



Universiteit
Leiden

Thesis evaluation Mariam Bidzinashvili

Student details:

Name: Mariam Bidzinashvili

Studentnr: 2675447

E-mail: m.bidzinashvili@umail.leidenuniv.nl

Programme details

Programme: European Politics and Society

Specialisation:

EC: 30

Evaluators:

First: M. Skalamera

E-mail: m.skalamera@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Second: Slavomir Horak

E-mail: slavomir.horak@post.cz

Thesis details:

Title: EU's Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy
Towards Occupied Territories of Georgia: Abkhazia and
Tskhinvali Region

Is the thesis in your assessment free of plagiarism?

Yes to my knowledge the thesis is free of plagiarism

I found no problem with plagiarism in the text

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

by Slavomir Horak: it can be made public through the repository.

Summary assessment/comments

In sum, I would like to underline that I am not against the position of the author, however, more balanced view and the research of roots and reasons standing behind the position of this or that regional player instead of sometimes all-embracing criticism would make the text even more valuable. A biased approach (understandable from the author's point of view, but less acceptable for the academic text) did not enable the author to make a more robust and more in-depth analysis of the problem. Sometimes uncompromised attitude regardless of the other side opinion could cause the troubles to the author in the negotiation processes with its counterparts.

Despite all concerns and remarks mentioned above in the review, I have to conclude that the author presented an excellent thesis. The text shows developed analytical skills, the abilities to formulate the problem and to transform it into a comprehensive, well-structured and transparent paper.

Criteria

Knowledge and insight

The submitted Master Thesis deals with the problems of the EU involvement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The text analysis deeply the role of all involved actors – Russia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Georgia and the EU. It presents the logical structure while pointing on the specifics of each side of the conflict with final recommendations and conclusions. The methodology, as well as the theoretical part, are out of problem and research question is adequately posed. The author used the appropriate literature and used it analytically.

Assessment: very good

Weighing: n/a

Application knowledge and insight

The problem of the work is mostly “pro-Georgian” view of the problem regardless of the realities of the region. Even if I can understand this attitude (and I even have partial sympathy towards it), for the unbiased analysis, such an approach might be tricky. To make the thing more balance, I have to admit more critical views in some parts of the text, especially in the chapter on Georgia (p. 37-39), although it focuses mostly on the South Ossetian problem rather than Georgian-Abkhazian relations. The author also correctly analyses the obstacles on the EU side.

The author, as a red line, tends to favour the only solution to the problem – the reintegration of so-called occupied

territories back under Georgian jurisdiction. However, apart of Russian involvement, we have to bear in mind also the interest of the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia themselves. Currently, it does not seem possible, and the change in minds will be quite painful. Though the author acknowledges the problem in the respective chapters of the thesis (p. 24-34), the general impression does not contribute to the conflict resolution. One detail as an example: using the term „Tskhinvali region“ systematically throughout the thesis instead of South Ossetia (well-established even in the scholar literature), the author unilaterally follows the Georgian rhetorics in the problem. The author is correct in the critique of the EU ineffectiveness in the conflict resolution. The text admits the limits of the EU's involvement due to obstacles that appeared on all sides of the conflict (p. 14-15). The lack of EU interest towards Georgia and its breakaway region comparing to its internal problem (p. 43) is also seen mostly from Georgian perspective (or from opinions of regional experts) as a negative factor. However, we have to accept the real politics of the EU, which is pre-occupied with other problems (despite our, joint with the author, personal wish in the opposite).

In this regards, I would have expected the author to conduct the informal and semistructured interviews with the EUMM and EU Mission staff in Tbilisi within the research instead of using written sources and media outputs. The „in-field“ view could better clarify the author what is being done and what achievements have been accomplished in situ. I had numerous talks concerning the situation on the border, co-operation and, contrarily, communication troubles with Russian and Ossetian/Abkhazian forces during my recent long-term stay in Tbilisi. I fully understand that the EU position looks more rhetoric (p. 7), but the real action might be limited due to its power, the position of other players (incl. Georgia) and their level of willingness to co-operate.

Although acknowledging the limitations of the EU policy, the criticism of the author in the last parts (particularly recommendations chapter) of the text is based often on the ideal way how the EU should deal with the issue. I expected the concretely formulated recommendation of what EU should do for the conflict resolution in the region with the in-depth assessment of existing realities, different approaches of EU member states and other sides towards the problem. I found instead mostly phrases and clichés repeated many times at different forums and from different political representatives. The author does not recommend realistic in-field action or, if we look more thoroughly, most of them have already being implemented in some way or another.

Let me be concrete. The educational programs (p. 48-49) are offered even for Abkhazian (and also theoretically South Ossetian) citizens. However, nobody removed practical barriers on EU, Russia and Abkhazian sides.

Abkhazia factually (regardless of opposite rhetorics and official statements) does not support the educational exchange, EU missions in Tbilisi or even in Russia are not entitled to issue visas for citizens of Abkhazia or South Ossetia (even those with Russian passports with residence on the respective territory). At the same time, the author need not underestimate the local civil sectors, which is (at least in Abkhazian case) surprisingly well-developed.

The recommendations also require prioritising Georgian agenda in the EU institutions. Dealing with EU documents and based on the experience from Georgia, I am convinced that Georgian issue is quite high on the Brussel agenda, comparing to other foreign policy issues (and Georgia still falls under this category). From EU documents I had access to, I can conclude that Georgia is one of the most preferred countries, at least within the Eastern Partnership group and even non-EU Balkan countries. Of course, the quantification of such attention might be problematic. However, the author of the text need not selfishly underline the Georgian territories as the only and the most crucial EU agenda even if I understand that it stands as number one for the Georgian interests (I wish I saw more EU involvement in some Czech issues, but I have to accept the reality as well).

As for the de-politicisation of the issue, EU mission and EUMM staff would be more than happy, if they could meet

with both Georgian, Abkhazian and South Ossetian counterparts based on this principle. At this stage, such a transparent approach is not always welcomed on either side. Any move forward to one side could be seen as a hostile on the other side. Of course, not all steps on the EU side could be considered as balanced, but opposite sides of the conflict often interpret any incorrect statement very sensitively. In the situation of this actual zero-sum game, the EU is not an all-embracing institution capable of solving everything. „Sticking the dogmas“ (p. 50) should also be visible on both sides of the conflict, including Georgia itself.

Intensification of civil society (p. 51) is a big issue of the conflict. As I wrote, the civil society is well-developed and established, at least in Georgia and Abkhazia. However, for the successful involvement of the civil society in the conflict resolution, we need a full permeability between Track I (official level) and Track II (unofficial level, civil society) diplomacy on all sides. It is not the case of current conflicts due to the lack of connection and impact from Track II towards Track I in both Georgia and Abkhazia (and probably South Ossetia, which I am less informed about), between Tracks II of both sides of the conflict and the public and, last but not least, the influence of Russia as well as Track I in both de facto entities) in boosting these relations.

I also agree with the author enthusiasm in opening EU liaison office in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the same time, did the author ask about this idea among EU officials, EU missions staff? The initiative to expand the EU activities inside the breakaway region has existed for a long time (at least, I remember such initiatives were discussed back in 2008-2010). However, the obstacles from both Georgian as well as Abkhazian side made this idea impossible to implement. Nevertheless, I am also not aware fully about the current situation.

Assessment: good

Weighing: n/a

Reaching conclusions

Therefore, the conclusions and recommendations mentioned by the author and analysed above hold more rhetorical character and do not discuss the problems and obstacles of it. In other words, the author recommends WHAT should be done. It is mostly correct, but also usually well-known in the field. Nevertheless, the text does not answer the fundamental question on HOW should it be done WHY the ideas have not been implemented yet.

Assessment: good

Weighing: n/a

Communication

The whole text is easy to understand and it uses (regarding the fact that the author is not a native speaker) high-

level language. The structure of the thesis systematically and logically follows the plan explained in the introduction. The text is consistent and adequately balanced.

Assessment: very good

Weighing: n/a

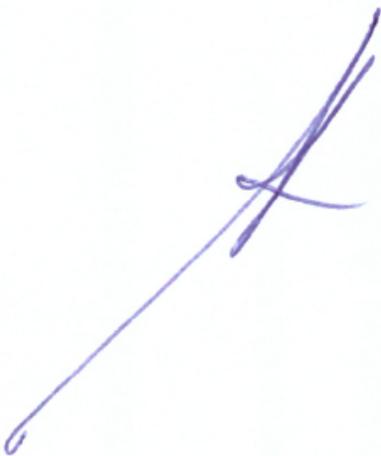
Formal requirements

The last remark is more of a technical character. The footnotes in the whole text are better to be merged at one place, and it should not follow one after another (the first usage footnotes 6,7,8 at p. 4 and further through the text).

Final assessment

This thesis is graded with a 9.2

Signatures

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a long, sweeping diagonal stroke that curves upwards and ends in a small loop, followed by a shorter, more complex stroke that crosses the main stroke.

