

Review

For the dissertation of Kristian Stefanov on the topic “Prerequisites for the radicalization of the social democratic movement in Bulgaria, 1891-1923” submitted for awarding the title of “doctor” (PhD) in 3.3. Political Science

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The presented dissertation was developed at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Department of Political Science and is under the scientific supervision of Prof. Nikolay Naydenov, Dr. Hab. The text is 276 pages long, organized into an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography with sources in English and Bulgarian.

I will immediately note that the presented dissertation is in a relatively small developed research field – that of historical political science. Although there is already a lot of historical research that skillfully combines methods of political science and political sociology and anthropology, historical political science still provides a wide terrain of undeveloped topics. In addition, the presented dissertation has as its research subject a radicalizing social democratic party that became communist at the beginning of the twentieth century, which in a post-communist situation seems at least unusual. That is why I insist that the choice of such a topic is no longer only an intellectual challenge, but also a manifestation of research courage. Moreover, on the one hand, the author will have to deal with the legacy of historiography from the time of communism, often, although not always, burdened by the then official ideology, and at the same time with the research on the history of communism in Bulgaria, often, although not always, burdened by the new ideological post-communist framework.

Achievements of the dissertation

The presented text is an ambitious and panoramic study of an episode in the political and social history of Bulgaria from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century (a period of 42 years), with the focus on the evolution of the BRSDP (t.s.) to the newly established in 1919 BCP. It is about the history of a party that remained in opposition throughout this time, which developed its political activity in conditions of political pluralism, albeit in an unconsolidated democracy, which was simultaneously the subject of political repression during the time of Stambolov and during the wars, but also represented in parliament and with certain positions in local government bodies. A situation completely different from the dominant position of the ruling BCP during the communist era.

The theoretical framework of the study is described by the author Kristian Stefanov as the parallel use of “models coming from both modernization theories, established in the field of political sociology and political science, and from new trends in social and political historiography, affecting the topics of radical politics at the beginning of the 20th century.” To this, undoubtedly, the use of methods of political sociology and political anthropology should be added, because historiography alone would not be enough.

In fact, the methodological center of the work is the theory of cleavages, structural social conflicts that operate continuously and influence the typology of political parties and the character of the political process in general. Kristian Stefanov refers quite logically and justifiably to the large-scale study of Stefano Bartolini on the political sociology of left-wing political parties and organizations in Europe, thus introducing a not very well-known scientific text into Bulgarian political science.

Although not explicitly formulated, the main research question of a dissertation would look like this: “What are the factors (the main reasons and driving forces) of the radicalization of the BRSDPL towards the profile of a revolutionary communist party?” Kristian Stefanov offers an expanded matrix of the factors that he identifies as relevant to the research process.

A good achievement of the research is its systematic conduct in the socio-economic and political context of the Bulgarian predominantly rural society of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is this context that is described by five main factors of the radicalization of the social democratic party: rural protest politics; ideological clashes, the socio-political crisis during the wars and the influence of the international communist movement after the creation of the Comintern in 1919.

The achievement of the dissertation is the political sociology of the vote for the BRSDP before and after the split in 1903. It is rightly argued that in predominantly rural Bulgaria, the Social Democrats are quickly orienting themselves towards the protest rural vote. The analysis of the differences in electoral support in the village between the “narrow” and “broad” socialists is also indicative and innovative. Of course, the rural vote for the “narrow” socialists will remain relatively limited not only because of their ideological “puritanism”, but above all because of the competition with the BZNS, established in 1899, and its more authentic rural cause.

The analysis of ethno-nationalist mobilizations as a factor in general radicalization is a good solution, although it is not a question of a direct manifestation of this on social democracy. The influence is mediated, mostly through anti-Semitism, which is promoted among ethno-nationalism and it is this that causes the opposition of the social democrats. A consequence of this is the connection in the ideological pressure against them of anti-Semitism and socialism, a later standard thesis of the Nazis.

The principled opposition of social democratic internationalism and ethno-nationalism is also an important factor in the radicalization of the BRSDP in the period under consideration. This is seen in the role of the socio-economic crisis during the First World War (unlike the Balkan Wars, this war does not seem to have been accepted very well, and Bulgaria had already exhausted its resources). The BRSDP took advantage of the social tension, but its firm anti-war position also put it under the blows of repression and this radicalized it. Kristian Stefanov also shows the role of the Soviet Revolution in the fall of 1917 and its influence on the most revolutionary-minded social democrats.

Also interesting is the analysis of the influence of the Comintern, the international communist organization, on the radicalization of its member parties, which gradually adopted the centralized organization of the RCP and, to a large extent due to the civil war, its almost military discipline. The BRSDP/BCP adopted the same model and this was a significant factor in its radicalization. Kristian Stefanov rightly describes this radicalization of the BCP as different from what was happening with similar parties in neighboring countries such as Romania and the newly created Yugoslavia (officially with this name after 1929). The reason is that the Bulgarian social democracy was

organizationally divided between a revolutionary and a reformist wing as early as 1903, while the other parties from neighboring countries retained their unity. Here I will also point out a new, made from contemporary positions, interpretation of the events in Bulgaria of 1923 and in particular the September Uprising. The author's decision to emphasize the pressure exerted by the Comintern on the Bulgarian Communist Party, whose leadership seems to be reserved for the possibility of a successful uprising that would fit into the revolutionary wave that began with the Soviet Revolution, is outstanding. In this section, of course, Kristian Stefanov refers to a series of newly published studies by established historians such as Vesselin Yanchev and Rita Grishina.

The fifth factor for the radicalization of the BRSDP/BCP is the growing political violence, especially during and after the end of World War I. The paradox is that after the end of World War I, the BCP became a mass party with growing electoral potential, and in rural areas, but ideologically radicalized and caused the growing fear among the ruling elites of an imminent communist revolution. This radicalization was also reinforced by the activities of the increasingly active anarchist organizations in Bulgaria, which became competitors of the communists (and also of the BZNS) in the race to channel radicalism.

The presentation of the five main factors for the radicalization of the BRSDP/BCP allows Kristian Stefanov to offer his original explanatory scheme of political radicalization. Its main pillars are the electoral demand in conditions of social and political crisis, the pressure of the Comintern to develop the world revolution in the first half of the 1920s, and the securitization of political life, marked by increasing political repression as a response to political violence and fears of revolution.

The most significant achievement of the study is that the analysis of a relatively short but significant period of the development of Bulgarian social democracy is made in the context of political and social processes in Europe and the world. Thus, national political history ceases to be a “story in itself”, but fits into a broader international environment – something typical of contemporary social science research.

Kristian Stefanov refers to an extensive bibliography mainly in English and Bulgarian, but also with some individual titles in Russian, French and German. The references follow the academic requirements and are related to the specific text in the presentation. The work with archives and periodicals from the period under study is also impressive, which significantly contributes to the argumentation of the statements.

Critical remarks

Any research text can be criticized, and so can this dissertation.

My first critical remark concerns the description of the methodology used. Right at the beginning of the text, it is stated that modernization theories constitute a basic methodological framework. I think that the brief reference to the concept of modernization and the subsequent focus on cleavage theory require a little more explanation. Modernization is a much-discussed category in the social sciences, and therefore it would be appropriate to present a brief overview of the topic before concentrating the analysis on just two elements – the social transformations that give rise to mass discontent and its mediation by the specific political system.

But in fact, a more essential point is the mobilization of cleavage theory, which explains why a significant part of the explanation of the methodology is based on the class cleavage (workers – capitalists). There is a serious discussion about the extent to which the four main cleavages, understood as structural social conflicts resulting from two revolutionary social processes (the emergence of the modern nation-state and the emergence of industrial capitalism), are universal. Stein Rokan and Seymour Martin Lipset conducted their research on a comparison of societies from Western civilization. However, subsequent research questions the validity of the theory in societies from the Orthodox world, as well as in non-European societies. For example, the state-church cleavage does not seem to be structured in most countries of Eastern Europe, including Bulgaria. The question is also how valid the class cleavage is in societies with predominantly rural communities and weak industrialization. Isn't some adaptation of the theory of cleavages in a non-Western environment necessary?

In fact, the main emphasis in the explanation of the choice of methodology is the reference to Stefano Bartolini's approach. In a sense, it can be said that the dissertation is a study that tests Bartolini's theory in the case of the radicalization of the BRSDP / BCP from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. This may be good to explain as a theoretical framework, because it is a completely acceptable scientific contribution to test a theory on different empirical material and in different social conditions.

Here I ask myself whether in Bulgaria there really is no “cross-cutting cleavage”, which weakens the influence of the class cleavage. We are talking about the urban-rural cleavage, within which we explain the emergence of parties such as the BZNS. But even in this case, adaptation to the conditions of Eastern Europe is necessary – this rural party is not traditionalist and clerical, but largely secular and republican, something like a Bulgarian analogue of the populist parties from the beginning of the 20th century in Latin America.

My second critical note is regarding the interpretation of the September Uprising of 1923 as inspired from outside. Although the author compares it with similar revolutionary attempts in 1919-1922 in other European countries, the general understanding of the text is that it is about “foreign intervention” in Bulgaria. This is also related to the understanding of the Soviet Revolution itself. In the post-communist situation, the event is treated either as a “Bolshevik coup” or as a second radical phase of the Russian Revolution of 1917. The text uses the concept of “export of revolution”, but in fact underestimates the understanding of the event by its main actors (the leaders of the Bolshevik party) as the beginning of an expected world revolution. This understanding was shared by the Soviet elite (which was truly cosmopolitan at the time) until almost the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the debate about whether “socialism in a single country” was possible. During the first decade of Soviet Russia, the followers of the Bolsheviks around the world had no doubt that this was only the beginning of a global process, not an “export of revolution.”

Along with these more general methodological and conceptual considerations, I have criticisms for a certain neglect of the text. There are factual inaccuracies, such as the claim that a majority voting system was introduced for the parliamentary elections in April 1923, which allowed the BZNS to win an overwhelming majority. In fact, the elections were proportional, the reasons for their result lie elsewhere.

There are many spelling mistakes, which does not make a good impression. For example, the name of David Benvenisti appears as Benvetisti, and Theda Skocpol is systematically transliterated as “Skochpol” (as it appears in the Bulgarian version of Google, but probably incorrectly). As well as the wrong year of publication somewhere – instead of 1990, 1900 is shown. These are, of course, small things, but they make an impression.

In my opinion, there is also a problem with the bibliography. It is in a different format and in places it seems to have been made with the help of artificial intelligence. There are titles where the entry begins, as is correct, with the author's last name, but also those that begin with the first letter of their first name. The use of artificial intelligence is not prohibited, but it must be stated how and for what purpose it was used.

Conclusion

It is usually said that despite the weaknesses, the presented work has its qualities. I will conclude in a different way – the presented work is an original and modern study of an otherwise somewhat developed scientific problem, but it undoubtedly gives us a new perspective of understanding and new knowledge. It complies with academic standards, despite some shortcomings, and in general has the necessary qualities for a successful defense. I consider the presented dissertation to meet the criteria for awarding the educational and scientific degree “doctor” (PhD) of 3.3. Political Science to Kristian Stefanov.