

Daniël Heinsius Thesis Prize 2023

Jury Report

Life is about making choices, as one of the jury members said during our discussions about who should be awarded the Daniel Heinsius Prize for the best thesis in the domain of political science, written by a student enrolled at a Belgian or Dutch university.

And it was a difficult choice to make for us, the members of the jury, consisting of:

- Dr. Ellen Claes, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
- Prof. dr. Annette Freyberg-Inan, Universiteit van Amsterdam
- Dr. Léonie de Jonge, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen
- Prof. dr. Tom Sauer, Universiteit Antwerpen
- Dr. Hans Vollaard, Universiteit Utrecht (chair)

Of course, we were honoured that the Belgian and Dutch associations of political scientists chose us to assess in total 21 theses, submitted by thesis supervisors from 5 universities in Belgium and 16 universities in the Netherlands. But it was a challenge to make a choice. Because of the variety in themes, theories, approaches, and methodologies, it was quite a challenge to make a proper comparison, even more so because many theses were of high quality. And let us not forget to mention the length of quite some theses. *In der Beschränkung zeigt sich der Meister* – but that didn't apply to all masterpieces here.

Fortunately, we got excellent help from Emile van Ommeren (Antwerp University), who supported us throughout the entire process. And after due consideration, we shortlisted four theses, based on the following criteria:

- The innovative nature and creative take of the topic addressed in the theses
- The critical nature and originality of the theoretical framework
- The robustness of the chosen methodology
- The proper presentation of the findings
- well-founded conclusions and implications for researchers and practitioners
- the quality of structure and writing style

The four shortlisted theses were written by, in alphabetical order:

Hannah Jakob Barrett, Maastricht University, who showed us, based on image theory, that we need to distinguish two types of allies in international relations, good allies and important allies. This distinction allows us to map shifts in perceptions of citizens better, as she has empirically examined by using a focus group of German students discussing the change of US presidency from Trump to Biden.

Haije Dijkstra, Leiden University, who analysed the “people who live in the dark”, political advisors of ministers in the Netherlands in the past 20 years. He developed a new typology of PA's to examine the 13 PA's he interviewed, in a pleasantly concise thesis. In this way, he provides a good insight into recent developments in Dutch politics.

Joren Van Nieuwenborgh, Antwerp University, who used a nicely designed survey experiment to investigate the impact of politicians' uncivility on trust and persuasiveness. The analyses showed that whether people agree with a politician's position or not, uncivil expressions do lower politicians' political trustworthiness and persuasiveness.

Agnes Termeer, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, who examined how Islamic violent rebel groups seek to build legitimacy for their rule through the construction and use of legal orders, thus combining insights

from international law and international relations. She examined the English-language publications of ISIS and the Taliban, which suggested that Islamic rebel groups indeed attempt to strengthen their legitimacy through legal orders.

The annual thesis prize of the Dutch and Flemish political science association is named after Daniel Heinsius, the first political science professor ever in the Low Countries, living in the 16th and the 17th century. Daniel Heinsius liked elegant writing. In his poems. He wrote also several religious texts and several tragedies, which were also focused on uprisings – as exemplified by his tragedy on the murder of William of Orange. We are very pleased that the thesis of the winner of the Daniel Heinsius Prize 2023 nicely fits with Heinsius' work. It is well written, it addresses two tragic developments in Asia, while it concerns uprisings, and religious texts. As you may guess now, the winner is Agnes Termeer, with her thesis on Jihadist justice.

Let us explain in more detail, why she deserves the Heinsius Thesis Prize 2023. As said, the thesis of Agnes Termeer investigates how violent rebel groups attempt to build legitimacy for their rule through the construction and use of legal orders. Based on a thorough and well-structured literature review, Agnes clarifies her own contribution to the existing state of knowledge. She then develops and operationalizes her own analytical framework, based on legal pluralism, an understanding of legitimacy as process and a distinction between normative and performative legitimacy, to theorize how rebel groups construct, appropriate and use law. Her contribution in terms of theory development and application is very strong for a Master's thesis.

She then applies a multi-method approach combining critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis to investigate the propaganda publications and legal practices of two rebel groups - the Taliban insurgency (2001-2021) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (2014-2017) - to trace their legitimation processes. The analysis shows that these rebel groups draw heavily on legal reservoirs to gain, maintain and expand legitimacy and reveals how they have harnessed their legal orders to fill a legal vacuum, to signal statehood, and to secure and expand obedience. Agnes provides rich evidence for her observations. The manner in which the seventh and eight chapters tie the empirical findings back into the theory and relevant literature also deserve special praise. In sum, the jury considers this an excellent thesis. The research question is both highly original and very ambitious. Agnes Termeer succeeds in answering this ambitious question in a both theoretically and empirically convincing manner, using a multidisciplinary approach combining political science and law studies. The thesis is also well written. In all, the thesis of Agnes Vermeer is a genuinely original research contribution, and she demonstrates a mastery of academic skills which makes her a deserving recipient of the Heinsius Thesis Prize.

Congratulations to Agnes Termeer, and to her supervisor John Hogan at the VU University in Amsterdam!

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