

**Evaluation of the doctoral thesis of Kristian Földes,  
*Identity and state action – The case of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia  
during the European Schengen crisis* (revised version)**

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## **Note**

This evaluation is limited to my expertise in the field of discourse studies, and its contribution to the study of political discourse and ideologies related to the so-called “refugee crisis”, appropriately called the “European Schengen Crisis” in the thesis and its very title.

## **Introduction**

Many of the studies about the so-called “refugee crisis” have been carried out within the field of political science. Therefore, one of the major contributions of the thesis is its multidisciplinary framework, combining theories in political science, and especially International Relations, with theories and methods of discourse studies. Such a framework is especially relevant because the empirical data of the thesis, and many aspects of the “crisis” itself, are discursive, as is the case for parliamentary debates and discourses of governments and political leaders.

The second most important contribution of the thesis is the analysis of political discourse in Central Europe (the V4 group), and in particular in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, whereas most earlier studies are limited to such discourse in Western Europe.

The third major contribution is to the field of political science more generally, because most detailed and systematic studies of political discourse are carried out in the field of discourse studies and not by political scientists.

A fourth major contribution, itself multidisciplinary, is the political, discursive and social psychological study of identity, both of refugees as well as of the countries of Central Europe, and how these identities are discursively legitimizing the denial of asylum to refugees.

No doubt another major contribution, about which however I am unable to judge, is the study of EU integration as related to decision making about the reception of refugees in Central Europe and the policies in Brussels, a topic relevant to both IR and history.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

Besides a systematic content and discourse analysis of political discourse in Central Europe about refugees, the thesis offers a multidisciplinary theoretical framework, based on an extensive literature review. Specifically relevant for this evaluation is first the theoretical approach to the study of political beliefs underlying the political discourse about refugees. The thesis reviews in detail the studies in several disciplines about nationalist, racist (nativist) and conservative ideologies, on the one hand, and humanitarian and multicultural ideologies about (non-European) refugees, on the other hand.

Related to the study of political and social ideologies is the multidisciplinary study of national, regional and group identities underlying the political discourse about migration in general, and the arrival of refugees in particular. Referring to studies in several disciplines, including social psychology, the thesis shows how ideologies and identities are systematically related to language, discourse and communicative interaction, as is for instance the case for pragmatic studies of speech acts accomplished by political discourse.

Relevant throughout the thesis is the fundamental ideological polarization between ingroup (US) and outgroup (THEM) organizing discourse about refugees, thus showing how ideologies are always adapted to the current political context such as the current Schengen Crisis. In this perspective the thesis draws on and contributes to the field of discourse studies, in which a systematic relation is established between polarized discourse structures and underlying sociopolitical ideologies.

These theories of discourse-related identities and ideologies in several disciplines are discussed in a more general framework of the role of constructivism in political science, thus contributing to the theoretical coherence of the thesis.

## **Methodology**

Within the general framework and aims of the thesis, the methodology chosen in the thesis is a combination of qualitative content analysis and (critical) discourse analysis, crucial for detailed and systematic empirical study of political discourse about refugees. The corpus of analysis combined transcripts of parliamentary debates in Hungary and Slovakia, discourses of Orbán, the Czech and Slovak government websites.

Using MAXQDA, the procedure of qualitative content analysis applied is detailed and systematic, consisting of lexically based coding in two steps of relevant sections on immigration, asylum and refugees, followed by several steps of thematic and finally critical analysis, so that not only explicit data but also implicit meanings are assessed. Using especially (also) the work of Wodak & Meyer, specific analysis is focused on nomination (e.g. as what refugees or the current crisis are described) and argumentation, e.g. in the form of standard arguments (topoi), especially relevant how opinions on immigration (such as rejection of refugee applications) are legitimized.

The major discursive strategies analyzed are positive and negative self- and other-presentation, metaphors, irony, topoi, polarization, lexicalization, evidentiality, and victimization, all very relevant for the detailed study of discourse on immigration and refugees.

## **Analysis**

Within the multidisciplinary theoretical framework, uniquely combining political science on the one hand, social psychology and discourse studies, on the other hand, the unique and original empirical contribution of the thesis is provided in what is called “The Empirical Part” (Chapter 5) consisting of a systematic analysis of refugee-related parliamentary and government discourse in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

In the discussion of similarities and differences between countries, it is regrettable that the tables and figures of relevant codes/themes are only referred to in the text but actually only shown in the (extensive) Appendices, as is for instance the case for data about coded topics used by government and opposition parties and the temporal changes and session-dependent of the use of such topics. Such analyses are especially relevant for a political (party-based) analysis of the use of dominant topics, such as their

prominence in government party in Hungary and opposition parties in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Besides the political (party-based) distribution of topics, a very relevant second part provides frequency tables of the various themes in the three countries, ranging from the topic of the sources and management of migration, humanism and social and political aspects, borders, the EU and the most frequent themes of the “refugee crisis” and security themes, with the highest frequencies in Hungary.

Whereas the qualitative content analysis in terms of general topics (or themes) and their frequencies among different parties and in different countries, give a general idea what the politicians talk about during this “crisis”, the third part presents a critical discourse analysis with detailed insight in *what* the politicians are actually saying and *how* they do so.

In the revised version of the thesis, this analysis is systematized in terms of tables that not only give fragments of actual text or talk, but also data about the speaker/author, his or her party affiliation and ideology and relevant discourse strategies. It is this part of the thesis that is closest to systematic critical discourse analysis, and obviously also very relevant for scholars in other disciplines. It is here that is shown how specific nationalist, racist and other ideologies are expressed and communicated in political discourse, in which parties and which countries, and how exactly the national identities and the identities of the refugees are construed.

This detailed qualitative analysis of political discourse, shows how such discourse in Hungary is specifically prominent for members of Jobbik, emphasizing negative Other-presentation, and the topoi of burden, threat and security, expressing underlying Far-Right ideology. The discourse of members of other parties in Hungary, expressing more centre-left and green ideologies, rather focuses on such topoi as responsibility, demography, and rationality. A detailed analysis of the speeches of Orbán shows his focus on the threat from Others to Hungarian identity, a threat emphasized by multicultural EU policies, thus construing a positive Hungarian Model, explained in detail in the thesis.

In Slovak political discourse, especially the theme of illegal, economic asylum seekers is emphasized, and the analysis of detailed fragments shows various conservative (or liberal-conservative) ideologies, with topoi such as those of fear, negative other presentation, economic burden but also of humanitarianism, about EU policies of distribution. Interesting to see in the analysis is that even in the discourse of social democratic politicians, the topoi of security, economic burden, and negative other-presentation are expressed. Using the metaphor of “the same boat”, Prime Minister Fico thus focuses on the topic of the criteria for the rational distribution of refugees, aiming at a consensus among government and opposition.

The analysis of politicians in Czech parliament, shows – as elsewhere – the theme of illegal immigrants, but also – somewhat less common (but an old stereotype) the topic of diseases of immigrants. Right-wing populist speakers thus emphasize the topoi of fear, danger, security and economic burden. Seeking consent, Prime Minister Sobotka critically commenting on EU distribution policies, also discusses the topic of the integration of immigrants in the country and (limited) rights of social security for illegal immigrants, at the same time positively representing the country, and its cooperation with other V4 countries.

The general conclusions of this detailed qualitative discourse analysis of political discourse on refugees in the three countries provide an empirically based explanation of the role of the identity construction of both refugees and the country as explanation of the immigration policies and their (critical) relation to EU policies. It is also here that

the thesis shows how this detailed discourse analysis fills a gap in current IR studies of migration and the relations between the three countries and the EU, especially in terms of the sovereignty of each country.

Most of the qualitative discourse analysis is carried out in terms of various standard argumentation schemas (topoi). Obviously, these are still quite general and schematic, and do not yet show how exactly they are expressed in text and talk. For instance, the topos of Threat may be expressed in many ways and differently by different politicians and parties. For instance, the Extreme Right, may use more negative ways of exaggerating the alleged threat of refugees. Unfortunately, some of the discursive strategies that were aimed to be analyzed, e.g. beyond the typical ideological Positive Self-Presentation and Negative Other-Presentation and other topoi, such as metaphors, irony, or evidentiality are only rarely observed and usually do not appear in the schematic analysis of the discourse fragments of individual speakers.

## Conclusions

This thesis is an excellent, multidisciplinary study of political discourse in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, about the “Schengen Crisis” in the context of the arrival of many refugees and EU policies of their distribution over EU countries.

After a detailed discussion of different theoretical frameworks in political science and IR, its specific and original contribution is to offer a detailed content and discourse analysis as empirical methods. Thematic coding offered a detailed perspective of how governments and members of different parties focus on the main topics associated with the arrival of many refugees, such as questions of security on the one hand, and integration on the other hand. Detailed discourse analysis of fragments of the discourses of leaders and parliamentarians more specifically shows how the standard arguments (topoi) about the identity immigrants as well as the self-perception of the country are used to challenge EU distribution policies of refugees.

In this sense, the thesis is a unique contribution to political science and IR, fields in which detailed qualitative discourse analysis is rare, and more often carried out by linguists and discourse analysts. When published, it offers students and other scholars in political science and excellent example how discourse analysis may be a valuable approach in qualitative research.

The research design of the thesis is classical in the sense of first providing a detailed political and historical description of a prominent issue: the “refugee” or “Schengen” crisis, followed by a detailed discussion of relevant theoretical frameworks in political science that may be relevant for the study of this issue. New in this case is the inclusion of theories of discourse studies and social psychology. In this historical and political context and the available theoretical frameworks, it is decided what aspects of the issue are studied: the attribution of identities of Self (the country) and the Other (the refugees) as foundation for national migration policies critical of EU policies. Finally, to study these identities, both qualitative content analysis as well as more detailed discourse analysis is chosen and carried out.

In each of the relevant chapters of the thesis, literature reviews are detailed using a large number of relevant references not only in political science, but also in discourse studies and social psychology.

Data collection of the thesis is impressive with a selection of a large corpus of parliamentary debates in the three countries, government websites and speeches of Prime Ministers.

From my point of view, the most original contribution of the thesis is no doubt the detailed, systematic and explicit analysis of many aspects of official political discourse in the three countries, much beyond superficial code-and-count content analysis, with relevant qualitative content analysis of the general themes discussed by politicians, in which party and which country, followed by a unique qualitative, critical discourse analysis of a large number of personal discourse fragments. It is in this analysis that we see in specific detail what arguments (topoi) and other discourse structures are used to legitimate the especially negative reactions to EU distribution policies of refugees, and what broader ideologies are shared by different politicians, parties and countries.

Unfortunately, I am unable to judge the sophisticated discussion of the various political models used in the account of the discourse data, e.g., the Hungary Model of Orbán, and those of other leaders. It is this kind of analysis that would also be relevant to discourse analysts accounting for the macro schemas of political discourse.

On the basis of this very positive evaluation of this thesis, I recommend that it should be defended.