



Universiteit
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Programme details

Programme: European Politics and Society

Specialisation:

EC: 30

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Thesis details:

Title: Finding the European Union's grand strategy: understanding the Commission's role in formulating grand strategy

Is the thesis in your assessment free of plagiarism?

Yes to my knowledge the thesis is free of plagiarism

Checked by supervisor

Can the thesis be made publicly available in the Leiden University Repository?

by M. Broad: it can be made public through the repository.

Summary assessment/comments

Overall this was a strong thesis which pursued an evident-rich argument of which I was largely sold. There were moments where the student was a little too verbose and parts (especially the theory/methodology) weren't as strong or coherent as they could have been. But for an MA thesis this was otherwise intelligently and robustly reasoned by an enquiring mind.

Criteria

Knowledge and insight

This was a most interesting thesis regarding whether and in what form the EU has a grand strategy. The opening paragraphs were quite convoluted, but the introduction otherwise did a decent job of setting the scene and situating the research question. Of particular interest to the student was the tools and plans adopted by the Commission, and the extent to which the policies, ideas and approaches adopted by the Juncker Commission specifically were all driven by one overarching goal. Whether any institution within the EU - let alone an IO more generally - is capable of adopting a grand strategic vision was dealt with directly in the literature review. This took us through the development of grand strategy both as a concept and an accompanying academic discipline with awe-inspiring ease, drawing throughout on a commendable array of secondary works. Perhaps with so much being covered it was always going to be difficult to come to a firm conclusion of precisely how the student himself defined grand strategy and why it was applicable to the EU; the candidate at times seemed to be saying everything they knew about the subject (which, admittedly, was a lot!) without really nailing down what was most important. Some of the conclusions reached were also perhaps not quite as novel as claimed. But this was still in-depth and highly reflective.

Assessment: very good

Weighing: n/a

Application knowledge and insight

Chapter 3 first proposed a theory for how IOs engage with grand strategy. This was ambitious if not an always flawless section - some of the theoretical assumptions behind the EU's grand strategic priorities weren't always obvious, for instance. The 'orchestration' argument was especially revealing and had the capacity to tell us much not simply about grand strategy but also the power dynamics of the contemporary EU. This wasn't discussed as

fully as I'd have hoped, however. Nor was there much about the role of bureaucratisation and specialisation, mentioned only briefly on p. 27. All this might have helped develop the hypotheses a little more: as written they seemed to come out of nowhere and were in danger of becoming rather pre-determined answers. The chapter then turned to methodology. Case selection was touched upon, but there might have been better justification for the time period covered and whether/what such analysis tells us more broadly about Commission priorities/the EU as a strategic actor (this was always skirted around, both here and in the introduction, but a clear sentence/paragraph-length rationale would have been welcomed). The choice of a critical discourse analysis made much sense, and this was said to be combined with process tracing. I can't help but feel that the student sometimes forgot about (or didn't really demonstrate how they used) the latter and concentrated instead on the former: doing so was entirely serviceable, but if it was going to be included it would have been an idea to use it (or highlight how it was used) more systematically. Moreover, there is a debate to be had as to quite how much a study of Commission documents were able fully to inform us of the behaviours and mechanisms behind the question, but the whole framing and rationale of the piece was nevertheless well considered. For an MA thesis, indeed, I thought this quite innovative.

Assessment: good

Weighing: n/a

Reaching conclusions

The research chapter was persuasive and balanced, premised on a detailed and confident reading of primary sources and secondary works. We learn of two distinct phases in the Commission's priorities, and this evolution – defined first by internal and then increasingly by external 'threats' – involved utilisation and deployment of different tools and resources. I most liked how conscious the student was to gaps in his own argument, particularly relating to the lack of military assets available to the Commission and thus whether their actions might conceivably be considered grand strategy. All this was wrapped up in an honest and insightful conclusion, which did well to delineate the main findings of the research and the wider contribution of the piece from both a theoretical and conceptual perspective, all skilfully argued.

Assessment: very good

Weighing: n/a

Communication

Writing was something of a weak point in what was otherwise a good thesis. On the whole it read well and was

sufficiently varied to keep the reader interested. But one was still left to contend with an unacceptably high number of grammatical errors, malapropisms and oddities of expressions. Citations were also haphazard, and the bibliography a bit messy with dois and book urls needlessly included, whereas websites didn't have access dates. None of this suggested any lack of ability on the student's part, but they did perhaps point to too little proofreading and a regrettable inattention to detail in the final stages of completing the piece.

Assessment: (more than) satisfactory

Weighing: n/a

Learning skills

Met

Assessment: very good

Weighing: n/a

Formal requirements

Met

Final assessment

On 30-06-2020 this thesis is graded with a 8

Signatures

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'M' followed by 'BROAD' and a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

M. Broad