

# REVIEW

by *Assoc. Prof. Dobrin Hristov Kanev*, PhD, PD 3.3. Political Science  
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 "PhD in Political Science"

It is hardly a frequent case when, at the time of reviewing a dissertation, its topic is at the center of current political events. By coincidence, the defense takes place on the day when the voting for a new (party) composition of the European Parliament begins in the member states of the European Union. This suggests the undoubted relevance of the broad topic of the dissertation chosen by Martina Marinova - "Party system in the EU - dynamics after the Treaty of Lisbon". It is the results of the current elections that will show the current state of the individual "parties at the European level", and thus - ultimately - of the party system of the Union.

What is more important is that, along with relevance, we can also talk about the theoretical significance of the research problem itself. Researching topics about European integration, about the European Union poses risks for younger scholars, as far as this community is accompanied by permanent changes, and its extreme complexity and multi-layeredness are difficult to analyze. Assessments are needed of an extremely dynamic environment, of processes taking place at many levels and with many actors, and in recent years developing in the conditions of a series of different types of crises.

Actors, including those who are the focus of this dissertation, are in diverse and not always visible interdependencies. But without understanding the place and role of the parties not only in the EU member states, but also at the level of the Union itself, the overall functioning of this community cannot be understood. After the Maastricht Treaty (1993) stated that parties at European level should play an important role as a factor of integration in the Union, after the legal foundations of their existence were laid in 2004, and three years later they expanded their financial capabilities, the activity potential of these parties has significantly increased.

The study of political parties in the EU is important both within the framework of political party theory and for the study of European integration processes. The importance of this object of study

increases even more if it is taken into account that they are supposed to have an increasing role in the future, and that certain hopes are still placed on these organizations to contribute to the democratization of the Union.

European parties became an independent object of scientific research relatively recently - in the last quarter of the 20th century. The first serious impetus was connected with the direct elections for the European Parliament in the late 1970s. A second such wave, related to the mentioned provisions in the Maastricht Treaty, can be observed since the mid-1990s. Today, European parties enjoy considerable research interest, primarily within political science and law. This cannot be said for Bulgaria, where researchers and publications are relatively few in number. This makes the present study even more valuable.

The dissertation itself is clearly the result of many years of consistent and thorough independent work. It has all the characteristics of a serious, complete and consistent in terms of content academic work. First of all, the goal, the tasks (although I am left with the impression of a certain mixing of goals and tasks) and the resulting hypotheses of the research, to whose consistent proof the entire exposition is subordinated, are clearly formulated.

In fact, initially there is an attempt to present one main objective ("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), but in the subsequent text it remains unclear what these processes are to be studied.

After that, the PhD student already talks about four goals, among them: a review of the literature and clarification and systematization of the concepts used; tracking and analyzing the main stages in the development of the European party system within its three "images" - parliamentary groups, European parties and national parties; clarification of the ways in which the process of parliamentarization (strengthening the powers of the EP) favors the development of partisanship and the party system in the EU; analysis of the Europeanization of EP elections and the partisanship of decision-making processes at all levels in the EU.

And the tasks set are three: critical reading and attempt to systematize the academic debate about the European party system and party subjects at the EU level; critical evaluation of the changes in the political-legal framework of the EU, aimed at increasing democratic legitimacy, and rethinking the normative conditions in which the European elections are held; analysis of both the organizational and ideological evolution of the European parties, as well as the development of the transnational party system, related to and caused by the expansion of the powers of the EP. (see p. 6-7).

Regarding the presented hypotheses, the author also talks about a main hypothesis with its various aspects: whether the constitution 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 result of two key processes at the European level - parliamentarization and partisanship? (p. 5). At the same time, she also defines three working hypotheses that she monitors in the course of the research: 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, i.e. the pre-election debate gradually centered around topics of European rather than national importance (see p. 6).

The choice of such a complex and broad research problem and the large number of set goals largely determined the *methodological approaches* used by the PhD student - diverse in view of the specifics of the research tasks.

If the first and second chapters suggest rather a critical analysis of literary sources and partly the case study method, document analysis, electoral analysis, then in the third chapter a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the debates and votes related to the adoption of the EU budget is successfully used (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 the political groups). And in the last (fifth) chapter, a two-layered study of the content and discourse of the manifestos of all represented European parties in the EP is made. indicators were initially developed on the basis of statistical analysis, followed by qualitative research to identify the ideological positions of European political parties. In the end, ten case-specific hypotheses were put forward, tested by means of correlation analysis. This methodological diversity has not affected the consistency of the work, since the focus always remains the subject of research, analyzed with different analytical tools.

The source base on whose analysis the author built her research is impressive. She has studied in detail a large volume of academic literature. The bibliography of the dissertation covers 251 used scientific secondary sources, of which 246 are in English and 5 in Bulgarian. It is about the most representative authors and works in the field of theories of political parties, political institutions, European integration, European elections, European institutions. At the same time, it is evident from every part of the dissertation that this vast literature has been mastered and critically understood. However, I would allow myself a small remark. There was an opportunity to increase the number of

Bulgarian authors and publications, at least because one of the chapters examines the Bulgarian parties and voters more specifically.

Outside of this number are the used primary sources, where there is a wide range of official documents that 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. One example gives an idea of the considerable amount of work carried out by the PhD student: To test one of her hypotheses, she analyzed debates surrounding the vote on the European budget, comprehensively covering all shorthand recordings on the given topic (over 400 speeches). Internet sources not included in this number are also listed in the bibliography.

The *structure of the text* chosen by the author creates the necessary prerequisites for an analytical exposition of the problems and for their scientific interpretation. The dissertation consists of an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography.

In the *first chapter*, entitled "Conceptualization of the main terms and approach", the theoretical foundation necessary for all further analytical steps is built. It starts from the general, by first reviewing the "big theories", the theoretical approaches to the study of the European Union itself. This is necessary for the author to justify, after a critical review of the intergovernmental approach and of neo-functionalism and in view of her research subject, her preference for the multi-level governance approach as part of post-functionalism (see p. 21). Thus, according to her, the European party system and its elements can be adequately studied within the framework of the multi-level EU system. Then the complex nature of the European party system itself is presented. Based on classical texts of political science, the PhD student comes to the conclusion that the party system at the European level meets the criteria for such a system, although it is not identical to the national party systems (see p. 29). Some topics are initially touched upon here, which will be further examined in detail, such as the party connections between the different levels of EU government, the personalization of the electoral struggle, the polarization of the party system and the formation of a more pronounced dualism between the ruling party and the opposition in the EP, to reveal party-political competition.

A natural next part of this introductory chapter is the clarification of the nature of the "three faces" of the European party system (parties at the national level, parties at the European level, political groups in the EP), two of which are devoted to a separate section. After the European party system, the parties themselves at the European level are presented - their nature, development, organization, influence, financing. Next, the political groups in the EP are analyzed. It is not clear why the author lumped

them together with the political foundations. This seems to belittle their importance, although she herself has repeatedly (and with reason) emphasized the even more significant role of this very element of the "party triangle" in the EU.

Overall, this chapter, which is also the most extensive in the dissertation text, by clarifying the main concepts and presenting the complex process of partisanship in the Union, has successfully laid the foundation of the study.

In the second chapter of the dissertation ("The effect of EU crises on the consolidation of the European party system: a study of cleavages at the EU level"), some factors for the formation and development of the EU party system are examined, such as the role of cleavages, on the one hand, and the recent crises of the EU, on the other. A more specific problem such as Euroscepticism has also found a place here. It is initially treated briefly, mainly to introduce the author's necessary distinction between "hard" and "soft" Euroscepticism, but in the subsequent text it plays a central role.

At the beginning, after following the classic theory of cleavages (at the national level), the dissertation seeks an answer to the question of which cleavages are the basis of inter-party competition at the European level.

The author perceives the thesis developed in political science about the emergence of a new transnational cleavage - between those who defend national sovereignty and national culture against those who are in favor of higher economic and cultural integration (p. 82). In general, in her research, Martina Marinova defends the thesis of the existence of three such cleavages - in addition to the ones mentioned here, the traditional left - right, and due to the polarization of the European party system, also the pro-EU - anti-EU dividing line (see p. 152) .

The main focus of this chapter is on the potential and real role of the crises experienced by the EU in the formation of new transnational cleavages. From this point of view, different types of crises of the last fifteen years are successively considered (the financial crisis - 2008, the annexation of Crimea - 2014, the refugee crisis - 2015, Brexit - 2017, the war in Ukraine - 2022. ). The conclusion that the euro crisis has strengthened not the left-right cleavage, but the pro-/anti-EU divide is important (p. 89). The emergence of new dividing lines as a result of the refugee and migration crisis is clearly shown. The effect of Brexit can be found rather in reducing the intensity of the "Eurosceptic cleavage" due to the fact that right-wing Eurosceptics have moved to the positions of "soft" Euroscepticism: "The Brexit referendum turned withdrawal from the EU into a viable political option, but the right-wing Eurosceptic bloc of the EP chose moderation over radicalization" (p. 98). The war in Ukraine also led to changes in the extreme right wing in the EP, which weakened its homogeneity due to

internal conflicting positions in this regard. The problem with the rule of law in some member states is also treated in the light of "soft" Euroscepticism.

The *third chapter* ("Parliamentarization and partisanship in the EU") plays an important role in the structure of the text, as its center is the testing of two of the three working hypotheses raised by the author at the beginning of the dissertation. It is also related to the "main hypothesis".

Based on a historical review, the author has traced the process of partisanship from its first beginnings within the ECSC to the present, including actions on the normative regulation of the status and financing of European political parties, as well as related electoral provisions. What really impresses here is the detail of the analysis, which does not miss a single step in this process. The same has been done with regard to the process of parliamentarization of the Union, i.e. of the gradual empowerment of the European Parliament over the years. With the help of this parallel analysis, the author proves her first hypothesis: "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) In addition, M. Marinova further strengthens this conclusion with evidence through the specific presentation of the possibilities for action and influence of the European parties at the level of the EU as a whole and at the level of the EP.

Another aim of this part of the dissertation can be found in assessing the validity and applicability in the current stage of development of the Union and its party system of the "opposition deficit" thesis. This is actually a test of the second working hypothesis, made through a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the debates and votes in the European Parliament related to the adoption of the EU budget - a quantitative study of the relevant EP votes and a qualitative study of the debates. Through this empirical research carried out by the author, it becomes possible to reveal the models of opposition within the EP, its characteristics, the motivations that determine it, the arguments that are presented. Based on the results of the research, but also on the critical analysis of the main theoretical conclusions in this regard, the author presents facts about the presence of opposition, albeit non-homogeneous, although sometimes reduced from the point of view of all the classic dimensions of opposition. But her final conclusion is that "the working hypothesis cannot be fully proven, because the conservative line in the face of the ECR is strongly divided during the votes on the adoption of the EU budget" (p. 153).

The *fourth chapter* of the dissertation ("The political debate on supranational partisanship and the Europeanization of the EP elections") aims to examine the last, third working hypothesis of the author, which boils down to the thesis of the gradual acquisition of specificity of the European elections,

different from that in the national elections, expressed in the dominance of European themes in pre-election debates.

Here again we meet the already demonstrated ability of the author to give a complete and detailed follow-up of certain developments in the EU. In this case, it is about tracking the development of electoral reforms and their stages, about the various proposals put up for discussion in specialized reports reflecting the EP's attempts to create a unified electoral procedure. The current legal framework of the EP elections is also presented in detail. Attention is paid to new ideas (and partly practices) for leading candidates in the election campaign, for transnational constituencies and electoral lists, etc.

The question of problems in electoral legislation is treated against the background of important concepts of European integration - the problem of the "democratic deficit" of the Union, as well as in close connection with the two main theories of European elections - "second order national elections" and "Europe matters".

An important achievement of the PhD student is the document analysis of the Devesa report (2021) and especially the substantive analysis of the debates during its discussion 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. The author then examined the debates not only within the EP, but also in the Council of the EU (two meetings in the period October 2022 - June 2023). Her analysis of Member States' positions shows the opposition of the majority of Member States to key ideas in the report such as the introduction of pan-European constituencies and trans-European candidate lists.

At the end of the chapter, we do not find a definitive answer to the validity of the third hypothesis, although the exposition itself leads us to the conclusion of slow changes in this regard. The reason is actually that the subject of the European elections continues to be discussed in the next, fifth and last chapter ("Autonomy of the processes of partisanship and Europeanization of the EP elections").

In its first part, the pre-election manifestos of all European political parties (from the 2019 elections) are the subject of analysis, looking for the priorities of the European party families. In this connection, the conclusion related to the third hypothesis already comes, that "at this stage of the development of the Union, European issues enter the field of national politics alongside internal issues and that voters have a choice between many different visions for the future of the European Union" ( pp. 201-202). At the same time, Martina Marinova's thesis 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, elaborating relevant indicators and performing a subsequent correlation analysis, followed by content and discourse analysis. This has given her the opportunity to show us the main ideas of the pre-election manifestos in a comparative plan.

The subsequent analysis of the previously mentioned two main theories about the character of the European elections, based on the study of the behavior of citizens voting in EP elections, has its own value. The critical view is directed above all at the theory of the European elections as "second order national elections". For this purpose, the author has derived ten hypotheses, which are accordingly tested on the basis of the behavior of Bulgarian voters in three consecutive European elections. Her conclusion is that "none of the two theories about the EP elections manage to explain the behavior of the voters in Bulgaria completely. Correlational analysis shows mixed results that demonstrate distinct aspects of both approaches' (p. 248). At the same time, she manages to find aspects that, in her opinion, suggest the need for a revision of the theory of European elections as second-order national elections.

A positive side of the dissertation conclusion is that, in addition to summarizing the content, it indicates unexplored aspects and thus future directions for research.

This review of the content of the dissertation once again convinces us that it is a completed research work at a high level, in which the PhD student has successfully carried out a complex and in-depth study, has realized her research goals and tasks, and has given a reasoned answer to the set hypotheses. She has managed to reach certain own contributions in the researched issues and to contribute to the enrichment of the available scientific results.

A contribution to the research can be considered the fact that the work deepens, and with the extremely rich and detailed information, also expands, our knowledge about the functioning of this complexly intertwined whole of different actors at different levels, which is the European party system.

It is important to note that, according to the realities of the European integration process, the thesis reflects the close relationship between European political parties, European elections and democracy in the EU ("democratic deficit"). One of the significant achievements of the dissertation is that it constantly takes into account this complex and scientifically difficult to penetrate environment.

The author's contribution is also her conclusions mentioned above from the independently conceived and carried out analyzes of debates and votes in the EP, of discussions in the Council of the EU, of the content of the pre-election manifestos of the European parties, of the behavior of the voters during the European elections in our country.

At the end, it is also necessary to say that the dissertation of Martina Marinova, presented for discussion and evaluation, with its 270 pages of text, with its well-built and balanced structure, as well as with its rich source base, also meets the formal criteria for a similar kind of research product. The other requirements have also been met, such as the presence of an abstract that accurately presents the dissertation as a whole, as well as a self-evaluation of the contributions, with which I express my agreement. There are also twice the number of required publications on the PhD topic.

Confirming once again my positive impression of the dissertation, I would like to draw attention to some shortcomings (besides those mentioned in the previous exposition) and opportunities for improvement of the text.

I am left with the impression of a scattering of the same themes in different places throughout the text. This has also led to a number of repetitions (for example on p. 74, 112, 122, 162, 165, 227) and probably requires additional systematization.

I believe that the analytical value of the work would be enhanced if there was more detailed subsequent analysis of the data in most of the tables.

Perhaps it would be an additional plus if, along with the pre-election manifestos of the European parties, an analysis of their fundamental (principle) programs (for those who have them) was also included, as far as the topics of interest to the dissertation were more extensively covered.

The author's style is markedly academic, her formulations are precise. However, there are some misspelled names (especially of German authors), and more correction work is needed.

In conclusion: Obviously, these remarks are rather peripheral against the background of the serious research achievement of the author, so everything presented so far leads to one conclusion, namely to my high evaluation of the presented dissertation and to my categorical opinion "in favor" for awarding the educational and scientific degree "PhD" in professional direction 3.3. Political science of Martina Tsvetanova Marinova.

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Assoc. Prof. Dobrin Kanev, PhD