OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Mira Zdravkova Kaneva, PhD

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on a thesis proposal for acquiring a **PhD degree in Political sciences (European studies – European Integration)**

PhD full-time candidate: **Martin Danielov Milanov**

PhD supervisor: Prof. Mariya Stoycheva, PhD; Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University

The PhD student Martin Milanov has submitted for review his thesis on the topic: *"Identity as a foreign policy variable – the EU and China cases compared"*, as the outcome of his full-time PhD studies in the Department of European studies, under the supervision of Prof. Mariya Stoycheva. Following a department discussion in June 2024 and pursuant to a decision taken at the first session of the scientific jury on 9th September 2024, I have been assigned the preparation of an opinion on the aforementioned PhD thesis.

The topic reflects the contents of the dissertation in a correct way, which debates on the process of interaction between the European Union and China through the prism of identity. **The structure of the thesis** is organized in three chapters which are balanced in volume and are consequential, starting from the conceptual framework, going through the bilateral relations and arriving at the global and regional context.

The context is being outlined, the research questions are stated clearly, and the aim of the research is duly noted. The study verifies the main argument about the influence of identity within the EU – China relations, by means of **a set of methods** (historical research, content analysis and comparative analysis). The structure of the PhD thesis is well summarized, with all the boundaries of the scope considered.

The first chapter elaborates on **the theoretical framework**. While taking into consideration the dominant West-centric paradigm, the PhD student traces **the shift of the axis of the world order** through the emergent powers in Asia (according to the US strategic vision it is not a linear process but a process of power dispersion instead). A remark should be made here that defining China as a 'postcolonial power' is not appropriate as long as it is more of a conceptual term about emancipation rather than a political term about the reordering of the

global hierarchy. Whereas the author puts an emphasis on the transition from the Westphalian system of the balance of power with horizontal jurisdictions of sovereignty towards the Vienna version of the European concert, he abandons his further analysis on the peculiarities of the global order after the two world wars in the 20th c., nor does he dare to present the Chinese interpretation of the same developments. The study of the shift in hegemony not as mere material forces but as a change in perceptions and a process of recognition deserves distinction.

The 'identity' variable is introduced via the theoretical approach of Social constructivism which broadens and deepens our knowledge about **norms and ideas through the reflexive post-positivist prism**. The PhD student's attempt to refocus the foreign policy analysis from Realist clichéd tenets on interests and power toward actors' identification, socialization and legitimation, is worth admiration. The concept of the Other as a dimension of identity – be it local, temporal or personal – allows us to study aspects of exclusiveness and victimization. Thus the Chinese foreign policy identity has been established in an ambiguous way by combining the unique civilization of the Middle Kingdom, the Confucian ethical system of harmony, the historical legacy of humiliation and Maoist proselytization. For its part, the European identity is depicted by the social narratives, its value core and its inherent pluralism being also its vulnerability.

The second chapter is dedicated to **a comparison between EU foreign policy and Chinese foreign policy through the identity prism**. The European foreign policy identity is collective and constitutes a buildup to the national identities, although it is individualistic in its essence because it respects human rights; it is also open and deliberatively democratic. The Chinese foreign policy identity is based on national egoism and self-help, albeit being rooted in the collectivist mindset; it is also closed and conditioned on autocratic stability. Both identities are perceived as situated in the center while being exposed to threats from the periphery. Both foreign policy identities follow **the economic pragmatism** but as far as China is concerned, it is described quite factually by enumerating trade agreements, infrastructure enterprises and the like, without estimating the real impact of the resource dependency or the security nexus. Both foreign policy identities are rigidly **institutionalized**, yet the author hasn't studied EU normative and civilian power as part of its specific soft power.

The third chapter is engaged in the study of **the strategic dimensions** as tested in a definite context. EU strategy towards China is one of **de-risking, including via sanctions**, which is manifested in its ambition for strategic autonomy and its strife for diversification. It is determined by the perceptions of China as revisionist power which makes use of **subversive tactics of disinformation** and **Communist propaganda, as well as demonstrating a**

nihilistic attitude towards human rights and liberties. The problem, as the PhD student contends, is that the common identity is differentiated in member states. The Chinese strategy towards the EU is **highly pragmatic while affected by its skepticism about the Western interventionism and its perception as vulnerable and weak**, especially after Brexit.

The referencing style is in accordance with universally accepted standards with several omissions of page indexing, authors (p. 121, e.g.) or incorrect spelling (Walt 1987, instead of Waltz, p. 23). I also recommend that the text should be written uniformly in the present tense, the abbreviations should be in Bulgarian language only, as well as grammar, punctuation and spelling errors should be thoroughly proofread.

My critical remarks concern two aspects of the thesis as regards its future publication which I am looking forward to – first, the PhD student is advised to review **the causal links between the different sections** (what is the systematic place of China – Serbia relations, why aren't the regional strategies juxtaposed, and so on); second, the author is expected to explain the constitutive meanings in both discourses by means of a content analysis of speech acts.

A starting point for further discussion during the public defense is my question to Martin Milanov: *What is the role of identity in naming and shaming as EU foreign policy tool vis a vis China (incl. examples)?*

The aforementioned critical remarks do not in any way belittle the five contributions of the submitted PhD thesis; they are rather intended to encourage the improvement of the argument.

All things considered, I give **a positive assessment** of Martin Milanov's thesis on "Identity as a foreign policy variable – the EU and China cases compared". With his thesis being in complete compliance with the relevant Bulgarian legal framework, Martin Milanov is eligible to be awarded the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD degree) in Political sciences (European studies).

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