

REVIEW

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for the PhD. dissertation of Denitsa Plamenova Gatsinska

titled

“The Covid Crisis: Institutional Communication and Legitimacy – Bulgaria and the EU”

presented for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree of “doctor” in scientific
direction 3.3. Political Sciences (Politics – International Relations)

The dissertation work deposited for public protection consists of 231 standard pages and is structured in an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography, and an appendix presenting the results of semi-structured interviews which should be accepted separately from the main text. The work fully meets the formal academic requirements laid down in the Law on the Academic Staff Development in the Republic of Bulgaria and in the Statute on the Terms and Procedures for Acquiring Scientific Degrees and Occupying Academic Positions at Sofia University.

The topic of the dissertation is distinguished by an extremely high degree of relevance and importance. The political dimension of the topic is also clearly highlighted and argued. The ambitious intention of the doctoral student to cover a truly diverse and complex phenomenon like the Covid-crisis from different theoretical, methodological and thematic positions is striking, by looking for the intersection of very different processes in two key problems: communication and legitimacy. This has led to an equally complex research design of the doctoral thesis, in which a total of five research questions and five hypotheses have been set. Hypotheses are non-trivial and arise from the questions. The formulations of the hypotheses are precise and convincing, with the possible exception of the fourth hypothesis (“Communication of national and European institutions during the crisis should be evaluated thoroughly and comprehensively, considering both positive and negative sides”), which has a normative character (“should”) and can rather be qualified as an inference. In addition to the object and subject of the study, four goals are listed which are located in the field of communications and which can be considered to be temporally limited to the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The doctoral student has also indicated several research methods, which unfortunately are listed

without any specification and without any explanation as to why they are necessary, what they mean and how they are applied. According to the words of the doctoral student (p.6), the methods are enriched by four theoretical approaches to the research, which are fully tested in the fourth chapter of the work.

The structure of the dissertation work is derived logically from the set goals of the research. I won't rehash the individual chapters. I will try to briefly present the main points in them as I see them.

The first chapter introduces the conceptual apparatus of the dissertation work, and more specifically, its focus is the concept of crisis in its various dimensions - political crisis, crisis of democracy, crisis of legitimacy, health crisis. Dozens of definitions by different authors are quoted and commented on. Most essential, in view of the topic, in my opinion, is the review of the views of Schmitter, Morlino and Przeworski on the crisis of democracy. This is because the mentioned authors develop certain themes that will later prove to be key to making sense of the Covid crisis. These include Schmitter's idea of a governance crisis, which is related to the effectiveness of governance itself; Morlino's emphasis on the legitimacy of democracy; and Przeworski's observation of the dangers of "democratic backsliding". All three themes were on the agenda of political, expert and scientific discussions during the pandemic, but also in Denitsa Gatsinska's analysis of the problems of institutional communication. Further, the doctoral student dwells on the problem of governance of crisis and examines the different approaches within the field, popularly known as crisis management. Most important here, I think, are the references to Wildavsky and his "sustainability strategies" that allow predictability of crises. The unprecedented nature of the Covid-crisis undoubtedly updates the reasoning about the sustainability of crisis prevention. The literature review clearly enough leads to the final conclusion that the Covid-crisis is a crisis of a new type. The implications of this conclusion can be found in three directions. First, the multi-layered nature of the Covid-crisis also implies an interdisciplinary analysis that is not reduced to the political, social, economic or health spheres, but tries to integrate them. Second, institutional actors are unprepared, so their decisions can be examined on their own, as a stand-alone unit of analysis, rather than within some longer chain of governmental activities. Third, existing theoretical approaches should be reevaluated and adapted by researchers to adequately respond to the new reality.

The second chapter presents an overview of the communication theories of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas from such a point of view – as an expression of the need for re-evaluation in

order to better understand the challenges of crisis communication in the context of a pandemic. The essential thing for Arendt is that the legitimacy of power can only be produced in an environment of undistorted communication of citizens, and for Habermas – that the procedural model of sovereignty is directly based on interactions in the public sphere. With the help of her extensive analysis of the works of the two thinkers, Denitsa Gatsinska formulates her important conclusion: “The Covid-crisis can be seen as a crisis of effective communication and legitimacy, where insufficient or manipulated communication can undermine trust in institutions and make it difficult to manage the crisis” (p. 69).

The third chapter presents the general reactions to the Covid-crisis in world societies, including the Bulgarian one, in order to assess the adequacy of institutional communication. Public opinion is conceptualized by the doctoral student in its many modes of existence: mass attitudes, protests, prejudices, and conspiracy theories. Successful and unsuccessful examples of leadership and effective communication in different parts of the world are examined through the eyes of the recipients of the communication, the citizens. Data from an empirical study conducted by the doctoral student for the purposes of the dissertation are also presented. It consists of two parts – expert semi-structured interviews with journalists covering the development of the pandemic (10 in number) and an online social media survey with the same questions as in the interviews (with an impressive 1,142 respondents). The impression of unsatisfactory communication of the institutions in Bulgaria dominates. The explanation can be found in the reluctance or inability of political authorities to engage the public sphere (in terms of Habermas) in the discussion of problems and potential solutions and in the motivation for action. The emergence of alternative centers of communication and conspiracy theories can be deduced as a consequence of this communication deficit.

The fourth chapter selects four well-known sociological theories: structural functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, and social exchange theory. The doctoral student’s intention is interesting in itself. She not only systematizes the main elements of the theories under consideration, but also adapts them to the crisis situation of the Covid-19 pandemic and illustrates each of them with examples of behavior from the period of the pandemic.

The fifth chapter has a dual purpose. On the one hand, she presents the Bulgarian model of crisis management, which, according to the doctoral student, is “a unique phenomenon that demonstrates a combination of different types of leadership and approaches, ranging from traditional to innovative strategies” (p.173). The research approach in the dissertation is based on a distinction between three communication strategies: the political one expressed by Prime

Minister Boyko Borisov; the expert-institutional one, illustrated by the head of the National Operational Staff, Gen. Ventsislav Mutafchiiski, and the chief health inspector Angel Kunchev; and the alternative-critical one, traced through the appearances of the physician Dr. Atanas Mangarov and the nationalist politician Kostadin Kostadinov. It can be argued that the interactions of the three strategies in the mass consciousness produce to a large extent the overall attitude of the Bulgarian society towards the management of the crisis. And on the other hand, in the same chapter, the model of health diplomacy as a communication tool is noted. This model, which seems to be preferred by the doctoral student, is commented on from the point of view of the possibilities for effective influence on the system of international relations. Health diplomacy seems like a kind of finalizing point, a positive example that answers the deficits of other existing communication tools.

Any dissertation research opens up space for scholarly discussion, including criticism, disagreement, and recommendations. This is especially true for the study of such a topical and controversial issue as the Covid-19 pandemic. Before proceeding with my critical remarks, I would like to emphasize that Denitsa Gatsinska has carried out a completed and comprehensive study, which contains all the necessary elements for a successful defense. Therefore, the following lines should be read rather as recommendations for future research or for a possible revision of the dissertation for its publication as a monograph.

Denitsa Gatsinska shows remarkable competence in various fields of knowledge. She is a confident interpreter of both complex cases from political philosophy and sociological theories. She knows and presents clearly and comprehensibly key events and trends in the Bulgarian, European and global political process. And last but not least, she demonstrates a solid orientation within the dynamically changing models of managing the Covid crisis in dozens of countries on several continents. All this seems to go beyond the aims and goals of the dissertation research. Guided by the understanding that the Covid-crisis is an intersection of multiple processes and trends, the doctoral student does not always manage to find the focus of her analysis and subordinate her presentation to the previously formulated goals.

The structure of the dissertation is clear and logical, and nevertheless, some hesitations can be found. I will give an example with the third chapter. Section 3.6 („How did Covid-19 turn from a health crisis into a political crisis?") is quite short, consists only of conclusions, not analysis, and looks much more like a chapter conclusion than an analytical section within its framework. The doctoral student's empirical study in the same chapter is presented after the chapter's main findings and conclusions and is extraneous to the main text. If we continue to the fifth chapter,

section 5.3. on the impact of the pandemic on global relations thematically covers observations offered far earlier in the text. Some of the sections need clearer reasoning - why they are there and what new they say compared to what has already been said.

In terms of content, the dissertation would also benefit from more focus and removal of some important, but peripheral to the goals and tasks of the research topics. This relates, I think, to the numerous definitions of crisis in the first chapter (before the theories of Schmitter, Morlino, and Przeworski), which leave the impression of listing without a clear logic. Also, while I fully understand that Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas can hardly be understood without a more holistic view of their visions of legitimacy, I think that the dissertation commits to an overly broad overview of their writings and observations.

The empirical study of the doctoral student constitutes an important element of the dissertation research. Even the realized number of respondents in the online survey is admirable. At the same time, the presentation of the results is short and schematic. In relation to the semi-structured interviews, the argumentation of the selection of questions in their totality and their relationship with the goals and tasks of the research is missing. There is also no attempt to typologize the answers despite apparently close points of view and despite the interesting decision to title each answer in some way. It is not clear from the appendix, where the interviews are given, whether the answers are summarized or transcribed. Regarding the social media poll, we do not receive information on when it was conducted. The time for such a study is not irrelevant due to the dynamic development of the pandemic situation. The data analysis is descriptive. At least from what I can see, it is not matched with the responses in the semi-structured interviews, and ends abruptly, with no attempt at summarisation.

The bibliography in turn raises problems for at least three reasons. First, the dissertation has repeatedly commented on authors with their statements without citing the works of the authors themselves. Particularly drastic is the example of the fourth chapter, in which four significant sociological theories are presented practically without a single reference. Second, the bibliography itself contains many references to theories and schools used in the text, but there are very few scientific publications related to the communication effects of the management of the Covid crisis. It is known that in the last 4 years there has been a virtual boom of literature on these issues in scientific journals and books, and the majority of publications can be found in open access mode. Quite a few studies by Bulgarian political scientists, sociologists and lawyers on the political aspects of the subject have also appeared. The third reason is mainly

technical and refers to the manner of citation, which undergoes changes in different cases, but deserves unification.

In general, a further careful editing of the text could have removed many of the noted errors, controversial moments or more cumbersome passages. The reader could conclude that the finalization of the dissertation was rushed. A number of examples can be given of changes in verb tense (from present to past and vice versa) and in the agent of the narrative (from “we” to “I” and vice versa). Annotated polls can be presented in tabular form to avoid lengthy retelling of percentages. Etc.

Finally, I would like to address a question that expresses a desire for discussion, not criticism. In my observation, the dissertation takes the view that the Covid-19 pandemic (as a “crisis of a new type”) functions as an independent variable and produces a variety of consequences – mistrust, crisis of legitimacy, conspiracy theories, etc. The examples are indisputable and popular enough. However, another reading is also possible, according to which in contemporary political systems there is an initial distrust of institutions and political elites, and the pandemic is an accelerator, not so much a creator, of these processes. In other words, if public opinion is alienated from the political system and mistrusts its behavior, it can be assumed that any new decision, however it is made, will be burdened from the beginning with mistrust. This requires a more contextual approach to the problems of the pandemic situation and goes beyond the immediate aims of the dissertation.

The abstract correctly reproduces the main elements of the structure and conclusions of the main text of the dissertation. In general, I accept the doctoral student’s assessment of the contributions made, with some clarifications. The first contribution, which concerns the application of theoretical approaches, could be specified more clearly. In my opinion, the essential thing in the dissertation is the selection of theoretical tools from the point of view of the conceptual correspondence between communication and legitimacy. Also, the empirical study in the work could be counted as a very clear contribution to the analysis of public attitudes towards pandemic communication. The abstract lists seven publications of the doctoral student on the topic of the research in English, Russian and Bulgarian. Regardless of the fact that some of them lack precise bibliographic annotations, I believe that the results of the research are sufficiently popularized among the Bulgarian and international academic circles.

In conclusion, and based on the above considerations: I will confidently vote “FOR” the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in Professional direction 3.3. Political Science (Political Science – International Relations) by Denitsa Plamenova Gatsinska.

19/05/2024

Reviewer:

/Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boris Popivanov/