

STATEMENT

by Associate Professor Plamen Marinov Ralchev, PhD,

University of National and World Economy, Sofia

*Regarding Dissertation Thesis for awarding the educational and academic degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Professional Field 3.3. Political Studies, Scientific Area:
Political Science (Contemporary Bulgarian Politics)*

*Author of the Doctoral Dissertation: Mila Boyanova Moshelova, PhD student at the
Department of Political Science, Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University "St. Kliment
Ohridski"*

*Dissertation Topic: **Influence of the Radical Right Political Discourse on Systemic
Political Parties in Bulgarian and Britain (2010-2019)***

Information about the PhD candidate

Mila Moshelova has graduated from Aberdeen University and University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, in the UK, receiving bachelor's and master's degree in Political Science. Later she was enrolled in the PhD programme in Political Science (Contemporary Bulgarian Politics) at the Department of Political Science at Sofia University from 2018 to 2022. She has fulfilled all the requirements of the doctoral programme and the individual plan and was directed to defense of her dissertation work. The presented biographical reference gives a clear idea of the high academic training and already accumulated professional experience of the doctoral candidate.

General characteristics of the presented dissertation thesis

- The dissertation is structured in an introduction, four main chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter presents the various models of inter-party competition and the theoretical foundations for the study of the interaction between political parties, on the one hand, and the corresponding dynamics of the party system, on the other. Basic theories of inter-party competition, concepts of the presence of niche parties are examined, followed by an examination specifically of radical right-wing

parties and their competition with systemic or mainstream parties. The second chapter examines Bulgaria as a comparative case study. The third chapter focuses on British politics. The fourth chapter presents an analysis of the results according to the comparative analytical framework. The conclusion summarizes the results of the study.

- The dissertation contains 170 pages of text, 7 pages of appendices, 13 pages of bibliography. The bibliography includes 141 academic publications and 79 online scholarly, media and other secondary sources.
- The dissertation topic is extremely relevant and significant both in terms of research and political application, as the radical right-wing political discourse is becoming more and more influential in the restructuring of political systems and that resonates in the so-called mainstream parties. In this sense, the research has the potential for innovation and originality.
- The doctoral student aims to study the effect of radical right-wing parties at the level of topics and policies, at the level of inter-party competition, and at the level of the party system.
- Specific research tasks are formulated that structure the logical sequence of the research and distinguish its individual parts. The doctoral student analyzes the literature on the processes of convergence and divergence of individual parties on specific topics in different cycles of relevance. Different theoretical approaches are evaluated based on their advantages and disadvantages. The existing literature on center-periphery dynamics within party systems in the context of the entry of (new) radical right-wing parties and themes, and the attraction of electoral weight, is traced and systematized. Key messages, policies and discursive frames are identified; determining "ownership" of topics in order to track processes of borrowing them from other parties. Strategic decisions of political parties in relation to radical right-wing messages and policies have been identified through the analysis of political programs, tracking the effect of processes of unification/difference of party positions. The use and influence of the messages of radical political parties on the dynamics of party competition has been tracked and analyzed. Empirical evidence and the connection of the researched processes with the wider theoretical framework were sought through a comparative analysis of British and Bulgarian politics with their systemic and radical right-wing political parties. The specific scope and limitations of the study are also indicated.

- The doctoral candidate demonstrates a high level of knowledge of the scholarly work and uses very accurately previous studies on the issues covered in the dissertation work.
- The work is distinguished by an excellently thought-out structure, a clearly defined research topic and research questions, an appropriate analytical framework and methodology.

Evaluation of the results of the dissertation research

- The doctoral candidate has conducted a critical reading of the strategic choices of systemic political parties and an analysis of the factors that play a role in their positioning on topics and policies from the arsenal of the radical right, including the dimension of political discourse. A particularly positive impression is made by the application of political discourse analysis as a research method that allows attention to be directed to current political issues and to the task of investigating the way specific issues are discussed in the political space. The research contributes to the understanding of the discursive dimension of the discussed topics in the political messages of the parties. The content analysis of political documents and programs, in combination with a discursive analysis of the political presence of radical messages in the public and political space, looks for manifestations of similarities, distinctions or neutrality among the positions of the main political parties. The doctoral student concludes that manifestations of similarities, distinctions or neutrality should be understood as strategies for maintaining positions among voters after the introduction of polarizing radical messages and positions on certain topics.
- The obtained results can serve as a basis for new studies of the political and communication strategies of the radical right or be used as recommendations and ideas for correcting the current policy course.
- Overall, the tasks and the purpose of the dissertation research have been fulfilled.

Evaluation of scholarly contributions

The study undoubtedly has scholarly contributions, but the doctoral student did not formulate and synthesize them as concrete claims for scientific contributions, but presented them descriptively. I consider as a valid contribution the evaluation of the interaction between the populist radical right parties and their mainstream

competitors beyond the traditional left-right division and their consideration in the dimension of the national-supranational clash along the axis of identity politics. Among the indisputable contributions, we can list: the testing of leading theories of party competition in two cases that differ in key characteristics - electoral and party system; the study of the effect of the "spillover" of radical right-wing political discourse to mainstream parties and the danger of limiting political pluralism. The work has an innovative character, as it enriches Bulgarian political science with new knowledge, and at the same time exposes and compares the Bulgarian case, which is less represented abroad, with similar cases from Central and Eastern Europe.

Evaluation of published work in relation with the dissertation thesis

The doctoral student has four publications related to the topic of the dissertation research, one of which is in a publication referenced and indexed in world-renowned databases of scientific information. She also participated in various academic forums, trainings and academic exchanges in Bulgaria and abroad. All this undoubtedly demonstrates persistence and systematic diligence in her scholarly work.

Evaluation of the Dissertation Abstract

The presented dissertation abstract in a volume of 25 pages correctly and to a significant extent reflects the content and certain important highlights, conclusions and summaries of the dissertation work.

Critical notes, recommendations and questions

The work undoubtedly impresses with its depth and scope, theoretical soundness and analysis of empirical data. What I can formulate as a specific critical note concerns the style of expression and wording, which is clearly influenced by English syntax and text construction techniques, which in turn is understandable given the UK education background of the PhD student.

When applying a discursive analysis of the strategies and messages of radical right-wing parties, I would recommend taking into account the importance of traditional and so-called "new" media for the construction and broadcasting of radical messages, because radical right-wing populism is not only political but also a media and communication phenomenon. Exploiting the new social cleavages, radical right parties

try to simplify issues and code their messages to target groups usually as binary oppositions, which severely limits and eliminates alternativeness. This, combined with the mediatization of politics, i.e. turning politics into a media show sets alarming parameters for mainstream mass political culture. How should mainstream parties approach the new social cleavages so that they don't have to "overtake" the rhetoric and messages of the radical right?

Conclusion

An outstanding and fully completed dissertation thesis was presented to the attention of the academic jury, which demonstrates the skills of the doctoral student to independently conduct academic research work.

In my opinion, the dissertation work has been sufficiently developed and satisfies the basic requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Rules for its Implementation. Based on the above, I give a positive opinion on the awarding of PhD degree in 3.3. Political Sciences, Scientific Area: Political Science (Modern Bulgarian Politics) to Mila Boyanova Moshelova.

27.10.2022

Sofia

Signature:

(Assoc. Prof. Dr. Plamen Ralchev)