

## REVIEW

by Associate Professor Dr. Milen Todorov Lyubenov,

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of the dissertation of Adriana Antonova Toneva on the topic "The Eurosceptic populism of the radical right-wing parties in Bulgaria and Germany in the period 2005 - 2022" for the award of an educational and scientific degree "doctor" in a professional field 3.3. Political Sciences (European studies - Political studies of the EU)

### 1. General characteristics of the dissertation work

The presented dissertation fully complies with the scientific requirements. It examines a significant topic in the context of contemporary challenges facing the European Union. The rise of populism and Euroscepticism is a significant problem that carries with it potential risks for European democracies. Therefore, the understanding of the causes and consequences of these phenomena has in themselves an important practical value, which helps to find adequate scientific explanations of these challenges.

The dissertation covers 221 pages, which include an introduction, four main chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. The research builds on an impressive volume of literature that demonstrates dedication and broad knowledge of the subject of research.

### 2. Evaluation of dissertation publications

5 publications are submitted that exceed the minimum requirements related to the current procedure. All of them correspond to the subject of research of the dissertation work. Four of the articles have been published in peer-reviewed doctoral journals and one in the journal Rhetoric and Communications. Each of the articles has certain contributing moments, demonstrating consistency and dedication in the process of working during the doctoral studies. The papers follow

the general conceptual framework with preliminary conclusions and summaries, which are subsequently developed in depth in the dissertation.

### 3. Evaluation of the abstract

The abstract fully complies with normative and scientific requirements in terms of content and structure. The content of the individual chapters of the dissertation is presented comprehensively and correctly. The conclusions and scientific contributions of the work are clearly identified and presented in the text.

### 4. Structure, content and results of the dissertation

The doctoral candidate has a clearly formulated research question that aims to test whether Euroscepticism is an essential or opportunistic feature of the populist radical right parties in Bulgaria and Germany. Euroscepticism as a subject of research is defined in the first chapter of the dissertation. It presented the theoretical part of the dissertation, based on leading conceptual models that analyze the essential characteristics of the concepts of populism, radical right, Euroscepticism. The doctoral candidate demonstrates very good theoretical knowledge. The authors presented in this part of the dissertation are not simply presented schematically and retold, but critically analyzed in view of the goals and tasks of the work.

The object of research are 5 Bulgarian parties, which the dissertation defines as populist radical right - "Attack", VMRO - BND, NFSB, "Volya" and "Vazrazhdane" and the German one - "Alternative for Germany". The author notes that the Bulgarian parties, the object of the study, cover, albeit "with some conditionality", Cass Mude's definition of radical right-wing populism. In fact, defining these parties in the political space seems problematic. The most significant seems to be the divergence with Volya, in which populism is undoubtedly a main feature, but which could hardly be classified as a nativist radical right party, especially when it was founded. However, all five formations are defined as populist radical right in the expert study of CHES, which the dissertation also refers to.

The main hypothesis considers the Euroscepticism of the populist radical right in Bulgaria as opportunistic, while that of the "Alternative for Germany" is an essential characteristic of the party. The hypotheses put forward in this way suggest a comparative analysis between the Bulgarian and

German cases and an answer to the question - why, in contrast to Germany, Euroscepticism is an opportunistic strategy in Bulgarian radical right-wing populist parties.

The proof of the hypotheses is carried out by means of an adequately chosen methodology, based on a qualitative content analysis, which aims to establish the dynamics and changes of key indicators for Euroscepticism. They are appropriately presented and aim to show whether Euroscepticism is an essential and fundamental characteristic of the parties under study or whether they are of an opportunistic nature. The substantive analysis is based on party programs, documents and declarations that reflect the parties' strategic positions on major political topics. The author also refers to other significant studies in the field, such as the Comparative Study of Party Programs, for example.

The second chapter of the dissertation presents the Bulgarian case. The development of the radical populist right in the country with its various incarnations has been thoroughly analyzed. The conclusions and generalizations made are correct and reasoned.

A third chapter is devoted to the "Alternative for Germany". The origin and development of the formation are selectively presented, using numerous sources that reflect the internal party debates and factional groupings, which are essential for its transformation from a conservative Eurosceptic to a populist radical right party.

The fourth chapter examines how Euroscepticism changes in the face of crises such as the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The conducted research confirms the hypothesis of the opportunistic nature of the Bulgarian populist radical right and rejects the preconceived assumption that Euroscepticism is an essential characteristic of the party in "Alternative for Germany". Thus, the general conclusion is reached that in both investigated cases Euroscepticism has an opportunistic character.

## 5. Evaluation of the scientific contributions of the dissertation work

The doctoral candidate presents four main scientific contributions. Three of them can undoubtedly be rated as such. The main contribution is related to the presented empirical model based on appropriately selected indicators of hard and soft Euroscepticism, which enable a comparative

analysis to track the change and dynamics of attitudes towards the EU and European integration. The second contributing point is the result of the analysis of the characteristics of the Bulgarian populist radical right parties. The part of the dissertation devoted to the parties' reactions to crises such as the covid-pandemic and the war in Ukraine can also be highly appreciated.

The doctoral candidate cites as a contribution the creation of "his own dynamic definition of political populism, in which opportunism is valued as an essential characteristic of populism." A few clarifications should be made here. First, what does "dynamic definition" mean? Any single definition of a phenomenon, entity or process is based on certain characteristics that are precisely defined.

Dynamics reflect change, but if there is a change it would mean that the research phenomenon has transformed into something else and changed its essence.

Second, is opportunism characteristic only of populist formations and does the doctoral candidate equate populism with opportunism? In places the text speaks of a "populist opportunistic attitude". If opportunism is a main feature of populism, does this mean that opportunism is not characteristic of other political parties that are not populist. It is true that sometimes parties, especially those in opposition, use opportunism as a strategy to maximize electoral gains, but then how do we explain populism in power? And here the Latin American populisms of Fujimori, Chavez, Morales show that populism can be a consistent and sustainable management practice.

Conclusion:

The presented dissertation has fulfilled the set research objectives. The hypotheses are defended which gives research an indisputable scientific value. The overall evaluation of the work is positive; therefore, I will support the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in a professional field 3.3. Political Sciences (European Studies - EU Political Studies) by Adriana Antonova Toneva.

1.11.2024

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Signature:

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