



**SOFIA UNIVERSITY "ST. KLIMENT OHRIDSKI"**

**FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY**

**DEPARTMENT OF RHETORIC**

## **REVIEW AND OPINION**

on the Ph.D. thesis:

**"RHETORICAL STRATEGIES OF NATO IN BULGARIA  
ALLIANCE'S INFORMATION POLICY IN WEB-BASED COMMUNICATION  
CHANNELS BETWEEN 2016 AND 2021"**

submitted in fulfillment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Rhetoric – Political Rhetoric)

**Ph.D. candidate:** Boris Ognyanov Tsenov

**Supervisor:** assoc. prof. Neli Stefanova, Ph.D.

**Reviewer:** assoc. prof. Gerasim Petrinski, Ph.D.

### **Ph.D. candidate**

Boris Tsenov has graduated in National Security Defense at the Academy of Bulgarian Ministry of Interior and holds a Master's degree in Public Relations (at the National Military Academy “Georgi Sava Rakovski”) and Rhetoric (at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”). He has been enrolled as a regular doctoral student under Order No. RD 20-1232/12.07.2019.

All activities outlined in the approved individual plan of the doctoral student have been executed diligently, and the respective reports have been submitted at regular department meetings of the Department of Rhetoric during the corresponding academic years. The requirements for obtaining 60 credits annually from educational, pedagogical, and scientific activities have been met. During his doctoral studies, Tsenov published three articles in peer-reviewed journals within the field of his dissertation, participated in three conferences, and met the minimum scientometric requirements stipulated by the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff.

The doctoral student was granted the right to defend their dissertation within the legally established timeframe, adhering to the relevant deadlines according to legal and regulatory provisions and the regulations of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski.” The internal review of the dissertation took place at an extended meeting of the Department of Rhetoric on January 29, 2024, during which the jury members made methodological and substantive comments and recommendations to the doctoral candidate regarding the dissertation text. It was then unanimously voted to allow the dissertation to proceed to public defense with the scientific jury members: internal members Associate Professor Dr. Donka Petrova, Associate Professor Dr. Gerasim Petrinski; and external members Professor Dr. Sc. Georgi Karastoyanov, Associate Professor Dr. Velizar Shalamanov, Professor Dr. Sc. Velichko Rumenshev. Order No 38-104 approved this composition of the scientific jury on February 19, 2024, based on a decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Philosophy on February 6, 2024. At its first meeting, the jury elected Associate Professor Dr. Donka Petrova as its chair and set the date for the public defense as June 5, 2024 (Tuesday) at 3:00 PM. All procedures followed the law and the regulations of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski.”

The standard procedures found no plagiarism in the Ph.D. thesis.

## **Ph.D. thesis**

**The dissertation topic** is highly relevant, aligning well with its content, especially given the significant changes in communication practices and theories in the macro-political landscape following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Tsenov's chosen topic promises to enhance interest in military-political rhetoric and public relations. The research is also valuable from a practical standpoint. As the candidate highlights, he chose the topic due to the "persistently low levels of trust in the Alliance throughout the entire period covered" (p. 3; p. 35), which require thorough analysis. Both the theoretical and applied aspects make Tsenov's work an innovative and valuable contribution to political and military rhetoric.

Tsenov convincingly justifies narrowing the research period to January 2016 to December 2021, spanning from just before the launch of the "WeAreNATO" communication campaign to the start of the war in Ukraine. Notably, during this period, "public attitudes toward NATO remained unchanged" (p. 53) despite Bulgaria's internal political upheavals. This timeframe can also be viewed as the final phase of diplomatic relations between the East and West, transitioning to the current "hot" phase of the conflict.

**The structure** of the dissertation is clear and precise, corresponding well to its content. The research spans 206 pages and includes an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion with the candidate's main findings and recommendations, a bibliography, and four appendices with documents (NATO Strat Com Policy PO(2009)0141, ACO Public Affairs Policy AD 095-001, ACT Public Affairs Policy ACT Dir. 95-10, and Appendix 1 to Order No. OH-32 of January 20, 2012, by the Minister of Defense announcing the rules for the activity "Public Relations"). The author's text, along with the bibliography, totals 159 pages. The relatively large volume of appended documents is notable, but given their relevance to the thesis content and their limited accessibility, their inclusion is considered justified. The text is well-organized around the topic, with impressive balance between chapter volumes, showcasing both high-level guidance and the candidate's scholarly writing ability.

In **the introduction** (pp. 3–7), the topic choice, methodology, subject (NATO campaigns during the studied period), object (rhetorical strategies), aim (reasons for the campaigns' and strategies' low effectiveness), and research tasks are outlined (pp. 4–5). These elements are clear and precise. I want to reiterate the text's practical value for enhancing communication between

institutions and the public regarding our country's geopolitical orientation and civilizational choice. The second part of the introduction briefly outlines the content of the individual chapters (pp. 5–7).

**Chapter One** (pp. 36–52) delves into the subject and scope of rhetorical science, primarily focusing on political and military-political rhetoric, central to the study. Its volume aligns with the research's specifics and is divided into two main parts. The first part covers rhetoric, its historical development, classifications, and elements (termed "rhetorical canons" by the researcher). The concise historical overview until the end of Antiquity (pp. 8–10) fits the topic, but I must express once again my opinion that including a general historical overview of rhetoric in dissertations on modern topics is generally redundant. While parallels with historical rhetoric, such as those made by Tsenov very frequently in his analyses, are necessary, such a comprehensive sub-chapter seems rather unnecessary. The candidate, not a specialist in ancient rhetoric, makes some unrelated inaccuracies, like claiming rhetoric is a "science" according to Aristotle or attributing the invention of the five parts of rhetoric to Cicero. On the other hand, the historiographical overview of studies in political rhetoric (Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, H. Ranc, and J. Lakoff) adds value. Similarly, the overview of studies in political rhetoric in Bulgaria is insightful, despite some bibliographical gaps.

The second part delves into military rhetoric within the realm of political rhetoric, exploring its essence, historical evolution, modes, and manipulative aspects (pp. 17–31). I fully support the notion that military rhetoric should extend beyond wartime communication, encompassing dialogue between military and political entities on security and defense matters during peacetime (p. 17). This includes activities such as public diplomacy and targeted communication policies aimed at garnering public understanding and support (p. 24). Additionally, I highlight the presence of militaristic elements within deliberative rhetoric and other rhetorical genres, particularly in specific contexts and the expression of certain ideologies. However, this issue lies beyond the dissertation's scope and warrants separate consideration.

It is crucial to highlight the significance of Tsenov's work. However, I must express certain reservations regarding one of his main leading postulates. According to him, the reasons for the low levels of trust in the Alliance, as well as in the EU, which sharply distinguish Bulgaria from the other member states of these unions, are primarily communicative (see pp. 34 ff., 71 ff., et

passim), which contradicts his stated concept that "philosophy, ideas, and concepts (not technologies) are the factors that attract followers and supporters" (p. 29). While I don't want to downplay the role of communication and rhetoric and without delving into details beyond the scope of a review, I find this understanding somewhat one-sided. However, Tsenov accurately identifies and defines the complex errors made in communication when building campaigns to popularize NATO in Bulgaria, namely - the almost complete lack of attention to intermediate phases in the creation of rhetorical works (mainly disposition and stylistic formation) (pp. 27–28). It must be noted, however, that in the third chapter of his study, he nevertheless presents primarily the "technical" nature of the instructions contained in the WeAreNATO campaign manual (p. 58 et passim) - it seems to me that they belong to the realm of stylistic elaboration.

At times, Tsenov shows strong bias and partiality. Every ideology, regardless of being labeled "totalitarian" or "democratic," is somewhat detached from reality. The notion that ideology and propaganda differ between the USSR and the Western world, with the former being "unrealistic" and the latter entirely "realistic" (pp. 28–29), is itself ideological and lacks scholarly merit without proper evidence. This partiality sometimes renders the text unclear (e.g., "The end of the Cold War changes the status quo - one enemy disappears from the world map, the other persists, primarily due to its effective integration and established utility" – p. 33). Oversimplifying the West's victory in the Cold War as merely "effective integration and established utility" (whatever the latter term may mean) fails to yield meaningful scientific insights.

**Chapter Two** (pp. 36–52) focuses on a detailed presentation of the primary framework documents related to public communications in NATO and Bulgaria. I believe the candidate has presented the material concisely and placed it in the appropriate rhetorical context, and I have no remarks regarding this part of the study.

**The third chapter** (pp. 53–130) is dedicated to NATO's specific communication efforts, primarily the "WeAreNATO" campaign, which constitutes the bulk of the research and highlights Tsenov's major contribution to military rhetoric. This section is well-organized, presenting a compelling argumentative framework. It succinctly outlines the campaign's unique rhetorical aspects, such as cross-channel integration, diverse audience engagement, objectives, and key messages (pp. 54–56). The Ph.D. candidate has presented the campaign handbook's technical instructions in a similarly concise way. The analysis of visual materials as enthymemes (pp. 59,

61 ff.) is particularly noteworthy. However, I anticipated more references to scholars like Joshua A. Prenosil and Kate Lloyd, who extensively explored this concept. I disagree with the assertion that USSR leaders were pioneers in widespread poster usage for political propaganda (p. 63) – while the term "widespread" is conditional, the use of such images dates back to the Reformation era, notably by Protestants.

Much of the chapter (pp. 83–113) analyzes specific publications on official websites and social media related to NATO and Bulgaria's membership. I believe Tsenov has effectively identified the main rhetorical mistakes contributing to the low interest in these materials. For example, he points out the emphasis on abstract topics, such as the historical development of the Alliance, rather than the organization's contribution to modernizing the Bulgarian army (p. 99). He also notes the formal approach to public diplomacy, the widespread use of English, and the neglect of two of Cicero's three *officia oratoris* (emotional appeal and entertainment) (p. 116). Tsenov's analysis through the lens of the five stages of creating a rhetorical work (pp. 124–126) is valuable. However, I have some reservations about the term "стилизиране," which should be replaced with "стилистично оформление."

My overall impression of the pivotal third chapter is that the argumentative framework is exhaustively presented, emphasizing the practical applicability of the findings. The issues arising from the overall low effectiveness of the WeAreNATO campaign are addressed comprehensively, clearly, and precisely, showcasing a deep understanding of rhetorical methodology. For instance, Tsenov's conclusions on p. 69 highlight the lack of specificity and clear contrasts in the messages, while on p. 73, he notes that "despite its desire to reach the public, NATO continues to speak about itself rather than addressing them."

**The conclusion** (pp.) is comprehensive and effectively complements and summarizes the content.

### **Bibliography and citations**

The citations and bibliography meet the requirements for an academic text. In some instances, we note hypercorrectness—such as specifying the online database from which a scientific article was accessed (e.g., JStor on pp. 11, 12, et passim).

### **Language, style, and terminology**

Tsenov generally follows the principles of academic language and style, though there are occasional unclear or incomplete sentences. Additionally, the use of abbreviations such as "от Т.Г.Л.Т." (on pp. 13, 87, 89) and "в Т.Ч." (on pp. 80 and 94) is inappropriate in a scholarly text. In some sections, adding citations would improve clarity, particularly regarding the contentious assertion that "while in the USSR-dominated Eastern Bloc, unified propaganda was imposed by force (repression and cutting off communication with the rest of the world), in the Western world (NATO, which was gradually expanding), the development and dissemination of the bloc idea were aided by natural processes—development and fear" (p. 19). No propaganda can be imposed entirely by force or entirely without it.

### **Summary of the thesis**

The abstract presents all thematic parts of the dissertation clearly and accurately. It is informative enough and meets the regulatory requirements.

### **Publications**

During his Ph.D. studies, Tsenov has published three articles in peer-reviewed journals and participated in two scientific conferences. These activities are in full accordance with the research topic, the product of which is the dissertation proposed for public defense. Through them, the doctoral candidate has met and exceeded the minimum regulatory requirements for publication activity stipulated by the laws and regulations of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." Furthermore, Tsenov engaged in extracurricular activities, such as participation in forums addressing disinformation, which, while not directly linked to his doctoral studies, offered valuable experience and broadened his academic perspective.

### **Contributions**

The four key contributions are presented at the end of the study (p. 145). They are formulated rather abstractly, and I recommend that the candidate rephrase them more precisely in the event of publishing his work—the material for this is more than sufficient. Despite this shortcoming, I fully accept them.

## **Questions**

I would like to ask the Ph.D. candidate the following questions:

1. You have often characterized the media environment in Bulgaria as "pluralistic." How exactly does this pluralism work, and do you think the Bulgarian media are entirely censorship-free? By "censorship," I do not mean necessarily political but also business influence, as Noam Chomsky coined the term in his excellent book "Manufacturing Consent."
2. On p. 100, you review the Alliance's publications on Facebook. As you note several times, the overall popularity of these materials has been low. However, I noticed one video from the WeAreNATO campaign that stands out, achieving an impressive 1.1 million views. I would like to know more about this video and what factors contributed to its audience's interest.

## **Conclusion**

The dissertation proposed for public defense meets the formal procedural requirements for this type of research. It stands out for its originality and high scientific value. The candidate demonstrates exceptional skills in information analysis and clear, concise presentation of the argumentative framework, though there are instances of minor bias as previously noted. Stylistically and structurally, the research is well-organized and clear on both a content and linguistic level. Despite minor shortcomings that do not significantly affect the quality of the dissertation, I confidently recommend that the esteemed academic jury award the doctoral candidate Boris Tsenov the degree of Ph.D. in the scientific field 2.3. Philosophy (Rhetoric) and will unreservedly vote positively in the final public defense procedure.



Sofia,

May 21, 2024

/assoc. prof. Gerasim Petrinski, Ph.D./