

Evaluation of the master thesis titled **“Different Mentality as a basis of international conflicts. The case of escalation relations between Russia and the EU in 2008-2018”** written by **Ekaterina Kruglikova** and supervised by **Lucie Cviklová**.

### **General observation:**

The aim of the thesis is to apply a cultural approach for understanding and exploration of the gradual deterioration of relations and escalation of conflict between Russia and the European Union between 2008-2018 (since Russo-Georgian war, Ukrainian crisis, and Russian engagement in Syria). The author claims different mentality in particular and different culture in general to be one of the influential factor of the escalating conflict (see page 4). The aim of the thesis is highly ambitious, although me and my colleague prof. Jan Štemberk have been asking the student to narrow it down, make it more focused, and manageable. As a consequence, the aim was not fulfilled at all, I believe. The author identified that a lack of trust toward social norms and (state, non-governmental) institutions is typical for Russians (page 37-53), however even those findings can be questioned (see below). However, the ***author did not provide us with any analyses of the conflict between Russia and the European Union, and did not show how these possible differences in the system of values possibly shape the conflict.*** To put it in other words, if we find whatever differences in values, worldviews, or mentalities, it does not necessarily mean that these culture differences are responsible for a conflict or for its absence. Also, the problem is that a constant independent variable (culture difference, mentality etc.) is assumed to cause or shape a highly varying dependable variable (conflict or its absence). To put it in other words, why the same culture difference between Russia and Europe did not lead to the escalation of conflict during the late Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Jelcin government (on the contrary, there was a de-escalation, Russia even become partner of NATO), however we see the sharp escalation of relations since 2008 (while more or less the same culture difference is at work)?

So, the main problem of the thesis is that none of the particular chapters is written in connection with the research topic, which is the Russia-EU conflicting relations and its escalation. No application on the Russia-EU conflict is performed. It is in fact not clear, why the chapters are included in the master thesis.

Other general weaknesses are identified regarding the ***cultural determinism*** that is probably the implicit and un-reflected starting point of the thesis. The Russian culture is not homogeneous, nor is the presumed European culture (for example, in Russian case we can think about different approaches to the international relations among the so called *zapadniki*, *vychodniki* or *euroasijci*). Also, culture matters, however relying on mono-causal explanations is usually unconvincing. However, the author does not discuss or analyse other possible factors for the escalation of the conflict and does not try to relate it to the “cultural factor”.

### **Comments on methodology:**

The empirical part of the thesis is a second weak point. There is a huge amount of key shortcomings that a student of sociology should definitely avoid (pages 37-53). Generally speaking, it is not clear, why the author chooses such a research design and how does it fit with the main research question trying to figure out the connection between the culture differences and the Russia-European Union escalating conflict.

As for the quantitative research, it is not clear, why the author focuses on the culture difference between the Czechs and Russians regarding the rule of law (it is not clear why should be this particular difference responsible for the conflicting relations between Russia and European Union). Also, the sample of 15 people for Russian public and another 15 for the Czech public is very limited, however there is no discussion of the fact (and there is also very ambitious presumption that the 15 Czech respondents not only represent the Czechs, but the whole 28 European nations). On the contrary, the student makes generalizations from her sample on Russians and Czechs, respectively on the culture difference between them (page 44). No statistical tests are used to measure if there is really the difference (just two histograms are produced), we have no idea why a snowball sampling method was used for the survey (why not a sample based on quota method; snowball is inadequate here and limits the representativeness even more), we know nothing about the sample (geographic location, age, education, etc.). Last but not least, the way how the findings are presented is inadequate.

As for the secondary analyses of the WVS, again it is not clear why the author focuses only on the three questions covering trust in state institutions and labour unions. Only the Russian sample of WVS is analysed, however the authors enterprise is to find out the differences between the Russian and European/Czech value systems relevant for the conflict analyses. Also the way how the findings are presented is inadequate (one clear table for each question is enough, verbal interpretation of the dates needed).

As for the in-depth interviews, we know nothing about the sample and especially how and according to which logic it was selected. We do not know if there was a so called theoretical saturation after the five interviews with Czechs and five with Russians were conducted. But this can be questioned since five interviews for each of the national sample is rather limited. It is stated by the author, that this research is based on grounded theory. However, grounded theory approach is sensitive to a strong theoretical a priori, which is the case of this master thesis (in fact, the author knows in advance what does she wants to find in dates, and finally she finds it; the different attitude toward law and rules among the Russians and Czechs in this case). Also, I do not see any results in the shape of a theory based on the interviews (causal or hierarchical connections between particular categories uncovered by the analyses). In fact, what the student did is just an open coding of the interviews, the rest of the methodological repertoire of the grounded theory is completely missing. Finally, in the two opening paragraphs of the chapter (page 49), the student shows that she does not understand the logic of qualitative research: for example, she claims that a qualitative research aims at generalizations (however, definitely not generalizations about populations) and at confirming hypothesis (no, it can be used for generating new hypothesis, not for

verification or falsification of it). The way how the dates are presented is also inadequate here, I miss a single illustrative quotation from the interviews for example.

### **Formal shortcomings:**

Lack of references on relevant or whatever literature through the whole master thesis (sometimes the whole pages without a single reference, for example pages 27-32). The way how the particular chapters are written very often reminds notes from reading, not a mature text (for example parts covering Vygotsky, Juergensmeyer or Coser).

### **Particularities:**

Samuel Huntington does not claim in his book (1996) that culture differences are the cause of the international conflicts, however he said so in the early journal paper (1993). The student explicitly states that she does not want to reflect critically on Huntington's thesis (page 29-30). However, I believe, that is exactly what she should do and focus on the huge amount of literature criticising the Harvard professor.

A Russian must be born in Russia, otherwise he or she is not a Russian (page. 30). So there are no Russians in Baltic states (however officially recognised by those nation-states governments), there are no Russians on the territory of Ukraine, or in the Caucasus and in Central Asia (for example Kazakhstan)?

Any economic or political values are not existential – they are less connected with personal identities (page 32). Really? To have a latest cell phone is not a matter of being accepted or excluded in his or her social group for the contemporary teenagers, and it does not form his or her feeling of dignity and identity? To believe in communism and in the party itself is not a matter of personal identity and self-concept for the otherwise atheist “core believers” of the Czech communist party?

I do **not consider the evaluated thesis as suitable for the defence** because of the many serious shortcomings. I propose to narrow down the research question and choose a relevant research design to deal with the question.

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