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**Examiner's Final Report on PhD Dissertation by Miroslava Kuřková
"Regional Transition – From Conflict to Cooperation"**

I have read both the revised version of the doctoral thesis as well as the candidate's rebuttal to the suggestions and comments by both reviewers. In this second report, I will concentrate mainly on the changes made after my first report, arriving at a final recommendation.

1. Relevance of the topic, relation to existing literature; contribution of the dissertation

The candidate has clearly taken my comments to heart and made a substantial effort to implement them. As a result, the thesis is now much better placed in the literature on regionalism, in general, and peaceful change, in particular. More precisely, the candidate has included a thorough and extensive discussion of the historical genealogy of the concept of peaceful change in the discipline as well as relevant literature from the new regionalism, comparative regionalism, and norm diffusion. All of this has been executed quite nicely, even though I would suggest that, in preparing the manuscript for publication (if the author chooses to do so), the literature review can be substantially tightened without losing much of its substance.

The candidate has also more clearly outlined her contribution to the field, namely her eclectic and multi-causal approach as well as her analytical focus on transitions between regional orders. There is indeed need for more holistic approaches to enable researchers to better understand processes of regional integration and for further exploiting the utility and explanatory potential of integrating findings from different theories

into coherent theoretical models. I believe this can be pushed even further (especially in the Conclusion) but the candidate does make a fairly convincing case that she is introducing a different approach to what has been done so far in regional integration studies and how that may further our knowledge about regional dynamics in world politics.

2. *Research design*

The candidate has also made significant changes to her theoretical framework. Most importantly, she replaced the rather vague concept of “magnetism” with the concept of “hegemon”. In the revised version of the doctoral thesis, the concept of hegemon is now firmly embedded in hegemonic stability theory, thus making the assumptions underlying transition mechanism 1 much more convincing. Moreover, the candidate has elaborated on her notion of “analytical eclecticism”, particularly on the problem of incommensurability. This has been done by assigning different theories to each phase in the model as well as by more clearly separating the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions from each other. Thus, the model starts with realist hegemonic stability theory (stage 1), then moves on to liberal theories of cooperation (stage 2), and finally arrives at constructivist theories of mutual trust and collective identity (stage 3). However, there is still some theoretical overlap during the transition phases, and this should be accounted for when turning the dissertation into a book publication. Grant, it is hardly possible to clearly separate the different theoretical approaches during stages of transition but this needs to be better explained and justified.

There is also room for further improvement with regards to the selection of case studies. In the revised version, it now appears like the cases are chosen according to an outcome that is yet to be studied in the subsequent empirical chapters. In other words, the empirical findings of the dissertation seem to provide the rationale for choosing the cases, which amounts to circular reasoning. I doubt that this was the candidate’s intention, especially given her very elaborate theoretical model, but this is a potentially serious problem and should be dealt with when preparing the manuscript for book publication.

Concerning method, I find the new structure that has been introduced to each case (identifying a “before”, an “in between”, and an “after”) quite useful. It more clearly demonstrates the changes that occurred (or did not occur) during each stage of transition and makes the use of process tracing a bit more convincing.

3. *Empirics*

As pointed out in my previous report, the scope of original data and analysis is most convincing in the case of the Western Balkans (especially the use of personal interviews) and least convincing in the case of North America. In the revised version of her dissertation, the candidate has made laudable efforts to close this gap a bit, even though I still find the North American case overly descriptive with its heavy reliance on secondary sources. However, I realize and accept the fact that funding and opportunities for retrieving new data was limited (especially given the COVID-19 pandemic). Still, the candidate could have considered scheduling online interviews with decision makers or to more extensively rely on digital primary sources. In the end, I do commend the candidate for attempting to face this challenge and make the most out of it. For turning the dissertation into a book, I would highly recommend extending the empirical sections, adding new data material and more analytical depth to each case.

4. *Style, language, grammar*

There are no formal errors. However, if the candidate plans to turn her dissertation into a book, I would strongly recommend to have an English native speaker check the manuscript for spelling and grammar.

5. *Conclusion of the evaluation and recommendation for the examination board*

As pointed out in my previous report, this dissertation represents a solid and well-crafted piece of academic work. As I also pointed out, there were some critical issues – some more significant, some less so – and I urged the candidate to work on these issues. Having examined the revised version of the dissertation, I can confirm that the candidate has seriously engaged with these issues and provided helpful suggestions to accommodate them. As I have made clear in this report, some problems remain and should be dealt with if the candidate intends to turn her dissertation into a book. They can also be discussed during the second defense.

These issue notwithstanding, the dissertation is of sufficient quality and analytical depth to pass as a valuable scholarly work. It offers an interesting and, in some ways, innovative approach to the study of regional integration and peaceful change. There is certainly room for improvement. But I do not believe that these remaining issues are serious enough to merit a reconsideration of my original assessment. The candidate has clearly proven her ability to conduct original academic research and has engaged with

criticism in the most constructive way. I therefore recommend acceptance of the dissertation.

PD Dr. Simon Koschut