

# OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Simeon Asenov, UNWE, professional field 3.3. Political Science,  
member of a scientific jury, determined by order of the Rector of  
Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”,

for the **PhD Thesis of Mila Boyanova Moshelova**

entitled:

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

for the award of the educational and scientific degree  
"Doctor of Political Science (Contemporary Bulgarian Politics)

### **1. Relevance and general characteristics of the dissertation**

In the last two decades, the party systems of European democracies have seen a process of emergence and entry of new, radical right, nationalist and populist parties. The public trust these parties attract and the influence they exert in the political process vary in degree. They change the nature and dynamics of inter-party competition, which also has an impact on the overall stability of party systems. This dissertation is devoted to one specific problem in this research field. It concerns the study of the influence and effects that radical right populist parties (RRPPs) have on the main, established parties in party systems, or so-called mainstream parties. In addition, two democracies have been selected for comparative analysis, Bulgaria and the UK, which is a challenge in itself given the radically different political, party and electoral systems in the two countries. The above-mentioned circumstances indisputably support the degree of relevance of the thesis submitted for defence.

The dissertation has a total of 196 pages (175 of which are the author's own text) and is a complete text that fully meets the adopted standards for this type of scientific work. It is structured in an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and references used, which logically relate to its

content. The text contains numerous tables, graphs and three annexes to support the author's analysis for the period under study (2010-2019). The extensive bibliography (especially in English) is worth noting and other information sources and resources that have been used to achieve the aims and objectives of the study.

Pages 8 – 15 in the introduction present and justify the research elements of the work are precisely formulated in the following sequence - research hypotheses, subject and object, aims and objectives, limitations of the analysis and the choice of the research period, the methods used and the structure adopted. Three hypotheses are formulated: (1) the presence of the RRPPs in the political space increases the attention of mainstream parties to their issues, incl. due to electoral considerations; (2) mainstream parties mobilize resources and strategically position themselves in relation to the presence and discourse of the RRPPs, through ignoring, borrowing-coopting, or confronting-opposing; and (3) whether the RRPPs are present in parliament or outside it, their impact on system parties and inter-party competition continues after their electoral performance declines. Three objectives are set out aiming to reveal the effects of the RRPP's influence on mainstream parties: 1) at the level of issues and policies; 2) at the level of inter-party competition; and 3) at the level of the party system (p. 12).

Chapter One clarifies the theoretical-methodological base of the research. Първата глава (с.16-66) изяснява теоретико-методологичната основа на изследването. The main trends and concepts in the scientific literature on the problem under study are presented, interpreted and clarified. An in-depth knowledge and skillful handling of a number of classical and contemporary authors on the analyzed issue is demonstrated and leaves a very good impression. The concepts of so-called “niche parties” of B. Meguid. and of systemic effects of the radical right on the mainstream parties of Zobel and M. Minkenberg. play a key role in the research. Through these, an analytical model is derived to study the influence and effects of the RRPP on the mainstream parties and the party system which is then applied in the two selected countries and in the comparative analysis. Alongside this, the study's methodological framework is helpfully complemented by the use of empirical data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), which includes a set of indicators to capture changes in party systems, and from the Comparative Manifesto Project, which contains datasets on the programmes and positions of political parties in a range of countries. On this basis, chapters Two (pp. 67-111) and Three (pp. 112-153) examine

the competition between the mainstream and RRPPs in Bulgaria and the UK respectively over the period (2010-2019).

An in-depth and well-founded analysis of the effects of the influence of the radical right in Bulgaria (Ataka, VMRO and NFSB), compared to the main parties - GERB and BSP, is conducted. Subsequently, this approach is applied to the UK represented by the radical right UK Independence Party (UKIP), transformed in 2019 into the Brexit Party, and the traditional parties - the Conservative and Labour. The fourth chapter (pp. 154-172) provides a comparative analysis of the effects of the issue under study identifying commonalities and differences caused by the influence of the RRPP in the two cases studied at the level of issues and policies, inter-party competition and changes in the party system. Findings and conclusions are drawn that confirm the three hypotheses, and the conclusion (pp. 173-175) summarizes the results.

## **2. Evaluation of scientific results and scientific contributions**

The dissertation presents its author worthily and a number of positive aspects and achievements can be pointed out in it. The presentation is rich in information and elements of comparison, which gives it depth and wholeness of the subject under study. In summary, I would point to the following scientific results as having been achieved:

- there is a well-chosen methodology, theoretical and empirical basis of the research, with a scientific style of presentation, without getting lost in unnecessary details and deviations;
- the contemporary academic debate on the impact of the RRPP on mainstream parties, the dynamics of inter-party competition and party systems is presented
- the derived analytical model is appropriate and is applied to study the influence of RRPPs on systemic parties, which can be applied in future research on this issue;
- the effects of the influence of the radical right in two different democracies - Bulgaria and the UK on the mainstream parties are revealed at the level of issues and policies, inter-party competition and changes in the party system for the period studied;
- a comparative analysis of the two studied cases carried out reveals the potential for effective influence of RRPPs under different institutional conditions and strategies of behaviour of mainstream parties towards them;

- it is established that the adoption by mainstream parties of radical right-wing themes and positions contributes to creating a favourable environment for the legitimisation of the RRPP, regardless of whether they are in or out of government.

Based on the content of the text of the thesis text, in principle I accept the narrative self-assessment of contributions on p. 22 of the abstract. I believe that the contributions should be better formulated and structured. I mean to highlight their number and to make them distinct and specific, in the style adopted and established in this kind of scientific work, instead of the descriptive presentation provided.

### **3. Evaluation of the summary and the scientific publications**

The length of the prepared and submitted abstract is 24 pages. It consistently and correctly reflects the content of the thesis. 5 publications have been made on the topic of the dissertation, which exceeds the requirements and testifies to a deep interest in the researched problem. All have been published in serious scientific journals and in English, which adds an extra touch of responsibility to the candidate to present their research work to the critical gaze of an audience external to our country. There is also active participation in scientific conferences of different format and subject matter.

### **4. Critical comments, recommendations and questions**

The dissertation is very well developed considering the research parameters set in the introduction and the final scientific product achieved. Nonetheless, any scientific text could raise various considerations, disagreements and questions of different nature. In a constructive spirit, I would make some technical and editorial comments and recommendations. These do not call into question its scientific merits and the achieved convincing results.

I deem it necessary for the sequence of research elements to be amended. It is correct to state the object and subject of the work first and then its aims, objectives, hypotheses, etc. It is also appropriate to present the analytical model in chapter one graphically for clearer understanding and applicability which is a good practice in research work of this kind. Some editorial, technical and factual errors have been made in places. For example, the claims that there was an early parliamentary election in April 2014 (p.74), the BSP did not publish an election platform in the

2019 EP elections, the errors related to the reference in the analysis to the serial number of graphs 12 and 13 (p.139 and p.142), etc. Chapter Four is not structured in separate paragraphs and could be better organised by outlining the criteria for comparability between the researched influence of the radical right in Bulgaria and the UK, which could be illustrated in an appropriate way. There is some repetition in this chapter and in the conclusion which should be removed.

I recommend for the dissertation to take into account the constructive comments and subsequently be published to find its applied relevance and wider readership. My question for the candidate is: Does the influence of the RPP on mainstream parties and party systems appear to be enduring in the long term?

## **5. Conclusion**

On the basis of what has been set out in the opinion so far and taking into account the implementation of the legal provisions of Art. 6 of the Academic Staff Development Act in the Republic of Bulgaria, paragraph 27 of the Rules for its implementation I state my I express my strong conviction and support for awarding the degree of Doctor of Political Science to Mila Boyanova Moshelova for her dissertation on "Effect of Radical Right Political Discourse on Systemic Political Parties in Bulgaria and the United Kingdom (2010-2019)".

Associate Professor Simeon Assenov

Sofia, 24 October 2022 г.