

Name of the student:	Dorđe Dimitrov
Title of the thesis:	The European Union as the Mediator in Belgrade-Pristina dialogue: What influenced mediation effectiveness?
Reviewer:	Dr Eske van Gils (Leiden University)

## 1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

(relevance of the research question, research objective, literature review):

The thesis asks a relevant research question, about an important aspect, namely the effectiveness of the EU's conflict mediation efforts, which is relevant for our understanding of the EU as a regional security actor. The Introduction chapter also explains the relevance of this topic more broadly, by showing how this issue is not merely about conflict resolution, but also about the European integration process of the Western Balkans.

However, the hypothesis around which the rest of the research is designed, seems to be quite self-evident, as was also mentioned at the EPS conference in January: it seems only natural that the effectiveness increases as leverage goes up. It's therefore not clear what the research problem or puzzle is. Because of this, the immediate contribution of the study isn't fully clear either. The Introduction is quite short, and the issue of the research puzzle and contribution could have received much more attention here.

The literature review offers a good discussion of literature on EU mediation efforts, both on the Western Balkans and elsewhere. The review draws on a relevant body of literature; and overall, the thesis is based on a very good range of academic as well as policy sources. Master theses are perhaps not the best source to include in a literature review, though. It is useful that the review ends with a conclusion on the aims of this thesis – but it is not explained *why* the research wants to challenge the dominant view in literature, namely that the EU's leverage is high. What are the grounds for questioning this? This point is connected to the issue of the absence of a genuine research problem on which the research is built.

## 2. ANALYSIS

(methodology, argument, theoretical backing, appropriate work with sources):

The theory section offers a detailed description of the concept of 'mediation', which is good. The distinction between different aspects of mediation is useful, and everything has been explained well, again on the basis of scholarly literature.

The methodology section, likewise, is generally appropriate and clear. There is a good justification of the case study selection. The detailed reconstruction of the mediation process across three periods in time seems useful, and immediately gives a clear structure to the analysis. The thesis builds on a rather (overly) complex research plan, with many variables and measurement criteria. All variables have been explained clearly. While there is an appearance of operationalisation, this part merely mentions that weak, medium, and strong levels of the different aspects exist, but without clarifying what exact findings would correspond to these three levels.

Some other things are also not clarified in as much depth as required. For example, while the methodology chapter mentions that the congruence method and process-tracing are used, it doesn't explain what these two methods entail, and how they will be applied. Likewise, it is good that some of the limitations of the research are mentioned (this shows a good understanding of these methods), but it's not clarified how the research has tried to mitigate these.

There are also a few flaws in the design of the research.

First, while the distinction between process-oriented and outcome-oriented approaches is relevant, the choice for an outcome-oriented approach in this research is somewhat confusing. Not only does it counter the logic of using process-tracing as a method; but most importantly, it sets you up for flawed conclusions about the EU's effectiveness: by defining high effectiveness as the reaching of a mediated agreement (outcome), it becomes impossible to conclude that the EU has been effective, since the premise of the research is that there has not been any agreement so far. In the analysis, the role of outcomes is also not applied in a consistent way when allocating values to the different variables.

Second, a restriction of the research is that the framework with variables is built around the EU: it only aims to assess characteristics of the EU. Other factors, such as domestic factors inside Kosovo and Serbia, or the role of Russia, are thereby overlooked. It's normal that for practical reasons, the scope of a research needs to be narrowed down, but it would have been important to at least acknowledge that the EU's characteristics are only one of the factors affecting the mediation process; and to justify why the choice was made to look solely at the EU.

In terms of the data, relevant sources have been used. As mentioned before, the research draws on a large number of academic publications; and it is very good that policy sources have been unpacked in detail. The use of interviews is also highly relevant. It is very good that these included both EU and Serbian government officials. There is a clear discussion of why some interviews were not possible to be organised. All sources have been applied well in the analysis, and there seems to have been good triangulation of sources. As a result, all different segments of the analysis are based on a variety of sources. There is, however, also quite a strong reliance on existing literature, in parts of the analysis. This raises the question to what extent all of the research is sufficiently novel.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

(persuasiveness, link between data and conclusions, achievement of research objectives):

The analysis presents a detailed description of events across the three time periods. Everything is explained in detail. There are a few interesting findings. The fact that the variables are discussed one by one, means there is a clear structure, and it becomes easy to see the developments over time.

The analysis does remain somewhat descriptive. There is very little interpretation of the findings. This includes the issue that certain statements or observations are made, but then not elaborated on – which leaves the reader wondering what the presented findings imply for the research question. One of these aspects is the role of the HR/VPs: the entire analysis is built around the phases 'under' certain HR/VPs, but it's not explained what their significance in this process was. Most of the factors that are assessed appear to exist independently from the HR/VPs, so can the differences across the three periods be attributed to them, or is this reference simply used for purposes of convenience?

There also seems to be a flaw in the reasoning regarding the factor of cohesion. It is concluded that cohesion was low, due to differing views on Kosovo's recognition, among the EU member states. This point also strongly affects the conclusions about the EU's effectiveness. But the analysis also shows that it is only because of this partial non-recognition, that Serbia was willing to accept the EU as a mediator in the first place – which seemingly is one of the biggest factors affecting effectiveness? This would therefore require a more nuanced approach to ensure valid conclusions.

The contributions of the research become more clear in the Comparative chapter. The reflection on similarities and differences across the three time periods is useful and all findings have been summed up concisely. Again, further interpretation could have been done, though. The actual Conclusions are brief. There is no reflection on the limitations of the study.

As such, the research does answer the research question, and it does touch upon some interesting points, but it feels as if this is just the start: much more could be done to assess what all these findings mean for our understanding of the EU as a mediating actor. Does this case study really counter the dominant views from literature, and under which conditions? How do the findings on the role of EU

effectiveness relate to other factors that contribute to the mediation process? Has the EU's role in the mediation process between Kosovo and Serbia been as we could expect, or were there unexpected aspects in the process? By not reflecting further on the findings from the analysis, the thesis seems to have missed an opportunity to genuinely engage with the implications of this case study.

#### 4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

(appropriate language, adherence to academic standards, citation style, layout):

The thesis has very poor spelling. The main issue is the use of articles, but there are also numerous other spelling and punctuation mistakes throughout the thesis – even in the research question on page 1. There are also some sentences that look sloppy (e.g. halfway page 15, a sentence just ends mid-way).


Generally, the thesis has a clear structure. It is not clear however, why the literature review, theoretical framework, and methodology are all covered in one chapter, instead of in separate chapters.

References are generally correct.

#### 5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

(strong and weak point of the dissertation, other issues)

The dissertation addresses a relevant topic and has the potential to make an interesting contribution to literature on the EU as a conflict mediator. The research contains several flaws in terms of the design and the reasoning, however. The findings are straightforward and answer the research question as such, but a limited degree of interpretation means that the research's contribution remains minimal. The dissertation should have also been proofread before submission.

<b>Grade (A-F):</b>	D - 65
<b>Date:</b>	<b>Signature:</b>
29 July 2021	Dr Eske van Gils 

Percentile	Prague		Krakow		Leiden		Barcelona	
	A (91-100)	91-100 %	8,5%	5	6,7%	8,5-10	5,3%	9-10
B (81-90)	81-90 %	16,3%	4,5	11,7%	7,5-8,4	16,4%	8-8,9	11,0 %
C (71-80)	71-80 %	16,3%	4	20%	6,5-7,4	36,2%	7-7,9	18,4 %
D (61-70)	61-70 %	24%	3,5	28,3%			6-6,9	35,2 %
E (51-60)	51-60 %	34,9%	3	33,4 %	6-6,4	42,1 %	5-5,9	30,1 %

**Assessment criteria:**

Excellent (A): 'Outstanding performance with only minor errors';

Very good (B): 'Above the average standard but with some errors';

Good (C): 'Generally sound work but with a number of notable errors';

Satisfactory (D): 'Fair but with significant shortcomings';

Sufficient (E): 'Performance meets the minimum criteria';

Fail: 'Some/considerable more work required before the credit can be awarded'.