

# OPINION

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of the dissertation thesis of **Dimitra Dimitrova Voeva**, full-time doctoral student at the  
Department of Political Science, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, on the topic

**“The Democratic Mask of Political Engineering:  
the Amendments to the Electoral Rules in Bulgaria (2009-2021)”**

Scientific supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Stoycho Petrov Stoychev, PhD, SU “St. Kliment Ohridski”

for the award of the educational and scientific degree **“Doctor”**

Professional field: 3.3. Political Sciences

Doctoral Program: Political Science (Bulgarian Political Process)

## **1. Main characteristics and framework of the dissertation thesis**

Doctoral student Dimitra Voeva’s dissertation **“The Democratic Mask of Political Engineering: the Amendments to the Electoral Rules in Bulgaria (2009-2021)”** was prepared in accordance with the regulatory requirements and academic standards for awarding the educational and scientific degree “doctor” and was discussed and proposed for public defence at a meeting of the Department of Political Science at the Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, held on June, 15, 2023.

The presented dissertation contains 196 pages main text and 146 pages appendices, and structurally it consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The literature list consists of 211 sources in Bulgarian and English.

The introduction clearly sets out the framework of the study, including **topicality** and **significance** of the topic, purpose, focus, subject, hypothesis, tasks and structure of the study. The limitations of the scientific research are also correctly described, as well as the arguments for the

limits set, with focus on “the approach of the political parties in the implementation of reforms in the electoral rules”. The topicality and significance of the topic are adequately argued and correctly present the realities of the political process in Bulgaria. The elections as basis of representative democracy have different dimensions determined by the objective suffrage. Electoral rules have diverse aspects that are described in the dissertation research, and they are relevant to the structure and functioning of the governing bodies that are formed through them. The topic discussed by Dimitra Voeva is particularly significant in the Bulgarian context. Since 1989, the topic of changing the electoral rules has been put on the agenda periodically and engages public attention to varying degrees. The most popular idea is for a majority/plurality electoral system, or at least a majoritarian element. In this sense, the in-depth analysis that Voeva makes of the reasons for such proposals, the argumentation and the achieved results are of particular importance. At the very beginning of her study (in the introduction) the doctoral student emphasizes the high expectations for the results of an electoral reform, namely to “resolve existing democratic deficits” (p. 5). Furthermore, she directs attention to the way to overcome the weaknesses of democratic development in the country, involving a transformation in the political culture of the society, or as she puts it, “a profound change in the character of the society” (p. 5).

From the statement made in the introduction, the **aim of the research** is to establish and investigate “the manner in which electoral reforms are used as a tool to secure political advantage” (p. 6) in the Bulgarian context.

The **focus** of the dissertation is the preferential voting in the Republic of Bulgaria in the examined period, which includes the elections for national representatives in the period 2014-2021 and the elections for members of the European Parliament in the period 2007-2019 (p. 6-8). As the author points out, the study has two **subjects**, namely „the debate about the changes in the electoral rules and the effects of the adopted rules“ (p. 7).

The doctoral student formulates the **hypothesis** that the political elite instrumentalizes electoral reforms by trying to take advantages just before elections (p. 7). It indicates that the goals of the parties when amend the electoral rules are only image-based, and the public is expected to perceive the changes as ensuring more democracy and legitimacy of the elections.

The **tasks** formulated by her are relevant to the achievement of the set research goal and the formulated hypothesis:

- Tracking the parliamentary debate and the reasons for and against the introduction of a majoritarian system, a mixed system and preferential voting;
- Analysing the political context, including public attitudes and how they affect the adopted amendments;
- Collection and analysis of data on the use of preferential voting, as well as the factors influencing the increase or decrease in its use.

## **2. Content, research and analysis**

The **first chapter** examines topics and concepts relevant to the purpose, hypothesis and focus of the dissertation. Basic concepts related to elections, their functions and the principles of modern electoral law are presented. Various criteria for typologizing electoral systems have been considered, beyond the standard distinction of majority/plurality, proportional and mixed. It is related to the subsequent analysis. Substantial attention is paid to preferential voting and its relationship with various socio-political processes, which are relevant to the essence of the dissertation. Of particular interest is the examined relationship between the electoral system and the party system. The doctoral student bases her analysis on the view that the electoral system is a product of the party system (p. 37). The conceptual framework and practical dimensions of electoral reforms are also presented. The first chapter ends with a brief historical overview of the Bulgarian electoral system from the beginning of the 20th century to 2009.

The **second chapter** begins where the first one ends, namely the dynamics of the Bulgarian electoral system since 2009. The end of the researched period is 2021, as stated in the introduction of the dissertation. Not only the reforms in the electoral legislation are presented, but also the referendums from this period concerning the elections. A particularly valuable and essential contribution of the study is the systematization of the parliamentary debate, as well as the detailed presentation of the arguments of the political parties. Furthermore, the context in which the positions were expressed has been reported, and the comments of analysts from the researched period about the reasons for the behavior of the political parties have also been presented. The contextual analysis is particularly important for the accumulation of arguments relevant to the PhD student's hypothesis.

The **third chapter** begins with a detailed description of the methodology used, which makes it possible to assess the validity and significance of the results obtained from its application.

First of all, it should be noted that “votes from abroad ... votes for initiative committees and votes “I do not support anyone”” are correctly excluded from the calculations, and it is also indicated that “the analysis of preferential voting by party covers only those of them , who manage to jump the 4 percent barrier in the respective elections” (p. 102). Methodologically, the definition of “effective preference” and “random preference” is also essential. For the elections for members of the European Parliament held in 2007, 2009, 2014 and 2019, tables are presented. They consist the following information: parties that received mandates, the number of votes for them, the mandates received, the preferential quota, the number of those who voted with preference, as well as the share of those who voted with preference from those who voted for the respective party. A similar approach was chosen for the parliamentary elections. Summaries have been made for both types of elections, and the factors for dynamics in the preferential vote have also been derived. The effect of machine voting is also taken into account.

The **conclusion** corresponds to the fulfillment of the tasks set out in the introduction of the dissertation and correctly summarizes the main conclusions of the conducted research and analysis.

### **3. Contributions**

According to the self-assessment of the contributions presented by Dimitra Voeva, she emphasizes two leading scientific **contributions** of her research, namely:

- 1) Comprehensive analysis of preferential voting as one of the most significant changes in Bulgarian electoral legislation;
- 2) The implemented qualitative analysis of the parliamentary debate in the period 2009-2021 on the topics of majority vote, mixed electoral system and preferential vote.

I fully accept the doctoral student’s assessment of the contributions of the dissertation, considering that they can be supplemented with her analysis of the debate on the influence of the party system on the electoral system, because it is the less popular one in Bulgaria.

The **publications** presented by the doctoral student are directly related to the topic of the dissertation and present different approaches to the research. They fully cover the requirements for successful completion of the doctoral program. The **abstract** presents the content and all aspects of the scientific research carried out in a systematized form and gives the reader the opportunity to gain a comprehensive idea of the dissertation.

#### **4. Recommendations and questions**

From the introduction, it is clear what the focus of the doctoral student's research is, but not all elements are clearly presented, such as the goal, the object of research and some basic points of the methodology. From the point of view of accuracy when defining the framework of a study, I would recommend Dimitra Voeva to explicitly indicate the relevance and significance, purpose, object, focus, hypothesis, tasks and methodology of the study in her future scientific works.

The author ends the first chapter with a paragraph concerning the dynamics of the Bulgarian electoral system from the beginning of the 20th century to the beginning of the researched period (2009). I would suggest that this historical review be at the beginning of the second chapter, as it seems to me more relevant to the focus of research, namely the Bulgarian electoral system, than to the literature review of main theoretical points.

The recommendations made do not reduce the value and significance of the research. It has a significant scientific and practical contribution, provoking additional questions and interest in the topic.

In this regard, I have a question for doctoral student Dimitra Voeva, regarding the association between the electoral and party systems. On p. 33 it is stated that "there are generally two main approaches to the study of the relationship between the electoral system and the party system - those that consider the party system as a result of the electoral system and those that consider the electoral system as a product of the party system". Regarding the effects of the electoral system on the party system in Bulgaria, Duverger's law is most often cited, which mainly concerns the British type of electoral rules (plurality system in single-member constituencies), which create a two-party model. In this case, the mechanism of election and determination of the winner lead to the specified result in the party system.

The studies referred in the dissertation, do not indicate such direct influence of the party systems on the electoral. Thus, my question is whether the indicated influence of the party system on the electoral system is in fact the role of the context, i.e. of the political culture on political structure? Is it the party system that determines the electoral system or political-cultural factors? Aren't the electoral rules introduced in a given party system as a response to the need for a correspondence between culture and structure to ensure political stability?

## 5. Conclusion

The scientific research and expert activity of Dimitra Voeva, presented in her autobiography, show dedication and consistency in the work on the topic of the dissertation “The Democratic Mask of Political Engineering: the Amendments to the Electoral Rules in Bulgaria (2009-2021)”. Taking into account the overall qualities of the thesis and the scientific and practical contributions to the proposed and professionally developed topic, I express my **positive opinion** and propose to the respected scientific jury to award **Dimitra Dimitrova Voeva** the educational and scientific degree “**Doctor**” in the professional field “3.3. Political Sciences”, doctoral program “Political Science (Bulgarian Political Process)”.

October 16, 2023

Sofia



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