Diploma Thesis Evaluation Form

Author: David Neppel

Title: Russia's Wars in the Ukraine and Georgia: A parallel case study of Russia's choice to engage in the 2014 Ukraine Crisis and 2008 Russo-Georgian War

Programme/year: International Security Studies / 2021

Author of Evaluation (supervisor/external assessor): Mgr. Jakub Tesař, Ph.D.

Criteria	Definition	Maximum	Points
Major Criteria			
	Research question, definition of objectives	**10**	9
	Theoretical/conceptual framework	**30**	24
	Methodology, analysis, argument	**40**	35
Total		*80*	68
Minor Criteria			
	Sources	**10**	8
	Style	**5**	4
	Formal requirements	**5**	5
Total		*20*	17
TOTAL		*100*	85

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Evaluation

Major criteria:

The thesis seeks to understand better why Russians engaged in conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia. It focuses on (still) a highly relevant topic of IR, which it analyses from an innovative perspective of spatial models. In the text, the author shows an excellent understanding of the two cases and brings many intriguing insights with the help of the chosen method. He shows how evolving situation, in both cases, dispatched from the scenario acceptable to the Russian Federation and how other actors were unable (unwilling) to prevent it from happening.

Even though the analysis is performed well, it is not without issues. First of all, the interested reader should find a detailed rationale for why a spatial model is used, especially in connection with the existing literature. To understand the results better, one should understand what such a model can (and cannot) provide before engaging with the cases. Primarily, when the model is adjusted to include the "collapse of the game", this modification should be adequately conceptualised. The author should further explain why given dimensions have been chosen instead of some others. In particular, it should be made clear why the dimensions differ in the two cases.

As regards the spatial analysis itself, it provides many important insights into what the actors have to consider and the options available to them. However, the analysis seems to be imprecise in cases – especially regarding the indifference curves and areas of acceptable solutions. In the spatial models, indifference curves going through the status quo are used to depict the areas that are preferable to the actor than the current status quo, which is different from a set of acceptable solutions. For example, states can accept outcomes outside of their indifference curve intersecting the current SQ; although their situation worsened, they can accept the change.

Some logical incoherencies seem to follow from the previous point. For example, the claim "If the status quo is the only point that the players can agree on, it is unlikely that the fragile balance can survive any significant changes" (page 39) seems to contradict the model's logic. When we suppose there is no significant overlap of outcomes preferred over the current status quo among the actors, we can probably conclude that the game is stuck in a given state as a relevant majority would back no possible alternative.

Regarding placing the ideal points and status quo, the author presents a deep-thought analysis of all individual values. The only issue is that in some cases, the value is based on the strategic reasoning of the actors, which is not an assumption of the model. In some cases, it provides an argument for why the extreme value (1/10) is not chosen. However, the ideal points should reflect only the preferences of actors,

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not the strategic reasoning. Strategic consideration is only the following step of the spatial model (overlaps among the actors).

The author provides a literature review, which nevertheless comes only after defining the model. The thesis could be better related to the existing literature – what do we already know about the motivations for those engagements? What do we not know? what can we know? – how realistic it is to understand the causes of action of other actors? Including the general scholarship focusing on the causes of armed conflicts would enable to discuss the value-added of similar analysis better.

Minor criteria:

The thesis itself is written in excellent English. The argumentation is straightforward, excellent in places (e.g., chapter 3 repeats what we already know about the conflicts, but the review is brilliant). Several editing issues are there (page format, wrong dimensions at page 15, wrong values of the variable in text and graphs at page 46), but only scattered through the text. It uses relevant sources, but the argument could benefit from direct citations in places (the thesis features none).

The structure of the thesis is logical but relatively uncommon, which leads to some problems. Starting with the introduction and literature review would help identify a gap in the topic that a proposed method will try to fill. On a similar note, more place could be devoted to synthesising the argument (final sections of chapters 6 and 7 and the conclusion) and putting it into the context of the existing literature instead of describing all dimensions in so many details. The thesis is somehow lengthy, but all sections contribute to the argument.

The graphs would benefit from some extra editing. Graphs 1, 3, 5, 7 should have equal distance between the values in both dimensions (circles would then be circles), graphs 2, 4, 6, 8 should feature all possible values on the axes (and possibly the grid) and plot the indifference curves directly through the status quo (not just near). However, the graphs are an essential part of the thesis and are used well in the argumentation.

Overall evaluation:

The thesis focuses on a highly relevant topic and seeks to analyse it from the innovative perspective of spatial models. The analysis is systematic, well-informed and offers genuine insights into the topic. However, it could be better placed into the context of the existing literature and discussed the added value of such an analytical viewpoint.

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Possible question for thesis defence:

When defining the scale of a given dimension, various aspects of dyadic foreign policy (mutual trade, political regime, military cooperation, identity questions, etc.) are fused. Do you expect that such a high correlation of various dimensions always exists, or are there some discrepancies? How would you deal with it in the model?

Suggested grade: B

Signature:

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