

OPINION

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

on the dissertation on "Direct democracy as a tool for activating civil society (the case Bulgaria 2015-2017) (The role of information on civic activity in the three national referendums)"

for awarding an educational and scientific degree PhD, professional field 3.3. Political Science

to Stanislav Valeriev Todorov

Stanislav Todorov's dissertation presented for public defense on "Direct democracy as a tool for activating civil society (the case of Bulgaria 2015-2017) (The role of information on civic activity in the three national referendums)" is a study that as a academic text in its size and content meets the formal requirements for this type of research product, set in the relevant legal and other regulations. There is an abstract that adequately reflects the content of the dissertation, as well as self-assessment of the contributions in it.

In general, the dissertation also meets the academic criteria set before a PhD thesis. It is a complete study that seeks its place in the study of Bulgarian political life.

I will pay attention to some important characteristics of the doctorate, which can serve as grounds for its evaluation.

First. The topic proposed by Stanislav Todorov undoubtedly points to a problem that is significant both scientifically and in practical political terms. The incorporation of elements of direct democracy (such as referendums) into the body of representative democracy continues to be considered one of the most appropriate recipes for addressing the shortcomings of representative government. This gives it an important place in modern political science and in particular in theories of democracy. From this point of view, any study of specific practices in this area, their characteristics and consequences is an opportunity to contribute to the clarification of a significant political phenomenon. The example of the Bulgarian referendums, the subject of research in the dissertation, is really indicative, at least because we were on the verge of a significant reformatting of the political system as a result of a referendum - a reformatting that would significantly worsen its democratic quality. In addition to its importance, the topic of the role of referendums remains relevant and will obviously be an important part of political processes and political science in the foreseeable future.

In other words, the choice of the research topic is successful, but it also presupposes finding one's own place and one's own point of view in the already accumulating research. Stanislav Todorov has successfully tackled this risk by concentrating on a less studied aspect of the referendums - the quality and nature of the information provided in the explanatory work during the polls. At the same time, this has enabled him to reach deeper layers of the democratic process, linked to the interrelationship between civic activism and informed choice, between the simple activation of the citizen and his or her actual 'empowerment'. Based on the premise that civil actions and decisions are dependent on the information provided, the author asks whether "the information provided in the explanatory campaigns for the three national referendums implies informed political participation" (p. 4). In this field is situated his research aim - to explore what kind of information is offered by the participants in the campaigns of the citizens and what civic activity produces this information - informed or misinformed" (p. 6).

The author's thesis is that "desinformed, not informed activity determines the result of the three national polls" (p. 9), that "referendums in our country increased the opportunities for civic activity, but the information in the explanatory campaigns weakened the basis of democratic governance – the informed citizen" (p. 6).

A number of hypotheses have been formulated, which direct the research efforts towards proving the thesis: the provided information stimulates uninformed participation; the desire to win over the political opponent determines the information provided; emotions caused by manipulations and rationalization determine the results of referendums; the large amount of unnecessary information fills the campaign space at the expense of meaningful information on the issues raised.

In this regard, Stanislav Todorov has set adequate specific research tasks, including: to analyze a significant part of the campaign information in the three national referendums in order to ascertain what type of information determines the outcome of national polls - information in terms of proposals or emotions, manipulations and non-essential information; to outline the role of populism in the 2016 referendum and the information that accompanies it; to look for opportunities to mitigate the consequences of the uninformed vote (see p. 9).

Second, the dissertation is based on a methodology suitable for the realization of the goals and tasks and uses a rich source material.

At the center of the research is the empirical study of the information offered during the referendums, realized with the help of qualitative and quantitative content analysis. It is a detailed study of a

significant number of media publications from various sources - national media, websites of parties and initiative committees, news sites, print media.

The secondary sources on which the author is based are also rich and diverse. The 240 titles in Bulgarian and foreign languages used in the work and mentioned in the bibliography illustrate the high degree of knowledge on the part of the author of the significant classical and modern publications in the field of research.

Third. The structure of the dissertation text proposed by Stanislav Todorov also contributes to the realization of the pursued research tasks.

The author has organized his work in an introduction, four separate chapters and a conclusion. After an introduction that meets the academic rules, the first chapter presents the main theoretical starting points and clarifies the basic concepts used in the study related to referendums and the motives (informed, uninformed) for voting. The second chapter is devoted to various forms of unconventional political participation. The third and fourth chapters are focused on the subject of research - the three referendums in Bulgaria. First, the referendums themselves are presented in their specific context. Then comes the empirical study and testing of the four hypotheses formulated by the author. The conclusion does not contain summaries and conclusions, but is rather essayistic.

Fourth, the contributing nature of the dissertation is that it enriches the available knowledge regarding an important political phenomenon such as the referendum. In this case, it is an analytical view of the referendum as a "school for democracy", in which citizens receive the necessary information and acquire the appropriate competence to make an informed decision. The author's analysis does not confirm this claim and provides additional arguments for the risky nature of referendums in the absence of not only debate but also the necessary information.

In general, the dissertation has shown the author's abilities for independent research, has demonstrated good knowledge of his scientific field, has convinced us that he is able to successfully apply the necessary methods of analysis to achieve the goals of the work.

At the same time, a number of weaknesses, inaccuracies, opportunities for improvement can be found in the dissertation text.

I am not convinced that the second chapter, dealing with some forms of unconventional participation, was necessary to solve the research goals and objectives arising from the topic chosen by the author - the three referendums in Bulgaria, the role of information on civic activism and referendum results.

The author likes to use many quotations, which, on the one hand, illustrates his literacy. On the other hand, sometimes it is exaggerated and almost whole pages with strings of quotes appear. At the same time, they sometimes seem self-serving or at least do not always reinforce the author's arguments.

The situation is similar with the subheadings, which look too much - an average of one per 3-4 pages. This approach moves the text, makes it more readable, but also carries the risk that the problems at work will not be covered in sufficient detail.

There are also many technical errors in the written text.

Despite these and other shortcomings in the dissertation, the author has generally fulfilled the set goal and presented enough arguments to prove his thesis. This gives me reason to express my support for the award of the educational and scientific degree PhD to Stanislav Valeriev Todorov.

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