

OPINION

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of the dissertation thesis of **Adriana Antonova Toneva**, part-time doctoral student at the Department of European Studies, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, on the topic
“The Eurosceptic Populism of Radical Right-Wing Parties in Bulgaria and Germany in the period 2005-2022”

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Rumyana Petrova Kolarova, PhD, SU “St. Kliment Ohridski”

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

Professional field: 3.3. Political Sciences

Doctoral Program: “European Studies - Political Studies of the EU”

1. Main characteristics and framework of the dissertation thesis

The thesis of Adriana Toneva “**The Eurosceptic Populism of Radical Right-Wing Parties in Bulgaria and Germany in the period 2005-2022**” has a total of 221 pages, and consists of an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. The bibliography includes nearly 350 sources in Bulgarian, English and German, including monographs, scientific articles, political party platforms, media publications, etc. The cited scientific literature includes both references to basic theoretical works, as well as up-to-date research on the studied problems.

The introduction clearly sets out the framework of the study, including the significance of the topic and its topicality, the main research question, the object, the focus, the aim, the tasks, hypotheses, methods and structure.

Adriana Toneva argues the **topicality and significance** of the topic with the fact that, regardless of the predictions that the radical right-wing parties that appeared in Western Europe in the 1980s will quickly lose their popularity, the exact opposite has been happening. She points out that, in fact, since the 1990s, they have been on a constant rise (p. 5). This is indisputable, and the

dynamics of the political life in the European Union in the context of the elections for members of the European Parliament in 2024 proves it. In the latter context the discussion on notions like “extreme right party” and “populism” has increased in the public debate.

Along with the clearly presented arguments for the topicality and significance of the topic, the doctoral student formulates a precise and concrete **research question**, which has practical importance, namely “Is the euroscepticism an essential or opportunistic characteristic of the radical right in Bulgaria and, respectively, in Germany?” (p. 6). The other parameters of the dissertation fully correspond to the question. The **object** of the research is correctly defined, namely radical right-wing parties from Bulgaria and Germany, with a **focus** - their euroscepticism. The research’s **hypotheses** give it even more focus by drawing attention to the potentially opportunistic nature of the euroscepticism of radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Germany.

The **limitations** of the dissertation are stated into the text itself, which seems to me to be a good approach. Toneva repeatedly touches on topics that are relevant to the dissertation but are not her focus. In these cases, she draws attention to the fact that the given topic will not be considered.

2. Content, research and analysis

In terms of content, the dissertation has a qualitative literature review of theoretical sources and its own empirical research.

The **first chapter** *Defining the basic concepts of “populism”, “euroscepticism” and “radical right-wing political party”* is dedicated to the theoretical basis of the dissertation and presents the conceptual framework of basic concepts related to the purpose of the research. The overview of a wide range of both foreign and Bulgarian scientific interpretations regarding populism, euroscepticism and radical-right parties is impressive. It should be noted that the doctoral student makes an argument on part of the theses of the cited authors, which shows a deep knowledge and insight into the texts. In addition, Toneva clearly indicates which of the presented definitions of populism is the starting point in the dissertation, and with regard to euroscepticism, she offers her own empirical model for distinguishing between soft and hard euroscepticism.

The presentation of the radical right-wing Bulgarian parties in the **second chapter** of the dissertation is done in a focused manner with sufficient both own research and reference to authoritative international and Bulgarian sources. Data from the Eurobarometer on public attitudes towards the EU in Bulgaria and Germany are provided. This is essential for identifying an association between the dynamics of public attitudes in the two countries and a potential

Eurosceptic populist response from the parties under study, which would demonstrate the opportunistic nature of Euroscepticism.

The set goal and the tasks for its realization require a serious volume of work with primary sources, namely the political programs and messages of the studied parties. The texts presented by Toneva in the second but also in the third chapter show that she coped with this task perfectly. I believe that the **third chapter** itself has a significant contribution, due to the detailed presentation of the origins of Alternative for Germany and the analysis of the dynamics in its eurosceptic positions, similar to that of the Bulgarian parties discussed in the second chapter.

The **fourth chapter** unconditionally shows that the materials discussed by Toneva are understood, thought out in depth with a sufficient argument. This is demonstrated in the moments in which she easily makes a parallel between the Bulgarian parties and Alternative for Germany.

In the **conclusion** are presented the main summaries that can be drawn based on the conducted research. The way the hypothesis is formulated in the introduction is an excellent basis for discussing it in the conclusion. Key moments of the analysis are commented, which prove the first part of the research hypothesis concerning the Bulgarian radical right-wing parties and reject its second part, concerning the Alternative for Germany. The conclusions drawn in the summary were obtained by correct application of the used methodology.

3. Contributions

Adriana Toneva formulated four contributions of the dissertation thesis. I agree with each of them, considering the inclusion of opportunism in the definition of populism as the most essential contribution of the dissertation. The thesis undoubtedly contributes both to theoretical political knowledge concerning populism and euroscepticism, but it also has practical dimensions. The first and second contributions formulated by doctoral student Toneva can be attributed to this theoretical knowledge. The detailed examination of the emergence, development and positions of radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Germany is an undoubted contribution. I find that the above makes it possible to predict the dynamics of electoral support for populist parties in a given national context.

The conclusion that euroscepticism should be considered as a dynamic characteristic of the radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Germany is significant. In this sense, an important contribution of her work is the proof of opportunistic euroscepticism not only among the Bulgarian

parties, but also in Alternative for Germany. Her finding that this conclusion is not an end point, but requires further research, which is quite practically oriented, also deserves recognition.

Doctoral student Toneva has presented five publications on the topic of her dissertation research. The abstract summarizes the framework of the study, as well as highlights from the four chapters, the conclusion, a self-assessment of contributions and a list of published texts.

4. Recommendations and questions

I believe that Adriana Toneva’s dissertation is a complete scientific research product, and I would recommend publishing it as a book. Along with the above, scientific knowledge would gain if she continue her research on this topic. It is in this connection and in the context of the results of the elections for members of the National Assembly in Bulgaria, held on October 27, 2024, that I would like to ask whether, in her opinion, there is a reason for the political party “Velichie” to be defined as *euroseptic* and what variety it would be this eurosepticism – soft or hard?

5. Conclusion

The scientific CV of Adriana Toneva explains why the doctoral student so professionally and thoroughly manages to interpret the topic of populism and eurosepticism of the radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Germany. Her study and internship in German universities has had a serious impact on her detailed knowledge of the subject and her ability to critically analyze. The above presupposes the qualitative of her dissertation on the topic “**Euroseptic populism of radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Germany in the period 2005 – 2022**”. It contains scientific and applied scientific results, which I consider to be an original contribution to science, and it undoubtedly shows that the candidate has in-depth theoretical knowledge of the relevant specialty and abilities for independent scientific research. Thus, I express my **positive opinion** and propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award **Adriana Antonova Toneva** the educational and scientific degree “doctor” in the professional direction”“3.3. Political Sciences”, doctoral program “European Studies - Political Studies of the EU”.

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Sofia



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