

Opinion report

For the dissertation submitted by Milen Zhurnalov on “Political Representation of Bulgarian Muslims after 2005” for the award of PhD in 3.3. Political Science

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The submitted dissertation is 162 pages in length, developed in an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion and is under the scientific supervision of prof. Evgenia Ivanova, Dr. Hab. Milen Zhurnalov has been working on it for several years, and the current version is the result of considerable improvement after discussion in the Political Science Department and recommendations made. The submitted text fully complies with the academic requirements such as style of exposition, structure of the text, handling of sources and rules for their citation.

The topic is undoubtedly original – as the author of the dissertation rightly states – there is little or almost no research on the political behaviour and political representation of Bulgarian Muslims. The chosen time frame is also justified, the time after 2005, when extreme nationalist parties such as “Ataka” emerged as a significant political factor on the Bulgarian political scene, but also, a little later, a new and established non-postcommunist party of the transition such as GERB. It is also characteristic of the post-2005 period that extreme nationalists entered government with GERB after the 2017 elections, albeit for a single term. In this situation, the question of the political representation of such a specific minority in Bulgarian society as the Muslim Bulgarians acquires a special meaning precisely as part of the Muslim community in Bulgarian society, but distinct also from the Turkish ethnicity. Milen Zhurnalov has also chosen this topic on the basis of his own experience, the mobilization of which undoubtedly contributes significantly to the unfolding of a successful study and the achievement of a thorough understanding of the social and political role of Bulgarian Muslims in today's Bulgarian society.

The author of the dissertation formulates a quite extensive research question: whether and to what extent the double marginalization of the Bulgarian Muslims (by the Bulgarian Christians – on religious grounds, by the Turks – on ethnic grounds) provokes them to create their own political projects, whether and to what extent this community remains in its traditional role of an object of politics, or manages to become their active subject. The question can also be posed in another way: to what extent are Bulgarian Muslims a political subject compared to other ethnic and religious minorities in Bulgarian society.

The main hypothesis of the author is that “the gradually expanding political representation of Bulgarian Muslims is primarily carried out through traditional parties instead of their own projects, but – despite this – the attitude towards their representatives remains largely that of a marginal community”. In other words, Milen Zhurnalov argues that although they are to some extent politically represented through what he calls “traditional parties”, Bulgarian Muslims are not at the same time socially and politically recognised as an equal and autonomous subject of the political process.

In answering his research question, the author of the dissertation develops his research in four chapters of the text, which are logically connected and this is fully consistent with the stated aim – the defence of the main thesis. The first chapter deals with such a still debatable issue as the ethnic identification of Bulgarian Muslims. Milen Zhurnalov demonstrates an excellent competence on the history of the uses of various appellations for the Bulgarian Muslim community in order to justify his adopted appellation. He rightly concludes that “the various self-designations and the many theories about their origins – influenced by the traumas of the past and the unreliable policy of the state towards them” favour their use by various political actors as a supportive community, always secondary and subordinate to interests external to their own.

In the second chapter, the author distinguishes between the two political roles of the Bulgarian Muslim community – as subjects and objects of politics. In the first part, Milen Zhurnalov provides a systematic overview of the history of policies regarding Bulgarian Muslims from the Liberation (1878) to the present day. Here the historical information of a series of policies of inclusion, assimilation and sometimes forced imposition of a new identity on the studied community during many different historical periods of the Bulgarian Kingdom and the People's Republic of Bulgaria is collected and summarized. The general conclusion is that, regardless of the impression, the policy of the Bulgarian state on this issue has been consistent, although decisions have often been taken in a conjunctural manner and without any strategic vision. But as a result, the community appears neither included nor assimilated, but most often covertly discriminated against. Very original is the research in the second part of this chapter on the various attempts to turn Bulgarian Muslims into subjects of politics through their political self-organisation and their political activism in existing political parties. Although the community representatives are either just 'figureheads whose presence secures community votes' or active professionals with civic positions (which is more like an exception).

The third chapter analyses the political representation of Bulgarian Muslims in the different levels of political governance already in the selected research period (2005-2019). This is possible both through the nationally represented parties, which implement both exclusionary and inclusionary policies, and through their own political projects. The inclusion of Muslim Bulgarians by national political parties shows how difficult it is to gain social recognition of members of the community not as representatives of an ethnic, religious, cultural community, but as citizens, individuals with political qualities useful for the whole society. What is new in this chapter is the detailed study of two political parties, *Progress and Prosperity* and *Patriotic Alliance for Diversity, Authenticity and Culture*, initiated in 2009 and 2013. The author explains the failure of these formations mainly by the fact that they somehow tried to perpetuate the notion of the existence of a “Pomak ethnicity”, which seems to be unacceptable not only in Bulgarian society, but also for the majority of the members of the Bulgarian Muslim community.

Particularly interesting is the fourth chapter, where the author analyses the political and electoral behaviour of the Muslim Bulgarians. He defends the thesis that “the ethnic vote, characteristic of the last decade of the 20th century, has rather become blurred in the period under study”. Especially for the younger generations, ethnic identification and traumatic memory are less and less emphasized as a reason for political choice, which is why the vote gradually acquires a specifically political character. This conclusion is very important for the research on Bulgarian society in general. Here the author also refers to the field interviews conducted, one of his main research methods.

On the whole, the study convincingly proves that “the political representation of Bulgarian Muslims in the period under study was not convincing”. This is mainly because “Bulgarian Muslims are represented in politics as having been elected by a specific community”, and not so much “due to their personal qualities as assessed by the parties that have nominated them”. Yet in this representation the “ethnic” dominates over the “civic” in the author’s words.

The abstract to the dissertation presents 5 contributions, but, as is usual, these are again presented as a description of what the researcher has done. More substantial are contributions 2 and 3. The first is a thorough analysis of the “conceptual and substantive diversity of the ethnic and religious identity of Bulgarian Muslims” and the justification of the choice of the name “Bulgarian Muslims” as descriptive of the community under study. The second is the search and systematization of “concrete results of the political representation of Bulgarian Muslims in parliamentary and local elections in the period 2005-2020”. I must stress that these two contributions are undoubtedly useful for the research community and are quite sufficient for the quality of a dissertation for the award of the PhD.

Finally, I would like to pose a general question that seems to me to have been raised but not fully addressed in the study: “How does the author imagine the political representation of a specific community as only respecting the individual qualities of the representatives without also considering that they are part of this community?”

In conclusion, the dissertation presented by Milen Zhurnalov fully meets the academic criteria, answers the research question in a reasoned way, has undoubted value for other researchers and contributes significantly to the expansion of our knowledge of Bulgarian society and the Bulgarian Muslim community. I believe that the dissertation meets the criteria for the award of the PhD in 3.3. Political Science.

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