

Opinion

For the submitted dissertation of Martina Tsvetanova Marinova on "Party System in the EU - Dynamics after the Lisbon Treaty" for the award of PhD in 3.3. Political Science

From prof. Antony Todorov Todorov, Dr. Hab., New Bulgarian University, specialty 3.3. Political Science

The presented dissertation was elaborated at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Department of Political Science under the scientific supervision of Prof. Dr. Rumiana Kolarova. The chosen topic undoubtedly fits into the developed research field and its relevance is proven. The dissertation is 267 pages long (actually 311 standard pages), contains an introduction, five chapters of exposition, a conclusion, an account of research contributions and a bibliography. The work presented is the result of thorough research of its own and generally (language, structure) conforms to established academic standards for such a text.

Key achievements

On the positive side, the main research question that structures the whole study is formulated in the introduction: is the constitution of the European party system and the trends of its change determined by the processes of polarisation of national party systems or are they a consequence of two key processes at the European level – parliamentarisation and partisanisation? In essence, this is a more private question to the more general and widely debated question of whether there is a European party system at supranational level at all.

Based on this research question, Martina Marinova formulates three resulting sub-questions: /1/ whether the political situation in the EP is a result of the crisis of European democracies and the growing support for anti-systemic political parties (far right and far left) or /2/ is related to the growing support for Euroscepticism and the emergence of a relatively homogeneous Eurosceptic and even anti-European political alternative or /3/ is a manifestation of political destabilisation caused by the series of pan-European crises (the economic crisis of 2009-2009, the migrant crisis of 2015)

To answer these questions, Martina Marinova mobilizes two theoretical models: that of multilevel governance and that of historical institutionalism, which are adequate to the tasks at hand. Together with this, she has conducted a qualitative research of considerable scope, based on content analysis and document analysis. The author has also used statistical analysis in many cases (mainly correlation analysis). This demonstrates a methodological competence, a prerequisite for successful research. I would also add the author's ability to work with concepts, which is particularly evident in the first chapter of the thesis.

The structure of the text corresponds to the objectives of the study. The logic of the exposition starts with the conceptualization of the main concepts and approaches in the studies of the political system and the EU, continues with the analysis of the cleavages at the EU level, and develops in two related but different directions of the dynamics of the EU party system: the processes of institutionalization of the European parties as parliamentary parties at the European level and the level of Europeanization of the

EP elections. The last chapter discusses the extent to which EP elections have become autonomous in relation to national parliamentary elections.

The first chapter explains in detail and arguments the history of the formation of the EU party system – alongside the creation of pan-European parties, but through the building of durable coalitions of political groups in the EP. It concludes that *“there is a supranational party system within which Euro parties interact and compete at the level of the EP.”*

The second chapter and very interesting because it addresses the question of *“which cleavages structure the pattern of inter-party competition at the European level?”* Building on Lipset and Rokan's classical theory of cleavages, developed many times since their 1967 publication, Martina Marinova makes an interesting contribution to this theory with her analysis of the influence of cleavages on the structuring of the EU party system. I will also note here the reflection on an essentially journalistic term, but increasingly used in academic texts, Euroscepticism. The extensive references to the use of this word helps to understand why it is now a term with theoretical status.

I will also note here a quickly drawn conclusion that *“European far-right and far-left political parties share one common characteristic between them: Euroscepticism, or its more extreme form, Europhobia.”* Quickly, because a little later in the thesis it becomes clear that the reasoning of the far-right and far-left in their criticism of the EU is different and opposite.

Interesting is the analysis of the impact of EU crises such as Brexit (2016-202), the financial crisis of 2008-2009, the immigration crisis of 2015, on the possible structuring of new cleavages such as the one between creditor and debtor nations or open-closed-society. The author critically examines these new cleavages in terms of their impact on the structuring of the European party system. Her conclusion is that these cleavages do not in all cases give rise to new political families in the EP.

The third chapter of the dissertation discusses its two main concepts, parliamentarisation and partisanisation in the EU. The analysis of the interaction between these two processes is well argued and draws on relevant research. Martina Marinova rightly argues that *“parliamentarisation at the EU level facilitates the process of partisanisation”* because the expansion of the powers of the EP leads to an increase in *“the importance of the Euro parties as the main structuring unit of representative democracy at the European level”*.

This chapter is also particularly productive in discussing the question of whether there is an opposition in the EP. The whole history of European integration up to this point has been presented as one of consensus and compromise between states and avoiding acute ideological confrontations between parties. The system of de facto coalition governance of the three largest groups in the EP (conservatives, socialists and liberals) also suggests more of a consensus logic. Martina Marinova rightly summarises that most studies *“show that political discourse within EU-level debates has been depoliticised and the political system has been transformed into a system of 'bureaucratic despotism’”*.

A finding in this chapter is the author's argued claim that *“content analysis highlights a significant difference between left and right opposition in the EP – right-wing political groups offer principled opposition, while left-wing groups tend to pragmatically criticize the objectives in all sectoral policies included in the EU budget adoption discussions.”*

One of the hypotheses tested here is that *“no consolidation of opposition forces in the EP can be detected”* based on an examination of the parliamentary debates on the EU budget and the voting results. However, in a number of cases there is occupation of the opposition role by Eurosceptics, but it does not appear to be structured and stable. This is partly because the Eurosceptic parties have nationalism as a common ideological foundation and the international cooperation of nationalists seems to be an oxymoron. But on the other hand, *“what really unites the motivation and the main argumentation of the opposition in the EP (regardless of their ideological orientation) is their positioning as opposition to the ruling power in all the political debates observed”*. Therefore, even at the peak of the observed crises, the opposition in the EP consolidates against EU policies in general.

The fourth chapter discusses supranational partisanisation and the extent to which EP elections become genuinely European. Here, the author examines in detail the debates on the establishment of a single electoral procedure for the EP, on the autonomy of European parties vis-à-vis national parties, and on the democratic legitimacy of the EP in general. But her conclusion is that the European institutional framework does not allow European parties to play a meaningful role in the formulation of the main policy objectives subject to the electoral debate. In this case, national parties remain the main actors in European elections.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed analysis of the topic of the “secondary character” of EP elections, based on a content analysis of party manifestos based on data from the European Manifesto Project and empirical comparative public opinion research (2009-2019). Here, the author formulates and tests 10 hypotheses to prove the validity of the theory of “second-order elections”. Data from the 2009, 2014, 2019 European Election Study (EES) in the 28 EU member states are used, with a total sample size of approximately 26,500. The author used correlation analysis for her findings, but with such a dataset on values, is it not better to do a factor analysis (multiple correspondence analysis) to help identify the value differences/fractures in European society and hence correlate with the parties' programmatic messages.

Critical notes

There is no doubt that this is an original study, done to academic standards. But some remarks can be made.

For example, there are many uncertainties in the interpretation of the correlation analysis data (pp. 202-203). Is it a correlation between membership of a particular family and sensitivity to indicators? But then the low correlation to taxes, redistribution, civil liberties, liberal policies, and immigration remains unexplained.

One strong claim is that *“one of the key findings of the survey is that people tend to vote in protest against national governments in European Parliament elections. This confirms the theory of second-order elections.”* But immediately after this, it is claimed that *“correlation indices do not prove a link between the influence of government approval and the choice of the GOP or CP in EP elections.”* It is unclear which of the two is true.

Assessment of contributions

Martina Marinova's self-assessment defines three contributions of the dissertation:

1. The study proves that the increase in parliamentary representation and Eurosceptic parties does not lead to the emergence of a distinct group of Eurosceptic voters (voter alignment), nor to the creation of a homogeneous Eurosceptic alternative.
2. The study proves the significant link between the parliamentarisation process (the strengthening of the powers of the EP) and the partisanisation processes (the institutionalisation of well-organised and financed European parties).
3. The study demonstrates the relative autonomy of the processes of partisanisation and Europeanisation of EP elections.

I accept all three contributions as valid, but I will also note their very correct formulation, which is usually rare.

Conclusion

Taking into account the qualities of the proposed text, the result of independent and original research, the correct use and citation of sources, the well-argued conclusions and the fact that the work presented is useful for the research community, I accept that the dissertation has all the necessary qualities for the award of the PhD in Political Science to Martina Marinova.

Prof. Antony Todorov, Dr. Hab.