

Review

For the dissertation "Organizational Building and Institutionalization of Political Parties in Bulgaria: 1990 - 2018. Patterns of consolidation and fragmentation of the party system in transition", submitted by Hristo Hristov Panchugov for the award of PhD in 3.3. Political Science

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The presented dissertation was developed at New Bulgarian University under the scientific supervision of Prof. Dr. Evgeny Dainov. The text is 183 pages (220 standard), organized in an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion, a bibliography with 117 titles and appendices. The candidate Hristo Panchugov has gained experience in political organizations, as a media analyst and teacher, which undoubtedly helped him in the development of the dissertation.

1. Significance of the research problem in scientific and applied terms

The problem chosen for research is undoubtedly important for Bulgarian political science. The presented dissertation fits into an already significant series of studies of the party system in democratic Bulgaria after 1989 by Bulgarian and foreign authors, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians and philosophers. The author thus joins an ongoing discussion about the characteristics of Bulgarian politics, its peculiarities but also shared features with the countries of post-communist Europe but also with the established democracies of the West. The results of his research presented here certainly broaden our understanding of this problem area, introduce new arguments and defend new theoretical explanations, thus contributing to the development of social science in Bulgaria.

In applied terms, the dissertation also contributes to the realization of the importance especially of internal party organization, both for the quality of democracy and for the success of parties in their competitive environment. The text provides criteria for assessing the ability of one party or another to withstand the changing socio-political environment and achieve sustainability as an organisation and part of the political process.

2. Justification of the aims and objectives of the thesis

The author defines his objective as "to derive, summarize, and analyze the characteristics of the Bulgarian party system, beyond the existing generalizations that assume that in terms of challenges, dynamics, and mechanics, it is the same as the larger group of post-communist systems." All this in discussion with the "existing generalizations" in the academic literature. The dissertation will therefore "problematize and critically evaluate existing approaches to the analysis of processes in the Bulgarian party system, as part of an attempt at a more differentiated understanding of the topic of party systems in Central and Eastern Europe and of party systems in general."

The main intention, however, is formulated somewhat more precisely: "to achieve a better and deeper understanding of the relationship of these processes and the development of parties as organizations, as

strategies for adaptation and survival in the Bulgarian party system, in an attempt to derive a generalized understanding of the challenges but also of the dynamics of influence that the two parallel processes have on each other (system change on organization change and vice versa)." It is this intention that is original to the research presented and to some extent stands out amongst the available academic research in the field. This adds up to a second task of the study: to "explore the question of the relationship between the organizational development of individual party organizations as one of the factors within the theme of 'stability/change' of party systems."

It can be said that there is a significant and scientifically interesting link between the aims and objectives of Hristo Panchugov's research, although the stated intentions of the work thus lack the explicit formulation of the main research question. And the main research question organizes the research itself and justifies the chosen structure of the presentation of its results. After all, such a question exists implicitly, and it can probably be formulated as "How does the organizational development of parties in Bulgaria affect the stability/change of the party system?" With the caveat, as will be discussed shortly, that the study limits the case studies to three parties of the charismatic type: the NDSV, Ataka and GERB in the period 2001-2018 (the title is somewhat misleading with the original date of 1990).

3. Correspondence between the chosen methodology and research methodology and the stated aim and objectives of the thesis

The chosen structure of the thesis is consistent with the stated aim and objectives of the research. It presents the logic of the reflection: it starts with a discussion of the patterns of consolidation and fragmentation of party systems (chapter one), continues with a discussion of parties as organizations (chapter two) and ends with the creation of a typology of new parties in Bulgaria (chapter three).

The first chapter is also constructed in a logical, deductive style, beginning with a summary and somewhat critical analysis of existing theories to explain party systems in the history of modern democracy, continuing with a summary of research on the party systems of Central and Eastern European countries since the end of Soviet-style communist regimes, and concluding with a discussion of the two types of successive party systems in Bulgaria since 1990, with change defined in the period 1997-2001.

In this chapter, the author summarizes a substantial literature, mainly English-language, clearly stating his theoretical choices. No significant author or study in the English-speaking milieu is omitted, and the summary of theoretical explanations is correct to the theses of the authors cited. One key question the author asks, referring to Peter Mayer, is "what is 'change' in a party system; when do systems change; and what are the factors that explain these dynamics?" This introduces and discusses fundamental scientific concepts such as system, political system, party system, respectively the related notion of elements, boundary and environment, the nature of internal dynamics (processes), but especially the notions of stability and change. Slightly less discussed is another concept of the systems approach, equilibrium, and the extent to which equilibrium is synonymous with stability or whether we are talking about different states (absence of multiple changes or absence of significant changes).

In what the author defines as the "key question" in his theoretical framework is "how do we distinguish one system from another", therefore agreeing with the authors of typologies of party systems that in this case it is the number of political parties (probably what is usually called the "effective number of parties") that matters most.

Referring to a 2006 article by Paul Lewis on the nature of party systems in CEE, Hristo Panchugov argues that "agency" dominates structure, choice dominates historical legacy, and agency precedes institution". In other words, the thesis is, and it seems to be fundamental in terms of the objectives of the presented study, the agency of the subject, its characteristics, attitudes, perceptions, resources, as well as inherited practices and habits, are decisive for the character of the party system. This is essentially methodological individualism, a paradigm adopted by the author, though not explicitly stated. According to the author, this approach allows him to avoid "too static and deterministic conclusions" when analyzing the party system. And the system, as it is known, has homeostatic mechanisms that maintain its identity, i.e. it is a conservative construction whose change is rather a deviation from the rule.

I will note here that the first two chapters, which essentially discuss the theoretical framework for the study of party systems in general and in CEE and Bulgaria in particular, show the dissertation author's excellent familiarity with the available research, albeit mostly published until 2019. But certainly this part of the dissertation could be extremely useful for the development of a textbook in this field.

4. Scientific and applied contributions of the thesis

The main research work is presented in the third chapter "The New Parties in Bulgaria - Towards a Typology". There the author mobilises empirical material from sociological surveys (mostly exit polls), but also from the large-scale comparative study of parties "Manifesto". It is in this chapter that the most significant scholarly contributions of the dissertation can be seen.

Summarizing the scientific contributions is not an easy task. Candidates are usually required to do so in their abstract. Hristo Panchugov evaluates 6 such contributions. The first is a declaration of the chosen methodological approach, but is a contribution as such. But I will note as a very positive aspect of the dissertation the author's clear statement of his own theoretical choices. The second contribution - "a new approach to examining the Bulgarian party system through the prism of stability/change" - is also not a substantive contribution insofar as the very use of the term system implies the discussion of the concepts of stability and change. The sixth contribution 'updates and renews the available data', but this is also not a substantive contribution. Perhaps it introduces new data not previously used or known?

However, I would accept the points described as third, fourth and fifth in the self-assessment as contributions. The most significant is that the dissertation "derives a model to trace the constant interaction between the environment and the organizational models of political parties in Bulgaria". A model based on three axes of party strategies: seeking votes, proposing public policies and fighting for access to government. Another contribution is the testing on the Bulgarian terrain of "several already established methodologies for measuring and evaluating party organisations". It seems to me, however, as the most original and related precisely to the selected three parties as the main case studies of the research "the systematization of the concept of "charismatic party" and the operationalization of the criteria for their evaluation, adapting the methodology of Enyedi and Linek".

But to these more generally formulated contributions I would add a few relating to our understanding of the evolution of the party system in Bulgaria since 1989.

The first such finding is the argument that, unlike established democracies in Western Europe, social cleavages do not play as important a role in institutionalizing political identities in CEE. This challenges

the 'incompleteness of the process of party institutionalisation (at the ideological and programmatic level)'.

The second finding is that the author, while of course analysing the notion of instability of the party system, asks about possible patterns of such instability. And that to explain the differences between these patterns one must necessarily include the issue of the organizational preferences of politicians.

The third finding is that the dissertation "assumes that changing the structure and dynamics of the party system is not analogous to the emergence of new party entities, and that it is possible for a system to remain stable even when some or all of its components undergo substantial change."

A fourth finding is that despite the relative stability of the party system in Bulgaria, it remains extremely open, which may hint at the presence of hidden political cleavages in Bulgarian society that fail to find representation in the party system.

The fifth finding is in the identification of conservative (right-wing) markers in the ideological messages of the BSP (albeit inconsistent in the period studied), which may explain the current situation of a so-called "conservative socialism" professed in part of the socialist party.

The sixth finding is the measurement of charisma as an ideal type and the definition of the factors of charismatic authority. In fact, this is a major criterion for selecting case studies. Related to this is the finding and argumentation of the understanding that "some parties created around and led by a charismatic leader sooner or later begin a process of organizational development and institutionalization" (the question is, are only some parties?). I think what is most original about the work is precisely the definition of charismatic parties and the analysis of their role in party system stability/change. Here I think that a definite scholarly contribution is the theorization of the differences between NDSV, GERB and Ataka in terms of initial structuring and organizational smoothing, allowing us to understand their different fates on the political scene.

5. Evaluation of the publications on the dissertation work: number, nature of the editions in which they were published.

The abstract indicates 11 publications related to the topic of the dissertation. All within scientific editions, 2 of which are in Bulgarian and 9 in English. Of these, 6 are articles in the dictionary of political concepts (NBU edition in English). Another 4 publications in English were co-authored with Dr. Ivan Nachev and were published in international collective books in refereed and peer-reviewed editions.

The publications are more than sufficient to present some of the findings and conclusions of the dissertation.

6. Citation by other authors, reviews in the scientific press, etc.

I have no information about the citation of these publications by other authors, but I can assume that they are part of the field of scholarly exchange of ideas in the field of political science and comparative political science in particular.

7. Opinions, recommendations and notes.

I will start with an already made finding – there is a lack of an explicitly formulated basic research question. It has been replaced and is explicitly contained in the stated main goal of the research, but this

goal lacks one of the most essential achievements of the dissertation - the study of charisma as a factor in the construction of parties and the party system.

When working with the concept of system, there seems to be acceptance of understandings about it as something obvious and not subject to discussion. The author questions whether stability is the rule and change is the anomaly. But the system is a concept of a dynamic equilibrium, i.e. mostly about the processes that feed it. Systemic change in this sense is always an anomaly.

In the dissertation, there is a relatively modest reference to the relationship between the party and political system and its social environment - economy, civil society, normative frameworks, culture. And this environment probably strongly influences the functions of charisma and its relative success in the Bulgarian party system.

I also have a few specific criticisms of the use of the empirical material.

The first is about the use of exit poll data - they are always "soft" because they collect and summarize opinions, under the hypothesis that the respondents answer reliably. But probably these data, especially those related to the change of the vote, should be supplemented with other studies, on the election results themselves in the individual municipalities or sections with the multiple regression method. Sometimes its results help explain some unusual results in exit polls.

The second is related to the graphs presenting the author's calculations for the ideological distances between the Bulgarian parties in the period 1994-2017. The graphs are two-dimensional, but the second dimension does not matter, but is chosen for better "visual clarity". However, this is misleading because a second dimension is like a scale and seems to suggest some logic.

What is more important here is that, as a result of the calculations, in 1997 BSP and SDS were equally "right", in 2002 NDSV was on the left, BSP in the centre, in 2014 - the Patriotic Front was on the extreme right, and Ataka was in the centre, in 2017 BSP and GERB are in the centre and DPS is on the left. A little more explanation of the methodology of the Manifesto project is definitely needed here, but also a more analytical and in-depth analysis of the results obtained. As is well known, a statistical quantity obtained by some methodology may not have any meaning if it is not accompanied by an explanatory theory.

On p. 59, the fractionalization index does not actually show clearly distinct periods of the political system (up to 2001 and after), but only two spikes in 2005 and 2014 (with the second election being an emergency).

On p. 62 fig. 8 is unreadable, and it is problematic to what extent the various coalitions around the BSP should be distinguished as separate and unrelated entities.

It is true that the author makes the caveat that "an in-depth analysis of electoral attitudes is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it does attempt to assess the consistency of support for different political formations (party loyalty) based on exit polls conducted by Alpha Research for the period 2001 - 2017". Data on party loyalty are also available in other studies, for example in "The Quality of Democracy in Bulgaria" (Sofia, "East-West", 2014)

On p. 63, it is claimed that "based on the election results, it can be said that voter turnout during elections for the National Assembly, in the specified period, remains at relatively close values." In fact,

however, Table 4 shows a steady decline from 75% at the beginning to 55% at the end, a significant change of as much as 20 percentage points.

In the critical notes, I would add finally that while it is not possible to read research in all languages, today's technology makes it possible to at least have a general knowledge of non-English language research. Just as a small note, I will note that out of all 117 sources, only 16 are in Bulgarian, and one of them was an interview. I think that a topic about the Bulgarian party system can mobilize more references, published in Bulgarian (although it is true that many of the Bulgarian authors are listed in their publications in English).

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, I will say that the presented dissertation is original research that gives us new knowledge about political life, which respects academic standards and therefore possesses the necessary qualities for the award after a successful defence of the title of "doctor" (PhD) under 3.3. Political sciences of Hristo Panchugov.

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