

CHARLES UNIVERSITY IN PRAGUE
Faculty of Social Sciences
Institute of International Studies

PROTOCOL ON DIPLOMA THESIS ASSESSMENT
(Supervisor)

Name of the student: Alexander Purton

Title: The Steppe Tradition of Geopolitics: Implications for Post-Soviet Reimperialization

Supervisor: Slavomír Horák

1. TOPIC AND OBJECTIVE (short information on the thesis, research objective):

The author focused his extremely voluminous thesis on the thorough historical and political science analysis of the Russian (Soviet, post-Soviet Russian) empire defined (even in the title) within the Steppe Tradition. It seeks the answer to the question of to what extent we can explain contemporary Russia (and its predecessors – Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union) using this paradigm. The author follows the concept of predestination of the Steppe Empire legacy and traditions and demonstrates how these traditions manifest themselves both in the past and today, including Russian involvement in Central Asia space.

2. CONTENT (complexity, original approach, argument, structure, theoretical and methodological backing, work with sources, appropriateness of annexes etc.):

We can, of course, discuss and even challenge the main setting of the Russian empire as defined by the “Steppe”. Moreover, Russian thinkers and political philosophers provide many different concepts (Steppe vs. Forest character, Eurasianist location, etc.) based on geography, multi-ethnicity, mixing of cultures and the impact of foreign influences. Nevertheless, the author brings a valuable contribution to the long-discussed questions on Russian Imperialism, its declines and revivals with a crucial focus on the latter aspect of the revival, following the concept developed by Alexander Motyl. The thesis also tried to shed light on the nature of the current Putinist’s regime in Russia and its approach to internal politics and foreign policy, particularly towards its neighbours (including the explanation of the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine).

3. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE (quality of language, citation style, graphics, formal aspects etc.):

The formal editing is fully within the academic norms. Probably the only remark could be dedicated to the footnote style that resembles the Chicago/APA ruler rather than standard footnotes with the full quotation.

4. STATEMENT ON THE ORIGINALITY OF THE THESIS

The thesis was checked by the Turnitin anti-plagiarism software with minimal correspondence with other sources.

5. SHORT COMMENTS BY THE REVIEWER (overall impression, strengths and weaknesses, originality of ideas, achievement of the research objective etc.):

The text represents one of the most comprehensive Master theses I have ever supervised and evaluated in my academic life. I can underline that it fulfils the criteria not only for a Master's level but, in most ways, even for a PhD level. The student demonstrated an extraordinarily high level of erudition. He proved his orientation in many fields, from history and historiography through linguistics and

philosophy to political science. His wide education, including extensive language abilities and deep knowledge of Eurasian continent histories, enabled him to create highly balanced and complex text. He also shows the ability for deep analytical skills in the above-mentioned disciplines.

Nevertheless, despite a generally positive view of the thesis, we could also mention several critical aspects. In many ways, the text's extensive character disperses the author's attention as the main problem and topic of the text. Some parts of the text, with its intensive and extensive background with a substantial number of thematic "sidewalks", do not indicate clearly, to what extent they contribute to answering the research questions. Jumping through different historical periods and geographical regions, he does not consider the geographical and historical specifics. How, for example, did the details of the different Steppe empires' rulership in Africa or the Arabic peninsula really impact Russian Imperialism or Central Asian geopolitics? How did the historical ruling circumstances of the different Eurasian Steppe empires leak into the more recent or contemporary political regimes (such as Tsarist Russia, Soviet Empire or the Putinist system in contemporary Russia? The partial answer could have been Figure 7 (p. 99) or figure 13 (p. 156), but even here, the eventual sequence of ruling institutions seems to hold rather constructivist than an explanatory character.

The absence of political philosophy or "political science" of the particular period seems to be another shortcoming of the thesis. If speaking about the nature of the Russian "Steppe Empire character", the past and contemporary debates about this should not certainly be omitted from such a complex analysis. I understand that it would open yet another chapter of the text and extend the already large text, but in the case of a scientific monograph exclusion of discussions between historians, political scientists or historiographers from Nezamolmolk or Yusuf Balasaguni through the Russian historians of the 19th and the 20th century (such as Chaadaev, Vernadsky, Gumilev, Savitsky, Trubetskoi) or Turkish Eurasianists (Yusuf Akçura, Attila İlhan et al.) up to the contemporary authors writing about the Steppes in the academia (Igor Panarin, Marlene Laruelle, Nurbulat Masanov, Iver Neumann, Alexander Morrison among many others).

6. COOPERATION WITH THE SUPERVISOR (communication with the supervisor, ability to reflect comments, shift from the original intention, etc.)

The student demonstrated his ability to work independently, especially with his supervisor, who could not always answer his requests promptly. Despite my fears that the student took a wide stance and the initial fragmentation of the previous versions, he accomplished a convincing final result that represents highly mature scholar skills. He could define the topic (despite several changes made during the working process) and accomplish it to the final product. In this way, I appreciated the substantial progress from the initial ideas to the final result, which has a clear and logical structure as well as an exhaustive factual aspect.

7. QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS THAT SHOULD BE ADDRESSED DURING THE DEFENCE:

The whole text raises many fruits for discussions, as it advances important questions about whether historical development is determined by the legacy of the specific historical, geographical, societal, or environmental setting or the combination of actual factors within the particular period.

In this regard, this traditional question between (titles are metaphoric) the "school of historical determinism" (those who believe that a fundament of historical development is predestined by its past and long-term settings) and the "school of historical coincidence" (believing that historical development can be part of the actual political, geopolitical, economic, social and setting in the leadership). Is the Russian state pre-destined to be a Steppe empire or an autocracy, or does the actual regime represent a momentous power arrangement? Does the author think that the Russian Empire (in whatever form) cannot be influenced by external factors to transform itself from the Steppe (Tribute) Empire to a rather hybridised form or even sedentary form of rulership, as in the case of Hungary or the Ottoman Empire/Turkey? Or, are these three positions – the Steppe form of the empire, sedentary

or hybrid ones (including contemporary Hungary or Turkey) – determined to swing from one to another based on the actual elite composition, geopolitical settings (i.e. external factors) or other aspects? To what extent did/do the administrations of the Russian Empire (the Soviet Union, post-Soviet Russia) adopt the previous models of the Steppe Empire organisation, and what was/is the result of the actual situation? Or does a particular administration form represent the result of natural processes based on the necessity to manage the large (and often scarcely populated) territory?

At the same time, speaking about the Central Asian region, how does the Steppe Empire legacy or character explain such diverse styles of authoritarian regimes (both geographically and in the timeline) that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union? Were these differences also historically determined with no way out? How to understand the up/down trajectories of the authoritarianism in Kyrgyzstan, the personalism (and subsequent regime character in Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan) or personality cults in Turkmenistan?

Of course, these questions go far beyond the defence's time span. Nevertheless, the author should consider them when studying the Steppe Empire's transforming legacy.

8. (NON-)RECOMMENDATION AND SUGGESTED GRADE:

Even though the text certainly raises a heated academic discussion, the Master thesis of Alexander Purton could undoubtedly be recommended for the defence with **evaluation A**. Despite its large scope (far exceeding the standard theses), he kept the texts mostly consistent (with some remarks mentioned in this review). I strongly recommend the student go through another round of expert reviews (from other historians, political scientists or philosophers) and consider the publication of his thesis (after some modifications and adjustments) as the text represents a valuable contribution to the academic world.

Date: August 21, 2024

Signature: