

# PH.D. THESIS STATEMENT REPORT

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Thesis Evaluation Report of Alexander Ivanov Draganov

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Daniel Smilov, Associate Professor

“Political Parties in the United States and Canada in the context of the liberal – conservative cleavage (2016 – 2019)”

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## I. THEORETICAL RELEVANCE AND EMPIRICAL FEASIBILITY OF THE STUDY.

In his research, Alexander Draganov assesses a topic that occupies an increasingly important place in the academic debate about the political parties in developed democracies. The division within classic cleavages such as "left-right," "liberals-conservatives," etc., intensified in parallel with the geopolitical processes after September 11, 2001, which gave impetus to political phenomena such as the "new right," "new left," and formed preconditions for rethinking the way liberals and conservatives position themselves in the political discourse. These processes have deepened after the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States – the most developed democracy in the world – and the emergence of new conservative movements in Europe, some of which openly call for a rethinking of the concept of "democracy" through the prism of the traditional values on which European culture stands since the dawn of its existence. In this sense, the dissertation research has a high degree of relevance since the conclusions and conclusions drawn by the doctoral student attempt to decipher the displacement of the political layers in the USA and Canada, as well as their re-positioning along the "liberal-

conservative" axis. This study is also valuable because a large part of the political actors in the Anglo-Saxon world perceive ideological profiles of liberals and conservatives by defending ideas that in Europe have a completely mirrored political tone, both in politics and economics. The traditional division of liberals and conservatives, to a large extent, also forms the consensus on which modern democratic societies stand since these political ideas were the first to offer an alternative to absolutism and later to nationalism historically. In this sense, the consensus in a democratic society like the American or Canadian one rests on the compromise between these two visions of politics. When this consensus is broken or, as we see at present – polarized, processes begin that can lead to the blockade of entire segments of the political system and the growth of populist movements whose goal is to undermine citizens' trust in the values of democracy and the rule of law. Therefore, I consider this research to be both relevant and applicable.

On the one hand, it answers the question of how the political parties in the USA and Canada are positioned in theory, and on the other hand, it traces how they have deviated from their ideas and pursued a development path that can re-position them within another ideological camp. There are different points of view in the scholarly debate as to what these processes lead to, but the dominant view is that their end product may lead to an overall crisis in liberal democracy, pluralism, and the mechanisms of political representation. Historically, this thesis has been justified by the events in the US during the Capitol Insurgency in 2021 and by the idea of holding a pan-Canadian referendum on Canada's political system. The doctoral student correctly looks for the reasons for shifting the liberal and conservative spectrum and the overflow of some voters into the other camp. At the same time, the dissertation also enjoys a high degree of applicability, as it is one of the few studies, if not the only thesis, recently approved in our country and analyzed the Canadian political system in depth. Last but not least, I believe that this study can also serve as an opportunity for further developments in the field of political science to draw parallels between comparative political science and the field of international relations. It is a fact that the foreign policy of a country - especially democracies such as the USA and Canada - primarily reflects the political attitudes of its citizens, which logically raises the question of

what will be the impact of this new wave of polarization on the place of these actors in the system of international relations.

## II. OVERVIEW OF THE MANUSCRIPT.

The submitted manuscript is 210 standard pages long and includes a title page, table of contents, introduction, four chapters, conclusion, appendices, and bibliography. Appendices in the text reflect the role of minor parties in the USA and Canada's political system, making them an essential argument in favor of the author's thesis. The literature includes over 100 Bulgarian and English sources: books and monographs, articles and empirical studies in Bulgarian and foreign publications, and media publications. Cited sources are underlined, and the citation standard follows the Common Bulgarian Standard. Within the bibliography, the named authors are arranged alphabetically. With these clarifications, I conclude that the manuscript meets the technical requirements for writing a dissertation. The cited authors are adequately selected for the study and reflect existing analyzes on this topic, making them applicable to the objectives of the dissertation. The same applies to quantitative data that the PhD student uses to illustrate his claims better.

## III. ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RESEARCH.

The academic contributions of this research stand as follows:

1. The first contribution of the present study is undoubtedly related to the analysis that the doctoral student makes of the Canadian political system. Until now, there has been only one in-depth study dedicated to Canada by a Bulgarian scholar, and it focuses not so much on the political processes in the country but on its economic system and the prospects for Canadian-European economic cooperation. This makes this dissertation the first to examine how political actors in Canada are positioned, what cleavages divide them, and how this affects Canadian politics. More broadly, Canada's political system is rarely discussed in countries such as Gordon Stewart and Donald Savoie, partly because it often falls into the shadow of its southern neighbor, the United States. However, it is a fact that the two political systems have significant differences, which is also evident from the comparisons that the doctoral student makes. Draganov quite correctly observes the reason for these differences in the polarization

of voters and the high charge that American parties have to generate more profound public cleavages. A number of authors argue that such cleavages are standard for any developing democracy, but there is also a growing number of authors who believe that democracy cannot be an excuse for such divisions and that sometimes political responsibility must be sought at the level of the party system. This study convincingly proves the second point of view by practically illustrating why, when the polarization of the society reflects the party polarization, we are talking about a crisis of ideas. Finally, a significant contribution of the study is that it separates the Canadian from the American political reality by demonstrating that the polarization processes can be overcome by democratic means according to the Canadian model, which would, in practice, limit the growth of populist movements in developed democracies.

2. As a second important contribution of the study, the classification of the remaining political actors in the USA and Canada and their definition of "small parties" can be cited. I believe this categorization most fully corresponds to the role and place of these political actors since, although not represented in power, their influence on the electoral attitudes of Canadians and Americans is insignificant. This issue has also been vaguely studied, as most studies on this topic include political encyclopedias or historical accounts of the emergence and development of third parties in the US and minor parties in Canada. In Bulgarian, such studies are absent. This contribution is significant for the political reality in America since one of the main criticisms of the party system in the USA is its two-party nature and, in particular, the decade-long dominance of the Democrats and Republicans. There has been only one instance of the rise of a third party in American history - The famous and historical fact is that when this happened in the late 19th century, the remaining two parties did their best to preserve the two-party model, regardless of memories of the Civil War. I therefore consider this an original author's contribution, given the considerable space the student devotes to elucidating the profile of parties such as the Green, Libertarian, or Constitutional. Even more interesting are the observations of the doctoral student on the minor parties in Canada, which, despite their small electorate, continue to fight for influence with the Liberals and Conservatives in the country. Important

in this regard is the role of the Bloc Québécois, a political movement often accused of fueling separatism in the French-speaking regions of Canada. Draganov quite rationally analyzes these turbulent processes within the framework of the significant party cleavages, as this reveals the weakness of the smaller parties, which are sometimes inclined to compromise to retain some political influence in the country. On the other hand, his analysis clearly shows why these societies have more difficulty inventing saviors than less developed democracies or European political systems.

3. a precious contribution of the dissertation research is its central part – the comparison between the American and Canadian party systems. They are often seen as one big family, inheriting their traditions from the British model, but the author's analysis shows that this is not always the case, mainly due to objective social, economic, and cultural features in the profile of their voters. An important conclusion of doctoral student Draganov is that American society and democracy are far more prone to cleavages and polarization than the Canadian one. This conclusion correctly reflects the political realities in the US because, unlike in Canada, health care and social security in America are goods and benefits considered a privilege, not a right of citizens. The author rationally looks for the reasons for these cleavages in the two countries' political cultures since the American political culture, which is undoubtedly not monolithic, has reached a consensus that the state should not interfere in redistributing public goods. In Canada, however, such a consensus is lacking, allowing political actors to push their vision of how the government should deliver these goods to voters. Although such periods are not lacking in the history of the USA, they are associated with managing crisis processes such as the Great Depression and are single precedents - for example, the so-called Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Analogously, the situation is with the cultural policy, which acquired an increasingly severe role in the years after the Cold War. The foreign policy parallels that the PhD student draws with the Coronavirus Pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the change in the ideological cleavages along the "liberal-conservative" axis are valuable. They show that Canadian society is far more resilient in maintaining its unity mainly because, although an essential part of NATO, Canada has not yet adopted for itself the Great Power status and politics that the US currently has. On the contrary,

America often suffers from a division of society heavily influenced by the economic and financial resources Washington invests in maintaining its status as a global actor.

4. Last but not least, Alexander Draganov touches on a particularly painful problem for developed democracies - the erosion of the middle class, which is the primary source of a high standard of living and income for the population. Such processes are already beginning to be observed in Europe and America and have been a fact since the 80s or 20th century. After September 11, 2001, however, much of the budget surplus was allocated to costly military operations, which led to a sharp increase in the gap between rich and poor. Quite rightly, the PhD student looks for the reasons for these processes in the politics of both parties because, despite the social rhetoric of much of the Democrats, the only president who took any real steps to contain the crisis of the middle class was Barack Obama. Unlike Obamacare, which was liquidated during the Trump administration and is a big precedent in American politics, in Canada, such programs are numerous and essentially copy the so-called unconditional aid granted to Americans under Franklin Roosevelt.

#### IV. REMARKS TO THE RESEARCH.

Several remarks could be addressed in this study, as the latter could serve for its future publication:

1. In his research, the PhD student often pays close attention to those factors that relate to public attitudes in the US and Canada. In fact, the leading causes of division in these developed societies have always been economic and societal. Such are the cases of those democracies that are entering a period of instability due to the invasion of new waves of values that have led to large-scale protests and the rise of populism in Europe. A key feature of American foreign policy is that values are always heavily invested (so-called smart power, which the administration of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton coined). In this sense, the resources allocated to cultural policy follow the values the US stands for globally. An example is the administration of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who, despite his political flirtations with Russia, tends to bet on more balanced policies when allocating Euro funds. In this sense, electoral

victory in the US and Canada has more than once fallen into the hands of parties that support the middle class. The exceptions reflect crisis episodes in the history of the two countries when the "stronger wins" principle came into force.

2. In his dissertation, Draganov raises the question of how the radicalization of public attitudes reflects the crisis of the middle class and cites several authors who make the same claim (e.g., Adams). It would be interesting to consider whether the radicalization of attitudes is general to how US democracy functions or is more specific to American political discourse. In Canada, such phenomena are present, but they are rare because, as the author notes, the rhetoric of Canadian politicians can hardly be compared with the polarizing rhetoric of people like Donald Trump. In this sense, public speaking can be a powerful stimulus even for undermining the authority of democracy itself.

3. An interesting case, raised but less affected within the research framework, is about the role of the objective restrictions that democracy sets before politicians attempt to damage its quality. Given the crisis processes in most liberal democracies, one could reflect on whether these restrictions are still effective and to what extent the erosion of the middle class may also lead to the erosion of the protective mechanisms that democracies have available to influence the political process.

In summary, I would like to say a few words about the scientific activity of Alexander Draganov, as I had the opportunity to follow his development as a doctoral student in the Department of Political Science of Sofia University. The student regularly participated in the postgraduate readings organized annually by the Faculty of Philosophy of the SU. During his work with colleagues from the department, Draganov participated in several scientific conferences and a summer school organized in cooperation with our partners from the Guangdong University of International Relations and Political Science. The student has two publications on the topic of his research. The first is dedicated to the American influence on Bulgaria's new generation of rights and freedoms and was published in English in the *Balkan Social Science Review* - an open-access journal indexed in SCOPUS. His second article - in Bulgarian - is dedicated to dissertation research and is part of the annual edition of the *Journal of Political Studies*.

This is also the place to share my good impressions of the teaching activities of the doctoral student, who, for three academic years, led a course for international students in English in the Erasmus program and several consecutive seminars within the bachelor program in Political Science.

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the text presented by Alexander Draganov proves that it contains all aspects of a finished and to-be-defended dissertation study. I propose to the respected committee to support this young career scholar, and I confirm that I will vote "for" the awarding of the academic degree "doctor" in professional profile 3.3. (Political Sciences) of Alexander Ivanov Draganov.

May 9, 2024

DR. ISKREN IVANOV

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