

ACCADEMIC OPINION

on a dissertation work

on the topic: **THE COVID-CRISIS: INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION AND
LEGITIMACY - BULGARIA AND THE EU**

for awarding the educational and scientific degree of “doctor”
in the Scientific field 3. 3. Political Sciences, doctoral program “Political Science” -
International Relations

of the dissertation student: Denitsa Plamenova Gatsinska,
with academic supervisor: **prof. Tayana Dronzina**

by **assoc. prof. Elena Simeonova**
(Department of “Political Science”, UNWE, PD 3.3 “Political Sciences”)

Basis for drawing up the assessment: This assessment is prepared in my capacity as a member of the scientific jury, appointed by the Rector’s order № 38-112/21.02.2024 г., on the basis of article 4 the Act on development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

I. Evaluation of the dissertation, abstract and publications.

Dissertation data. General characteristics: The dissertation has a total volume of 243 pages, of which 218 pages are the main text, 10 pages are used literature and 13 pages are appendices, 2 pages are contents. In terms of structure, it is decided in an introduction, five chapters (in contrast to the usual for similar kind of developments – triadic structure), conclusion, used sources and two appendices. The introduction presents the mandatory attributes for every scientific text, namely: object and subject of analysis; main research question (expanded into 5 “elements”, each an independent question); main research hypothesis (also expanded into 5 “elements”); methods and theories, methods and theories, through whose postulates an answer to the research question/s is sought.

The scientific apparatus is incomplete and not well-formed, which makes it difficult both to navigate in the text itself and to follow and verify the author’s statements and assumptions. The bibliography (the sources used) consists of a total of 178 numbered units, which, however, are not structured by type, type and language (Cyrillic and Latin), which makes it extremely difficult for the reader to orientate in them. In addition, there are repetitive (№ 6 and 8; 10 and 11; 126 and 127), incomplete (№ 3, 4, 5) and incorrect (№ 40; 166-168; 175-178) descriptions of sources.

Originality of the work. The originality of the work is mainly expressed in the chosen research focus, namely – rethinking the covid-19 crisis through the prism of the communication strategies implemented at the national and European level and their impact on the legitimacy of decision-makers.

Methods. Based on the text of the dissertation, it can be said that for the purposes of the dissertation research, methods such as **questionnaire survey** (quantitative), **in-depth interview** (qualitative), **content analysis** (quantitative and qualitative) of documents and information materials, statements of politicians, analysts, etc., and also a **comparative analysis**, at least as far as comparing the measures taken to limit the covid-19 pandemic at the national and European level.

Language and style of exposition. From a linguistic point of view, the dissertation meets the academic requirements for this kind of work.

Main achievements of the dissertation: The following was achieved in the dissertation submitted for assessment:

- Broadly, from a philosophical and sociological point of view, the concept of “crisis” has been defined, as well as a number of accompanying and related concepts such as: incident, catastrophe, accident, disaster, as well as the derivative concepts of “political crisis”, “crisis of democracy”, “crisis management”. The author demonstrates knowledge of the theories of Schmitter, Morlino and Przeworski, through which she interprets the “crisis of democracy”, “crisis of participation”, “crisis of legitimacy”, “crises of capitalism” and others. In the so-called “conclusions from the first chapter” (it is strange to draw conclusions from the definitional part) functions of the *political crisis* are deduced;
- A detailed presentation of Hannah Arendt’s ideas on the state, the political, power and control, violence, and Jürgen Habermas’s ideas on society and communicative power. An attempt at a theoretical conceptualization of the covid-19 crisis through the prism of some sociological theories such as structural functionalism; symbolic interactionism, social exchange theory, adaptation theory, etc.;
- Overview of the impact of the covid-19 crisis on socio-political life and civil rights in our country and in other countries. An answer to the question “how did Covid-19 affect trust in the government and the legitimacy of institutions?” is sought. The impact of the pandemic on EU and NATO relations is also being monitored. Examples of effective communication during the pandemic in countries such as Germany, New Zealand, Vietnam, etc. are cited.
- Two empirical studies were conducted using the survey method and the in-depth interview method, the data from which are presented in detail as evidence for the author’s stated theses;
- There is an attempt to identify different types of leadership, some of them strange, such as “health leadership” and “team” (apparently referring to team leadership);

Evaluation of the abstract: The abstract correctly reflects the content of the dissertation, presenting key points for the understanding of the topic, a list of the literature used, a list of publications and a self-evaluation of the contributions.

Evaluation of publications: The list of publications contains a total of 6 titles, two of which are in scientific journals (№1 and №6) and the remaining four are in the form of conference papers. Three of the publications are in English, two in Russian and two in Bulgarian. All of them reveal certain substantive aspects of the dissertation research.

Scientific contributions. In the self-assessment of the contributions, a total of 5 contributions are formulated, among them there is a separate theoretical and empirical contribution (contributions №1 and №2), and it is not clear which of the two categories the other three contributions fall into. My overall assessment of the scientific contributions of the dissertation is that their formulations are too general and therefore unclear. I take them as subjectively decoded meaning rather than as persuasive formulations.

Since for the purposes of this assessment, as well as for the purposes of the defence, it is necessary to consider a number of contributions, I would formulate them as follows:

- A new, original perspective to study the covid-19 crisis, namely through the interrelationship of institutional communication and legitimacy;
- Comparative assessment of institutional communication and legitimacy at national and European level during the covid-19 crisis;

- Comparative analysis of different types of communication strategies and their application at national and European level during the covid-19 crisis.

Critical Notes: There is no study that does not raise criticism, objections, and questions. Here, in the form of comments, I will synthesize some of my critical remarks and Denitsa Plamenova Gatsinska to reflect on them during the defense.

Structural and organizational notes. I find the chosen 5-component structure (five chapters) not particularly suitable, on the one hand, because, although wasteful, it does not fully reveal the topic in terms of content, and on the other hand, because it leaves an impression of fragmentation, lack of focus. The study would have gained in terms of logical consistency and persuasiveness if the classical structure had been followed. In order to reveal the analytical focus of the title to the maximum extent, and also to have a single and consistent logic that facilitates the perception of the text, it would be good for the first chapter to unite in one paragraph the definition of the main concepts (*crisis, political crisis, crisis management, institutional communication, logic, etc.*), in the second paragraph to synthesize the theoretical approaches and concepts of analysis (*conflict theory, structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, the political-philosophical concepts of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas on power and communication*), and in the third paragraph to present and justify the chosen methods of analysis (*content/discourse analysis; survey; comparative analysis*). In such a case, chapter two should summarize the available theoretical-practical interpretative models of institutional communication (respectively at the national and European and international level), and in a concluding paragraph clearly state and defend the interrelationship of institutional communication and legitimacy. And the third chapter presents the actual results of the empirical study of the causal relationship institutional communication-legitimacy during the covid-19 crisis in Bulgaria and the EU, respectively, with a special emphasis on the evaluation of the effectiveness of communication.

I have allowed myself this broad recommendation, guided by the understanding that one of the important skills any doctoral student should demonstrate is the ability to summarize and structure a body of information in a way that most adequately expresses the analytical focus of his or her topic..

Conceptual-methodological notes. The conceptual versatility of the dissertation is, to a large extent, due to the lack of explicitly set research components, namely: main objective; research question/s; object and subject of analysis; research hypothesis/s. Formally, all these elements are present in the introduction, but they are not unambiguously and correctly formulated. So, for example, the “object of the research” is established “*institutional communication as a tool for managing the covid crisis and preserving the legitimacy of national and European institutions*”, and for the subject of the research - “*the ways of implementing communication between national institutions and citizens, European institutions and citizens, etc.*” If the logic of the title is followed, however, the subject of research should be the covid-19 crisis, and the subject - the models of institutional communication and legitimacy in Bulgaria and the EU.

In practice, a fundamental and conceptually unifying research question is lacking. The so-called “elements” of the research question are, in practice, independent questions, unfortunately too diverse and ambiguous. A relevant research question would be: *How does institutional communication during the covid-19 crisis affect the legitimacy of institutions in Bulgaria and the EU?* Accompanying and clarifying questions could, of course, be added to it.

The lack of an explicit research question has also made it difficult to formulate a clear interpretive hypothesis, which would set a causal relationship between the main variables - institutional communication and legitimacy, and which would be subject to verification in the course of the research. The so-called “elements” of the “main research hypothesis” are actually

findings and conclusions that do not need verification. The hypothesis, together with the research question, should set the main direction of the author's search. One possible hypothesis would be: *During the covid-19 crisis, the legitimacy of institutions largely depends (or is directly dependent) on the effectiveness of institutional communication.* A major difficulty, in such a case, would be to define the concepts of "legitimacy", "institutional communication" and "effectiveness of communication" and also "to a large extent".

In terms of methodology, I will note only one point, and it concerns the empirical research conducted by the doctoral student. Two methods were used for it - quantitative - *questionnaire survey* and qualitative - *in-depth interviews*. In both cases, it is not clear how the sample of respondents was formed. It is not clear how an in-depth interview differs from a questionnaire survey - in both cases, information is collected using the same questionnaire. Although conditionally admissible, in the specific case, especially given the way of presenting the empirical information, it casts a certain shadow of doubt on the methodological soundness of the study. Also, there is no comparative summaries of the individual questions - the answers to the individual questions are simply listed one after the other in the form of quotations. Complete summaries and conclusions from the so-called empirical part - the part in which the doctoral student should most clearly demonstrate the author's contribution are also missing.

II. Conclusion

Regardless of the critical remarks made, I believe that, in relative terms, the dissertation meets the minimum national requirements of Art. 2b, para. 2 and 3 of Law on the development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria et al. Art. 24, para. 1 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on the development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, on the basis of which, I propose to the Scientific Jury to award a dissertation Denitsa Plamenova Gazinska the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in professional direction 3.3. „Political Sciences”.

30 April 2024.
Sofia

Author of the assessment:.....
/assoc. prof. Elena Simeonova/