

REVIEW

for the purpose of the contest for the academic position of associate professor, in professional field 3.3. Political Science, announced by New Bulgarian University, department of

“Political Sciences”, at SG No 97/13.11.2020

for the candidate assistant professor, Evelina Radoslavova Staykova-Mileva, PhD

by Professor Dr. Anna Slavcheva Krasteva NBU, Political sciences (3.3.)

'The twenty-first century will not be dominated by America or China, Brazil or India, but by the city' (p.51); 'The city is a world' (p.21), 'The city promotes art and is art' (p.37)-these quotes introduce the pathos of the book, the author's fascination with her subject of study. The extent to which the book has succeeded in 'translating' the fascination into academic language through conceptualisation, theorisation, and research is the subject of this review. It is structured in two parts - an evaluation of the habilitation thesis and an evaluation of Dr Evelina Staykova's overall teaching and research activities.

I would synthesize the merits of the habilitation thesis 'Urban Politics and Local Democracy at the Beginning of the 21st Century. Global Trends, European Perspectives and Bulgarian Realities' into several groups:

- - The first group is related to the relevance of the topic and the innovative approach. A decade ago, humanity made a civilizational transition and entered the phase of urbanization in which more than half of the world's population lives in cities, and this trend continues to develop dynamically. This upward trend continuously complicates the challenges for urban policies, which must seek innovative approaches to complex urban, economic, social, cultural, and a range of other problems. Dr. Staykova takes a complex approach to the topic, bridging two equally legitimate, often opposing, but complementary perspectives - that of local government and citizens, urban policies (priorities, programs, funding, stages, and trends), and the role of citizens in revitalizing local democracy.

- - The second group is related to the productive complementarity of epistemological and political science perspectives: reflection on notions and concepts of cities on the one hand, policy analysis on the other. Urban development trends are examined at the global, European, and Bulgarian levels; policies at the European and Bulgarian levels. The integrated approach is a realization of Dr. Staykova's triple expertise in urban policies: as a researcher and lecturer on the subject, and as a consultant - a member of the team that advised Sofia Municipality on the major international project 'Open Cities'.
- - The third group are related to the most interesting issues and ideas that Dr. Staykova highlights in her research. I will highlight some of the most productive ones.
 - *The conceptualization of cities* as key actors of the modern world: 'Because of the concentration of talent, the mix of peoples, and the economic opportunities in the city, they become fertile grounds for the development of innovation, science, technology, and art (p.33). Cities are analyzed in the diversity of their forms-global hubs, megacities, urban gateways, in their historical and contemporary development trends, in the specificities of Western and Eastern European cities, and in terms of the life satisfaction of city residents. The author also focuses on the political dimensions of city empowerment (p.58): 'the city becomes the center of power' (p.33).
 - *Urbanisation and sustainable development* is one of the key themes theoretically defended and politically analysed through policy analysis at European and local level. It also carries a strong normative message and conveys the author's deep conviction that cities are leading the way towards more innovative, more inclusive, more sustainable development (p. 105). The author traces the stages of urban growth and complexity, as well as new trends of disurbanization, 'punching up' the structure of the city, and non-compact grid-type structures. The author's interest is focused on smart, green, open cities.
 - *Citizen participation* in urban governance is convincingly defended as central to local democracy. The author starts from A. Marinov's thesis of civic participation as limited at the local level, which generates distrust of the whole party system. In E. Staykova's interpretation, civic participation is deployed in a more optimistic analytical perspective through a rich set of forms of civic control and participation

in local politics, many of which enjoy great popularity and have real effects (p. 201) - local referendums, citizens' initiatives, general assemblies, public mediation, CSOs for sustainable development, community councils, electoral forms of participation (online petitions, complaints, internet communications with the mayor, interactive forms of control and whistleblowing.

- *Decentralisation.* The author's pathos is critical in two ways: on the one hand, Dr. Staykova considers that it does not occupy a sufficient place in the political agenda, and on the other hand, it is seen more as a problem than as a necessary part of solving the country's problems in terms of development and modernization (p.177). Financial decentralization is also given a significant place.
- *Recipe for success.* The author has the intellectual courage to articulate her vision of brave and innovative cities, the realization of which she sees in four interconnected strands - exploiting the advantages of the global world, high technology, the green idea, and civic engagement as 'good examples and ambassadors of the new vision of cities of the future (p.206).
- The book is erudite, using both classic and contemporary publications, and the style is not heavily academic but readable and engaging.
- The author keeps her promise to consider the habilitation thesis as a prolegomena, as an introduction to the highly complex interdisciplinary problems of the city, to be continued with other books. The next book Sustainable Urban Development - Lessons for Sofia - is already a fact.
- Significant positive criterion for Dr. Staykova's positive evaluation is related to the intertwining of the issues in the educational process and scientific-educational dynamics at NBU. Important theses and information sets from the monograph have been approbated in the Master's course "Management and Analysis of Urban Policies". This course is included in the program 'Political Management and Public Policies' at the suggestion of Dr. Staykova and is a testimonial to the innovativeness of both the teacher and the programs of the Department of Political Science, always addressing new and promising directions of political science. Inspired by the course and by the students' interest in it was the fieldwork together with the Department of Administration and Governance under the supervision of Dr. Staykova. The fieldwork was on "Urban policies, business environment and local

democracy: a study of a medium-sized Bulgarian town (Lom)" and was very successfully carried out in 2017. Students from both departments presented the results at the round table "Policies and entrepreneurship in a medium-sized Bulgarian municipality" within the seminar "Urban policies, entrepreneurship, local democracy". This in-depth and interesting academic, field and seminar work will continue to develop thanks to the new monograph. Another form of applied contribution is Dr. Staykova's participation in the team advising Sofia Municipality in the large international project 'Open Cities'. Its theoretical and political triad - leadership, internationalisation, integration - is also explored in the book.

There is no study that does not contain deficits and raise *critical questions*. Almost inevitably, the author's 'falling in love' with the so attractive object of study, the city, leads to a certain analytical lightening of the national in the author's interpretation of the urban and the global through the city networks: 'Today we live not so much in nation-states but in city networks' (p.24). Globalization does erode the national, but not only through the mechanisms of the global city, and not to the extent of minimizing the Westphalian order that pervades the text at times. The reader would expect the ratio between critical reflection and programs, policies, principles to be more explicitly in favor of the former. The same is true with regard to the rich corpus of trends, regulations, policy documents, platforms and the reader's unsatisfied 'appetite' for more illustrations - verifying or problematizing - of them from the inexhaustible variety of cities. These considerations have been formulated in the context of an academic debate, which the habilitation work undoubtedly deserves. For the purpose of the procedure for an associate professor, I wish to emphasize that the merits of the book unquestionably and emphatically outweigh some unavoidable points of discussion.

For the defense debate, and to more explicitly link the habilitation thesis to the new collective book on Sofia edited by Dr. Staykova, I would raise the following question: if you have the opportunity to formulate strategic recommendations for the (possible) visionary leadership of the capital, what would be the three key ones?

I would add that the main results of the study were interestingly presented and lively discussed at the habilitation seminar, which was actively attended by students and academics from several departments.

Research experience

Dr. Staykova's mature research profile is thickened by research in three theoretical fields - migration and refugee studies, e-governance and e-citizenship, urban studies and policies. Each of these is thickened by the highest European standards with publications both at home and abroad; university, national and international projects, presentations and the organisation of a significant number of conferences, seminars, workshops and other academic forums.

Creative and devoted work with students is a red thread that runs through all of Dr. Stankova's activities. She is one of the proponents and implementers of the idea that the most promising students should start gaining research experience as students. Among the numerous examples, I will mention four: fieldwork in a medium-sized city (Lom) with students from two departments with a round table presentation of the results; inclusion of most brilliant students in the most prestigious European Horizon 2020 projects; writing academic texts in co-authorship with outstanding students; training students as cultural mediators and their active involvement in intercultural activities with refugee and migrant youth. To illustrate the innovative nature of these activities, I would point to the fact that they have also attracted individual students from other universities who are strongly committed to intercultural issues and have found its realizations at NBU more convincing.

Dr. Staykova is an interesting example of a young researcher, who already at the stage of habilitation began to work meaningfully for a professorship with the brightest request - the creation of a 'school', a research community around a promising issue. Illustrative is the cited series, the new book in it, and the high expectations that the urban research and policy series will be successfully continued.

Publications

The number and quality of publications meet and exceed the requirements for habilitation. They are in three languages - Bulgarian, English and French. It is important to emphasize that they are in journals and books published in NBU, other solid national and prestigious international publishers.

Teaching experience

I know Dr. Staykova from many courses and I can categorically say that she is a talented, innovative and dedicated teacher. She successfully uses the capabilities of new information technologies for meaningful and rich interactivity with students. She continually introduces new methods that students like and appreciate. She is sensitive to student expectations and demands,

but also consistently follows high academic standards of assessment. She teaches courses in three broad areas - migration and integration policy, urban policy and citizenship policy. In each there is a solid research background, so the courses are based on and constantly updated with the latest research in the respective fields, some literally from the kitchen of research projects. The excellent student evaluation - 4.58 out of 5 - is a testimonial to teaching excellence.

Contribution to the development of NBU

I would say without hesitation that Dr. Staykova is one of the emblematic faces of NBU and a clear testimony to the university's policy of forming and promoting bright, brilliant young lecturers and researchers. She not only convincingly passed through all levels - undergraduate, PhD student, assistant professor, now in habilitation procedure, but she left bright marks in each of them. She was honored as the top political science student in the country in 2008 and is the recipient of the Moser Award for Excellence and Civic Engagement. She was selected for the NBU scholarship for her doctoral dissertation, which she defended brilliantly.

It is impressive in how many directions and with how many activities she contributes to the development of the innovative and dynamic image of the Department of Political Science and of the NBU: she participated in the launch and management of the first and only seminar in the country on migration policy, together with the Departments of Law and Social Work she participated in the creation and regular organisation of the first and only in the country academic seminar on human rights, together with professors of public administration she conducts interesting sessions of interdepartmental seminar on urban policy. Coordinate the activities of CERMES, the country's first academic centre for refugee and migration studies, which enjoys national and international recognition.

She has a diverse administrative background as a program director, assistant dean, and now head of the Department of Political Science. This allows her to observe university processes in the diversity and complementarity of different perspectives - an important precondition for making balanced and strategic decisions.

One of the most positive dimensions of a rich administrative activity is the involvement of students in a variety of forms of activity - a conference with participation of students, former students and academics and publication of the papers; a summer university and many others mentioned in the review.

Citation

Citations are an important indicator of recognition and of the integration of the author's research results in the studies of other scholars from Bulgaria and abroad. They are concretely mentioned and show that the author's results have been feeding the searches of other researchers for years.

Personal impressions

I know Dr. Staykova through all the stages of her growth at NBU. I had the joy and honor to be her lecturer, as well as her PhD thesis supervisor, working side by side on so many courses, projects, conferences, seminars that no review can comprehensively cover. In this one I would highlight three aspects.

Dr. Staykova is a European level researcher in the quantity and quality of her output and competences, as well as in her involvement in international academic networks.

Evelina Staykova is a respected colleague and a warm-hearted person. She is honest and responsive, with an impeccable collegial attitude and a sincere dialogical nature. She has leadership qualities but is also a team player.

Dr. Staykova has already made a significant contribution to the development, innovation and dynamism of the NBU, and has the vision, potential and capacity to extend that contribution. She needs the stimulating environment of the NBU. NBU needs the initiative, energy and enthusiasm of young leaders like Dr. Staykova.

Conclusion

The theoretical advantages of the habilitation work "*Urban Policies and Local Democracy at the Beginning of the XXI Century. Global Trends, European Perspectives and Bulgarian Realities*", the active research, teaching, publishing and administrative activities, the commitment in the development of the Department of Political Science and the NBU give me reasons to categorically and confidently conclude that Assoc. Dr. Evelina Staykova meets the highest requirements for the position of Associate Professor in the professional field 3.3 Political Science.

Prof. Anna Krasteva

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