

REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. Dobrin Hristov Kanev, PhD, NBU, Political Science (3.3)

on the scientific works for participation in a competition for the academic position of Associate Professor in the professional field 3.3. Political Science (Political Science - Political Parties and Party Systems), announced in SG, issue 32/16 April 2021, pp. 168,
with candidate Assistant Professor Milen Todorov Lyubenov, PhD

Assistant Professor Milen Todorov Lyubenov, PhD, is the only participant who submitted the necessary documents within the announced deadline, for competition for the academic position of Associate Professor in a professional field 3.3. Political Science (Political Science - Political Parties and Party Systems), announced by Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

The candidate meets all the requirements for holding the mentioned academic position, set in Art. 29 of the Law for Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria. He obtained the scientific and educational degree "Doctor" in the same professional field in 2010. He holds the academic position of Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" from 2010 to the present, having previously been an Assistant (2006-2008) and Senior Assistant (2008-2010). He presented a published monographic work (in this case two monographs) and scientific articles and studies, which do not repeat the presented for obtaining the educational and scientific degree PhD. As evidenced by the attached data, his current research output and teaching achievements meet the minimum national requirements for the academic position of associate professor, and some of the indicators show higher results (sections D, E).

The publications presented in the competition are original and follow the rules of academic ethics.

The **research production of the candidate**, with which he participates in the competition, includes eleven research publications. Among them are two monographs, three studies (one co-authored), one chapter in a collective monograph and five articles. Three of the publications have been published abroad in English.

All of them fit into the thematic framework of the competition, focused on the theory of political parties and party systems.

Most of these publications have entered international scientific life, have been the subject of citations and references in reputable databases. The attached reference (8 citations in Scopus and Web of Science, as well as 8 in CEEOL) and the 24 citations established by the author show that Milen Lyubenov is

present as an author on the international and national research scene, which was made possible by his serious scientific achievements, especially in the study of political parties and party systems.

This conclusion is also confirmed in the evaluation of the scientific papers submitted for the competition and subject of this review. In this case, it is no wonder that almost all of them are devoted exclusively to the topic of parties and party systems. Moreover, his research appears in a complex and ambiguous stage of existence and development of his object of study. On the one hand, the fact remains that the parties still retain their key role in the functioning of representative democracy, which is, as a rule, "party democracy". They are the structures that can only turn the interests and preferences of the citizens into political alternatives and participate in their realization. They are the mechanism for nominating political leaders. They structure the political agenda, formulate and implement policies. They form governments or, when in opposition, take control of those in power. This overall role is beyond the power of other formations, or if such groups or organizations try to do so, sooner or later they become parties, regardless of their original intentions. On the other hand, although parties are vital to a democratic political system, claims have been accumulating in recent decades that parties are "declining," "dying," becoming unnecessary.

This internally contradictory picture stimulates research interest in the current state and prospects of parties and party systems around the world. Bulgarian political science is no exception and in general has paid more attention to the study of parties and the party system in the country than to other aspects of it. Over the years, a number of authors have studied in detail the emergence and development of individual relevant parties in Bulgaria, their members and voters, as well as the main characteristics of the Bulgarian party system and the factors that formed it.

As mentioned, one of them is Milen Lyubenov, who stands out with his dissertation, but in recent years has expanded and deepened his research and become an established and recognized author in this field. This applies with particular force to the works submitted to the competition.

I will start the evaluation with the most significant among the publications proposed for the competition - Milen Lyubenov's monograph "European Party Systems. Comparative Analysis of 20 Democracies (1945-2020)", published in the prestigious St. Kliment Ohridski University Press in 2021. Probably the first thing that impresses in this case is the author's courage to focus on such a large-scale topic - a study of the development of 20 European party systems in a long period of three quarters of a century (from the end of World War II to the present day). At the same time, he has entered a scientific field full of research by the most authoritative scientists. His choice of objects of comparison has fallen

on diverse democracies and party systems - both established democracies (such as Britain, France, Italy, Germany and eight other countries) and countries from different phases of the "third wave of democratization" - along with Spain, Portugal, Greece, and the "new democracies" Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Croatia, Estonia, Bulgaria. The number and diversity presuppose at least the availability of in-depth and extensive knowledge of the political and party systems of these countries.

Another bold undertaking is the author's decision to abandon the dominant thesis about the decline and crisis of parties (especially the traditional ones) and to put at the center of his research the question, "why the old parties survive and continue to be an important political factor" (p. 13). The answer sought is formulated in the main thesis of the work, built in the sense of the idea of path dependence: despite the large differences between the analyzed party systems, "the main parties involved in the initial institutionalization of the party system after periods of political transformation gain a significant advantage over their future competitors". (p. 12)

The monograph is 253 printed pages long and, although with a flexible structure and a larger number of separate chapters, it strictly follows the academic tradition and the logical sequence of presentation of the problems.

The natural beginning is to clarify the initial methodological positions of the author. As seen above, he relies on neo-institutionalism and the concept of path dependence developed within its framework. Lyubenov accepts its statements that the initial decisions and the initial institutionalization lead to lasting and sustainable patterns of behavior, norms and practices; that the chosen path leads to an inertial process that narrows the environment for other solutions (see p. 16).

Of course, as can be seen from the very subtitle of the monograph, the main methodological tool is the comparative analysis.

The aim of the author further is to prove his thesis. He does this by going through the most important aspects of the emergence, formation, functioning of parties and party systems. The result is a truly large-scale and comprehensive study, which collected, processed and analyzed a large amount of data on the development of political parties and party systems of the studied countries.

In the beginning, the problem of the cleavages was reasonably posed. This is where the research of party systems traditionally starts - a direction set by Lipset and Rokkan. This is the most voluminous part of Milen Lyubenov's book - over fifty pages. Here we can be convinced of the author's detailed knowledge of the development of the cleavages and the emerging party systems in the twenty countries he studies. He presents them in detail from the point of view of both the traditional cleavages

formulated by Lipset and Rokkan and the later changes - the weakening of the traditional cleavages, the "silent revolution" of values and the birth of the "materialism-postmaterialism" division and the corresponding reaction, described by the author as the "noisy counter-revolution" of the radical right.

Even more important in this part is that it demonstrates the research qualities of the author and sets out his original ideas that have led to contributions to the study of these issues.

Lyubenov critically develops the typology of the cleavages in the new democracies proposed by G. Karasimeonov, adding to the temporal dimension of Karasimeonov the possibility of a substantial dimension and justifying a more general division into two types of cleavages - potential and actual. He also connects them with the three characteristics of the cleavage developed by Mair and Bartolini. This is one of the author's contributions to the theory of cleavages, applied in the conditions of emerging democratic regimes, in which the classical schemes à la Lipset - Rokkan do not give a satisfactory result.

Adopting the thesis of the rather political nature of the cleavages, Lyubenov also offers us his vision of the genesis and life cycle of the cleavages. He formulated five phases of this development, beginning with the emergence of a significant critical process, its escalation, politicization, institutionalization, and finally its mitigation.

I share Lyubenov's critical attitude to Kitschelt's approach, which in search of factors for the formation of cleavages in the CEE countries, to some extent coarsens the nature of the "old regimes" and the role of this legacy in the nature of party systems.

The revelation of the picture of the party systems continues with the study of one key characteristic according to Sartori - the ideological distance. Lyubenov does this by compiling various empirical data (quantitative research with appropriate questions and a comparative study of party programs) and has compiled detailed tables for the positioning of parties on the left-right axis. These data have been used to track the situation in individual countries and development trends in recent decades. Original is the idea he developed about the role of electoral competition on the part of new parties in positioning the existing parties, which pushes them from the center to both extremes (p. 90) - an idea that will probably need more evidence.

The author has made an additional typology in terms of the degree of ideological distance in different groups of countries. A similar analysis was made with regard to the distances along the materialism-postmaterialism axis, using data from the stages of the World Values Survey conducted so far.

Chapters seven, eight and nine seem to be most directly related to proving the author's thesis. The first of them examines the changes that accompany party systems - splits, mergers, renaming of parties, as well as the emergence of new parties as a competition of traditional parties. His conclusion is that "new parties, whether they have arisen as a result of a split or are entirely new, have a short life" (p. 115). This is not the case for many traditional parties, whose success is dealt with directly in the next chapter. Asking again the question of how these parties survive and why they continue to dominate, Lyubenov presents summary tables on the parliamentary representation and government participation of the "old" and "new" parties. From them, in general, the advantage of the parties that participated in the initial formation of the party systems over the later parties is seen, although the tendencies are not everywhere one-way or categorical.

In the ninth chapter, one of the broader parts of the work, the author's thesis is examined by revealing the key specifics of different types of party systems such as their fragmentation, polarization, institutionalization. Here, too, the conclusion of the author's detailed analysis is that, although certain critical moments lead to a change in party systems, traditional parties receive the "advantage of the former" (see p. 174).

The last chapter deals with the current problem of populism and populist parties, but does so in an original way by seeking a connection between populist tendencies and the cartelization of parties and party systems.

The conclusion of the book helps us to pay attention again to some basic theses of the author. In it, he emphasizes his thesis that today it is much easier to form new parties due to the larger and more diverse sources and resources in this regard. But traditional parties, based on their advantages, maintain their dominant position in the party systems of the studied countries.

A valuable part of the study are the applications - 60 tables with important data on the state and development trends of the party systems of the twenty countries studied.

Milen Lyubenov's monograph is a serious study with scientific contributions, in which a large amount of data on the development of parties and party systems in a large number of European democracies has been collected, processed and analyzed. It demonstrates the high professionalism of the author and his detailed knowledge in the research field.

These conclusions are also valid for the other publications that the candidate has submitted for participation in the competition. Lyubenov's second monograph entitled "Political Parties. Institutionalization and Organizational Development "(Science and Society Publishing House, Sofia,

2021) continues and expands the representation of political parties and party systems. Here the author goes beyond the borders of Europe and considers the phenomenon of parties in a global context and from a principled point of view. Along with some overlaps (mainly in the last chapter of the book), the paper addresses important issues of the parties that did not find a place in the first monograph. It is a general view of the nature and functions of the parties, of their definition and of their ability to adapt as necessary. Central are the issues related to the organization of parties, the factors that led to changes in their organizational appearance, the changing models of party organization. Lyubenov also presents his version of "ideal types" of political parties - elitist; mass; electoral catch-all; cartel; entrepreneurial and media; digital. His analysis continues with other important aspects of party life - party membership, intra-party democracy, dependence of parties on state resources. With this monograph, the picture of the parties outlined by Milen Lyubenov becomes broader and denser, which strengthens the conviction of him as a serious connoisseur and researcher of political parties.

Most of the other publications presented also shed light on various aspects of the functioning of parties and party systems.

On the one hand, in some of them we find the beginning of the development of some of Lyubenov's contribution ideas, which have found their finished form in his monograph. For example, the article "Cleavages and Party Systems" (and before) sets out the above-mentioned ideas about actual and potential cleavages in the new democracies. And the article "Cartelization and Populism: Effects on Party Systems in Europe" originally developed the idea of the connection between the turmoil of populism and the cartelization of parties. Another article - "Media and Digital Parties" - paved the way for expanding the typology of parties in Lyubenov's monographs.

On the other hand, in some of the publications one can find contributing ideas that are developed entirely there. Such is the case with the study "The Bulgarian Party System: Emergence of a New Cleavage 'Center - Periphery'", in which the author has made a serious attempt to prove the hypothesis of outlining the new type of cleavage mentioned in the title, which is expected to have a growing influence of the party preferences of Bulgarian citizens. The application of a combination of multifactor regression analysis and the method of classification trees has led the author to a reliable result, which can be considered a scientific contribution of Lyubenov. And once again he has demonstrated his ability to work with modern empirical analytical tools. Another such case is his article "Party System Without Systemness". The hypothesis tested in it (set in the title) is that as of 2009 the party system in Bulgaria is characterized by a lack of systemness. The author builds on the concept of institutionalization of the party systems and through the index of electoral volatility shows first the weak institutionalization of

the Bulgarian party system. As this is not enough to verify the lack of systemness, he turns to Sanchez's idea of extra-systemic electoral volatility, which measures the transfer of votes from major parties to new or small parties (which would be a sign of a lack of systemness). Lyubenov modifies this approach by considering the transfer of votes from parliamentary parties to new parties. The results provide grounds for confirming the hypothesis.

On the third hand, texts are presented in which the wider palette of research interests and results of the author is noticed. The chapter on Bulgaria (co-authored with Georgi Karasimeonov) in the collective work "Handbook of Political Change of Eastern Europe" retains the focus on parties and the party system, but on the broader background of political processes in the country. The situation is similar with the part about Bulgaria in the publication of the European University Institute (with a foreword by Yves Meny), dedicated to the elections for members of the European Parliament in 2009. And the study "Bulgarian Constitutions - Political and Institutional Dimensions" goes beyond the narrower Lyubenov's research interest and shows his ability to analyze in depth important processes in Bulgarian politics from the past and the present.

Of course, in serious works such as those of Milen Lyubenov, shortcomings can be found, but most of all, the fields for scientific discussion can be highlighted.

I am left with the impression that not all the problems set out in the main monograph are directly related to proving the author's thesis.

Nor am I convinced that the path dependence approach alone is sufficient to explain the still dominant or significant role of parties established after profound transformations.

It also seems to me that the author overestimates the role of European parties in stabilizing party systems in new democracies, a thesis that appears in several places in his works.

There may probably be more such questions, but the purpose of the review is rather to assess the scientific level of Milen Lyubenov's works in terms of the requirements for holding the academic position of "associate professor". So in conclusion I can confirm that the scientific production of Milen Lyubenov presented for the competition outlines the profile of a trained and erudite scientist with a contribution to the theory of political parties in a number of aspects, which is undoubtedly a sufficient reason to hold this position.

Turning to the evaluation of the **teaching activities** of the candidate, I will note that he began his teaching career in 2006, when he became an Assistant in the Department of Political Science. Between 2008 and 2010 he was a Senior Assistant, and after the successful defense of his doctoral dissertation

(2010) from 2010 until now he is an Assistant Professor in the same department of the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

As the attached official reports for the last five academic years show, his workload (classroom and not classroom) is really significant. In the past 2019/2020 academic year, his academic workload is over 785 hours, of which 528 hours are classroom lectures. The situation is similar in the previous two years. Over the years Milen Lyubenov has assisted or been a titular holder of a number of courses related to the topic of the competition - Party families and systems; The party system in Bulgaria; Political parties and movements.

He works successfully with the students. His work with graduates is intensive, as he has provided scientific guidance to 17 graduates.

As additional touches I will mention that Milen Lyubenov between 2011 and 2019 is Scientific Secretary of the Department of Political Science.

He is active in academic life at the national and international level, having participated with reports at a number of scientific forums.

The fact that since 2018 he has been a member of the Executive Board of the Bulgarian Association of Political Science speaks for the authority of the candidate among his colleagues in Bulgaria.

This gives me every reason to fully support the candidacy of Assistant Professor Dr. Milen Todorov Lyubenov for Associate Professor in the professional field 3.3. Political Science (Political Science - Political Parties and Party Systems).

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