

OPINION

by Associate Professor PhD Simeon Asenov, UNWE,
Department of Political Science, professional direction 3.3 "Political Sciences",
member of a scientific jury formed by
the Rector of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski",

for Martina Marinova's dissertation

on the subject:

"The party system in the European Union - dynamics after the Lisbon Treaty",

for awarding the educational and scientific degree
"PhD of Political Science"
professional direction 3.3 "Political Sciences" (International Relations).

1. Actuality and brief overview of the dissertation work

Over the past two decades, the European Union (EU) has experienced the impact of a number of events and processes that are testing and changing its institutional structure and decision-making mechanisms. As a result of the eastern expansion, the number of countries in it doubled. For the first time, a member state has left the union, as part of the so-called Brexit. On the other hand, during this time, several crises of a different nature have affected both the political process within the member states and the relationships between them within the framework of the European institutions in search of solutions to overcome them. The presented dissertation is aimed at researching the dynamics of interaction and competition between European parties and their groups in this context, after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. This treaty strengthens the role of the European Parliament (EP) and European parties, which begin to have a key role in the decision-making process among other European institutions, in determining common policies and the future functioning of the union. The task of the PhD student is difficult because the topic implies the study and analysis of problems from several research fields, among them the theories of European integration, party systems, and the functioning of EU institutions. The stated circumstances indisputably argue for the relevance of the dissertation presented for public defense.

The dissertation has a total volume of 270 pages (of which 253 are author's text) and is a complete, complete text that meets the standards for a similar kind of scientific research. It is structured in an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, and references, which logically link its

content. The content contains 27 tables and 24 figures that summarize, complement, and illustrate very well individual aspects of the analysis performed. It is worth noting the extremely rich and up-to-date bibliography of 251 titles (of which 246 are in English) and other information sources and resources of a different nature, which were attracted and used to achieve the goals and tasks of the study.

The study of the dynamics of the party system in the EU, which is the main objective of the work, was carried out by analyzing three processes - the polarization between European parties, the cleavage theory (with an examination of the classic and emerging cleavages influencing the interactions and competition pattern between parties) and the ever-increasing role and importance of European Parliament elections (which is a consequence of the processes of parliamentarization and partisanship after the Treaty of Lisbon).

In the introduction, the research elements of the work object, subject, hypothesis, goals, and tasks are formulated, and the used methods and limitations are presented and justified (pp. 5-8). In view of the multidimensional research subject, three working hypotheses are formulated: (1) the increase in the powers of the EP favors the development of the transnational, European party system; (2) changes in the model of inter-party competition necessitate a revision of the theory of "opposition deficit" in the EP; (3) EP elections are gradually acquiring their own specific, European political dimension, different from that of national elections.

The first chapter clarifies the theoretical basis and conceptual apparatus of the study. The main approaches (neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, and the multilevel governance model) to the study of the EU and how they relate to processes of partisanship at the supranational level are presented, interpreted, and clarified. The concepts of the European party system and European political party are defined and the relations in the so-called party triangle (parliamentary groups in the EP, European parties, and supranational party families) are analyzed. A very good impression is made by the demonstrated in-depth knowledge and skillful handling of a number of modern theories and authors on the analyzed issues.

The second chapter of the dissertation is devoted to the analysis and verification of the classical (derived from the theory of Lipset and Rocan) and emerging new cleavage structures that determine party formation, grouping, and interactions. A critical analysis is made regarding these two groups of cleavages, with their reflection on the relations between the parties at the EU level. Through the study of individual cases and the series of new crises manifested in the studied period,

the strengthening of polarization in the national party systems and its transfer and dimensions in the European party system and EU institutions are revealed.

The third chapter of the dissertation focuses on the processes of parliamentarization and partisanship at the EU level. The multidimensional aspects of these two interrelated processes are examined in depth. Through the methods of historical institutionalism and analysis of critical ramifications, it is proven that the representatives in the EP use different channels and strategies for the informal empowerment of the institution. There is a link between the strengthening of the role of the EP in the legislative process and partisanship - both in its political agenda and in the organizational principles of this institution. The "oppositional deficit" theory is also tested here. It is argued that changes in the pattern of inter-party competition as a result of increased polarization and partisanship necessitate a revision of this theory. Through content analysis, it is proven that there is a clear grouping of two parliamentary blocs - "pro-European" and "Eurosceptic". In the second bloc, the group of European conservatives consistently exhibits features of parliamentary opposition. As a result of the analysis carried out in this chapter, the first and second working hypotheses of the dissertation research are confirmed.

The fourth chapter of the dissertation examines the debate at the level of the EP and the European Council regarding the increase in levels of supranational partisanship in the EP elections. The current legal regulation for holding the EP elections in the member states has been analyzed. The proposed changes in the two main projects for its reformation in 2012 and 2021 have also been systematized. These changes cause disagreements between the parties and at this stage are not accepted in the European electoral legislation.

The fifth chapter examines the manifestos of European political parties and the behavior of voters during voting in European elections, incl. of Bulgarian voters in three consecutive EP elections in Bulgaria (2009-2019). The theories of "second-order choices" and "significance of the European project" are tested here. The analysis carried out by the author identifies a change in campaigning during EP elections. The politicization of European issues invariably influences and changes the national political agenda. The EP elections are gradually acquiring their own specific, European political dimension, different from that of the national elections, which corresponds to the third working hypothesis of the dissertation.

2. Evaluation of scientific results and scientific contributions

The developed dissertation presents its author with dignity and a number of positive aspects and achievements can be pointed out in it. The exposition is built on an appropriate methodology and theoretical basis, with the conduct of own research and analysis of empirical data and other studies, which gives depth and completeness to the studied subject. In summary, I would point to the following scientific results achieved.

- Presented is the contemporary academic debate on approaches to the study of the European party system and its growing role in the functioning of the EU.

- The organizational and ideological evolution of the European parties and party system related to the expansion of the powers of the EP is analyzed.

- The various manifestations of the dynamics of the European party system, after the Treaty of Lisbon, have been identified through the analysis of the processes of polarization, parliamentarization, and partisanship.

- It has been proven that the growth of the populist vote, parliamentary representation, and political influence in the EP of Eurosceptic parties does not lead to the identification of a single group of Eurosceptic voters and the creation of a homogeneous Eurosceptic alternative.

- A critical assessment of the democratic legitimacy of the EU was made and scientific research arguments were put forward regarding the need to strengthen the independent role, reform the organization, and legal regulation of holding the European elections.

Based on the content of the dissertation text, I accept the self-assessment of contributions on p. 37 of the abstract. They have their reasons and correspond with the results of the research. At the same time, I feel that the contributions could be better presented. I mean to formulate them more precisely and concretely, in the adopted and established style in this kind of scientific development.

3. Evaluation of the abstract and scientific publications

The prepared and presented abstract is 38 pages long. It consistently and faithfully reflects the content of the dissertation. 6 publications were made on the topic of the dissertation, which exceeds the requirements and testifies to a deep interest in the researched problem. All have been published in serious scientific journals, which gives an additional touch of responsibility to the author to present his research work to a wider range of readers.

4. Notes, recommendations and questions

The dissertation work is very well developed considering what was stated in the introduction and the final scientific results achieved. In a constructive spirit, I would like to make some technical and editorial notes and recommendations. They do not question its scientific merits and the convincing results achieved.

First of all, the introduction can be constructed more precisely and disciplined in terms of content and sequence. I believe that it is necessary to consider in the future the logical sequence of presentation of the research elements. It is correct to state first the object and subject matter, then the main aim, the tasks, the main hypothesis, and possibly related working hypotheses, etc. The structure of the dissertation is also not sufficiently developed, as a brief presentation of the content of its units. Next, I note the absence of numbering of the individual structural units within the content of the work, which would facilitate their individuality and distinction for the readers within the scope of the voluminous research work presented. I recommend that the dissertation be prepared and published in order to find more widely its scientific and applied significance among a diverse range of readers. My question to the PhD student is: can and how can the European party system today be typologized by type and character? What is shaping up to be its appearance in the foreseeable future?

5. Conclusion

On the grounds stated so far in the opinion and considering the implementation of the legal provisions of Art. 6 of ZRASRB, art. 27, para. 1 of the Regulations for its implementation, I express my firm conviction and support "for" awarding the educational and scientific degree "PhD of Political Science" to Martina Marinova, for her dissertation work on the topic: "The party system in the European Union - dynamics after the Lisbon contract".

Assoc. Professor PhD Simeon Asenov

Sofia, May 16, 2024.