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**Review of the doctoral dissertation by Róża Smolak, MA, entitled “The Coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict by the Polish Media (2014-2015)”, University of Wrocław, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Political Science, Wrocław 2018, pp. 213 (Supervisor: prof. dr hab. Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska, co-supervisor: prof. Gunnar Nygren).**

#### 1. Choice of topic

Róża Smolak’s choice of the topic for her doctoral thesis is pertinent, needed and important from a cognitive and practical point of view. In times of great importance of the mass media in mediating social experience with the way the media cover certain issues has become the subject of intense academic research. The media not only inform, but also comment and interpret social reality. They are essential for shaping public opinion and for building a political agenda. This is particularly important in cases which the impact on public life is potentially large. The political and military conflict that takes place in neighboring countries could undoubtedly be classified as such.

Relations between Poland, Russia, and Ukraine have a long and difficult history, they are an important subject of political activity of all political entities in Poland and an area of many stereotypes, prejudices, and resentments. In the context of the double presidential and parliamentary elections in Poland in 2015, media coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict took on special significance. What is interesting, however, is that this important issue had not become an important topic of the then campaigns, dominated by other issues, mainly the populist social project and the issue of refugees. It does not change the fact that investigating how the media described this conflict is perfectly valid. In her doctoral thesis Róża Smolak took up the task of analyzing this issue. Her thesis concerns the coverage of the conflict by selected Polish media as their scope and impact on both public opinion and political entities make them particularly influential. The conclusions from the research she conducted make it possible to better understand the question of how the Polish media presented and domesticated the conflict chosen for analysis. For this reason I find that the topic is pertinent and needed and her thesis

constitutes an important contribution to the scholarly question defined in the title of the reviewed dissertation.

## II. Methodology

The methodology used in this study fulfills the requirements for a doctoral thesis. In the introduction, the author points out elements that are necessary for an academic dissertation: the aim of the study and its hypotheses. There is however no information about the formal structure of the dissertation nor the content of particular chapters.

As her goal, Ms. Smolak chose the description of “how the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was covered by the Polish media in 2014 and 2015 and to conclude if the fear of its spreading to Poland, as well as historical and cultural patterns, influenced the coverage” (p. 6). She added that “the purpose of the study is also to check if the crisis in Ukraine was domesticated by the Polish media” (p. 6). To attain these goals, the author formulated two hypotheses: “H1: An anti-Russian perspective is dominant in the Polish media coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. H2: Stressing the threat to the economic and military security of Poland was the dominant tool of domestication of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by the Polish media” (p. 7). Hypotheses were supplemented by research questions introduced in the second chapter of the dissertation. The answers to these questions should have helped, in the author's intention, to verify the hypotheses. Taking into account the history of Polish-Russian relations and the current state of affairs, as well as anti-Russian resentments existing in Polish society, the hypotheses do not seem excessively innovative. The purpose of scientific research is, however, testing hypotheses created on the basis of common-sense knowledge or verification of previously examined assumptions, therefore the limited originality of hypotheses does not diminish the legitimacy of their putting.

The dissertation's time frame is not entirely clear. While the choice of 2014 as the point of departure is appropriate, the explanation for the end of the period – March 2015 - is not convincing enough (“the number of materials devoted to the conflict began to decrease”, p. 47). Taking into account the then upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, it would be more reasonable to conduct research until the end of the parliamentary campaign, later one of those mentioned. The author admitted she collected in-depth interviews in the period from April 2015 to January 2018 which does not coincide with the declared research period.

The methodology adopted in the dissertation is appropriate. The author made use of three methods: quantitative-qualitative (hybrid method), qualitative, and comparative. These research

methods were supplemented by the desk research. The author referred to the research project “Ukraine 2014 – media war and the war in the media” stating that it was “an important part of the methodology of the conducted research” (p. 46), as it was a project in which Ms. Smolak took part. It is a pity, however, that by certifying her participation in the project (confirmed by publications included into bibliography) she did not clearly express her role in creating the methodology and conducting research, and to what extent the research carried out in the project was used in her dissertation (in-depth interviews, for example). Her statement that: “Due to the fact that this project is the methodological basis of this dissertation,...” (p. 44) raises the question about the degree of the author’s independence in the construction of a research tool. A doctoral dissertation should prove such independence.

The dissertation structure is clear and reflects the successive stages of the analysis. The study is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, the author presented theoretical perspectives of the conflict coverage. She dealt with the notions: “conflict”, “civil war”, “hybrid war” used in covering the Russian-Ukrainian issue. Taking into account the fact that the reviewed dissertation was created in the area of political science, it should be noted that relatively little space was given to the character of the conflict, its historical roots, political significance and importance for the Polish politics and therefore for studying its media coverage. Giving more in-depth historical and political background would enrich the explanatory and analytic part of the conclusions.

The second chapter of the work was devoted to research methodology. The author was very detailed in explaining her methodological approach giving comprehensive description of the methods used as well as justification of her choice. There is, however, no explicit declaration regarding the criteria for the selection of specific research units - it can be assumed that in the analyzed materials the key words and their combinations related to the subject of research (Russia, Ukraine, plane crash, etc.) had to appear. Yet, the number of research units to be analyzed should be emphasized. The collection consisting of 1726 units makes an impression and for each researcher the contribution of work and time necessary to carry out the research is evident.

Regarding the language of the dissertation: the dissertation is written correctly, it is understandable and reads well. The references and footnotes are done correctly. In terms of form and technique, the dissertation represents a good level.

The sources the dissertation is based on are sufficient to conduct an appropriate analysis. The author also used books and articles on the topic being researched, written by widely known and appreciated analysts and scholars. In her analysis the author based her work mainly on the

Hallin and Mancini model, which is justified. However, the reference to the concept of cascading network activation (Entman, 2003) in explaining the process of framing a conflict, or to package journalism as a mechanism affecting the practice of gatekeeping could enrich the analytical part of work.

In chapter 1.4, the author correctly and comprehensively discussed the current state of research in the area she has undertaken, indirectly proving that the topic she is taking is complementing and extending reflection on the coverage of important events by the media, and the submitted work is an important contribution to research on reporting by Polish media of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Reaching out to many sources: books, scientific articles, as well as primary sources, the author was able to familiarize herself with different concepts and theories, and this enabled her to maintain a high degree of objectivity and reliability in her research. The historical part of the dissertation would have undoubtedly been enriched by the works from the field of political science/international relations describing in more in-depth way intricate relations in the Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian triangle.

The list of the sources used in the dissertation has been given in the well organized and clear form.

### III. The content of the dissertation

The content of the dissertation undoubtedly corresponds to the topic defined in the title. In the first chapter, the author included the most important information concerning the question of the character of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The title of the chapter “Theoretical perspectives of the conflict coverage” suggested, however, that the author would devote a space to the considerations regarding the theoretical perspectives of conflict coverage in (e.g. in terms of the theory of framing), while the author went straight to the Russian-Ukrainian one. More theoretical overview of the problem was presented in 1.3 section. In my opinion, this is the part that should have opened the Chapter 1. The author found a space to give the general information on the Polish media system, placing her considerations within the frames of the Hallin and Mancini’s work. She also discussed the concept of domestication of conflict, as it is understood in the subject literature as well as presented and analyzed earlier studies on the main issue of her dissertation.

In this chapter, at least two of the author's statements provoke polemics. Firstly, she wrote: “Furthermore, gossip and lifestyle press titles are listed among the most widely read newspapers in Poland, which may indicate a progressive tabloidization of this media sector” (p.

18). In my opinion domination of gossip and lifestyle press does not mean tabloidization, but the shift of the audience from the qualified press to the tabloid one - tabloidization applies to qualitative journalism and information media, taking over the standards of tabloid journalism. The second opinion I would argue with is a statement that “On the other hand, the press, in particular the largest national dailies and weeklies, are characterized by an interest in political issues. Therefore, it is likely that there can be ideological connections between these media and political parties and actors. The same applies to the largest television stations” (p. 21). In my own research I did not notice this obvious correlation between interest in political events and the political bias. Moreover, the interest in politics is ambiguous when comparing the amount of the political news with the total number of news. On page 22 the author wrote: “The fact that media are in the hands of foreign owners does not necessarily mean that they will be politically independent, as exemplified by among others Newsweek and TVN. They both show support for the Civic Platform. Despite that there are private and foreign owners on the media market, political and commentary oriented journalism can still be found there”. In my opinion, this has to be a shorthand, because support is not identical to political dependence, as it might be understood from the structure of the sentence.

In the second chapter Ms. Smolak successfully attempted to introduce, explain, and justify research methodology used in her research and, as it was previously mentioned in this review, did it in a very detailed way. But two things seems to me to be needed to draw attention: a choice of “Rzeczpospolita” instead of “Gazeta Polska Codziennie” or “Gazeta Prawna”. The last two dailies were higher in readership rankings than “Rzeczpospolita”, although the first one was among the most frequently cited. I do not question the choice made by the author, I only ask for the transparency of the criterion adopted. The author herself stated: “*Rzeczpospolita* was in fact on the eighth place in general and on the fourth position among the opinion dailies (...). However, considering the number of sold copies (55 849 in 2014 and 55 886 in 2015), and thus the range of the newspaper, it was decided to include it in the study” (p. 48) and this statement does not sound convincing enough.

My second remark relates to the discussion on an interesting and important project coordinated by prof. Gunnar Nygren. It does not seem justified to report the project this broadly as the author did since the outcomes of it have been already published. This creates an unjustified impression about the derivative character of the author's research.

In the third and fourth chapters of her dissertation Ms. Róża Smolak presented the outcomes of her own research. The amount of research items is impressive and professes that the author is well organized and able to conduct methodologically sophisticated and time

consuming surveys. She was able to deliver collected data derived from her own research in a systematic, clear, informative, and competent way. In-depth interviews are the additional value to the data gathered in the quantitative procedure. The only issue that raises my doubts is the justification for the selection of journalists invited for interviews. As the author wrote: “This group will be examined in terms of their role in the conflict, for example degree of emotional or national involvement and its influence on the coverage, and the level of autonomy in the selection and implementation of topics” (p. 46). The question is whether it is not too arbitrary to measure and estimate emotional or national involvement as well as the level of autonomy before having interviews.

The dissertation is rich in facts, the argumentation in the dissertation is logical, and conclusions reached are appropriate. The content of the dissertation is indicative of the author's high degree of familiarity with the questions she addresses, and of her understanding of the importance of the media coverage on conflicts and other politically sensitive issues.

The conclusions contained in the dissertation may leave the reader yearning for more. The reflection on social and political resonance of media relations regarding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict is rather shallow. Interestingly enough, the conflict itself was not a high profile issue for the 2015 campaigns in Poland. It can be surmised that although it took place in a close proximity (and in the country of Poland's neighbours), and engaged sides which shared a long, complicated, and rather difficult past, it was not viewed as a direct threat. How does that relate to the tone of the media coverage? A very skimmed introduction of the character of this conflict (1.1) and historical, political, and cultural contexts alongside it has not aided such reflection in any way. I am under the impression that the author has focused almost exclusively on the research procedure and methodology, and the dissertation is at times purely “technical”; which is a shame considering that the effort that went into those methodological considerations could have been better used on more intense commentary on the topic, especially in the systematic approach.

Nonetheless, the aforementioned comments do not alter my conviction that the research process conducted by Róża Smolat reflects her familiarity with the facts, her ability to link them together, to present arguments in a logical fashion, and to draw the appropriate conclusions.

#### IV. Final remarks

Róża Smolak's doctoral thesis has demonstrated author's knowledge of media coverage of the chosen issue and a good familiarity of the questions under examination. She is

able to utilize research methods and techniques, as well as answer research questions effectively. Many of the author's findings and observations are indicative of her good familiarity with the facts and her adequate understanding of dynamic connections between political events and their representations in media. What should be particularly stressed and appreciated is the work put into the empirical research which was appropriately organized and implemented based on various methods.

#### V. Conclusions

The doctoral thesis under review meets the requirements defined in Art. 13, section 1 of the Act of 4 March 2003 on academic degrees and academic titles, and on degrees and titles in the arts, in accordance with which I motion for accepting the dissertation under review and allowing Ms. Róża Smolak to proceed to the next stage of the PhD program.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Prof. Piñth". The signature is written in a cursive style with large, flowing letters.