

Masaryk University**Faculty**

Faculty of Social Studies

Applicant

Miriam Matejova

Habilitation thesis

Environmental disasters and political activism

Reviewer

doc. Mgr. Michal Kolmaš, Ph.D.

**Reviewer's home unit,
institution**Metropolitan University Prague, Center for Security
Studies

The thesis by Miriam Matejova focuses on the impact of disasters on political activism/political change. It contains three articles published in respectable journals and a book chapter published in a respectable commercial publisher. I will elaborate on the contributions Miriam makes in these in detail, but to summarize it up front, I believe that the habilitation thesis provides a solid contribution to the literature of environmental disasters and their political and social implications, which stands on rigorous methodological footings. It therefore fulfils, in my view, all the requirements put on habilitation theses. That said, however, I do have several questions regarding the theoretical standpoints Miriam uses, as well as a few notes on the viability of the applicant's approach for future research. But I will get to that in due time.

Political activism surrounding environmental disasters is an increasingly important topic in both empirical politics and social science research. Due to the fast approaching climate catastrophe, disasters are becoming increasingly frequent and severe. Climate-derived disasters such as floods and draughts have stormed over both the developing and developed nations and have increased pressure on their representatives to act. The 2022 decision to create the Loss and Damage fund at the UNFCCC Conference of Parties in Sharm el-Sheikh has, for instance, arguably been significantly influenced by the devastating floods that hit Pakistan during the conference. And yet, as the applicant notes, the research into the practical effects of disasters is relatively scarce. There are studies that focus on the effects of climate catastrophes on political and policy systems (Pelling and Dill 2010, Birkman et al 2010, Nohrstedt 2022 etc). Others focus on the implications for international trade (Oh and Reuveny 2010) or on social consequences such as community change (Arcaya et al 2020).

Here, Miriam makes two deliberate choices. First, she limits her endeavours (in this habilitation thesis) to industrial catastrophes (as opposed to natural ones discussed above). Second, she limits the impact of these catastrophes to social mobilisation (contrary to ie institutional or political change). While these choices necessarily limit the impacts of Miriam's work by delimiting the findings to a (albeit significant) fraction of the disaster research, both of the choices are discussed in the habilitation thesis and justified.

The articles as well as the introductory remarks are well positioned within the existing literature, and they choose a coherent line of inquiry. The three papers as well as the overall habilitation thesis constructs a strong research puzzle that fits with how contemporary research is stipulated (see Gustafsson and Hagstrom 2018). The methodologies the studies offer are perhaps the strongest parts of the thesis. The methodologies are carefully crafted, work with large data sets in both qualitative and quantitative ways, and offer state-of-the-art evaluations capable of producing highly relevant findings. This makes Miriam's work fit nicely with other high-standard studies in the discipline of environmental politics, that also often pride themselves in rigorous methodologies.

Empirically, the papers and a book chapter make meaningful contributions that can have political repercussions. Due to the careful methodological foundation of the studies, the conclusions that Miriam comes to are rigorous and based in significant empirical material.

That said, I do have three lines of questions/suggestions to the author regarding the theoretical foundations of her work, as well as regarding the possible contributions beyond the narrowly defined boundaries of industrial disasters.

First, while I see a strong point in the discussion of environmental disasters, I would appreciate a bit more on the theoretical evaluation of how they are socially constructed and how do these studies differ from previous research. The discussion of the social construction of empirical events has been pervasive in International Relations literature since at least the fourth great debate in the end of 1980s, when social constructivism entered the discipline. Concepts such as securitization have long been an IR jargon and have been applied to discuss similar phenomena (ie why is migration suddenly a security issue?). The thesis of Miriam Matejova does not work with this literature. Why is that? Is this literature not relevant to the study of disasters?

Second, while I see a strong contribution to the study of environmental politics (which is the point after all), I would like to hear more about the contribution towards social movement studies (SMS) and general sociological literature. While the author identifies her locus well (and the part about grievances makes a solid conceptual foundation for the paper), I am wondering whether there is more in the literature about the relationship between specific events and social movements? Grievances have also been approached from several angles, including, for instance, environmental grief and environmental justice and their impact on social attitudes (Lockwood 2016, Martinez-Alier et al 2016). In other words, I would like to hear more about the relationship of grievances to these other literatures, and what new it brings to SMS.

Third, while I appreciate the narrow focus the thesis makes into the study of industrial disasters and their impacts to climate movements and policies, I would also appreciate a bit more of a discussion on the replicability of the findings. Are industrial disasters in any way unique from the other previously discussed phenomena? Does the contribution the thesis makes have any relevance for our study of non-industrial disasters (or even other social phenomena)? While the thesis makes a persuasive case to study only industrial disasters, climate-related non-industrial disasters are more frequent and severe than industrial ones, and it would be very much welcome to focus on them as well.

These questions aside, as I wrote earlier, Miriam Matejova's portfolio is strong, rigorous and important. The presented articles and a chapter offer an excellent insight into an under-researched topic that warrants further investigation. The presented studies are carefully crafted, use state-of-the-art methodologies and work with large bulks of empirical data to produce relevant and important conclusions. I have therefore no qualms recommending Miriam for habilitation at Masaryk University and wish her the best of luck during the forthcoming proceedings.

References:

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Birkmann, J., Buckle, P., Jaeger, J. et al. (2010) Extreme events and disasters: a window of opportunity for change? Analysis of organizational, institutional and political changes, formal and informal responses after mega-disasters. *Nat Hazards* 55, 637–655

Nohrstedt, D. (2022). When do disasters spark transformative policy change and why?. *Policy & Politics*, 50(3), 425-441.

Oh, C. H and R. Rafael Reuveny (2010) Climatic natural disasters, political risk, and international trade, *Global Environmental Change*, 20 (2), 243-254

Arcaya, M., E. J. Raker and M. C. Waters (2020) The Social Consequences of Disasters: Individual and Community Change, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46: 671-691.

Gustafsson, K., Hagström, L. (2018) what is the point? teaching graduate students how to construct political science research puzzles. *Eur Polit Sci* 17, 634–648.

Lockwood, A. (2016) Graphs of grief and other green feelings: the uses of affect in the study of environmental communication. *Environmental Communication*, 10(6), 734–748.

Martinez-Alier, J., Temper, L., Del Bene, D., & Scheidel, A. (2016). Is there a global environmental justice movement? *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 43(3), 731–755.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)

As stated in the text:

- 1) How do you make use of social constructivist and social-constructivist-derived (ie securitization) literature? If not, then why?
- 2) Could you better identify the contribution towards social movement studies?
- 3) Are your findings regarding industrial disasters relevant for non-industrial disasters?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled *Environmental disasters and political activism* by *Miriam Matejova* fulfils requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Political science.

Date: July 16, 2024

Signature:

