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School of International Relations

Professor Rick Fawn

16 April 2021

Dear Professor Hynek and members of the Habilitation assessment committee,

It gives me the greatest privilege and pleasure to write, after very careful consideration, in the most emphatically supportive and unreserved manner in support of Dr. Střítecký's candidacy for promotion to Associate Professor/Senior Lecture (Docent - Doc.). in the Department of Security Studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University, Prague.

I have known Dr. Střítecký for nearly 15 years and believe I can speak to his sustained, extremely high value, professional academic work, and that in many spheres, across this time. These I briefly assess under three broad headings:

1. academic career development: academic work, policy, advising

Dr. Střítecký has developed an extraordinary academic career. His work at UK and in the Czech Republic is probably, and should be, very familiar. Let me confirm that, from an international perspective, and from having done invited promotion assessments and external examining at leading Universities in the UK and internationally, that Dr. Střítecký offers an outstanding record.

I might especially give attention to his innovative and sustained work with Masters degrees. All of these are deeply impressive and have had and will have lasting impact through the calibre, numbers and international nature of the successive cohorts of students who benefit from Dr. Střítecký's pedagogic and academic-administrative initiatives and commitments. Here too I might add specific professional experience: I served as the External Examiner to the University of Glasgow's unit with which Dr. Střítecký collaborates. This is an outstanding department, with a fantastic international reputation. I also saw, commented on encouraged the joint Masters that Dr. Střítecký runs, the Security, Intelligence & Strategic Studies, Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree. I suggest from close knowledge, therefore, that this is an excellent programme, of a truly international standard and status. This is outstanding in its own right, but comes as additions to high-ranking teaching and academic leadership. These additionally include: past co-directorship of the Security and Intelligence, Double-Degree Programme with the University of Glasgow and Ostbayerische Technische Hochschule Regensburg; and his multi-year convenorship of the Masters in International Security Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University.

I would offer a further note drawing from my own familiarity to comment on Dr. Střítecký's decisive engagement with DCU in securing and conducting European Commission grants. Dr. Střítecký's engagement brings tremendous European and international associations that unquestionably raise the markers of his Department, UK generally and I would say also with

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certainty the Czech Republic. These are profoundly praiseworthy initiatives.

Dr. Střítecký has alongside his teaching innovation and extensive and dynamic research also received substantial research funding and engaged with policy-makers. In my view and experience, it is unusual and deeply commendable to find someone who such well received work across all major features of an academic career. These really should not be taken for granted or be expected: rather, these are exceptional and should be applauded.

2. Dr. Střítecký's interdisciplinary publications/research

Dr. Střítecký's research and published work is deeply impressive. Not that 'brand name' publishers and journal should be indicators in themselves, but Dr. Střítecký has established himself in a range of major referred publication outlets internationally.

One could say a great deal, but I might highlight but three among a very many internationally-recognised publications (and noting also that his habilitation submission, itself indications of ground-breaking work, receives separate attention, below). To this I draw attention to Dr. Střítecký's refereed article 'Understanding Havel?' (published with Ondřej Ditrych, Vladimír Handl and Nik Hynek) in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* is for me outstanding scholarship, and such that brings a textured analysis of some of most complex and important features of Czech political life to an international audience. As someone with a professional interest in the Czech Republic and Central Europe I could not imagine approaching these topics without repeated reference to these aspects of Dr. Střítecký's work.

I also am deeply familiar with the special issue that Dr. Střítecký oversaw and contributed to for the leading regional/area studies journal *Europe-Asia Studies*. This constitutes a second research/publication assessment. The special issue convened an astonishingly vibrant collection of established and newer scholars. Unlike many special issues, this had a sustained argumentative core, and rich contributions throughout. As a *Europe-Asia Studies* editorial board member I confess to a certain inclination to speak to the journal's standards and impact. Those aside, these multiply-refereed papers are of a high quality and in really the very best place internationally. This demanding work is a real testament to the ability to frame a major scholarly project from start to finish, and to deliver it to international audiences.

The third area is Dr. Střítecký's recent and innovative work on artificial intelligence and politics/security studies. I limit myself here because of the below, and wish to stress the different and very highly-ranked publication forums that Dr. Střítecký as achieved. He has departed from the prestigious international security and area studies journals to secure publication in leading AI forums. I find these achievements to be intellectually breath-taking. They constitute an achievement, call it, for those who were born into working in these fields. Yet Dr. Střítecký has been an apparently seamless move – but one whose demands and ingenuity must not be lost, and instead should be praised. To me, these are areas of innovation to the utmost importance to us all. Few of us, however, have the capacity even to begin such work, let alone with such achievement. I look forward to more from Dr. Střítecký. Fortunately, his submission for Habilitation gives us further insight, and makes for a highly beneficial and informative third dimension of the present assessment.

3. Dr. Střítecký's Habilitation Thesis: *The Technology of Revision and Virtual Maps.*

Perhaps we wish first to know the impact of such work. I would pause, however, and say that I enjoyed reading this research and with its very readable presentation. One might not, indeed almost could not expect such a fundamental and compelling addition to a scholarly portfolio that already includes high-end international journals such as for example, on European security and on post-communist politics. But Dr. Střítecký has done exactly that – and before going into the merits, I really think we must not lose sight of what an additional achievement this is.

I will restrict myself to addressing the conceptualisation, approach and provisions. In terms of conceptualisation, the work makes a clear and defensible case for why and how it frames its work. It is fluently written and grounded in diverse yet relevant literature (perhaps the reference to literary studies itself could be developed even more – but this is a modest point, and in a process by which we might instinctively seek to critique). The approach shows systematic thoughtfulness and rigour. Here to we might press for still more of 'routes not taken' but I would suggest that, again, the work knows where it is situated and what it can achieve and is suitably self-critical. The provisions are a core element, where we witness masterful interactions between a resource- and methods-rich approach with very substantial empirical findings. To me, this is an area of ever-increasing importance in our fields of study but for which few of us are equipped. The work at hand gives us insight both to the conduct of that research and to findings. Let me briefly elaborate.

The *Technology of Revision and Virtual Maps* investigates how political plurality evolves under the influence of virtual social networks. Using two paradigmatic cases of political revisionism, those of the Islamic State and of state-sponsored Russian disinformation, the work demonstrates how virtual social networks are mobilised to constructi alternative political orders which conflict with the liberal status quo.

The contributions to the study of International Relations and International Security are substantial and innovative Theoretically, we learn how we can reason about spatiality when, as so potently evident now, so much political struggle and contestation now occurs in the virtual world. The work offers an empirical view on the poststructuralist slogan that 'the map precedes the territory'.

It is precisely in this deeply important area where this dynamic study delivers fruitful and important empirical insights. At least two observations are evident from this study and it how is conceived and undertaken. First, careful attention is dedicated to issues that arise from applying machine learning systems to content recommendation, which multiply the effects of revisionist efforts online. Second, a computational method is then used to reconstruct the maps of revision which emerge from the interplays between political actors and algorithms that drive the attention-maximising mechanisms of social media.

From the disciplinary point of view, this is a timely, rigorous, deeply distinctive, and welcome contribution. These attributes foundationally expand the IR/Security understanding of technologically-driven changes of the political domain. The value of this scholarly initiative cannot be understated. It should be appreciated that the selected context of political revisionism serves as a reflexive surface and reveals the emerging challenges that must be confronted and addresses to seek political consensus.

While dealing with highly complex technological issues, the work remains firmly grounded in the disciplinary understanding of spatiality, including its evolution. It additionally prepares the debate on spatiality for what is becoming its deterritorialized phase. Already a significant

contribution, this is made even more relevant by utilizing a rigorous computational toolbox for the empirical investigation which overcomes the inherent limitations suffered by poststructuralist theorisation about territoriality.

Despite its very considerable merits, the work, understandably, leave questions for further inquiry. That is the hallmark of innovative research: identifying new pathways and providing the means for the exploration, and giving evidence of how this can work in practice. *Technology and Revision and Virtual Maps* successfully identifies urgent and pressing issues that, without exaggeration, endanger current political consensus.

The virtual maps identify a picture of disrupted and highly-polarized societies that are fragmenting, even losing the most basic components of their previous cohesion. To identify so clearly is already an achievement, and this work goes further by asking what can be done to mitigate these adverse effects of the unchecked reign of political revisionism occurring in the digital world. How can we find means to re-establish political consensus without resorting to exclusionary policies that would likely alienate, and inflame, impacted groups still further? It might be argued that the diagnosis of this social ill is equally important as a successful solution. Among its many qualities, Dr. Střítecký's Habilitation work opens a new area of inquiry, one in urgent, even desperate need of further research.

In short, this is both a valuable work in itself, as it stands, but also as an indicator of further inroads. That is, I think, again a testament to exemplary scholarship, one deeply deserving of recognition and of reward.

More technically, let me state that I am aware also that FSV UK checked the originality of the Habilitation thesis *Technology of Revision and Virtual Maps* by Dr. Vít Střítecký through the Turnitin system did not identify any ethically controversial way of dealing with the texts of other authors or the applicant's own previous texts.

The submitted Habilitation thesis is original and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not, in an ethically unacceptable manner, draw from the works of other authors or older works of the applicant, and lists all sources in the usual way and can be recommended towards Dr. Střítecký's overall application to be promoted to the rank of Docent (Doc.).

I have sought to keep these remarks brief and I am happy to elaborate as may be helpful.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Rick Fawn (BA, MA, PhD)
School of International Relations,
University of St Andrews, United Kingdom
Email: rick.fawn@st-andrews.ac.uk