejection of the hypotheses formulated and accompanying hypotheses are well substantiated and confirmed by the study. This is the study by the author on the indicators of the operationalization of the factual situation in 19 Bulgarian municipalities for the management and disposition of the municipal property in the period 2015-2016. In particular, the author convincingly confirmed the hypotheses of domination of the mayor and the municipal administration in the local government as well as the lack of regulation at central and local level for effective civic participation in the management and disposal of municipal property. At the same time, the hypothesis has been rejected that the existence of a structured majority in the municipal council influences the work of local authorities to protect the public interest.

It should be emphasized that the dissertation study also puts into practice important scientific and applied goals, which have also been realized. For example, problems and deficits have been identified in both legislation and practice and adequate solutions are sought. Such are the cases of the management and disposal of municipal property, the legislation of the local referendums and others. The solutions proposed by the author would undoubtedly lead to important improvements in these areas.

The written text is distinguished by its academic style. Very valuable are the 40 tables and the several figures in the text that illustrate the results of the survey and the applications where we can find the specific assessments for each of the municipalities surveyed in the work.

Finally, I would like to confirm that the work corresponds to the formal requirements for such a research product, laid down in the relevant legislative and other normative documents. The abstract

reflects adequately the content of the dissertation. Self-assessment of contributions has its rationale. There are also many publications on the subject of the doctorate.

In my attempt to summarize these achievements of the dissertation, I would say that we have been presented with a comprehensive and rich content study, in which the candidate has proved to be a serious researcher who knows perfectly her scientific field, applies modern methods of analysis, and has drawn from her analysis proposals for political action. It is undoubtedly a contribution to the study of problems of the present and future of the Bulgarian democratic political system. All this gives me the necessary reasons for expressing in my opinion a strong support for awarding the Doctor habil degree in the scientific field "Political Sciences" to Milena Hristova Stefanova.

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