

IMESS DISSERTATION



Note: Please email the completed mark sheet to Year 2 coordinator
(cc Allan Sikk a.sikk@ucl.ac.uk and Louise Wassell l.wassell@ucl.ac.uk)

Please note that IMESS students are not required to use a particular set of methods (e.g. qualitative, quantitative, or comparative) in their dissertation.

Student:	Cosimo STAHL
Dissertation title:	Cleavage politics and Europeanisation-induced transformation of the national political space – The case of the Czech Republic

	Excellent	Satisfactory	Poor
Knowledge <i>Knowledge of problems involved, e.g. historical and social context, specialist literature on the topic. Evidence of capacity to gather information through a wide and appropriate range of reading, and to digest and process knowledge.</i>	X		
Analysis & Interpretation <i>Demonstrates a clear grasp of concepts. Application of appropriate methodology and understanding; willingness to apply an independent approach or interpretation recognition of alternative interpretations; Use of precise terminology and avoidance of ambiguity; avoidance of excessive generalisations or gross oversimplifications.</i>	X		
Structure & Argument <i>Demonstrates ability to structure work with clarity, relevance and coherence. Ability to argue a case; clear evidence of analysis and logical thought; recognition of an arguments limitation or alternative views; Ability to use other evidence to support arguments and structure appropriately.</i>		X	
Presentation & Documentation <i>Accurate and consistently presented footnotes and bibliographic references; accuracy of grammar and spelling; correct and clear presentation of charts/graphs/tables or other data. Appropriate and correct referencing throughout. Correct and contextually correct handling of quotations.</i>		X	

ECTS Mark:	A	UCL Mark:	71	Marker:	Sean Hanley
<i>Deducted for late submission:</i>		0	Signed:		
<i>Deducted for inadequate referencing:</i>		0	Date:	12 June 2014	

MARKING GUIDELINES

A (UCL mark 70+): Note: marks of over 80 are given rarely and only for truly exceptional pieces of work.

Distinctively sophisticated and focused analysis, critical use of sources and insightful interpretation. Comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research, showing an ability to engage in sustained independent research.

B/C (UCL mark 60-69):

A high level of analysis, critical use of sources and insightful interpretation. Good understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research, showing an ability to engage in sustained independent research. 65 or over equates to a B grade.

D/E (UCL mark 50-59):

Demonstration of a critical use of sources and ability to engage in systematic inquiry. An ability to engage in sustained research work, demonstrating methodological awareness. 55 or over equates to a D grade.

F (UCL mark less than 50):

Demonstrates failure to use sources and an inadequate ability to engage in systematic inquiry. Inadequate evidence of ability to engage in sustained research work and poor understanding of appropriate research techniques.

Comments

This dissertation seeks to apply the method developed by Kriesi et al for analysing dimensions of party competition/cleavages through content analysis of media coverage of party statements during election campaigns. It adapts and applies the method to the case of the Czech Republic, specifically the elections of 1996 and 2010, also importing the research question of Kriesi et al concerning the extent to which globalisation and Europeanisation had reshaped political space by introducing, transforming and/or raising the salience of issue of culture, values and lifestyle.

It also extensively reviews literature on cleavages and party competition in Central and Eastern Europe, presenting specific issues of party competition in the CR from a variety of perspectives and demonstrating wide reading and a generally good understanding of the literature. It also demonstrates an excellent case knowledge of Czech politics and the Czech party system. The dissertation's main strength, in addition to the above, is its ambitious – and insofar as I can judge – successful application of a technically demanding method to the Czech case and the production of valid findings. This, in my view, pushes it into the category of a low distinction (71%) despite a number of problems /flaws

Research question

The dissertation's main weakness is that it lacks a clearly justified research question: the dissertation somewhat mechanically imports the research question of Kriesi et al about impacts of globalisation (along with the method), but struggles to think through sufficiently clearly how these impacts might be different in CEE given different social structure and differences in structures of party competition that emerged after 1989 and frame clear and specific research questions on this basis

The dissertation presents a reasonable general argument (pp. 45-6) that CEE countries may be compared to West European states in a pan-European comparative perspective because all are democracies but I think it would be unconvincing to suggest that this means regional differences can be set aside.

There are perhaps strong suggestions in the literature (including some of the literature reviewed here) that are the kind of questions asked of Western Europe by Kriesi and his team may not meaningful and interesting in CEE context.

The dissertation makes a number of general observations, drawing on the literature on CEE: globalisation is felt through neo-liberalism market reform; cultural traditionalism and left-wing economics are bundled together; EU accession shapes some social and political constituencies, but may damp down aspects of party competition and so on. However, the dissertation does not manage to use this to rethink the Kriesi-agenda clearly enough and highlight specific phenomena that can be tracked to assess globalisation/Europeanisation impacts.

The possible pitfall – which perhaps affects this dissertation – is of discovering that West European style phenomena simply do not extend to any great extent in CEE, resulting in speculative exercise about the 'potential' for them to emerge. (A bolder alternative

possibility to consider is, even with a better adaptation of the Kriesi agenda, such effects they may simply not emerge in CEE

More discussion could also be devoted to the nature of the 'other' (socio-cultural) dimension in CEE whose transformation is central to Kriesi et al (see this review by Rovny http://www.cergu.gu.se/digitalAssets/1463/1463562_2013-3.pdf)

Comparing East and West – role and rationale of Czech case study

The dissertation also struggles to reconcile the broad difference between West and Eastern Europe (which require some loose generalisation about both regions) with the fact that there is cross-national variation across states in CEE. In practice, given that this is a one country study, it might have been better to take the latter approach, putting the CR into comparative context as a developed state which is a 'most likely' case in CEE to develop the type of trends picked up by Kriesi et al in some West European states.

A more case-oriented focus – moving away from efforts to make judgements about East and West - also have made its presentation of findings more interesting: in the end the findings presented very much confirm existing views of the nature of Czech party competition (including changes around 2010) and do not pick up on findings that might be new, interesting or original. (However, at MA level, originality – while welcome - is not a requirement and I have not marked it down in this regard).

Structure

There are a number of problems with structure. Literature is reviewed across several separate sections (pp. 8-21; 22-30; 41-45) in a rather disjointed way and the research questions are (re-)presented mid-way through the dissertation (pp. 44-5).

In reviewing the literature, the dissertation also fails to summarise literature on cleavages and party competition without synthesising it enough: it is sometimes not clear what the reviewing of literature is contributing to the research; or what the author's stance. The sections reviewing literature also need to make clear how ideas about the structuring of party competition evolved, both in general (broad consensus with the field) and at the level of individual authors: to take one example, there is considerable difference between the focus of Kitschelt's seminal contributions of 1992 and 1995/9. In the former he postulates a general model of CEE party competition, in the latter a legacy-based cross-national comparative one.

Minor points

- It is puzzling that the Republicans (SPR-RSČ) are excluded from discussion of the 1996 election as this party had one of the most distinct discourses and (at the time) a genuine grassroots and electoral base. This may be due to lack of coverage of the party in HN and Blesk - which may suggest an underlying problem with a method as regards radical/extremist parties, although my personal recollection from this time is that SPR-RSČ was well covered in the mainstream Czech print media). (There is also less of a division between lowbrow and highbrow print media in the CR than in some European countries: the leading newspaper being the middlebrow MfD.)

- It would be helpful to have some figures in the main text.
- The author could have drawn more on Czech language sociological literature about the extent to which post-material values exist in the CR and political sociology literature (e.g. by Linek).

Suggested questions

- Please justify at greater length the method of Kriesi et al for mapping dimensions of party competition? What are its advantages and disadvantages as a method?
- Given your findings on the CR, are the kind of questions asked of Western Europe by Kriesi and his team meaningful and interesting in CEE context? Can you offer a stronger justification beyond the fact that these issues are to some extent present and there may be 'potential' for them to emerge further? If they have not emerged further in 20 years of post-communist development and democracy, why would we expect them to?
- How could the Western Europe-based expectations of Kriesi et al about the impacts of globalisation and Europeanisation be better adapted to a CEE context? How can these questions be asked in a more regionally relevant way?
- To what extent the CR a 'typical' CEE case? Please present the CR (Czech party system) in a clearer comparative context with CEE? How and why is it an appropriate or interesting case study for this type of research?