

Opinion

*by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Daniel Mihaylov Smilov, PN 3.3. Political Sciences
of Martina Tsvetanova Marinova's dissertation on the topic
"Party system in the EU - dynamics after the Lisbon Treaty"
for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Political Science"*

Martina Marinova's doctoral dissertation is an indisputable academic achievement, for which she and her supervisor - Professor Romyana Kolarova - should be congratulated. The research is both in-depth and diverse - it uses different methods, but all the time it keeps clearly in front of itself the set tasks and the research hypotheses. Entering into numerous detailed discussions on various issues of European politics is never an end in itself. From this point of view, the dissertation is well written and could easily be transformed into a published monograph, which I recommend.

The topic of the dissertation is timely and scientifically significant. On publication, one might consider changing the title, because it is currently too neutral – dynamics of the EU party system after the Treaty of Lisbon. In fact, the dissertation explores a central issue – how much the EU party system resembles or differs from member states' systems. Martina Marinova well understands the *sui generis* nature of the EU as a political community – a hybrid between a state and an intergovernmental organization – which by definition implies that the party system of this hybrid will have significant differences from that of nation states. However, the dissertation traces convergence processes that are expressed in the institutionalization of supranational parties, the emergence of a more structured opposition, the affirmation of certain cleavages at the supranational level, the imposition of supranational political themes, which transform European elections into more independent democratic statements of will, rather than simply "second-order elections" that make sense primarily in terms of national elections and the positioning of national political forces in domestic politics.

Martina Marinova's conclusions are nuanced, because reality is also quite complex. The processes of transformation of the supranational party system into something similar to the national are far from being complete, nor are they irreversible - i.e. the output is not predetermined. The study has well shown the different trends in these processes and has actually become a good introduction to contemporary European party politics. As such, it definitely has a contributing character in Bulgarian political science.

Formal evaluation of the research is also beneficial to the PhD student. It contains 270 pages of text, well structured and well written, and a very rich source base - the bibliography 251 used scientific secondary sources, of which 246 in English and some in Bulgarian. In addition, a huge amount of official documents were used, which are essential for the researched problem - the founding treaties through acts and documents of the European institutions, regulations, reports in the researched area, transcripts of meetings of European institutions and commissions.

The research fully meets the academic criteria for a similar kind of academic product. A well-written abstract is presented, as well as a self-assessment of contributions that is accurate. The PhD student has twice the required number of publications on the topic of the PhD.

From a substantive point of view and in a more concrete fashion, the presented dissertation has one main goal ("to trace and analyze three key processes determining the dynamics of the European party system and determining its polarization after the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon" - p. 6). This rather general objective is actually broken down into four more operationalizable research objectives: review the literature and clarify and systematize the concepts used; tracing and analyzing the main stages in the development of the European party system; clarifying the ways in which the process of parliamentarization favors the development of partisanship and the party system in the EU; analysis of the Europeanization of the EP elections.

The dissertation also has one main hypothesis (which is broken down into different sub-variants): whether the institutionalisation of the European party system and the

tendencies of its change are determined by the processes of polarization of the national party systems or are the consequence of two key processes at the European level - parliamentarization and partisanship? (p. 5). There are three working hypotheses: the increase in the powers of the EP favors the development of a transnational party system; changes in the model of inter-party competition necessitate a revision of the theory of 'opposition deficit' in the EP; EP elections are gradually acquiring their own specific political dimension, different from that of national elections (see p. 6).

From the point of view of methodology, the first and second chapters are a critical analysis of literary sources (supplemented with the case study method), document analysis, electoral analysis. The third chapter uses quality and quantitative analysis of the debates and votes related to the adoption of the EU budget (a quantitative study of the votes in the EP on the adoption of the budget and a qualitative study of the debates, which aims to show what are the main characteristics of the opposition in the EP and what is the motivation of political groups). Chapter five offers a complex study of the content and discourse of the manifestos of all the represented European parties in the EP, initially based on statistical analysis, indicators were developed, followed by a qualitative study to identify the ideological positions of the European political parties. In the end, ten hypotheses specific to the case were put forward, tested by means of correlation analysis - the chapter is based on a study of the Bulgarian case study, but it can also be treated as a pilot in relation to other countries.

The first chapter is "Conceptualization of the main concepts and approach", and deals mainly with the analysis of the intergovernmental approach and of neo-functionalism, with the author ultimately expressing a preference for the approach of multi-level governance as part of post-functionalism (see p. 21). This approach is actually analytical and does not take a position on the big questions – whether the EU is headed for deeper federalization or vice versa. From this point of view, the theoretical choice is justified - it enables the researcher to maintain a more neutral analytical position and to be sensitive to different, sometimes contradictory trends.

In this chapter, after examining classic definitions, the author comes to the conclusion that the party system at the European level meets the criteria for a party system, although

it is not identical to the national party systems (see p. 29). The "three faces" of the European party system (parties at the national level, parties at the European level, political groups in the EP) are also introduced, with a separate section dedicated to two of them. Overall, the conceptual and empirical part done in this chapter provides a solid foundation for the dissertation.

The second chapter ("The effect of EU crises on the consolidation of the European party system: a study of cleavages at the EU level") examines the role of cleavages at the supranational level, on the one hand, and the recent crises of the EU, on the other. One of the main cleavages - Euroscepticism - is well analyzed, looking at the dynamics between its "hard" and "soft" variants. The existence of a new transnational cleavage is justified - between those who defend national sovereignty and national culture against those who are in favor of higher economic and cultural integration (p. 82). The second major cleavage at the supranational level is the classic left-right. The third is a consequence of the polarization of the European party system as well as the pro-EU - anti-EU dividing line (see p. 152).

The chapter analyzes in detail the role of various crises in shaping and strengthening these cleavages in recent decades: the financial crisis - 2008, the annexation of Crimea - 2014, the refugee crisis - 2015, Brexit - 2017, the war in Ukraine - 2022). It is concluded that there is a strengthening as a result of the euro crisis, not of the left-right cleavage, but of the pro-/anti-EU divide (p. 89). The emergence of new dividing lines as a result of the refugee and migration crisis is clearly shown, and the Brexit effect is analyzed.

The chapter ("Parliamentarization and partisanship in the EU") plays an important role in the structure of the dissertation, as it tests two of the three working hypotheses raised by the author at the beginning of the dissertation. It also relates to the "main hypothesis". The positive role of EU parliamentarization in strengthening the supranational party system has been analyzed accurately and substantiated. One of the main conclusions of the chapter is that "The evolution of the powers of the EP undoubtedly leads to an increase in the importance of European parties as the main structuring unit of representative democracy at the European level". (p. 152) The chapter explores in detail

the evolution of EU powers, a contribution in itself, and ultimately argues that this evolution contributes to the structuring and institutionalization of the supranational party system. The chapter also examines the "opposition deficit" thesis. According to the author, "the working hypothesis (that this deficit is gradually being overcome) cannot be fully proven, because the conservative line in the face of the ECR is strongly divided during the votes for the adoption of the EU budget" (p. 153).

The fourth chapter ("The political debate on supranational partisanship and the Europeanization of EP elections") is in fact a study of the extent to which European elections - as a topic of debate at the supranational level (EP, EC, the Council of Ministers) - acquire their own specificity, different from that of national elections, expressed in the dominance of European topics in pre-election debates. The chapter is a combination of a detailed study of certain reforms - in the development of electoral reforms and their stages, about the various proposals, position issues of discussion in specialized reports reflecting the EP's attempts to create a unified electoral procedure. The current legal framework of the EP elections has also been analysed. The key question of "leading candidates" in the election campaign, of transnational constituencies and electoral lists, etc. is analyzed in detail. There is also a separate empirical study of the debates surrounding the Devesa (2021) report in the EP. The main arguments brought to bear on the issue of supranational partisanship are traced (see p. 189). The vote in the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (May 3, 2022) is also analyzed. After that, the debates not only within the EP, but also in the Council of the EU (two meetings in the period October 2022 – June 2023) were analyzed. Although she does not arrive at a definitive answer to the question of whether the European elections are no longer simply "second order" elections, the author continues the study of the same topic in the fifth and final chapter ("Autonomy of the processes of partisanship and Europeanization of the EP elections"). In it, the pre-election manifestos of all European political parties (from the 2019 elections) are the subject of analysis, and the priorities of the European party families are sought in them. The overall conclusion is that, in general, national issues continue to dominate (see p. 251). The author's study of the manifestos has its own value. In the first (statistical) part, it builds on data from the European Manifesto Project, selecting relevant indicators and performing a subsequent correlation analysis, followed by content and

discourse analysis. For this purpose, the author has derived ten hypotheses, which are accordingly tested on the basis of the behavior of Bulgarian voters in EP elections. The conclusion is nuanced - "none of the two theories regarding the EP elections succeed in explaining the behavior of the voters in Bulgaria completely. Correlational analysis shows mixed results that demonstrate distinct aspects of both approaches' (p. 248).

The dissertation, as has been said, is a serious academic achievement. Minor criticisms of repetitions in individual places can be made, as well as of individual quotations, but this is more of a technical work to fix before publication. A more general critical note can be made regarding the relative disconnect between the debate on different theories of European integration in the first chapter and the detailed analysis of the EU party system thereafter. The author could think of more serious generalizations about what the state of the EU's party system tells us about the EU itself. Is this hybrid, sui generis state of affairs sustainable? If sustainable, for how long, over what time frame? Philippe Schmitter in many of his articles reports that the rise of national-populism has not been adequately taken into account by neo-functionalist theorists. Are there limits to European integration that are set by the development of party systems at the national and supranational level in the EU? These are all questions that the thesis raises before its readers, but seems to avoid their answers. Every research has its limitations - this choice can be respected, but the questions do not disappear because of such a choice.

In conclusion, I would unreservedly support a decision to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in professional direction 3.3. Political science of Martina Tsvetanova Marinova.

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