

Review of a Ph.D. dissertation

Regional Transition – From Conflict to Cooperation

by Miroslava Kuřková

The submitted thesis seeks to develop a theoretical model of peaceful change. The more specific aim of the model is to theorize the transitions between negative and positive peace and the transitions between positive peace and the security community. Concerning the first type of transition, the author argues that it is hegemon and key regional states that play the crucial role in the process. The second type of transition is supposed to be associated mainly with political elites, their interaction, the increase of trust, and the delegation of power.

In justifying the need for the respective theoretical model, the thesis sufficiently refers to the existing literature on the topic. It claims that while regional peaceful transitions have already been studied by others, there is a scarcity of research on the actual dynamic transition from one stage to another. Likewise, it has not been sufficiently studied how exactly the factors produce the outcome. Hence, the author explains rather well what the basic motivation behind her effort is. More specifically, the model grasps the issues comprehensively and specifies causal mechanisms. However, I suppose that the author would still need to explain more extensively and convincingly why exactly those two sets of factors (and not others) were chosen for a new theory.

A specific change was implemented in the model by the author after the small defense. In my review for the small defense, I identified the emphasis on the active role of the hegemon as a scope condition that might be too limiting in empirical terms. I was concerned about the number of historical instances of a regional peaceful transformation in which this condition would potentially not be satisfied. In the final version of the thesis, the role of the hegemony has been redefined. The beginning of a peaceful transformation is still conditioned by its support, but the key active behavior is now supposed to be carried out by a crucial regional actor/s. Thanks to this, the model should capture a greater deal of empirical cases. But two problems remain. First, a hegemon still has to at least passively support the transformation and hence one can still wonder whether this has really been the case in the majority of the past transformations. Second, the theorizing of the involvement of powerful states is the text still based on the theory of hegemonic stability. But this theory refers only to the role of the hegemon and not of other powerful states/actors. Hence, the participation of powerful actors lacks an adequate theoretical backing.

To be sure, the thesis to a high extent focuses on relevant cases. Indeed, the four selected cases represent well the analyzed phenomena. However, it seems to me that author did not manage to address well some critical aspects of the case selection that I raised already in the previous report. I continue to believe that the case selection would be more convincing if the author outlined all potential candidates for selection before explaining why exactly those four cases were chosen. She also still does not adequately explain why both stages are not explored for the Western Europe and the North America when they uniquely offer a possibility to study both stages at once.

The thesis has a good methodological basis. It is based on a concrete and useful method, namely process tracing. The author has improved her application of process tracing. She restructured her descriptions and by doing so she distinguishes better the initial conditions, the temporal sequencing of events, and the outcomes. It is also necessary to appreciate that a primary research was conducted (the interviews in the Western Balkans).

What I still consider to be a major limitation of the analysis is the lack of operationalization for the different factors included in both causal mechanisms and of the subsequent application of this operationalization in the empirical part. The author has elaborated now an operationalization for the hegemon. But I still cannot find the same operationalization for the other parts of the causal mechanisms. I suppose that the author should explain during the defense why she does provide this operationalization and why she thinks that its absence does not have a significant negative effect on the analysis.

It is also a pity that the author does not include in the analysis alternative explanations and their empirical assessment.

Overall, I suppose that Miroslava Kul'ková has submitted a solid Ph.D. dissertation. It needs to be appreciated that the thesis wants to make a contribution to the existing literature, engages in a theoretical work, and offers a good empirical analysis. In my view, the thesis also contains several shortcomings that are, however, acceptable and typical for a Ph.D. dissertation. What is more worrying is that some of the problems that I pointed out in my previous review were neither corrected in the thesis nor commented on by the author in the accompanying explanation. Nevertheless, I think that this does not substantially alter the fact that the thesis is of a good quality. Hence, I recommend the thesis to be defended.

Jan Karlas

21. 12. 2020