

Name of the student:	Silke Maes
Title of the thesis:	Ceci n'est pas un accord. Contesting informal externalisation: The European Parliament in informal readmission agreements
Reviewer:	Jan Váška (Charles University; as supervisor)

1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

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

Silke Maes's thesis contributes to the ongoing research of what has been termed "the externalisation turn" in management of EU migration policy, that is an increased involvement, since the 2015 migration crisis, of third countries in migration control on behalf of the Union. Part of this push has been the tendency to conclude informal, non-binding bilateral deals catering for readmission (10 of them during the 8th parliamentary term of the EP, which is the period on this the present thesis focuses, alone). The informal character of these arrangements meant the European Parliament was excluded from this process – and yet, with one or two exceptions (2016 agreements with Turkey and Afghanistan) the EP largely did not contest this development and the lack of parliamentary scrutiny it entails. The author, having found the dominant existing explanation ("shadow of hierarchy" – Servant 2020) insufficient, sets out to explore why non-contestation was the norm.

All in all, this research is relevant academically, normatively (i. a. it interrogates the norms of human rights, human security and democratic accountability), and of continuing political topicality.

The literature review for the thesis is adequately developed (especially its final section, "What drives parliamentary behaviour?", though parts of it (sections A, B) focus more on presenting background knowledge than engaging with literature and as such they might fit better elsewhere in the thesis.

2. ANALYSIS

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

This is a qualitative-oriented research design relying on systematic content analysis of documentary evidence, supported by a set of semi-structured elite interviews and organised around a comparative analysis of three case studies representative of various degrees of contestation (agreements with Turkey, Afghanistan and Ethiopia).

It is built around a single open-ended research question: *What drives contestation by the European Parliament of informal readmission agreements?* The literature review equipped the author with a set of possible explanations (hypotheses in all but name), falling into two broad categories (means and motivations), which are then tested against the three cases explored. A detailed discussion of the findings - some explanations were upheld, some partly, whereas some were not supported by available evidence – is presented on pp. 45-54 (and then summarized, as juxtaposition of theory-derived expectations and findings, in a chart as Annex I).

The case selection is clear and logical; as for the operationalisation of the central variable (degree of contestation, p. 19 + fig. 3), I was (as supervisor) surprised to see that only a fraction of the work actually done made it to the final text; if the author had expanded figure 3 to include data on the basic criteria of contestation (number of speeches, written questions etc.) this sections would have been more commanding.

Other aspects of the thesis to be covered in this section – the link between the empirical enquiry and literature/theory, argument, work with documents and literature – are very good at the least.

3. CONCLUSIONS

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

The conclusions of the thesis are persuasive, adequately supported by the evidence presented and firmly embedded in argument developed throughout the paper. I am pleased to conclude that the research objectives of the project were achieved.

(For questions and topics suggester for discussion during the oral defence please see section 5 of this report.)

4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

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

I am not a native speaker so my assessment of the author's English is of course just indicative. The language of the thesis appears excellent, both the general and academic style. I have no issues with referencing and citations (the author adheres to the APA citation style), though I would have preferred, for the sake of more clarity, breaking up the list of references by source type.

The layout, on the other hand, is somewhat less satisfying. I do not object, in principle, to the lavish use of bold characters (this actually is, while unorthodox, quite reader-friendly) but the author's avoidance of numbering of chapters/headlines, combined with not starting chapters on new pages, makes the text somewhat harder to navigate and its internal structure a bit unclear. I do appreciate the visual support elements but again, they sometimes require a bit extra time to fully grasp (Fig. 1. Annex 1..)

5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

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

On the whole, this is a very good piece of original and independent qualitative-oriented research on an academically and politically relevant, even topical, issue. Robustly embedded in literature, with appropriate theoretical and methodological framework, relying on reliable data, sensible in analysis and drawing conclusions, with very good language and adherence to citation style. Minor weaknesses include the way the author tackled the literature review (which is blends a literature review proper and a background chapter) and at times not-entirely-reader-friendly layout.

During the oral defence, the author might like to discuss (1) the limitations of the selected methodological approach (she does this in the thesis with respect to the scope of enquiry but not specifically to the methodology); in particular the number and representativeness of the interviewees – do you tend to think that additional interviews (possibly with EP officials rather than MEPs) would not have yielded new knowledge or cues?;

(2) what exactly are the new insights into the problematics your thesis is bringing, on top of earlier research (Reslow 2019 and others);

but also (3) the political, institutional, or normative implications of her research, to the extent there are any in your view.

Grade (A-F):	B (87 %)
Date:	Signature:
29 June 2023	