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Review of the MA thesis of Jenny Fleischer

The Influence of Media on Protest Activities in Post-Soviet Semi-Authoritarian Regimes

Ms. Fleischer's master thesis investigates case studies of seven "protest waves" (p. 4) in four post-Soviet countries: the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Euromaidan Revolution (2014) in the Ukraine; the Tulip Revolution (2005) and the Second Kyrgyz Revolution (2010) in Kyrgyzstan; the Russian mass demonstrations in 2011/2012 and the Belarussian protests in 2010 and 2017. Grounded in document analysis and interviews with eight experts, the case studies specifically explore the role that different types of media played in these mobilizations, as well as the outcomes of these mobilizations.

I laude the student for this well-written and extraordinarily ambitious thesis. The study is overall thoroughly conducted. However, I would also argue that a number of weaknesses of the paper result from its overly broad scope. Four case studies, focusing on a broad range of aspects of social protest, can hardly be pursued with the limited resources available in the context of a master thesis. An even more convincing argument might have been developed, had the student selected only one or two cases for analysis and, in addition, narrowed in the research questions. Please let me detail in the following some aspects that I think could have been enhanced, or approached differently, in a more focused version of the paper.

Overall, the thesis is well structured. A theoretical part is followed by a methods, a findings, and a discussion/conclusion section. The content of section 3 should, however, have been incorporated into the findings section. In the current version, the findings section largely relies on data collected in the interviews. Yet, documentary analysis of newspaper articles, academic research and think tank reports is also part of a case study's "findings". This type of data can significantly contribute to the analysis.

The literature review of the thesis is comprehensive. It illustrates that the author has thoroughly read a broad range of studies. However, some of the claims formulated are too sweeping and should have been definitely supported by references, or have been formulated more modestly. Let me cite one example:

"But with the so-called Color Revolutions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the early 2000s as well as the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, protests have become more widespread even in authoritarian regimes." (p. 3)

This claim needs to be definitely supported with references to extant research. In a similar vein, page 8 does not feature a single reference, while it contains a great number of - potentially controversial - claims. Let me provide a third example:

"Previous research on the effect the mass media has on political participation is divided into newspapers, television and the internet. Each medium shows different characteristics regarding their influences on participation." (p. 23)

This categorization is probably taken from a specific piece of research that needs to be referenced.

With regard to methods, I find the strategy of case selection convincing. It is based on the outcome of the protests (two successful, two unsuccessful cases). However, I would suggest the author to reflect upon what these cases were "cases of". Was it "protest waves", as the author claims, or might the reference to "revolutions" have been a better choice?

As already stated above, the research questions were formulated too broad. Consider, for example RQ1: "How did the media play a role in mobilizing the protest waves of the countries analyzed and which kind of media (traditional or social) was more influential?" (p. 5). While the first part of the question may be answered based on a case study analysis, I find it difficult to even imagine a convincing, empirically grounded, answer to the second part based on the research design of the thesis.

Concerning the quality of argumentation, I commend the author for a well-written thesis. The findings and concluding thoughts are well presented - with minor exceptions. Let me point out but two examples. On p. 12, a word appears to be missing after "sending a 1000". „Social networking sides“ on p. 27 is misspelled.

After having voiced my concerns and my suggestions on how the study could have been enhanced, please let me again emphasize that this is an extraordinarily ambitious and well-written thesis. I commend the author for her great efforts and for presenting a

study, which I have very much enjoyed to read. I wish her all the best for her future career.

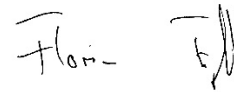
I grade the paper as follows:

Scale of the Free University of Berlin: 1,7

ECTS scale: B

Scale of St. Petersburg State University: 4

Percentage scale: 79%

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the name 'Florian' followed by a stylized surname 'Töpfl'.

Dr. Florian Töpfl