

REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. Dobrin Hristov Kanev, Ph.D., Political Science (3.3)

of Adriana Antonova Toneva's dissertation on the topic

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

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

Adriana Toneva's dissertation submitted for public defense on the topic "Eurosceptic populism of radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Germany in the period 2005 - 2022" is a consistent, mature and complete study, elaborated in an academic style, which is aimed at academically significant problems, distinguished by their actuality.

In fact, it is the choice of the dissertation topic that first attracts attention, because we are meeting with another study dedicated to problems related to the populist radical right in Europe. On the one hand, the reason for such a decision is clear – the political successes of this party family in recent decades are indisputable, and their consequences for both party systems and the democratic sustainability of many European countries are serious. We have long witnessed the coming hour of populism, including especially radical right-wing populism fueled by economic anxieties and cultural fears, aided by the crisis of political representation in most old and new democracies. Wherever we look, today there are no countries that can be considered "free" from populism and influential populist parties. The populist wave in Europe, which started more than thirty years ago, has led to the present significant presence of these parties and their ideas in European political life. We are direct witnesses to a series of proofs of this fait accompli. Let's mention only the most recent - the serious electoral successes of Alternative for Germany in the eastern part of the country (in Thuringia it took first place for the first time, with a 10% lead over the second), as well as the first place of the stronger and more radical than before Freedom Party in the Austrian parliamentary elections.

We can cite quite a lot cases from previous years, and obviously more steps in this direction are coming in the near future in other countries as well.

All this development, which has the potential to lead to significant political changes, has inevitably become a challenge for political science as well, and it is no coincidence that in recent decades the constant stream of populism studies has been carried out. As early as seven or eight years ago, Cas Mudde wrote about the unfolding of a new, already fourth wave in the study of populism, distinguished by the effort to cover this phenomenon in its complexity.

And the doctoral student herself gives us some data in this regard - from 1990 to 2010, more than 1,200 books on populism were published, and the tendency is to strengthen academic interest; according to the search engine GoogleScholar, there are more than 19,000 scientific articles on populism. The total number of scientific publications on the radical right in Bulgarian, German and English in the period 2020-2024 is about 64,000 (see p. 7).

Having in mind her topic, we see that Adriana Toneva's dissertation also fits into these ongoing theoretical attempts to explore various aspects of radical right-wing populism. So there are all grounds to claim both relevance and scientific significance of the questions posed in the dissertation. Her subject has long been no longer on the fringes of the research mainstream, but rather at its center.

On the other hand, the extraordinary attention that populism has caused among academic circles also hides a different kind of risks. For young researchers, they come down to the difficulty of finding their own research aspect that distinguishes them from the multitude of populism studies and thus leads to their own contribution to the process of accumulating new knowledge in this research field. Adriana Toneva has found her solution by, in the first place, focusing on the so-called party-based populism, choosing as her object of study the radical right-wing populist parties in two countries, which would be far from the first choice especially in comparative studies. We are talking about Bulgaria and the Federal Republic of Germany - two countries that differ significantly in numerous indicators described by the doctoral student (see p. 6-7). At the same time, this non-traditional approach could reveal additional opportunities to reach new knowledge about radical right-wing populist parties.

Secondly, we can find the research niche sought by the dissertation student in the very research goal she set herself, namely, to seek and justify the connection between Euroscepticism and the populism of radical right-wing parties (see p. 7), and from there - to reveal the specifics of the Eurosceptic populism of the radical right-wing parties (see p. 8). More broadly, this goal is described as a main research question - "is Euroscepticism an essential or opportunistic characteristic of the radical right in Bulgaria and, respectively, in Germany?" The author explains that it would be opportunistic if the

parties' attitude towards the EU changes in different directions, "without any significant change in the other elements of their political program and ideology" (see p. 6).

These two important specifics of the dissertation are leading in the formulation of the respective research tasks as well as the hypotheses.

In summary, Adriana Toneva's intended research tasks look roughly like this: clarification of the key concepts in the dissertation area (radical right party, populism, Euroscepticism); stepping on the concept of hard and soft Euroscepticism (Taggart-Szczerbiak) to derive indicators for analyzing the dynamics of Eurosceptic positions; an empirical study of the dynamics of these positions in "Ataka", VMRO-BND, "Volya", "Vazrazhdane", NFSB and in "Alternative for Germany", defining the specifics of Eurosceptic populism in Bulgaria and Germany by comparing them and analyzing them relevant changes in terms of the presence of opportunism; discovering the causes of the possibly manifested opportunism; search for general trends in the dynamics of the Eurosceptic positions of the studied parties, the similarities and differences in the Bulgarian and German cases (see pp. 9-10).

On this basis, the author formulated the two working hypotheses that are subject to testing. The first comes down to the fact that the radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria have a populist opportunistic attitude towards the European Union. And in the second case, it is assumed that in the studied radical right-wing party in Germany, Alternative for Germany - AfD), Euroscepticism is an essential characteristic of it. (see p. 9-10)

In order to fulfill her research goals and tasks, to find answers to the posed hypotheses, the author has adopted a suitable methodology for this purpose, using different methodological approaches.

At the beginning, we see a successful application of critical analysis in reviewing the theoretical positions of key authors and in clarifying the main concepts with which the author works. Even here, the high degree of knowledge and understanding of the main scientific texts related to the topic of her research is evident.

The requested comparative analysis between parties from two countries is practically preceded by two analyzes of separate cases (case studies), separately affecting the radical right parties in Bulgaria and in Germany. Central to the work is qualitative content analysis - the study of the content of political documents (primarily election platforms for parliamentary and European elections, as well as party programs, but also parliamentary and party speeches, statements, declarations, interviews of key political figures in the respective parties). The author describes her approach as follows: "Using the method of qualitative content analysis with extraction (Gläser, Grit,

2010, p. 199) we select certain parts of party programs and messages that correspond to indicators of soft or hard Euroscepticism according to the developed by us empirical model based on the concept of Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak (2001, 2008). We arrange the text excerpts in columns for soft and hard Euroscepticism, and below them in italics we indicate the corresponding indicators to which they correspond." (p. 11)

Along with the selection of the appropriate methodological approaches and tools, indicative of the serious work of the PhD student is the significant source base she has attracted. The reference in the bibliography indicates a total of 345 used sources, 188 of which are in Bulgarian, 93 in English and 68 in German. Brief mention has already been made of the secondary literature on populism, the radical right and Euroscepticism, which the author has thoroughly studied and analyzed in the first chapter of the dissertation. Many of these publications are listed on p. 11 of the dissertation. Serious work has also been done with primary sources (including speeches, interviews, statements of populist leaders). An important place among the sources used by the author is the data on the radical right-wing parties in the two studied countries from the expert studies of Chapel Hill, which evaluate the ideological and political positioning of the parties. This data is accompanied in some cases by data from the Comparative Manifesto Project, which is the leading source of information in the field of textual coding of party political manifestos.

The structure of the text chosen by the author also creates the necessary prerequisites for an analytical exposition of the problems and for their scientific interpretation. The dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography.

After an introduction, which in its completeness and precision meets academic standards, the first chapter solves the task of defining the main concepts in the doctorate, starting with an overview of the most important texts devoted to analyzes of the radical right, populism and Euroscepticism. In this regard, the author has shown both in-depth knowledge and the ability to critically evaluate, compare, typologize and build independent concepts.

In the beginning, her gaze was turned towards political populism. After a brief overview of the emergence of modern political pluralism and its development, of the main authors and texts in foreign and Bulgarian political science, there follows a more detailed presentation in separate paragraphs of the three main concepts of pluralism (as an ideology, as a political strategy for mobilization, as a socio-cultural phenomenon). By comparing these three theoretical approaches with their strengths and weaknesses, the author expresses her preference for the first one and sets as the theoretical basis of her research the so-called "minimal definition" of Cas Mudde of populism as

"thin" ideology. This is where the working definition formulated by the doctoral student came from, which includes an element (a place of opportunism) closely related to the main research question: "Populism is a "thin ideology that divides society into two antagonistic groups - the 'pure people' and ' the corrupt elite', in an opportunistic attempt to gain popularity in a given situation'. (p. 22)

Toneva's next step is aimed at clarifying the definition and concept of Euroscepticism. In this regard, she again compares two widespread theoretical constructions of the nature and varieties of Euroscepticism - Taggart-Szczerbiak, who distinguish hard and soft Euroscepticism, and Kopecky-Mudde, who prefer to differentiate Euroscepticism by diffuse and specific support (in the sense of David Easton) of the European integration process. The author's preference is for the first concept as more applicable from the point of view of her research tasks.

Based on it, she developed her empirical model for studying the Euroscepticism of radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Germany. As already mentioned, Toneva steps on the indicators of hard or soft Euroscepticism proposed by Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak, as the information archive, which is analyzed through qualitative content analysis, consists of election platforms and political programs, official statements of parties and leaders, from their social media posts.

Radical right-wing parties are the author's next focus in her first chapter. Here, the relationship between right-wing radicalism and populism, as well as between right-wing radicalism and Euroscepticism, are placed in the center. Also included is a short paragraph (about two and a half pages) on the role of the media. There is no doubt that the media play an important role in all the political phenomena that the author explores, but the size of this text does not seem sufficient for a serious analysis, and its place seems somewhat artificial.

In the second and third chapters, in the form of separate case studies, the Bulgarian and German parties in the spectrum of the radical right are analyzed, using the indicators adopted by the author to carry out a qualitative content analysis.

The second chapter, which is the most extensive in the dissertation (almost a third of the total text), is dedicated to the radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria. The object of analysis are five parties (Ataka, VMRO-BND, NFSB, Volya and Vazrazhdane), for which the author proves (on the basis of Mudde's criteria: presence of populism, authoritarianism, nativism) a radical right-wing entity at least for a given time within the framework of studies from her period. Especially for this chapter, in accordance with the dates of parliamentary and European elections, the research period is slightly shortened (2003-2019), thus focusing the analysis to a greater extent on the first four parties. A separate paragraph is devoted to each of them.

It is natural to start with Ataka, which chronologically is at the forefront of the process of the entry of the radical right into Bulgarian political life. In tabular form (which will then be repeated for the other parties as well), the author arranged the positions of Ataka regarding the EU, extracted from election platforms and other significant party documents, differentiating them as either hard or soft Euroscepticism. Toneva notes a dominance of soft Euroscepticism in the years 2005-2013 until the parliamentary elections in the last mentioned year. Then there is a significant change towards the dominance of hard Euroscepticism: "For the first time, Ataka questions the country's stay in the EU, because the European Union in its current form is a threat to the democracy and national sovereignty of the member states, and has failed in the field of economy." (p. 77) The same line was observed during the European and parliamentary elections in 2014, as well as in the 2017 elections, when Ataka was in the United Patriots (OP) coalition. Later on, however, the participation of the OP in the government leads to Ataka's de facto agreement with the pro-European orientation of the cabinet. However, it was firmly withdrawn in 2019 when Ataka was excluded from the coalition – something that was on full display during the 2019 EP elections, when hard-line Euroscepticism returned. All this changeable development leads the author to the conclusion that for Ataka is rather typical populist Euroscepticism on an opportunistic basis (see p. 86).

The next paragraph follows in an analogous way the Euroscepticism of two other parties from this spectrum – VMRO and NFSB. Here, too, the author finds that their Euroscepticism undergoes changes, moving from soft to hard Euroscepticism and vice versa depending on the political situation, and they even tend to leave it when they are in a ruling coalition.

With regard to the next analyzed party Volya, the author concludes that until the European elections in 2019 it was not Eurosceptic at all, but since then it has moved directly to a hard Euroscepticism, caused in her opinion rather by the opportunistic expectation of support from international partners such as Le Pen, Salvini etc.

For Vazrazhdane, in this very short period from its creation to 2019, it is found that, although there are no Eurosceptic elements in its election platform in 2017, this attitude in the form of hard Euroscepticism is evident in the European Parliament elections in 2019 .

In general, Adriana Toneva summarizes her analysis of the Bulgarian radical right-wing parties (in this case mainly the first four) with the conclusion that their Euroscepticism is not principled, but rather opportunistic, in other words, populist (see 113).

In this chapter (almost at the very beginning) a relatively extensive text is also included (pp. 55 - 62), which recreates the results of Eurobarometer surveys on the dynamics of the public attitudes of

the population of Bulgaria and Germany in general regarding the EU. This seems somewhat self-serving, and the explanation that in this way the elements of opportunism can be detected in the messages of the radical right does not seem to me to be fully fulfilled in the thesis, to say the least. And hardly the thematic place of this text (if it is needed at all) is in the chapter entitled "Radically right-wing parties in Bulgaria".

As mentioned, the third chapter deals with the radical right in Germany, in this case reduced to the Alternative for Germany party. But right from the beginning, attention was also paid to its predecessors, who formed a favorable spiritual and political environment for its emergence. The dissertation emphasizes two points - first, the specificity of the party's emergence in its being as a "professor's anti-euro party", and second, its turn towards the radical right after 2015 against the background of the refugee crisis and the behavior of the official German authorities. In this part of the dissertation, Toneva has demonstrated extremely detailed knowledge about the development of the party over the years, about the main actors in its leadership, about the conflicts between them and about their frequent changes, about internal party disagreements and divisions.

After this thorough dissection of the Alternative for Germany party and its elites, the author turns her attention to her own research task – the dynamics of its Eurosceptic positions. Before that, she devotes space to proving the radical right-wing nature of the party, again following Mudde's criteria. Regarding the Euroscepticism of the AfD, Adriana Toneva has again presented us with the results of her empirical research using qualitative content analysis. In the initial period, the party moved rather within the framework of soft Euroscepticism, explained by the doctoral student with "the fact that at that time the AfD was more of a one-issue party, which declared itself mainly against the euro and the policy of the German government to save the euro" (pp. 151-152). She found a temporary dominance of hard Euroscepticism in the party's Program (2016), followed by a return to soft Euroscepticism evident in the 2017 election platform. This came to an end around the 2019 EP elections, when in the election campaign the call to leave the EU appears on her platform. From then until the end of the researched period, the author noted the persistence of hard Euroscepticism. According to her, these fluctuations are the result of opportunistic decisions in specific situations, which leads her to the conclusion of a more populist nature of this populism (see pp. 156, 158).

The fourth chapter departs from the form of a case study and, through the simultaneous analysis of the parties in both countries, turns to a more complete comparative analysis. The focus has shifted to the last years of the research period (2020-2022), when the situation in the world changes significantly as a result of the two major events - the covid pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine.

This provides a good opportunity for the author to test her hypotheses regarding the dynamics of Euroscepticism from the point of view of the reactions of the studied parties to these events.

As indicators of Euroscepticism in relation to the pandemic, the author perceives the rejection of EU-authorized vaccines and the disagreement with the introduction of vaccination certificates. Although all the parties studied criticize to one degree or another their governments' measures to deal with the Covid-crisis, she concludes that it is difficult to reduce these positions exclusively to Euroscepticism.

In the case of the war in Ukraine, the negative attitude towards EU sanctions and the positive attitude towards cooperation with Russia are indicated as indicators of Euroscepticism, and after February 2022 – the justification of military aggression (p. 169, 171). Here the author notes a partial change in the positions of three of the six studied parties (AfD, VMRO, NFSB).

Taking into account the positions of the parties on both events, the dissertation describes an increase in the differences between the parties. Ataka and Vazrazhdane remain staunchly Eurosceptic. At VMRO, Eurosceptic positions at least significantly weaken, and at NFSB they disappear. There is insufficient data for Volya. AfD remains Eurosceptic, but certain nuances are present. These differences, according to the author, also do not confirm the thesis of the presence of Euroscepticism due to a radical right-wing nature.

At the conclusion of the dissertation, Adriana Toneva gives a general answer to the questions posed and researched. The conclusions arising from the stated hypotheses are logical and well-founded throughout the work. In the end, she was able to prove that Euroscepticism cannot be defined as an essential characteristic of the studied radical right-wing parties: "In the Bulgarian case, the radical-right character of the parties is combined with rather large variations in their attitude towards the EU and the European integration of Bulgaria . In the German case, the Eurosceptic positions are not unequivocally connected with the radical right positions of the AfD, which emerged as a Eurosceptic but liberal formation" (p. 184). This leads to the conclusion that Euroscepticism is related to the populist and not to the right-wing radical component of the ideology of all the parties studied.

In practice, this means confirming the first hypothesis and rejecting the second (see p. 190).

A good way to end the conclusion is to state questions that remain unresolved in the dissertation or that have emerged during the course of the research, then outline possible directions for future research. This also shows the serious qualities of a researcher, revealed in the text traced so far.

After this presentation of the main characteristics of the presented dissertation, I must also confirm that as a scientific text, Adriana Toneva's dissertation with its size (221 pages) and content, with its well-built and balanced structure, as well as with its rich bibliography fulfills the formal requirements for a similar genre research product laid down in the relevant legal and other normative documents. There is an abstract which, in my opinion, adequately reflects the content of the dissertation work, as well as a self-evaluation of the contributing moments in it. There are five publications on the topic of the doctorate, which even exceeded the number required for the case.

It is more important, of course, to establish the research contributions, new ideas and results that the presented doctorate contains.

First of all, it must be said that the dissertation undoubtedly enriches the available knowledge regarding such important political phenomena of our time as the development and state of the populist radical right parties, their specifics and their attitude to the European integration process - results achieved through a detailed analysis of individual cases and comparative analysis. They have also become possible by finding a specific research perspective, which has enabled the discovery of new aspects of the studied phenomena.

The author has developed her own empirical model with indicators of soft and hard Euroscepticism to study the dynamics of Eurosceptic attitudes of radical right-wing parties. Her contribution is that by carrying out this empirical research base, she has presented us with a complete picture of the Eurosceptic attitudes of the studied parties in the two countries. And this subsequently gave her the opportunity to reach her own reliable conclusions.

The precise and detailed analysis of party documents and secondary sources in the dissertation is also valuable.

Of course, some remarks can be made to the doctorate or additional recommendations can be made for the improvement of the text. Some have already been noted earlier – regarding certain opportunities for changes in the structure of the work.

In addition, I am left with the feeling that in some cases the author gets carried away by the inertia of seeing in every wording by the studied parties necessarily right-wing radicalism or populism, which, at least as a programmatic text, is not always the case (see p. 141).

There are also many repetitions in the text (pp. 23, 46, 97, 99(108(141, etc.)

Regardless of these and other possible shortcomings, in general, the dissertation is characterized by qualities such as the theoretical and political significance of the researched problems, a reliable methodology, a consistently built and logical internal structure, a detailed and accurate picture of the development and essence of the researched phenomena, an in-depth analysis of party documents and messages, scientifically based conclusions and independently achieved research results.

The above evaluations of the scientific quality of the work give me every reason to strongly recommend the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "PhD" in professional direction

3.3. Political Sciences (European Studies - EU Political Studies) by Adriana Antonova Toneva.

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Assoc. Prof. Dobrin Kanev, PhD