

# OPINION

By **assoc. prof. Maria Eneva Bakalova, Ph.D.**, UNWE, Department of International Relations  
Scientific track 05.11.02 Political Science (International Relations) / Professional field – 3.3  
Political Sciences

Regarding: competition for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in professional field: 3.3. Political Sciences with **candidate Milen Zhurnalov**, doctoral student in the "Political Sciences" Doctoral Program, NBU

Topic of the dissertation: "**Political representation of Bulgarian Muslims after 2005**"

Scientific supervisor: **Prof. Evgenia Ivanova, Ph.D.**

Grounds for presenting the opinion: Order No. 3-RK-131 of 01/03/2023 of the Rector of the NBU

## **1. Scientific and applied significance of the researched problem**

Milen Zhurnalov's dissertation examines an undeniably significant research problem – the presence and participation of Muslim Bulgarians in Bulgarian political life. The significance of the topic can be outlined in a number of ways: in relation to the ethno-confessional and cultural diversity in Bulgaria, in relation to the processes of democratization and the political representation and participation of different communities in the country, as well as in regards to the state policies towards the different communities, setting the framework for their inclusion or exclusion in socio-political life. The topic also is of practical and applied importance for Bulgaria, given the need to develop and implement adequate policies against marginalization and for the social and political inclusion of the representatives of various communities in the country. Since this ethno-confessional group is present in a number of countries on the Balkan Peninsula, the scientific and applied significance of the present research is not limited only within the borders of Bulgaria. Scientifically, the significance of the researched problem can be sought in terms of the relationship between identity and the motivation for political choices and behavior at the individual and community level.

## **2. Justification of the goals and tasks in the dissertation work**

The doctoral student contextualizes the topic of the dissertation research temporally and spatially (for Bulgaria, but also at a regional level) and on this basis the main goal of the research is derived, namely "to verify whether and to what extent the belonging to a community of the Bulgarian Muslims affects their political representation at the national and local level: whether and to what extent their double marginalization by the majorities (on religious grounds by the Bulgarian Christians, on ethnic grounds by the Turks) provokes them to create their own political projects, whether and to what extent they remain in their traditional role as the object of policies, or manage to become their driving force". The outlined research tasks logically follow from the set goal. It should be noted, however, that the research tasks are not quite correctly formulated, as most of them are in the form of (research) questions.

Regarding the overall logic of the research project, as it is described in the introductory part of the dissertation research, it should be noted that the object of research is indicated, but not the subject of the research, which leads to a certain defocusing in the definition of the research tasks.

The structure of the dissertation is generally logical and corresponds to the set goals and objectives (see item 7 for remarks). The formulated thesis of the research ("the gradually expanding political representation of the Bulgarian Muslims is carried out primarily through the traditional parties instead of through their own projects") is logically connected with the object, goal and tasks of the research.

### **3. Correspondence between the chosen methodology and research methods and the set goal and tasks of the dissertation work**

The chosen research methodology, generally defined as interdisciplinary, is well presented and argued for. Given the nature of the research question, the main method is political analysis, but elements of historical and cultural analysis are also included. In order to derive the electoral dynamics regarding the results of all elections at the national and local level in the period covered in the dissertation research, a diachronic comparative analysis is used. A special emphasis in the methodology is the field research carried out by the doctoral candidate in the form of in-depth interviews. The chosen research methodology and the methods used enable the research goal and objectives to be achieved and specific conclusions to be reached (see point 7 for a recommendation in this regard).

### **4. Scientific and scientific-applied contributions of the dissertation work (description and evaluation), including the presence of an original contribution in science<sup>1</sup>**

Five contributions are formulated in the dissertation abstract. With the proviso that the wording of the contributions undergo editing (so that they do not sound like a description of the characteristics of the dissertation, but to emphasize precisely the contributions) I fully accept the first, third and fifth of the formulated contributions: the political representation of the Bulgarian Muslims as an independent object of analysis, which has not been subjected to research until now, especially in the period from 2005 to the present; the extracted and analyzed specific data on the political representation of Bulgarian Muslims in parliamentary and local elections in the researched period; and revealing and explaining the fluidity and ambiguity of political choice and the electoral behavior of the representatives of this community. I accept to some extent the fourth contribution with the proviso that similar field studies were also done by other authors (in the first place, of course, Prof. Ivanova, the supervisor of the present dissertation study, but also other researchers such as Antonina Zhelyazkova and various collectives over the years). Regarding the second mentioned contribution, it should be noted that the presentation of the "conceptual and essential diversity of the ethnic and religious identity of the Bulgarian Muslims" even if it is "in-depth and evaluative" it is not in itself a contribution. In the last part of the contribution formulated in this way, there is a derived connection ("the self-determination of the Bulgarian Muslims is tied to their political vote"), which itself could be claimed as a contribution, although this connection is not well explained, highlighted and developed in the dissertation text.

### **5. Evaluation of the publications on the dissertation work: number, nature of the editions in which they were published**

Three publications on the topic of the dissertation research are presented. One of them is in a foreign scientific periodical, *KNOWLEDGE – International Journal*, and the other two are in the *Balkanistic Forum* and *Language and Publicity* published in Bulgaria. All three publications have undergone the approval of the editorial boards of the abovementioned scientific journals. All three

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<sup>1</sup> It refers to the doctor of science degree.

publications are from an earlier period of work on the dissertation research - 2018-2019. The texts of the posts have not been made available to me, so I am unable to comment on them in substance.

#### **6. Citation by other authors, reviews in the scientific press, etc.**

There is no information on citations from other authors and reviews in the scientific press. However, to the extent that this point of the opinion should apply to doctor of science dissertations, the lack of citations and reviews cannot be taken as an indicator of poor research quality.

#### **7. Commentaries, recommendations and general remarks**

The dissertation thesis is characterised by a clear and good scientific writing style and, in general, a well-supported and logical structure of the exposition. The competent work with the sources should be noted, as well as their correct usage and their skilful weaving into the author's text. The research impresses with its rich factual basis and thoroughness in presenting the material, the attempt to be comprehensive and cover every single aspect of the problem with a lot of data and details. The idea of presenting the data in tables as appendices to which references are made in the text is extremely appropriate. With this level of detail, it would also be good to have separate conclusions after each chapter.

In terms of dissertation content of particular interest is the thesis that the self-determination of Bulgarian Muslims is tied to their political vote. At the core of this thesis is the understanding of the interrelationship between identity, identification, on the one hand, and behavior and attituded (including in political terms), on the other. This thesis could be developed more deeply in the dissertation research<sup>2</sup>, even formulated as the main hypothesis of the research, so that it can be traced based on the collected empirical material, what are the factors under which this thesis is valid and what factors determine the direction of causality. In other words, as a background to this thesis is the understanding that community identity not only presupposes, but also is shaped as a consequence of choices regarding the political. In this sense, from a methodological point of view, it would be appropriate to use a constructivist approach, which allows to consider how social, political, economic, etc. processes "construct" nations and ethnic groups and therefore predetermine the nature and importance of ethnicity and nation.

Again, in relation to the substance of the text, certain deficiencies in the review of the relevant scientific literature should also be noted. In addition to theoretical statements related to the formation and development of ethno-confessional identities, the dissertation study should be "joined" to the large array of theoretical and empirical studies related to the political significance and political behavior of ethnic groups and specific to ethnic voting, i.e. is. the problematic in the theoretical and analytical field of ethnopolitics. I am referring to a number of authors – European, from the Balkan countries and Bulgarian, whose works are relevant and related to the issues under consideration and should be present at least in the review of the literature, if not (in some cases) with the specific models developed by them.

A strong aspect of the dissertation research is the author's field research, the results of which, along with those of Prof. Ivanova's studies, are skilfully woven into the text. In the words of the respondents, a deeper plan is conveyed, revealing motivational dynamics and logic of behavior and choices, which cannot be extracted from dry data about the choice of one or another person or the percentages of voters in given elections. The instrumentalization of the vote is clearly demonstrated

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<sup>2</sup> I find the formulated research thesis that "the gradually expanding political representation of the Bulgarian Muslims is carried out primarily through the traditional parties instead of through their own projects" to some extent self-evident (as far as there are no established political actors of/from the community of Bulgarian Muslims).

from the point of view of personal motivation – both of the participants in the elections and of the Bulgarian Muslim voters. The analysis reveals and explains the differences in the electoral dynamics by regions where compact parts of the Bulgarian Muslim community live, as well as the different logic and motivation for voting in local and parliamentary elections.

At the same time, the fact that in the third and especially in the fourth chapter the empirical data regarding election results is not accompanied by an indication of the source gives grounds for a critical note. In this line of thought, it should be noted the lack of any indication or reference to other electoral studies, which, although not specifically directed at the Bulgarian Muslims, would give a macro picture in development, in which to locate and interpret the data presented. I am specifically referring to the electoral studies of Stoicho Stoichev and Dimitar Dimitrov, but there are others that should find a place in such a study. A consequence of the above is the problem of the main text of the dissertation being too small in volume.

There are also some problems of a more technical nature. For example: no page numbers specified in the content; the abstract has an incomplete form; a certain imbalance is noticeable in terms of paragraphs in individual chapters, as well as in terms of the detail of different parts of the text (from extremely detailed presentation of individual episodes or facts to rather telegraphic coverage without the logic of this difference being clear); there are places in the text (especially in the historical part in chapter 2) where one can notice certain temporal "jumps", reiterations, contradictory texts, which require refinement of the structure and clearing of the thematic and chronological lines of the exposition.

For the most part, these critical notes are related to certain finishing and editing of the text of the dissertation study, in the implementation of which the text could be published as a monographic study. I make a recommendation in this respect, as I believe that the complex reading of the political participation and representation of Bulgarian Muslims, which Milen Zhurnalov presents in his dissertation, should go beyond the narrow readership of a doctoral dissertation and become accessible to more broad – academic, activist, political and other – audience.

**8. Conclusion with a clearly formulated positive or negative assessment of the dissertation work**

I express a positive opinion and vote "for" the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Milen Zhurnalov in the professional field: 3.3. Political science, scientific specialty «Political science».

22.05.2023

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Assoc. Prof. Maria Bakalova