FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
Charles University

Diploma Thesis Evaluation Form

Author: James David O'Blenis

Title: The Discursive Construction of Syrian and Ukrainian Asylum Seekers in Czechia and Migration Outcomes: Observed Covariations

Programme/year: MAIN/2024

Author of Evaluation (supervisor): Mgr. Jakub Tesař, Ph.D.

Criteria	Definition	Maximum	Points
Major Criteria			
	Research question, definition of objectives	**10**	9
	Theoretical/conceptual framework	**30**	28
	Methodology, analysis, argument	**40**	36
Total		*80*	73
Minor Criteria			
	Sources	**10**	9
	Style	**5**	4
	Formal requirements	**5**	5
Total		*20*	18
TOTAL		*100*	91

Evaluation

Major criteria:

The thesis focuses on the discursive construction of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in the context of two recent migrant events in 2015-16 and 2022-23, a very actual and relevant topic for international relations today. The thesis presents an excellent literature review, which nevertheless does not fully situate his work in the existing scholarship (how does his take contribute to what already exists). The thesis provides an insightful review of Czech experience with migration and Czech migration policy. However, I miss the Czech emigration aspect, which also seems to inform the migration discourse.

The thesis utilizes critical discourse analysis to unpack the discursive construction of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Czech political discourse. The author understands this framework well and provides unique insights into various aspects of the discourse. While I consider the (qualitative) analysis fairly convincing, there are some apparent limitations. First, the author does not clarify whether the analysis is based on Czech or English texts, which is relevant since some meaning could have been lost in translation. Second, the data selection and automated analysis introduced some biases. Google search introduces hidden personal bias (due to the personification of the search results), so replacing it with some news aggregator (like Factiva) would be more appropriate. While using ChatGPT is well justified (and increasingly common in processing language data), the thesis does not provide enough insight into how the results were verified. We are therefore left unsure whether some of the known LLM biases have not impacted the analysis (but the topical analysis is not the core of the findings). Third, I was not entirely convinced by the attempt to look for covariations. According to the theoretical framework, we assume the co-constitution of discourse and political actions. The results, on the other hand, suggest that the discourse mainly follows the events. I do not think the analytical framework allowed us to unpack the directionality of the relationship. I do not, however, fully agree with the claim that "finding and proving a definite causal link between the speech acts ... and outcomes is not feasible with any approach" (p.45). Yes, the constructivist approach avoids making causal claims (and "proving" is hardly possible in the social science), but, e.g., careful process tracing or interviews with leading figures could unpack how the shared meaning of the problems (as constructed in the discourse) contributed to the specific decisions and vice versa (in a co-constitutive manner). Fourth, I do not think the thesis compares quantitative and qualitative data (it is instead a covariation of the time series); it offers (indirect) comparison between the discursive construction of the two refugee events.

Even though I see the limitation in the quantitative parts of the discourse and migration outcomes analysis, I find the qualitative insight very insightful, well-elaborated, and justified. The conclusions like "Ukrainian refugees being constructed differently from Syrian, which however does not apply to Ukrainian Roma people" or "the threat to Czech population in securitizing discourse later included (besides migrants) the European Union" are not trivial and give merit to the thesis.

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Regarding the discursive construction, I find the following two aspects not fully elaborated:

- The differences between the two discursive constructions seem to partially stem from legal (regular) migrants being constructed differently from illegal (irregular) migrants. If so, the core of the analysis should focus on how Syrian migration has been constructed irregularly in the first place.
- It would be interesting to see 1) how the same logic worked (or did not work) in the other case, e.g., the argument that "real" refugees should stay in the first safe country and not come to Czechia was used in the case of Syria, but not in the case of Ukraine, why? 2) whether the same actors framed the two migration events differently (what was Fiala's stance on Syrian migrants? What was Okamura's stance on Ukrainians? etc.) – see also discussion question below.

Minor criteria:

The thesis is executed well. It meets all academic standards and provides a well-structured and coherent argument. The presentation could, however, be more effective.

- The thesis should include chapters and subchapters to help readers navigate the text. The subtitles could use better font – they are lost in the regular text. Some long sections (like Post-Socialist &Modern Czechia (p. 19-26) or Czech Migration Policy (p. 27-43) should use subtitles to divide the lengthy text into separate periods.
- I think some parts could be shortened, and the argument presented more concisely (but, e.g., the intro is very effective).
- The quantitative data are poorly presented – having one graph and commenting on the trends (without delving into percentage changes with two decimal numbers) would convey the message better.
- I am glad the author added the definitions of key terms, but I think presenting them in the introduction was a poor choice presentation-wise.

The thesis works with many relevant sources that are used well throughout the text. However, the bibliographic entries are not precise (combining different citation styles).

The final title of the thesis differs from the one registered in the SIS. This should be remedied before finalizing the thesis.

Assessment of plagiarism:

Based on Turnitin's anti-plagiarism check, all sources are properly used and cited.

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Overall evaluation:

The thesis discusses a highly relevant topic of IR. The author selected an appropriate analytical framework and executed it well. The critical discourse analysis is persuasive and provides some non-trivial results. I find the quantitative parts of the analysis comparatively less convincing, and the presentation could also be improved. The thesis meets very high academic standards, and I strongly recommend it for the defense.

Possible questions for the defense:

- To what extent was the "development" of the discourse driven by a change in the governing elites – Zeman -> Pavel, Sobotka/Chovanec/Babiš -> Fiala/Rakušan (as those individual actors seem to have relatively consistent stances)? Aren't you looking for the effects in the wrong place?
- I was surprised that the thesis has not directly addressed the question of racism (I would expect that from CDA, given the insight you provided). How do you see your results with respect to racism?

Suggested grade: A

Signature:

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