

OPINION

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professional direction 3.3 "Political Sciences",

member of a scientific jury formed by order No. RD-38-474/24.07.2024
of the Rector of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski",

for **the dissertation of Adriana Antonova Toneva**

on the subject:

**"Eurosceptic populism of radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Germany
in the period 2005-2022",**

for awarding the educational and scientific degree
"PhD of Political Science" in professional direction
3.3 "Political Sciences" (European Studies - Political Studies of the EU).

1. Actuality and general characteristics of the dissertation work

The presented dissertation has a high degree of relevance given the formation, rise and ever-increasing social influence and political representation of radical right-wing parties in the party systems and democratic institutions of a number of European Union countries. The results obtained from the recently held elections for national representatives of the member states in the European Parliament and the early parliamentary elections in France provide sufficient arguments for the study of growing Euroscepticism, the main exponent of which are the parties of the radical populist right. This trend manifested itself even more strongly in the subsequent parliamentary elections in Austria and in some German states, where these parties won first place and the opportunity to govern. Their political representation is also stable in the countries of Eastern Europe, incl. and in Bulgaria. The choice of the PhD student to research and compare the Eurosceptic populism of the radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Germany, for a contemporary period filled with strong political dynamics and crises of a different nature, is fully justified and well-founded. As far as I know, a comparative study with such a subject is being done for the first time in our country, which further strengthens its relevance among contemporary Bulgarian political studies.

A dissertation is structured in an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. The total volume of the manuscript is 220 pages, of which 192 pages are author's text and 27 pages are a list of used information sources. In the introduction, the necessary supporting elements for dissertation research are precisely formulated - object, subject, goal, tasks, hypotheses, methodology, structure and limitations of the work. The main research question of the development is clearly stated: to establish whether Euroscepticism is an essential or opportunistic characteristic of the radical right in Bulgaria and Germany (p. 6)? The purpose of the research is to "reveal the specifics of the Eurosceptic populism of the radical right-wing parties" (p. 8). Two working hypotheses of the research were formulated on the basis of the established research line: 1) "...radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria have an inherent populist opportunistic attitude towards the EU", i.e. in this case Euroscepticism is opportunistic; and 2) it is assumed that "...with the radical right party "Alternative for Germany" Euroscepticism is essential".

The first chapter lays the theoretical foundation of the study by clarifying and defining the main concepts for the subsequent analysis: "populism", "euroscepticism" and "radical right party". Their theoretical presentation, analysis and adaptation for the purposes of the dissertation is key to the achievement of the stated objective and related research tasks. In this regard, PhD student Toneva here also achieves the enrichment of leading concepts and definitions in political science, by bringing his own understanding and insight into their content, in accordance with the set goals of his research subject. It is important and necessary to make a distinction between a number of labels often used in bad faith by some right-wing parties – traditional, systemic, radical, extreme, extreme, populist, or between right-wing populism and right-wing extremism. The choice of an approach to the study of populism (the concept of shallow ideology of K. Mude and R. Kaltwasser was adopted) and the formulation of one's own working definition for it in view of the subject of the dissertation are of essential importance (p. 22). An empirical model for research and typology of the other key concept - that of Euroscepticism, supplemented with relevant indicators for its evaluation, based on the concept of P. Taggart and A. Sterbiak of "soft" and "hard" Euroscepticism (p.37).

The second chapter clarifies the emergence, the main ideological and programmatic positions of five parties representing the radical right in Bulgaria - Ataka, VMRO, NFSB, Volya, and the process of the initial formation of the "Vazrazhdane" party, for the period 2005-2019.

Through a qualitative content analysis based on the derived indicators of hard and soft Euroscepticism, an empirical study of the pre-election programs of these parties during the parliamentary and European Parliament elections in our country was carried out. Through it, the dynamics in the Euroscepticism of the analyzed parties are tracked in order to establish how opportunistic it is, and own conclusions are drawn.

The third chapter is devoted to the radical right in Germany, using the example of the Alternative for Germany (AfG) party. The issue of the special regime and sensitivity of German society to the extreme right, the difficult formation of such parties, the reasons for the successful formation of the Social Democratic Party with its transformation and subsequent radicalization and positioning in the extreme right space have been thoroughly clarified. Subsequently, the empirical research model was also applied here, to this party, and the specifics of the manifestations and nature of its Euroscepticism were substantiated and summarized.

The fourth chapter focuses on an examination of Euroscepticism during the crises of the Covid-19 pandemic and the outbreak of war in Ukraine. These two crises have a strong and nurturing influence on right-wing populism. For this reason, the PhD student quite rightly singles out this chapter and period (2020-2022) of his research. Arguably, through an in-depth qualitative content analysis of their pre-election programs, messages and media publications, the opportunistic nature of the Euroscepticism of the six radical right-wing populist parties under study is proven, through the strong differences and changes in their attitudes and positions (the so-called "oscillation") on relation of these two crises. In this part of the study, for obvious reasons, the "Vazrazhdane" party is included in the analysis of the Bulgarian case very thoroughly.

In the conclusion, conclusions and generalizations are made in response to the two working hypotheses of the study. The analysis carried out proves that the first hypothesis is confirmed, while the second one is rejected, i.e. for the far-right party AzG, it is also an inherently opportunistic populist attitude towards the European Union (p.190). A main argument and evidence for this assessment is that the Eurosceptic positions of all the six studied parties change depending on the political situation and therefore they can be characterized as opportunistic. The general conclusion of the research is that opportunistic Euroscepticism is a dynamic, highly variable and conveniently positioning characteristic for radical right parties in different situations, and not their essential (originally inherent and unchanging) characteristic.

2. Evaluation of scientific results and scientific contributions

The dissertation presented for discussion is a complete, complete text that has the qualities of an in-depth political study of an actual problem for political science. The presentation is informative, with logically bound content that consistently achieves the set research goals and objectives. The results of the performed analysis are traceable and proven in the conclusions and summaries made. The dissertation reflects the author's own research efforts. I find no unfair use of other authorship, other people's theses, scientific results or citation.

My overall scientific assessment is that the presented dissertation is very well developed considering the research tasks set in the introduction and the final scientific result achieved. In summary, I would point to the following scientific results achieved.

- A successful choice of an accurate and applicable methodology was made, with the attraction of an appropriate theoretical and broad empirical base for the author's analysis on the subject of the study.

- An in-depth analysis of theories, approaches and concepts of modern foreign authors for research and typology of the concepts of populism and Euroscepticism was carried out, on the basis of which they derived and applied a working definition of political populism and an empirical model for studying the dynamics of Eurosceptic attitudes of the parties.

- Four empirical studies were carried out in different parts of the dissertation research, through which the opportunistic nature of Euroscepticism of the studied six radical right-wing populist parties in Bulgaria and Germany is proven. The strong differences and changes in their attitudes and positions towards the EU and its common policies during two deep and different crises for the European continent have been identified and analyzed.

- A comparative analysis of the specific characteristics of the Bulgarian radical right-wing populist parties in their pre-election programs and messages regarding the EU and the country's European integration process under different political conditions and situations for the research period (2005-2022) was made.

Based on the content of the dissertation, I accept the author's self-assessment of contributions with p.20 of the author's abstract. I believe that they are correctly formulated and have their specific grounds and substantive coverage in the text of the dissertation research presented for public defense.

3. Evaluation of the abstract and scientific publications

The prepared and presented abstract is 28 pages long. It consistently and faithfully reflects the content of the dissertation. 5 publications were made on the topic of the dissertation, which exceeds the requirements and testifies to a deep interest in the researched problem. They have been published in serious scientific publications which gives an additional touch of responsibility to the author to present his research work to a wider range of readers. Along with this, the scientific autobiography of PhD student Toneva should be noted, which testifies to carried out specializations, research activity and other activities in German universities and political institutions, which undoubtedly gave its fruitful influence in the process of working on the dissertation research.

4. Notes and recommendations

By coincidence, I had the opportunity to get acquainted with the initial version of the present dissertation submitted for preliminary internal discussion, and then I made a number of notes and comments on the text. I note that the PhD student took into account the notes and recommendations made by me, as well as those of other participants in the internal discussion, as a result of which the dissertation was improved and enriched in terms of quality and content. Questions and notes from different positions and considerations can be added to each scientific work. In this case, the author shows additional demands on himself by posing some discussion questions for future research that would deepen the scientific analysis of the complex and dynamic phenomenon of contemporary radical right-wing populist parties.

I recommend that the dissertation be prepared and published as a monographic study in order to reach a different circle of readers. I find that it contains a conceptual foundation and rich empirical material that can be used for future research.

5. Conclusion

On the grounds stated so far in the opinion and considering the implementation of the legal provisions of Art. 6 of ZRASRB, art. 27, para. 1 of the Regulations for its implementation, *I express my firm conviction and support "for" awarding the educational and scientific degree "PhD of Political Science" to Adriana Toneva, for her dissertation work on the topic: "The Eurosceptic populism of the radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Germany in the period 2005-2022".*

Sofia, 22 October 2024

Assoc. Prof. PhD Simeon Asenov