

Daniël Heinsius prize 2022

Jury report

The Daniël Heinsius prize is awarded by the Dutch and Belgian political science associations (Nederlandse Kring voor de Wetenschap der Politiek / Vereniging voor Politieke Wetenschappen) to the best master thesis in the domain of political science, written by a student enrolled at a Belgian or Dutch university. Nominations for the prize are submitted by the student's promoters, and are evaluated by a jury. This year's jury consisted of five members:

- Dr. Ellen Claes, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven;
- Prof. Dr. Annette Freyberg-Inan, Universiteit van Amsterdam;
- Dr. Jonas Lefevere, Vrije Universiteit Brussel;
- Prof. Dr. Tom Sauer, Universiteit Antwerpen;
- Dr. Reinout van der Veer, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen.

In its work, the jury received excellent administrative support from Emile van Ommeren (University of Antwerp).

The jury received 22 submissions, of which 13 were completed at a Dutch university, 9 at a Belgian university. With four submissions each, the universities of Amsterdam, Antwerp and Leiden had the highest number of submissions. The set of submissions did not just vary geographically, but also in content: the jury appreciated the wide array of topics which spanned, amongst others, political theory, public administration, party politics, international relations, political communication and political economy. Further underlining the varied work encompassed in political science, the theses used a wide array of research designs, including formal theory, survey methodology, content analysis, participatory observation, and interviews. It is of note that most submissions were written in English (17 out of 22 submissions).

The wide array of topics and research designs makes comparisons hard. So, with this in mind the jury agreed on a set of criteria to help guide the evaluation of the submissions. The criteria covered the introduction (e.g. clarity, relevance, and innovativeness of the research question), theoretical framework (e.g. relevance and critical reflection in the literature review), the robustness of the research methodology, presentation of the findings, and the conclusion and discussion (e.g. reflection on the implications on the findings for society and further research).

Still, given the high level of quality of the submissions, selecting three theses to feature on the shortlist was no easy task. As seems to be a recurring theme in these jury reports, the jury wants to emphasize that many of the theses that did not make the selection were of very high quality. In the end, the following three theses were selected (listed in alphabetical order of the students' last names):

- Danai Petropoulou, *"How it's Made: Cracking the Black-Box of Green Policy"* (Universiteit Maastricht, promotor: Elissaveta Radulova);
- Zinaïda Sluijs, *"A Feminist or a Maternalistic Ethics of Care? Strategies for equality and persisting asymmetries between volunteers and forced migrants in transit zones in Brussels and Dunkirk."* (Universiteit Gent, promotor: Robin Vandevooordt);
- Thomas Van Damme, *"Global Trends in Fact-Checking. A Data-Driven Analysis of ClaimReview"* (Universiteit Antwerpen, promotor: Peter Van Aelst).

Below, we briefly outline the topic and key strengths that drove the jury to select each of these for inclusion on the shortlist.

Danai Petropoulou

The thesis of Danai Petropoulou investigates the role of soft law in EU environmental regulation. Soft law refers to non-binding instruments (such as rules of conduct) that nonetheless impact regulation. Yet, their development is inherently removed from the traditional decision-making processes, which raises concerns regarding their legitimacy. The jury considered this an excellent thesis: Petropoulou convincingly argues the relevance of her topic for society at large and the literature, and her literature review is impressive in its breadth and clarity. Despite the complexity of the topic, the thesis is well structured and easy to read. Moreover, the thesis has an impressive empirical design, covering a detailed analysis of throughput legitimacy of three Directives. In all, the thesis of Petropoulou covers an important topic and she demonstrates mastery of academic skills, which culminates in a strong contender for the thesis prize.

Zinaïda Sluijs

In her thesis, Zinaïda Sluijs sets out to investigate power imbalances in the work of civil initiatives to support migrants. The EU has struggled with the reception of migrants, and such civil initiatives thus constitute an important solidarity mechanism that helps support migrants. Drawing on volunteer experience, Sluijs sets out to investigate the power asymmetries between forced migrants and

volunteers. The jury appreciated in particular the original data collection method, which relied on both participant observation in Brussels and Calais and interviews in two civil initiatives (vzw Humain and the Citizen's Platform Supporting Refugees). Zinaïda Sluijs moreover reflects critically on her own position as a researcher, and the challenges this introduced in her research. The presentation of the findings brings together a mix of interpretation and quotes from volunteers and migrants in both initiatives, woven into a convincing narrative. In sum, the thesis of Zinaïda Sluijs features an innovative mix of methodological approaches that offers a new perspective on an important topic.

Thomas Van Damme

Fact-checking organizations play an important role in the fight against disinformation online. Thomas Van Damme investigates whether the shared format for fact-checks, *ClaimReview*, can be systematically collected and analyzed to provide insight into fact-checking. Van Damme's thesis has clear relevance: the practice of fact-checking claims has rapidly spread, making it a topic that has garnered increasing academic interest. The jury was impressed with the empirical data collection and innovative nature of the thesis: Thomas Van Damme compiles an exhaustive set of 116.888 *ClaimReview* entries, which is meticulously cleaned and prepared for data mining. The rigor on display here is unmistakable, and the thesis critically reflects on the merits and limitations of the *ClaimReview* format. The thesis is also rare in that it seeks out feedback on the findings by presenting and discussing them with prominent fact-checkers. Finally, the thesis is very well written and despite its complex data collection, is very approachable. The result is a thesis that impresses especially through its innovative nature, extensive empirical design and efforts to valorise its findings.

Winner

Selecting a winner from the shortlist was not easy: all had unique strengths and were solid pieces of academic work. After debating the candidates from the shortlist, the jury has chosen Danaï Petropoulou as the winner of the Daniël Heinsius prize. In particular, her thesis combines a solid theoretical framework with an extensive empirical effort on a highly relevant topic. The jury congratulates Danaï with her performance.