

Opinion

On the competition for the academic position “Associate Professor” in Political Science, initiated by the New Bulgarian University with a sole candidate Chief Assistant Professor Dr. Evelina Staykova-Mileva

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The candidate

The candidate in the competition Evelina Staykova-Mileva graduated as a bachelor and master in political science at NBU (2009) and successfully defended her doctorate at the same university in 2013. She successively passed through various university positions, starting as administrative secretary of the Department of Political Science, then as Program Director, Coordinator at the CERMES Research Center, Assistant and Chief Assistant, and currently Head of Department. Such consistency in academic growth is an excellent prerequisite for gaining rich academic experience, both in research, teaching and administration.

For the competition Dr. Evelina Staykova-Mileva presents a monograph (as a habilitation thesis), as well as 17 articles, studies and chapters from collective books published in Bulgarian, English and French, 7 of which are co-authored with various colleagues. These publications were realized after the defense of her dissertation “Migration and the new borders of citizenship: Bulgaria in the modern European context.” (2013) The total volume and quality of this research generally meet the criteria for a habilitated lecturer, as evidenced from the reference submitted by the candidate according to the NACID criteria.

Habilitation thesis

The habilitation paper presented for the competition is the monograph “Urban Policies and Local Democracy at the Beginning of the 21st Century”, published in 2021. The topic of this study is quite different from the topic of her doctoral thesis.

The chosen topic is undoubtedly relevant in the field of social sciences, but much more often treated in the field of political sociology and anthropology, less often in the field of political science. Cities are simultaneous topoi of the social life, centres of political governance, economic and commercial concentrations, a place of coexistence of diverse audiences, places of memory, “anchors of self-identification”. Separated societies, part of the national or global

society, a field of conflict and cooperation, but mostly places of coexistence in a relatively limited space.

In her book, Dr. Evelina Staykova-Mileva tries to analyse the urban phenomenon from the point of view of political science, i.e., of the management of common wealth. That is why the general centre of the research is through urban policies, purposeful management and development of cities as specific social communities. Of course, her understanding of the nature of the urban phenomenon is broader than its reduction to managerial practices. She defines it as follows: “In my own understanding, they are dynamic, complex organisms in which reality is the result of a combination of geographical and climatic conditions, historical experience, managerial capacity, the vitality of civil society.” In fact, such an understanding allows research that deals with urban development strategies, governance issues, civic participation, environmental aspects of the urban phenomenon.

The construction of the text follows a deductive logic – from the general to the specific. The study begins by defining the problem of the city, then presents the global perspective of urbanization, narrows the scope of the analysis to the European experience of urban development and ends with a chapter on “Bulgarian urban realities”. Such a structure of the exposition is undoubtedly understandable and logical in view of the set research task, which, however, seems to remain quite broad. The urban phenomenon as such is difficult to study in only 223 pages. Therefore, in my opinion, the most interesting part of this work is the last chapter, which deals with urbanization and its problems in Bulgaria.

Although the fourth chapter seems to be the most interesting and original, the whole study demonstrates a broad theoretical culture, knowledge of basic urban studies, but also a significant amount of documentation of policy strategies and analytical reports on urban governance (a significant volume of documents from the UN, the EU, the Council of Europe and individual governments have been examined and used adequately in the text). This monograph can be, among other things, a useful source in the teaching of urban studies at the university.

Along with the undoubted merits of this habilitation thesis, I will note some critical remarks that its reading provokes. First of all, although this is a matter of author's choice, it seems to me that the apparent techno-optimism regarding the development of the so-called responsive cities in which, as the author writes, “technology will lead to new forms of governance”. She added: “This will be possible thanks to new and rich forms of data, new sensory technologies, new opportunities for interaction between people, communities and their environment.” I am sceptical about the understanding that technology, as a factor independent of the human will, must lead to new forms of governance. Rather, it seems to me, this is a risk, and the causal relationship must be reversed – governance as a conscious human activity to subordinate technology to its goals.

This techno-optimism is probably due to the normative approach visible in the text, aimed at a desired but still unrealized future. The author herself confirms this, for example, regarding the

expectation that the cities of the future will be “open cities”: “The idea of open cities is extremely normative, it is much more a project than an analysis, more a multicultural ideal than multicultural policies.” (here she refers to Anna Krasteva). Optimism permeates the analysis everywhere: “Successful cities of the future will present vibrant, smooth and flexible ecosystems along the lines of the 'live, work and play' paradigm, building on new opportunities while mitigating risks and challenges.”

Of course, this optimism is also a matter of the author's choice, but to some extent it pushes aside the negative side of urbanization. Less space in the text is occupied by phenomena, which by virtue of the established linguistic norm we call “challenges” (as if we imagine that every problem necessarily has a solution that is within our power and capabilities). Probably such optimism also stems from the used public strategies for urban development, whose style is inevitably based on techno-social optimism. Here, too, is a more specific critical note: very often the text summarizes public documents, but less critically compares them with existing practices or with the results of the implementation of one or another strategy. And very often the practices differ significantly from the adopted documents.

There are also questionable elements in the very useful analysis of Bulgarian urbanization. For example, why is there no effective policy of regional development in the presence of the “Ministry of Regional Development” almost all the time and today the study itself finds such significant differences between the cities from the different regions of Bulgaria? Also, in how many of the municipalities have public councils of citizens been established and are they effective at all? Is there a quantitative and qualitative assessment of the civic participation in local self-government? How effective are the “online” petitions or “online communication” with the mayor and the municipal administration? The purely political side of local self-government, the axes of political opposition, remains a bit on the side-lines, at the expense of a thorough examination of the existing regulatory framework. I was also surprised that in a monograph on such a topic there is no mention of a recent collective book of the NBU on the same issue (Krastanova R. et Hadjitchoneva J. (sous la direction de). (2020). *Villes en transformation: défis, (pré) visions, perspectives*. Sofia: NUB) as well as the Bulgarian translation of the book cited in the study by Saskia Sassen “The Global City” (published by “Critique and Humanism”, 2011).

Of course, it cannot be expected that a single study can answer all the questions that the topic raises, and probably my remarks point to the future development of the author's research efforts.

Scientific publications

The scientific publications presented at the competition (17 in total, 7 of which are co-authored) show that Dr. Evelina Staykova-Mileva is already an established young researcher with academic competence in a dynamic research field. Along with the consistent interest in cities and urban policies, the candidate shows a deep and consistent interest in three other very

relevant fields of political science (and social sciences in general): migration research, new forms of citizenship and populism.

On the topic of populism and new citizenship, I will emphasize the special importance of two co-authored articles: "Being a Citizen in Times of Mainstreaming of Populism: Building Post-communist Contestatory and Solidary Citizenship" (2019) and "Countering Populist Othering Online: Strategies of Anti-racist Movements" (2017), published in renowned international collections. But on the same topic is the article "Formes européennes d'une Citoyenneté nouvelle: la naissance de la citoyenneté locale" (2016), published in Romania.

These scientific publications show that Dr. Evelina Staykova-Mileva is already an established researcher, known and valued in the scientific community, competent in extremely active research fields of political science.

Teaching

To my opinion I will add the teaching activity of Dr. Evelina Staykova-Mileva at NBU. She is already an experienced teacher, has authority among her colleagues and is positively evaluated by students.

I also have excellent personal observations on the academic development of the candidate.

In conclusion, I will note that the candidacy of Dr. Evelina Staykova-Mileva for the academic position of "Associate Professor" in Political Science is fully defended from the presented habilitation thesis, from the presented publications and from its overall research, teaching and organizational activities.

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