В диссертационный совет НИУ ВШЭ
по политологии

ОТЗЫВ
на диссертацию Захаровой Оlesi Викторовны
представленную на соискание ученой степени кандидата политических наук НИУ ВШЭ

1. Актуальность темы диссертации
In her PhD Olesya Zakharova discusses a highly topical matter in today’s world, including Russia, that is, human rights and in particular the development of the human rights discourse in Russia. She rightly argues that the given topic – broadly understood as the relationship between the state and citizens – requires also more discussion and problematizing in this geographical context. In her empirical analysis, Ms. Zakharova focuses on the human rights agenda of Russian presidents, which is approached from the point of view of the evolution of discourse, and in particular, that of argumentation and topos used in the human rights agenda of President Putin and President Medvedev. The analysis has also been put into a historical context of post-Soviet Russia, and the evolution of discourse accompanied by the changes in the level of legislation and policies regarding human rights has been tracked from the 1990s until the end of 2017. Studying the transformations in the discourse and practices of post-Soviet Russia from the 1990s until today is extremely important also from the point of view of imagining the variety of potential developments in the future.

The broader research problem of the thesis concerns the development or transformation of liberal concepts when they travel to a post-communist culture and face concepts of illiberal nature. This problem also requires our attention in today’s highly interconnected world.

2. Новизна полученных результатов и выводов
Regarding the research results and findings, what constitutes a novelty in the given PhD is a systematic analysis of the human rights discourse of Russian presidents – its themes and topos – and what they tell about the evolution of the agenda on human rights – and thus, also about the evolution of the context – a move from a post-Soviet transition to a more consolidated authoritarian regime. The PhD identifies the exact moment in time when the argumentation changed (two
periods: 2000-2014 and 2015-2017) and in addition gives evidence about differences between the argumentation of President Putin and President Medvedev.

3. Обоснованность научных положений и выводов, сформулированных в диссертации

Ms. Zakharova has conducted a systematic analysis of the evolution of human rights agenda of Russian presidents. In her analysis she uses the discursive historical model of Wodak and Reisigl and analyses the discourse on four different levels. She is clearly an expert in this model of analysis and this approach to study politics. In particular, she has focused on the analysis of argumentation and the use of topoi (or a Toulminian warrant – how the claims are justified). The model of analysis is carefully followed and the findings are convincing. The fourth, second and first levels of analysis are clearly documented and give interesting results. For example, Ms. Zakharova argues, with the help of the analysis of the first and second level, that there are two types of argumentation models, the first covering the years 2000-2014 and the second the years 2015-2017. The use of the concepts of human rights and democracy characterize the first period as well as its link with the concept of strong state. The findings concerning the relationship between ‘strong state’ and ‘human rights’, and the development that has taken place in this relationship constitute a significant result. According to Ms. Zakharova, the latter period is characterized by the lack of use of human rights - both thematically and as a topos - which is replaced by the topos of responsibility and humanism (and unity). This may also tell us a lot about the change in (the discourse of) the domestic and foreign policy in general.

4. Замечания по диссертационной работе

Ms. Zakharova has taken into account most of the comments previously made by the Dissertation Committee, and has revised the dissertation accordingly. There are still a few remarks that I would like to make.

1) The Conclusions represent a summary of the key findings of the PhD based the analysis of the primary data, and mainly those based on the first and second level of analysis. In the Chapter 1, Ms. Zakharova does refer to the literature on discourse analysis and argumentation analysis and human rights, however, in the conclusions she does not return to these discussions– i.e. neither to the methodological literature nor to the human rights literature, and thus, does not properly contextualise her findings within previous studies.

2) Related to the comment made above, there is very little discussion in the thesis about the meaning of the analysis – i.e. what the results of this analysis would mean more broadly, or what kind of contribution this research makes to the field of Political Science. One of
the reasons for this might be that the third level of the analytical model of Wodak and Reisigl is not explicitly used and hardly discussed at all.

3) It is not always clear to the reader how all the topoi identified in the Chapter 3.3 are linked with human rights argumentation. E.g. some examples such as the topos of responsibility used to justify the actions in Syria, or some examples regarding the topos of threat do not seem to explicitly refer to human rights argumentation.

4) The research question itself seems quite narrow — in the PhD it is formulated as follows Какова динамика использования аргументационных схем при формировании президентской повестки дня в ежегодных посланиях Федеральному Собрания РФ? , and in its English summary *What is the evolution of the use of argumentation schemes in shaping the human rights agenda within the annual Presidential address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation?* In a PhD in the field of Political Science in addition to the above mentioned methodologically-based research question, one would have expected research questions that have to do with the meaning of the evolution of argumentation and agenda for Russian and/or international politics.

5) The primary data consists of eighteen presidential addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation which can be taken as a relatively small amount of data for a PhD. This limitation is acknowledged by Ms. Zakhareva in her thesis, and she has also acquainted herself with other types of materials but they have not been used as primary data for the analysis. However, it seems that it might have made the analysis even richer had the additional materials been analysed.


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