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**BETWEEN RESEARCH, POLICY AND POLITICS:  
IN PRAISE OF INDEPENDENCE**

*by Nathalie Tocci*

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I would like to express my immense honour and gratitude in being awarded this prize, an honour motivated by more than one reason. First is a great privilege for me to receive an award established by three of the principal foundations in Europe: the Compagnia di San Paolo, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and the Volkswagen Foundation. These three foundations, particularly over the last four years through their European Foreign and Security Policy Studies programme, have trained and given the possibility to emerging researchers to elaborate projects, write books and articles, and thus contribute to our understanding of what is still an under-researched, under-theorized and poorly understood phenomenon in European Studies: European foreign policy. Moreover the three foundations have done so by accepting and encouraging a diverse set of projects, highlighting their understanding of European foreign policy as a broad and holistic phenomenon. Projects have focused on the classic domains of CFSP and ESDP, as well as on EU enlargement, and on EU external relations more broadly understood, including aid and trade policies, and specific initiatives such as the European Neighbourhood Policy.

Second, it is a great honour for me to receive this award, following previous editions of the prize being awarded to Helene Sjursen and Karen Smith. Both are researchers whom I deeply admire and respect, and from whose work I have learnt tremendously. In particular, both hold dear two aspects that I value highly: a critical and a non-eurocentric understanding of European foreign policy. While being committed Europeans, Sjursen and Smith have taught me a great deal in terms of not shying away from unveiled critique of EU policies and always bearing in mind that, no matter how pro-European we may be, there is a big world out there, upon which we, as the EU, have an influence, and which in turn has a huge impact on us in both material and normative terms.

Last and most important, I am deeply honoured and grateful to receive an award named after an incredible woman: Anna Lindh. I have always felt immense respect and admiration for Anna Lindh, for her abilities as foreign minister particularly during Sweden's EU Presidency in 2001, when together with High Representative Solana, she contributed to brokering the Ohrid agreement averting civil war in Macedonia. But above I respected Anna Lindh for her political convictions and her political integrity: for being a committed European campaigning in her country in favour of the Euro at a time when Europe was becoming progressively less popular amongst the public; for standing up firmly against the war in Iraq in 2003 on the grounds of its illegality, pointing to the tight interconnection between acting lawfully and achieving international security in an era of rampant securitizations in which abiding to norms is often viewed as naïve, unrealistic or weak; for criticizing firmly the violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, pointing to the cardinal importance of respecting rights and law in order to achieve veritable conflict resolution; and for incessantly speaking out in favour of tolerance, dialogue and non-discrimination, at a historical moment in which, *nolens volens*, civilizational prisms increasingly shape our understanding of the world and international relations. It is the

political spirit, passion and integrity of a politician like Anna Lindh that have inspired me to pursue a research-based career, and in particular research on European foreign policy, to which I now turn. In discussing European foreign policy I will focus in on three broad questions: the relationship between research and politics, between research and policy, and future avenues in European foreign policy. The *leitmotif* running across all these questions is the value of independence.

## Research and Politics

I guess like many of you, I have never seen myself sitting squarely in the seat of an academic, and perhaps like several of you, I have considered time and time again working within the institutions, contributing from the inside rather than studying from the outside the European project. My choice for research was driven largely by the potential that research holds to cultivate two key qualities: depth and long-term perspective on the one hand, and independence on the other. I need not delve much into the comparative advantages that research brings in terms of encouraging deeper analysis into the nitty gritty details of political questions, as well as developing a longer-term perspective on ongoing political trends. Both are fundamental in allowing us, as researchers, to help discern when a political event is truly novel and when instead, it merely conforms to and reproduces existing realities. The case I find illustrates this point best is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Officials and analysts are often overtaken by and attribute excessive importance to the event of the day in the region. In recent years we can think of many such examples, like the Mitchell and Tenet reports in 2000-1, the Roadmap for peace in 2003, the Gaza disengagement in 2005, the convergence plan in 2005-6, and most recently the Annapolis process in 2007-8. We instinctively tend to think, or want to believe, that these events mark historic turning points. In doing so, we are often distracted from underlying trends taking place at a deeper level, be this the progressive fragmentation of the Palestinian national movement or the continuation of Israeli occupation, i.e., fundamental structural features unfolding at a deeper level than the episodic attempts to manage the conflict. Officials are absorbed by the event of the day on which they work on and contribute to, and this is, of course, inevitable. It is therefore our role and comparative advantage as researchers to point to events that may actually mark a potential turn of tide, as opposed to others that merely create uneventful ripples on the surface.

Independence is the second quality that we, as researchers have the privilege to develop, a privilege which compensates for the relatively modest salaries and low job security we have compared to alternative career paths within the institutions or the private sector. I understood how much I valued independence back in 1999 in the course of writing one of my first papers on the Cyprus conflict. This was a time when most of the literature on Cyprus was dominated by partisan publications that eschewed any theoretical background and were often close to sheer propaganda. Politically speaking, this was a time when the Republic of Cyprus was en marche towards EU membership, and the Turkish Cypriot side, ruled by former leader Rauf Denktas, was unanimously viewed in Europe as the unquestioned *bête noir*, responsible for the ongoing partition of the island. While being far from sympathetic to the former Turkish Cypriot leader's policies, I came round to the view that reality was not as clear-cut and adopted a position – which I no longer subscribe to – in favour of a confederal rather than federal

solution on the island. Having circulated a draft, all hell broke loose and I came under intense pressure to change my writings, which I accepted to do in form (i.e., by dropping the dreaded C-word) but not in substance. Yet even this slight change, so meaningless in practice, came to me as such a sacrifice that I realized how privileged I was, as a researcher, to be able to work and develop ideas that are principally my own.

Now, this Confederation anecdote also highlighted to me how maintaining my independence, even as a researcher, was no simple feat. Whether we're academics or policy researchers, we know this far too well. It is far easier to get published if our ideas and discourse "fits" within particular trends and traditions, far more difficult if our thoughts fall in between stools and our language does not immediately resonate with upcoming fashions, issues and arguments. Especially if we are academics and want to secure posts and get promoted, it is important for us to publish in respected peer-reviewed journals and we may find ourselves falling into particular currents more out of convenience than conviction.

Likewise, if we work within a research centre or think tank, it is of prime importance to maintain good relations with political and institutional actors, as principal "recipients" of our work as well as sources of information for our research. As opposed to advocacy NGOs, our self-ascribed role as policy researchers is to work in a non-adversarial manner with institutional actors. It is in fact increasingly common for the policy-maker to actively seek "scientific proof" in order to legitimize further ex ante policy decisions, proof that the researcher often generously provides in order to be "useful" to the policy process. Yet apart from exceptions in which scientific evidence and ex ante policy positions nicely dovetail, this puts immense pressure on us as researchers to retain and cultivate close and cooperative relations with the institutions without allowing their priorities and positions overwhelm our research. Maintaining academic independence and integrity while fostering close and non-adversarial relations with the institutions means constantly treading a fine line, and again, for the sake of convenience, it is at times easier to compromise upon intellectual independence and act more "in the service of the institutions" rather than maintain a complementary yet distinct role from them.

Finally, in both universities and research centres we are increasingly pushed to constantly search for new projects and thus new sources of funding, as and when core state funding became increasingly scarce. While we have been forced to diversify our sources of funding and this has had, as a welcome by-product, the strengthening of our independence, the search for diversified funds has also risked compromising independence in new ways. Our research increasingly tends to follow ongoing "hot" political issues, focusing on questions when they are topical, while dropping them when they are not, and this compromises our ability to acquire a broader, deeper and longer-term perspective on specific questions. Hence, for example in the 1990s research on the Western Balkans flourished. Since then many projects have not been renewed, having met difficulty in securing new research funding and in many cases entire research programmes have dwindled to a close.

By contrast, when new research themes rise to the top of the political agenda, rather than following a natural evolution in our research interests, we sometimes have to improvise ourselves as "experts" on particular issues and regions, simply in order to provide a supply there where there is a demand. To give an example, when I started working on the Middle East at the time of the Camp David II summit with a project on EU policy in the Middle East, we initially met considerable resistance to our work by

colleagues from the region as well as other experienced researchers in the field. Initially we felt that such resistance may have been due to an oligopolistic knee-jerk reaction, whereby well-established experts in an area view with unease the entry of newcomers. I then came round to the view that this scepticism was rather due to the *déjà-vu* effect, particularly by people in the region, of seeing upcoming self-appointed experts devoting their attention to a region when it becomes politically en vogue, while forgetting about it when it drifts away from the international limelight.

Yet perhaps the most explicit way in which the galloping search for funds risks compromising our academic independence is when calls for proposals enter into the details of what kind of project is eligible for funding. Donors such as the Commission make no secret of their will to promote particular kinds of research agendas. Viewed from their standpoint this is fully understandable and legitimate. Yet this leads to research projects that are elaborated not because they reflect the best and most natural evolution of new research avenues, but rather because they best fit the objectives and categorizations of a call for proposals, a trend which risks compromising both the quality of our research, especially interdisciplinary “frontier” research, as well as its independence.

In this context, maintaining our independence as researchers has become more complicated. Especially when our views fall beyond the mainstream either in terms of substance or discourse, it becomes far more difficult to publish, with reviewers being more prone to splitting hairs and journals or publishers quibbling with the academic relevance or market value of a particular theme or approach. It also becomes more difficult to be awarded research grants, with funders either sharing no interest or objecting to a particular approach or topic. Finally when an issue or topic happens not to follow the trend of the day, it becomes rarer to be invited to brief governments, parliaments or to speak to the media. This notwithstanding, it remains possible for us as researchers to maintain our independence and this is a critical advantage that we enjoy compared to other professions. As mentioned earlier, as researchers we probably cannot boast whopping salaries or an enviable job security. What we do enjoy is independence and that we should jealously guard.

This of course does not entail that our independence should be expressed within an unreachable ivory tower, detached from the world around us. In fact while our “relevance” to the world sought by compromising our independence becomes the very negation of research and thus of long-term relevance, independence expressed through aloofness from the world fails to do justice to the privilege we have been granted, i.e., that of independence. This is a complex and constant challenge that I see for myself and others in the field.

## **Research and Policy**

A second aspect of research and more precisely European foreign policy research that I’d like to touch upon is the “political” interest in studying European foreign policy. Within academia having political views and bringing these into research is often seen as contaminating the objectivity and neutrality of social science research. In other words, wanting to “change the world” pollutes our ability to observe it. But also within think tanks we often confuse neutrality with objectivity, claiming that by only maintaining a detached and neutral position we can assure our objectivity. I strongly

disagree with this approach. I would certainly agree that meticulous care should be taken to ensure that political ideas do not prejudge research approaches, methodologies and certainly research results. I also firmly believe that ideally the relationship between politics and research, between wanting to change and wanting to observe the world, ought to be an inverse one, with the latter informing the former rather than the other way around.

This said, it is also true that politics, interpreted in the “higher” sense of the term inevitably conditions the way we see each other and the world around us, and as such politics inevitably informs our views, approaches, methods and attitudes. We are not, as researchers, aliens observing the world from Mars, but are rather agents located in time and space within the political systems we study. Unlike the natural sciences we have no laboratories in which to experiment and examine a world separate from us, but rather work on while living in the same big laboratory alongside our tools, methods and samples. It is precisely this rootedness that allows us to understand and analyse international relations by applying equally our academic as well as social and human skills to our work. Given this the reality, I believe it is more intellectually honest to put upfront where we stand. Ultimately I guess that for many of us and certainly as far as I’m concerned, a “personal and political” interest in EU studies and EU foreign policy is a key reason why we have chosen this particular discipline. Hence, this is another fine line we must constantly and carefully tread, without either falling into the complacency of an abstract and unreal form of objectivity or allowing our political views and positions to overwhelm our research.

### **Research and the Policy-Making Process**

A third theme I wanted to mention regards more specifically the precise manner in which we go about doing policy research and how we, as researchers, can contribute to policy-making and policy-shaping.

By far the most common method and approach is that of feeding information and providing ideas to “the policy-maker”. This is done in a variety of ways that we are familiar with, such as policy conferences, briefings, unofficial conversations and networking. This approach works well when our ideas and analysis by and large “fit” with mainstream policy trends. In other words, when ineffective or deficient policy is the product of an absence of capability, which takes the form of an absence of long-term, in-depth and creative “out of the box” thinking, then a natural complementarity is forged between the policy researcher and the policy-maker. The most exciting experience I had in this respect was in 2002, when the UN process was re-launched in Cyprus, the process that ultimately culminated with the publication of the Annan Plan. This was also the time when the Republic of Cyprus was concluding its accession negotiations with the EU in the run-up to the 2004 enlargement. At the time, the Turkish Cypriot side was extremely reluctant to enter the EU, the UN team did not include any EU experts, and the Commission, charged with negotiating Cyprus’ accession, was initially kept far apart from the peace process. As such for a brief moment in time there was little know-how in the context of the peace process of how a reunited Cyprus could fit in the EU, and more specifically how this could be achieved without it posing a perceived threat, and thus a disincentive, to the then eurosceptic Turkish Cypriot side. In this context, our work exploring the intricacies and potential applicability to Cyprus

of the Belgian federal model within the EU, easily found reception and resonance both with the UN team and with Turkish Cypriot side and as such made its way into the Annan Plan.

Yet rewarding as experiences like this may be, I believe this is the easiest and in a sense most fortuitous type of contribution that researchers can bring to policy-making. Far more often in fact, bad policy, from our point of view as researchers, is not simply the product of deficient capabilities, but rather of deficient political will. In these situations the policy researcher whose views do not “fit” with ongoing policy trends is rather powerless, as his or her analysis, means less to the policy-maker and is easily ignored. In such situations, which represent the majority of cases, how can researchers contribute to the policy process?

One avenue is that of establishing closer links with other civil society actors, broadly interpreted. As opposed to think tanks that tend to work through persuasion, other civil society organizations, such as NGOs and social movements develop policy-shaping skills that are more adversarial in nature such advocacy or grassroots mobilization. Yet often the campaigns carried out by these organizations lack a sound grounding in research, and as such they tend to lose much of their effectiveness. Interacting more often and in a more structured manner with these organizations could contribute to the policy-shaping process there where what is needed is a shift in political direction rather than an improvement of existing policy trends. An alternative avenue is that of establishing more organic ties with the media, which informs the news while disseminating it to the wider public. By this I don’t mean simply speaking to journalists as and when we are contacted or inviting journalists to our dissemination conferences. While important, activities of this kind put the researcher in a passive rather than an active role. What I mean is to involve journalists, where it is possible, as active observers within our research projects, rather than simply recipients of and listeners to an end product. Such a process of inclusion may be less gratifying for us as researchers than speaking to and being interviewed by the media. Yet it may prove more effective in socializing journalists into different types of analyses and approaches, and as such may help disseminate more effectively a policy message which runs counter to official policy trends.

### **Future Avenues in European foreign policy research**

A final theme that I wanted to touch upon regards future directions in European foreign policy research. Largely because of the *sui generis* and highly complex nature of the European project, the study of European foreign policy has predominantly been inward-looking, attempting to discern the theoretical, empirical and normative aspects of how, when and why European foreign policy comes into being. This has taken different forms over the years, including detailed historical accounts of the EPC through to the CFSP/ESDP, meticulous empirical analysis of policy-making mechanisms, studies on member state interactions within the EU institutional framework, empirical accounts of EU relations with third countries and regions, and enrichments to empirical analyses through a variety of theoretical perspectives extrapolated and applied from IR theory.

The vast majority of these studies have focused on what the EU says, what it does as well as why it acts. Very few studies concentrate on what the EU actually

achieves, that is, what its impact in the world is. This has meant that often research on European foreign policy has been extremely eurocentric, and this eurocentricity has on the one hand compromised our ability to dialogue with other sub-disciplines in political science, and on the other hand, induced us to develop a normative bias in our assessments of the EU.

In recent years there has been a growing appreciation of these problems and a rising sense that a non-eurocentric approach to European foreign policy studies is of the essence. There have been a number of studies analysing how external actors perceive the EU. While many interesting findings have been made, I have several questions regarding this type of research. First, asking directly questions related to the perceptions of the EU in polls or interviews risks concealing other views about Europe and international relations. If for example we ask a Georgian what he or she thinks about the EU's role in conflict resolution, the response we receive will reflect the extent to which the EU's positions coincide with Georgia's stance in its internal conflicts and the EU's position vis-à-vis Russia. Second, especially if this kind of research is carried out by European researchers, it raises exponentially the problem of enquiring directly about the views of the EU in third countries. Not only would the responses we receive act as proxies for other political views, which are either directly or indirectly related to the EU, but they would also be distorted by the fact that the subject asking the questions *is* a European researcher.

For these reasons, I sympathize more with research which seek to discern what the impact of EU policies actually is. Unpacking impact and understanding causality in the social sciences is one of the most arduous challenges we face. Yet this is not a reason to shy away from such endeavours nor does it entail necessarily relying exclusively on hard quantitative approaches. One way out of this dilemma from a qualitative perspective may be that of focussing on micro-case studies within particular issue areas and geographical regions. To gain a detailed empirical understanding of the EU's foreign policy role, and in particular to delve into the intricacies of the actual impact of these policies, it is often not sufficient to focus on one specific policy field and one geographical area over a fixed specified period of time. It is necessary to enter into greater detail by analysing specific aspects of the case study in question. Hence, for example if we're analysing the impact of EU aid policy in Egypt, a micro case study could be the constitutionalization of the emergency laws under the anti-terrorism legislation and the EU's stance towards it. If we're studying the impact of EU migration policies in Libya, we could analyse the non-applicability of the Geneva Conventions in Libya and on the EU's position towards it. Naturally the micro cases we select in order to assess and extrapolate broader lessons for the impact of EU policy ought to be representative in several respects. First, the selected micro-case must have a clear and critical relevance to the wider case study under consideration, acting as much as possible, as a microcosm of the wider issues at stake. Second, the selected micro case must be one in which EU policy instruments have a potential role to play, and thus it must be a case in which the EU, while not necessarily taking a precise action, had the option of doing so. Moving in this direction would also create deeper links between scholars in EU studies and scholars in different area studies, able to provide the necessary empirical detail to delve into the intricacies of these micro cases.

Beyond impact studies, another possible avenue to develop European foreign policy research in a non-eurocentric manner is to focus more on the macro dimensions of the EU's role in the world, that is the dynamics and effects of the EU's global



interactions with other major actors. This would include interactions with major states such as the US, Russia, China or India; international organizations such as the UN or the WTO; as well as transnational movements, the latter creating a possible interesting link with the literature on global civil society and transnationalism. There have been many critical studies in this domain, including work on EU-UN relations, on EU-Russia relations, on transatlantic relations, as well as newer studies on EU-China or EU-India relations. Yet very few studies analyse the overall macro dynamics in the global interactions between these key players, analysing for example what these interactions entail in terms of setting or consolidating norms and practices in international relations, or discerning what the role of the EU is in terms of instilling new forms of multilateralism in an increasingly multipolar world. In other words, research on European foreign policy, while still relatively young, is gradually coming of age and by increasingly attracting new energy and resources can and is slowly stepping into a more open, outward and forward looking phase, which holds the promise of opening the subject more to cross-fertilizations from other disciplines and research areas.

Thank you all for your attention and once again my most heartfelt thanks for this award.