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Effect of Radical Right Political Discourse on Systemic Political Parties in Bulgaria and the United Kingdom (2010 - 2019)

THESIS SUMMARY

DISSERTATION FOR THE AWARD OF PhD DEGREE

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The main body of the doctoral theiss contains 170 pages , 7 pages of appendices, 13 pages of bibliography. The bibliography includes 141 academic titles and 79 online scholarly, media and other secondary sources.

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Chapter One. MODELS OF PARTY COMPETITION. ANALYSIS OF THE STATE OF THE PROBLEM

Chapter Two. MAINSTREAM AND RADICAL RIGHT POPULIST PARTY COMPETITION IN BULGARIA (2010 г. - 2019 г.)

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the central questions in political science analysis of party systems is what kind of an ideas system structures politics? In the 'classical' reading, the relationship between societal agenda and the agenda of political parties is a reflection of social conflicts and divisions. A more holistic approach which allows for rethinking the relationship between parties and voters steers away from social conflicts and political differences between different groups in society as the core of party platforms and points attention towards party agency. Thus, it insists that the role and weight of political parties as strategic actors whose behaviour plays a major role in transforming and channelling public attitudes and translating them into political action.

The proportion of the national vote captured by radical right populist parties (RRPPs) across Europe is a subject of wide research interest and much of the academic literature focuses on the trajectory of the electoral success of radical parties. A key paradigm shift in the scholarly literature occurs when the starting point in the analysis of the radical right shifts to the radical right as external to the system or as a manifestation of an anomaly separate from contemporary political processes. The need to approach the phenomenon with the help of established theories and concepts of the political 'mainstream' has been recognised and secondly, the main object of study becomes not the demand but the supply of the radical right - messages, policies, positions - in the political system (Mudde, 2010).

Most models consider the adoption of radical right-wing messages and positions by traditional parties as a consequence of the erosion of their traditional profile and the challenge of the emergence of new players. The processes of differentiation and convergence of party positions are key to the trajectory of development in the political space and the role of political parties in its configuration. In Kitschelt's hypothesis, as the major parties converge on economic issues, the importance of the economicy as an issue of importance for voters declines and they are more likely to vote on other dimensions that benefit radical right parties - for example, immigration. The electoral threat of the RRPP is the main factor that motivates systemic or mainstream parties to address issues and problems from the programmes of RRPP. According to Bonnie Meguid (2005), it is primarily the behavior of mainstream parties vis-à-vis smaller ones, including radical right parties, that is the factor many researchers leave out of the equation when analyzing inter-party competition, but it is in fact a determinant of the trajectory of the success and influence of the RRPP.

Thus, the behavior of the main parties in the configuration of competition further legitimizes and normalizes radically right-wing discourses and logic in public policy making. This leads to changes and a hardening of positions on the topics under consideration. A 'spill-over' effect (Zobel and Minkenberg, 2019) is observable from the RRPP to the other parties in the system in terms of policies and cross-party political consensus, as well as growing negative attitudes in public opinion on the issues of the radical right agenda. The actions of systemic parties in Bulgaria and the UK in the period 2010 - 2019 allow for favourable conditions for the radical right to influence issues and policies. These provide with sufficient case studies to follow up the processes discussed.

The study examines what tools the major political parties - majority coalition partners with the radical right, governing with the support of the radical right, or challenged by extra-parliamentary minor radical right parties - are using to maintain or increase their electoral support in their attempts to counter the challenges from the RRPP. It is not only the ruling system parties that are in focus but also the opposition parties in the respective countries with their decisions to move closer to or away from radical positions and policies in their own struggle for votes vis-à-vis the incumbents. Through a reading of political theory and discursive tools of analysis this study provides the necessary concepts for understanding radical political discourses in Europe and the ways in which the political 'mainstream' discusses and makes sense of such discourses and messages in the UK and Bulgarian party systems.

II. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

1. Relevance of the problem

Since the 1990s, new, small or seemingly insignificant before elections actors from the radical right have more and more often gone as far as to help displace from office established parties, force their way into previously unthinkable governing coalitions or become an insurmountable factor in parliamentary arithmetics. This is why centre-right and centre-left political parties are often unable to ignore the presence of radical right parties and movements even when such do not gain access to parliament due to institutional or other thresholds. Despite many contextual and national differences, these trends are traceable in both Western and Central and Eastern European democracies, where radical right parties gather support and sometimes join coalition governments (Minkenberg, 2015: 30). Yet, the effect of the radical right on the political process is not limited to electoral success (ibidem, 34). Thus, in a number of countries, mainstream parties have, to varying degrees, used messages attributed to the radical right political family. Pressured by public attitudes, growing nationalism in public discourse, or in search of new electoral latitudes, parties position themselves on issues that are not necessarily part of their traditional agenda.

Even if each radical-right political party has its own trajectory of development, process of construction or decay over time, and operates in a different institutional context, what they have in common is their impact on party competition and, in particular, on the competition between established centre-left and centre-right parties. In this sense, the dimensions of the radical right's influence on other political parties - their positions, policies and discourses on issues such as minority rights, immigration, attitudes towards the European Union and other mainstream issues raises a number of questions. These concern the extent to which competition is affected depending on electoral system or the party system on the one hand, and the electoral fate of radical right parties, on the other. The role of the political 'mainstream' in these processes is also significant in terms of what strategies they apply to radical right parties and their messages. Thus, while a number of studies trace the line of influence of the political agenda of other parties in the system on the popularity and electoral success of far-right parties, this dissertation examines the effect of the political agenda of radical right parties on the positions of systemic ones.

2. Working definitions

Here, radical right is understood not as inherently anti-democratic but as anti-liberal democratic (Mudde, 2007; 2010). 'Radical' refers specifically to the distance from the centre to the space on the right, where parties 'with clearly stated positions on immigration and ethnic diversity' are positioned (Akkerman et al., 2016 in Mudde, 2010). Also, the concept is not understood as being tied to the political divide in terms of economic positions. Under political mainstream, the thesis summarises centre-left and centre-right parties with a role as mainstream, traditional, established, largest and in opposition to each other for power. Concepts such as 'systemic' and 'traditional' are good alternatives but do not fully correspond to the Bulgarian reality as in the UK context, for example. That is why the term mainstream is chosen as more appropriate. The definition of political discourse applied in the study is modeled on Teun Van Djik's understanding that discourse is first recognised according to its speakers or authors - political representatives or politicians. Second, by its form - speech and text - which, at least at an abstract level, aims at achieving political goals and objectives, such as making or influencing political decisions (e.g. decisions that concern joint action, the allocation of social resources, the establishment or change of official norms, regulations and laws, etc. (Van Djik, 1997: 12, 15).

3. Main hypotheses

Based on the reviewed literature and from the perspective of political parties as instruments of democratic representation, the following main arguments form the main point of departure of the study.

First, the understanding that the influence and importance of radical right populist parties (RRPPs) for party systems in different countries and politics at the EU level are not limited to their electoral success (Minkenberg, 2013; 2015; 2017). Their ability to function within representative democracy has direct and indirect implications for the dynamics of party competition (Han, 2014). Beyond electoral success and coalition potential, effects can be sought in the displacement of other parties in the party system, programmatic changes, changes in policy positions, legislative initiatives, and the borrowing of radical right narratives and discursive changes from other parties in political life.

Second is the understanding that the actions of systemic political parties in positioning themselves vis-à-vis radical right ones in the space of the political system are strategic in nature and have a determining role in the trajectory of inter-party competition, traditional boundaries

in political space and ideological distance between parties. In the long run, such processes of changes in the presence and positioning of political parties have the potential to affect the quality of the political environment in its openness to dialogue, degrees of polarisation and inter-party consensus, especially in processes of where established parties distance themselves from the political centre under pressure from radical right competitors and narratives.

Deriving from academic literature, this study brings together the necessary concepts for understanding radical right political discourses in Europe, and the ways in which the political mainstream responds to, makes sense of and handles such discourses in the UK and Bulgarian party systems between 2010 and 2019. In doing this it tests the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis (1): the presence of radical right populist parties and messages in the political space increases the attention of other parties to the issues raised by them when the latter feel electorally threatened by the former (conditions of uncertainty exist).

Hypothesis (2): systemic parties mobilise resources and strategies in their reactions to the presence and discourse of radical right parties. Depending on whether they ignore, incorporate (through cooperation and borrowing of themes) or oppose the messages of such parties, the effects may be:

2.1 If they ignore such issues, they remain within the RRPP realm and their influence does not increase.

2.2 If they coopt the themes and positions of the RRPP soon after their articulation, they are no longer "owned" by the latter, but their relevance increases. This process may manifest itself not only as programmatic positions and policies, but also discursively. Also, it may affect the electoral potential of the RPPP by even leading to a decline in their electoral support. However, it may also increase their coalition potential due to the convergence of the mainstream with their positions (process of radicalisation of the mainstream).

2.3 If the mainstream parties confront or dissociate themselves from the positions of the RRPP, then the issues in question will not become more topical and relevant, but it is possible that the polarisation in competition between the parties and their discourse will increase (Zobel and Minkenberg, 2019).

That is to say, the type of strategy, as well as the time dimension of its implementation, directly affect the degrees of importance of the issues of the RPP, the legitimacy of the RRPP on the political scene and their recognition as acceptable coalition partners, as well as their electoral

presence. This aresenal of responses, however, also has implications for the political mainstream which is of primary interest in this study.

Hypothesis (3): Even if the PAC's direct influence on legislative changes is limited once their agenda is refined, its impact on parties and competition continues beyond the RRPP's decline in electoral performance.

4. Subject and object of the research

The subject of the study is the effect of the presence and messages of radical right parties on the strategic decisions of the main political parties in terms of positions, policies and discourse in conditions of competition for electoral support.

The object of this study are political parties, considered from a systemic perspective - their distance and relation to the other main players in the party system which distinguishes them as units of analysis. The parameters of party competition that will be the subject of this dissertation will examine the role of radical discourse in structuring political debate and inter-party competition on specific issues. The main focus is on the relationship between political parties, political discourse and the salience of political issues. The objects of study are centre-left, centre-right and radical right political parties in the UK and Bulgaria - ruling, opposition and mainstream.

The analytical framework is comparative in nature and traces the processes of interaction between political parties in two different institutional settings - with different party and electoral systems. It is situated in the paradigm of 'radicalization of the political mainstream' as opposed to 'mainstreaming of the radical right'.

5. Aims, tasks and research questions

The purpose of this dissertation is to trace the effect of radical right parties:

- At the level of issues and policies;

- At the level of inter-party competition;

- At the level of party system;

The major research questions underlying the dissertation are:

Under what conditions are radical parties perceived as a threat by systemic parties?

- What strategies do systemic parties employ in relation to the issues and presence of radical right parties in the party field?

- What effect do these strategies have - do they reduce the electoral threat, change the policies they advocate, affect the distance or distinction between parties in the party system?

- In the event that such effects do occur - shifting or borrowing positions, moving away from the political spectrum towards the radical right - do they affect only part of the political spectrum or party systems more broadly?

The research **tasks** that structure the logical sequence of the study and differentiate its parts are:

- An analysis of the literature on the processes of convergence and divergence of different parties on selected issues in different cycles of relevance. Evaluation of different theoretical approaches with their advantages and disadvantages.
- Tracking and systematizing the existing literature on center-periphery dynamics within party systems in the context of the entry of (new) radical right parties and issues, and their gaining electoral traction.
- Identifying key messages, policies and discursive frameworks; identifying 'ownership' of themes in order to trace processes of borrowing such from other parties.
- Identifying strategic decisions of political parties vis-à-vis radical right messages and policies through analysis of policy agendas, tracking the effect of processes of alignment/disalignment of party positions.
- Tracking and analysing the use and impact of radical political parties' messages on the dynamics of party competition.
- Seeking empirical evidence and linking the processes studied to the wider theoretical framework through a comparative analysis of the UK and Bulgaria with their systemic and radical right political parties.

6. Methodology and selected research instruments

From a methodological point of view, the methods of comparative analysis and case study analysis (UK, Bulgaria) are applied. The empirical work is complemented by content analysis of documents and speeches (parliamentary and party speeches, statements, declarations, official interviews) of key political figures in the respective parties. The analysis also applies data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES-Europe), which assesses the positioning of parties in

terms of ideology, policies and international relations in countries around the world. The indicators of parties' overall positioning on the GAL/TAN values scale, position on social lifestyles (e.g. LGBTI rights, gender equality) and position on immigration policies, European integration, civil liberties versus law and order are examined in particular . According to the literature review, these are the themes that stand out most as leading in the presence of radical right parties in Europe. The analysis is complemented by data from the Comparative Manifesto Project, which is a leading source of data in the field of textual coding of political programmes because of its volume and scope. It allows for the identification of political parties' positions on given issues and, according to the frequency and nuance of their mentioning, the relative emphasis placed on them.

7. Contribution to the scientific debate

Research on political parties and democratic theory can hardly be considered in isolation. The processes of alignment or differentiation of positions on issues with potential for electoral returns and their use in political discourse have implications for the quality and role of the party system as an instrument of democracy that integrates and reconciles differences in the context of democratic pluralism. The thesis examines the problem in two institutional arrangements with different levels of system permeability for newcomers to the party system. The case study selection also displays dissimilar institutional environments and divergent evolution and trajectory of success of radical right parties. These also function at different levels in their respective systems - extra-parliamentary in the United Kingdom, and as part of the government - in Bulgaria. The aim is to determine to what extent these differences impact the spillover effects of radical right arguments into the centre of the political spectrum. The contribution is expanded on further at the end of the thesis summary in 'V. STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DISSERTATION' on page 22.

8. Scope, structure and limitations

The study does not cover the dynamics of mainstream competition with far-left parties, as such a focus would exceed the capacity and scope of the thesis. The period covered is selected as it captures the timeline of the peak and drop of the radical right in the UK, especially in electoral terms. In the same period the RRPP presence in Bulgarian politics can be traced in mainly two forms: broadly speaking, the radical right provided parliamentary support to minority governments in the period 2005 - 2017, and was a junior coalition partner between 2017 and 2021. Hence, the political processes in Bulgaria allow for observations of radical right impact

in terms of spatial shifts on policy and issue positions, mainstream party competition and on the policy level.

The text is structured into an Introduction, a General Description of the dissertation, four main chapters and a Conclusion. Chapter One traces the different models of inter-party competition and the theoretical foundations for the study of the interaction between political parties on the one hand and the dynamics of the party system according to them on the other. It examines basic theories of inter-party competition, the concepts of the presence of niche parties, followed by an overview specifically of radical right parties and their competition with mainstream or mainstream parties. Chapter Two examines the case of Bulgaria. Chapter three focuses on the UK. Chapter four presents an analysis of the results along the comparative framework, followed by a conclusion. The dissertation contains 175 pages of text, 7 pages of appendices, 13 pages of bibliography. The bibliography comprises 141 academic titles and 79 online scholarly, media and other secondary sources.

III. STURCTURE OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

The thesis is structured as follows:

INTODUCTION

1. Relevance of the problem
2. Working definitions
3. Main hypotheses
4. Subject, object and analytical frame of the research
5. Aims, objectives and research questions
6. Methodology and selected research tools
7. Contribution to the scientific debate
8. Scope, structure and limitations

CHAPTER ONE. MODELS OF PARTY COMPETITION. ANALYSIS OF THE STATE OF THE PROBLEM

1. Main tendencies in the scientific literature on the research problem
2. Basic terminology in the scientific field - definitions and controversies
3. Working definitions: "Radical Right", "Populism" and "Mainstream"
4. Models of inter-party competition
5. Presence of radical right populist parties in Western and Eastern Europe
6. Concepts of the effect of radical right parties, messages and positions on the political mainstream
7. Elements of the theoretical framework, analytical model and methodology

CHAPTER TWO. MAINSTREAM AND RADICAL RIGHT POPULIST PARTY COMPETITION IN BULGARIA (2010 - 2019)

1. Introduction
2. Party System in Bulgaria.
3. Profile of the radical right - emergence, electoral success, programmatic features. Development trajectory (2005-2010)
4. Entry of the radical right into government and strategies of mainstream parties regarding the positions of the radical right on selected issues and policies (2010 - 2019).
5. Summary

CHAPTER THREE. MAINSTREAM AND RADICAL RIGHT POPULIST PARTY COMPETITION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM (2010 - 2019)

1. Introduction
2. The party system in Britain: systemic characteristics and features
3. A profile of the radical right - emergence, programmatic features and electoral success to 2010.
4. The radical right's extra-parliamentary presence and mainstream parties' strategies in relation to its positions on selected issues and policies
5. Summary

CHAPTER FOUR: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

CONCLUSION

APPENDICES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

IV. КРАТКО ПРЕДСТАВЯНЕ НА ДИСЕРТАЦИОННИЯ ТРУД

Intorduction

В увода са очертани изследователският интерес и измеренията на темата за влиянието на радикално десните партии в демократичните режими.

General characteristics of the doctoral thesis

The part outlines the topicality of the dissertation topic. The subject, object and limitations of the research are defined, the main aim and objectives, hypotheses of the research, methodology and terminology of the analysis. The chronological order of the exposition is briefly presented. It is also clarified that the study does not cover the dynamics of competition between mainstream and far-left parties, as such a scope would exceed the capabilities and scope of the thesis.

Chapter One.
MODELS OF PARTY COMPETITION. ANALYSIS OF THE STATE OF THE PROBLEM

Chapter one of the dissertation collects, analyses and synthesises a number of scholarly sources that present the state of the art in understanding competition between political parties. As a basis, the scientific publications in Bulgarian and English which analyse theoretically and empirically the issues related to the positioning of parties in the systems in which they operate, the different incentives and considerations in their actions, and the contemporary processes that affect their sustainability as postulates of representative democracy are presented. Chapter One traces the different models of inter-party competition and the theoretical foundations for the study of the interaction between political parties, on the one hand, and the dynamics of the party system, according to them, on the other. It examines basic theories of inter-party competition, the concepts of the presence of niche parties, followed by an overview specifically of radical right parties and their competition with mainstream or mainstream parties. This section also provides detailed explanations of the terminology underpinning the study. Definitions of the terms populism, radicalism, mainstream politics, and political discourse are examined. Various factors and conditions that operate at different levels are analysed - political systems, party and electoral systems, political parties, issues and problems in politics, political discourse. Last but not least, in this first part of the dissertation, methodological approaches in the study of party positions and political discourse are analyzed with an overview of current approaches and their advantages and disadvantages. After an overview of the different and

basic models of inter-party competition and the sub-hypotheses derived from them, the analysis moves on to the dimension of the presence of radical right populist parties in Western and Eastern Europe. Both a summarized and a comparative overview are presented. Elements of the theoretical framework, analytical model and methodology that underpin the study are outlined.

It also sets the framework by which the steps in the analysis of the two selected cases are made:

- **Stage 1** - Under what circumstances mainstream parties perceive competition from the radical right as a threat - 'need for strategy' in reaction to emerging (and not only) parties, thematic conflicts and public attitudes on issues on the agenda of radical right populist parties (RRPPs);
- **Stage 2** - what mobilisation mechanisms and resources they apply in their responses or the *'strategy implementation'* stage in the process of competition between political parties and their agenda for voters' attention.
- **Stage 3** - *'outcome of strategy'* - how effective these strategies are in terms of the relevance of the issues, policies and electoral success of the RRPPs, as well as the positioning of the system parties vis-à-vis the political centre. Examining the way and scope of such influence also helps determine the direction of such influence**.**

Chapter Two.

**CHAPTER TWO. MAINSTREAM AND RADICAL RIGHT POPULIST
PARTY COMPETITION IN BULGARIA (2010 - 2019)**

Research demonstrates that although the radical right populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe are younger than the Western ones, they are much more quickly recognised as potential coalition partners and are also more radical in their positions than the Western ones. Chapter Two examines the case of Bulgaria in this respect. After an overview of the particularities of the political and electoral system, it moves on to analyse the emergence and trajectory of the radical right in the country since 1989. It examines the configurations of support and opposition in Bulgarian parliaments since 2005 and specifically the dimensions of radical right influence from 2010 to 2019. Among the main themes that stand out in this period and are examined in terms of the influence of the RRPP and the reactions of centre-left and centre-right parties are

the campaigns against the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention), the Social Services Act, the issues of migration, minority rights and the LTTE community, and Bulgaria's role in blocking the EU membership negotiations of the Republic of North Macedonia. The example of Bulgaria for this study allows to trace the processes of radical discourse in the political and public space and the 'migration' of narratives from radical right parties to major political parties. Bulgaria also provides an opportunity to compare a less institutionalized democracy and party system. As in the UK, since its emergence at the beginning of the transition (Todorov, 2013), the radical right has been a constant presence in Bulgarian political life with variable trends of electoral success. These tendencies are finally consolidated with the emergence of PP 'Ataka'. After Ataka's breakthrough in the 2005 parliamentary elections, the party became an example of a consolidated presence after consistent electoral growth. With its emergence, the presence of the radical right not only became a regular feature of Bulgarian parliamentary politics, but also gradually became a recognisable coalition partner. The radical right's key role in securing support for governments on both sides of the political centre has started a process of normalising its presence. As a consequence of this process, the opening of space for the emergence and development of other radical right actors on the political scene is noted (Avramov, 2015). The influence of the radical right in Bulgaria is visible in the adoption of aggressive rhetoric and behaviour by other political actors and their acceptance by the general public (Avramov in Minkenberg, 2015). As the overview of their political impact presented in this dissertation shows, this process has been developing and intensifying further since the United Patriots joined the government between 2017 and 2021.

In order to track for changes in party systems such as polarization or system shifts towards the radical right in the interaction of radical right parties with other parties, the dissertation applies data on the location of parties on specific issues and policies from the Chappell Hill Expert Survey, wave 1999 - 2019, for the period 2010 - 2019, as well as data from content analysis of political manifestos in the period under review. The analysis also draws on data from the so-called GAL-TAN scale, which captures contemporary lines of conflict in two thematic groups of green-alternative-liberal/libertarian policies versus traditionalist-authoritarian-nationalist policies as value conflicts of political life in contemporary democratic societies. The analysis is complemented by tracing and reviewing different discursive frameworks and radical right narratives articulated in the political space by the political parties selected for the purpose of the analysis.

Chapter Three.

MAINSTREAM AND RADICAL RIGHT POPULIST PARTY COMPETITION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM (2010 - 2019)

Chapter three focuses on the UK. After an overview of the particularities of the political and electoral system, it moves on to analyse the emergence and trajectory of the radical right in the country in the first half of the twentieth century. The stronger the RRPP became electorally, the more attention turned to the issues of immigration and the European Union within the party system. The Conservatives are established as the carriers or holders of both themes, but in the period before 2010 their emphasis on them weakened. Under threat from the radical right electorally and discursively, they regained influence through strict immigration policies, anti-immigrant discourse in the public sphere and a determined stance initially on redefining and subsequently ending Britain's membership of the EU. Based on these calls in their election campaigns and political discourse, as well as policies pursued, it is not only their re-election in the post-2010 period that is becoming a reality. They continue to govern to this day, but they have also managed to regain or reassert ownership of the radical right agenda themes that drive their policies even after the electoral decline of radical right representatives. This is one of the factors why they are also embracing the challenge from the right side of the political spectrum fairly successfully but also at significant costs. In the period studied, the radical right in the UK managed to increase its performance in national and European elections but the main deterrent remains the electoral system. There have also been changes in the positions of Labour as the main opposition party, but after a period of moving closer to the Conservatives and towards the radical right, since 2015 the party has positioned itself as more of an antipode to the Conservatives on issues concerning immigration, but remains more or less neutral on the EU. Thus, Labour have failed to articulate a clear and sustained opposition to the rise of radical right narratives that the Conservatives have successfully borrowed and developed within their post-2015 policies specifically. Results from the Chappell Hill Expert Survey, 1999 wave - 2019 wave, are appended, as well as data from a content analysis of policy agendas in the period under review. The analysis is complemented by tracking and reviewing the different discursive frames and radical right narratives articulated in the political space by the systemic parties and their competitors selected for the analysis. The results of the Chappell Hill Expert Survey, wave 1999 - 2019, and data on the content of the selected parties' electoral manifestos for the period 2010 - 2019 are analysed.

Chapter Four.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RESULTS, CONCLUSION,

APPENDICES

Chapter four of the dissertation summarizes the results of the study and analyzes them in a comparative framework. The comparative analysis of the two cases thus traces the effect of radical right parties:

- At the level of inter-party competition between mainstream parties;
- At the level of the party system, with changes in the positions of mainstream parties over time in competition with the RRPP;
- At the level of policies or specific issues on which they position themselves or change their positions.

A critical reading of the strategic choices of the systemic political parties and an analysis of the factors that play a role in their positioning on issues and policies from the radical right's arsenal, including the dimension of political discourse, is made. The analysis of political discourse as a research method allows attention to be focused on topical political issues and to engage with the task of examining the way in which particular issues are discussed in the political space. This allows the research to go into greater depth with the prospect of contributing to an understanding of the discursive dimension of the issues at stake in the political messages of the parties (Teun van Dijk, 1997: 12). The content analysis of political documents and programmes, combined with a discursive analysis of the political presence of radical messages in public and political space looks for manifestations of similarities, distinctions or neutrality among the positions of the main political parties. Manifestations of similarities, distinctions, or neutrality are understood here as strategies for maintaining positions among voters after the introduction of polarizing radical messages and issue positions.

In Bulgaria, the actions of the RRPP have led to a change in the government's position on the Istanbul Convention, the veto for the opening of negotiations for the accession of North Macedonia to the European Union, the rejection of the UN Migration Pact, the postponement and changes in the Social Services Act. In turn, the example of the UK shows that the relevance of the radical right does not require a parliamentary presence, rather its influence depends on the patterns of interaction with the main parties and the extent to which they perceive it as a threat. The issues of immigration and Britain's membership of the EU, and progressively

welfare benefits and the state of the National Health Service, have to varying degrees but with an upward trend engaged the attention and concern of the general public since 2000. In the context of national and European issues, and the actions of mainstream parties, they even overtake the issues of unemployment as the most significant problems facing British society. Thus, faced with a direct electoral threat from 2009 onwards, mainstream parties have been forced to take positions on the issues raised by the RRPP. The content of the political debate is thus changing, and particularly on issues that are insufficiently addressed or deliberately avoided by the Conservatives and Labour, but which are important enough to some voters to carry the support of the RRPP. Despite the differences between the evolution, the trajectory of success of the radical right parties and the institutional arrangements of the UK and Bulgaria, a comparative analysis of the behaviour of the systemic political parties in the two countries is relevant and original. The characteristics shared in the ways in which systemic parties interpret the radical messages and policies of radical right parties is the reason why the focus of this thesis is on political agendas and political discourse. Depending on whether they want to maximise their electoral support, their chances of participating in government or their influence on policies, the parties' options are subject to certain limitations. It can be summarised that in the UK, systemic parties tend to aim to increase their support, whereas in Bulgaria, due to the more fragmented nature of political competition, they aim to increase their chance of participating in power.

Conclusion

The results of the analyses of the two case studies presented in this dissertation provide grounds to believe that the main objectives and related tasks have been achieved. The research hypotheses are proven in both cases, but nuances of difference are observed with regard to their contextual features. The hypotheses also reflect the achievements and limitations of the available academic literature on the topic and thus trace and apply the expectations of the theoretical approaches to the two selected cases.

V. STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE THESIS

The research strategy contributes to an assessment of the interaction between populist radical right parties and their mainstream rivals across the traditional left-right divide and examines it in the dimension of the national-supranational clash along the axis of identity politics. The strategic responses of the mainstream parties are not limited to the 'traditional' ideologically closer rivals of the RRPP in the centre-right space. The relevance and specific contribution of

this dissertation lies in the comparison of the above trends and the testing of leading theories of party competition in two cases with dissimilar institutional arrangements - electoral and party systems. Both of the cases examined here demonstrate that the borrowing of radical right positions from mainstream parties contributes to creating an enabling environment for the existence and legitimation of radical right discourses and parties independent of the governing potential of the RRPP. Such processes narrow the plurality of perspectives and positions among parliamentary represented political parties, while saturating political discourse predominantly with a single-sinded reading and one set of solutions to the issues and problems presented.

Also, the work contributes in that it examines the Bulgarian example through the prism of contemporary research on the Central and Eastern European radical right actors. It further informs the body of contemporary scientific research into the topic with the examples provided by the current Bulgarian political experience. This contribution is key as there is a clear lack of discursive and Bulgarian-language informed research on the international research scene while the interest towards the developments in the country on these issues is great. On the one hand, the work provides an insight into the trajectory of interaction between mainstream parties and radical right ones as an individual case, on the other hand, it opens up an opportunity to further research of the trends in Bulgaria in a comparative perspective with the other already largely studied countries in the region - Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, for example.

Meanwhile, current issues in the contemporary politics of the respective countries under study are also reflected in trends at the European level. This is evidenced by the dynamics of interaction resulting from the presence of radical right representation in the political families in the European Parliament, especially after 2015, as well as the consequences of the presence of the radical right in the UK and Bulgaria on processes of European importance. Examples include the processes of negotiation of the Republic of North Macedonia's accession to the European Union in the period 2019 - 2022 and the UK's exit from EU membership in 2016. Last but not least, the comparative prism allows the comparison of two modern democracies - an established one and a new one. In terms of the time period, it has not yet been comprehensively explored in the scholarly literature on domestic politics, and the UK has so far rarely been placed in a comparative perspective in terms of its radical right in this period, due to the strong dominance of Brexit as a national issue in the politics of and research interest in the countries of the union. The latest CHES survey data is also applied to the case studies and comparative analysis.

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VI. ARTICLES AND PUBLICATIONS

- **Political and policy impact of Bulgarian radical right (2017 – 2021)** Publication from PhD Conference by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom and Sofia University 'St Kliment Ohrdiski', 2021 'The impossible European Union - time for solutions for the common future'. Minerva. ISBN: 978-619-7611-07-6
- **Book Review:** *Democracy beyond elections: government accountability in the media age. (Challenges to democracy in the 21st century)*, East European Politics, DOI: [10.1080/21599165.2021.2006643](10.1080/21599165.2021.2006643), Auhtor Gergana Dimova, Palgrave, 2019.
- **Effect of radical right discourse on centre-right and centre-left parties in Bulgaria (2017 -2021)** - paper presented at the 13th Dusseldorf Conference on Party Research (GraPa 2022), January 2022. [in press].
- **'From "civic deserts" to civic cohesion. How exploring Europe's peripheries can inspire ways of improving civic life'**, Mila Moshelova, Leonie Sichtermann, Louisa Slavkova, Dobrena Petrova. Published by Sofia Platform Foundation, 2022, ISBN 978-619-92101-1-6
- 'Radical Right Policy Influence in Bulgaria (2017 -2021)'. Paper presented to the research colloquium of the Chair of Comparative Politics at European University Viadrina, January 2022.

VII. DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

The undersigned

Mila Boyanova Moshelova

declare that this dissertation

'**Effect of radical right political discourse on systemic political parties in Bulgaria and the UK (2010 - 2019)'**

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Sofia 22.08.2022.

Signature: