

Joint Dissertation Review

Name of the student:	Martina Ellis
Title of the thesis:	Negotiations between the EU and Mercosur: Motivations behind the relaunch in 2010
Reviewer:	Matthew Broad

1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

(relevance of the research question, research objective, literature review):

This thesis sought to examine the relationship between the EU and Mercosur. It paid particular attention to the relaunch of the negotiations between the two sides following the failure of the Doha Round, and especially the motivations of the EU in pushing for talks to resume. Beyond that, the student hoped to understand the resumption of these talks almost as an example of the broader trend of interregionalism.

The topic of EU-Mercosur relations is a timely and interesting one – not least given recent events – and the importance and relevance of the case was nicely justified in the introduction. While an improvement of earlier drafts, the student needed to spend still more time establishing the logic behind the hypotheses outlined on pp. 7-8. Moreover, and as I mentioned to the student during our supervisions, I wasn't fully convinced of the nexus between explaining the drivers behind EU actions and interregionalism – this was perhaps more an implication of the research best left to the conclusion rather than a starting point. This became a problem in the literature review since the student tended to use the space to justify her approach rather than identify gaps in the academic landscape or areas of scholarship which she hoped to build on. That said, her understanding of the concept was sharp.

I also thought rather better of the student's chosen approach than the second marker - that she proposed explanatory hypotheses (in this case, pressure from external actors like China) is surely not descriptive, although I accept that the remainder of the thesis was not as analytical as it might have been, and that insufficient attention was given to alternative explanations. Indeed, why it was logically credible that the EU pursued discussions because of pressure from China above and beyond all other factors was somewhat taken for granted.

2. ANALYSIS

(methodology, argument, theoretical backing, appropriate work with sources):

The student used the theoretical section to 'understand the phenomenon of European interregionalism'. This was a little problematic, both for the reasons already mentioned above but also because it didn't really fulfil the job of a theoretical framework. What was needed was a much deeper discussion of the why the combination of stagnation following Doha and the concurrent rise of China compelled Brussels to return to the negotiating table. This meant that the whole section on Waltz and neorealism, while all entirely accurate and insightful, was superfluous. Much the same could be said for the background: really very absorbing and demonstrative of the student's evident command of the subject but not always relevant to the research question at hand. Considering the word limit, the background, at 20 pages, seemed quite verbose.

For a thesis designed to understand the external influence of state actors like China on EU policy motivations, I thought the student also did well to forego mention of Beijing for solid portions of chapters 3 and 4. Both chapters in fact were quite disconnected from the question the student had set herself, and chapter 5 read like another background chapter. It was only with chapter 6 that we got to the crux of the issue – global trade competition in Latin America. The chapter overall was good, and I really liked the EU's Economic and Social Committee quote on p. 57, although more could have been made of it. A better thesis might for instance have considered what came of the EESC report: was there any correlation between EU actors recognising the degree of competition in Latin America and actionable policy changes at the international level? Can we trace the processes by which these decisions were made, and thereby discount other explanatory factors? Were the issues raised by the EESC discussed for instance within the Council, EEAS or Commission? Given the failure to

adequately establish this connection, we're left with no doubt sincere but ultimately unsubstantiated suppositions like 'it could be said that China's growing presence in the region acted as one of the influential elements in the European Commission's decision to renegotiate with Mercosur in 2010' (p. 58) – this sort of argument ought to have been predicated on a firmer source base.

3. CONCLUSIONS

(persuasiveness, link between data and conclusions, achievement of research objectives):

The conclusion was reasonably reflective if a little curt. But given the points made above, it appeared to claim rather more than the data presented would allow. The evidence offered was too limited to fully establish the causal mechanisms that led to the specific outcome that was the relaunch of the EU-Mercosur talks. This was a shame since the bibliography revealed that the student had in fact consulted a decent number of primary sources but didn't seem to make the best use of this. In promising more than was delivered, the research question was consequently only partially tested and rationalised throughout the course of the thesis and in the conclusion chapter itself.

4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

(appropriate language, adherence to academic standards, citation style, layout):

Writing bumped along nicely, although referencing was a tad messy in places: ob cit rather than op cit; page rather than p.; some book titles were not italicised. Dates were written haphazardly. Layout was otherwise excellent.

5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

(strong and weak point of the dissertation, other issues)

The thesis was, I felt, strongest in choosing an eminently sensible and felicitous research question. The student has done enough to pass given the deployment of some sources in pursuit of the research question. But they only went so far to that end, and the hypothesis presented seemingly emerged out of thin air rather than a considered reading of the relevant academic literature. At times the thesis read as if the student was delineating everything she knew (which ostensibly was quite a lot!) or had read about interregionalism, Mercosur, EU trade policy and China-Latin American commercial ties without tying together all these various loose ends into one coherent, analytical whole. Nevertheless, her knowledge of the subject shone through.

I must also mention that through her studies Martina was an absolute pleasure to work with. I have no doubts that with her mastery of complex concepts and confident handling of economic data she will do well in her chosen career.

Grade (A-F):	Final agreed grade (Leiden scale): 6.8 (D)
Date:	Signature:
11.7.2019	