Third semester MA thesis prospectus submission

During the 3rd semester of their program, students in the Democracy and Governance and International Relations and Regional Studies programmes are required to submit an MA thesis prospectus as part of their progress toward completing the degree.

The prospectus procedure serves two purposes. The first is to provide students with a midway point on their road to completing the MA thesis. It is a marker to help students remain on track. Secondly, the prospectus process is an important opportunity for students to gain feedback and help from faculty. Therefore, the prospectus is an essential milestone for students to take advantage of.

Note that in accordance with Institute rules, only students whose prospectuses have been fully approved may be allowed to defend their thesis. Therefore, students should take this process seriously and aim to complete it as smoothly as possible.

The deadline for the submission of prospectuses is November 1 by 4pm. Even students expecting to graduate in their 5th semester should still think about submitting a prospectus or at least informing their Program Manager of their plans. Program Managers will go through the list of all current registered 2nd-year students and see if all students are accounted for.

Students should take care to prepare the prospectus in four steps.

First, they should review the initial thesis sketch they prepared for the Social Science Methodology course and any other developments they have had with their research project since then. Needless to say, students are not obligated to continue with the topic they may have drawn up for that first-semester assignment. However, going back to that paper is a good way to review the methodological elements that will be expected from the formal prospectus. If the student wants to change his/her topic, this is the time to consider such a move and to work out the details.

By the end of these reflections, the student should formulate their ideas into a 1-2 page overview that broadly outlines the project’s main topic, research design and expected data-gathering processes.

With this preliminary outline, students should approach a possible supervisor from among the Institute’s faculty in order to obtain perspective and advice. Students should not approach faculty with ideas that are very preliminary or vague, such as „I want to study something about Country X.‘‘ or „I want to do something about immigration.“ It is part of the test of an MA thesis that an MA student is able to independently work out a basic
research question and framework. Faculty are therefore not responsible for providing students with topics, although faculty may sometimes announce topics that they believe would be useful to study.

Students are highly recommended to make an appointment with faculty to discuss their ideas face-to-face (or if the student is abroad, via Skype). Discussing an MA thesis idea over e-mail can be very time-consuming and tedious. A student will get much quicker and more fruitful advice when speaking directly with faculty members.

If a student is unsure about which faculty member might be suitable for advising their project, they can consult the Program manager for guidance. Students may choose an advisor from outside of either the Institute or even the University. (For example, if the student takes a course within another Institute or finds a good advisor from a partner university during their study abroad.) However, program rules require that all theses have an Institute faculty member serve as at least co-supervisor in order to facilitate the internal process of thesis completion. This is also for the student’s benefit, so that they can be sure to have one foot in the expectations and procedures of the program itself.

Lastly, with their advisor’s recommendations, the student should prepare the 4-page (1200-word) prospectus based on the following headings:

- **Thesis title.** The title should be concise and incorporate both the main research concept as well as its empirical scope. Often these two components are separated with a colon, with either the concept being followed by the empirical case(s) or vice versa. Example titles could be “Europeanization in pre-accession states: Romanian and Slovak taxation policy 2000-2007”, or “Alexander Lukashenko: The emergence of electoral authoritarianism”, or “The effect of democratic institutions on international trade policy: comparing new and old OECD countries”. It is for this reason that students are advised to formulate their title last so that they can be sure to capture exactly what they plan to research. Note also that this title is preliminary. Students are free to modify the wording of their title before they hand in their final thesis.

- **Thesis supervisor(s).** The prospectus should give the name of the supervisor or supervisors. If the student proposes to have an external supervisor, they should briefly describe the background of that person. As noted above, the student should also list an Institute-based supervisor, so as to be sure that there is contact within the MA program. Note that students are not required to obtain an advisor’s formal signature for submitting the prospectus. By the same token, however, they should only list an advisor if they have spoken to that faculty member and obtained their agreement. When reviewing the prospectuses the Program Manager will speak to individual advisors. If it emerges that an advisor has been listed without prior consultation, the prospectus will automatically be rejected and the student will be asked to explain the situation.

- **Research problem.** This section of the prospectus should outline the research area or conceptual phenomenon that the thesis will address. The student should
demonstrate his/her familiarity with the relevant theoretical parameters of their topic. If the thesis is about, for example, social movements, the prospectus should give a brief outline of the concept drawing from relevant literature and giving a sense of how this framework will feed into the empirical research that will be done.

- **Research design and methods.** Here the student should outline the research design of the thesis (i.e. case study, comparative study, large-N) as well as any specific methods that will be used (policy analysis, document analysis, discourse analysis, statistical methods, etc.). Echoing what was written above, the prospectus should explain what methods the student has acquired so far in their studies that will be part of their thesis project. If the student anticipates that further methods work will be needed, s/he should outline how s/he will go about this.

- **Empirical data and sources.** The prospectus should outline the empirical information that the thesis will examine as well as how this data will reflect the research problem or main conceptual framework. The student should also explain what kinds of problems may arise (e.g. availability of data, sources, other materials) and how they plan on solving them.

- **Thesis structure.** The prospectus should provide a preliminary structure for the thesis in the form of possible chapters and subchapters. The student should think how many parts the thesis might logically have and in what order these might be. Often a thesis will devote one or two chapters to explaining the thesis’s conceptual framework and then devote two or three chapters to empirical analysis. However, other formulas are also possible depending on the topic and research design.

- **Bibliography.** The prospectus should conclude with a list of relevant source materials to be used in the thesis, but generally not more than 15-20 works. On the one hand, students are encouraged to cite these sources already when presenting their argument in the previous sections. At the same time, the bibliography can include sources that have not yet been referenced. Nevertheless, students should avoid producing merely a list of scholarly sources that seem to be interesting or were obtained during a superficial computer search. For faculty, the bibliography is another way of checking that the student has become familiar with the necessary conceptual and empirical literature.

As noted above, the entire prospectus should be up to 1200 words (excluding the Bibliography). There is no need for a title page, but each heading should be clearly delineated.

Note that some advisors may want students to submit their prospectus to them before the official deadline in order to be sure the topic is to their satisfaction. Students should consult with their advisor on this issue when they discuss their preliminary outline.

The prospectus should be submitted electronically to the Program Manager via the address democracy@ut.ee or irrs@ut.ee by November 1, 4pm.
If a second-year student does not expect to defend in his/her 4th semester, but rather in the 5th semester (because of study abroad or other extenuating circumstances), the student must still inform the Program Manager of this issue by the November 1 deadline. A second prospectus deadline of April 1 will be announced for those students who expect to defend at the end of the fall term (conventionally in January).

During the two weeks following a prospectus deadline, the Program Manager (together with other faculty members) will review each prospectus, and take one of three decisions:
- fully approve the prospectus and offer any additional recommendations as needed;
- conditionally approve the prospectus, provided the student addresses certain concerns or provides additional information;
- return the prospectus for more thorough revision.

In the case of the latter two decisions, students will be given another two weeks (until approximately December 1 and May 1, respectively) in order to re-submit their prospectus. Prospectuses that have been conditionally approved will then usually be definitively confirmed. Prospectuses that have been returned for revision can also thereafter be fully confirmed, or conditionally approved if problems remain. Should a prospectus be returned for revision twice, the Program Manager may suggest that the student find another topic or advisor. Once a prospectus has been confirmed, its title and supervisor will be registered under the student’s record in the Study Information System.

In accordance with Institute rules, only students whose prospectuses have been fully approved may be allowed to defend their thesis. If a student fails to submit a prospectus by the required deadline (or has had his/her prospectus returned twice for revision without ultimately getting full approval) and then simply submits a thesis for defense, the Program Manager has the right to refuse the thesis for defense before a proper review is carried out. This may include postponing the defense until the next fall or spring period of defenses.

If you have further questions, please contact your Program Manager.