

Authoritarian Rule & Media in Turkmenistan

submitted by Oguljamal Yazliyeva.

Reader's Report

This reader recommends that this dissertation is progressed to defence, but only just. It is in fact a very descriptive draft, one that, in my view, necessitates of substantive amendments to match the standards required for a doctoral degree. Ultimately, however, the research component of this piece is sound, its originality high—albeit poorly explained by the candidate—and the structural soundness of the thesis as a whole satisfactory: these positive notes convinced me to allow progression to defence, on the basis of the substantive amendments that I list below.

In this sense, my evaluation of Mrs Yazliyeva's thesis is as follows:

1. In this dissertation, the author has demonstrated the ability to work independently in the field.
2. The thesis meets the standard requirements for dissertations in the field.

Let me now motivate my decisions by referring to the assessment criteria as forwarded onto me by the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University.

Continuity with existing research

It seems to me that this thesis does a decent job in situating itself in current debates on germane topics. The literature review does cite, and at times even engages with, key works on Turkmen media and politics, and offers sufficient evidence of the candidate's familiarity with the key concepts used throughout the draft. It is however only a very limited literature review that features on the sighted draft, one that ought to have engaged with a greater range of scholarly research on authoritarianism on the one hand and media politics in non-democratic settings on the other. There is a whole set of scholarly conversations that the candidate simply ignored, including those centred on media politics in personalist regimes and the establishment of alternative media discourses in non-democratic information ecosystems. Looking at scholarly production in these areas may have helped the candidate to address a wider set of issues, thus enhancing the transportability of her argument. Failure to do so, conversely, limited the contribution that this thesis has made to academic knowledge.

Originality and contribution to academic knowledge

It is precisely for the cursory engagement with different literature strands that I regard the contribution made by this thesis to academic knowledge to be of a very limited nature. Having read this thesis, I can confirm that it helps us understanding better the Turkmen media landscape, particularly as the candidate presents the findings of some solid research work. But this is the only segment of the scholarly discourse that is enriched by the sighted draft: Mrs Yazliyeva's contribution is to a specific, and ultimately rather narrow, segment of Eurasian Studies. This is not a banal contribution, but I felt that this thesis could have done a bit more.

Area Studies per se is a discipline that can make substantive, long-lasting contributions to other disciplinary remits or address wider debates on some important, and timely issues. By addressing literature strands that look at media landscapes in personalist regimes or compare Turkmenistan to the



many, other cases of media monopolies existing in the former Soviet space, this thesis could have made a more substantive contribution to our understanding of media politics as developed under conditions of extreme authoritarianism. I would like to see a final draft engaging with these literature strands so that the oral examination can probe the candidate on the wider scholarly implications of her work.

To my mind, moreover, the limited nature of the contribution made by this thesis is also the consequence of the very poor—or poorly explained, which, from the point of view of a reader, is the same—methodological work showcased here. I am going to elaborate on the methodological flaws of this thesis in the next segment of this report.

Comments on the content

There are two paragraphs devoted to the methods in the whole thesis. These days, this is quite rare at undergraduate level and it has to be considered unacceptable for a doctoral degree. Mapping techniques and arts-based research [mentioned at page 15] are apparently the methodological frameworks wherein the candidate immersed her work. These are not explained nor outlined throughout the draft, leaving the reader puzzled as to how the research showcased in this work has been conducted. It is a very unsophisticated way of working towards a terminal degree. The body of the thesis does simply not engage with these methods, nor does it seem to operationalise them in any substantive way.

I am therefore requesting that the candidate significantly expands the methodological infrastructure supporting her work in the draft to be prepared for the defence, offering information on 1) literature on mapping techniques and arts-based research; 2) how these are operationalised in the thesis; 3) their relationship with the literature gap supposedly addressed by the thesis and, finally, 4) how they relate to the data dimension of the research work conducted while researching this thesis. The inclusion of such a methodological segment would enhance the relevance of the great empirical work showcased in chapters 4-6.

Moreover, the survey data presented in Chapter 5 [pp. 90-103] is illustrated in purely descriptive fashion: no triangulation, no connection between questions, no analytical aspiration. It should be rewritten entirely.

Structure of the work

I think that, ultimately, the structural organisation of the thesis is sound, and the candidate selected a rather linear sequence to present her argument. Some sections—including the long, and completely unnecessary history of RFE/RL [pp. 132-152]—could do with some editing down.

Language and graphic level

Satisfactory, despite the occasional typo and the use of awkward language and convoluted sentences.

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