

PH.D. THESIS STATEMENT REPORT

Thesis Evaluation Report of Denitsa Plamenova Gatsinska

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“The COVID Crisis – institutional communication and legitimacy – Bulgaria and the EU”

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I. THEORETICAL RELEVANCE AND EMPIRICAL FEASIBILITY OF THE STUDY.

Denitsa Gatsinska's dissertation focuses on the impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on political and cultural attitudes, as well as the consequences these processes have for the global balance of power in the system of international relations. Objectively speaking, this dissertation is the first study in Bulgaria dedicated to these problems as, until now, most analyses that emphasize the Pandemic's geopolitical consequences belong to Western and Chinese scholars. The topic is more than relevant since, in academia, the opinion that the Coronavirus has triggered processes that led to a permanent reformation of the international system is increasingly promoted. In this context, there is the other view that the Pandemic itself cannot be such a powerful source of change. However, in his dissertation, the doctoral student convincingly refutes this thesis and defends his position using theoretical and empirical arguments. With this request, the dissertation is positioned as an in-depth empirical study of international relations and security. Although the title of the study is aimed explicitly at Bulgaria and the European Union, a large part of the discussion and the examples used by the doctoral student also refer to broader cases of international politics, for example, the relations between the United States

and China, the relations between the United States and Europe, as well as Russia's foreign policy after the end of the Cold War. A large part of these examples present the role and place of Bulgaria in these processes and the impact of the Pandemic on the institutional and political - and why not the geopolitical - culture in our country. This gives me the right to consider that the presented dissertation work has a high degree of significance and applicability, making it a valuable contribution to existing research in international relations and political science.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE MANUSCRIPT.

The submitted manuscript is 248 standard pages long and includes a title page, table of contents, introduction, five chapters, conclusion, and bibliography. The text also presents seven appendices as diagrams demonstrating the doctoral student's empirical research results. The literature includes 105 sources: books and monographs in Bulgarian and English, articles and empirical studies in Bulgarian and foreign editions, and media publications. Sources cited are cited directly in the text, with the citation standard following the American Psychological Association (APA) model. The manuscript meets the guidelines for a dissertation with minor inaccuracies, such as the lack of content, which is explicitly mentioned after the title page, which I assume is due to the student's attempt to fit in the necessary deadlines for the approval of the dissertation, you're hard work. The cited authors are adequately selected for the study and reflect existing analyzes on this topic, making them applicable to the objectives of the dissertation.

III. ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RESEARCH.

Dissertation research has a very good degree of academic objectivity, which is a leading standard for writing a dissertation work and the main criteria for the content of its contributions, especially in the field of security.

The academic contributions of this research stand as follows:

1. In her research, Denitsa offers her original model of the political effects of the Pandemic based on variables operationalized through the main sociological and political theories that can explain the impact of such

phenomena. I consider this an original contribution to the dissertation for several reasons. First, the model is developed in its theoretical part and tested with several case studies from Bulgarian and global politics. This proves its validity and makes it an applicable tool for assessing the effects of the Pandemic on the institutional and political culture of developed societies. Second, the variables on which the model is based are generally valid patterns in political science because they reflect some major contributions to international relations and political ideas. In this sense, doctoral candidate Gatsinska has done a huge amount of work, as two chapters of the study are rightfully devoted to reviewing these theories. Third, model testing is closely tied to the conspiracy theories that gained widespread popularity during the Coronavirus Pandemic. This is a precious contribution since relatively little research in this area speaks to the role of conspiracies, whose influence can sometimes be much more severe than real challenges to human security. Here is the place to emphasize that the individual variables are displayed in the content relatively ordered, which makes it easier to understand the model.

2. Among the contributions is the empirical research that the student does in support of her hypothesis. It includes two stages – in-depth interviews with journalists who covered the Pandemic at its outbreak and online conversations with another 1,200 respondents – representatives of other professional groups in society. The interview questionnaire is divided into two: the conversations with media agents were conducted using a specialized methodology, while the rest of the participants were randomly selected, and their attitudes were analyzed based on semi-structured interviews with open questions. The author presents the results of his empirical research in the form of quantitative data and summarizes them graphically as charts reflecting seven aspects of the political and cultural attitudes of the citizens in the sample. I believe the research is an original contribution to the dissertation for two reasons. First, excluding the studies of the larger sociological agencies and the official statistics during the Pandemic, there is a lack of analysis in Bulgaria that presents the citizens' attitudes in such a concise and systematized way. Second, based on the assessments and conclusions thus made, the results of this research can serve to develop specific policies and strategies for crisis management at the national level. The doctoral student takes as a starting point for the

influence of the Pandemic the symbols and slogans that the Bulgarian society adopted later in the attempts to change the political climate in the country. In this sense, the doctoral student reaches a conclusion that is generally valid for the political reality in Bulgaria - that the incentives for social and political change can arise either under the influence of external forces or at the appearance of sufficiently robust phenomena such as the Pandemic, which can put under question citizens' perceptions of politics and the way it is conducted by one government or another. These conclusions are also valuable because they prove an old thesis that applies to Bulgarian society - that its polarization is the main threat to its security.

3. Also valuable are the contributions of the study related to those aspects of the Pandemic that affected the balance of power in global politics - some of them as strongly as the attacks of September 11, 2001. Several essential aspects can be pointed out here, which are also touched upon in other developments but are systematized compellingly. The first is how the student analyzes the economic relationships between people on a global level. Although less attention has been paid to this issue, it is crucial to address it because the thesis proves that the coronavirus crisis has led to a sharp increase in the gap between the rich and the poor. The predictions of Gatsinska here are valuable in that they reveal one of the most significant risks to the functioning of liberal democracy – the elimination of the middle class and the forced restriction of the rights and freedoms of citizens. Secondly, the research proves that otherwise underestimated disasters such as pandemics can influence the behavior of state actors and, in this sense, accelerate or slow the transition from one state of the international system to another. Here, the PhD student seems to have left open the question of which of the global actors was most affected and changed by the Pandemic – the answer to this question essentially hides the answer to the kind of world we will live in in the coming decades. Last but not least, considerable space is devoted to how the Coronavirus Pandemic has affected multilateralism as a pillar of global politics and U.S. leadership since the end of World War II. The question of whether the Pandemic could lead to the end of American leadership or whether it is simply a process that is objectively presupposed in the dynamics of global politics is a contention in scholarly debate as

significant as the debate between neoliberals and realists about the future role of America in Global Politics. That is why – and quite rightly – the student sees the crisis of multilateralism and restrictions on the free movement of citizens as an opportunity for other state actors, such as China and Russia, to push their vision of what the international system should look like.

4. Finally, essential conclusions have been drawn about how the Coronavirus Pandemic has affected the vision and role of leadership in Bulgarian politics and the political behavior of the elite. I consider this aspect of the research to be a precious contribution to the dissertation as it tests to what extent political actors in the country can effectively manage crises that threaten human security. Changes in the way politicians see the Pandemic or use it to achieve their political goals can serve as a starting point for analyzing other such situations, as well as for establishing how credible the mythologized narrative that Bulgarians can unite is in the face of challenges that threaten the functioning of the state. As the research of doctoral student Gatsinska points out - this not only did not happen during the Pandemic, but on the contrary - the polarization in Bulgarian society became so visible that it created prerequisites for changing the political agenda.

I can summarize that the contributions made in this way give the research a high degree of dissertation ability, and in this sense - the presented text meets the substantive requirements for writing a doctoral dissertation.

IV. CRITICAL REMARKS TO THE RESEARCH.

Several recommendations could be addressed in this study:

1. Several aspects of American political life are touched upon in the dissertation research, which the doctoral student directly relates to the Pandemic. The first concerns the presidency of Donald Trump and his policies in the last years of his administration. It is a fact that Trump's strategy to fight the Coronavirus did not rest on a logical framework and led to many victims in the U.S., but it is challenging to look for his administration's failure, mainly during the Pandemic. The anti-vaxxer rhetoric of the Trumpist wing led to a collapse in the American healthcare system, but it was far weaker than the charge that the far-right

movements in America generated to maintain trust in Trump. A suitable argument in this regard is the Storming of the Capitol, which was not directly provoked by the president's open policy towards the Pandemic but mainly by populism. The second aspect concerns the policy of the U.S. government during the Pandemic. It is a fact that the Trumpists in America insisted that no restrictive measures be taken against the Coronavirus because this would limit the rights and freedoms of U.S. citizens. However, in reality, America was one of the countries with the most restrictive policies in the field of health, mainly because of the strategy of Prof. Anthony Fauci, who at the time served as the medical adviser to the Trump administration. From this point of view, it is difficult to argue that the American administration's policy to deal with the Pandemic was unsuccessful.

2. In the study, a particular chapter is devoted to how the Coronavirus Pandemic affects the global balance of power in international relations. Two primary authors that the doctoral student steps are Keohane, Peterson, and Krasner, who define multilateralism as a system of cooperation to achieve lasting global peace. In some places in the thesis, there is an overlap between multilateralism as an approach and the multipolar model as a state of the international relations system. It is good to clarify that these are two concepts with different meanings in theory. The claim that multilateralism reflects Western preferences and approaches in foreign policy is also debatable – this is not always the case, and much depends on how American presidents see cooperation with their partners in Europe and Asia.

3. Global hegemony is often used to describe the status of countries such as China and Russia. Still, given the objective geopolitical realities of our time, it is difficult to say that there are hegemonies at all on a global scale. If we accept this claim, we should reject the previous one because hegemonies are not inclined to take multilateralism for granted. I recommend that the PhD student use the term "candidates for global leaders" as it more accurately reflects the position of countries such as Russia and China.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the text presented by Denitsa Gatsinska proves that it has the potential to become part of the academic community. I propose to the respected committee to support this young career, and I confirm that I will vote "for" the awarding of the academic degree "doctor" in professional profile 3.3. (Political Sciences) of Denitsa Plamenova Gacinska.

April 24, 2024

DR. ISKREN IVANOV

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