

REPORT ON THE BACHELOR THESIS

PPE – Politics, Philosophy & Economics, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

Title of the thesis:	Kvalita demokracie v Polsku 2011–2019
Author of the thesis:	Paulina Skřivánková
Referee:	Janusz Salamon, Ph.D.

SUMMARY OF POINTS AWARDED:

CATEGORY	POINTS
<i>Theoretical background (max. 20)</i>	17
<i>Contribution (max. 20)</i>	17
<i>Methods (max. 20)</i>	17
<i>Literature (max. 20)</i>	18
<i>Manuscript form (max. 20)</i>	19
TOTAL POINTS (max. 100)	88
The proposed grade	B

Comments of the referee on the thesis highlights and shortcomings.

Since Paulina Skřivánková chose to devote her thesis to a research question, the answer to which was quite predictable, my attention, right from the start, was focused on possible shortcomings of her study. I allowed myself to adopt such a nasty attitude as the reader, since I also had, right from the start, a clear sense that this is a very good thesis, with clear and convincing research plan, with fairly clear methodology, and above all, with a lot of work being put into it. In short, I didn't have to worry that by searching for weak points in this project, I will risk being unfairly over-critical. And so it is, that I have arrived at the overall assessment: strong B – so, a very good thesis but with a question mark. I leave it open - to be determined at the defence – whether or not my criticism was based on misreading of the Author's intentions as to what she actually wanted to establish in her thesis.

My main problem with this thesis is as follows. The Author defines the goal of the thesis as being twofold: (a) to show the decline of the quality of democracy in Poland between two administrations (that of Tusk and Kaczynski, to simplify), and (b) to examine the CAUSES of its decline.

I have no fundamental problem with the quality of the execution of the first task which was easier, at least in the sense that it sufficed to analyse the evolution of the situation in the main areas to which the democracy indices used by the Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit to measure the quality of democracy are applied. My only potentially critical comment at this stage is that if the goal of the entire thesis was limited to merely reporting the available data on the quality of democracy in Poland between 2011 and 2019 (by reporting the changes regarding the independence of judiciary, freedom of the media, the levels of corruption, the influence of the church on politics, etc.), then I would be inclined to think that such a thesis is not ambitious enough to earn the Author grade A. So more would need to be done with the available data to produce an 'excellent' thesis.

However, the Author actually suggests, in the introductory chapter, that she will be attempting to do at least two more things than just putting together and presenting the available data. Firstly, as already mentioned, she promises to examine the causes of the decline of the quality of democracy in Poland, but secondly, she introduces (in chapter 2) concepts (such as illiberal democracy, hybrid regimes, autocracy), promising to capture the essence of this newly emerging less democratic form of government.

Now, regarding the latter promise, Paulina spends clearly too little space and intellectual energy to establish her claim that the concept of illiberal democracy (but not that of hybrid regime or autocracy) captures well the nature of the post-2015 regime in Poland. Her verdict sounds in the end purely declaratory, especially given that her definition of illiberal democracy (based on the conjectures of Fareed Zakaria who, for all his insight, is a journalist) are vague. It is almost as if she was reasoning as follows: "Clearly, the regime in Poland after 2015 is not a full democracy. So what is it? Well, it is clearly not yet a hybrid regime, because the elections seems genuine, and clearly not yet autocracy. So it must be illiberal democracy, then." But if, according to Zakaria, illiberal democracy "se vyznačuje úpadkem občanských

svoboda lidských práv”, then – as much as I personally loath this regime – I fear such a phrase in the Polish context would be a gross overstatement. Of course, my main critical point here is not so much what is the fact of the matter, but whether Paulina has done enough to conceptualise in a plausible way the changes that have taken place in Poland after 2015. Just using the label ‘illiberal democracy’, especially without defining it clearly, is taking an easy route. (Nota bene, I think one must distinguish between what Kaczynski might like to do, if he would have such an electoral support as Orban – but he has only half of it – and what he is actually doing.) So on this point, I fear that there is a certain disjunction between Paulina’s analysis of the actual data about the quality of democracy in Poland after 2015 and her attempt to ‘name’ somehow this post-2015 regime. I’m not sure her analysis of the data justifies such a conceptual attribution she makes. (Or perhaps the whole attempt to ‘name’ this regime was a bad idea, especially given the brevity of the exposition of ‘illiberal democracy’? And, by the way, why to waste space – in an already long thesis – on brief definitions of ‘hybrid regimes’ and ‘autocracy’, only in order to conclude that these concepts do not apply to this case? Perhaps spending three times more space on more detailed discussion of ‘illiberal democracy’ and on formulating a more convincing argument that the post-2015 regime in Poland is an instance of illiberal democracy would be a better choice?)

Having said that, my second charge is even more fundamental because it concerns Paulina’s promise “to examine the causes of the decline of the quality of democracy in Poland”. To my surprise, she identified as such main “causes”, (a) the reform of the judiciary which significantly undermined the separation of powers, and (b) the erosion of the independence of the public media. My first reaction was: why to call these “causes”? One might as well call them the “effects” of the decline of democracy, rather than the “causes” of such decline. Or one may say that these are “manifestations” of the decline of democracy (sin a way fever is a manifestation of a disease). But “causes”? I would think that one would need to search for such “causes” back in the causal chain, otherwise we don’t explain anything, we just report the facts. Equally important might be the point that the attempt at using the judiciary for political purposes (having first undermined its full independence) is one thing, and being actually able to make a political use of it is another thing. PiS has been in power for 6 years and they haven’t managed to put a single political opponent to jail, etc. The control of the public media by the government invites a similar comment: it allows the government only to influence its faithful “base”. Everybody else simply switched to other media which are far from unfree. So this scenario, as undesirable as it is, must be differentiated from, say, the Russian scenario, where there are no alternative mass media to that controlled by the government). All the above comments affect my assessment of most of the grade components because they are related to both methodological and substantive aspects of the thesis.

QUESTIONS to the Author:

- (a) What, in your opinion, may be those more fundamental causes (back in the causal chain) of the political developments like the ones which took place in Poland after 2015 (and which were rather unexpected)?
- (b) Where would you draw the line between, let’s call it, “imperfect liberal democracy” and “illiberal democracy”?

I recommend the thesis for final defence.

DATE OF EVALUATION: 06.06.2021

Janusz Salamon

Referee Signature