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| Name of the student: | Tatev Derzyan |
| Title of the thesis: | The Effectiveness of Erasmus+ and UGRAD Soft Power on Armenia during Hard Times (Nagorno-Karabakh War 2020) |
| Reviewer: | Mitchell Young |

1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

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

The thesis addresses a highly relevant question for soft power (and the rationale for any country to invest in it). Specifically, it explores the question of how resilient soft power is? Can it withstand adversity between the promoting and receiving countries? The author test this by examining a specific instrument of soft power (student exchange programs) in the context of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The war provides a critical juncture by which to test whether the good-will beliefs and values that exchange programs (with both the EU and the USA) have provided are lost after a conflict in which countries don't actively intervene or support the student's country. The author has three research questions which specify the study, and those are complimented with three hypotheses that logically derive from them. The research questions are carefully worded to avoid the perception of generalizing, which given the limited number of interviews would raise issues of validity; rather, the research focuses on the 'types of' impact, response and perceptions which can be found, and would be a valuable basis for future research of a more quantitative type.

The literature review successfully weaves together a number of discourses: hard and soft power predominate, but they are connected with institutional theory and constructivism, public diplomacy as well as bringing in the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance. The academic literature on the history of exchange programs in the EU and USA and their perceived role in diplomacy and international affairs is also reviewed in the respective chapters. Overall, there is an extensive bibliography, and the literature is addressed in a way so as to make a logical argument, not simply listed, as is often the case. I appreciate the treatment of exchange programs as institutions, which enables the author to argue for their socializing effects.

2. ANALYSIS

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

The thesis is well designed as a comparative case study between the EU and the USA and the Erasmus+ and UGRAD exchange programs. These two policy instruments are well matched for comparison as the author shows; though there are differences between them, which could at times have been address more thoroughly in the analysis, i.e. by questioning critically what effect those differences might have had. The comparative aspect allows the author to investigate different approaches and their affects on the exchange students.

The cases include two intertwined research endeavours: a qualitative analysis of interviews with participants from both exchange programs and a content analysis of the respective states' approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The latter content analysis allows for setting expectations about how the exchange students are likely to perceive the EU/USA reaction to the conflict. It was done by process tracing the policy/diplomatic developments over time, and then applying an analytical framework to summarize four key aspects of each country's response.

The interview data is the main research element, and the author has overcome a number of challenges in order to obtain it. Privacy issues prevented her from obtaining a list of possible interviewees, so she had to use a snowballing technique through social media. This does raise questions about the representativeness of the sample, but by focusing on the types of answers rather than their prevalence, the author addresses this potential problem. As would be expected when about 20 interviews for each program were done, the author reached a saturation point. The 39 interviews is certainly a sufficient number for this master's level research project.

3. CONCLUSIONS

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

The research presents its findings according to both the research questions and hypotheses, first country by country and then comparatively. There is a great deal of interesting and careful work in drawing out observations and evidence from the interviews. Of course, as the research was done ex-post the war, it relies on the truthfulness of interviewees and the accurate recollection about their beliefs before the war.

Overall the author presents persuasive and clear links between the data and the conclusions. There are times that the data overlaps the research question and hypothesis categories. It might have been better to structure the analysis using only one set – i.e. either research questions or hypotheses – but the structural logic of keeping all of them is an asset.

There are some points which I think could have been further explored, particularly, I would have like to see a clearer link between the process tracing and the cognitive dissonance expectations. I think that the three mechanisms of dealing with cognitive dissonance that the author mentions could have been more directly addressed in the data analysis. As well, there is an extremely interesting observation about the reversal of the question in H3, where both EU and USA respondents claimed that the war made them rethink their own country. This is worthy of further consideration and investigation.

4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

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

The thesis is very well written. The writing is clear and grammatically correct. The structure is logical and appropriate. I would only wonder why in the EU/US chapters the author has chosen to address H1 before RQ3. The paper adheres to academic standards. The appendix is also well used.

5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

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

Overall, this was an ambitious undertaking which uses very recent history to examine an important and highly relevant and topical issue. The author succeeds in uncovering evidence of the effect of the war and showing how a critical juncture can negatively affect attempts at creating soft power through exchange instruments. The research opens up quite a number of interesting avenues for future research, which is a sign of success in an exploratory study such as this one. There are at points still hints at generalization, which should largely have been avoided, given the methodology; however, the author has mainly managed to avoid this.

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| Grade (A-F): | A |
| Date: | Signature: |
| 22.8.2021 | |

classification scheme

| Percentile | Prague | | Krakow | | Leiden | | Barcelona | |
|------------|----------|-------|--------|--------|---------|--------|-----------|--------|
| | 91-100 % | 8,5% | 5 | 6,7% | 8,5-10 | 5,3% | 9-10 | 5,5 % |
| 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'.