

## REVIEW

by **Svetoslav Mikhailov Zhivkov**, PhD,

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**Dimitra Dimitrova Voeva's** dissertation on "**The Democratic Mask of Political Engineering. The Changes of the Electoral Rules in Bulgaria (2009 - 2021)**", for the award of the PhD degree in the professional field 3.3 Political Science; Doctoral Programme in Political Science (Bulgarian Political Process)

I am appointed by Order of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" № RD-38-411/ 14.07.2023 on the basis of Article 4 of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria as a member of the scientific jury for the defense of the Ph.D. dissertation of Dimitra Voeva, a Ph.D. student at the Faculty of Philosophy of the same University. In this capacity, I submit the following review.

**PhD student details.** Dimitra Voeva is a graduate of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." In 2016, she graduated in Political Science at the Faculty of Philosophy. Two years later, she graduated with a Master's in Political Consulting. She has been a regular PhD student at the Department of Political Science since 2020. In this capacity, he participates in several research conferences, and in the

academic year 2021/2022 he teaches seminar classes at the Department of European Studies. The competencies acquired during her studies allow her to pursue a career as a professional political scientist. In 2021-2022, she worked as an assistant at the Central Election Commission and the District Election Commission of the 24-MIR, and in the current 2023, she is an expert at the Trend Research Centre.

**Topic Relevance:** Elections are an irrevocable component of any representative democracy. Political scientists have long established that not only the sentiments of voters' matter for the outcome of electoral struggles and the methods by which their votes are transformed into representative mandates. Preferential voting under the list proportional system debuted in Bulgaria in 2007 for European Parliament elections, in 2014 for parliamentary elections, and in 2015 for municipal council elections. However, there is currently no in-depth research on the innovation, its application in Bulgaria, and its implications for the political system in the country. From this point of view, the topic of this dissertation is extremely topical.

**Dissertation:** The submitted dissertation is titled " The Democratic Mask of Political Engineering. The Changes of the Electoral Rules in Bulgaria (2009 - 2021) " with scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stoycho Stoychev. It is 342 standard pages long and consists of an introduction, three chapters (24 paragraphs), a conclusion, a bibliography (195 pages of main text), and five annexes.

In the introduction, the dissertation highlights the importance of electoral regulations for the outcome of electoral struggles and political actors' resulting interest in adjusting the rules according to their interests and expectations. The author indicates the focus of the work: the problems with the majority system and preferential voting. The dissertation is not a study of electoral regulations in their entirety, but in the introduction, the colleague has successfully argued the need to

limit the object of study (p. 8). Voeva specifies two objects of study: the positions of political forces on changes in electoral laws and the effects of the adopted reforms. The author hypothesizes that "political elites instrumentalize electoral reforms by trying to realize comparative advantages immediately before elections" (p. 7). In the introduction, the Ph.D. student also identifies the main issues: the motivations for the changes, the political context in which they are taking place, the dynamics in preferential voting, and the political implications.

The first chapter is entitled "Electoral Systems and electoral reforms: theory and Practice". In its introduction, the author defines the terms 'elections' and 'electoral system' and briefly traces the evolution of electoral law over the last two hundred years, highlighting three important processes: the introduction of universal suffrage for men, the inclusion of women in the electoral process and the lowering of the voting age. My colleague argues that the electoral system is not synonymous with electoral law but covers only some of its parameters. In this respect, Voeva follows Alan Renick and adopts an "expansive" view of the electoral system, including voting rights, electoral administration, campaign finance rules, etc. (p. 13). The PhD student already demonstrates excellent knowledge and critical insight into the research of political scientists, sociologists, and legal scholars from Bulgaria and around the world. For example, Voeva not only successfully differentiates the main components of electoral systems (formula, constituency magnitude, etc.) but also knows and presents in detail the differences in conception of leading political scientists such as Arend Leiphart, Michael Gallagher, Paul Mitchell, Reynolds, etc. Regarding the typology of electoral systems, the author adopts the classical division into majoritarian, proportional, and mixed. The colleague demonstrates a good knowledge of their wide varieties (relative majority, absolute majority, list proportional, single transferable vote, etc.) and explains their main characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages. For example, regarding proportional systems, the PhD student acknowledges the important role of the magnitude of electoral districts, while with

majoritarian systems, he points out the systemic problem of (re)districting and the dangers of gerrymandering. Regarding trends, Voeva agrees with the dominant conclusions of scholars such as Josep Colomer, Leiphart, and Reynolds, who report an increase in the share of proportional systems but note the existence of other points of view. The colleague's conclusion that "the electoral system is not directly related to the quality of democracy" is fully justified (p. 20)

The third paragraph of the first chapter is devoted to preferential voting. Here again, Voeva demonstrates excellent knowledge. Given the dissertation topic, the author objectively concentrates on preferential voting in list proportional systems. Pointing out the two main types - closed and open lists, the colleague notes the existence of many varieties - single/multiple, compulsory/voluntary, etc. The author highlights the essential feature of preferential voting - "candidates cannot rely on the party alone to get elected but must compete with their fellow party members" (p. 23). Regarding the impact of preferential voting on turnout, Voeva is familiar with the different perspectives but does not take sides. More importantly, given the political culture of Bulgarians, the colleague acknowledges the interconnections between preferential voting and clientelism. Very original is the author's differentiation of electoral corruption into "internal" (characteristic of rigid lists) and "external" (in preferential voting) (p. 29). The dissertator distinguishes two ways in which preferential voting is used to control the vote: as a code for unauthorized voter identification and to buy votes for individual candidates.

In the following paragraphs (4-7), the dissertation addresses the fundamental question concerning the interdependencies between electoral and party systems. Here again, Voeva demonstrates an excellent knowledge of political theory and brings into scholarly circulation the research of leading political scientists (Maurice Duverger, Douglas Ray, Rain Taagepera, Carles Bois, Colomer, Leiphart, Matthew Sjöberg Schugart, etc.). Regarding the "eternal" argument of what is cause and what is effect in the "electoral system -

party system" relationship, the dissertation introduces the reader to both views and notes that "both approaches have their merits" (p. 36). This "neutral" position is successfully argued with the Bulgarian electoral reform 2009, which has important political consequences but is a product of electoral engineering. The PhD student agrees with the prevailing view in scholarship that cardinal changes in electoral systems are rarely made because the winners have no interest in changing the rules under which they won and because of institutional constraints in some countries. Regarding the latter, the author rightly notes that there are none in Bulgaria because the electoral code can be changed according to the standard procedure. Noting the factors for changes in electoral law, Voeva stresses the importance of partisan interests but adds that ideologies, public attitudes, etc., also play a role here. For her, it is the presence of multiple "environmental" factors that make the players' calculations not always work out in electoral reforms. In view of the promotion of electoral reforms as a panacea by some Bulgarian parties, the colleague notes and explains the three historic cases of cardinal change in electoral regulations after World War II - Italy, New Zealand, and Japan in the 1990s. At the end of the chapter, Voeva gives a brief retrospective of the Bulgarian electoral system. Quite naturally, the focus falls on regulations after the collapse of the communist regime. The colleague demonstrates a good knowledge of the electoral legislation for the VII Supreme National Assembly and the National Assemblies.

The second chapter, entitled "Substantive Aspects of Electoral Reform Proposals," focuses on Bulgarian electoral legislation. The dissertation's main source is the National Assembly's shorthand diaries. From the outset, the dissertation clearly distinguishes between the officially declared motives for the reforms - 'a desire for more democracy' - and the actual motives of the legislators - the introduction of formulas favouring the representation of certain parties or personalities and the search for image effects (p. 54). Voeva makes a strong case for highlighting the main stages in the evolution of electoral legislation - the 2009

law, the 2010 Fidosova Code with its 2012 amendments, the Manolova Code (2014), and the 2019 legal changes. I welcome the inclusion in the narrative of the failed reform attempts - the 2015 and 2016 referendums, the 2017 and 2021 drafts - because they are evidence of political intent. My colleague's approach to structuring the narrative follows global models. The description of each of the reforms begins with a presentation of the political context and continues with an exposition and analysis of the different projects, the positions of the different parties, and their arguments. The colleague notes the contradictions in the BSP's behaviour on the issue of preferential voting - official support for flexible lists and, at the same time, a party ban on personal campaigns. I would point out to her that there is a similar ban on ITNs, which contrasts with the advertising of the majority system. I fully support Voeva's conclusion that Slavi Trifonov's party's agitation for electoral reform only aims to 'gain popularity'. In chapter two, Voeva demonstrates a detailed knowledge of the dynamics of the different parties' positions on specific reform proposals. In most cases, she also manages to highlight the real motives of the political actors - the affinity of the coalition formations for preferential voting and why the small parties resist the introduction of a majority system with regard to GERB, Voeva notes that the formation has an interest in introducing a majority system, but also with some proposals the party is seeking a purely image effect. I fully agree with the author's conclusions. I would add that it was good to distinguish the specific cases in which one or the other motive dominates (in my opinion, by 2020 GERB no longer has any party interest in a majority system). The lack of analysis of the MRF's positions against the majoritarian system is the only more serious omission in the narrative of chapter two, given that the party is of a regionalized type (after Karamani).

The third chapter, entitled "Practical Implementation of the electoral changes," focuses mainly on the political implications of introducing preferential voting. Here, the author's main source is the election results data from the CEC. Given the study's objectives, I support including the results of the European

Parliament elections. My colleague has successfully argued his method for calculating the share of the preferential vote - from the votes for parties and coalitions from Bulgaria, not from the total vote. I also welcome introducing and using the term 'effective preference'. Voeva reveals the trends in preferential voting and which parties it is more common in. The PhD student manages to highlight the factors determining the dynamics - both "internal" and "external" (the introduction of three-digit numbers in preferences, machine voting, etc.). The most valuable thing in the chapter is the highlighting of the direct effect of the reform - the preferentially elected deputies. They are presented by name, and in most cases Voeva reveals the reasons for their "rise" in the ranks. Here I would refer the colleague to an issue she has not addressed - how the personal vote for candidates affects their positioning on the lists in subsequent elections. Chapter Three concludes with an analysis of the effects of machine voting. I fully share the author's conclusions on the benefits and risks of the innovation. However, the narrative here could have been more thorough. Given the study's objectives, I would refer Voeva to a comparative analysis of preferential voting in paper ballots and machine data in the April 2021 general election. The PhD student also demonstrates self-criticism. She notes the restriction of cases of passed preference to parliamentary parties as a "shortcoming" (p. 153). For me, this is not a disadvantage, as to do otherwise would include the lists of marginal formations in the database and distort the view of the effects of the reform. As a "compromise", I suggest that Voeva incorporate parties with votes above 1% in future studies, the so-called relevant parties (according to Leiphart).

The overall impression of Dimitra Voeva's work is more than positive. The dissertation meets and, in some respects, exceeds the legal requirements. The author demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the issues, the ability to critically analyze the sources, and the necessary distance from the object of study. Voeva's conclusions are justified. The volume of sources used is impressive, with the number of research papers exceeding 120 bibliographic units. In citing, the

colleague has adhered to the American Political Science Association method. Deviations here are rare and minor (periodicals are not in italics; in places the years of publication are in parentheses, following the Harvard model). The text incorporates 35 tables, not counting those in the appendices. The work is originally authored. There are no signs of plagiarism. I highly recommend the publication of the dissertation with the inclusion of the changes in the electoral code in 2022 and the data from the 2023 parliamentary elections.

**Abstract and publications:** Dimitra has also submitted the required abstract, in which she briefly presents her dissertation and synthesizes her findings; she has also submitted three scientific articles on the topic, one of which was published in the Yearbook of Sofia University.

**Conclusion:** Dimitra Voeva covers the minimum national requirements laid down in the legislation of the Republic of Bulgaria. Her dissertation is a complete scientific study contributing to Bulgarian political science. It is the first in-depth study of preferential voting in Bulgaria. I declare that I will vote in favour of awarding the Doctor of Science and Education degree to Dimitra Voeva.