

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Applicant

Mgr. Petr Ocelík, Ph.D.

Habilitation thesis

Energy transition from a political science perspective:
Selected cases

Reviewer

Prof. Dr. Kacper Szulecki

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The cumulative habilitation thesis “Energy transition from a political science perspective: Selected cases” by Petr Ocelík constitutes an important addition to the international scholarly debate on at least three levels. Firstly, it contributes to the growing literature on the politics of energy transition. Secondly, four of the five articles which make up the thesis bring the important and otherwise under-researched case of the Czech Republic to the attention of scholars and analysts abroad. And finally, and I dare say - most importantly – Petr Ocelík’s methodological aptitude and consistency move political science research forward in several thematic areas and are a clear trademark of this talented scholar.

Political science’s contribution to the study of energy transitions is late in coming and still limited, even though understanding the political dynamics of decarbonization and technological change may well be the most pressing problem of the century. Regarding this first level, that is the contribution towards analysing energy transitions as political processes, the thesis component articles combine the focus on the discursive side of political contests with an actor focused approach. This appears to be the organizational principle of the thesis, that is, the order in which articles are arranged – from the study of Russian foreign energy policy discourses to a study of social networks operating at the local level in Czechia. We move further away from the way actors represent political issues and problems and more towards the relational arrangements and constellations, that is – the way actors act.

The study of energy transitions from a political perspective is still a relatively new area of inquiry, and for that reason, exploratory studies such as those (co)authored by Dr. Ocelík, are very valuable, mapping the landscape of political conflicts, showing both what the key actors

are saying, what communication strategies and rhetorical tactics they employ, what epistemic communities they form, and finally, how they interact with each other.

The scope and breadth of this endeavour is already telling. Dr. Ocelík engages with several subdisciplines of Political Science with equal prowess. Starting with International Relations, and gradually moving through Public Policy Analysis to arrive at an important contribution to Political Sociology. This says a lot about the impetus of his work, and his own ability to explore new sub-fields, indicating clear and remarkable progress since his doctoral thesis defence – which is perhaps the most important expectation from a habilitation thesis.

As noted, the second level on which Petr Ocelík's work makes an important addition to the field is also empirical and related to the in-depth exploration of the Czech case, to which 4 out of 5 papers in the cumulative habilitation are devoted. Often overlooked as part of the allegedly monolithic 'Eastern Europe', Czech Republic – the fourth most industrialized country in Europe, as Ocelík notes – is in many ways pivotal for the energy transition, if not because of its size then because whatever decarbonization policies can work in Czechia, can in principle work in any of the 'hardest' cases.

While single case study research has important limitations, of which the author is well aware and makes it clear in several places, their knowledge-building role should not be dismissed. Importantly, Dr. Ocelík knows how to communicate the significance of the Czech case beyond its singularity, that is to say, identifying what it is a case of. In two of the articles, it is portrayed as an example of an adversarial subsystem (studies II and IV), and its dynamics are analysed both from a discourse and an actor-centred perspective. Elsewhere, he underlines the importance of post-communist politics both in itself and as a counterpart to Western liberal democratic politics – showing their proximity beyond apparent differences. This again makes for a contribution to several subdisciplines, particularly Public Policy Analysis and Comparative Politics.

The Russia case study (Study I) should also be praised as a topical and interesting work on an important issue, and the current political context makes this paper additionally valuable through the insight it gives into the way Russian policymakers see, frame, and understand key elements of the energy landscape.

Arguably the strongest side and the greatest contribution made by Petr Ocelík in his postdoctoral work is methodological innovation. He juggles different qualitative and

quantitative approaches with expertise, and hardly ever allows himself to draw conclusions not backed by methodologically sound evidence. This is very important from a disciplinary perspective. To all the critics of social science research, citing its apparent lack of rigour, Ocelík provides a very strong rebuttal. This is clear throughout the cumulative habilitation thesis, but perhaps most clearly in Studies I-III, that is those providing a discourse-oriented approach. In Study I, the authors engage with constructivist theorizing in International Relations as well as Discourse Analysis (of more than one kind), but operationalize their concepts in a highly transparent manner, building on (quantitative) content analysis techniques combined with a well-structured research design employing the notion of frames. Study II is able to convincingly show the evolution of both discourses and actor coalitions over time, using appropriate analytical techniques, while Study III provides a very good and methodologically grounded backing for a thesis which was perhaps clear to observers of the Czech political scene – that is the importance of President V. Klaus for the denialist rhetoric prevalent in the country. Studies II-V all use network analysis of different kinds, allowing the author to draw interesting and at times non-intuitive conclusions from the material analysed. While employing network analysis methods do the study of actor coalitions is not unconventional, the way Ocelík combines network-based methods and content analysis is really inventive.

What suffers a bit in the process is theory-building, as the works presented in the habilitation set are primarily empirical and problem-oriented. There is, however, visible potential for theoretical innovation in the material presented, and we can only hope that Dr. Ocelík can be bolder and more self-confident in proposing his own conceptual and theoretical contributions in the years to come.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence

Question 1: Discourse-focused studies tend to be static, describing structured of meaning and representations that are not easily changed. What is, in your view, the biggest challenge in tracing the *evolution* of actors' policy preferences and positions through media discourse over a period of time, as proposed in Study II?

Question 2: Where do you see the main ontological and epistemological obstacles in combining discourse-focused and actor or network-focused approaches? How do you overcome them in your work?

Question 3: In practical terms, what are the main factors that shape Czech energy and climate policy and what is needed to set the country on a more ambitious decarbonization path in line with the Paris Agreement?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled “Energy transition from a political science perspective: Selected cases” by Mgr. Petr Ocelík, Ph.D. **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Political Science.

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Signature:

