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Review of Ph.D. dissertation

Who needs goodwill? An analysis of EU norm promotion in the Central Asian context.

Author: Vanessa Boas

With the selection of the topic of her dissertation Vanessa Boas has not made an easy choice at all. Central Asia is a troublesome region typical of a limited number of reliable written and oral sources or a limited access to them. Also the question of how the EU („normative power“) might contribute to significant changes (a sort of “Europeanization”) in local regimes and societies is rather a problematic one. Compared to Central Asia, both issues, normative power and Europeanization are represented by a vast and sometimes a “labyrinthine” amount of literature, also current crisis in Ukraine is putting into doubts certain aspects of the two concepts. Hence the main task was to integrate two themes (one “oversourced” and the other one “undersourced”) to produce a coherent dissertation narrative.

The candidate made a reasonable choice at the beginning of her research and decided to employ rational institutionalism as a basic theoretical fundamental of the whole work, beginning with a clear research question through theoretical framing, methodological operations up to conclusion drawings from her findings. This strategy perfectly fits to the nature of collected sources and posed research question, and the candidate is also well aware of it when commenting on other possible strategies (rather anthropological or discursive) of how to study the topic. The candidate also very clearly defines the limits and possibilities of her way of research, which I find very fair, since the dissertation does not then pretend to be anything else than what it really is.

With respect to rational institutionalism the candidate constructs her theoretical model based on a triangle with its three interacting vertices represented by leverage, linkage and organizational power as the three independent variables. Interplay of these three factors is crucial for understanding of how the EU norms are (can be) adopted in Central Asian *milieu*. To make the mechanism of the model work in a more precise manner, candidate introduces an intervening variable (regime type). This variable corrects candidate's findings, emancipates her from her inspirations (Levitsky & Way) since it shifts her research to another type of regime (non-competitive), testing at the same time limits of Levitsky and Way's concept (more attention could be devoted to regime classification out of the Levitsky & Way's work). To put the work to go in an organized way the candidate forms four hypotheses to show how variables are going "to behave in the real world".

After successful exposition of theoretical premise the candidate takes a next step which is an application of theory in empirical context. First she introduces the areas where the theory will work, explains the reason of the selections of these areas and analyzes them (also here would be useful to focus more on the post-Soviet character of the studied regimes). This part of the work is based on a carefully prepared empirical stuff which illustrates very clearly the problem mentioned above – Central Asia is an "undersourced" region. The candidate has proved the ability to think critically about sources producing remarkable synergic effect when combining written and oral sources in an adequate manner. Also the fact that she keeps her "oral sources" anonymous must be appreciated *vis a vis* the fact that interviews provided by local people could have put them in troubles.

The candidate then analyzes how all three independent variables function within selected areas and also assesses the impact of the "regime type" as an intervening variable. I would just add here that after experience with regimes like the one in Chile under Pinochet we should not be so much surprised by the fact that certain states "liberalized their economies but still remain politically authoritarian" (p. 180). Already during the reading of this chapter it is possible to feel and anticipate some of the lately drawn conclusions, which proves once again candidate's ability to produce a coherent and thoughtful text.

Evaluator is very sympathetic with one of rather practical conclusions that the norm promotion carried out by European projects "have a greater impact in those sectors where improvements are feasible" (p.202). Neither business interest, nor "hard core" struggle for human rights bring a real and efficient help if people lack more elementary things to live in a more civilized manner.

To sum up:

1. Selected dissertation topic is innovative and difficult
2. Candidate clearly explains why it's reasonable and important to do this research
3. Research design is very productive because of:
 - a) critical and efficient work with both, written and oral sources
 - b) well prepared theoretical framing including clear research question,
 - c) theory translated to functioning methodology
 - d) findings and conclusions in accordance with empirical background and theory
3. Coherence and consistence of the narrative
4. Useful recommendations
5. No traces of plagiarism, correct use of sources
6. Problems:
 - a) theoretical framing could be explained as a part of the broader theoretical context (regime classification, Weberian background of organizational power)
 - b) what it means exactly when we speak on the "post-Soviet systems/societies" or to what extent these regimes do emancipate from their Soviet past or are they still post-Soviet?

Prague, 21 May 2015

Proposed grade: **magna cum laude (1,3)**


Doz. Dr. Jiří Vykoukal, CSc.