

Reflections on European Identity and Solidarity: Celebrating 30 Years of the Institute of European Studies at Jagiellonian University and Milestones of Poland's EU Membership



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and
Milestones of Poland's EU Membership

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Introduction

This publication is the result of a project aimed at promoting European values and reflecting on the role of the European Union in shaping contemporary societies. Organised on Europe Day in the crucial year of the 20th anniversary of Poland's accession to the European Union and the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Institute of European Studies, the project provided a platform for social dialogue, education and collective commemoration of these important milestones.

The main objectives of the project were to strengthen cooperation between experts, NGO representatives, the academic community and the inhabitants of Krakow. To this end, two open panel discussions and a student event were held, attracting participants interested in European issues, heritage and the future of the Union.

This publication documents these events, presenting the main conclusions, key topics discussed during the panels and participants' reflections.

The first section entitled "More or Less Integration? Challenges for the Future of the European Union" focused on the meaning of European identity, the role of solidarity and the challenges facing the EU in the context of contemporary crises. The expert-led discussions covered key issues such

as the functioning of democracy in the EU, the growing influence of populism and the dilemmas related to a unified foreign policy. The panelists stressed the need to engage citizens, strengthen European values and build trust between Member States. They also stressed the need to adapt EU mechanisms to address internal and external challenges, including tensions in the Western Balkans and Russian aggression.

Despite the different perspectives, the participants agreed on the importance of increasing the EU's capacity to respond effectively to crises, foster solidarity and find solutions to strengthen European unity, while taking a cautious approach to potential treaty reforms.

The second section, entitled "What's happening in Brussels? EU institutions seen from the inside", included graduates of the Institute of European Studies. Former students emphasised the value of the interdisciplinary nature of European studies, which equipped them with the ability to analyse problems from different perspectives and prepared them for careers in international environments, including the EU institutions. Their experiences included both theory-based lectures and practical activities, such as simulations of EU institutional processes, which proved invaluable in their career paths.

The discussion also touched on the phenomenon of "Brusselisation" as a process of elite socialisation in EU institutions, emphasising the role of language and a specific work culture. The graduates emphasised the need to balance integration into the EU environment with maintaining cultural identity and respect for the host country.

Advice for future candidates included gaining international experience through exchange programmes, volunteering with

the European Solidarity Corps, participating in Blue Book internships and working with student and non-governmental organisations. Key skills emphasised included certified language skills, teamwork, time management and the ability to adapt to new professional environments.

This publication invites readers to reflect on the relevance of European values in the contemporary world, providing a comprehensive summary of the project activities and the discussions they inspired.

Editors

1. More or less integration? Challenges for the future of the European Union

Participants:

Prof. Dominika Kasprowicz: Associate Professor at the Institute of Journalism, Media and Social Communication at the Jagiellonian University. She is the director of the Villa Decius Association, one of the most important cultural institutes not only on the Cracovian but also on the Polish and European map. She specialises in political communication, populism studies, and social innovation in politics.

Prof. Zdzisław Mach: the founder, and former head of the Institute of European Studies; Professor in Sociology and Anthropology at the Jagiellonian University. He is one of the main authors of the European studies curriculum in Poland. His research interests cover identity issues, nationalism, minorities, ethnicity and European citizenship, politics, and democracy.

Prof. Karolina Pomorska: Jean Monnet Chair and Associate Professor in International Relations at Leiden University. She is an affiliated research fellow at the University of Cambridge.

She specialises in the European Union's foreign policy and external relations, and studies the behavioural norms of political leaders.

Moderator:

Prof. Magdalena Góra (M.G.): Associate Professor at the Institute of European Studies at the Jagiellonian University.

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Magdalena Góra: It is one of the most difficult moments in the history of European integration. We are living in a time when geopolitics is dictating us very difficult conditions. In these circumstances the question arises: do we really need European identity?

Zdzisław Mach: Those of you who know me know that my answer is going to be yes, we do need European identity. I will try to elaborate a little why that is, especially in the context of the perspective of building European democracy, European polity and political community. Indeed we can also speak about the need to create European identity from the perspective of culture and heritage – and it's also a very interesting theme to debate. From the point of view of political integration we do need European identity because of a very important, mutual relation between identity and democracy. The link between national community and national democracy is that in order for a democracy to function properly on a national level we need identity at least to some extent on that very level. People need to feel they belong to the community, that they act on behalf of the community, in the name of the community, having in mind this community. That is, I think, a condition of

a successful democracy and this will be true for all levels: the local, regional, but also European. In order to develop democracy, especially if we understand it as participation, not just procedures, not just elections, but participation of citizens, it is important that people must feel that there is a community to which they belong. And if this is the case, if people believe that they belong to the community called Europe, that this community matters, that they are part of it, that they care for it, then of course they will participate in democratic procedures, knowing that this is how they realize their identity. But as I said it is a mutual relation, because I also think that identity needs democracy, because identity is not just an image but it is also doing things, it is also meaningful behaviour. Therefore, in order for identity to be created we need to be active, we need to do things. And this means, of course, that well-functioning democracy and participation of citizens in democratic procedures also builds, creates, and strengthens the feeling of belonging. I suppose that this is something that those people who created the institution of European citizenship may have had in mind. That it is important to create an institution which encourages people to be active in the European frame of reference – this is good for democracy and this is good for identity.

Magdalena Góra: Professor Mach, you observed for this 30 years – the Polish experience in building European identity here. I was wondering, what is your main take away from this Polish experience? What do we bring into the discussion about how to create a European identity that is inclusive, that embraces what you bring in but one that is also productive and contributes to building relations with others?

Zdzisław Mach: I must say I am not completely satisfied, to say the least. I am a long perspective optimist and a short perspective pessimist. I think that it will still take a long time before a European identity is built. One of the great mistakes which we in Europe made was that we believed that it will be enough to introduce instruments and mechanisms of democracy in candidate countries and everything else would follow. Of course, we obtained and used an enormous amount of European money for various educational purposes. But we still could not overcome this very strong view in Poland that Europe is an external body. It is useful of course and good to be a part of Europe, but most people in this country – not only in this country, but since you ask about Poland – most people if asked if Europe is good they would say “well Europe is good because it is good for us”. Well, I would be much happier if people said Europe is good for what it is in itself, what it represents and not because it is good for them. And of course, we can talk for hours about this problem of treating Europe as a cash machine or saying that we need the money because we deserve it, because we have been heroic, because we have been brave, because we have been poor, and then need compensation. But what is lacking is this view that European funds are the common European investment in a common European future, and not a donation or compensation. So, there is still not enough of this not only among people but also in the way Europe is spoken about and promoted. I think there is a big task which still lies ahead, especially when we speak about values. We need to create European values. Not in the sense of how we too often think about values as cultural tradition, which of course would be divisive and exclusive,

but future oriented values of democracy, of the rule of law, of human rights, of equality, of human creativity, individualism. All those values which are written in European documents but perhaps less so in the way people create their own sense of belonging.

Magdalena Góra: Professor Kasprowicz, I would like to ask about the upcoming European elections to the European Parliament. The polls are showing a surge in support for populist, right wing and conservative forces. Will these forces soon create a union of European populists

Dominika Kasprowicz: Indeed, the polls are giving us a kind of haunting, anxious feeling that we are facing catastrophe. But I would be a long term optimist and short term not so very pessimistic in that regard for three reasons. But before I answer your question more directly, let me just make a very short, general remark. This haunting spectre of populism already has been researched extensively; it has already been debated, and has already been experienced by many European societies. What we should acknowledge is the fact that populism itself is a phenomenon that is eminently embedded into representative democracy as such. Because in its essence it is a devotion to the people and that can be a handy tool in the hands of demagogues. Since the 1980s we have seen several waves of populism. We can track down the changes that it has made on the local, national, European, and even global level. And of course, numbers speak for themselves – the third position in the polls for the European Conservatives and Reformists group is alarming to some. But at the same time, whether it is going to be a European Union of European populists depends on

the reaction and the strategies of the mainstream political groups and European leaders.

Magdalena Góra: Professor Pomorska, how do you assess the role of the national leaders in enabling populist actors? You mostly look at them in the area of European foreign policy, but I think that it allows us to reflect more generally on the future of the European project.

Karolina Pomorska: First of all, let me thank you very much for the invitation. It's really an honour to be here with you at such an important moment. And I want to congratulate all of you for all that you have built here in Kraków. And I can say that whether I was coming from Cambridge or Leiden or Maastricht it was always so intellectually stimulating and such a pleasure to come here. It is really one of the brightest points of European Studies in Europe, in the world. I'm not exaggerating. You built something truly, truly wonderful and what is unique aside of the academic excellence is the energy you feel here at the Jagiellonian University. It's the absolute positive energy for building, constructing something, and engaging not only with students but also with the public.

Let's move on to the question – always difficult and challenging. I actually stay away from leaders in my study. I try to make it easier for myself when I look at officials and bureaucrats and what they do behind closed doors, how they negotiate. But it is about factors shaping public attitudes. Leaders have a very important role to play and they do it by framing and setting the agenda. Politicians can put forward topics in the media. They really can determine what gets through, what is important. And my impression is that – based on my research on foreign and security policy – there is this tendency

among national leaders to blame Europe. We also call it “don’t tell the children”. It works this way: politicians come from the summits and they sell completely different stories at home to the public. Sometime ago I looked with my colleague at all the press conferences of national leaders after the European Council meetings. You can watch them in different languages and sometimes you see so many different stories told. These are always stories of national success, and often if there is something bad or inconvenient, they say that Europe kind of made them do it. But then when you think about it, and I always ask my students to think about competences and voting procedures, and very often you find out there is unanimity, or you know that this country actually voted in favour, but that’s not the story they want to sell to their constituency back at home. I remember when I lived in the UK, the European Parliament passed the law about roaming, which was a very good law for citizens limiting the costs of roaming. In the UK, it was sold as something that was introduced by the British government and that the EU was kind of just there, whereas it was the opposite, because national leaders would not move on that. That is a problem that we have this kind of “don’t tell the children” approach at the national level. I also think that leaders have an important role when it comes to identity management in explaining what we as a group stand for. That is their responsibility, in my view. The problem is that we do not see much of that now. One example of a leader that is making the effort is French President Emanuel Macron. He is engaging much energy in defining what is at stake for Europe today. My French students tell me this is not that well perceived in France, but I tell them that it is quite well perceived in the part

of Europe I come from. Ursula von der Leyen has been doing that as well (and before her Jean-Claude Juncker as well). But the problem when European officials such as the President of the European Commission or the President of the European Council do that, it often does not really get through to the people. Not only that we do not really have strong European media, but it also does not really get through to the people because citizens prefer listening to their own national politicians. And then we are back to this problem of “don’t tell the children”, or we call it a smoke screen between the capitals and Brussels.

Magdalena Góra: And that brings us to the point that national politicians are sometimes gatekeepers in the process, right? That they navigate the politics between national capitals and the EU to their benefit. I think there has also been quite interesting recent research attention towards the visibility of leaders. In one of the recent polls, von der Leyen showed a very significant increase in recognition by citizens in terms of who she is and what function she performs. Such recognition gives her a certain agenda in shaping politics. I would like to address a question to all of you now. Europe has gone through multiple crises in recent years. But the full-fledged Russian aggression on its peaceful neighbour two years ago is unprecedented in how it shattered the peace foundations in Europe and questions the EU as a peace project. How do you assess the European reactions to the war against Ukraine and what would you advise European leaders on the first day after the EP election on what they should do?

Karolina Pomorska: I was writing my PhD 20 years ago and I started looking at EU-Belarus, and EU-Russia relations and

I quickly stopped doing that. It was very depressing because there was no common policy and the EU was always divided. And when I observed what was happening in 2022, I was quite pessimistic. It was surprising to me that the EU member states came together and overcame so many diverse interests: energy interests, financial interests, security interests, different threat perceptions. Of course we can be critical, but I think it was surprising how relatively united and fast they were in their reactions to the aggression. Moreover, I think it is very positive that several taboos were broken when it comes to security integration. For example, for the first time we have the EU delivering lethal weapons. It opens prospects for further integration in the defence area. Von der Leyen is talking about opening a new post in the European Commission for a defence commissioner. Even if this is limited for now and will mostly be about integrating the defence industry, it is breaking some taboos. We have not had commissioners talking about security for a while because it was understood that it is not an EC competence. The Commission used to have the right of initiative. It never used it because it knew it was not really wanted. Developing such competences in the EC is a positive step, in my view. I would say there is a need to go in this direction and there is not much alternative. Poland, the Netherlands, the country I live in, and the UK used to always say not to duplicate NATO, be very careful, and we all understood that. But now, with the elections in the United States and what is happening globally, I think we as the EU have very little choice. We need to move with integration in the area of security and defence. It will not be easy – again coming back to identity – because changing national strategic cultures is

a very slow process. I think it is important to remember where we are and what are our choices. My suggestion to European leaders will be – take it seriously, take the spending on defence seriously, and think of alternatives. Think of the common good and what can happen otherwise.

Magdalena Góra: Professor Mach, how can European identity – unfinished, incomplete, always shared and renegotiated between the national and European – be our resource in responding to such challenges?

Zdzisław Mach: The crisis that we have experienced: the financial crisis, and then the migration crisis and Brexit demonstrate that we actually have a problem of solidarity. But this depends on your perspective. I remember a seminar I had in Singapore, and the way the response to the financial crisis was seen from outside of Europe was that they were amazed by the high level of solidarity which Europe produced. That rather than kicking Greece out of the European Union, they said “well, all right”, and many instruments were made to deal with the problem. I mean nobody was happy, nobody was pleased, but nobody was supposed to be happy with this. And of course, the migration crisis was also a crisis of solidarity. Central and Eastern European countries played a very bad role by not showing this solidarity towards the victims but also towards other countries. And now the rule of law and so on and so forth. I think the instruments that could help to strengthen solidarity, and, in a way, efficiency with which European institutions work is very important. I think it is very disappointing for people who treat Europe seriously and consider it as a real frame of reference, the one they want to belong to, they want to be part of, when it fails to do things

because of some Hungary or some other country blocking or vetoing. I think it is absolutely essential that we strengthen the community mechanisms, the ability for the Commission, for the Parliament, for the Court of Justice to actually enforce what is to be enforced, and not to give up just because there is a country that says “I will veto it”. And of course, before we go any further in enlargement, this would have to be solved, because otherwise, we would dilute the institutions. There was a lesson of Poland and Hungary, which had to be learned. Fortunately, as it turns out, European institutions developed enough ability to solve problems with a little bit of financial pressure that it actually helped in the Polish case. But we will see in the case of Hungary, maybe something will also change there in the future. It is important, from the identity point of view. No one wants to belong to an institution which fails, that does not matter, that does not mean much to anybody. People want efficiency. People want serious institutions. People want institutions that others really respect, and not ones which can be made to give in just by some adventurous kind of state or something like this. So, this is my advice to European leaders. I know that I am provocative in what I am saying but deliberately so.

Magdalena Góra : This brings me to the inevitable question on the *finalite politique* of the European Union. What do you think Europe should do? Should we open the treaties in order to get the necessary forms? Or should we be careful about this, and rather think about the existing structures that are implemented in the treaties in order to get this community working. What would you advise to the future President of the European Commission, to the other leaders, what to do with the EU reforms?

Karolina Pomorska: Firstly, I would like to say something about what Professor Mach said, that nobody wants to be in a club that is kind of failing. I think unfortunately some governments really like that, the populist governments, because – and we see that in their discourse – the more Europe fails, the stronger they look. But then we come back to the reforms. I have to say the reforms are a bit controversial. In the area I research, security foreign policy, there are these ideas to introduce the majority vote. And as I have written, I believe this is kind of like finding a solution to the wrong problem. We are changing the system when we are not ready for it because we do not have a common strategic culture. We do not have, I think, enough trust yet between smaller and bigger states. We are building that, it is getting better, but I think introducing Qualified Majority Voting in the area of foreign policy might be too early, and it might be dangerous. I would say that we should be serious about what is written in the current treaties. If there are countries who violate fundamental values, we have certain procedures that might even lead to a suspension of the vote. If there are procedures, why are we changing the whole system of voting? My main area of research is how negotiations take place under the shadow of the veto. And yes, sometimes they are slow, but countries generally feel they need to be taken seriously, even the small ones, because they can veto. There is this need to take everybody's voice into account. That also has a kind of functional role of building a community. I am worried that under QMV there would be too much bargaining that ownership will be lost. You know that in other policies if you do not implement EU law and you have a mountain of waste, the court will tell you to

do something about it or will fine you. In foreign and security policy, sensitive policies, we do not have courts' involvement. I see a lot of dangers there. I am all in favour of integration, but I think we should not design policies because of the worst students in the classroom, you know. So, we should really be serious about defending our values inside Europe even if it opens other taboos, because we may need to take away the vote. Yes, it's scary, it can happen to you too, but you know what the other choice is.

Zdzisław Mach: I would agree with Professor Pomorska that certainly we have to be very careful with the reforms. I do not really know, not being a specialist in this field, how much can be done within the existing legal frame. But I agree that we should largely use the instruments that we have. The EU should not hesitate or be afraid of using harsh measures against countries that violate EU rules. We all remember that Poland and Hungary were both offenders, and it seemed nothing could be done because they said unanimity would not be achieved. But there are two offenders. They should both be excluded from voting. I think that before there is any further enlargement, the way decisions are made in the EU needs to be changed. So the opening of treaties, if it happens, would have to be very well prepared so that we do not ruin what we already have by having them not ratified. This already happened, unfortunately, with the Treaty establishing the Constitution for Europe, which I think was partially due to the enlargement. So maybe it was too early. It was not the right moment. But first of all, let's use what we have. Let's not be afraid of the consequences.

Magdalena Góra: Professor Kasprowicz, what is your take on how populist actors are engaging with the treaties' reforms debate? What are the risks from the perspective of scholars looking at the populists' views on the future of European integration?

Dominika Kasprowicz: There has been a large amount of scholarship on incoherence as an imminent element of the so-called populist groups. And it makes me feel a bit more hopeful. Because if you look into the agenda, into certain issues and topics and subjects, apparently it is only migration that most of the populist actors agree on. In many other policies the fact that populists are very national-oriented, very ethnocentric, denies them efficient collaboration. So, of course, maybe I am overly optimistic, maybe there are not very positive circumstances coming together in the form of a kind of perfect storm and they will prevail and succeed in shaping the near future of the European Union strategy.

2. What's going on in Brussels? EU institutions seen from the inside

Participants – alumni of Institute of European Studies at the Jagiellonian University:

dr Maja León Grzymkowska, European Commission

Łukasz Klejnowski, European Parliament

Beata Krawiec, European Commission

dr Paulina Lenik, Jagiellonian University, former employee of the EU Delegation to Uzbekistan

Mikołaj Solik, European Commission, Directorate General for Budget

Moderators:

dr Karolina Czerska-Shaw

dr Marcin Zubek

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Karolina Czerska-Shaw & Marcin Zubek: What knowledge gained during the wonderful years of studying at the European studies proved more useful in your work nowadays and what knowledge gained proved less useful act in your present work?

Maja León Grzymkowska: I think the interdisciplinary character of the studies – that you are learning to take a different perspective and to get out of your dogma to look at the problem from different angles – this is for me is what I’ve benefited the most from in my work in the Commission. I think that if you work in the institutions, you need to understand a bit of the institutional aspect and the processes and the politics. Because everything is sensitive, and you need to have this political sense, and I think these types of studies give sensitivity and helps to prepare you for a job in the institutions. I feel that I benefited from exposure to different ways of thinking and the fact that I did my PhD program here was really beneficial to my career in the institutions.

Beata Krawiec: What I remember most is Professor Jan Tkaczyński and his lecture on European Institutions. My degree, which was good enough for him, meant a lot to me. I also vividly recall our seminars with lecturer Olga Brzezińska, whom I met again a few years ago when I was more mature. The exam we took with her was one of the hardest of my life, but also one of the most important. It provided not only a legal foundation but also the essential knowledge that has greatly helped me in my work in European institutions.

Paulina Lenik: I remember every time I crossed the corridor and saw the EU flag, Professor Kowalski would ask, “Is it really the EU flag? Or is it the Council of Europe’s flag?” That question has stuck with me to this day. If not for lectures about the Lisbon Treaty and Professor Magdalena Góra’s lectures on security policy, I probably wouldn’t have the job I have now, as European External Security (EES) doesn’t exist in its current form without those developments. Another valuable take away from my

studies, although not directly from European Studies, was the importance of certifying my language skills. Having a certified language exam is crucial. The language classes at the Institute of European Studies were top-notch and incredibly useful. I'm glad to see you're continuing these valuable programs.

Mikołaj Solik: I think I will start with this statement that I don't think there's something like useless knowledge. I think there are perhaps less useful teaching methods but I'm very happy to say we didn't have many of these here. What I enjoyed most in the institute was this very practical approach to making students interact, and discuss, not being scared to ask questions and voice their opinions. I can very much agree with what you said about the multidisciplinary nature of the department. I appreciated that we had very practical exercises, such as a simulation of the Foreign Affairs Council. This type of exercise required us to study a specific case, topic and context, as well as the political background. It was essential to understand the factors that shape the positions of member states, including the negotiation dynamics and cultural aspects. Furthermore, we had to grasp the institutional setup and the background behind why discussions occur in specific settings and how they unfold. I believe this approach provided for a strong application of theory that we can carry forward into our future endeavours. I have very fond memories of the classes on EU law, particularly because they were held in the castle. I didn't have many classes there. A solid understanding of EU law and institutions is crucial if one aspires to work in Brussels, and this course provided that foundation. I also cherish the design of the course on EU Institutions, which included sessions with the current mayor of Warsaw.

His practical experience from the European Council meetings enriched our learning. I took the foundational knowledge imparted by Dr. Grzegorz Pożarlik about the institutions with me, and I apply it in my everyday job. These experiences are certainly not to be underestimated.

Łukasz Klejnowski: It has been 21 years since I studied here, and it's difficult to pinpoint exactly what I learned. What I remember most are the people rather than the specific knowledge I gained. However, I believe that's part of what a university is meant to do – it's not just about providing knowledge and tools for your future career, but about opening your eyes to the world. In many ways, the university experience is an eye-opening exercise that spans five or more years, allowing you to explore various fields and discover what truly interests you. At the Institute, I had the chance to engage with a wide range of subjects, which allowed me to see what excited me and what drove me to seek more knowledge. In my case, this exploration led me to an internship in the European Parliament during my first year, where I began learning about Europe and European integration through both study and practice. In my second year, I went on an Erasmus exchange, so my learning experience involved a lot of coming and going, not just a continuous process that happened exclusively at the university. Before coming to the Institute, I studied law, and it felt very uniform – everyone seemed to go through the same curriculum. So after one year of law, I joined the Institute, where everything was different. I had the freedom to choose what truly interested me, and that was the best part of the experience. It gave me the chance to explore various subjects and ultimately decide what I was passionate about.

Karolina Czerska-Shaw & Marcin Zubek: Let's move to the second question, which is perhaps a little bit more connected to what you are doing in Brussels. One of the significant concepts we are teaching is the concept of elite socialization taking place in Brussels, sometimes called "Brusselisation". To what extent do you feel "Brusselisation" or elite socialization in your work, in your daily work? How do you "Brusselise" or defend yourself from "Brusselisation"?

Łukasz Klejnowski: I don't think "Brusselisation" is the right term. It's not just about Brussels; it could just as easily be Strasbourg or any other location. For me, the process isn't limited to Brussels. It's something I observe regularly in the European Parliament, where we have numerous meetings with committees, national parliament representatives, and countless stakeholders. This process isn't confined to institutions – it's happening across regions, involving various representatives from Brussels, Strasbourg, and other places. It also includes different business actors and civic organisations. It's a process that engages not just the 30,000 civil servants in EU institutions but also thousands, if not millions, of people connected to member states. This isn't about elites. Working groups and representatives from regional institutions are regularly involved in discussions with the Commission or the Council, and they are also invited to the European Parliament. Every member of parliament hosts around 100 visitors each year. If you multiply that by the number of years and members, you can see the vast number of people who come to Brussels for a few days and become part of this "Brusselisation" process.

I'm certainly not distancing myself from this process – it's a significant part of my job. A large portion of my work invo-

lves negotiating legal drafts and discussing them with people from other countries. Of course, knowing them and being able to speak freely helps, as it fosters a level of understanding that strengthens cooperation.

In many ways, this process is central to what the EU is today, as it helps us comprehend one another better. We would need to delve deeper into what we mean by “socialisation” because it can have multiple layers and meanings. However, I believe this process is far broader than most people realize.

In the field of security policy, “Brusselisation” or socialisation is least expected, as it remains primarily under the control of member states, with limited joint efforts. However, in areas such as economic, social, and fundamental rights issues, nearly everything has a European dimension. Even at the regional level, particularly with EU funds and local initiatives, there is a broader perspective that extends beyond regional or national boundaries due to the high level of interconnectedness across Europe.

Mikołaj Solik: I would focus on the aspect of language because, for me, one of the key elements of socialisation is the language we use and the concepts it carries. Language shapes our perception of the world and being part of the EU environment means adopting a certain linguistic framework. There’s a distinction between being an EU practitioner, working in the institutions, and being a scholar of European studies. The latter gives a specific framework for understanding the world and applying specific concepts to it. In Brussels, there is a so-called “EU bubble,” comprised of people working in the institutions, as well as trade unions and associations related to them. This bubble even has its own social space, the well-known “PLUX”

[short for Place du Luxembourg] in front of the European Parliament, where EU professionals meet. While I don't frequent these places often, they reflect the socialisation of those deeply embedded in the EU world.

For those studying European Studies, it could be said they already have their entry ticket into this bubble. They can discuss EU topics – whether it's the evolution of the EU flag or the role of institutions – on a different level than the general public. I recall a job interview for a communication position where, after answering a question about communication strategy, I thought I had done well. However, when I asked for feedback, they told me that while I seemed experienced, my responses sounded “very Brussels-like” So, there are also risks of integrating too much of the EU-specific jargon into the everyday vocabulary.

Hence, we should not underestimate the importance of communicating EU-related issues in a way accessible to people who are less familiar with the intricacies of European integration. As someone with a European Studies background and someone working in the European Commission I remind myself that it's essential to remain accountable to citizens, and we need to be able to explain these topics clearly and understandably.

Paulina Lenik: In following up on the language aspect, I would highlight its role as a key signifier of the EU bubble, especially when it comes to acronyms – there are many of them. From my experience as a member of a delegation, we tend to have a somewhat monolithic understanding of the EU bubble, with places like PLUX in Brussels serving as central points. However, this isn't entirely accurate. There are subcultures within the EU institutions. For those of us in delegations, our work is a bit different, and that influences the language we

use, including the acronyms, which reflect our distinct tasks. The nature of the job shapes a position within this broader bubble, and for us, the expat community plays a bigger role than the typical EU bubble centered around PLUX. We are more connected to an expat bubble, which brings us together in a different way than those working directly within Brussels-based institutions.

Beata Krawiec: We often refer to ourselves as expats, but I'm not sure if there's a significant difference between being an expat and being an economic migrant from Poland or other countries. When you come from relatively poorer countries like Portugal, Romania, or parts of Greece, the salary you can earn in Brussels is significantly higher than what you could earn in your capital. I know many people who have been working as officials in Brussels since 2004, or even since the 1980s, and yet they don't speak French. They are not integrated into the local culture, which is why I wouldn't classify them as elite, as they show little respect for the culture of the country where they live.

This is, in my view, a weak point of this so-called elite. Even though we live in the capital of Belgium or cities like Strasbourg or Luxembourg, we need to show respect for the countries that host us. It's important to respect their traditions and culture and to integrate with the local people and neighbours. This respect and integration are essential aspects of being part of a community, regardless of your status as an expat or migrant.

Maja León Grzymkowska: I've been reflecting on the concept of "Brusselisation" and I'm not entirely sure I fully grasp its meaning. What I initially understood is that it refers to the development of a kind of supranational identity, where we begin to identify more with Brussels than with our places of

origin. Having lived in Brussels for 18 years and being married to a Spaniard, my situation makes it somewhat challenging to maintain a close connection to my cultural roots. Yet, despite this, I still feel very much connected to where I come from, and I believe Brussels plays a significant role in this.

When we lived in Spain for a few years, surrounded by Spaniards, my children stopped speaking Polish. In Brussels, however, the sheer diversity of the city ensures that you never forget your origins. This diversity helps maintain that vital link to your culture. For me, as I get older, I find myself more interested in returning to and understanding what's happening back home. This is a frequent topic of conversation at home, as my husband is deeply engaged with current events in Spain. In this way, Brussels facilitates this balance, allowing us to maintain ties to our respective countries.

Regarding the issue of not learning French, it's true that many don't, but I believe that's partly because you don't need it in the context of the EU bubble. Brussels is so diverse and multilingual that there isn't a dominant culture forcing you to assimilate. This, in my view, makes it easier to maintain your own identity without losing the connection to your roots.

This aspect of diversity is important in our work as well. Although we serve as EU officials, our task is to represent different perspectives and work toward solving common problems, all while acknowledging the varied challenges and perspectives that each of us brings from our respective backgrounds.

Karolina Czerska-Shaw & Marcin Zubek: What advice would you give to those who are interested in pursuing a similar career path? Could you share some insights into how you navigated your journey?

Maja León Grzymkowska: In 2007 I successfully passed one of the general competitions, which I did in French, that marked the beginning of my career within the institutions. It was easier back then, I believe, because these were general competitions specifically for new member states. Therefore, my experience might not be the most straightforward example to follow, as the process has become more complex since then. However, based on my own experience and work, I can say that the Blue Book traineeship¹ is incredibly valuable and beneficial. Another useful strategy is to specialise in a particular area, as specialised competitions tend to be more manageable than general ones. For instance, areas such as data protection or public health are fields that anyone can study and master.

¹ The Blue Book Traineeship Programme provides two types of internships: one in administration and another in translation within the Directorate-General for Translation (DGT). These internships are offered across various services and agencies of the European Commission, mainly in Brussels, Luxembourg, and other EU cities. Interns' specific duties depend on their assigned department, covering areas such as competition law, human resources, environmental policy, and translation. The programme is accessible to all EU citizens, regardless of personal characteristics, and a limited number of positions are available for citizens of third countries. Applicants must be graduates from any field, having either obtained their degree or provided proof of completed coursework if their diploma is pending. Proficiency in two EU languages is mandatory. Daily responsibilities for interns may include attending meetings, preparing and analyzing documents (such as reports and consultations), responding to inquiries from citizens, participating in project management, and conducting translation or terminology research. Candidates are expected to demonstrate an open attitude toward European issues, a willingness to learn about the Commission's methods, readiness to work in a multicultural setting, and a proactive mindset [editor's note].

Beata Krawiec: During my studies, no one informed us about the EPSO exams, which is something I greatly missed at the time. In March 2010, I took the initiative to send my CV to all Polish Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), except for two. After about eight hours, one of the MEPs responded and invited me for an interview. Following that, after a few months, I secured my first internship in the office of the President of the European Parliament, starting in May 2010.

To begin, it's essential to research and identify where you would like to work or intern. Are you interested in the European Committee of the Regions, the European Parliament, the European Commission, or another European institution? For example, Frontex has an office in Warsaw, which may be more accessible, or there are opportunities with the European Neighbourhood Policy Authority in Bratislava. Ultimately, you need to clarify your career aspirations following your European studies in Kraków. Do you want to work in a cultural institution? This is a critical question for you to consider. It is crucial for candidates seeking positions in the cybersecurity unit to have a minimum of two years of experience, as a degree alone is insufficient. Therefore, pursuing internships or work opportunities in Poland or your home country to gain practical experience is highly recommended.

Additionally, I strongly encourage joining student organisations or NGOs, as these experiences can provide valuable skills and help prepare you for future roles in European institutions. This is a crucial aspect of building a professional profile, especially from the perspective of someone who is involved in hiring.

Paulina Lenik: It is crucial to have certified language skills to secure a Blue Book traineeship, a requirement I was unaware of when I obtained mine. Currently, the EPSO exam system is undergoing a review, resulting in the cancellation or postponement of certain tests, which presents challenges for candidates. This situation highlights the importance of not fixating on a single job goal, as unexpected changes can lead to frustration. Instead, candidates should evaluate their skills and identify transferable abilities, as this broader approach may uncover new opportunities. Personal experiences, such as an unexpected move to New York, can lead to rewarding paths that were previously unconsidered.

Mikołaj Solik: If you're unfamiliar with EPSO, there's no need to panic. There is a wealth of information available online, and one aspect I truly appreciate about various EU bodies and institutions is that they invest considerable time and effort into detailing how they operate, where they are located, and what opportunities are available. However, this doesn't necessarily translate into a complete job transparency, which is one of the challenges faced by institutions, especially in Brussels.

First and foremost, conduct your research beyond the university setting. There are numerous resources you can find online. On LinkedIn, some organisations can offer valuable insights into who is hiring and you might see new vacancies there more quickly than on the official websites of chosen EU bodies. Consider reaching out to the EU Careers Ambassador at your university. The Ambassadors aim to promote EU employment opportunities within the student community. Do not underestimate the value of international experiences. While speaking multiple languages is undoubtedly important,

having tangible international experiences will certainly be advantageous for both the Bluebook Traineeship and work prospects. Even if your experience abroad involved non-professional work, it still holds value. Such experiences demonstrate your ability to navigate stressful and unpredictable situations, your resilience, and your capacity to organise yourself in new environments. They also reflect your willingness to learn and adapt.

Learning is an ongoing process; being open to acquiring new knowledge, even after graduation, is crucial. Participating in Erasmus exchanges is particularly beneficial for securing an EU job. Additionally, consider other projects co-financed by Erasmus; you can find good information on the European Youth Portal. Look into Erasmus projects for university alumni, as these may provide grants for internships after graduation.

You might also explore opportunities with the European Solidarity Corps, which focuses on volunteering for various social causes in different countries. Seek out youth organisations, youth councils, and NGOs, as they frequently implement projects co-financed by the EU, which often involve exchanges with organisations from other countries. These experiences can greatly enhance your social skills and how you present yourself as a collaborative individual.

It is important to note that very few EU jobs are solitary; teamwork is often a significant component. The ability to organize yourself within a team is highly valued and encompasses skills of self-management, time management, focus management, and information management, as well as effective communication and collaboration.

Łukasz Klejnowski: Acquiring language skills and exploring different experiences is essential. In my case, it was more of a coincidence; I wasn't actively seeking a job in Brussels when one was offered to me, and I ended up staying there for 15 years. Therefore, I can't provide much concrete advice because sometimes opportunities simply arise, and you need to be open to them. However, as we can see from our experiences, there are various paths to success. Some individuals pursue careers through the EPSO exams, which have gained a notorious reputation in Brussels. Many people find these exams to be absurd and ineffective in assessing relevant skills; there seems to be widespread dissatisfaction with them. It raises the question of whether a complete overhaul of the EPSO process is needed. Nonetheless, it's important to try different avenues. Think of it as a directive – the outcome is what truly matters. The way you achieve that outcome is entirely up to you, and many different paths can lead you to opportunities within European institutions.

Maja León Grzymkowska: I have checked the statistics, and it appears that we are still underrepresented in certain areas. There are Polish quotas for administrative positions that remain unfilled, which I find unfortunate. I recall that when I started, my head of unit mentioned that he had the pleasure of being on the recruitment panel for secretarial positions, where there was a significant number of Polish women with PhDs applying. This situation suggests that we sometimes underestimate our capabilities. Working in Brussels is a great opportunity, and there are numerous career paths available. I encourage everyone to explore these opportunities, as there is still plenty of room for Polish professionals in Brussels.

Mikołaj Solik: If I could offer a piece of advice to my younger self, it would be this: don't expect yourself to perfectly match the job description or to know everything required for the position. If you are perfectly suited for the job and possess all the necessary knowledge, you are overqualified. It is important to understand that you will learn while you work – and your job should offer you learning possibilities. When preparing for an interview, consider what you would like to learn from the position, and feel free to express this during the interview. Additionally, avoid the pressure of striving for perfection in your qualifications, as that is not the purpose of applying for a job. This mindset may explain why many individuals apply for positions below their qualifications – they fail to recognize their value and the skills they already possess.