

REPORT ON THE MASTER THESIS

IEPS – International Economic and Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

Title of the thesis:	Humor as a Mirror of Political Reality: Anti-Communist humor in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in comparative perspective
Author of the thesis:	Arevik Zadoyan
Referee (incl. titles):	Dr Janusz Salamon

Comments of the referee on the thesis highlights and shortcomings (following the five numbered aspects of your assessment indicated below).

1) Theoretical background: Arevik Zadoyan chose to delve into a territory largely uncharted by political scientists and as a result her thesis proved to be an ambitious and challenging project. I start this report by stressing its novelty and difficulty, because I will conclude that – like Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse – her thesis is perfect, despite of its imperfections, precisely because its imperfections are a consequence of its novelty. The author decided to test a thesis that under the conditions of the lack of freedom of speech and publications, anti-communist humor may be considered to be a form of expression that uniquely mirrors the way the reality of life under Communism has been perceived by ordinary people. She argues that far from expressing merely subjective feelings about the life in a totalitarian state, political humor captures impressive perceptiveness of the public in identifying the contradictions and irrationalities of the Communist politics. She also takes into account the diversity of the anti-Communist jokes across both space (between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union) and time (from Stalin's era to Gorbachev's) and attempts to introduce some classification of the humorous responses to the Communist reality, but at the end all parts of the thesis contribute to establishing convincingly its central and most valuable claim indicated in the title, namely that political humor can serve as a mirror of political reality.

2) Contribution:

It seems to me that the contribution of Arevik Zadoyan is obvious in light of the scarcity of the scholarly literature devoted to this subject matter and a virtual absence of the comparative work on the Soviet and Czechoslovak political humor. A more robust reliance on the collections of anti-Communist jokes in Russian, Czech and Slovak would bring this work to a different level of scholarly importance.

3) Methods: The nature of the material called for employment of qualitative methods and as a brilliant writer who has published a number of literary works, Arevik does an excellent job in analyzing the available material. Indeed, what comes across as most impressive, is her originality in forging for herself tools of analysis of political jokes, attending with great sensitivity to the cultural differentiation (across various parts of the Soviet empire) as well as to the shifting historical moods (for example, between the reality of Stalinism marked by horror and the later stages of the Communist experiment lending themselves more easily to comic caricature).

4) Literature: One undeniable limitation of this project is its almost exclusive focus on the sources available in English. One key Czech source is included, without which this thesis would be unthinkable. Still, the Author made it clear from the start that she does not aim at anything approaching completeness in mapping the entire spectrum of the anti-Communist humor in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, the main aim being more theoretical in nature, namely supporting the thesis that political humor is a serious *locus politicus* – a source of theoretical insights into the nature of politics. To this aim, taking into account some works in political methodology that might help her to establish her claim were as important as the collections of political jokes themselves and she consulted such works to a satisfactory degree.

5) Manuscript form: Given the literary character of the material with which the Author worked, the style of exposition – which might be considered controversial in the case of a different political subject matter – is appropriate and the references are carefully edited, so that the imperfections of the manuscript are minor.

Box for the thesis supervisor only. Please characterize the progress in the working out of thesis (e.g., steady and gradual versus discontinuous and abrupt) and the level (intensity) of communication/cooperation with the author.

Arevik Zadoyan had – right from the start – a very clear idea what she wants to achieve in her thesis and she did not stray away from her original plan. She communicated with me on a regular basis. She manifested a high degree of independence in realization of her project, but approved of such approach, having known her as a student since the beginning of her undergraduate studies. In short, I had no objections to the way she approached the cooperation with me as her supervisor.

Suggested questions for the defence are:

- (1) Would, in your opinion, a more robust use of the collections of jokes published in Czech, Slovak and Russia (or even Armenian) change the character of your research project? Was your self-limitation largely to the sources in English a pre-meditated methodological choice?
- (2) Are the differences between the Czechoslovak and the Soviet anti-Communist humor to be explained by reference to the cultural or rather to the political differences between the two countries you compare?
- (3) It is hard to deny that at least some citizens of the Soviet Union (and perhaps also Czechoslovakia) were fond of at least some aspects of the Communist state (for example, its welfare policies). Is there a way to quantify to what degree the anti-Communist humor mirrored the anti-Communist stance of only some citizens (or an opposition to only some aspects of Communism, but not the other)?

I recommend the thesis for final defence.

SUMMARY OF POINTS AWARDED (for details, see below):

CATEGORY	POINTS
Theoretical background (max. 20 points)	19
Contribution (max. 20 points)	18
Methods (max. 20 points)	19
Literature (max. 20 points)	17
Manuscript form (max. 20 points)	19
TOTAL POINTS (max. 100 points)	92
The proposed grade (A-B-C-D-E-F)	A

DATE OF EVALUATION: 30.08.2020

Janusz Salamon

Referee Signature

Overall grading scheme at FSV UK:

TOTAL	GRADE	Quality standard
91 – 100	A	= outstanding (high honour)
81 – 90	B	= superior (honour)
71 – 80	C	= good
61 – 70	D	= satisfactory
51 – 60	E	= low pass at a margin of failure
0 – 50	F	= failing. The thesis is not recommended for