

OPINION

of Assoc. Prof. Dobrin Hristov Kanev, PhD, 3.3. Political Sciences
on the dissertation "*Political representation of Bulgarian Muslims after 2005*"
for awarding the educational and scientific degree PhD, professional area 3.3.
Political Sciences
by *Milen Ruzhenov Zhurnalov*

The dissertation submitted for public defense by Milen Zhurnalov on the topic "Political representation of Bulgarian Muslims after 2005" is a complete, in-depth and independent study of high quality, which meets in all its aspects the high academic criteria set for a doctoral thesis.

In order to justify this statement of mine, I will pay attention to some important features of the dissertation work that give me reason to reach such a conclusion.

First. The topic of Milen Zhurnalov's dissertation implies the clarification of problems that are significant from a scientific and practical point of view. Aiming at researching the place of the Bulgarian Muslim community in our political life from the point of view of policies aimed at them, but also of their own political activity, is of undoubted interest for political science, but it can also have its practical significance. Moreover, as the author rightly claims, the question at the center of the dissertation - "the problem of the political representation of the Bulgarian Muslims has not been studied in depth and comprehensively in the Bulgarian academic literature" (p. 5).

Second. Zhurnalov has clearly and precisely formulated his goals, tasks, and thesis from the very beginning.

The author of the dissertation has set himself a complex research aim in three dimensions - first, to check "if and to what extent the community affiliation of Bulgarian Muslims affects their political representation at the national and local level"; secondly, "whether and to what extent their double marginalization by the majorities (by the Bulgarian Christians - on religious grounds, by the Turks - on ethnic grounds) provokes them to create their own political projects" and thirdly, "whether and to what extent they remain in their traditional role as an object of politics or manage to become their subject" (see pp. 4-5).

From here follows the series of many more specific research tasks brought forward by the dissertation: whether and in what way the diverse community identification of Bulgarian Muslims and their various theories of origin influence their political choices; whether and to what extent – from an object of state policies – they become a subject both at the regional and national level; whether and to what extent the parties' attitude towards Bulgarian Muslims remains an attitude

towards the community as a whole or is transformed into an attitude towards individual citizens, valued or rejected because of their personal qualities, instead because of their community affiliation; whether and how the strategies of nationally represented political parties are changing for the inclusion of Bulgarian Muslims in power; are the attempts to implement own party projects successful; what are the motivations of the Bulgarian Muslims for their political choice; what is the realization of their candidates as MPs, mayors, councilors and holding high management positions in the state administration (see p. 5).

The thesis of the dissertation, set out to be proved, seems rather partially formulated from the point of view of the overall content of the dissertation: "the gradually expanding political representation of the Bulgarian Muslims is carried out primarily through the traditional parties instead through their own projects, but - nevertheless - the attitude towards their representatives remains to a large extent the attitude of a marginal community." (p. 5) In addition, we encounter a significant hypothesis stated in passing - that diverse community identification influences political choice, as well as the indicated need to answer the question whether for the political representation of for Bulgarian Muslims, their belonging to a specific community plays a leading role, or their personal qualities are of predominant importance (see p. 6).

It must be said here that the fulfillment of the research goal, the proof of the thesis, the validation of the hypothesis are a serious scientific challenge, not least because, for example, the electoral behavior on which political representation is realized depends, along with the linguistic and religious factors that are important in this case, and on a number of other factors of a more permanent or situational nature.

At the beginning, the time scope of the study is also indicated, but it seems that there is a need for additional argumentation for the choice of the starting point, insofar as the only criterion indicated (the parliamentary breakthrough of "Ataka") is rather external from the point of view of the content of the work. And actually, the greater part of the dissertation examines a wider period.

Third. With regard to the **research methodology** chosen by Milen Zhurnalov, it can be argued that it **reveals opportunities for proving the thesis of the dissertation work**. Generally speaking, it is an in-depth case study in which the investigated objects - the community of Bulgarian Muslims, its place in Bulgarian politics, its own political activity - are analyzed from different aspects - political, historical, cultural, ethnic, psychological.

An important role in proving the author's theses is also played by the results of his field studies with qualitative methodology (in-depth interviews), with which he demonstrated his ability to successfully apply a variety of research methods.

Fourth. The author has built his ***research on an extremely rich and varied source material***. The dissertation is based on a large number and variety of primary and secondary sources. The 134 titles in Bulgarian and foreign languages used in the work and indicated in the bibliography illustrate the author's high degree of knowledge of all significant older and modern publications in the field of research. On the one hand, these are works dealing with the theoretical aspects of identities (A. Smith, A. Giddens, R. Brubaker, E. Gellner), on the other - works specifically examining the identity of Bulgarian Muslims (from V. Aprilov and L. Miletich to modern Bulgarian and foreign authors), on the third - the research on state politics regarding Bulgarian Muslims over the years.

In addition, numerous documents and archival materials were used, mainly taken from the Central State Archives and the state archives of Blagoevgrad and Smolyan, as well as publications in central and regional media. An analysis of the electoral statistics for the study period was also carried out. As mentioned, an important source is the field research carried out by the author in 2019 and 2020, (as well as Evgenia Ivanova's unpublished field materials from 2013 and 2016), conducted in the districts of Blagoevgrad, Pazardzhik (Velingradsko), Smolyan and Kardzhali and collected memories and stories of respondents, directly or indirectly related to the researched problem.

Fifth. The structure of the dissertation text proposed by Milen Zhurnalov meets the academic standards and the pursued research tasks.

The author has organized his work into an introduction, four separate chapters and a conclusion, achieving a sufficient balance (despite the fact that two of the chapters are noticeably longer than the other two), logical connection and consistency between them.

After an *introduction*, which follows the academic rules, in the *first chapter*, which also has a kind of introductory character, it first sets out to clarify the problems surrounding the identification of Bulgarian Muslims. Based on various sources and historical examples, the author's positions regarding the identity of Bulgarian Muslims (defined as "hesitant" or undefined) are clarified; around the name (Muslim Bulgarians); around defining them as an ethnic group with a specific "intermediate position" between Orthodox Bulgarians and Turks; about their origin (rather, the many different theories on this matter are presented here); around the self-identification of the members of this community in different parts of the country (also hesitant, unclear).

The *second chapter* continues the process of introduction to the main topic of the dissertation. It highlights two aspects of the position of Bulgarian Muslims in the politics of the country. On the one hand, from the first post-liberation years until 1989, they were subject to interference and pressure from various actors in their internal lives. On the other hand, from the first decades of the 20th century, they get opportunities to act as subjects of local and national politics. The author, on the basis of considerable historical and biographical material, has outlined in detail the various

stages of these two conditions and their characteristics. He concludes his analysis with the political activity of community representatives immediately before his assumed starting point of the actual research - 2005. "These two chapters, as Milen Zhurnalov writes, are necessary to clarify the close connection of the current political processes with the types of identities of the Bulgarian Muslims, as well as with the traumatic memory formed by the successive policies of repression carried out by multiple regimes in recent history of Bulgaria" (p. 8).

The next two chapters already strictly follow the main topic of the dissertation and its stated time scope, although here too the logic of research inevitably leads to going back, especially for parties whose peak of influence was before 2005. In the *third chapter*, are tracked the policies of the more important parties towards the Bulgarian Muslims and hence their political representation through the respective parties. A separate touch is the attempts to create their own party projects, introduced by the Bulgarian Muslims. The author's conclusion is that "through its vote, the community is fragmented, which largely presupposes the preponderance of the political over the ethnic and religious aspects of its electoral motivations" (p. 106).

This conclusion of the author is confirmed in the *fourth chapter*, in which, first of all, the electoral motivations of the Bulgarian Muslims are subjected to a detailed analysis - an analysis in which age differences are additionally highlighted - mainly the older generations, still preserving the traumatic memory, are more inclined to vote "ethnically", while in the current century other grounds, closer to the specifically political, come to the fore (see p. 116). Similar differences emerge in the analysis of the activity of the elected political representatives from the community. Even the fact that, in the typical case, the representatives or those included in the executive power are mainly concerned with local problems, does not make it clear "which prevails - local patriotism or community attachment" (p. 142). This is what we read in the conclusion of the dissertation, which briefly summarizes the results of the research process.

It is worth mentioning the two *appendices* of the dissertation - about the Bulgarian Muslims in the National Assembly and in the local government (mayors, municipal councilors) during the studied period - which once again show the detailed knowledge of the author in his research field.

Sixth. In the PhD thesis of Milen Zhurnalov, there are undoubtedly contributing moments in this research field.

The very fact that an in-depth study of poorly studied aspects of the Bulgarian political reality was carried out is significant enough in this respect.

The conclusions related to the relationship between (ethnic) self-determination and political behavior and action can be considered as the author's contribution to the never-ending debates on this topic.

A strong impression is made by the collection and putting into scientific circulation of very detailed and reliable information about the political representation of the Bulgarian Muslims, which does not seem to have missed a single person, part of this process.

The author's qualitative study on a terrain that is difficult for this activity is also a contribution. The conducted interviews enrich the analytical picture of motivations and assessments, and it is particularly important that in most cases Zhurnalov avoided the temptation to exaggerate the importance of individual statements.

Seventh. At the end, I would also like to confirm that ***the work also meets the formal requirements*** for a similar type of research product, laid down in the relevant legal and other normative documents. The abstract adequately reflects the content of the dissertation. Self-assessment of contributions has its reasons. The required three publications on the topic of the doctorate are also available, although their bibliographic data indicated in the abstract are not complete and it is not possible to get a complete picture of them.

The author's style is markedly academic. However, there are individual, albeit unobtrusive, repetitions (for example, on pp. 60, 78, 83, 114, 127).

Naturally, some comments and opportunities for improvement can be made to the dissertation work. Some of them were suggested in the text above. Rather with an eye to possible future work on the text, it also seems to me that a fuller use of electoral statistics (eg dynamics of electoral participation and non-participation, etc.) could have been possible.

But my conclusion is clear: The presented dissertation work is a serious research achievement that will cause deserved interest among scientists in this field. Its author has shown abilities for independent research, has demonstrated excellent knowledge of his scientific field, has successfully applied the methods of analysis necessary to achieve the goals of the work.

All this gives me the grounds to express without hesitation my support for the awarding of the educational and scientific degree PhD in professional direction 3.3. Political sciences to Milen Zhurnalov.

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Assoc. Professor Dobrin Kanev