

REVIEW

on the works of Assoc. Prof. Milena Hristova Stefanova
the only participant in a competition for full professor at Sofia University St. Kl. Ohridski "
by professional field 3.3 Political Science (Local Government and Self-Government),
announced in SG, issue 22 of 16.03.2021
by Prof. PhD Romyana Kolarova

1. COMPETITION DATA

Assoc. Prof. Milena Stefanova is the only participant in a competition for full professor of political science (Local Government and Self-Government). I am not aware of any violations of the procedure.

2. CANDIDATE DATA

Milena Stefanova is a recognised scholar, an active member of the political science community, and key analyst and participant in local government in Bulgaria. I have known her since 1982, when together we were part of the *Bulgarian Political Process Research Laboratory* at the Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia University. It was 39 years ago when, Milena chose to analyse the emergence of "local government" in modern Bulgarian politics through her doctoral / candidate's dissertation on the innovative topic of Bulgarian chorbadjii – a research with indisputable high impact. Milena's role in the empirical research of *Bulgarian Political Process Research Laboratory*, especially in the study of the functioning of local government in the Strandzha-Sakar government program set a standard for erudition and scientific integrity. Later Milena Stefanova became a lecturer in the newly established specialty "Political Science" - first as a senior assistant, and since 1998 as an associate professor of local government and local government.

As a founder and subsequently head of the Department of Public Administration, she actively participated in the establishment of the department, which plays key role in the development of public administration in Bulgaria. As a member of the Department of Political Science, I am confident that Milena Stefanova is one of the most highly respected professors in the field of Political Science. I have repeatedly had the opportunity to evaluate the professionalism of Assoc. Prof. Stefanova as an active member of the Board of the Bulgarian Association for Political Science.

My colleagues and I hold Milena Stefanova on a high esteem for the exceptional diligence and integrity in her professional commitments, for her thorough and assiduous research and teaching.

I would add that Milena Stefanova's high professionalism is manifested not only in her academic work, but also in her commitment to the politics of local government – as an active citizen, as a skilled expert and as responsible politician (she was member of the municipal Council of Sofia and Chairman of the Committee on Local Self-Government and Legislation in the period 2003-2007). Unlike the "cabinet scientists" Milena's professional daily life had not only academic but also real social dimensions.

3. DESCRIPTION OF SCIENTIFIC WORKS SELECTED FOR THE COMPETITION

To participate in the competition, Milena Stefanova presented twelve publications, of which two monographs, two studies, two chapters from collective monographs and six articles, one of which was published, referenced and indexed in "world-famous databases of scientific information". Of the 12 titles included in the list, three are in English and the rest are in Bulgarian.

Although thematically related publications have their own significance. As an example I would mention not only the two monographs "Comparative Studies of Local Self-Government" and "Local Government and Local Self-Government", but also the studies of the processes of democratization and decentralization of local government, the system of integrity in local government and the public sector.

The main publication of Assoc. Prof. Stefanova, the monograph "Comparative Studies on Local Self-Government", is a volume of 112 pages and includes a preface, three chapters (analysing the methodology, the diversity of comparative studies of local government and their practical significance) and a conclusion. The monograph is a systematic analysis of comparative studies of local government, the first of its kind in Bulgarian literature.

The studies, articles and chapters from collective monographs included in the bibliography have been published in Bulgarian and international publications and analyse problems related to the public sector, local government and the processes of democratization in Bulgaria.

4. SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Milena Stefanova's publications are the result of her thorough and systematic research interest in the field of local government and self-government, which is analysed with regard to

two key processes - decentralization and democratization. The organic unity and interconnectedness of her publications is impressive.

I will first discuss the main monograph "Comparative Studies of Local Government", Sofia University Publishing house, 2021; 112 p.

This is the first study of its kind in Bulgarian, which includes a historical overview and a comprehensive analysis of a representative sample of significant academic comparative studies of local government. They are systematically reviewed and critically evaluated in three analytical perspectives: methodological framework; subject field and problem scope; and practical significance. The analysis of the expansion of the problem field of the comparative researches of the local government is of contribution character, as well as the process of differentiation of significant research topics, which Assoc. Prof Stefanova connects with the real practice of the local government. I highly appreciate the contribution in the third chapter, analysing the connection with the practice - the importance of comparative research both in the reforms of local self-government and in decision-making in international organizations.

The main contributions of Assoc. Prof Stefanova are related to the overall study of the Bulgarian system of local self-government, which is analysed and assessed both theoretically and practically in eight of the twelve publications included in the list for the competition.

Milena Stefanova gives her definition of the concept of "local government", following two classical approaches - institutional and functional. Her arguments that the clear definition of the term "problem / issue of local importance" is of key importance for the functioning of self-governance in Bulgaria is of a contributory nature. She argues that the concept plays key role for a bottom-up governance reform.

As a sociologist by education, Assoc. Prof Stefanova also analyses the two main parameters of the political community on municipal level, which makes local self-government possible: the right to territorial self-determination and the normative framework set by the provisions of the constitution and the law. In her monograph on the local government in Bulgaria, a through analysis of specific cases proves that the main problem in the functioning of local self-government is not the lack of regulatory guarantees, but the established practice of "distorted" implementation. Several publications of Assoc. Prof Stefanova are dedicated to the quality of local government legislation. By analysing the established practice, and by comparing the current Bulgarian legal framework with the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government Stefanova provides arguments for the need of a new Law on Local Self-Government.

The systematic analysis of the local government is of a contributory nature. Here the research interest of Assoc. Prof. Stefanova focuses on the effects of the electoral system on the formation of majorities in municipal councils and the role of these majorities in the management of municipalities. By analysing the results of local elections in the period 1991-2019 she shows that the lack of a coalition culture is a major problem in local governance.

A key role in the research of Milena Stefanova is study of the relationship between local government and the central government. She considers three aspects - distribution of areas of competence, control over the work of local authorities and the impact of local authorities on the policy of the central government. Two theses are important here: first, the role of municipal associations in achieving horizontal integration in the system of government and second, the deficit in the application of the principle of subsidiarity, which according to Stefanova is key to effective interaction between the three levels – central, regional and local.

The analysis of Milena Stefanova of the activity of the local authorities and administration in protection of the public interest in the management and disposal of municipal property is also of a contributory nature. The research focuses on the role of the so-called "structured majorities" in municipal councils. Special attention is paid to the analysis of the strategic approach in the management and disposal of municipal property, as the study of Milena Stefanova proves the lack of strategic vision and capacity in the municipal administration.

The third big topic in Milena Stefanova's publications is decentralization. It analyses the specific dynamics of the decentralization process in Bulgaria after 1991 following two approaches - diachronic and synchronous. The evaluation of the process is performed through indicators for three types of decentralization - political, administrative, financial and tax. The results prove only partial decentralization, which does not substantially change the fact that Bulgaria is still a centralized state.

The fourth big topic is the regional self-government in Bulgaria, which Assoc. Prof. Stefanova defines as "a qualitatively new degree in the development of local democracy" and "a factor balancing the governing system of the state." The analysis of the relationship between local and regional government through the principle of subsidiarity is of a contributory nature, as well as the systematically presented arguments in support of the thesis that the introduction of regional self-government is closely related to decentralization and is a guarantee for its effectiveness.

I would like to pay special attention to the three publications related to two significant studies of the political process in Bulgaria - the institutional system of integrity in Bulgaria

(2011) and the Bulgarian results of the European Values Survey (2019). Milena Stefanova analyses integrity system and citizens' attitudes concerning the public sector as part of two research teams. This is an analysis dedicated to the two major challenges of Bulgarian democracy - corruption and (dis)trust in political institutions. In the analysis of the integrity system, she discusses the imbalance between resource security, capacity and efficiency in the work of the administrations at central and local level, as well as the non-transparency in their work, and the dependence on the will of the politicians is of contribution importance. She points out to the contradictions between the legal framework and the practice. Directly related to the integrity of the public sector is the analysis of the ombudsman, where Milena Stefanova argues that the deficiencies of integrity is the result of the selection and election procedures - the lack of clear criteria for selection of candidates, nomination of candidates only by political parties and coalitions and election by simple majority.

As a special merit of Milena Stefanova's research pursuits and achievements I would point out the systematic and parallel interest both in the dynamics of political institutions (their structure, functions, capacity and role) and in political behaviour (public opinion and attitudes of citizens).

5. TEACHING WORK

Milena Stefanova is a highly valued lecturer in two main disciplines - Local Government and Governance and Comparative European Public Administration (in Bulgarian and English), as well as in several disciplines related to general problems and specific policies of local government in Bulgaria. She teaches in the departments of Public Administration and Political Science at the Faculty of Philosophy, as well as in two other faculties of Sofia University. I have always been impressed by her commitment, energy and dedication, both in the teaching process and in the process of organizing and updating curricula. I would especially like to mention her work as head of the innovative master's program "European Public Administration", which was established in collaboration with the University of Maastricht and EIPA - Maastricht. The administrative engagement of Assoc. Prof. Stefanova as Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Deputy Rector of Sofia University has also resulted in innovating the curricula and improving the quality of education at the University.

I know and highly appreciate Milena Stefanova as a lecturer and author of textbooks in the training programs of the Institute of Public Administration, which provides the administrative expertise of civil servants in Bulgaria. Milena Stefanova is a respected and long-

term lecturer at the Bulgarian School of Politics, which has been building the political culture of municipal councillors and MPs for more than twenty years.

6. CONCLUSION

Considering the scientific-theoretical, research and applied significance of the works of Assoc. Prof. Milena Hristova Stefanova, the high academic standards met by her teaching work, her long-term contribution to improving the quality of education at Sofia University, as well as consolidating and activating the professional community of Bulgarian political scientists, I will confidently vote for her to take the academic position of professor.

MEMBER OF THE SCIENTIFIC JURY:

26.06.2021

Prof. PhD Romyana Kolarova