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**PARTY SYSTEM IN THE EU – DYNAMICS AFTER THE LISBON
TREATY**

ABSTRACT

**of a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree
"PhD"**

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On January 31, 2024, the Department of Political Science at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of St. Kliment Ohridski discussed and scheduled the dissertation work for public defense.

The dissertation spans 270 pages and includes an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography.

The bibliography includes 251 used sources, with 246 in English and 5 in Bulgarian.

Keywords: European party system, European political parties, European Parliament, parliamentarization, partisanship theory, European Parliament elections in Bulgaria, polarization processes, European Union.

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General characteristics of the dissertation work

Relevance of the researched problem

The relevance of the dissertation is entirely based on the object of the study-the European party system. Partisanship at the level of the European Union (EU) is an issue that is widely discussed in the academic literature. The presented work includes a study of key challenges to the future development of the European party system - the formation of supranational partisanship, the processes of polarisation in the European Parliament (EP) and transnational lists in EP elections. Although it may appear limited at first, the topic holds great importance in shaping the European integration project and its democratic legitimacy, especially given the current geopolitical crises of unprecedented magnitude.

In the extensive debate surrounding the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and the reform of the EU's constitution and institutions, Europarties are rarely discussed in academic discourse. Focusing on the rising significance of political parties in EU politics and their role in legitimizing the EU, the dissertation analyzes the mechanisms present in the EU legal framework that facilitate the development of party politics at the EU level. It also examines the evolving dynamics of the EU party system.

Dissertation objective and research tasks

The primary goal of the dissertation is to trace and analyze three key processes determining the dynamics of the European party system and determining the processes of polarization after the Treaty of Lisbon.

The main research hypothesis in the dissertation is focused on the answer to the research question: are the composition and evolution of the European party system shaped by the polarization of national party systems, or are they primarily influenced by two crucial processes at the European level - parliamentarization and partisanship? This multidimensional question has several important aspects: /1/ whether the political situation in the EP is a result of the crisis of European democracies and the growing support for anti-establishment political parties (far right and far left) or /2/ is related to the growth of support for Euroscepticism and the emergence of a relatively homogeneous Euro-sceptic and even anti-European political alternative or /3/ is a manifestation of political destabilization caused by the series of pan-European crises (the economic crisis-2009, the immigration crisis-2015).

Four research objectives are identified in the dissertation work:

1. The primary aim encompasses reviewing the relevant literature and organizing the conceptual tools that have been utilized. This objective marks the crucial starting point for the dissertation, given the complex nature of the research subject and the interdisciplinary approach required to investigate the topic.
2. The second aim involves tracing and evaluating the main developments in the European party system, encompassing parliamentary groups, European parties, and national party families (commonly known as the “party triangle”¹).
3. The third aim is to examine how the process of parliamentarization (strengthening the powers of the EP) favors the development of partisanship and the European party system.
4. The fourth aim is to analyze the Europeanization of EP elections and the partisanship of decision-making processes at all European levels.

The stated aims are achieved through the following research tasks:

1. To make a critical analyses and attempt to systematize the academic debate about the European party system and parties at the EU level;
2. The research task is to critically assess the changes in the political-legal framework of the EU that seek to enhance democratic legitimacy and reconsider the normative conditions under which the European elections take place. The legal framework related to the European elections is complex, as it is based on principles and norms laid down at the European level, but implemented in the national legislation and also by the national electoral rules of the 27 member states;
3. To examine the growth and changes in European parties, both in terms of their structure and beliefs, and how they relate to the development of a transnational party system, which is influenced by the increased powers of the European Parliament.

The subject of the present study is complex and multidimensional, and therefore the formulation of working hypotheses is of key importance. Three working hypotheses are defined:

1. The strengthening of the powers of the European Parliament encourages the formation of a party system that transcends national boundaries.

¹Pridham, G., Pridham, P., 1981, p. 319.

2. The evolving dynamics of inter-party competition call for a reevaluation of the ‘opposition deficit’ theory in the European Parliament.

3. The European Parliament elections are slowly developing a distinct political character that sets them apart from national elections. This is visible in both the pre-election discourse and the candidate selection process, as well as the voter turnout and the election results.

Research methods

Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used in the dissertation.

1. To achieve the first research goal, two theoretical models were used - multi-level governance and historical institutionalism.
2. To achieve the second goal, a qualitative study of debates in the EP, content analysis of primary and secondary law in the EU was conducted. The “party triangle” in the EU is explained by utilizing a multi-level analysis that focuses on the actors involved and their interactions.
3. Historical institutionalism and document analysis are used to achieve the third objective.
4. A study with multiple components was conducted to achieve the fourth objective, encompassing qualitative methods like analyzing documents, EP committee reports, speeches during EP debates, and political speeches of European leaders, as well as quantitative methods involving statistical analysis of citizens’ voting behavior in European elections.

Structure and summary of the dissertation

The dissertation begins by defining the object of research - the European party system. There is a long-standing academic debate about its main characteristics and parameters. An important clarification is that the dissertation does not aim to prove the existence of the European party system. The studies and analyzes in the work are built in the paradigm of its existence.

The dissertation examines the idea of the partisanship theory in the EU and its relationship with the powers of the EP. Partisanship theory has its roots as a concept of the role of parties in American legislative politics², according to which parties are formed primarily to solve collective problems, i.e. conflicts created in the electoral arena, regarding the mobilization of the electorate and the effective differentiation of political positions³. After the Lisbon Treaty,

² Cox, G., McCubbins, M. 1993.; Hix, S., 2008.

³ Cox, G., McCubbins, M. 1993.

this aspect of the theory was also introduced at the EU level. After the 2014 European elections, a significant change in the election campaign can be observed in most of the member states. A second aspect of the formation of parties is also identified - the collective actions within the legislature. This reading can be translated as the need to coordinate the behavior of actors on a complex multidimensional political issue at the EU level.

A key place in the dissertation is the study of the processes of Europeanization of the EP elections. The proposed study applies a well-established and repeatedly used in international comparative studies theoretical model for the analysis of the model of the European elections. The party system at the European level and the EP elections are analyzed through the categories and concepts of comparative political science. In addition, the party system in the EU and the EP elections are theoretically intertwined, as they mark the legitimate beginning of partisanship theory in the EU. After the first direct elections for the EP in 1979, the European parties became more integrated and organized. Successful analysis of the European party system's dynamics requires a thorough examination of voter behavior in EP elections. This is a necessary element because the theory of 'second order' elections find little support for the claim that there is differential electoral behavior in European elections compared to national elections. Hence, it is imperative to examine this behavior in the context of Bulgaria to identify the unique characteristics that differentiate the national and European electoral processes.

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Research results

Chapter I

The first chapter of the dissertation examines the main approaches to the study of the EU and how they relate to processes of partisanship at the supranational level. Within the chapter, there are four sub-chapters that establish the conceptual framework utilized to attain the primary goal of the work. The scientific methods that are used are: desk research; critical analysis of the used scientific literature; analysis of election results and own calculations of percentage shares of polarization processes in the EP; study of main party documents of officially registered European political parties; comparative analysis of the funding of European political parties, European political foundations and political groups in the EP; content analysis of party documents related to the selection and election of leading candidates for the officially registered European political parties.

The first part of the chapter of the dissertation examines the theories regarding the study of the EU. The author considers the different understanding of the dynamics of the party system in the EU, which the three main approaches (neo-functionalism; intergovernmental approach; the model of multilevel governance) to the study of the EU define. By conducting a literature review,

we have identified fundamental ideas from theories on European integration. This critical analysis highlights the differences and limitations in comprehending theories about the object of study and partisanship as a process within the EU.

The thesis adopts the approach created by L. Hooghe and G. Marks. The rising relevance of the political dimension in EU studies mirrors the heightened interdependence of policy-making arenas within the multi-level EU system. A key insight by L. Hooghe and G. Marks offers a new, profound perspective on considering the European party system and processes of partisanship – “The action has shifted from national governments and technocrats in semi-isolation to domestic politics in the broad and usual sense: party programs, electoral competition, parliamentary debates and votes, public opinion polls, and public referenda”⁴.

The object of the study is defined in the second subchapter. What is the EU party system and how is it possible to study it? In the academic community, it is widely recognized that a party system encompasses the respective political parties operating within a political system, along with the dynamics between them⁵. The party system at the European level meets these criteria, although it is not completely identical to the typical national party system. This definition takes on additional complexity when applied to the EU’s multi-level governance system⁶. European parties interact with each other in the EP, where they form political groups. Political groups influence the legislative process in the EU and the activities of governing bodies at the European level. European parties and their constituent political groups compete for influence on the political agenda of the Union and of the EP. Communication with voters is carried out through the constituent national parties, while the European parties act as mediators in the process of forming political groups (national parties — European parties — political groups)⁷. This kind of party triangle is the basis of the definition of the European party system. The usage of this term in the context of the EU is justified because European parties compete and their interaction creates a “systemic effect”, i.e. the functioning of the EP is legitimized. The first study in the dissertation was done through the methods of the multi-level governance approach. Because of the multi-level form of governance in the EU, the relationships that are built are multidimensional. In the process of selecting candidates for participation in the EP elections, the main decision-making body is the national parties. It is an action that is initiated from the

⁴ Hooghe, L., Marks, G., 2001, pp. 9-10.

⁵ Sartori, J., 1976.

⁶ Hooghe, L., Marks, G., 2001.

⁷ Pridham, G., Pridham, P., 1981, p. 319.

supranational level but is fully implemented at the national level. An analysis of EU primary and secondary law reveals no formal mechanism by which European parties can influence or regulate this process. The selection of candidates for participation in the EP elections differs according to cultural and historical traditions, as well as the statutes of the national parties. On the other hand, the selection of candidates regarding the lead candidate mechanism takes place entirely at the supranational level. In certain European political parties, the national parties participate in the process, while in others, the decision is centralized. In this process, there are different ways of decision-making. The other three relationships presented in Table 1 are closely related to the evolution of partisanship at the EU level and the first working hypothesis. According to Lord⁸, the organizational decentralization of the European party system does not hinder the integrity and effectiveness of parties across the EU, if their ideological and behavioral cohesion is not compromised. Research on the structuring of competition in the European party system supports the idea that the unification of national party systems has been successful; the European party system can generate competition at the European level.

Table 1 Building party ties between different levels of government in the EU.

Level	Process	Actors	Relationship between actors
Supranational and national	EP Elections	National parties European parties	National parties are the main actors in the process; European parties serve as general organizations
Supranational	The mechanism of leading candidates - selection of candidates	European parties National parties	European parties are the main actors in the process; national parties participate in the election process
Supranational and national	functioning of EP	Political groups National parties Political groups	coordinate national parties and provide

⁸ Lord, C., 2006.

			access to EP resources
Supranational and national	Interaction between the EP and national parliaments	Political groups National parties	It is carried out through the representation of the members of the EP in the governing bodies of the national parties; participation in the European affairs committees of the national parliaments; MEPs can be political advisers on European affairs
Supranational	Functioning of the EP	Political groups European parties	The European parties coordinate the political groups in the EP. At this stage of development, this relationship has not yet been developed to its full potential

When it comes to creating majorities in the EP, the growing process of polarization is significant. As a result, Eurosceptic and populist political groups in the European Parliament continue to exert pressure on the main political groups. The process of creating majorities is getting more complicated than before. The levels of the pro-European majority and radical political factions in the EP provide evidence of polarization tendencies. Table 2 clearly shows that the share has increased over the last 20 years. Data are based on official election results and our own estimations. The conclusion of the research is that certain processes of strengthening the processes of polarization are observed, but at the same time the European party system

corresponds to the multi-party consensus model and, more precisely, the "magic formula in Switzerland".

Table 2 Percentage of polarization processes

	Radical political groups	Pro-European majority	Pro-European majority+soft Eurosceptics	Radical political groups+soft Eurosceptics
2019-2024	15%	69%	77%	23%
2014-2019	17%	69%	79%	27%
2014-2009	8%	79%	87%	20%
2009-2004	13%	82%		
2004-1999	13%	81%		

The third section of the first chapter describes the concept of a European political party as well as how its study is carried out. Haas⁹ was the first political scientist to examine European political parties. He identifies political parties at the EU level as important agents of values and ideology. They are the primary criteria determining the success or failure of transnational ideology. More importantly, Haas believes that studying the evolution of supranational partisanship is a crucial perspective for analyzing the EU's development as a political system. A short wave of scientific interest followed the first direct elections for the EP¹⁰. The intergovernmental method does not devote significant scientific attention to the formation and function of European party organizations. Later, study on European parties became synchronized with the mainstream of EU research, comparative political science¹¹. The limitation of the paradigm in which European parties are investigated is the usage of national political parties as the exclusive unit of comparison. Thus, European political parties appear to be underdeveloped in terms of policy formation, interest representation, voter engagement, and media access. The multi-level governance concept addresses some of these limitations by spreading the functions of European political parties in a manner like federal states.

Scholars¹² agree on the number and key characteristics of the various stages of European party formation, as well as the critical influence of the EU's institutional growth. The establishment

⁹ Haas, E., 1958, p. 5.

¹⁰ Pridham, G., Pridham, P., 1981; Niedermayer, O., 1984.

¹¹ Hix, S., 1994.

¹² Hix, S., Lord, C., 1997; Kreppel, A., 2002; Hix, S., Noury, A., Roland, G. 2007; Ladrech, R., 1997.

of the EP's party core in the mid-1970s is regarded as the beginning of the emergence of the party element in the EU.

The second stage overlaps with the creation, ratification, and implementation of the EEA. In this period, transnational party federations supported European integration, according to their own vision: as "rational, purposeful organizations, they clearly have significant incentives to shape the institutional opportunity structure to their advantage, similar to national political parties"¹³.

Political parties in Europe institutionalize their function in the third stage. Organizational changes result from the extension of the Union, the co-legislative process, the expanding powers of the EP, and new methods of decision-making. European parties have proven to be remarkably flexible in adjusting their structures and integrating a large and diverse number of new members.

The fourth and final stage falls in line with the 2007 and 2004 enlargement of the EU and the 2003 and 2007 regulations going into effect. Integration (institutional incentives) and enlargement (broadly interpreted as a rise in the number of parties in the EU party system) are crucial in each of these developmental stages¹⁴.

The fifth stage emerges once the leading candidate mechanism has been institutionalized. It is currently too early to determine if this method will result in systemic changes to the structure of the EU's decision-making process. For the first time in EU history, member states were required to consider the results of the European elections when choosing the President of the European Commission in 2014. While the EU treaties do not establish European parties' supremacy in appointing the president of the EC, EU leaders regard this procedural shift as a necessary requirement for democratic renewal. This approach intends to reduce the European Council's influence in talks and nominations while also opening up new potential for synchronization and customization of the European elections. Several months before the elections, European party families select potential 'leading candidates'.

The dissertation's second research focuses on the procedures used by European political parties to select a leading candidate. The research methodology involves a content analysis of political papers and minutes from European political party meetings. The analysis includes all of Europe's registered political parties. The major conclusions are based on the concept that

¹³ Luther, R., Müller-Rommel, K., 2002, p. 340.

¹⁴ Hix, S., Noury, A., Roland, G. 2007

European parties are still unable to accumulate positives from the mechanism of the leading candidates. The mechanism of the leading candidates was completely successful in one direction: it increased the functioning, structure, and unity of the European parties.

The research identifies the following characteristics: first, most European parties use more restrictive criteria and centralized registration procedures to choose party candidates. Direct nomination helps to reduce intra-party competition. Second, the profiles of the EC President candidates highlight the growing separation between EU-level politics and national politics. Previous Commission heads, including Jean-Claude Juncker, José Manuel Durão Barroso, and Romano Prodi, were all previous Prime Ministers with extensive experience leading national parties. In contrast, the candidates supported by the European parties in 2019 have extensive experience in European institutions (MEPs or members of the European Commission) as well as a considerably more modest national political career. Third, despite the public narrative of pan-European unity, all major pro-European party families selected leaders from Western Europe in 2019: EPP (Germany), PES (Netherlands), Greens (Germany and the Netherlands), and ALDE (Denmark).

The third sub-chapter investigates the party triangle of the EU and the interactions between its components. This section of the dissertation focuses on party politics at the EU level, namely the link between political groups in the EP and European parties. The data clearly shows that the EP's political groups outperform the relevant European political parties in the categories evaluated. In 2004, the introduction of public funding for European political parties provided an incentive for Eurosceptic families. The number of European parties is growing in tandem with the scope of their competences: initially limited only to "offering vague and broad electoral platforms for the European elections, the parties gradually became more important for the preparation and training of the candidates for the EP"¹⁵.

Comparative organizational strength analysis is an essential measure of the interaction between European political parties and political groups in the European Parliament. Organizational research academics believe that the two most important variables influencing structural strength are an organization's economic and human resources. A similar approach to examining political issues is utilized in scientific publications¹⁶. Researching the funding of party entities at the EU level entails examining the EP's budget framework. The study's data comes from the official

¹⁵ Bardi, L., et al. 2010

¹⁶ Katz, R., Mair, P., 1994; Hix, S., 2002.

EU budget, as well as the yearly reports of all officially registered European political parties and foundations. The distribution of the EP budget is a valid indicator for measuring the balance of power between groups and parties, since both European structures are financed by the same institution, which allows us to understand which of the two is considered by the European institutions to be the most important.

Once registered, all European political parties and foundations are eligible to apply for European financing. The only extra requirement for funding is that the European political party be represented by at least one Member of the European Parliament. Given the requirement for representation in at least one-quarter of the member states, all European parties easily meet this standard. The examination of the percentage share of funding of European political parties reveals that EU funding takes the lead in their financial statements. The main European parties EPP and PES rely only on membership fees to fund themselves (in the annual financial statements, there is no income from donations).

Chapter II

The second chapter of the thesis examines and revises the theory of cleavages at the EU level. The chapter is divided into three sub-chapters, which include a desk study and critical analysis of the cleavage theory and its appearance at the EU level; for the study of the theory, the author chose several case studies: the financial crisis of 2008; the immigration crisis of 2015; the political crisis related to the rule of law mechanism and the new aspects of Euroscepticism; the political crisis related to Great Britain's withdrawal; the COVID-19 pandemic; the war in Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis; systematization of the literature on the definition of the concept of Euroscepticism, an in-depth analysis on the crisis potential of the EU and its influence on the European party system.

The chapter contains a study that demonstrates that the processes of polarization are essentially unrelated to the 'grand coalition' and decision-making in the EP, but rather are a nationwide mirror of the polarization of national party systems. The author uses the Chapel Hill study, when she studies the relationship between the emergence of the ECR and the EPP's conservative wing. As part of the study, far-right political groups in the EP were examined. A qualitative analysis of political speeches and party documents (during the selected case studies) demonstrates that all individual crises have varying degrees of impact on the European party system and EU cleavages.

The second chapter attempts to answer the following question: which cleavages structure the pattern of inter-party competition at the European level. The cleavage at the national level urban-rural does not show at the European level, hence it has little potential to establish confederal parties. The church-state cleavage has resulted in the formation of a European political party, but it has no representation among political parties in the EP. The case with the center-periphery cleavage is similar: the ESA is a European political party, but in the EP, they are allies with the Greens, and their ability to show themselves as an independent political force cannot be quantified.

The research in this section of the dissertation focuses on cleavages at the EU level. It is based on Stein Rokan and Daniele Karamani's thesis and its application to European political families. Lane and Erson's suggestion that conservative and liberal parties should be viewed as "parties that are not connected and do not arise from divisions and oppositions between voters"¹⁷ is an important consideration. The 2019 elections can be viewed as a referendum of sorts, as they are the first large-scale expression of European civic society's will after Brexit. The "grand coalition," which includes the two biggest political organizations in the EP: the EPP and the PGA of the SD, lost its majority for the first time in decades, resulting in a different configuration in the process of decision-making and majority building.

Polarization processes are linked to an increase in the relative proportions of the extreme left and extreme right. In terms of programmatic and ideological identity, they are strongly anti-European (regional parties are pro-European by definition). When radical right-wing anti-European parties rule coalition national governments, the polarization of national party systems should result in the strengthening of anti-European attitudes in the EP and the development of anti-European representation in the EU Council.

A cleavage on this scale is unable to arise due to the incompatibility of the extreme left and extreme right, implying that there is an intersecting group of voters rather than a grouping of such. This means that national party systems are replicated at the supranational level, and the model of party competition in the EP does not result in the formation of a new group of voters (voter alignment). This conclusion has two empirical manifestations that have been investigated:

1. The split between the ECR and the EPP is centered on support for or opposition to the EU.

¹⁷ Kolarova, R., 2008, p. 114

2. The division for/against the EU influences the formation of political groups in the sixth and seventh EPs. The first manifestation of this rift is the radical right's split into two wings: anti-European and anti-democratic.

The impacts of the pro/anti-EU division were investigated using data from the Chapel Hill poll on the ideological profile of national parties and a coefficient established by them on their attitude toward the EU. The formation of political group and the European political party of the European Conservatives and Reformists marks an important moment for the EU in terms of cleavage theory. The study's conclusions are as follows: ECR was successful in bringing together new national parties from the conservative political family to accept this identity. As a result, ECR was able to damage the conservative core of the EPP in the name of European integration. The second conclusion is connected to the level of radicalization inside the political group. During the years 2009-2019, the radical right-wing parties in the group increased significantly. In numerical terms, the increase is 30 percentage points, from 8% in 2009 to 38% in 2019. The group is relatively homogeneous.

The analysis of the EU's crisis potential using cleavage theory is critical for understanding the dynamics of the European party system. The first case study looked at the 2008 financial crisis. Its outcome can be described as a split between creditor and debtor nations. The discursive analysis of remarks in the EP throughout the era demonstrates that this schism does not correspond to Simon Hicks' concept about the national-territorial divide. According to Hix, it occurs in EU politics when "an issue on the agenda puts individuals from different nations on opposite sides of the debate, for example, when one national group appears to be gaining at the expense of another"¹⁸. In this case, Simon Hix' territorial cleavage hypothesis does not meet the basic prerequisites of cleavage theory. Such cleavage at the EU level cannot exist because it fails to garner support from the population, i.e. voters do not define their position on it, and it has no impact on political families in Europe or the EU. The economic and migration crises in the EU have had the greatest impact on the open-closed society split, as well as the cleavage connected with the creation of the New Left political family. This idea is tested by evaluating the parties represented in the seventh and eighth EPs. It should be noted that the migrant issue comes between two legislative elections (after 2015) and subsides dramatically after the 2019 European elections.

¹⁸ Hix, S., Hoyland, B., 2011, p. 106.

The second prominent case study is the refugee crisis of 2015–2016. It reveals new dividing lines that were previously only weakly exhibited. Not only are national parties divided on whether migration threatens national identities, but national governments and EU institutions differ on the significance of migration for European identity and the European project. Political actors inevitably fail to mobilize and express such structural potential. The 2015 migration crisis undoubtedly served as a catalyst in the dynamics of Europe's party system. To trigger latent conflicts, certain players must publicly defend opposing perspectives in the public discourse.

Analyses of European policies during and after the crisis demonstrate the rise of regional unions in the EU. The Visegrad Four (V4), which includes Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, is the most visible illustration of the impact on the dynamics of the European party system. It began as a regional union with the goal of безоминг EU members. When the goal is attained, the alliance ends its cooperation. However, with the refugee crisis, the V4 began to develop similar viewpoints, and in February 2016, they successfully opposed the EU migrant redistribution system. The multi-level governance model has the potential to provide a scientific explanation for cooperation inside the V4 (despite the different party lines of the governments). This method is based on the notion that the state is a major actor in European integration, but unlike the intergovernmental approach (particularly the liberal intergovernmental approach), it emphasizes the concept of identity in explaining the political processes that occurred following the refugee crisis. According to multilevel governance theorists, local identity is "the most powerful source of mass political mobilization"¹⁹. Right-wing Eurosceptic and populist parties across Europe are fueled by culturally rooted anti-immigrant sentiment and nationalism. Furthermore, the established European parties were unable to respond appropriately at the outset of the crisis due to internal divisions over European integration and the impact of immigration. Against this backdrop, the refugee crisis might be viewed as a watershed point in the politicization of migration in the EU. Politicization is a crucial notion in post-functionalism that explains the change from permissive consensus to restrictive disagreement about European integration²⁰. According to the theory of evaluating the EU through the lens of the multi-level governance approach, the V4 can be viewed as a transnational party cooperation or, more specifically, a mechanism for expressing anti-immigrant sentiments.

¹⁹ Hooghe, L., Marks, G., 2018, p. 113.

²⁰ Hooghe, L., Marks, G., 2009, p. 5.

The study of the dynamics of the European party system affected by the financial and refugee crises can reach the following conclusions:

1. Opposition to European integration in Southern Europe is categorized as soft euroscepticism. The radical left does not oppose the fundamental concept of European integration, but rather calls for more solidarity between the EU and other member states. Ultimately, the extreme left desired a different, more united Europe.
2. The Eurosceptic reaction of the EU's extreme and nationalist-conservative right is classified as hard Euroscepticism, in which the concept of integration is originally contested. This variety of Euroscepticism wishes to return to the previous state of the nation-state, in which national sovereignty is totally under the jurisdiction of state power. Euroscepticism seeks to restore national sovereignty and maintain national population homogeneity.

Eurosceptic political parties gained strength because of the Brexit political crisis and were able to maintain their presence in the 2014 European Parliament elections. The total share of Eurosceptics in the EP has stayed steady over the last two terms, but there is a trend toward "unbalanced, more strong right-wing Euroscepticism."²¹ Another conclusion made from comparing the last two EP mandates to Brexit is that hard Euroscepticism has become a marginal force in the most recent EP elections.

The polarization processes of the past EP, as well as the breakdown of the grand coalition, have resulted in: 1) a softening of the Eurosceptic rhetoric of ECR and KGEOL/SZL, and 2) consolidation and improvement of organizational structures in order to achieve political power. This also explains the actions of Eurosceptic political parties outside the EP: Viktor Orbán (Fidesz-Hungary) is in talks with Matteo Salvini (Nordic League-Italy) and Mateusz Morawiecki (Law and Justice-Poland) to form a new right-wing political alliance in the EP. In the short term, the Fidesz party's new connection with a right-wing Eurosceptic group could have an impact on the political balance in Parliament. The party is currently independent, which greatly decreases its influence in the EP. Political groups are given the resources and opportunity to gain influential positions in committees and as rapporteurs (in proportion to the size of the group).

²¹ Taggart, P., 2020, p. 223

After analyzing the Brexit crisis, the following conclusion can be drawn: in the long run, initiatives to restructure the EU in a more intergovernmental soft Eurosceptic direction will expand at the expense of hard Eurosceptic proposals. The Brexit referendum made leaving the EU a viable political option, but the right-wing Eurosceptic bloc of the European Parliament chose moderation over extremism. The low intensity of overlap with European identity, as well as the politicization of the immigration debate, are the primary elements driving the resurgence of this long-held Euroscepticism. In this way, the pre-election campaign for the state's separation from the framework of community space aroused many Brexit supporters.

As a starting point for investigating EU-level cleavages considering the war in Ukraine and the new crises in the EU, member states demonstrate significant consensus and determination in reaction to the war in Ukraine. The Union has developed ambitious sanctions packages that go beyond prior red lines while maintaining a strong sense of unity in the bargaining process. Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has put many Eurosceptics on the defensive. The divide between Poland and Hungary increasingly isolates Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. After a content study of political speeches, party documents, and comments of political leaders, it is possible to substantiate the assertion that the right-wing Eurosceptic center in the EU is weakening its consolidation based on the foreign policy cleavage.

The electoral victory of the right-wing "Brothers of Italy" party in Italy's elections marks a shift in the emerging dynamics of Euroscepticism across the continent. A significant ideological theme evident in the statements of the party's leader, Meloni, is the construction of a pro-European rhetoric during a period of rising tension with Russia. In a recent interview, Italy's Prime Minister declared that her party has "one line related to European conservatism,"²² rather than an anti-European side. A discursive analysis reveals a significant trend towards the government's approach in the realm of "soft" Euroscepticism. Meloni's first speech as Italian Prime Minister detailed the new government's aims and European policies. She emphasizes that the government does not prioritize slowing or sabotaging European integration, but, in a sign of her party's Eurosceptic stance, she calls for more "unity in diversity,"²³ noting that "Italy will respect all existing rules," while also contributing to the change of those that have failed.

The conflict over the 'rule of law' mechanism is not about how the EU defines the rule of law, but about when the EU can use it. Not surprisingly, two countries—Poland and Hungary—

²² <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/interview/meloni-my-party-does-not-have-an-anti-european-wing/>

²³ https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2022/10/25/news/discorso_integrale_meloni_camera_fiducia-371646980/

discovered major misunderstandings concerning national sovereignty and the mechanism. The EU can exert influence over member states by suspending payments and pledges, reducing funds under existing commitments, and employing other comparable financial instruments. In brief, the EU's funding for member states will be determined by whether they satisfy and preserve the union's essential values: a lack of commitment to the rule of law will result in a denial of EU funds.

The case study of Poland is multidimensional, with a clear divergence between government policy toward the EU and public opinion. As a result, the administration is unable to express direct criticism or opposition to EU and European policy. The prevailing opinions in "Law and Justice" (PiS) fall under the category of "soft" Euroscepticism. They believe that the state should remain a member of the Union while attempting to improve itself. To attain its objectives, the PiS formulates its policy toward the EU in two areas. On the one hand, the party believes it disagrees with the European political elite on moral and cultural matters. The ruling party's attitude to traditional morality and national identity stands in stark contrast to the socio-liberal, cosmopolitan consensus that prevails among Western European cultural circles and political elites. The political authorities in Poland and Hungary believe that connecting the allocation and management of Union funds to the rule of law is a political weapon based on ambiguous and arbitrary criteria that has no legal basis in EU treaties. This binding could be used as a technique to limit national sovereignty. Given the increasingly instrumental approach to EU membership, it is reasonable to expect that failing to provide recovery money for the economic impact of the pandemic would be immensely damaging to the Polish administration.

Chapter III

The third chapter of the dissertation examines the processes of parliamentarization and partisanship at the EU level. The chapter is divided into five subchapters that cover the various components of these processes.

The third chapter begins with a historical analysis of the origins of European political parties. For the purpose of this dissertation, three major aspects of the institutionalization of European political parties are identified. The first key point to note is that the first official recognition of the existence of transnational party formations within the Assembly occurred in January 1953, during the discussion and debate of the Assembly's new rules of procedure. It has been proposed that committee members be nominated in order to balance representation from different Member States as well as different political traditions. These self-defined procedural rules allow

for the institutionalization of political groups, although this is not foreseen by the ECSC Treaty (the EP's first informal self-empowerment). The result of this election is a de facto division into three political groups: Christian Democratic, Socialist and Liberal. These were the main party families in Western Europe at the time.

The second major feature is the appointment of Shelto Patin as rapporteur, with the primary goal of rewriting the 1960 draft convention (based on the Dehaus study) and preparing a new report on direct EP elections. After comparing the reports from the period, it is worth noting that the Patin report is less ambitious but more feasible than the Dehaus and Wedel reports. On January 14, 1975, the EP approved the report as a resolution. This period is an illustration for the first compromise resolution between the EP and its political factions on the electoral system and the institutionalization of European political parties.

With the Maastricht Treaty (1992) and the subsequent period of EP reports (third stage), political parties at the European level were explicitly recognized as an important factor in integration, with their role being to foster a European consciousness and express the political will of Union citizens. According to Article 138A of the Maastricht Treaty, political parties at the European level not only help to shape a European consciousness and represent the political will of Union citizens, but they also serve an integrating function. The new art. 10, item 4 of the TEU makes no mention of their participation in the integration process. This choice is probably due to the idea that some European parties are clearly and openly against the integration process. Another explanation for the article is the political crisis within the EU regarding the failed ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe and the subsequent negotiation process.

The second part of the dissertation's third chapter addresses the first working hypothesis. The initial working hypothesis may be translated as: Parliamentarization at the EU level support the process of partisanship. The growth of the EP's powers will surely raise the role of European parties as the primary structural unit of representative democracy at the European level. There is a link between the European Parliament's increased role in the legislative process and the partisanship of its political agenda and institutional principles. The development of the mechanism of the leading candidates, the new type of European election campaign, and the expansion of the EP's legislative powers reflect the new chapter in the EU's history. The progressive rise of European political parties coincides with the expansion of the EP's powers.

The EP's power in decision-making stems from the Treaty of Lisbon, which grants it (limited) official rights. The premise that EP representatives use various channels and strategies for informal institutional empowerment is shown using historical institutionalism and critical juncture analysis approaches. One of the first crucial junctures in the operation of the EP (Assembly) is the election of representatives. The proposal is that the nomination of members in committees attempts to balance the representation of different member states and political traditions at the same time. It allows partisanship processes to directly influence the supranational organization.

According to the Treaty of Rome, the president of the European Commission is elected jointly by the leaders of government of the member nations in the European Council. The next phase is for each government to designate Commission members, who are approved by the European Council. The EP plays no official part in this process. However, following the first direct elections, Parliament opted to conduct an informal 'vote of confidence' in each successive EC (the second important crucial juncture). This practice was formalized by the Maastricht Treaty (Article 214).

The treaty grants the EP consultative powers over the election of the President of the Commission and establishes the Parliament's right to impose a veto on the Commission as a collective entity. The EC's mandate changes to five years, matching the mandate of the parliamentary entity. The EP took a harder stance on its responsibility, including a vote on the candidacy of Jacques Santer as President of the Commission, as well as hearings with nominees for Commission members²⁴. As the final stage of the EC's adoption, the EP conducts a vote of the Commission as a collective body (the third critical juncture) through which the EP strengthens the processes of parliamentarization).

The Maastricht Treaty (1993) expanded the Parliament's vote of no confidence beyond the boundaries of the EC's yearly report. For the first time in 1998 and 1999, the Parliament profited from the treaty's newly introduced competences. The Jacques Santer Commission has been criticized twice; the first was for the Commission's failure to address the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) outbreak. With this measure, the Parliament directly influences the Commission's food safety policies²⁵. The European Parliament demands a formal response from the Commission to claims of financial mismanagement and nepotism. In the run-up to the no-

²⁴ Hix, S., Hoyland, B., 2011, p. 43.

²⁵ Hix, S., Hoyland, B., 2011, p. 46.

confidence vote, Commission President Santer stated publicly that an independent commission would be established to investigate the allegations, as well as fundamental administrative reform, such as a new code of conduct and rules governing the EC's appointment and work.

. The Treaty of Lisbon introduces a modification to the nomination of the President of the Commission. It states that the Council must recommend a candidate for the seat considering the upcoming EP elections. In contrast to the former system, it is stated that the candidate is elected by a qualified majority of all MEPs. The election of the Commission's Chairman by EP members is intended to provide democratic legitimacy. These new measures confirm the rise of partisanship logic within the institution. The Treaty of Lisbon clarifies the notion of parliamentarization by declaring that the Commission, as a body, reports to the European Parliament (Article 17, Paragraph 8 of the TEU). The vote of no confidence refers to the European Commission as a collective body. According to the TEC (Article 17, Paragraph 6), a member of the Commission must resign if requested by the President of the EC. This article, along with the 2010 Framework Agreement decision on interactions between the EP and the Commission, introduces a method for influencing the composition of the EC. Parliament employs an informal empowerment method in this process (the fourth critical juncture). The EP uses its powers under the Commission's voting procedure to elicit concessions from Member States' governments on their nominations. The first example dates to 2004, when the EP issued negative opinions to two Commission members, including President Jose Manuel Barroso. The Latvian nomination of Ingrida Udre (accusations of illegal donation to her party) and the Italian nomination of Rocco Buttiglione (during the EP hearings presents extreme theses on homosexuality) are withdrawn after the EC was criticized by the EP.

The third sub-chapter investigates partisanship at the EU level. Selected case studies define the distinct mechanisms through which European political parties affect the European decision-making process. European parties participate in the preparation of Council and European Council sessions, together with key figures from their respective EP groups. This is notably true for three political families: socialists, liberals, and the European People's Party. These three families have long held core representation in both the Council and the European Council.

As a result, their respective European political parties coordinate with ministers or prime ministers before the Council and European Council sessions. The Socialist Family conducted its first preparation conference of the European Council, known as a pre-summit, in 1974 (far before the European Council was established as an institution), whereas the EPP held its first

such meeting in 1980. Liberals began in the late 1990s²⁶. These gatherings progressively grow more frequent, and therefore institutionalized. These meetings aim to coordinate positions within a political family, inform participants about their colleagues' perspectives (within the political family), and establish coalitions. These sessions are also beneficial for long-term strategic planning, communication, and networking within the political family. During these meetings, European political parties play an important role in vertical and horizontal coordination by bringing together representatives of their national members, commissioners from their political families, and EP group representatives (coordinators, rapporteurs, and presidents)²⁷.

Moreover, political families convene before Council meetings. In this arrangement, European political parties are responsible for coordination. EPP has been having these meetings since 2007, while ALDE began organizing them in 2015. PES has traditionally organized similar meetings for certain Council formats but has significantly expanded the number of applicable formats²⁸. The Green political family has also started to hold such meetings. This is due to the Green parties' membership in government coalitions in several member states. These sessions typically conclude with the adoption of declarations, resolutions, and shared stances. Although there is no true harmonization of positions (since the national state remains prominent within the Council and the European Council), these party networks and meetings improve negotiations and decision-making. The European political parties have indirect influence.

The fourth part of the chapter investigates party relationships between national and European political parties and political groups in the European Parliament. Representatives in the European Parliament have affiliations to national and supranational parties. Thus, MEPs can be viewed as agents for two potential principals: their national parties, which control their nomination and election, and their transnational political organizations within the EP. Political groups in the EP control a substantial share of resources, hence they have a better ability to control and discipline MEPs than national parties. Furthermore, even if national parties have the capacity to conduct MEP surveillance, they may lack the will to do so. In addition, Hix and Lord suggest that national parties are less active in monitoring their EP MPs because they are confident that they would not be directly influenced in national elections, even if their

²⁶ Johansson, K., Raunio, T., 2019.

²⁷ Johansson, K., Raunio, T., 2019.

²⁸ Bardi, L., et al. 2020

representatives conduct irresponsibly²⁹. As a result, in their daily job, MEPs are more regulated by their political group in the EP than by their national party.

The fifth sub-chapter seeks to answer the question of whether there is an organized opposition other than the opposition to the institutional framework and European integration procedures. The answer lies in analyzing the heterogeneous set of votes represented in the EP: is it feasible to find a critique of the EU that advocates for more (or different) integration rather than less EU integration? According to Peter Mair, such opposing groups are nearly hard to form: "If you can't organize an opposition in the EU... you should organize an opposition against the EU"³⁰.

As a result, all international opposing forces lose the chance to oppose and hence organize against the system. Here, we additionally consider the second working hypothesis. The proposed second working hypothesis seeks to explore patterns of opposition in the EP by reviewing plenary debates on the European Union budget as well as voting results. According to the "opposition deficit" theory, there is no cohesion of opposition forces in the European Parliament. This has been taken for granted for decades, but with the Brexit process, a new phase of politics and parliamentarization is emerging.

Several researchers have disputed the difference between the "opposition deficit" idea and the current state of the EP. Accumulated data and research results suggest that the theory of the "opposition deficit" should be revised, insofar as there is now a clear grouping of two parliamentary "camps" - "pro-European" and "Eurosceptic," with conservative parties, which we unquestionably assign to the latter, having the characteristics of a parliamentary opposition.

For the purposes of this study, a content analysis of debates over voting on the European budget was conducted between 2009 and 2023. The study comprehensively includes all minutes on the selected topic. It contains almost 400 speeches (including written addresses), but does not include speeches by the EP's President, his deputies, or EC representatives. The research aims to trace the key arguments and examine the various forms of opposition. A registration card with five indicators was designed specifically for the research: Keywords: argumentation of the stated thesis, MEP position (affirming, denying, raising a problem), MEP attitude (positive, neutral, negative), and building the argumentation (rational-logical, emotional-figurative). The quantitative and qualitative analysis of opposition trends during the EP discussions on the EU budget adoption offers four results.

²⁹ Hix, S., Lord, C., 1997, p. 2018.

³⁰ Mair, P., 2007, p. 7.

First, political groups' positions toward EU policies and the EU system appear to be influenced by their ideological orientation. This is especially important to remember while discussing budgets. While right-wing opposition forces reject both EU policies and the regime on principle, the GUE/NGL takes a more pragmatic approach.

Second, what truly unites the motivation and main argumentation of the opposition in the EP (regardless of ideological orientation) is their positioning as opposition to the ruling power in all observed political debates (when this pattern is present), both in terms of the nature of the opposition and the motivations used.

The third conclusion concerns the discipline of national political parties in the EP's Parliamentary Group. The content analysis results show a resemblance in the positions voiced by parties working within the same political groups. One major exception is the ECR grouping.

The last conclusion concerns the consolidation of the opposition. At the highest point of conflict of the EU's crises, the opposition consolidates against EU policy. The patterns of opposition in the EP can be readily identified over different time periods. The far-right opposition in the EP includes criticism in their speeches without offering an alternative policy or approach to the EU crises, whereas the ID and ECR primarily follow a programmatic opposition, with the difference being that the ECR offers specific alternatives.

Chapter IV

The fourth chapter of the dissertation examines the debate at the level of the EP and the Council regarding the struggle to increase the levels of supranational partisanship in the EP elections. The chapter is divided into six subchapters. In the first sub-chapter, through a cabinet study, the problem of democratic legitimacy is addressed and is linked to the EP elections.

In the second sub-chapter, the main aspects of the dynamics of the debate on transnational partisanship at the EU level are defined through content analysis of primary and secondary legislation of the EU and reports of the committees in the EP. Electoral reforms at EU level are characterized by a series of changes in both the Treaties and secondary legislation. To systematize the debate, three key periods have been identified.

A main characteristic of the first period of the development of the European electoral system is the ideological opposition between the ideas of a unified electoral system and the production of the first direct elections. As introduced in the third chapter, this period ends with a compromise decision by the EP (Assembly).

The second period of attempts to build a unified electoral system is characterized by numerous reports on the subject. Shortly after the holding of the direct elections, the EP began to outline the European electoral system, confirming the supranational identity of the institution. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the political processes thereafter led to a revision of the number of representatives in the EP from Germany. Therefore, this was the occasion for the launch of a new process for the creation of a unified electoral system. The Maastricht Treaty further required a review of the Electoral Act of 1976, due to redistribution of seats and amended Art. 138, paragraph 3. This institutionalizes the EP's right to approve the Council's proposal on the single electoral procedure (the EP has the right to initiate a legislative procedure on the synchronization of national legislative rules).

The recent historical period is characterized by two political processes: the Labor government in the United Kingdom (1997) and the changes in the EU's institutional framework after the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam (1999). The Labor administration supports the proportional electoral system when voting for representatives in the EP. The Treaty of Amsterdam - and any treaty concluded thereafter - includes the following amended Article 190(4) (former Article 138(3)). The question of general principles includes the concept that has been developed during recent reports on electoral reform. This innovation provided a new basis for discussion.

In the third subchapter, an analysis of the Electoral Act of 1976 and a comparative analysis of the electoral procedure concerning the EP elections in the EU member states was created.

The Duff Report (2009-2014) is discussed in the fourth sub-chapter of the dissertation. It marks the beginning of the process regarding recent fundamental changes. The purpose of the report is to balance the expanding competences of the EP and its democratic accountability. The key points in the debate have been on the political agenda of Parliament for decades. The central theme in the Duff reports is a pan-European constituency, in which part of the representatives in the EP would be elected on the basis of a transnational list drawn up by the European parties. European citizens have two votes – one for the national list and the second for the transnational list. The second distinctive element of the proposal refers to the establishment of a mathematical formula for the redistribution of EP seats among the member states, according to Art. 14, para. 2 of the TEU. The Duff reports are composed of several proposals. The common characteristics between them is the goal of making elections a supranational process that is not monopolized by national parties.

The latest report on electoral reform is discussed in sub-chapter five. The EU dates from 2021 and the rapporteur is the representative of the group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats Domenech Ruiz Devesa. What sets this report apart is the concept of common minimum standards. The objectives of the report are the approximation of electoral legislation and a gradual movement towards a single electoral law at the EU level. The document proposes that 28 members of the EP be elected from a single electoral district, including the entire territory of the EU; pan-European lists to be composed of candidates, so as to guarantee the representation of both sexes (so-called alternative lists); that each voter has the opportunity to cast one vote for the entire European list in addition to his vote for the national or regional list; the allocation of seats in the EP to be carried out in accordance with the D'Hondt method; it is also proposed to create a European Electoral Authority to coordinate information on European elections and to monitor compliance with common electoral rules.

For the needs of the present research, a content analysis of the EP debate on the Devesa report was made, which covers the entire shorthand record. It includes more than 70 speeches (with 3 written speeches), not including the speeches of the President of the EP, his deputies or the representatives of the EC. The purpose of the study is to trace the main arguments that have been brought to bear on the issue of supranational partisanship. The main conclusion drawn from the analysis of the debate is a split along conservative lines (for/against deepening European integration) in the EPP.

Two meetings have been organized at EU Council level to discuss the proposal for a Council regulation on the election of members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. The first is on October 18, 2022, and the second – June 27, 2023. The content analysis used data from the video broadcast of the Council meetings. Through content analysis, the positions of the member states were derived and a subsequent comparative analysis of the positions was made. At the conclusion of the prepared analysis, three trends stand out: the high percentage of member states that reject the Europeanization of EP elections through tools such as: pan-European constituency and European candidate lists is mainly due to the perception that such changes go beyond the powers of the EU, violate the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and by a third party violate the EU Treaties. A large part of the opposition is of the opinion that in-depth analyzes and discussions are needed to reach a compromise solution. On the opposite side is the part of the opposition forces who believe that the changes of 2018 are completely sufficient for the harmonization of national electoral legislations. Large member

states (France and Germany) support the idea of transnational electoral lists and pan-European constituencies, which may favor a change in the attitude of states with neutral positions.

Chapter V

In the last chapter of the dissertation work, two elements of the European elections are considered: the manifestos of European political parties and the behavior of voters during voting in European elections. An attempt is made here to prove the third research hypothesis. The third working hypothesis is related to the consequences of Britain's exit from the EU. This is a turning point in the history of the Union, which puts on the agenda for both politicians and citizens the question of the possible severe consequences of the disintegration of the EU. Second-order election theory is examined and after a comparative analysis of the last three European elections – 2009, 2014 and 2019 – the working hypothesis that post-Brexit second-order election theory fails to fully explain will be confirmed or rejected the data from the survey of citizens' attitudes during the European elections. The idea is accepted that pre-election debates have their own specific content, the "Europe Matters" model or the theory of the importance of the European project - which is in contradiction with the model of secondary elections.

In the first subsection, a qualitative study of the pre-election programs of all officially registered European political parties is prepared. Two research methods offer tools to perform two levels of analysis respectively: content analysis and discourse analysis. The first level of research is the derivation of indicators based on statistical analysis and secondary data analysis. Through this method, it will be possible to highlight the correlations between the various indicators and therefore to deduce the trends in the researched topic. The second level of the research is a qualitative research through which the ideological positions of the European political parties will be identified.

The study includes the selection of indicators. Regarding the first of the examined cleavages (left-right and the crisis in the Eurozone), the following factors were selected: 1) left-right axis; 2) state intervention or free enterprise; 3) improvement of public services and reduction of taxes; 4) for redistribution or against redistribution; 5) planned economy or market economy. For the examination of the second cleavage (liberal-conservative and the migration crisis), the following indicators were selected: 1) liberal-authoritarian axis; 2) religious-secular axis; 3) multiculturalism-ethnocentrism; 4) civil liberties or law and order; 5) for liberal policies and against liberal policies; 6) against restrictive immigration policy or for restrictive immigration

policy; 7) environmental protection or economic growth. For the analysis of the third cleavage (pro-anti-EU), the indicator: for deepening European integration or against deepening European integration was considered.

The second stage of the research excludes indicators that have a weak correlation with the manifestos of European political parties. The subsequent analysis examines in depth the relationship between the indicators (Ideological left-right axis; State intervention or free enterprise; Liberal-authoritarian axis; Environmental protection or economic growth; Religious-secular axis; Multiculturalism-ethnocentrism axis; Axis for deepening European integration or against the deepening of European integration) and the electoral platforms of the European parties.

The paradox of the European elections is far from over. European political parties still remain "umbrella" type formations, in the member states, the candidates for representatives in the EP organize their campaign to a greater extent on the basis of the national electoral platforms than on the European ones. However, several elements can be noted in the direction of Europeanization of the electoral process during the last EP elections.

The second sub-chapter prepares a critical analysis of the two main theories examining the behavior of citizens during voting in EP elections. Based on the theory, ten hypotheses were derived.

X1: Disapproval of the government increases the probability that a voter who in national elections voted for a party represented in the government will switch to voting for a party outside of it in the European Parliament elections.

X2: Voter preferences should be the same at both levels of government and therefore voting behavior should be similar.

X3: The smaller the difference between the voter's preferences on the left-right axis and the position of a certain party, the more likely the voter will vote for that party in the EP elections.

X4: Government disapproval increases the likelihood that a voter will not vote in the EP elections.

X5: Party polarization on the dimension of European integration increases the likelihood of voting.

X6: Disapproval of deepening European integration increases the possibility that a voter will not vote in the EP elections.

X7: The smaller the difference between the voter's preferences on the axis regarding the dimensions of European politics and the position of a particular party, the more likely the voter is to vote for that party in the EP elections.

X8: Citizens' awareness of European issues and EP elections influences voting behavior.

X9: The effect of EU disapproval on abstention is greater than the effect of government disapproval on abstention in EP elections.

X10: Proximity between national parties and citizens on the pro/anti-EU dimension explains voting behavior better than any other hypothesis tested.

In the third subchapter, a quantitative study of the developed 10 hypotheses is prepared. Data for the study was taken from the European Election Survey. The SPSS software system was used for the correlation index calculations. In order to successfully analyze the Europeanization of the EP elections and, accordingly, the legitimate beginning of partisanship at the EU level, the conclusion should be drawn that neither of the two theories regarding the EP elections can fully explain the behavior of the voters in Bulgaria. Correlation analysis shows mixed results that demonstrate distinct aspects of both approaches.

In the empirical study presented in the last chapter of the behavior of the citizens in Bulgaria during the voting for the EP elections, it was proved that there are sufficient grounds for renewing the debate about the essence of the European elections. Revisiting Reiff and Schmitt's theory is the necessary starting point for an analysis of the European party system. The researched hypotheses in the fifth chapter of the dissertation work and the proof of some of them are undoubtedly grounds for further analysis and redefinition of the processes of Europeanization of the electoral process in Bulgaria. Together with the qualitative study of the European manifestos, the aspects of the legitimate beginning of partisanship at the EU level are outlined. Both studies identify a change in campaigning during EP elections, i.e. the politicization of European issues invariably changes the national political agenda. There is a tendency towards the impossibility of isolated national political analyzes (outside the pan-European perspective).

Conclusion and scientific contributions of the dissertation work

The dissertation looks at three features of the European party system: polarization processes, cleavage theory, and the Europeanization of EP elections. In conclusion, the analyses conducted show that polarization processes are unrelated to a lack of opposition. The following conclusions can be taken from the analyses of the processes of polarization of the European party system:

1. The polarization of the EP is a result and manifestation of the polarization of national party systems.
2. Europeanization does not result in the establishment of a homogeneous political alternative and opposition. There is a clear and distinct representation of them, but it cannot get a majority in the EP since it is divided into three groups: the radicalized right, the radicalized left, and soft Euroscepticism.
3. The political crisis caused by Brexit demonstrates that there are no resources available for the formation of new independent anti-European parties.

Polarization processes cause the 'grand coalition' to erode, but they are unrelated. Although there has always been opposition to the European idea, until the 1990s, the ideological movement was marginal. The viewpoints of the governing parties in continental Europe in the second half of the twentieth century demonstrate the existence of a consensus on the underlying idea of unification (despite all the discrepancies between the intergovernmental and federal conceptions of Europe). From a democratic standpoint, this broad elite consensus, also known as permissive consensus, has always been problematic because it has been accompanied by a lack of democratic negotiation procedures in the European public sphere.

In 2000, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) joined the Austrian government, breaking with precedent. For the first time during this period, an openly anti-European or Eurosceptic party in the sphere of "hard" Euroscepticism took on government responsibility. Other EU countries have reacted severely negatively. French President Chirac and German Chancellor Schröder criticize the Austrian People's Party's decision to form a coalition with right-wing populists. These two politicians represent the two major political families: EPP and PES. European integration is gradually becoming a contentious process, sparking opposition in the public and within the political class. For a long time, these oppositions were seen as minor or temporary, but today there is a broad consensus that Euroscepticism has become a stable and persistent phenomenon across Europe. Despite the general recognition of the EP as the main driving force

of the deepening of European integration processes, Eurosceptic representatives in this institution use it as a forum for active defense and promotion of their points of view.

In conclusion, the paper contends that pro/anti-EU as a cleavage cannot emerge at this point due to the great inhomogeneity of anti-European politicians - the incompatibility of the extreme left and extreme right. These are two intersecting factions with no potential for union, and anti-European voters cannot be unified. Polarization processes are unrelated to a lack of opposition (the latter is a result of consensual democracy). The EU-level study of the cleavage theory led to the following conclusions:

1. The war in Ukraine undermines the anti-European wing of the EP due to the foreign policy schism.

2. A true European cleavage occurs when voters' behavior during European elections is impacted by European concerns rather than national ones, which has yet to be shown.

Eurosceptic national parties and their respective political groups in the EP face an intriguing paradox: they had their greatest success in the European elections (2009 and 2014), but once elected, they must operate within an institution and, more broadly, a political establishment that they strongly criticize or even deny. This position causes tension not only among these actors, but also between Parliament and the EU. More broadly, Eurosceptic political parties from both the left and right challenge the role of political struggle in the EU, which is a political system based on consensus decision-making. This topic is key to analyzing the future development of European integration and political processes in the union. An in-depth analysis of the behavior of the ECR (as an opposition force in the EP) regarding the expansion of EU competences into new policy areas or the expansion of EU competences regarding stricter control is needed.

The last topic discussed is related to the Europeanization of the EP elections and the legitimate beginning of partisanship at the EU level. By using quantitative analysis and testing two theoretical models (second-order elections and the “Europe Matters” model), as well as conducting a discursive analysis of the pre-election manifestos of European political parties, a more comprehensive approach can be applied to study partisanship and parliamentarization at the EU level in relation to the EP elections in Bulgaria. On the other hand, the analyzes of polarization processes at the EP level opens the door to numerous studies regarding its impact on cartelization (which, according to evidence in the dissertation, is no longer present in the EP) and the development of majorities in the EP. The European electoral process in Bulgaria from 2009 to 2019, as examined in Chapter 5 of the study, underscores the significant role played by

national political parties in shaping the EP elections. When looking at the broader picture of electoral reform within the EU, it becomes evident that the European Parliament adopts a proactive approach, consistently pushing for ambitious proposals that align with the provisions of the Treaties. The content analysis of the key documents can reveal a strong federalist approach to the subject of the EP elections. The main reports provide an accurate reflection of the discussions held in the Committees on Constitutional Affairs and Political Affairs. Conversely, they are known for their biased stance in favor of furthering integration processes.

Potential future research directions in this field include examining in depth the following questions: What are the factors that contribute to the erosion of the consensus model in the European Union - is it the result of polarization or the presence of soft Euroscepticism? According to the dissertation, there is a noticeable erosion of the consensus model in the EU, but it is too early in the research to make definitive conclusions about the trend. Recent surveys examining European citizens' opinions on the 2024 EP elections indicate a notable increase in support for right-wing parties that oppose the European Union. These anti-European parties are expected to dominate the polls in at least nine EU member states and secure a significant position, either second or third place, in another nine countries³¹. The results show that the two main political groups (the European People's Party and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats) will experience an even greater decline in their representation. Another indication of the cartel model's decline within the EP will be showcased through the format of the upcoming EP.

Dissertation Research Contributions

1) An analysis of the behaviour of citizens during voting in elections and the behaviour of Eurosceptic political groups in the EP during debates and voting on the European budget (Chapter Two) demonstrates that the increase in parliamentary representation and political influence of Eurosceptic political groups and parties does not result in the emergence of a distinct group of Eurosceptic voters (voter alignment) nor the creation of a homogeneous Eurosceptic alternative.

2) The interrelationship between the process of parliamentarisation (the strengthening of the powers of the EP) and the processes of partisanship (the institutionalisation of well-organised

³¹ Хикс, С., Кънингам, К., 2023 г.

and financed European parties) is demonstrated through the methods of historical institutionalism (Chapter Three).

3) A discourse analysis of debates in the European Parliament and the Council (Fourth Chapter), a qualitative study of the pre-election programmes of European political parties and a quantitative study of the behaviour of citizens during voting in European Parliament elections (Chapter Five) demonstrate that the processes of partisanship and Europeanisation of European Parliament elections are relatively autonomous. The institutionalisation of European political parties does not guarantee the overcoming of the model of "second-rate national elections" that characterises the European electoral process.

List of scientific publications

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2. Marinova, M. (2021). „Modelat na evropeyskite izbori v Bulgaria – izborite za Evropeyski parlament 2019 g.“, 2021, „(Ne)vazmozhnuyat ES – vreme na reshenia za obshtoto badeshte“, Sofiyski universitet „Sv. Kliment Ohridski“ i Fondatsia za svobodata „Fridrih Nauman“, Sofia.
3. Marinova, M. (2022). „Parlamentarizatsia i partizatsia v Evropeyskia sayuz“, Doktoranski chetenia t. 5, Sofiyski universitet „Sv. Kliment Ohridski“, Filosofski fakultet
4. Marinova, M. (2022). „Debatat za voynata v Ukrayna i predefiniraneto na pro/anti evropeyskia klividzh.“, V „Evropeyskiyat sayuz v okoto na buryata – Obedinena Evropa ili Evropa na natsiite“, Sofiyski universitet „Sv. Kliment Ohridski“ i Fondatsia za svobodata „Fridrih Nauman“, Sofia.
5. Marinova, M. (2023). „Zakonodatelni Promeni i Zakonodatelni Initsiativi Kasaeshti Izborite za Evropeyski Parlament – Debatat za Nadnatsionalnata Partiynost“, Doktoranski chetenia t. 6, Sofiyski universitet „Sv. Kliment Ohridski“, Filosofski fakultet
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