BACHELOR THESIS REVIEW

Type of review: *thesis supervisor*

Author: Yashar Isgandarov

Title: Comparative Analysis of Media and Free Speech Policy-Formulation in Semi-Democratic

Contexts: A Case Study of Georgia and Moldova

Supervisor: Mirna Jusić, M.A., Ph.D.

Reviewer: Mirna Jusić, M.A., Ph.D.

Please explain the reasons for your evaluation (especially reservations and criticisms) according to the criteria listed below.

1. Is the aim of the thesis (research question) clearly stated and do the conclusions correspond to it? Is the thesis appropriately structured?

Comments: The author states his research aim and research questions. The main aim is to "delve into the policy frameworks governing media and free speech in the selected nations, with a specific focus on freedom of access to information legislation and legislation on free speech. By honing in on these two critical areas, we aim to compare and contrast how each country addresses the fundamental aspects of democracy within its legal systems."

More precisely, the author aims to "uncover the specific ways in which each nation balances the protection of free speech with societal considerations such as cultural norms, political stability, and public safety. Additionally, we will explore how these countries manage access to information amidst varying degrees of government control and media independence." Thus, he aims to "highlight the challenges and compromises inherent in their policy-making processes." (p. 6) The author also specifies that he will focus on policy formulation in particular, as to understand "the processes through which these policies are developed and enacted." (p.6)

Later, the author also specifies that "this research aims to explore the intricacies of media policy formulation in Georgia and Moldova, investigating the internal and external factors that influence the creation of these policies." The reasoning is that that by examining how different conditions interact to shape media policy, policies as outcomes of these processes can be better understood. (p.7)

The research aims could have been stated more directly and more precisely, rather than repeating the aim numerous times and formulating it differently. While the author discusses the importance of both free speech and freedom of access to information (FOI), he does not mention in the introduction why these two particular areas of media policy have been chosen, possibly in connection to what kind of policy developments have taken place in these two countries which may merit the focus on these particular policy realms.

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In his methodological part, the author poses two research questions:

1. How are freedom of access to information and free speech policies framed in media reports and politicians' statements in Georgia and Moldova?
2. What are the predominant frames used in shaping the policy debates on freedom of access to information and free speech in these countries? (p. 17).

The research aims are broader than the research questions. The conclusions of the thesis generally correspond to the research questions, but could be in a better, more direct correspondence with the aims of the thesis (see more on this under Question 4 below).

The thesis is properly structured. The author first introduces the the focus of the study and the research aim. A literature review follows, as well as the theoretical framework on the Multiple Streams Framework. A comprehensive methodology section (data and methods) is provided. The author subsequently showcases the findings, followed by a discussion and a conclusion.

2. Is the thesis based on relevant research and literature and does it accurately summarize and integrate the information?

Comments: The author has studied and referred to relevant research and literature in his work, especially important comparative work such as that by Hallin and Mancini (2004). However, the literature review on the situation in Moldova and Georgia is somewhat repetitive and incomplete. For instance, the author mentions only freedom of speech legislation in his policy overview of both countries, but omits the freedom of access to information legislation. These laws are only mentioned later on, in the methodological section. The author has also added some of the literature on the media systems in semi-democratic regimes, but this part could have been a bit more detailed and exhaustive, as it is not clear which countries the mentioned studies refer to. Since it is addressed, it would have been good to mention the recent relationship between Georgia and Moldova and the EU (both countries received became candidates for accession as of 2023).

One note – Multiple Streams is not a theory, as Chapter 3 suggests, but a framework (MSF).

3. What is the quality of the data or the other sources? Are the sample method, data collection and data analysis appropriate?

Comments: The thesis makes use of a qualitative content analysis and frame analysis. For the content analysis, the data collected stem from legal documents (relevant laws and their amendments), from policy papers and reports. Each document was reviewed to identify key themes. The documents were subsequently coded, using pre-defined coding from research questions / literature review. Coding was performed using the Taguette software; this was followed by categorization and thematic analysis. For the framing analysis, the author refers to Entman's (1993) elements of frames (problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation) to guide his analysis. However, from the analysis itself, it is unclear how these concrete categories have been applied, as they are not explicitly mentioned.

The author subsequently compared how different stakeholders used frames, and how the frames were utilized in the two different country contexts (pp. 24-25). Findings from both countries (policy debates on freedom of access to information and free speech) were compared to identify similarities and differences (p. 26-27), and to examine how the framing strategies utilized in the two countries reflect the contextual differences (factors such as legacy of Soviet rule, influence of political elites, role of international organizations).

The author also includes sections on ethical considerations and limitations of the methods used.

However, there are some unclarities regarding the methodological approach. The reports that the author incorporates, such as the ones from Reports without Borders, which highlight issues such as self-censorship and political influences, point more to the outcomes (lack of implementation of laws, and as a result, threatened free speech or access to information) rather than the policy formulation stage, which the author looks to study.

Moreover, the selection of reports is unclear. Since the author has aimed to look at core reforms during a 20-year period, has he used reports that cover the entire period, or the most recent ones? It is unclear from the methodological section how reports were chosen and how many were analyzed. The same pertains to the media articles and editorials, and for the transcripts and records of parliamentary debates in the two countries (what number of documents, what years).

For the codes included (such as "access procedures" "exemptions" and "public interest", p. 24), mentioned as part of the content analysis, it is not immediately clear how and whether they relate to the conceptual framework (specifically, the MSF).

The validation of findings (through peer review) is mentioned on p. 27, and then again on p. 29, but no further information is provided on how this was performed.

I appreciate the inclusion of coding from the Taguette database in the Appendix.

4. Are the findings relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions of the thesis based on strong arguments?

Comments: In the Findings section, the work is written mainly from the perspective of the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), stating that "the section examines how the problem, policy and politics streams converge to shape media and free speech policies" in these two countries. (p.31). However, focusing on all three streams would require somewhat different, more encompassing, research questions, not only those focused on framing, which in the MSF is mainly related to the problem definition and subsequent policy solutions.

Moreover, the Findings section mainly highlights challenges to implementation (which can be relevant for the problem stream, if they initiate amendments / changes). However, the MSF is usually applied to the agenda setting / policy formulation and decision-making stages of the policy process, rather than the implementation phase, at researchers usually use it to explain how and why issues make it onto the agenda, and how policy proposals are subsequently developed and adopted. It can be relevant for implementation as well, but this has to be operationalized (e.g. in the problem stream, focusing on what conditions of implementation are highlighted as a problem by policy actors; in the policy stream, how policies are interpreted by policy communities, or what resources/measures are proposed for implementation; and in the politics stream, how different political interests/positions influence decisions on how policies will be implemented). The shift in focus to implementation is somehow inconsistent with the previous aim of the study, which related to policy formulation (according to the Introduction, p. 6).

Thus, while the author mainly refers to general challenges in implementation (which are also framed as a problem by some media outlets and civil society), we don't find out much about the process of policy-making more concretely (e.g. have certain problem definitions been influential in shaping new reforms in this field? How have different policy actors acted / reacted?), in line with

the main concepts of the MSF. Rather, the framework is applied in a general way (pp. 31-36), where some of the core concepts that are a part of each stream are not integrated in the application. The application is somehow more straight-forward when the author discusses the convergence of the three streams for Georgia (pp. 39-40), referring to how reforms were adopted in the first place, thus shifting back to policy formulation and adoption.

The thesis does well in outlining the challenges to implementation and the commonalities of the two countries in that regard. As the author notes on p. 46, "one of the key insights that emerged from this research is the significant impact of political interference and bureaucratic barriers on the implementation of access to information laws;" as well as "the persistent challenge of media ownership concentration and political pressures on free speech." However, in relation to the claim that "the identification of policy windows and the analysis of the convergence of different streams provide valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges for policy change," one can comment that this has not been done systematically, in line with the MSF.

Another comment is that the results from both countries generally point to the same challenges, and are not nuanced / contextualized enough. This makes it sound as if the situation is almost the same in both settings (except as the described lack of a policy window in Moldova when it comes to reforms).

The author mentions multiple times that the respective legal frameworks in both countries are robust, but are not adequately implemented. However, it is unclear what the evidence to support this statement is. It would have been good to refer to the analysis of the substance of the laws (e.g. by Council of Europe) to support such statements.

5. Are the author's thoughts distinguished unambiguously from the borrowed ideas?

Comments: In the analysis and the discussion of findings, the author reflects upon his research findings with own original thoughts, interpreting the results with a reference to different theoretical concepts and the results of relevant studies in the realm. His thoughts appear to be unambiguously distinguished from the ideas of other authors that are referred to throughout the thesis.

6. What is the quality of style and other formal requirements?

Comments: The style of the paper is academic. It meets the formal requirements in terms of layout, page numbers, spelling/grammar and punctuation, and the use of references.

Some minor comments: Regarding the mention of MSF chapter from the Theories of the Policy Process book (p. 16) in the text, year and authors should have been added. The sources "European Endowment for Democracy, 2020" (p. 12) and Parliament of Moldova (multiple pages) are missing from the bibliography.

7. Are there any other strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, which are not included in the previous questions? Please list them if any.

Other comments: In the theoretical framework, a description of what the three streams constitute are combined with somewhat general statements regarding empirical studies on media policies. This could have been separated and explained more directly. For instance, after discussing what the politics stream (part of MSF) entails, the author notes that "research by Entman (2012) and Puppis (2017) contributes to understanding the interplay of political forces and interests in shaping media policies within democratic framework." (p. 15) How so? In what settings?

Moreover, the theoretical framework could have been explained in more detail, introducing core assumptions of the MSF, as well as the core concepts for each stream, such as indicators/focusing events/feedback for the first stream; policy communities and 'selection criteria' for the second stream; changes in governments after elections, or general national mood for the third. Moreover, the role of policy entrepreneurs as a core structural element of the framework is not mentioned in the theoretical part.

MSF researchers usually come up with some general theoretical expectations concerning their subjects of interest (Zohlnhöfer, Herweg, and Zahariadis 2022). The author could have explained what he expects to find for these particular cases of media reform, in line with the core concepts inherent to the MSF.

8. What topic do you suggest for the discussion in the thesis defence?

I would suggest mainly to discuss in more details the focus of the thesis (formulation / implementation), how the MSF has been applied, and how it connects to the research questions and aims.

9. I declare that I have checked the result of the originality check of the thesis:
[ ] Theses [**x**] Turnitin [ ] Ouriginal (Urkund)

Comment on the result of the check: The Turnitin similarity score is low (14%), with all potentially used sourced similar in the extent of less than 1%. There are no evident problems with referencing.

Overall evaluation of the thesis:

(Please, state clearly whether the thesis is or is not recommended for a defence and write the main reasons for the recommendation).

I recommend the thesis for defense, as this is a generally well-written BA thesis studying the policy frameworks on freedom of speech and freedom of access to information in semi-democratic countries, and challenges in implementing such legislation. The work is well-structured. Relevant literature has been used, and no referencing issues are recorded. However, the findings should be in a more direct correspondence with the research aims, at least as formulated in the introduction, and the theoretical framework chosen could have been applied more thoroughly.

Proposed grade: *(A - F)*
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Date: 3/9/2024 Signature:

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