

## REVIEW

of Doctor Habil dissertation in the scientific area of 3.3. Political sciences

**Title:** *THE PUBLIC INTEREST IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT*

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The question of how and to which extend the decisions and actions of the local government are motivated by the public interest is both natural and difficult. It is natural because the public institutions and their officers should take in consideration nothing than public interest. However, this question is difficult because protecting public interest is not an ambiguous and self-evident goal; it requires a purposeful argumentation and practical verification of the results obtained through the feedback of the public at large. To take for granted that public interest is innate to the public institutions means to miss the complexity of the mechanisms which give the private individuals and their organizations public meaning. It is not accidental that this study makes more visible the telling discrepancy between the extreme difficulty to measure the public utility of state institutions in academic objective manner and the noteworthy easiness with which the politicians generalize about the usefulness or harm of a government in order to accumulate certain political capital. Prof. Stefanova approaches this difficult and responsible research task in a consistent academic way by developing her conception of local power during her entire academic career. Besides, she enriches this conception due to her participation in the community council of the biggest community in Bulgaria – that of Sofia.

This clear academic focus in the academic development of prof. Stefanova finds a direct expression in the publications which support her claim to the highest academic degree of Doctor Habil. The reviewed dissertation is published as a monograph by the Sofia University Press at the beginning of February, this year. Five original papers published in a few academic journals and edited volumes between 2010 and 2018 represent the necessary thematic steps to this monograph.

The theoretical heart of this dissertation is the conception of prof. Stefanova of public interest. The main difficulty in defining the public interest stems directly from the elusive nature of the concept of the public in general. The latter has a deep relational character and strongly depends from the conditionality of the transition from private to public and vice versa. The analysis of the hitherto prevailing concepts of public interest confirms these difficulties and leads the author to the conclusion that the most acceptable solution is to connect the concept of public interest with the long-lasting development of society. By following this line of consideration, prof. Stefanova defines the public interest by asking 5 essential questions about the public interest. The most abstract aspect of this concept is presented by the question: What is the public interest? This question outlines the field for the other four questions: What is in the public interest? Who determines the public interest? How is the public interest achieved? How do administrators and politicians work to protect the public interest? This integrated approach

avoids the pitfalls of a unitary definitions of public interest and in the same time guarantees that public interest is identified theoretically and verified practically.

In answering the first question, prof. Stefanova ascertains that public interests is integrated result from the publics' activities and the reactions of state institutions and this result affects both each citizen and all citizens. In other words, three groups of participants contribute to the constitution of public interest – individuals, publics, and state institutions. The relations between them are in permanent flux which gives a completely relational character of the category *public interest* and its manifestations on different levels. In answering the second question, prof. Stefanova mentions every action which contributes to the realization and the defence of public interest. The effectiveness of the actions in public interest could be measured by determining the degree of congruence between the ends and the results of public authorities. The third question finds its answer in the will of majority and the mechanisms for domination. This is where the study enters in the heart of political science's problems such as what is majority, what kinds of majorities are there, and which are the ways to them. The fourth question considers the role of politics in the formation of public interest and specifies the mechanisms for the formulation of policies in public interest, for raising funds necessary to revitalize these policies and to put them under scrutiny. The last question concretizes the way the public administrators and politicians defend public interest. This can be done by using criteria such as lawfulness, openness, objectivity, and impartiality, their implantation in concrete rules and norms and operationalized in clear indicators. This is where the conclusions of prof. Stefanova approach the spirit of the seven principles of public life formulated by the Nolan committee at the British parliament at the end of 1990s.

The answers of these basic questions opens the door to a more specific level of study, which addresses the areas of competence of local authorities with special emphasis on the most sensible areas to the public interest and the key indicators related to it protection in local governance. This level of study begins with defining what is "problem of local importance". Basic criterion is whether the solution of this problem is shared between local and central governments or not. The deficiency of citizens' participation in local decision making and the lack of criteria for and alternatives in decision making, both are signs for the lack of protection of the public interest on local level. The study finds out that more than two thirds of Bulgarian municipalities are governed by vague and floating majorities. This fact, together with the lack of coalition culture and rules, related to it, predetermine the leading role of the mayor and community administration which, in turn, most probably has a negative effect on the protection of public interest in this community. Additional problem creates the normative incongruity between the legal rules and the lack of sanctions which makes them unreliable barrier before the conflict of interests and corruption. This chapter of the dissertation finishes with the conclusion that direct democracy, which is expected to solve some of these problems, could have also an opposite effect. It can protect the public interest but can also open room for populist manipulations in favour of non-public interests – private, corporative, and party.

The last chapter of the dissertation exposes the methodology developed by prof. Stefanova aimed at the assessing the extent to which the local governments protect public interest. This methodology is based on the previous attempts to assess the effectiveness of public institutions. It draws some lessons from the critical analysis of three prominent methodologies for local government assessment: *Local Democracy Assessment* (developed by IDEA), *Local Integrity System* (developed by the Transparency International), and the *Local Label on Innovation and Good Governance* (developed by the Council of Europe). The basic deficits of

these methodologies are as follows: the first one opens the door to the local specifics but in the same time impedes comparative analysis; the second one offers an index which is not able to specify to which extent local authorities work in favour of public interest; the last methodology offers 12 principles of good governance which, however, are not operationalized to clear indicators applicable to the specificities of a concrete municipality.

The main conclusion of prof. Stefanova is that the study should scrutinize specific areas of competence and the related activities of the relevant bodies. The other conclusion tells that two matrices should be done - one about the sphere of competence and the relevant activities of the bodies and another which operationalizes the universal principles of good governance in conformity with the selected sphere of competence and the related activities of that governing body.

According to prof. Stefanova, the principles of good governance, which could be applied to the selected areas of competence and activities, should meet two criteria: to be universal and at the same time to allow operationalization and concretisation. She has selected four principles of good government from the comparative analysis of the concepts adopted by four prominent international organizations - the UN, the EU, the OECD and the CE. These principles are as follows: *openness*, *participation*, *responsibility* and *accountability*, *effectiveness* and *efficiency*. Dr Stefanova adds to these principles another one – *coherence*. All of these principles have been operationalized by two groups of indicators: (a) representing the principles of good governance at local level, and (b) evaluating the protection of public interest in the management and disposal of municipal property.

As can be seen, prof. Stefanova applies this methodology to the assessment of the protection of public interest in the management and disposal of municipal property. There are multiple reasons to study this particular area of competence of local authorities. Firstly, this is the area in which the power of local authorities is not shared with the central authorities. Secondly, the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of the management and disposal of municipal property are easily to be identified and measured. Thirdly, this area is regulated by a good normative set of rules which result in a bulk of available sources such as municipal regulations, strategies and programs for management and disposal of municipal property, and reports on the implementation of the budget of the municipalities. Fourthly, municipal property is the most commonly used resource by the municipalities in the public-private partnerships which makes it one of the most sensitive areas for citizenships' control and a sure indicator for political participation of citizens. Fifthly, the management of municipal property is a telltale sign of the quality of community resources' management and the local government in general.

The academic contribution of this Doctor Habil3 dissertation are as follows: Firstly, the research design of the study as a whole is the most important contribution. This design involves the whole range of issues between the theoretical analyses of the concept of public interest to the statistical analyses of the data collected, including the selection of the most appropriate activities and areas of competence, the operationalization of the basic principles of good government and the application of content and cluster analyses – all these makes this study a model with both academic and applied importance. From academic point of view, it is a kind of invitation for a series of similar studies concerning the effectiveness of management not only on local but also on national level. From practical point of view, this study is important as it exposes the problem of management assessment outside of the party confrontation and scrutinizes it in an impartial and objective manner. Secondly, the definition of public interest as an integrated concept which unites five dimensions. This theoretical approach allows both preserving the

wealth of the concept of public interest and its clear identification. Thirdly, the critical and creative analysis of the previous attempts to assess the effectiveness of political and administrative institutions turns scholars' attention to the effectiveness of all types of power. Fourthly, prof. Stefanova makes some concrete contributions to the field with final results of its study. The cluster analysis' results reject the hypothesis that the existence of a structured majority in the municipal council has an impact on the protection of public interest in the work of local authorities. In the same time, the hypothesis that the mayor and the municipal administration in local government have strong influence has been confirmed. She ascertains substantial deficits of political participation, effectiveness, efficacy, and coherence. The lack of citizens' participation in the decision making of local authorities affecting the management and disposal of municipal property is a question of pressing local concern. Filling this gap is an issue of the utmost importance for the vitality of local governance.

The reviewed dissertation and the papers related to it outline the profile of a scholar who work systematically and thoroughly in the field of local authority – a scholar who has saddled with the difficult research task to assess the practical effect of government. The complexity of this task stems from the nature of the public interest as a crossroad of different types of interests concerning political parties, state institutions, and active citizens. The contributions of the author exploring such a complicated research problem give me reasons to recommend the academic commission to confer on prof. Stefanova the highest academic rank of Doctor Habil in Political science.

6 March, 2019

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