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

Yes, to my knowledge the thesis is free of plagiarism.

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

by M. Skalamera: it can be made public throught the repository.

Summary assessment/comments

The thesis asks a timely and important question about the ineffectiveness of the EU's Non-recognition and Engagement Policy. It shows a good understanding of the obstacles, grounded in the extant literature, and proposes an overall promising research setup to uncover the obstacles and conditions that preclude a more effective implementation of NREP. To deliver on this promise, however, the analysis would have needed to be much more fine-grained and a stronger attempt should have been made to link the case-level observations to theory.

Criteria

Knowledge and insight

This thesis poses the following question "Why has the EU Non-recognition and Engagement Policy proven to be largely ineffective in terms of meeting all the stated objectives?" The thesis is grounded in a good and relevant body of literature and the student demonstrates good understanding in respect of it. The literature review is used effectively to justify the focus on the theoretical framework resting on multi-level governance theory (MLG), and a series of "working concepts" are introduced that guide the reader through the issue under consideration.

The rationale for the research question is explicit and specified early on (i.e. why does it need answering now and how it compares to the existing literature). The thesis also identifies a relevant gap in the surveyed literature – namely, "there is a lack of literature specifically on why EU's NREP has been rather fruitless. There is no extensive study that connects and examines the roles of all the sides of the conflict: the EU, Georgia, Russia, and the de-facto states" (p.11).

The introduction to the subject matter (pp. 4-7) is perhaps too long, comes across as overly politicized and needed to be more succinct. This was nevertheless a fine section, and where the candidate chose to set out their contribution they did so convincingly.

There are some problems, however. Despite the promising methods section, there is no rigorous primary data collection, and therefore the empirical sections deliver less than promised. I would have still liked if the student's empirical analysis 'returned' to the analytical framework so to make clear to what extent and how the literatures and primary data discussed in the empirical sections relate to the chosen analytical framework and help solving the author's research question. As it stands the analysis in the empirical sections becomes too descriptive and, at the same time, overly prescriptive.

Application knowledge and insight

The author has chosen a very contemporary issue, which can in itself bring about challenges, but identified a fairly logical framework drawing on the existing academic literature and concrete actors' interests, important events and symbolic actions that interlace with is a good range of reading to examine the case. Some effort might still have been made to explain precisely what sort of evidence (and the approach underlining the collection of this evidence) the candidate deployed, even if such data ultimately derived from secondary works rather than primary material. The case studies offer a solid, rich and reflective empirical investigation into the links between the examined countries' positions and the failures of the EU's NREP.

Where the thesis falls down, however, is in its methodology. The author appears to be genuinely curious about recent developments in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the reasons for such a long stalemate. Nevertheless, the thesis in practice tends towards a summary of a range of readings rather than more structured independent research. For instance, the hypothesis makes an effort to engage the theory of MLG [on which the thesis rests], but the further empirical sections leave this attractive framing "hanging" rather than putting it in practice more purposefully to create an own analytical framework and clarify the thesis' contribution.

Moreover, the author claims on p. 14 that official documents available in the public domain and already existing interviews "are of importance to the research." What does this mean? – does the student actually use these primary sources or any other? As is, primary sources seemed a bit thin on the ground (it'd certainly have helped were these listed separately in the bibliography). I would have liked still more such engagement with primary data to build the overall narrative.

The student does demonstrate research skills, and shows the potential to achieve more but as it is, makes little attempt to carve out a research design with an overarching argument embedded in a broader analytical framework.

Most importantly, the author seems in a rush to point out what countries should do and why this will be good for them rather than looking into what they have already done, and so the thesis frequently reads more like a piece of advocacy or a policy brief than an academic research paper. This is a pity because there are plenty of interesting observations – for instance about the effects of the EU's approach vis-a-vis- its predecessor, the OSCE – that could have helped to form useful insights about strategies and conditions that make the existing policy more or less effective.

The student does, however, succeed in making the "importance" of this study clear and I particularly like the "limitations" section on p.14 addressing the limitations of the research setup that denotes a thoughtful and serious engagement with research methods.

Assessment: (more than) satisfactory   **Weighing:** n/a

Reaching conclusions

There is a clear question that, with some interpretation, can be read as connected to the literature. There is an attempt to apply a theoretical perspective. The discussion of method is less than perfect but ultimately it is in place. The thesis is strong in terms of the breadth of reading. The findings in the conclusion, however, while informative, are descriptive and tend towards highlighting some ideas based on a general reading of secondary literature, rather than a well-supported argument based on the author's own work.

Because of the methodological shortcomings evinced earlier, the conclusions reached – essentially that 'there are multiple actors responsible for the NREP's ineffectiveness: the EU, Russia, Georgia, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region' and that 'the lack of effectiveness involves the supra-national, international, national, and local levels and entails a lingering asymmetry in the goals of each actor' – are inevitably rather basic (see preceding comments). Such conclusions are more based on policy-recommendations rather than premised on the student's own work. For instance, I would have liked still more thought to be given to what Georgia's fear of "creeping recognition" means theoretically in terms of precluding an effective NREP.

Part of the problem seems to be that the author is in fact trying to pursue, in parallel to the thesis' stated aim, another project, to unearth 'Are there specific fields where the EU could work more extensively for greater effectiveness? (p. 11). The question of what the EU should do to boost its effectiveness is, of course, important, but is logically quite distinct from the stated aim of the thesis to ascertain why and how the EU Non-recognition and Engagement Policy has proven to be largely ineffective in terms of meeting all the stated objectives. Consequently, the fact that much of the thesis in fact seems to address the former seriously undermines both the analysis and the conclusion. The author's own commitment to the cause – laudable as it may be – then leads to rushed statements, policy-recommendations and speculations that are not in fact supported by any ground-level empirical observations.

Assessment: good   **Weighing:** n/a

Communication

The thesis – including the empirical chapters - displays a sound structure. Some facts are repeated in different places, there are some typos, incorrect use of words (i.e. unlike realism, it provokes the existence…"), and there are some idiosyncrasies such as unnecessary "the's" but overall, there is a logical structure and the information is

presented in a readable manner. The bibliography, however, does not demonstrate accurate referencing (i.e. the sources are not listed in alphabetical order). It certainly would have helped were primary sources (interviews + statistical documents + news articles) and Russian-language sources listed separately in the bibliography.

Assessment: good   **Weighing:** n/a

Learning skills

The author received extensive feedback on works submitted during their supervision, but has also worked on their own initiative.

Assessment: good   **Weighing:** n/a

Formal requirements

Submitted by deadline and within word count.

Final assessment

On 29-06-2020 this thesis is graded with a 7

Signatures

M. Skalamera