

BACHELOR'S THESIS EXAMINER REPORT
PPE – Bachelor's in Politics, Philosophy and Economics
Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

Thesis title:	Free Speech and Nationalism: “The Case Study of Vlaams Belang”
Student's name:	Barbara van Aert
Referee's name:	Jakub Franěk

Criteria	Definition	Maximum	Points
Major Criteria			
	Contribution and argument (quality of research and analysis, originality)	50	35
	Research question (definition of objectives, plausibility of hypotheses)	15	12
	Theoretical framework (methods relevant to the research question)	15	12
Total		80	59
Minor Criteria			
	Sources, literature	10	9
	Presentation (language, style, cohesion)	5	4
	Manuscript form (structure, logical coherence, layout, tables, figures)	5	4
Total		20	17
TOTAL		100	76

Plagiarism-check (URKUND) match score:

[NB:] If the plagiarism-check (URKUND) match score is above 15%, the reviewer has to include his/her assessment of the originality of the reviewed thesis in his/her review.

Reviewer's commentary according to the above criteria (min. 1800 characters including spaces when recommending a passing grade, min. 2500 characters including spaces when recommending a failing grade):

The reviewed thesis is devoted to an important and extremely relevant topic – the value, as well as the limits of free speech in contemporary liberal-democratic society. The thesis, which is conceived as a case study of the Flemish far right *Vlaams Belang* party and its verbal attacks against Belgian-Moroccan and Belgian-Turkish communities, is well designed and well researched. It also addresses a number of truly important and relevant questions and contains many relevant and thoughtful arguments. Nonetheless, it also suffers from some noticeable shortcomings.

My general impression is that while the author has obviously invested a great amount of time and energy into researching and writing her BA Thesis, she has not been completely successful in formulating her own position on the important subject matter. This is apparent especially in Chapter 2, which provides a really well researched overview of the relevant theoretical debates on the value

of free speech and admissibility of its restrictions, and Chapter 4, which analyses *Vlaams Belang's* rhetorical attacks against Belgian Muslim communities.

Chapter 2, which is supposed to formulate the theoretical framework of the reviewed BA Thesis, comes across as a very well researched but at the same time somewhat wordy literature review. In other words, the author does a really good job in introducing the reader to recent debates about free speech and legal (and/or moral) admissibility of its restrictions. On the other hand, she is less successful in formulating her own stance on these important questions.

At the same time, the theoretical overview provided in Chapter 2 strikes me as a bit superficial. This, however, is only natural because of the number of authors whose positions are discussed. Paraphs, it would have been better to limit the number of theoretical positions discussed, which would provide an opportunity for a deeper involvement with them.

Chapter 4 consists essentially of a detailed analysis of selected statements of the *Vlaams Belang* party (or its leading members) and their normative evaluation, which aims to balance the right to free speech with other considerations (such as right to human dignity) which might justify the restriction of the freedom of speech in the analysed cases. Perhaps because the author has failed to clearly articulate her own stance on these matters in Chapter 2, the discussion of individual cases is typically concluded by “on the one hand – but on the other hand” type of argumentation. (See e.g. the penultimate paragraph on p. 51.) Yes, of course, one can only agree with the author that the issue of restricting freedom of speech in liberal democratic society necessarily involves the need of balancing various arguments or even legal or moral rights. At the same time, however, the reader expects to learn the author’s position on these complex issues.

Moreover, some of the arguments employed by the author in Chapter 4 strike me as somewhat oversimplified and/or one-sided. Let us take, for instance, her analysis of “Statement 5”, which analyses a FB post related to Belgian-Turkish dual nationals’ support of R. T. Erdogan in recent Turkish presidential elections (p. 49). The analysed statement is problematic to the extent that it is, albeit only implicitly, generalising by suggesting that *all* Belgian Turks support Erdogan. Nonetheless the fact that a sizeable part of the Belgian Turkish community voted for him in the recent election may raise legitimate concerns about their loyalty to Belgium and to liberal-democratic values. Whether Erdogan is a genuine Islamist or, rather, an imperial nationalist who merely utilises Islamist positions politically, is a matter of academic debate. Nonetheless, calling him an Islamist is certainly not unreasonable. More importantly, it is undeniable that he is an enemy of Western liberal democracy. BTW: “Islamist” is not a derogatory term or a slur, as the author repeatedly insists. Rather, it is a term that denotes an adherent of Islamism, i.e. a political ideology based on Islamic fundamentalism, which is obviously (and quite explicitly) incompatible with the values of liberal democracy. To repeat myself, I agree with the author that generalising statements that imply that all Muslims (or all Belgians of Turkish origin) are Islamists are discriminatory. At the same time, however, I believe that it is entirely legitimate to raise concerns about the rising support for political Islamism (or, for that matter, for Erdogan’s anti-Western and anti-liberal Turkish imperial nationalism) among Belgians of Turkish origin.

Proposed grade (A-B-C-D-E-F): C

Suggested questions for the defence are:

I do recommend the thesis for final defence.

Referee Signature

Overall grading scheme at FSV UK:

TOTAL POINTS	GRADE	Quality standard
91 – 100	A	= outstanding (high honor)
81 – 90	B	= superior (honor)
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 defence.