

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: Vanda Rafaela Amaro Dias

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

The thesis envisages to contribute to the agenda-setting debate. By identifying an important gap in the literature on agenda-setting regarding how issues included in an agenda are defined and developed over time, the research aims at introducing an interdisciplinary approach to issue definition. The goal is to overcome gaps across disciplines engaging with agenda-setting, to systemize the debate on issue definitions and to improve the operationalization of the concept. Also, the proposed analytical framework includes three attributes – substance, salience and framing –, intersects reflections on issue definition with issue hierarchization and contributes to Punctuated Equilibrium Theory by unveiling how negative feedback – self-corrective mechanisms – and positive feedback – shifts – affect issue definition. This framework is empirically tested in the case of the European Council's agenda from December 2014 to March 2022. Findings resulting from a qualitative methodological approach in three different levels of content analysis confirm the argument that the feedback determining issue definition influences agenda-setting. Furthermore, they reveal that positive feedback determines primary issues – most salient issues on the agenda –, whereas negative feedbacks is connected to all type of issues – primary, secondary and tertiary issues.

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

The research is relevant and the author demonstrates solid understanding of agenda-setting as a research area crosscutting different disciplines. The surveying of the relevant literature in this field enabled the identification of an important research puzzle: “which issues are defined and developed on the agenda gradually (negative feedback) and which ones through punctuation (positive feedback)?” (pp. 5-6). To provide an adequate answer to this question and to fulfil the research objective, the thesis is organized in three sections.

Section one provides a literature review on agenda-setting, discusses relevant agenda-setting theories and defines the theoretical framework of the research. The author quotes an appropriate number of bibliographic sources and provides a compelling case for the development of a more interdisciplinary approach, as well as a comprehensive definition of agenda-setting, in order to address the “theoretical, conceptual, and methodological gaps” (p. 38) identified in the literature review. The section concludes by emphasising the need to develop the concept of issue definition based on three attributes – substance, salience and framing – that determine an issue positioning on the agenda's hierarchy. The objective thus becomes “to reveal any connection between issue definition and stability-change dynamics of agenda-setting, and hence to fill a gap in the PET [...] literature” (p. 39). The proposed qualitative approach further allows for the identification of subtle changes in issue definitions (and arguably in policy-making more generally). Although the section fulfils its objectives, it refers to so many issues, debates, theories and approaches that some parts are not sufficiently developed or explained to the reader. In this regard, the introduction of some figures systematizing different approaches and concepts would help the reader to better understand the genealogy of agenda-setting debates.

Section two presents the analytical framework and research design. PET is used to elucidate the concept of issue definition based on the above-mentioned attributes, which are introduced and explained in this section along with issue hierarchization and positive and negative feedback as central elements of the research conceptual proposal. Overall, it is argued that issue definition allows specification of issue position on an agenda's hierarchy. Because primary issues are believed to be more likely to induce policy change, the link between issue definitions and hierarchization allows to understand whether an issue's definition has impact on its position. Moreover, the proposed framework is suited to demonstrate if an issue definition has potential to trigger policy change or not. Based on this, two hypotheses are formulated: 1) Issues defined by positive feedback are primary issues; 2) issues defined by negative feedback can be either primary, secondary or tertiary issues (p. 47). EU agenda-setting at the level of the European Council – "EU macro-political agenda" (p. 50) – is presented as a single case-study. A three-level qualitative content analysis – composed of conceptual content analysis [based on the Comparative Agendas Project methodology and Issue Codes], holistic grading method, and relational content analysis –, is used to identify the dominant attributes defining issues in the European Council's agenda from December 2014 to March 2022, as revealed by the analysis of 79 documents resulting from formal and informal meetings. This results in a rather ambitious research design, which adequacy to resolve the research puzzle and operationalization is not always clear to the reader, as addressed below. In addition, the fact that the research puzzle is only plainly assumed in page 40 is confusing to the reader, who is up to that point figuring the purpose of the research and the information provided thus far. Unveiling the core elements of the research design in the introduction would have helped to better prepare the reader.

Section three is devoted to the empirical analysis in the three levels of analysis. This is the longest and most substantial section of the thesis (and the one subdivided into more chapters). It contains many good, well-presented ideas, especially in the chapters devoted to the three levels of analysis. The original survey of primary sources enabled the identification of what issues were situated on the European Council's agenda (Chapter 5), as well as their hierarchization (Chapter 6) and framing (Chapter 7). The addition of tables and figures in this section improved significantly the quality of this section and helped the reader to better understand a rather complex discussion. Although the last two Chapters aim at crossing and discussing findings in all three levels of analysis, they repeat much of previous chapters' information without significant added value. This section, however, is key to resolve the research puzzle, confirm both hypotheses, identify limitations in the research and suggest new lines of inquiry in the agenda-setting scholarly debates. The Appendices included in the thesis are mostly relevant to understand how primary sources were analysed and conclusions produced.

All in all, this is a well-structured and well-written thesis, presenting interesting ideas across a broad range. The author clearly demonstrates good command of the topic, capacity for clear thinking, research design and analysis, as well as to contribute to the advance of scientific knowledge on agenda-setting, although there is still room for improvement as discussed in topics 5 and 6 of this report.

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

The thesis is well-written and the reader feels a fairly strong authorial voice in the writing. Furthermore, the text is very reader-friendly without being too colloquial or compromising the scientific quality of the thesis. Transition between chapters and sections is well made and helps to keep the audience engaged. However, the correction of a couple of typographical errors (e.g., p. 8, p. 26, etc.) would further improve this work. Other formal aspects, such as citation style and graphics are adequately implemented, although there are some important affirmations that are neither properly anchored in the existing literature nor corroborated with evidence (e.g., p. 40). The tables and figures included in Section three are very relevant and facilitate the systematization of information by the reader.

4. STATEMENT ON THE ORIGINALITY OF THE THESIS

The thesis was checked by the URKUND anti-plagiarism software and there were no significant instances of similarity with texts from other sources (0% similarity).

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

Overall, the thesis is thoughtfully constructed and represents a mostly valuable contribution to the field. It recovers a theoretical and conceptual debate that has been dormant in the last years (with a few notable exceptions), but which remains of significant relevance to understand agenda-setting dynamics. Furthermore, it develops the concept of issue definition, improving its operationalization and implementation in other studies. The empirical part of the thesis is also very original and besides providing a testing ground for the introduced conceptual advances, allows for better and innovative knowledge of issue definition and evolution on the EU's macropolitical agenda, thus adding to the relevance of the research and its contribution to different fields. However, there are noteworthy shortcomings. The main weaknesses lie in the fact that the thesis was perhaps too ambitious in the sense that it comprised too many goals, not all clearly achieved or sufficiently demonstrated. This impacted on a number of issues that can be improved to make the thesis more suitable for publication (see topic 6 in this report).

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

1. The development of an interdisciplinary approach comes across as one of the objectives of the research based on the argument that the dominant multidisciplinary in agenda-setting debates has contributed to the "issue definition" poor conceptualization and lack of operationalization. Although engagement with different disciplines is noticeable in the literature review, it is less visible in the remaining of the research, including in the conceptualization of issue definition. Exactly why is the proposed approach markedly and distinctively interdisciplinary? Why is this so important to achieve the research objectives? What evidence shows that the redesigned concept of issue definition "embedded in an interdisciplinary agenda-setting literature, it is easily applicable not only to policy agendas, but also to media and public agendas" (p. 118)?
2. The author claims that dominant quantitative studies either result in superficial analysis of the agenda-setting different levels/dimensions or a more detailed inquiry of only one of these levels/dimensions (see p. 27). How does the – complex – qualitative approach employed in this research contribute to alter this state of affairs? It does provide for the analysis of three different levels, but is this an in-depth analysis? How?
3. Being the EU a sui generis organization, and the European Council a very singular institution, justify how findings in this specific and single case-study can be generalised and how. Also provide further explanation for the selection of the time-frame of the analysis. In page 56 it is mentioned that the "research covers the European Council Conclusions issued from December 2014 to March 2022, with reference to the two latest constellations of the European Union represented by Jean-Claude Juncker and Ursula von der Leyen's compositions of the European Commission. During this period, the European Council was chaired by Donald Tusk (December 2014 – November 2019) and Charles Michel (December 2019 – March 2022)". However, the relevance of the European Commission to the selection of the time-frame to analyse the agenda of the European Council is not clear.
4. How was the CAP coding system operationalised? Did the author used any automated text classification tools? If yes, which and how? Are there any limitations noteworthy?
5. Explain the usage of the label "issues avoiding either primary or tertiary position" as one of the three models used to divide the "(more) frequently discussed issues" in the European Council agenda (pp. 72-73). The label seems rather misleading given that the environment issue appeared 6 times as a

secondary issue, against 5 as a tertiary issue (out of 12 instances); the energy issue appeared 3 times as a secondary issue against 3 as a primary issue (out of 7 instances); and the banking, finances, and internal trade appeared 6 times as a secondary issue, against 4 as a primary issue (out of 11 instances) [the usage of mode – statistics – or reference to the value that appears most often could help to address this issue].

6. The thesis ends with the identification of relevant limitations, including the precarious identification of tone and appeal as sub-attributes of framing. Furthermore, it is assumed that “tone is generally difficult to find when official policy documents are the subject of analysis” (p. 118). As this is often the case in studies engaging with macro-political agenda dynamics, how useful are the sub-attributes of appeal and tone to understand how issues are defined and how their definitions and evolution influence political agenda-setting?

7. (NON-)RECOMMENDATION AND SUGGESTED GRADE:

YES – Pass / B (on A-F scale)

Date: December 11th, 2022

Signature: