

CHARLES UNIVERSITY IN PRAGUE
Faculty of Social Sciences
Institute of International Studies

PROTOCOL ON DIPLOMA THESIS ASSESSMENT
(Reviewer)

Name of the student: Eliška Ullrichová

Title: Issue Definitions in the Agenda-Setting of the European Union

Reviewer: Prof. Rómulo Pinheiro, University of Agder, Norway

1. TOPIC AND OBJECTIVE (short information on the thesis, research objective):

This PhD thesis aims to contribute to the agenda-setting debate by developing the concept of issue definitions. Following the identification of a relevant gap in the extant literature on agenda setting, the study's primary contribution is the development of a novel analytical framework, inspired by an interdisciplinary approach, for issue definition centered on key attributes influencing the performance of the issue on the agenda. After reviewing three seminal, theoretical perspectives, the study resorts to insights from punctuation equilibrium theory (PET), arguing that both issue definition and venues are primary drivers of agenda-setting dynamics. The study adopts a qualitative design, using the EU council as a case study, substantiated on a desk-top analysis of 79 official documents in the period 2014-2021.

2. CONTENT (complexity, original approach, argument, structure, theoretical and methodological backing, work with sources, appropriateness of annexes etc.):

The topic of the thesis is both relevant and timely. The candidate demonstrates a high level of ambition in terms of the goal of integrating separate literature streams and sub-fields in the context of not only theory testing (which is the case for most doctoral thesis), but theory development, which is commendable. The thesis structure is, overall, rather adequate, and the candidate does a very good job at using relevant work in the field in both sections I and II. The methodological section is both clear and thorough, and the design choices are well argued and, for the most part, convincing as well. The empirical section and data analysis is rather impressive, backed up by relevant referencing of the source materials and complemented by multiple tables shown as annexes. Content wise, and as pointed out in more detail below, the last section of the thesis - chapter 9 (discussion) and conclusion - fall short of expectations.

3. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE (quality of language, citation style, graphics, formal aspects etc.):

The language used is mostly adequate, which provides for clarity of thought and reasoning. Here and there the reader can get a bit lost with many details, but this is largely due to the complexity of the phenomenon at hand and the rich empirical base for the study. The terminology used however makes a good job at balancing this and in enhancing the text's readability. In very limited places some inadequate, informal terms are used, e.g. on pg. 67, 2nd paragraph: "Social policy (13) **got**...." – could be changed to something like 'appeared', 'featured', etc. This happened more than once with the same term, but not too often to distract the reader or affect the core message. One major structural shortcoming (highlighted below in detail) concerns the rather small discussion section (pp. 113-116).

4. STATEMENT ON THE ORIGINALITY OF THE THESIS

Given that thesis was not formally submitted via my own university, Agder, I was not in a position to check its content for plagiarism via our own system, so please do so from you end (Charles). That said, I did not detect any major issues as regards originality when reading the text.

5. SHORT COMMENTS BY THE REVIEWER (overall impression, strengths and weaknesses, originality of ideas, achievement of the research objective etc.):

As all thesis, there are strong sections and other weaker ones. I will start by stating that the ambitious goal of developing an integrative framework for issue definition within agenda setting was successfully achieved. As indicated earlier, the first two sections are well developed and argued. Section 3 however is more mixed. The empirical chapters (5-8) are well structured and developed, but the final sections of discussion (chapter 9) and conclusion (omitted chapter 10) have major shortcomings, and, as a result, lower the overall quality and achievement of the work, particularly chapter 9 which is way too succinct and has failed to link the findings back to theory/literature in any substantial way; with the exception of the work by Baumgartner and Jones. In short, the discussion reads largely like a summary of key findings, and one would expect a stronger engagement with part of the rich literature and theory presented earlier, including the three major models or perspectives. It should be stated that, in my view, chapters 6-8 are part of the empirical section and not in terms of a classic discussion per se, in light of theory/literature, hence my critical comments in this respect.

6. QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS THAT SHOULD BE ADDRESSED DURING THE DEFENCE:

- One learns very little with respect to the ontological and epistemological positions associated with the 5 fields referred to, in the context of theory integration. This is vital since it is important to explore the extent to which there is an ontological/epistemological alignment or not when attempting to bridge gaps amongst sub-fields and research traditions, e.g. in the form of an integrative framework as undertaken here. In short, these important elements are taken for granted or as given which is a major shortcoming of the interdisciplinary attempt. Likewise, the author should – in chapter 9 or in the conclusion – have discussed the possible epistemological/ontological implications of the proposed (new) framework to the 5 sub-fields in question, and the extent to which the insights derived from this study are likely to be accepted or rejected given possible clashes in key assumptions, traditions, postulates, etc.
- As pointed earlier, Chapter 9/discussion ranks, as an underdeveloped part of the thesis, and reads more like a summary of key findings – which could have been done at the end of the empirical section (chapter 8), for example. During the defence the candidate should address this by linking the key empirical findings to key aspects from the literature and theory, including referring to selected studies that may help interpreting or contextualising the empirical findings.
- Some suggestions for future studies are given in the conclusion but the candidate should expand on the interpretation of the implications in terms of theory development, and more importantly as regards integration efforts and the associated challenges (and how to possibly address these?). In addition, it would be interesting to ask the candidate to move away from the case at hand and discuss more generally the implications of the study's findings from a broader perspective - in terms of agenda setting and its multiple manifestations and contextual aspects, e.g. taking into account public governance dimensions such as poly-governance, multilevel-governance, turbulent environments, complexity, bounded rationality, democratic backsliding, institutional decline, etc.

The following aspects would strengthen the final text if addressed in the form of minor revisions, if possible at this stage:

- the study refers to 'hypotheses' (p.6; section 3.7, etc), but given the study's qualitative nature it should be changed to 'propositions' instead.
- The term 'policy entrepreneur' (p. 14) is used but not defined. A definition is given on pg. 25 but should be provided the first time around.

- When providing definitions (section I, chp 2), it would have been useful to know: 1) which authors belong to which sub-fields and traditions, and 2) which alternative definitions exist, as these are not explored exhaustively, and what was the authors' rationale for choosing some instead of others. One possibility would be to present this succinctly in the form of a table in text or in the appendix.
- When presenting the 3 theoretical frameworks prominent in the field (MSF, ACF, PET), it would have been desirable to illustrate, more systematically, how these frameworks have been used in earlier studies, and what their major findings and implications were.
- It would have been useful to mention (allude to) the goal described on pg. 44 – salient attribute into the framework of issue hierarchization – when presenting the core aims and research questions earlier on, e.g. on pgs. 37-38.
- Section 3.2. (substance) could be expanded a bit, as to align it better (in terms of size and scope) with the 3.3. and 3.4, even when taken into account that the primary focus is on salience and framing, as indicated.
- Method section: from a design perspective, in retrospect, the study could have benefited from some selected accounts by key actors involved with the agenda setting process at the level of the EU council, as a means of triangulating the datasets and bring an agency dimension (e.g. strategic actor-hood, power, etc.) on 'issue definition' to the fore. This could be acknowledged as a study limitation, either in the methods section or at the end/conclusion as presently.
- Table 1, p. 66: It would have been easier to organise the ranking by the number of occurrences rather than CAPIC number. Also, insert data range in the table's title.

7. (NON-)RECOMMENDATION AND SUGGESTED GRADE:

The thesis is recommended or 'accepted' with the suggested grade of B-

Date: 1.12.2022

Signature: _____

