



University of Hradec Králové  
Philosophical Faculty  
Department of Political Science

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## EXTERNAL REVIEWER'S REPORT

Doctoral Thesis: *China's Influence on the Autocratization of Hybrid Regimes in Africa*

Author: Mgr. Iva Sojková

Study program: P6701 Political Science Field of study: African Studies

I wish to begin my report with the formal aspects of the thesis. I can confidently state that it is well-structured and academically neat work, which contains a sound annotation, five coherent chapters, including a well-written introduction and a clear conclusion, together with a 53-page-long references and 22-page appendix. The references section, as well as the 117 footnotes found in the text support my view that it is a firmly evidenced doctoral piece, which is further strengthened by the nuanced content deriving from the 21 interviews the author recorded. At the same time, I would have liked to see the sample of the semi-structured questionnaire in the rather detailed appendix, as much as I was happy to look into the summary (table) of the respondents (page 2 in the appendix). The research questions are clear, together with the strong main arguments and thesis objectives. The hypotheses are formulated and tested in a proper academic manner, however, they start appearing only on page 64 (and from p. 64 onwards). Probably, the author could have indicated them in the Table of Contents, as well as signaled in her introduction. The conclusion is aptly written, presenting a fine summary of



closing thoughts and reference back to the original research questions. The style throughout the thesis is highly convincing, down-to-the-point, demonstrating exceptionally good analytical skills of argumentation and narration. At the same time, the entire text is a joy to read!

As for the methodology chosen, I agree with the author that such research is best supported by the MMR. I also accept that a case study was needed to show the nuanced complexities of the core theme of the investigation, and I would like to add that case studies are widely used in international relations and can offer in-depth insights about real-life issues and processes. The author's knowledge about Zambia and the local realities of the country could offer her the immediate choice of the case study. However, the author must not forget to mention the limitations of this methodological approach, in particular, the issue of generalizability. Several scholars deal with this and many more critiques of single case study analysis (see, for instance, Willis, 2014; Maoz, 2002; Seawright–Gerring, 2008; Flyvberg, 2006, and even Yin, 2014). Although the author has put forward the right argumentation in support of adopting such a qualitative approach for her study, it would have been better to demonstrate the larger context by acknowledging the potential pitfalls and criticisms.

Concerning the theoretical background (chapter 1), the author offers a very convincing literature review backing her original statement that: "The influence of non-democratic external actors on the quality of democracy abroad is still largely understudied." (p. 13.) The author pays sufficient attention to clarifying the key concepts, and with that can fill the many gaps in the published literature corpus about the international factors/dimensions of autocratization that are at stake for the sake of the present research, and in particular, to better understand "China's projection of influence" (p. 14.) in the international system. With this, the author has certainly contributed to a niche exploration of the "third wave of autocratization".



I enjoyed reading the thorough media content analysis, looking into frame categories, with which the author demonstrated again her exceptional abilities to conduct such research. Framing is also crucial from a geopolitical perspective, i.e. how audiences are told a story, such as the people-to-people narrative mentioned on p. 205. Important additional information derived from the interviews the author recorded could show further insights into the actual complexity of the 'China thread'.

I was also delighted to see that the author is well-versed in African Politics, when, for instance, dealing with Chinese ODF, which according to her, "is more easily manipulated by ruling elites to whom it may serve to maintain political power" (pp. 16.-17), she could contextualize it well in the African realm of neopatrimonialism (p. 60). Some of her significant critical thoughts and remarks are, however, indicated only in several of the footnotes of the dissertation. These could have been moved up into the main body of the work, as these are fine scholarly comments that can further support the author's arguments in the main body of the text.

The entire dissertation is written in a high-quality academic English with basically zero spelling and punctuation mistakes or typos. There are very tiny layout issues to be mentioned, e.g. on page 175 about the editing of the title of 3.1.5.2.1. or on page 176 with 3.1.5.2.2., and the same on pages 186, 201, etc.

The only item I miss is the indication of the continuation of this highly promising research: which directions, topics would the author foresee to continue working with? I am convinced that any connecting thread can be looked at and interpreted better if the author deals more with the 'debt issue' and several rising 'anti-China sentiments' in many African countries, also within the 'BRI framework'. All of these, or any of these should supplement any further inquiries.



In conclusion, I would like to congratulate the author for her strenuous work presented in a consistent and stable manner, using an easy-to-follow language, but operating with and applying the required scientific terms, methods, theories and analyses in a high-quality academic way. With her thesis, the author has contributed to an in-depth and more nuanced understanding of the international factors of autocratization via a Sino-African example. Her work has resulted in several novum items, which can be used for more research projects in the future. I would like to encourage her to work a bit more on the text to be able to transform it into an influential book in the field. As for the examination process, I can firmly state that the dissertation has fulfilled its stated aim and I can wholeheartedly recommend that the candidate should be awarded the PhD degree.

I have two questions for the candidate for the defense:

Q1: In the people-to-people angle of Chinese frames, the training opportunities offered to Zambian local journalists have resulted in numerous tangible manifestations of the pro-Chinese narrative. How are anti-Chinese sentiments dealt with (1) in the media, (2) by Zambian political actors, and (3) by Chinese actors (if at all)?

Q2: In a regional comparative context, talking about the East African Community (EAC), where would you place Zambia, as compared with Tanzania or Kenya, for instance, in the societal reception of the "positive image of China in the African media" (p. 208) and its criticism?

**Prof. Dr. habil. István Tarrósy, Ph.D.**  
Full Professor, Deputy Head of Department  
Director of the Africa Research Centre  
Programme Director, Doctoral Program in International Politics