

REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dobrin Hristov Kanev, 3.3. Political Sciences

of Mila Moshelova's dissertation on the topic "Influence of the radical right-wing political discourse on the system political parties in Bulgaria and Great Britain (2010 - 2019)"

for the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "PhD" in professional direction 3.3. Political sciences and scientific specialty Political Science (Modern Bulgarian politics)

The topic of Mila Moshelova's dissertation submitted for public defense - "Influence of the radical right-wing political discourse on the system political parties in Bulgaria and Great Britain (2010 - 2019)" - leads us on the way to another research project dedicated to problems related to the radical right in Europe. In recent years, similar works have multiplied and the reason is clear – the political successes of these parties form a new trend in the development of European party systems. Today, such parties are represented in the parliaments of most European countries, and somewhere they are part of the government. Their political discourse has already come out of the fringes and is becoming part of the ideas of established parties and politicians. These processes significantly and permanently change modern politics, impose illiberal trends and are generally assessed as a serious threat to democracy. The author is right when she points out that the study of the effect of radical right-wing parties is important in two directions - on the one hand, the attack on democracy, and on the other, the role of system parties in protecting the balance around the political center. Adoption by established parties of radical right-wing positions in terms of tolerance, exclusion, xenophobia is a risk to the sustainability of democracy - for any democracy, but to a greater extent for new democracies (see p. 48 et seq.) .

All this development and its consequences, which overturn established traditions, norms and practices, are undoubtedly a challenge for political science as well, and it is no coincidence the aforementioned unceasing stream of research on radical right-wing parties. So the very first look at the research topic chosen by Mila Moshelova tells us both the relevance and the scientific significance of the questions posed in the dissertation.

At the same time, however, the choice of a research field, so actively developed recently, cannot help but pose problems for each subsequent research step, insofar as it requires the discovery of the

author's own approach to the subject and to contribute on this basis to the accumulation of new knowledge in the given field. It can already be argued that the doctoral student has found her specific (and successful) research perspective, which has allowed her to reveal in a new way the consequences of the emergence and successes of radical right-wing parties.

First, it has chosen parties in two countries that have hardly ever served as the subject of a comparative analysis of this nature. We are talking about Bulgaria and Great Britain - two countries that are fundamentally different in terms of electoral systems in particular, but also party systems; whose democracies differ not only in terms of maturity and resilience, but also in the way they function. Significant differences are also present in relation to the specific field of research of the doctoral student - the radical right-wing parties, their channels of influence on the established parties and the respective strategic reactions of these parties. In one case, a direct impact and coalition capability of the radical right is observed. In the other, the possibilities remain limited rather to indirect influence. But it is precisely these features of two ("extreme") cases that have the potential to enrich comparative analyzes and to confirm or reject previous results in the research of this phenomenon. This prompted the author to choose the approach of the so-called analysis of the most different cases (most different systems design), which opens up possibilities for a successful research process, because the two cases, although extremely different in many respects, "share one and the same dependent variable, and it is this that constitutes a common premise for an observed phenomenon - the influence of radical right-wing populist parties on mainstream parties" (p. 61).

Second, her focus is very specifically on an analysis of the state and changes not so much of the right-wing radical parties themselves (which is usually the case), but of traditional, established, "mainstream" parties and the changes that occur in their programs, positions, discourse as a reaction to the influence of radical right-wing ideas and positions. In this way, the author can search for answers to important questions such as what is the extent of this influence, does the borrowing of radical right themes occur, what are the consequences of this in two different political and party systems.

These two important specifics of the dissertation are clearly stated in the formulation of the research aims and tasks, as well as the hypotheses.

The aim is formulated by the author to establishing the effect of radical right-wing parties in its diversity and in its manifestation at different levels (issues and politics; inter-party competition; party system). It is detailed using additional research questions aimed directly at the reactions of established parties – when do they feel threatened by the radical right, what strategies do they develop in response, what are the effects of these strategies, what are the implications for the party system? (see pp. 12-13)

Research tasks include developing a theoretical framework based on the analysis and evaluation of different approaches in major authors and works in the field of the theory of political parties and party systems; revealing the role of issues, messages, discursive frameworks in the course of inter-party competition; identifying the messages and issues specifically 'owned' by radical right parties and their influence in the course of inter-party competition; analysis of mainstream parties' reactions to radical right-wing ideas and policies; carrying out a comparative analysis of these developments in Bulgaria and Great Britain with their system and radical right-wing political parties (see p. 13)

In formulating the hypotheses of the research, Mila Moshelova starts from the ideas, firstly, that the influence of radical right-wing parties can be direct (electoral success, coalition potential) and indirect (displacement of other parties in the party system as a result of program changes, policy changes and borrowing radical right narratives and discursive shifts); secondly, that the actions of traditional parties under this influence can affect the overall political environment, especially when moving away from the political center.

On this more general basis, the author puts three main hypotheses to the test. The first states that the presence of radical right-wing populist parties and messages increases the attention of other parties to the issues raised by them when the latter feel electorally threatened by the former. The second is related to the reaction of the established parties to the discourse of the radical right parties and is divided into two subvariants. If they ignore the issues, they remain the "property" of the radical right and their importance does not increase; if they borrow the issues and positions, then they are no longer "owned" by the latter, but their importance increases, which may lead to a decline in their support, but increase their coalition potential. If, on the other hand, it focuses on confrontation or differentiation from the positions of the radical right, then the issues will not become more significant, but it is possible to increase the polarization between the parties and their discourse. The third hypothesis suggests that the impact of radical right-wing discourse on parties and competition continues even after a possible electoral decline of these parties. (see p. 10-11)

It should be noted that towards the end of the first chapter, new additional hypotheses appear, which, according to the author, complement the main ones so far. It is primarily about the motivation of the established parties to introduce new issues in the course of election campaigns, which could also refer to issues previously "owned" by the radical right parties. However, it seems to me that this addition of new hypotheses, detached from the previous ones, seems a little self-serving and not so significant from the point of view of the author's stated research aims.

Indicative of the serious work of the dissertation student is the significant source base she has attracted. The paper's thirteen-page bibliography contains 141 academic titles and 79 online scholarly, media, and other publications. In this list, we will find representative and important works

in the field of research - both the many significant secondary sources on the basis of which the author prepared the first chapter of the dissertation, as well as sources in relation to the two countries studied and their political and party systems. In this regard, it seeks to emphasize the presentation of those manifestations in the actions of the parties that are subject to direct observation (political and pre-election programs, political speeches and speeches, speeches on legislative issues, as well as the positions of deputies in the relevant votes), without omitting the available "secondary data" in the form of expert analyzes and assessments of other external actors.

An important place among the sources used by the author is the data from the Chapel Hill expert surveys (Chapel Hill Expert Survey, CHES-Europe), which assess the positioning of the parties in terms of ideology, policies and international relations in the countries of the world. It focuses on topics that are characteristic of radical right-wing parties in Europe. Indicators of the parties' general position on the GAL/TAN value scale, their positions on lifestyle, immigration policies, European integration, civil liberties, law and order are indicated. This data is accompanied in most cases by the data of the Comparative Manifesto Project, which is a leading source of information in the field of text coding of political programs and allows to establish the positions of political parties on given topics from the point of view of the frequency of their mention. of their relative weight, etc.

All of this shows us that Mila Moshelova has an excellent knowledge of the academic literature on the subject and has skilfully worked with it, relying on key works in the problem area. This has enabled her not only to synthesize important ideas in the subject area, but also, as we shall see, to develop an appropriate methodology for her research and successfully apply it.

In this regard, the approach of comparative analysis of the most distant cases has already been mentioned, the application of which promises reliable results in establishing the nature and dynamics of inter-party competition in the presence of radical right-wing parties in very different environments, about the possible tools and resources in influencing processes on the part of the radical right, for its concrete results.

In the dissertation, the comparative analysis itself is preceded by two analyzes of separate cases (case studies), affecting the ideological-political profile, the power, the influence of the main political parties against the background of the political and party systems of the two studied countries. Document analysis was skillfully used - substantive analysis of documents and speeches (programs and pre-election platforms, parliamentary and party speeches, declarations, interviews of key political figures in the respective parties). There are also elements of a discursive analysis of the political messages and ideas used by the various parties in order to better understand the selection, framing, and imposition of the desired political issues.

The dissertation student has also successfully relied on some models of measurement and evaluation of the influence of the radical right on traditional parties applied by various authors, presented in the first chapter of the dissertation. This also directs us to the evaluation of the organization of the dissertation text.

It can be argued that the chosen structure and logic of the research also testify to the high professionalism of Mila Moshelova and help to realize the pursued research tasks. The author has organized the written text into an introduction, four separate chapters and a conclusion. The four chapters of the dissertation have a clear subject of their own and are in the sequence necessary for the fulfillment of the research tasks.

As we mentioned, the beginning is devoted to defining the starting theoretical positions and the methodological basis of the research. On the basis of a thorough review of major works, the author forms her view of party systems, of political parties, of their interaction, of the competition between them.

In the first chapter, other important issues for the dissertation have also found a place. This applies to the accepted definitions of key concepts in the dissertation research, such as radical right (as opposed to right-wing extremism), populism, Euroscepticism, mainstream parties. For example, the author's understanding of right-wing radicalism is that, while not anti-democratic, it is anti-liberal-democratic as well as anti-pluralist.

Inter-party competition has been analyzed from different perspectives. On the one hand, the dividing lines on which it developed are clarified, emphasizing the new conflict lines and problems of the "post-Lipset-Rocan era" and their cultural aspects. On the other hand, it is also important for further research to emphasize the specifics of inter-party competition on issues, as important aspects of this issue have been examined - ownership of issues, importance of issues, issues entrepreneurship. Thirdly, the question of the nature of the competition between "mainstream" and "niche" parties, important for the fulfillment of the research objectives, is also introduced.

The chapter also includes a more general preliminary view of the development and state of right-wing radical parties on the European continent.

At the end of this content-rich first chapter, we can also find the general conceptual ideas of the dissertation about the ability of radical right-wing parties, their positions and messages to influence the political mainstream, presenting the indicators used further to determine party positions and their relevance, as well as an analytical model of interaction and influence of the radical right on the systemic parties.

This analytical model is applied in the following two chapters, dedicated to the studied phenomena in Bulgaria and Great Britain, and from its perspective, answers to the following questions are sought: Under what circumstances do the main parties perceive the competition from the radical right space as a threat, leading to the "necessity of strategy"; What mobilization mechanisms and resources do they apply in the process of competition between political parties and their agenda for voters' attention; How effective are these strategies in terms of the topicality of the issues, policies and electoral success of the radical right, as well as the positioning of systemic parties relative to the political center. (see p. 61)

First, the Bulgarian case is presented. After highlighting the characteristics of the party system, this second chapter traces in detail, on the one hand, the emergence, development, electoral achievements of the three parties identified as radical right (Ataka, VMRO, NFSB) and the coalitions between them in the studied period (and sometimes beyond). The author points out how quickly this type of party in Bulgaria escapes from the initial "sanitary cordon" and becomes the anchor of various administrations until they reach full members of a ruling coalition.

On the other hand, the analytical gaze is naturally directed towards the two major parties of that period, to the right and to the left of the center, GERB and BSP, and their reactions to the radical right-wing positions. The author convincingly proves the significant influence that the radical right-wing positions exert on the established parties, by examining indicative cases in this regard - the Istanbul Convention; the rights of sexual minorities; the accession process of the Republic of North Macedonia to the EU; the legislation regulating the provision of social services; immigration; the integration of the representatives of the Roma ethnic group. Her conclusion reads as follows: GERB "rather refrains from taking radical positions and discourse, but at the same time its opposition strategies are extremely weak. The party follows a behavior that allows radical right-wing populist parties to gain ground under pressure, while the main opposition party, BSP, meanwhile, clearly adopts radical right-wing approaches in its strategy to oppose GERB. Both strategies legitimize the theses of the RDPP and increase their influence, both on the two main parties and on the competition between them." (p. 105-106)

The third chapter is devoted to the British case study. In it we find an overview of the specifics of the British party and electoral systems, as well as a detailed analysis of the system (Conservatives, Labor, Liberal Democrats) and radical right parties (British National Party and its predecessors, UKIP, Brexit Party). On this basis comes the analysis of the impact of the radical right on the systemic parties in the country, bearing in mind the high barriers to parliamentary representation of parties such as UKIP and their only remaining possibility of indirect influence in this regard.

The author shows us how, starting as a single issue party in the early 1990s, UKIP gradually added the topics of immigration, social services, security and crime, Islamization around the core of the country's exit from the EU. Finally in the period 2010-2019 it managed to position itself as a real threat to the established parties and "force" the Conservatives and even Labour to move more or less closer to its position on European integration. According to Moshelova, the Conservatives are taking a clear step towards opposition to European integration in the period 2014-2019 (ie after the electoral peak achieved by UKIP) – a trend that is confirmed by their political programs as well as by the discourse of their leaders (see p. 130).

After the two case studies, in the last, fourth chapter of the dissertation comes the turn of the comparative analysis. In its preface, the author summarizes the results of her research in view of the hypotheses set for each of the parties, showing in which cases they are confirmed. And the subsequent comparative analysis successfully highlights both the differences and the similarities in the two studied cases.

This review of the content of the dissertation shows that, from a scientific point of view, the dissertation possesses the qualities of a completed, original work with achieved results in the field of research, so that it meets the high criteria set before a doctoral thesis.

With its 175 (computer) pages of text, together with appendices and a rich bibliography, with its well-constructed structure, as well as with its scholarly style, it meets the formal criteria for a research product of this kind. The other normative requirements are also fulfilled, such as the adequate reflection of the content of the dissertation work in the abstract, as well as a self-assessment of the contributing moments (which could be more precise and detailed). The required three publications on the subject of the PhD are also available.

If I try to summarize succinctly the new scientific ideas and results that the presented PhD contains, I must return to what I mentioned at the beginning - finding a specific research angle and methodological approach (a relatively rare type of comparative analysis) has allowed her to reveal in a new way the effects of the emergence and successes of radical right-wing parties on the strategies, policies and discourse of established parties and thereby contribute to the expansion and deepening of knowledge in the researched area.

Naturally, comments can be made to the dissertation work, as well as opportunities for improvement can be indicated. Some of them were suggested in the text above. Also, it seems to me that there's a bit of an imbalance between the size of the individual chapters, with the last one being significantly shorter than the other three (moreover since it literally repeats nearly three pages, probably due to a technical error). Certain repetitions can also be found elsewhere in the text. There are some

inaccuracies regarding facts or table names. It was possible to attract more Bulgarian authors who published on the topic of the dissertation.

These notes are rather peripheral against the background of the serious research achievement of the author, which gives me reason to categorically support the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "PhD in political science" to Mila Moshelova.

Sofia, October 27, 2022

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dobrin Kanev