

## Review

In view of the competition for the academic position of “associate professor” (docent) in 3.3 Political Sciences (International Relations), announced in Official Journal No. 61 of 2.08.2022 with only one candidate chief assistant Dr. Mira Zdravkova Kaneva

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The participant in the competition, Dr. Mira Kaneva, graduated as Master of International Relations in 2007 and Master of Law in 2009 at the University of St. Kliment Ohridski". In 2013, she successfully defended a PhD thesis on the topic “Soft power: the new dimension of power in international relations in the 21st century”. Between 2010 and 2014, she was an assistant professor at the SU, and from then until today – a chief assistant professor. In 2016, she specialized in the French Institute of International Relations in Paris (IFRI). I recall what is known from the competition documentation to emphasize that she is a young researcher and teacher who is extremely consistent in her scientific development and scientific interests.

For the competition, the candidate presents as the main habilitation thesis the monograph “Borders in international relations” (“Gutenberg” 2022, 339 p.), but together with this – 21 more publications, including the monograph “Bulgarian practices and discourses regarding borders in the context of the European refugee crisis (2015–2017)”, developed after her specialization in France (Sofia University publ., 2018, 94 p.). These publications are after the defense of her doctoral thesis, they are all in scientific publications in Bulgaria and abroad and should be taken into account by the reviewer.

### Main research fields

In the presented publications, I could distinguish three main fields in Dr. Mira Kaneva's research activity:

1. The study of borders (field of research identity).
2. The study of the types of soft and hard power.
3. Research on security and its dimensions.

All three fields are related, they overlap, which shows both a consistency in the candidate's research interests and an understanding that each separate field of research cannot but be accompanied by related fields, the study of which contributes to the understanding of the main one.

### *Border studies*

Undoubtedly, the review should start with the main habilitation work, the presented monograph “Borders in International Relations”, but also take into account that 9 more published publications are on the subject of the main work. And the topic, in short, is “borders”. I put them in quotation marks because the word names, as the author successfully argues, different realities, objective and intersubjective.

Already in the introduction, the monograph insists on a detected change in research interests in the field of international studies – from the particular importance of the temporal aspects of the phenomena to the growing importance of their spatial aspects. This statement should undoubtedly support the grounds for the monograph dedicated to borders, which also fits into another separate scientific discipline (or sub-discipline or better inter-discipline) called “border studies”, which seems to naturally fit into a line of similar phenomena or new research fields such as gender studies or migration studies). In fact, these new research fields claim autonomy, not because they are in any sharp conflict for supremacy with the established classical disciplines, but mostly because they are inter-disciplinary by design, not subsumable to any of the usual (?) university disciplines. But isn't this the beginning of the path of every scientific discipline in general, from the moment of completion with the conviction of the possibility of encyclopedism?

The monograph is undoubtedly a contribution to the construction of a new research field in Bulgarian science – the border study. And although the main idea is the study of borders in international relations, the author's effort inevitably goes beyond the narrow limits of political theory and presents a larger-scale discussion (philosophical, historical, anthropological, sociological, psychological) on the phenomenon of borders.

The author undoubtedly has an excellent command of her research field. The entire first part of the monograph presents systematically and with understanding the methodological approaches, including their evolution and conflicts, on the subject of borders, space and time. Of course, geopolitics, understood as a pluralistic and controversial research field, is the focus of this ‘literature review’. Dr. Mira Kaneva refers to other large-scale surveys of geopolitical studies, adopting a historical sequence from classical geopolitics to modern geoeconomics and critical geopolitics. But she also pays attention to the phenomena of a return to a retro-geopolitics, reactionary in nature, such as the geopolitics of the New Eurasian movement.

The second chapter of the monograph deals with the concepts that accompany a broad reflection on borders. This part shows a very good ability to work with concepts – a basic quality of the researcher. Concepts such as spatiality-space, territoriality-territory, de(re)territorialization are systematically analyzed. Of course, this work with concepts aims to construct a real conceptual system around the main concept of the study – the border. Dr. Mira Kaneva notes that the border is “a symbolic form of territoriality, which includes within itself a direction in space and an application of possession or exclusion,” i.e., a powerful instrument of power.

Just as the English language (due to the specific political experience of the English society) distinguishes with three different words the three main dimensions of the political (polity – policy – politics), in the same way the monograph treats the related dimensions of the border with three different words in the English language: (border – boundary – frontier). From here, the author skillfully develops the themes of other related concepts such as neighborhood and borderland (limitrophic territory), in order to lead, but already in the next chapter, to differentiation as a cultural-identity phenomenon. Work on the concept of border has been developed in the discussion of natural, land, sea, river, air, space and cyber borders. The latter is particularly interesting and deserves to be developed to a greater extent as far as intangible but actual boundaries are concerned.

Along with the work on concepts, Dr. Mira Kaneva mobilizes as a tool for the analysis of concepts the theoretical schools in international relations: realism, transnationalism and structuralism. These are also

three main perspectives of constructing the understanding of borders: dividing line of power, permeable membrane of interaction or virtual line of discourse. The research question here would be what is the preferred theoretical perspective – it seems to be the transnationalist one, but perhaps it would be useful if it were more explicitly explained.

In the third chapter of the monograph, Dr. Mira Kaneva points out the conclusion of her research program: “the production of meanings through discourses and practices in concrete empirical cases that illustrate the complication of boundaries from a linear international regulatory instrument into a complex international regime, in the same way as which theory walks the path from the materialist paradigm of realism (borders) to constructivism and critical theory (bordering)”. I will leave aside the suggestion that there is any linear evolution of theory from positivism to constructivism, although it is true that social constructivism has recently been the dominant paradigm in social science research.

In this chapter, the author expands her reasoning to such important contemporary topics of research as the mechanisms of othering, but also of securitization and the effects of the pandemic on border thinking. Here, the pathos is towards such intensifying practices of containing cross-border migrations and refugee waves as the construction of border walls and fences, the fencing of camps, detention fences in border areas, the demarcation of migrant islands and other new(old) overtures, which in general contradict an optimistic vision of globalization as opening borders.

There is no doubt that the presented monograph is both quality research and a quality university source for learning, it is a true habilitation thesis.

Of course, a significant part of its themes is presented for discussion by the academic community in at least 8 of the articles and studies submitted for the competition, some of which were published in English. Their themes also show the connection of the main theme of borders with Dr. Mira Kaneva's two other research fields: soft power and security.

#### *The soft power*

This now commonplace term has been spreading since the end of the Cold War, when J. Nye popularized it in his book on the changing nature of American power. “Soft power” is a theme in at least 5 studies offered as arguments for the contest, two of which were published in English. The 2013 study “The problem of 'soft' power in international relations and its role in the philosophy and practice of EU security policy” defines its object as “a set of possibilities to exert a transformative effect in accordance with the will of others, without to resort to tangible or intangible coercion”. From here, in subsequent studies, it unfolds in relation to borders (study in *Contemporary Law*, 2013) and as a foundational principle in the EU (study in collective collection of SU, 2014).

In general, research on soft power, although it occupies a more modest place in the list of publications, is worth developing as an undoubtedly promising direction.

#### *The security*

Among the presented articles and studies, at least 5 deal with different aspects of security. It is also an area of growing academic interest, both in research and university education. The topic is treated by the author of the studies in several parallel aspects: European security, human security and security in the state of emergency (around the Covid-19 pandemic). I will emphasize that with regard to human

security, this aspect of security in general that is crucial for the transnationalist school, the author advocates the thesis that “human security is an inseparable element of the new strategic discourse and practices of the European Union”. This is undoubtedly related to the “soft power” of Europe.

In all these aspects, Dr. Mira Kaneva demonstrated professionalism, knowledge of the research field, and scientific integrity. Here I will also add her participation in 7 research projects, one of which she is the head of (“Challenges and prospects for Bulgarian participation in the UN: legal and political analysis”, 2019).

### **Teaching experience**

The Habilitation implies both research professionalism and the achievement of certain scientific standards, as well as teaching work and skills.

It is clear from the presented documents that Dr. Mira Kaneva has already gained considerable experience as a teacher at Sofia university (from 2010 until now). She participates in 8 specialized courses, of which she leads 3 in English. In addition, the reference indicates that she was the scientific supervisor of 8 diploma theses of students from the Faculty of Law of Sofia university.

From the information I was able to get, it can be concluded that Dr. Mira Kaneva enjoys the respect of her colleagues and students.

### **Conclusion**

Bearing in mind the quality of the monograph presented as the main habilitation thesis, but in general the quality of the research and teaching activities of chief assistant professor Dr. Mira Kaneva, I am convinced that she possesses all the qualities necessary to occupy the academic position of “associate professor” (docent) in international law and international relations. If Sofia university “St. Kliment Ohridski” appointed her, there will certainly be an excellent habilitated teacher in this important field for the social sciences.

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