

JOINT DISSERTATION REVIEW

Name of the student:	Jonathan Jacobs
Title of the thesis:	Between Westbindung and Ostpolitik: Reconceptualising German-Russian Relations 2014-2017
Reviewer:	Dr. Abel Escribà-Folch

1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

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

The thesis examines German-Russian relations using a social constructivist approach centred on the analysis of the debate and the change in the positions of the two main German political parties, namely, the SPD and the CDU/CSU during the period 2014-2017.

The literature review is extremely comprehensive. The author shows that it knows the existing relevant works on the subject. My only concern here is that the review is not sufficiently integrated and critical. Most of the review consists of a long description of many works, but the author does not fully engage with the literature in a critical sense that helps justify his research and his approach. There is a “gaps in the literature” section, but most of the critique there is centred on the necessity to consider parties as relevant actors. However, the two so-called alternative approaches to FPA, realism and liberal institutionalism are not properly analysed, especially in contrast to normative approaches (see p.25 for example).

The relevance of the question is not very strong, at least as it is “sold” in the paper, especially considering the short period of time under study. Such relevance should be more clearly stated and presented in the introduction, anticipating the main findings of the paper and the implications of these in terms of consequences and for understanding the present and future of German-Russian relations.

2. ANALYSIS

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

The use of the chosen approach is generally well explained, and the student really shows that he has a deep knowledge of the implications and logic of social constructivism and role theory. The discussion of the methodology employed is profound and sound. I commend the author for taking this task seriously and taking the time to explain the approach adopted carefully as well as for justifying the methodology used with detail. There is some confusion, albeit a minor one, over the time period under study, while in the text the starting year mentioned is often 2013, in many other places it is 2014 (including the title).

In terms of data, and given the centrality of discourse, I wonder whether the author should have also conducted interviews with relevant actors, politicians, MPs of both parties, etc.

My main concern is the period under study. I do not see why the period is theoretically relevant in the creation of certain variability, change, or conditions that justify the analysis focusing on it. For example, it is said that relations between Russia and Germany “stagnated” since 2007 (p.42); why not start there then? It is not well justified the choosing of the period, especially considering that it coincides with the start of the crisis in Crimea. Is this crisis especially relevant for the relations with Germany? If the crisis is just an exogenous shock that justifies and analysis on whether relations and discourse changed, then we should have a more complete diachronic comparison of the years before and after the crisis (which is difficult, because one may argue that a previous crisis like the Syrian war put also tension to these relationships). If the crisis is the relevant factor, then we need a profound reflection on why it is expected that these crisis would put tension in the relations between the two countries, what makes this crisis more relevant, and, hence further, contextualization. Another criterion would be to focus on the role of parties and see what has changed in their status and roles in government over time, something only partially done with the SPD, and the formation of the great coalition. Both events tend to be conflated but not theoretically given separate attention. So we lack a meaningful comparison that allows to establish and theorize about potential changes in positions, all seems to be extremely path-dependent and based on pre-existing norms, whose origins and stability are not fully explored in the first place, they are just taken for granted.

The authors stresses many times for understanding foreign policy, it is necessary to take into account parties, historical legacies as well as social, cultural and domestic factors. Essentially everything, then. Yet, the thesis

does not do that or does so with many limitations that should be explicitly mentioned somewhere. The approach adopted and the data used is not enough to give answers and address all these factors and conditions satisfactorily. Assessing the impact of cultural and social factors, for example, demands alternative designs beyond some descriptive data and discourse analysis centred on parties. Also, one should then clarify what one does mean by specifically cultural and social factor with much clarity and precision.

3. CONCLUSIONS

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

The thesis achieves the goals it set out to investigate satisfactorily. Yet the conclusions reached are quite limited, maybe because of some of the points I raised above about the event, context, variability or puzzle being addressed, which is never fully developed and its theoretical implication never examined. There are so many moving parts and side discussions not fully central to the question that at the end, the contrast and analysis of party discourse loses some contact with the main theoretical questions and body of text. The conclusions, considering how lengthy some other sections are (and whose contribution to main question is doubtful) are pretty short and do not do a good job at highlighting the relevance and contribution of the work done and presented. They do not do justice to the analysis and the contribution gets to some extent blurred and loses relevance. At the end, it appears that CDU and SPD converged a bit but followed parallel stands. Also, the conclusion lacks a discussion of policy implications. The limitations of the thesis, which are many, only receive a very short paragraph in pages 66-67.

4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

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

The language is overall appropriate and clear, though some revisions and edits could have been made before handing the thesis. Many sentences look incomplete and many are confusing and lack clarity. Formalities having to do with citation standards, presentation, etc. are perfectly fine. The author's work is solid and professional and meets all academic standards.

5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

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

The strongest points are:

- an impressive knowledge and discussion of the existing and relevant literature.
- a sound and rigorous approach and a well-developed analysis of sources.

The weakest points:

- lack of theoretical focus and specification of the scope conditions that may explain or anticipate change in positions and discourse, including lack of full contextualization of the events that justify selection of time period under study.
- not enough discussion of alternative approaches and engaging the literature more critically.
- a limited contribution with also limited implications, both theoretical and empirical.
- the conclusions fall short of highlighting the main findings, its relevance and contribution to the extant literature; they also lack a discussion of policy implications.

Grade (A-F): B	
Date: June 11 th 2019	Signature: