

Annex 1 – Template Dissertation Report EPS



Joint Dissertation Review

Name of the student:	Maryse Boonstra
Title of the thesis:	How can crises generate a paradigm shift in political discourse on abortion? A cross-crisis study of political discourse on abortion at the EU level
Reviewer:	Vera Scepanovic

1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

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

The thesis proposes to explain the change in political discourse in the European Parliament on the topic of abortion, and specifically to examine the effect of crises on this change. This is indeed an important and exciting topic, and well placed to illuminate broader discussions about the changing self-perception and role of the EP in the European polity, as well as the mechanisms for social change through political institutions. The way the question is formulated, however, leaves a lot to be desired. The focus on crises and whether or not they contribute to change in political discourse is not implausible, but better contextualization would strengthen its theoretical relevance – the specific question ‘whether all crises have the same impact on political discourse’ risks rendering the answer tautological (why would they?). The literature review discusses no alternatives (what else could lead to the change in discourse?) and no mechanisms (how does it lead to a change in discourse? Whose perception/discursive construction of the crisis matters? What is the role of policy entrepreneurs?) Most importantly, the explanandum remains vague throughout the thesis, and even then it remains clear how much – if at all – the discourse of the European Parliament actually changed. The one piece of evidence is that the 2013 Estrela report failed to result in a resolution, whereas the 2020 Matic one was adopted by overwhelming majority. It is less clear, however, what these reports did/proposed/asked the EU to do, which makes it more difficult to compare the MEP’s responses. Stating the difference in outcome clearly up front would go a long way in strengthening the puzzle on which the RQ rests.

2. ANALYSIS

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

The thesis conducts a content analysis of 3 reports by the FEMME committee of the European Parliament, contextualized by analysis of the discourse of the reports themselves and the debates that follow them. The content analysis itself is effectively and professionally conducted and the results are clearly presented. The only thing I found dissatisfactory was the lumping of 'encouraging EU/actors/MS to act'. Constitutionally and legally it is very different to decisively call on the EU to regulate in an area in which it has traditionally lacked competences, and to call on the MS to respect women's rights. This broader category renders these key distinctions fuzzy, making it in fact more difficult to discern the change in political discourse and attitudes.

The discourse analysis is insightful, but could have been given a more prominent role. Especially when it comes to the debate, it is difficult to know how representative different statements from the MEPs are and how they were selected. What to make, for example, of the observation that sexual and reproductive rights were linked to the crisis more strongly in the 2020 report, but less in the discussion, and in 2013 the other way around? What does this tell us about the overall discourse of the Parliament?

Logically, the most serious objection to the analysis is that the thesis asks about the impact of the crisis on abortion discourse in the EP, but excludes or downplays other potential causes. The hugely problematic abortion law in Poland, linked to the wider dispute about the lack of judiciary independence and political activism of the Polish Constitutional court, is the most obvious likely explanation for why some MEPs may start to believe that EU intervention is appropriate and necessary to safeguard women's rights. The thesis itself mentions the broader shift towards moral agenda of the EP – so why should the change in political discourse be caused by the crisis? In fact, one could argue that rather than the perception of the magnitude of the COVID crisis shifting political discourse, it was a previous accumulation of shifting trends that changed the perception of the COVID crisis and ensured that it was viewed and discussed much more readily through a gendered lens than the Eurocrisis.

3. CONCLUSIONS

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

The conclusions are clearly formulated, but due to the methodological issues above they are not entirely persuasive. It is difficult, for example, to accept that the 'perception of the crisis' determined the shift in discourse, as this perception is not clearly demonstrated for the EP in general, or even for the majority of the MEPs, but rests entirely on the text of the report. It is similarly difficult to see from the findings what role the crisis itself played in the discursive shift (as compared to other trends that occurred in the EU between 2013 and 2020). The question the thesis actually appears to answer, and that quite effectively, is a slightly different one: to what extent, or in what ways, did the FEMME committee exploit the crisis context to promote a stronger stance on SRHR. This is in itself an interesting problem, that gives due to the role of political agency, and a more contextually sensitive discourse analysis could have helped to link this finding to the broader question about changes in political discourse. On the whole, while there are conceptual flaws that make the thesis less convincing than it otherwise could have been, this is a very creative and original, and worthwhile project, and I very much hope the author will continue to work on it.

4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

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

The thesis is very well and clearly written, professionally formatted and referenced. The level of English is very high and the thesis generally reads very well, although the concluding section is a little repetitive. I did not find the section on the Tarabella report to be very relevant to the question, but as it wasn't very long it was not especially distracting.

5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

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

The thesis explores a very interesting problem – that of change in political discourse, and perhaps the role and self-perception of the European Parliament – and does so through an interesting and engaging case study. The content analysis of the reports is executed professionally and is overall insightful. However, the lack of proper context makes seriously weakens the thesis claim to explain why the discourse shifted, and the use of crisis as an explanation appears pre-determined rather than demonstrated by the analysis. Taking more care to document the discursive shift over time so as to strengthen the puzzle and the question, and paying more attention to alternative explanations would have made the overall argument more convincing.

Grade (A-F)	B (8)
Date	Signature
21/06/2022	