



Universiteit  
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# Thesis evaluation Giorgi Tkhelidze

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## Programme details

**Programme:** European Politics and Society

**Specialisation:**

**EC:** 30

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## Thesis details:

**Title:** The EU in Georgia – Inducing Democratic Reforms with(out) Conditionality in Place

## Is the thesis in your assessment free of plagiarism?

Yes to my knowledge the thesis is free of plagiarism

The Turnitin software analysis does not flag up any issues, and I have not discovered any irregularities while reading the thesis. I have seen the work in progress at different points in time, and trust that this is the student's own work.

## Can the thesis be made publicly available in the Leiden University Repository?

by E.E.A. van Gils: It can only be made public in the repository after a specific date. From date 01-08-2021.

Reason: There will first be a defence of the thesis.

## Summary assessment/comments

This is an exciting thesis on a timely and relevant topic, namely the potential limits to EU transformative power in the absence of strict conditionality. The thesis presents an in-depth research on the case of EU-Georgia relations. The depth of the two case studies and the attention for detail show a good understanding of the topic. The thesis builds on a wide range of literature as well as thorough empirical analysis. Clearer application of the theoretical concepts, and further interpretation of the findings would have strengthened the thesis even further, as this would have allowed you to answer the research question more affirmatively.

## Criteria

### Knowledge and insight

The thesis begins with a clear abstract that communicates the core ideas and the aims of the research. The underpinnings of the research are then set out in more detail in the Introduction chapter. The research deals with a very relevant and timely topic, by looking at the limits to the EU's transformative policy instruments. There is a clear research problem, leading to a relevant research question on this issue. The focus on the period after 2016 highlights this timeliness, and this issue will probably become even more important in coming years, not just in Georgia. As such, the research makes a good theoretical as well as empirical contribution.

The Introduction chapter presents a concise overview of historical and recent developments in EU-Georgia relations, and also already offers a justification for the case study selection. It is useful that a definition of 'democracy promotion' and 'conditionality' are offered. However, while the discussion on democracy is very interesting, what of course really matters for this research is the EU's own definition or interpretation, and this is unfortunately not mentioned here.

There is good engagement with literature, throughout the thesis. The thesis builds on an impressive range of both scholarly and policy sources, including the most up to date ones, which is excellent. The review itself is relatively brief, however. Its focus lies quite narrowly on literature on conditionality, whereas it could have been relevant to

also include literature on e.g. EU-Georgia relations in general, or on the democratic developments inside Georgia. As such, the review remains mostly a reflection on one particular part of the literature.

In terms of the theoretical framework, the thesis applies the theory of external governance, which is appropriate to answer the research question. The chapter gives a clear introduction to the theory, and the distinction between network and hierarchical governance is useful. What could have been improved in this regard, is to explain better how all this would be applied to the research itself – currently, this is done only briefly in the final paragraph of the chapter.

In short, the foundations of the research are sound. There are a clear research problem and research question, well-embedded in relevant literature, and a suitable theoretical framework has been selected to answer the question. Some aspects of the first few chapters of the thesis could have been expanded a bit further.

**Assessment:** good

**Weighing:** n/a

## Application knowledge and insight

The research design is suitable to answer the research question. The in-depth study of EU-Georgia relations allowed you to unpack in detail what underlying mechanisms are at work – something you wouldn't have been able to do to this extent through a study of multiple country cases. The within-case examination of two concrete developments is useful too. There is a very good justification for the case selection, and they allow you to assess both the implementation phase and the use of novel policy instruments. The cases are furthermore recent. A potential third case study could have provided further insights, for instance about situations where the EU does not have any influence; but it is understandable that this wasn't feasible for considerations of time and space in the thesis.

The methodology chapter explains all the choices and steps of the research, clearly (although there is slight overlap with the Introduction chapter). Both the content analysis and expert interviews have been explained carefully. What is very good is that the content analysis is based on a variety of sources, including parliamentary debates and legal texts. This allows for an in-depth assessment as well as triangulation of data. The interviews proved to be a good source of information too. While the number of conducted interviews is limited (5), this should also be seen in light of the restrictions of the past year, as also explained in the methodology chapter. Importantly, the interviews were conducted with representatives from different actors, who were closely involved with the two cases themselves. Overall, a great amount of work was put into the collection and processing of these data.

Both case studies are explored in-depth in the analysis chapter. The case studies are empirically rich, and sources have all been applied in the analysis very effectively. There is good engagement with the full range of sources, and the content analysis and interviews support each other well. The use of quotations from the interviews is useful to

support some of the arguments.

What's slightly confusing in the first case study is that the first half isn't actually about the implementation phase, but rather about the decision-making part of the process – only the second half of this case study truly corresponds to the focus of the research. The second case study therefore seems to be a bit more coherent in that regard.

**Assessment:** very good

**Weighing:** n/a

## Reaching conclusions

As said, the analysis is empirically very strong and reflects a good understanding of both the Georgian political context and the EU's policy objectives. The research presents a clear picture of how the realities on the ground can clash with the EU's aims. The two case studies do a very good job at showing exactly how the EU's responses have then changed, and which complexities needed to be taken into consideration. It's also important that there is attention for the role of different EU institutions, again reflecting a good knowledge of the workings of EU external relations.

The analysis contains a lot of information, but everything is presented step by step, and it is easy to follow the narrative about both case studies. It is good that there are references to the theoretical framework (especially network governance; there's less attention for other concepts that were introduced earlier on in the thesis, e.g. linkage and leverage). The application of the theoretical framework could have been more in-depth, however. Likewise, while there are some very interesting and relevant interpretations based on the observations from the analysis, this could have been expanded further.

One issue with the application of the concept of conditionality is related to its definition. At the start of the thesis, a distinction is made between 'ex ante' and 'ex post' conditionality. The rest of the thesis is founded on the premise that after 2016, no genuine conditionality has been in place anymore – but some of the findings from the analysis do actually seem to suggest that 'ex post' conditionality might be in place. Specifically, the 'negative reinforcement-lite' and the threats by the EP could fall under this category. This implies that the whole idea of conditionality as it is conceptually drafted in this thesis may need further clarification. If these two policy 'instruments' are not considered as such, this would have had to be explained further, with a clearer definition of what does (not) fall under ex-post conditionality. As a result, the arguments put forward are not fully coherent.

It also wasn't clear why the EU's mediation of Rurua's release wasn't incorporated in the analysis, since this seems to be highly relevant for the second case study (there is only a short reference to this situation in the conclusion chapter). Possibly, this was done for practical reasons, but it would have been good to acknowledge this somewhere in the thesis.

In terms of the conclusions, the analysis puts forward several relevant and interesting findings but these are not necessarily formulated as a clear answer to the research question. It therefore felt as if the final step in the reasoning process since still needs to be taken. The Conclusion chapter as such gives a useful summary of the main points whilst also linking these back to the theoretical framework and literature, which is very good. The reflection on potential future avenues for research is useful too. Related to the point mentioned above, what should have been expanded on further, is the reflection on what the findings of the research imply for the research question: what does it mean for our understanding of conditionality that the EU does apply suspension mechanisms and threatens to use negative conditionality?

In short, while the analysis is very good and insightful, and truly interesting to read, the final step of the interpretation of the data and the conclusions resulting from that, hasn't been fully completed yet.

**Assessment:** good

**Weighing:** n/a

## Communication

The thesis has a clear structure. There is a clear narrative: everything is explained well, and the reader is taken through the thesis step by step. The writing style is good and is much clearer than in earlier drafts. There are however quite a few spelling mistakes throughout the text. References are correct (with the exception of one on page 21, where there is a 'second-hand' reference: when referring to a scholarly work as discussed in another publication, you should indicate this in the reference, rather than citing both works independently).

**Assessment:** (more than) satisfactory

**Weighing:** n/a

## Learning skills

You've worked on the thesis very independently and diligently. There was good time management, which was also required for this methodology: the content analysis was time consuming, and the interviews had to be planned well in advance. Feedback was always taken on board, and we've had very good communication throughout the process. Your enthusiasm and persistence throughout the year reflected your sincere interest in the topic.

**Assessment:** very good

**Weighing:** n/a

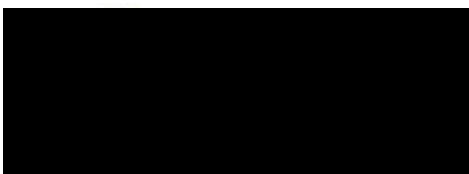
## Formal requirements

All formal requirements have been met.

## Final assessment

On 30-06-2021 this thesis is graded with a 7.8

## Signatures



E.E.A. van Gils