

Review

for the dissertation of Stanislav Valeriev Todorov on “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 /”, presented for award of Ph.D. on specialty 3.3. Political Sciences

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The presented dissertation was written at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski ” under the scientific supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Tatiana Burudjieva. The total volume of the text is 240 standard pages (223 in the selected format), of which 205 pages are the main text, and the rest – appendices. The text is organized in four chapters, the bibliographic list contains 240 titles in Bulgarian and English, outside the references of the studied media.

The doctoral student Stanislav Todorov has a bachelor's degree in tourism economics and two master's degrees in economics and political science (political management). He also has pedagogical qualifications. He worked as a sales and tourism representative.

Considering mostly his professional activity so far, the presented dissertation on a really original and complex topic (direct democracy and referendums) is a remarkable achievement. Most likely it is the result of a deep personal interest in the topic and long work for conducting the research itself (content analysis in particular) and for writing this voluminous work, based on a significant amount of literature. I have very rarely encountered such a case of engaged interest in an otherwise complex and usually requiring long professional experience topic of political science.

What are the main achievements of the work?

If the dissertation is to be summarized, it is in the words of the socialist Fabian Beatrice Webb quoted in it: " Democracy is not the multiplication of ignorant opinions".

The dissertation has chosen as a topic an issue that arouses growing interest, although in general the issue of democracy and the distinction between representative and direct democracy has been discussed by academic researchers for many decades. The growing interest in the development of democratic practices stems from the awareness of the difficulties facing liberal democracy in the world, especially in the last 30-40 years. Today, many critical authors speak of a crisis, even of the collapse of democracy, of declining confidence in its institutions, of declining civic participation in its practices, even of apparent forms of democracy called “post-democracy” or “façade democracy”. In this sense, the choice of this topic fits into an increasingly heated debate and a growing academic interest in civic participation in politics as a key feature of democratic governance.

The research question of the dissertation is not explicitly formulated as such, but is formulated as the main intention as follows: “The aim of the dissertation is to establish how direct democracy affects civic activity - informed or misinformed activity produces messages in awareness campaigns for the three

national referendums.” The real research question is, how do the messages of the explanatory campaigns in the course of the referendums in Bulgaria 2013-2016 affect the nature of the activity of the citizens? The interest here is not in the level of participation in referendums as an instrument of direct democracy, but in the nature of participation in terms of awareness of the stake in the referendum. In essence, this is a reflection on the relationship between civic activism and democracy – a debatable issue that permeates the entire study

The dissertation is built on a logical scheme – the first two chapters are theoretical and clarify two basic concepts, that of the citizen and that of democracy. The third chapter presents the political context of the three national referendums in Bulgaria (2013, 2015 and 2016). The fourth chapter is an analysis of the messages in the campaigns for the three referendums in terms of how much they support informed choices and, on the contrary, how much they contribute to uninformed behavior. The structure is logical insofar as it allows the author to step on the critical interpretation of the theoretical explanations of the relationship between the citizen and the democratic political regime and hence to analyze the political campaigns of three national referendums. Here we can read another formulation of the research intention: “With this paper I will show the deficit of informed voting in the three national surveys. Direct surveys in our country, conducted in the period 2013-2016 show an increase in the field of activity (voter turnout in direct consultations is increasing), but this study will seek an answer to the question, which is located in the other field: the information provided in awareness campaigns for the three national referendums, does it imply informed political participation?” As well as: “The aim of the survey is also to show that civic action is dependent on the information provided to citizens. And here is the main thesis of the study that misinformed activity, not informed, determines the outcome of the three national surveys.

The first chapter and the second chapter demonstrate a broad theoretical culture because they present the main theorists of democracy and civil society, albeit sometimes with a single thesis. The extensive citation of authors from Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel and John Steward Mill to Giovanni Sartori and Colin Crouch shows an enviable theoretical awareness in the broad field of the theory of democracy. In this part of the dissertation the author also takes critical positions towards the cited authors, although not systematically.

Particularly interesting is the author's proposal to overcome a procedural understanding of the democratic regime and its consideration from a value point of view. But not from a normative and prescriptive standpoint, but from the standpoint of understanding civic participation in terms of the democratic values shared by citizens. This proposal for a level of values in the study of democracy and civic participation seems to me to be particularly fruitful. Because it is not so important what is the level of arithmetic participation, but what is the qualitative participation. I accept as heuristic the author's statement that civic participation itself should not be defined as democratic in nature, but should be assessed in terms of what values it carries, what consequences it has for democracy. Because it is known from history that democracies perish when a majority by democratic means puts an end to them (for example, the referendum in Germany in 1934).

I also welcome the introduction of a new concept (rather the Bulgarian equivalent) of a modern understanding of democracy not as “democracy” but as “citizenscracy” (politicocracy or civecracy). This is not an anecdotal proposal for a new word in academic discourse, but a new understanding: “Democracy, in addition to democracy, can also be citizenscracy. The concept of people is static, unlike

the concept of citizen. Much more is expected of the citizen today than of the people. Today, the citizen is in the role of corrector of the democratic state. The people limit the understanding of democracy to power, and the citizen has the grounds in favor of this power. And democracy needs a foundation in the field of values. "

The short second chapter of the dissertation also contains interesting statements and analyzes of what the author qualifies as unconventional political participation of citizens. Although he puts the subscription in this category, in general, the reasoning here also brings a novelty, which is sometimes surprising. The author's thoughts on protests and protest behavior are especially interesting. It is fair to say that the protest is not like the assembly of the citizens of the agora, because usually the protests are not a place of deliberation, but "politics without debate of those convinced of their infallibility." Well, such a conclusion is probably very extreme, because the protests are more or less reminiscent of latent discontent and sometimes manage to change the course of the political affairs. But the distinction between the deliberation of the agora and the protest seems productive to me – the protest cannot replace the forms of civil communication in common affairs. Ultimately, however, protest is a form that has fewer risks and unpredictable consequences than riot or revolution.

Considering in the same chapter the distinction that many authors make between active and passive citizenship, Stanislav Todorov concludes about the three referendums that they are a prerequisite not for civic activism, but, conversely, for passive citizenship. The main argument here is that the issues addressed by these referendums are "dropped" for top-down approval, not the other way around. This observation is not neutral, it is highly critical of the referendums and shows that instead of an instrument for active civic participation in politics, they were much more an instrument for strengthening the national subject political culture in Bulgarian society, a culture focused on citizen obligations, and not to his rights and freedoms. To some extent, this feature of the protests is that they are most involved in the essence of politics, which Carl Schmidt describes as a relationship between friend and enemy.

Undoubtedly interesting for the analysis of the essence of participation in subscriptions as a form of "bottom-up democracy without a political enemy". According to the author, the subscription is a pressure to solve a specific problem and it does not create conditions for discussion, but is based, according to him, on "common sense". Of course, the latter is not an analytical category (no one can define "common sense"), but the author rather implies an implicit consensus that can be established spontaneously in relatively limited communities. The author rightly qualifies the participation in subscriptions for pressure on the authorities as "casual civic activity", which has a healing character for democracy and, most importantly, does not aim at "victory over the enemy", ie. goes beyond Schmidt's "friend-enemy" scheme.

Among the merits of the research, the content analysis of the media content of the information campaigns of the three surveyed referendums should undoubtedly be mentioned. The method here combines quantitative and qualitative characteristics, although no specialized content analysis software is used (this is generally expensive if the author does not have access to an equipped social research laboratory.). In this section of the dissertation (Chapter Four) the most interesting is the examination of three hypotheses: (1) Whether the information provided in the explanatory campaigns stimulates uninformed political participation; (2) Does the pursuit of victory over the political opponent determine

the information provided in the campaigns and (3) Whether the emotions evoked by manipulation and rationalization determine the outcome of the three national referendums.

The content analysis covers 113 articles from the explanatory campaigns for the three national referendums held in Bulgaria in the period 2013-2016. The author has also developed a system of indicators for the evaluation of materials, which include both “technical parameters” (date of publication, media, topic, genre, volume, author, availability of illustrations) and qualitative parameters such as attitude to the referendum issues, the existence of manipulative techniques or rationalization techniques.

The content analysis thus made allows the author to conclude that the topics of all three referendums actually offer approval only to “recipes”, i.e. the already existing decisions that the participating political groups (parties, initiative committees) have prepared and hope will be adopted. These “recipes” actually indicate “who” is behind one decision or another (the situation of “for” and “against”), and not exactly what it is about. The change in the nature of the consultation also leads to a situation of “uninformed participation”. For example: “On the topic of the first referendum in 2013. the following opposing theses were proposed: 1. Vote against the project, i.e. against BSP and corruption; 2. The “blues” want us to be energy dependent and to import electricity, vote against them.” In the second referendum, the alternatives are: “1. The status quo does not want and is afraid of electronic voting; 2. The electronic vote will increase the electoral manipulations and will take away the possibility of choice.” And in the third referendum there is even only one possible thesis: “1. Support the referendum against the political class” while there was practically no alternative thesis or it was imperceptibly presented in the campaign”.

These observations, argued with the results of the analysis, undoubtedly expand our knowledge of the characteristics of civic participation in the three referendums, but also of the importance of awareness / ignorance of the behavior of the participating citizens. Referring to Teun van Dyke that “manipulations in political discourse can be observed in three layers: social, cognitive and discursive”, the author draws a significant conclusion: “Advocates and opponents of voting topics attribute positive and negative qualities to each other, and society is faced with the choice of which group to join.”

Critical notes

It would be banal to simply say that any research work can be criticized. This is an original and undoubtedly useful study for the research community, which can be verified. It is in this plan that my main criticism is – there is no reference or explanation in the work on how to use the main research procedure – content analysis. This is a method developed on the basis of hermeneutics, but also of social psychology, there are varieties and a specific procedural description of its application. In the list of used literature, I did not find any reference to such a methodological text, as well as a more precise description of the method (except for a brief description of the four indicators used). Terms such as “rationalization or manipulation techniques” are used as self-evident, but need to be precisely defined and, above all, a description of the criteria for classifying media content according to whether it is rationalizing or manipulative.

For example, the explanation that “In the second part of the content analysis, quantitative procedures will be used for additional analysis of the information in the articles collected from the quantitative indicators. Here we introduce a new unit of analysis – judgment / sentence /, and for each quantitative

indicator will be presented the number of sentences in the following three types of categories: sentences type “general talk”, manipulative sentences and sentences about the pros and cons of the topic.” This necessarily needs a matrix of the criteria according to which one or another sentence is considered as “general talk” (non-academic category) or “manipulative”.

My second note is of a substantive nature – the understanding of democracy as representative and direct. The author seems to accept Sartori's assertion that there is no referendum democracy and my assertion that if it is direct, it is not democracy (but in fact the tyranny of the majority). But he concludes that referendums are “an expression of direct democracy in the representative system.” Then isn't it good to reformulate the research question – what are the conditions for a truly democratic referendum, so that it does not become a “mathematical operation” of the ratio of political forces in a society.

I also have a small terminological remark when the author states: “In Hegel's view, the citizen leaves his personal space and turns to cooperation with other citizens. Hegel defines this cooperation as “bourgeois society.” The German word used by Hegel is “bürgerliche Gesellschaft”, translated into Slavic languages either as “bourgeois society” (in fact inaccurate) or as “civil society”, in the sense in which it is used. The expression (according to Cass Mudde) “thin vs. fat” ideology, and it is customary to use the second as “thick” ideology. But these can also be minor details.

And one last note – the presented text is dotted with spelling and punctuation errors (especially the lack of spaces between words), which often makes it difficult to read.

In conclusion

An original study of the three referendums in the recent political history of Bulgaria is presented, referring to a wide range of general studies on democracy and civic participation. The abstract accurately presents the dissertation, although it is too voluminous. It lacks a self-assessment of the contributions to the survey, but I accept that it contributes significantly to our understanding of the concept of direct democracy and the conditions for truly democratic referendums as its instrument. The three publications on the topic appear in scientific journals and present important elements of the dissertation presented for defense.

In conclusion, I will say that the presented research of Stanislav Todorov has all the necessary qualities of a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (Ph.D.) in specialty 3.3. “Political Sciences”.

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