

Posudek oponenta disertační práce studenta Daniela Šitery

Review comments on PhD thesis by Daniel Šitera

“Europeanization and the State in Central and Eastern Europe: Political Economy of European Structural Funds”

předkládané v roce 2020 na Ústavu politologie

submitted in 2020 at the Institute of Political Science

I. Brief outline

The thesis studies the evolution of the European Union’s Cohesion Policy, the structural and investment funds in particular, and focuses on its impact on the transformation of the state in the Visegrad Four region, particularly in Czechia. It is based on the analysis of documents produced by the European Commission, various government bodies, and regional authorities. It argues that the cohesion policy implemented since late 1980s can be understood as ‘neoliberal developmentalism’. The function of the latter is to regulate the core-peripheral relations between economic regions in Europe. The thesis analysis the institutional aspects of the cohesion agenda as well as its content. It also makes claims on its impact. For instance, it claims that the ‘governmentalizing tendency’ (i.e. the institutional set up and the funds’ governance mechanisms) became ‘implicated’ in the reproduction of state capture.

II. Evaluation: A summary statement

The work demonstrates a very good command of political science research related to EU Cohesion Policy and that of (critical) political economy of EU integration and dependent development in Central and Eastern Europe. The empirical part is based on a qualitative analysis of an impressive range of reports by EU institutions, various government bodies, and regional authorities. However, the claims are not convincingly established through well documented and convincingly justified methods. Moreover, theory is used for abstract redescription rather than as an analytical tool.

III. Detailed evaluation

1. Structure and the overall argumentation

The thesis is structured in a logical way. It is clear where the argument is heading and there is enough signposting. At the same time, however, the heavy jargon makes the text extremely difficult to follow. The EU jargon is difficult enough, but the thesis also uses theory to develop its own language. The latter is then used throughout, but it is difficult to follow and its added value is not apparent. In fact, the thesis would benefit from making key claims by using a simple language.

The use of a simpler language would also facilitating addressing some of the methodological problems I discuss below, the lack of operationalization in particular. For instance, I suspect that ‘regularization’ means describing (possibly employing some rationale), ‘institutional fixing’ in practice seems to refer to putting together an institutional arrangement, ‘semantic fixing’ means describing with a use of concept implying validity of some theories or assumptions.

The main issue in relation to the structure of the thesis is a weak link between the theory chapter and the empirical analysis. The former does not offer a framework that would support the analysis in an analytical, if not explanatory, way. It rather offers a language without a clear added value for those not interested in development of critical state theory. It thus remains unclear if leaving out the theory section would make the analysis less viable. One might suspect that it would rather force the author to replace the jargon with simple language without losing added value.

2. Formal aspects

The thesis follows all formal requirements on scientific work (citation, list of abbreviations, etc.). Apart from the heavy jargon, the language is on a good level. A list of abbreviations is provided, but the text would be more readable if fewer abbreviations were used. The layout etc. is fine.

3. Sources and methods

The work is based on the analysis of documents produced by the European Commission, various government bodies, and regional authorities. In fact, a large part of the thesis consists of short quotes, or snippets, from various reports. Quotes from the reports are even used to describe companies (Agrofert). However, it is often not clear what the status of the quotes is, what they imply, and how they were selected. Empirical chapters thus rely heavily on the quotes, but the reader is left wondering if the author implies that the quotes simply provide an overview of the facts and actually existing relations, or if they illustrate a way of thinking that is remote from reality, or if it is assumed to shape it. Often the text seems to be based on the assumption that the usage of a concept, such as competitiveness, indicates that a) it reflects ideas held by the actors that b) actually make a difference for the actual policy. But what if the regional bodies, to give just one example, just use language merely to pay a lip service to priorities stated in EC documents?

There are also a number of tables, figures, and maps that are apparently meant to provide an overview of the content of a large body of reports or to illustrate specific claims. However, it is often not explained what, and why, the content of tables establishes. Nor is it clear how the tables and figures were put together. The text tends to refer to the figures/tables as if their interpretation was evident (which is typically not the case). For instance, it is not explained what the suspiciously smooth lines in Graph 3.2 capture (frequency of concepts?). Moreover, while it is understood how word clouds are constructed, these cannot be considered as appropriate tools for analysis. A bar chart, or a frequency table, would communicate the information in an efficient, if not simply usable, way. In Plate 4.1, for instance, a different presentation of data would allow comparing the changes between the periods.

Some of the claims on the transformation of the cohesion policy could be indeed established through a content analysis of these documents. But the thesis would need to demonstrate the methodological procedures through which the information is processed and the conclusions are made. That is missing.

The underlying issue is a lack of operationalization in the methods section. The latter should discuss what claims and how can be established with the data available. It should address the question of what we expect to see in the data to make a claim. For instance, what do we expect to see in the data if there was a governmentalizing turn? What does an ordnungspolitik type of development look like? How is something 'fixed' semantically? What makes something 'regularized' or 'normalized'?

It is not helpful, in this context, that the theoretical section does not attempt to develop hypothesis to be tested in the empirical part. Instead, it is content with facilitating an open ended inquiry (p. 51). As a result, alternative theories are not adjudicated in the light of the empirical material. Moreover, theories are not used as analytical or explanatory tools. They rather provide a language that is used to redescribe the empirical material on an abstract level. In this context, one can deduce, or guess, the meaning of concepts such as ‘semantic fixing’ (see above). At the same time, adjectives such as Fordist/post-Fordist (e.g. infrastructure) are used without being defined or explained.

Finally, the thesis makes a number of causal claims, or at least claims linking two variables. For instance, governmentalism is linked to state capture. Rescaled regulation is linked with polarization between leading regions. However, to establish these claims, the thesis would need to offer a) theories offering plausible causal mechanisms linking the variables, b) operationalization of the respective hypothesis and identification of appropriate methods. Regarding the latter, the nature of these claims would require going beyond the textual analysis.

4. Contribution to existing scholarship

The thesis goes beyond the literature review. It uses primary resources and offers an interpretation informed by existing theories. More specifically, the study of cohesion policy, as related to FDI, represents a contribution to European comparative political economy and to critical political economy of EU integration. It has not been addressed by these disciplines, despite its relevance.

IV. Questions for discussion

- The thesis introduces the concepts of ‘institutional fix’ and ‘semantic fix’. They relate to the socio-temporal fix (Harvey) and can be linked to the notion of a ‘mode of regulation’ (regulation theory). How can these concepts be established empirically? In other words, what is a difference between a set of institutions and an ‘institutional fix’, or between using a concept and establishing a ‘semiotic fix’. Can regulation theory or Marxist political economy be helpful in answering these questions?
- The thesis links ‘governmentalization’ with state capture. What is the causal mechanism that links the two? What theories can be helpful here? More specifically, would institutionalist cohesion scholarship offer a satisfying explanatory framework?
- If ‘neoliberal developmentalism’ informed implementation of cohesion policy in Central and Eastern Europe, what would the cohesion policy look like under the old, or another, paradigm (i.e. the core-periphery consensus of the 1980s)? In other words, where would the money go, what would it support? Would it challenge the dependent economic integration of the region, or would it be a dysfunctional arrangement?
- Finally, why ‘neoliberal developmentalism’? Is it a result of lobbying by investors? Or does it reflect the structural power of multinational corporations? Or does it reflect a

correct reading of what developmental policy is possible in the current phase of capitalist development? Which theories can help?

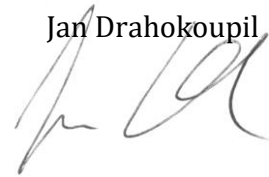
V. Conclusion

Předložená disertační práce splňuje požadavky kladené na disertační práci, a proto ji doporučuji k obhajobě a předběžně ji klasifikuji jako prospěl.

I recommend the thesis for defence, with the recommended result as 'pass' (the Czech system) and rite/genügend (the German system).

31 March 2021

Jan Drahokoupil

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jan Drahokoupil', written in a cursive style.