

## **OPINION**

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Simeon Asenov, UNWE, professional field 3.3. Political Science,  
member of a scientific jury, determined by order of the Rector of  
Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”,

for the **PhD Thesis of Dimitra Dimitrova Voeva**

entitled:

**The Democratic Mask of Political Engineering:  
the amendments to the electoral rules in Bulgaria (2009-2021)**

for the award of the educational and scientific degree  
"Doctor of Political Science (Bulgarian political process)

### **1. Relevance and general characteristics of the dissertation**

The conduct of free and democratic elections, with a high degree of citizen participation and public trust in electoral rules and results, is fundamental to the stability of modern democracy. The electoral system has been the subject of increased interest in our country in the last two decades and is among the most frequently discussed topics in the national media space and within the Bulgarian political process. The current dissertation explores the reform of the system for electing people's representatives in Bulgaria. It refers to the debate on the implementation of a majoritarian electoral system and the active possibility, introduced by the political elites, for so-called preferential voting for a given candidate within proportional party lists. The dissertation's focus on the study of preferential voting, with its various dimensions and effects, is timely and relevant. The continuous changes in the rules, the various problems and practices accompanying the electoral process, and the chronic political instability in recent years have set new contours and context for the analysis and evaluation of the effects of preferential voting. Introduced relatively recently, until now this subject has not been systematically and comprehensively studied. The stated circumstances indisputably argue in favor of the high degree of relevance and practical orientation of the dissertation submitted for defense.

The dissertation has a total volume of 342 pages (of which 185 are the author's own text) and represents a comprehensive and complete text that fully meets the accepted standards for this

kind of scientific work. Its structure includes an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and references, which logically link its contents. The text contains numerous tables to support the author's analysis of preferential voting with its dimensions, dynamics, influence, and effects for the period under study (2009-2021). It is worth noting the rich bibliography and other sources of information and resources used to achieve the goals of the research, including sociological surveys, media publications, legal acts and court decisions, and transcripts of parliamentary meetings (pp. 185-195). Five appendices are attached with a very rich and precisely structured empirical database on the dynamics and effects of preferential voting for individual parliamentary elections, constituencies, and parties (pp. 196-342). This part of the dissertation is a solid foundation that can be used in future research, analysis, and expert evaluations regarding parliamentary elections in our country.

In the introduction, the research elements of the work are formulated – the subject, main goal, hypothesis, tasks, the limitations of the analysis, and the choice of the researched period, the following structure is presented and justified (pp. 6-9). The hypothesis is that "... the political elite instrumentalizes electoral reforms by trying to realize comparative advantages immediately before elections [...], in line with their interest in gaining an advantage over political opponents and achieving a positive effect on their public image [...], the reform is presented as an opportunity to relegitimize the electoral process and increase voter turnout".

The first chapter (pp. 10-53) clarifies the theoretical and methodological basis of the study. The main concepts and trends in the scientific literature regarding electoral reforms and the implementation of various variants of electoral systems are presented, interpreted, and clarified. A very good impression is made by the demonstrated in-depth knowledge and skillful handling of a number of both classic and new authors on the analyzed issues.

The second chapter (pp. 53-101) analyzes the parliamentary debate in our country for the period (2009-2021) regarding the need to carry out electoral reforms. Through a qualitative analysis of the shorthand protocols of the National Assembly, the positions of all parties regarding the majoritarian system and the introduction of preferential voting have been presented and argued for. It was concluded that the positions of the parties regarding electoral reform correspond to their direct political interest. These are realized in the following ways: (1) directly, through an expected

advantage during elections (electoral engineering), or (2) indirectly, through the search for a better public image for the individual parties.

The third chapter (pp. 102-182) comprehensively examines in depth the dynamics and effects of preferential voting in five consecutive parliamentary elections from 2014 to 2021 (elections for the 43rd, 44th, 45th, 46th, and 47th National Assembly). The Chapter includes a complex empirical analysis of the preferential vote as a total share of those who voted and among those who voted for individual parties. This allows for the registering of a number of connections and trends regarding the application of preferential voting. The text makes a very good impression by highlighting the main factors affecting the dynamics in the use of preferential votes, especially clearly expressed in the last few years - the practices for attracting controlled and bought votes, the appearance of new parties in the party system, the introduction and effects of machine voting, etc.

The conclusion of the dissertation (pp. 183-185) summarizes the achieved results, which confirm the hypothesis. One of the main conclusions of the study is that preferential voting has an impact on the personalization of mandates and their distribution between parties, but not on the motivation of voters to exercise their right to vote.

## **2. Evaluation of scientific results and scientific contributions**

The dissertation presented for public defense presents an in-depth analysis of a topical political problem of practical importance for the Bulgarian electoral system for conducting parliamentary elections. The exposition is built on a rich theoretical basis and an empirical database, which gives depth and completeness to the subject of the study. The developed scientific work presents its author with dignity and a number of positive aspects and achievements can be pointed out within it. In summary, I would point to the following achieved scientific results:

- a successfully selected methodology, a broad theoretical and empirical basis of the author's analysis, and a scientifically sound presentation style, without unnecessary details and deviations;

- a review and analysis of the concepts of modern foreign authors regarding the causes, trends, and frequency of electoral reforms; the study presents the typologies of preferential voting, with its influence and particularities in the context of party politics and party electoral lists;

- a qualitative analysis of the parliamentary debate after 2009 on the topic of the potential implementation of a majoritarian electoral system, mixed electoral system, and preferential voting, which proves that the asserted positions of individual parties on the subject of electoral reforms either represent a search for a direct electoral advantage or serve the goal of achieving a positive party image;

- a comprehensive empirical analysis of the introduction and operation of preferential voting, with its dynamics, effects, tendencies, and dependencies, in the Bulgarian parliamentary elections for the period covered in the study.

Based on the content of the dissertation text, I generally accept the self-assessment of the contributions presented in a narrative form on p. 35 of the author's abstract. I believe that they should be better formulated and presented more precisely and concretely, in the style generally accepted for this kind of scientific work, instead of the descriptive presentation made in the text of the abstract.

### **3. Evaluation of the summary and scientific publications**

The prepared and presented abstract is 36 pages long. It consistently and faithfully reflects the content of the dissertation. There have been 3 publications made on the topic of the dissertation, which covers the necessary requirements for the defense of a dissertation work. The publications are realized in collections of doctoral studies of the University of Sofia and have the necessary accessibility and publicity for a wide range of readers.

### **4. Critical notes, recommendations and questions**

The dissertation is very well developed considering the research parameters set in the introduction and the final scientific result it achieves. In a constructive spirit, I would like to make some technical and editorial notes and recommendations. They are not meant to question the scientific merits and the convincing results of the dissertation.

First of all, it is noticeable that nowhere in the text of the dissertation and in the text of the author's reference is there an indentation made when forming separate paragraphs. This should be taken into account in future research. Second, the introduction sets out the understanding that the dissertation has two subjects of research (pp. 6-7). I think this is wrong. The subject is one, and it

is captured very aptly in the title of the dissertation topic: the debate on the changes to the electoral rules and the effects of the introduction of preferential voting. The verb tense used in formulating the research tasks (pp. 7-8) presents them as achieved final scientific results, and not as pending activities in the course of the dissertation's research.

I recommend that the dissertation takes into account the constructive comments and is subsequently published in order to have its scholarly and practical application: (1) in future political science research, and (2) in the debate on reforming and improving the parliamentary election system. Bulgarian politicians and parties have a certain need for such research. My question to the dissertation student is: what are the prospects for preferential voting in our country?

## **5. Conclusion**

On the basis of what has been set out in the opinion so far and taking into account the implementation of the legal provisions of Art. 6 of the Academic Staff Development Act in the Republic of Bulgaria, paragraph 27 of the Rules for its implementation **I state my strong conviction and support for awarding the degree of Doctor of Political Science to Dimitra Dimitrova Voeva** for her dissertation on "The Democratic Mask of Political Engineering: the amendments to the electoral rules in Bulgaria (2009-2021)".

Associate Professor Simeon Assenov

Sofia, 16 October 2023