

OPINION

BY

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*Subject:* dissertation for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "doctor" under 2.3. Philosophy (Rhetoric)

*Author of the dissertation:* Boris Ognyanov Tsenov

*Dissertation thesis:* "NATO Rhetorical Strategies in Bulgaria. The information policy of the Alliance, implemented through web-based communication channels, in the period 2016-2021."

*Ground:* my confirmation as a member of the scientific jury by order RD 38-104/19.02.2024

General impressions: The PhD student Boris Tsenov has left positive impressions on me in the course of his work – first as a regular, and then as a part-time PhD student at the Department of Rhetoric. Throughout the period of his doctoral studies, he has demonstrated a serious and responsible attitude, as well as thoroughness in his approach to the topic under study, in which he has shown interest at the Master's thesis level. In the course of this process, he has regularly participated in conferences and events of the Department, as well as has prepared the expected publications on the topic of the dissertation, showing skills in the preparation of scientific text, as well as striving to promote his work and its conclusions. The development has successfully passed the originality verification procedure in force at Sofia University. For the preparation of this opinion, I got acquainted with the dissertation and the autoreferate to it.

The dissertation work was created according to the rules of the scientific genre. All mandatory methodological attributes are included. The text is written in scientific language and is oriented towards a wide audience. It has its importance for theory, practice and society. The study was conducted with scientific attention.

The introduction (pages 3-7) outlines the broad framework of the study and offers a justification for the choice of the specific time period in focus – 2016 – 2021, namely just before the launch of NATO's *WeAreNATO* campaign until the moment before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which undoubtedly changes the Alliance's approach to communication and would suggest a separate study. The introduction also presents the motivation of the doctoral student to choose the topic – the lack of such a type of research of the Alliance's communication strategies in Bulgaria, as well as the problematic aspects of these strategies, reflected in low levels of public trust even after years of membership. The subject (NATO campaigns) and the object of study (the rhetorical strategies underlying these strategies, the normative documents and policies that define them) are correctly described. The aim of the PhD student is to investigate the causes of ineffectiveness of these

communication strategies, and specific tasks related to theoretical and meaningful analysis and recommendations are set against this goal.

*Chapter One* examines political and military-political rhetoric theoretically. Here you can find the ideas and interpretations of the rhetoric of ancient authors such as Cicero and those of the 20th century, such as Perelman. The focus is on the ideas of Hugh Rank's political rhetoric, which are presented in greater depth, in accordance with their role on the basis of many of the subsequent analyses. Another key theoretical model that finds its place here is that of framing – a relevant approach by Boris Tsenov in terms of the fact that the thought models, or frameworks through which we perceive and make sense of various phenomena in the world, are subject to shaping and changing, often under media influence. Thus, the PhD student sets an appropriate theoretical basis for his further analyses, and here is reported the theoretical contribution of Bulgarian authors such as Andrey Toshev, Donka Alexandrova, scientific supervisor Nelly Stefanova.

The *second part* of the first chapter discusses in more detail not so many theoretical formulations as the communication systems and policies that have acted (or operated) under different types of state structure and government (totalitarian and democratic societies). I would say that the theoretical foundation that the PhD student lays is good and stable to its goals, and highlighting communications, public diplomacy and public activities as NATO priorities is of great importance in this direction.

Chapter Two presents and critically analyzes the NATO Public Communications Framework Documents in General and those in particular that determine the focus of the communication activities of the responsible military-political institutions in Bulgaria. The PhD student shows excellent knowledge of these documents, drawing justified criticism of them – for example, in the conclusion that communication activities should not be considered as formal-performing, following a certain pattern and vertical imperatives, but creative, requiring flexibility and adaptation to contexts. The lack of documents setting communication policies at national level in Bulgaria is also critically read. Another significant weakness identified in the analysis is the Alliance's inability to raise awareness of groups such as young people and women who have traditionally been less interested in military affairs – these are groups, respectively, requiring a different approach and specific targeting.

A third chapter, which is also the most extensively developed, is devoted to rhetorical analysis of NATO's specific communication activities through web-based channels. Here, the PhD student again and more thoroughly justifies the choice of the time period he has chosen to cover, then critically analyzes the WeAre NATO campaign – on a textual and visual level. Aspects of visual rhetoric are touched upon here, so the work would also benefit from a brief explanation of its nature and specificity more generally. Posters are seen as a kind of enthymemes in which the target audience is left to complement the conclusion in their minds. Similarly, photographs are analyzed, and colors are also addressed, and the author's gaze turns to a comparative analysis of their use in the USSR in the past and in NATO countries today. Here my expectation was for more illustrative materials in the text. Also, these parts, oriented towards the role of posters, photographic and other images, in military-political rhetoric, could find a place in the previous theoretically directed chapters, and this one could remain only for concrete analyses.

Then the attention is focused on the communication activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense related to Bulgaria's NATO membership. Articles, publications in social networks and in the video platform YouTube were reviewed, and the effectiveness of these activities

was reported according to sociological data on trust in the Alliance in this time period. This part of the work is richly illustrated and a number of weaknesses in the activities carried out are outlined, including the lack of additional efforts to increase public confidence in the presence of clear indicators that it is low.

In conclusion, the PhD student continues his analysis – in particular, here of the reasons for the apathy of the Bulgarian audiences described by him. These are important accents in the overall analysis, but insofar as they introduce new information and theoretical justifications, I think they have a place in the previous chapter. Of particular interest to me is the conclusion made by the PhD student – that non-compliance with certain rhetorical canons and principles leads to ineffective campaigns and communication activities, namely: lack of clearly formulated goals; failure to take into account the specifics of the targeted audiences; therefore insufficiently impactful messages and communication channels; lack of performance research – all this makes campaigns and activities rather formal, superficial and requiring serious revision. Based on these identified weaknesses, Boris Tsenov formulated practical recommendations, which are a contributing element of the dissertation.

The PhD student himself has formulated four contributions: 1) the development is the first such analysis of NATO communication strategies in Bulgaria; 2) this analysis as a prerequisite for rhetorical reflection not only on what has already been done, but also on future activities and campaigns; 3) highlighting the importance of the national context for the success of activities and campaigns, and 4) as already noted by me, the recommendations given to practice themselves.

Regarding the content of the development, I can note that it is thoroughly and visibly well researched and carefully analyzed. The PhD student uses rich scientific terminology and various theoretical sources. Here I can add that, along with stereotypes and their change, the topic of attitudes, their essence according to modern understandings of social psychology and their change, which is usually the goal of large campaigns, would find a place in the work. I am also interested in the topic of opinion leaders and how such figures could potentially influence the change of stereotypes and attitudes, as well as to what extent the opposite influence of NATO campaigns is exerted by other forms of information, disinformation and even propaganda in our reality.

The sources used are varied in several languages (Bulgarian, English, Russian), with 58 being printed and 94 – electronic. The applications in volume of 48 pages. include significant NATO strategic documents.

The prepared self-report clearly and purposefully presents the most significant accents in the work and pays particular attention to the contribution moments and recommendations. However, it does not specify the publications of the doctoral student on the topic of the dissertation.

In general, both the dissertation and the autoreferate follow the rules of the scientific genre and the requirements for such texts. The text is both written in scientific language, but also accessible and comprehensible to wider audiences. The analysis is careful and thorough, and the contributions have a pronounced scientifically applied and comprehensively applied aspect.

Based on all this, I give a positive assessment of Boris Ognyanov Tsenov's dissertation on "NATO Rhetorical Strategies in Bulgaria. The information policy of the Alliance, implemented through web-

based communication channels, in the period 2016-2021" I recommend that he be awarded the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in PN 2.3. Philosophy/Rhetoric (Political rhetoric).

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Sofia.

23.05.2024