

Quo Vaditis, European Studies?

*Reflections on 25 Years
of English-Language Programs
at the Institute of European Studies,
Jagiellonian University*



JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY
IN KRAKÓW
INSTITUTE OF EUROPEAN STUDIES

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Introduction

English-language programs in Institute of European Studies hold a vital place within the Institute, serving not only as a bridge to the international academic community but also as a platform for comprehensive education about Europe. These programs enable students to engage deeply with Europe as a diverse continent and a complex political federation, exploring its cultures, heritage, and societies. By fostering interdisciplinary learning in politics, culture, history, and social issues, the Institute equips students with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and contribute to the ongoing European project, preparing them to navigate and shape the continent's future in an interconnected world.

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the English-language programs at the Institute of European Studies, a special debate was organized, bringing together experts and alumni to reflect on the question, “Quo vaditis, European Studies?” Experts discussed the condition and development of European Studies, highlighting its historical roots, interdisciplinary nature, and contemporary challenges such as Brexit, the crisis of democracy, and the need for new international research approaches.

Alumni responded to the question, “What is Europe For Me?” sharing personal and professional insights that

portrayed Europe as a space of values, cultural dialogue, and ongoing transformation. They emphasized the importance of the European idea as a continuous process of negotiation and cooperation between diverse identities, as well as the crucial role of education in fostering engagement for a shared future.

This debate thus captured both the evolution of European Studies as an academic field and the complex, multifaceted meaning of Europe for its current and former students.

Kinga Anna Gajda

Quo vaditis, European Studies?

Zsuzsanna Varga

The current condition of European Studies in the UK, where I have lived and taught for over two decades, offers important additions to any discussion of the discipline's fortunes in Europe. No longer the member of the European Union but still an active participant in the networks of tertiary education institutions, its participation in the development of the discipline shows both dependencies on political turns and also its move away from direct political agendas. The rise, fall and potential re-emergence show the complex relationship between the political project and group of scholarly disciplines that may invite developments of critical thinking in new directions.

The first point to consider is the rise and fall of European Studies in Great Britain. It is well documented that the impetus behind launching European Studies was primarily political: it was the UK's failure to join the EEC on two occasions in the 1960s that spurred what Alan Milward called the 'European Studies movement' in UK universities. It also led to the establishment in 1967 of the 'University Group for European Integration Studies,' offering explanations of intricate associations between member states, while also becoming a popular discipline for those who favoured the extension of European unity.

From the perspective of existing traditions of tertiary education, the teaching of modern languages represented a solid background for European Studies. The example of such developments at Loughborough University (England) amply illustrates its history: the combination of languages and social sciences resulted in a course that was ‘vocational in character, though not exclusively so, in that the course aim[ed] to produce graduates with a linguistic capability in two European languages, and a knowledge of Economics and the Political and Economic Institutions of major Common Market countries.’¹ The course thus combined the rigorous study of modern languages and social sciences. A compulsory course in the ‘Politics of European Integration’ showed its clear agenda: the training of a group of professionals with an unquestionable commitment to the European integration and the service of a stronger European community.

The heyday of European Studies was towards the end of the 20th century, but Kenneth Dyson, Chair of the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) – the main UK organisation that sets the trend for research in the UK – European Studies panel had already warned that the ‘absence of urgent and large scale action to support the sector the research base in European Studies will wither rapidly, and Britain will lack the resources of foreign language and cultural knowledge and skills necessary to make a success of Britain’s role in Europe.’ The decline continued, and although the move away in the

¹ See LSE Blog: Ros Taylor, ‘May’s Global Britain: the rise and fall of European Studies.’ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2017/03/23/mays-global-britain-the-decline-and-fall-of-european-studies/>. The author of this essay is grateful for the content of Taylor’s blog.

late 2000s from modern language studies to studies centred on social sciences and humanities – with research conducted in English – offered hopes that the discipline would regain its former strength, not even this pragmatic and heavily criticised move could re-establish its prestige. By 2014, the European Studies subpanel had been dropped from the Research Excellence Framework, and since Brexit in 2016, the discipline has declined further. Interest in European affairs has moved into the departments of Politics. General consensus also holds that the Brexit vote was partly caused by general low level of knowledge about the European Union; arguably, a UK population more routinely exposed to knowledge about Europe and in advanced educational setting might have produced a different referendum result.

What is left of European Studies now? Database searches on European Studies offer many hits, but most refer to modern language degrees in European languages. The number of universities teaching explicitly European Studies to undergraduates remains firmly under ten. Some universities offer masters courses in European Studies, and Birmingham and the London School of Economics also offer researcher PhD degrees. The existence of these courses is welcome and shows the existence of the discipline, but postgraduate courses are much more vulnerable to institutional changes as they can be suspended or withdrawn at a shorter notice and with much fewer administrative procedures.

European Studies from the vantage point of Hungary, a reluctant member of the European Union, also offers important perspectives. The 2004 accession to the European Union marks the rise of European Studies. At present, universities

offering European Studies programmes include Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest) the University of Public Service (Budapest) and the University of Miskolc. A recent development includes the launch of the Network of European Studies spearheaded by Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, the National University of Public Service and the University of Szeged. Although the organisations is only in its infancy, with conferences conducted in Hungarian and no obvious desire for involving international Europeanists, it is only to be hoped that this initiative – showing commitment on the part of Hungarian Europeanists to developing the discipline – will gain international traction.

The future of European Studies in the United Kingdom may contain unexpected turns. Although historically hesitant about committing to a strong political alliance, a closer integration with European tertiary education is very likely to happen. With the UK now having re-accessed Horizon and re-joining Erasmus + and creating a youth mobility scheme, it is hoped that the distance between British academia and that of continental Europe created by Brexit will gradually decrease and the earlier strong partnerships will be re-established. British-based European Studies are unlikely to return to the vocational goal of training Eurocrats, but the vision of Global Britain – the slogan commonly used after Brexit- will include closer collaboration with the nearest neighbours.

Visions of teaching specifically European Studies in the near future can only be limited, and linking European Studies to modern language learning would be counterproductive for enrolment. But understandings of Europe need to underpin the teaching of any course related to European studies,

whether in the field of European Union studies or in the more broadly understood critical European studies.

Critical area studies offers other refreshing perspectives. In a move away from dichotomy of Europe vs. non-Europe, it considers Europe within the framework area studies (or language based area studies) as it offers transdisciplinary approaches and regional and supra-national and supra-regional conclusions. For these examinations, the history and the cultural and political heritage of Europe can underpin a nuanced understanding of contemporary political responses, strategies and emotions. Through the examination European values in their changing nature, it offers perspectives for European Studies through a dynamic relationship with other world regions.

Zdzisław Mach

It is indeed a good question to ask now, when we at the Jagiellonian are celebrating the 25th anniversary of the degree programme in European Studies. To be precise, European Studies have been taught here for even longer, as we began offering courses for credit, although not yet a degree, as early as the 1990s.

At that time, more than 25 years ago, there was considerable enthusiasm in Europe for further integration of the EU, with the development of the Union not only as a Common Market but also as a political and social Union. The Iron Curtain fell, and former communist countries were negotiating their membership of the EU. The big enlargement seemed to be certain; the only question was when. This caused mixed

feelings in the EU, for some people the enlargement of the EU to the East was an obvious consequence of the defeat of communism, while others expressed concern about whether the countries of Central/Eastern Europe were really ready for membership and what consequences the enlargement would bring to Europe. In the East, the perspective of joining the EU was a great chance of modernisation, but for many people, the perspective of opening up to the West caused anxiety. All in all, it was the time of great changes and challenges, and the region of Central/Eastern Europe attracted a great deal of interest.

It was in the early 1990s that a discussion of European Studies as a new field to be developed in universities began in Poland. There were different ideas of what this new field should be: an interdisciplinary programme of studies of Europe from different perspectives or specialisation of some traditional disciplines such as law or economics. Eventually, the first option prevailed, and the European Studies interdisciplinary curriculum was developed. European Studies were created not as a new discipline but as a field of studies integrating many disciplines: philosophy, history, law, economics, sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, and literary studies. There were a few obligatory “pillars” which all students had to take, as well as a long list of elective courses for students to choose from and construct their own specialisation. We began with a two-year Master’s programme, and a few years ago, a three-year BA was introduced.

The new field was very popular among Polish students, as well as among international students who were coming from all over the world. Polish students were mainly motivated by

the expectation that European Studies might equip them with the qualifications needed for careers in EU institutions and in Polish institutions which would need specialists competent in European matters. Foreign students joined the programme either with the aim of studying about the EU, European integration and Europe as a whole, or because of their particular interest in the region of Central/Eastern Europe or Poland.

From the very beginning the idea of European Studies at the UJ was to integrate two dimensions of academic education: general knowledge in the broad field of humanities and social sciences focussed on Europe and practically oriented knowledge and competences which enabled graduates to work in a broad range of institutions which required professional competences in the matters of functioning of the European Union. Some of our students were more interested in the former, others in the latter. We have tried to offer both, but with the emphasis on what constitutes learning and studying in a research university: general knowledge, theory and methodology, as well as training in critical, independent and creative thinking. We believe that only in this way will we be able to give our students the ability to learn new competences and fully participate in what is known as lifelong learning. We always wanted to educate our students not just to enable them to find jobs after graduation, but to be employable ten, twenty or more years afterwards, when new competences will have to be acquired.

These dilemmas are still present in our reflection on European Studies today. But a lot has changed. The region of Central/Eastern Europe is no longer interesting because it is new and unknown. The region is no longer a unique laboratory

of transformation from authoritarianism to democracy and of modernisation. For some time, it looked as if the region would become just an average, slightly boring peripheral part of the EU. But unexpectedly, it became a focus of attention again, though perhaps for reasons that many of us did not welcome. Some post-communist countries experience democratic backsliding, Eurosceptic populists came to power, while the societies have not developed European identity; for them, the EU is still just a cash machine, transferring funds but not a community to which they all belong as Europeans.

25 year ago the most popular topics of research that students carried out were those related to functioning of EU institutions and processes of integration, while the students who had particular interest in the region or just Poland often chose to research post-communist transformation, the communist past or some specific topics among which the Jewish history, the Holocaust and antisemitism were among most frequently chosen. Today, the legacy of communism is still a popular topic, but rather in connection with the present problems with democracy. Identity issues, nationalism and populism, as well as democratic backsliding, are also among the subjects which many students want to understand. The ERU is still obviously a focus of attention, but often in connection with crisis, tensions between the Communities and the member states, and challenges with which the EU must deal. Climate change predictably also attracts a lot of attention.

The development of globalisation determined the need to change the perspective of looking at Europe. Here, several factors influenced the need to change. The role of Europe in the world in competition with the US, China and other powers,

globalisation in all its dimensions, but also self-reflection that has always been present in Europe and which currently takes the form of criticism of Eurocentrism, must be mentioned here. Also, the recently developed discussion on colonialism, post-colonialism and the need for decolonisation determines the tone of debate on Europe and its relations with the rest of the world. In effect of all this, European Studies are now less focused on internal affairs of the EU or Europe itself, but more take into account Europe in the wider world, in relation to other continents, countries and cultures in a global perspective. The great challenge here is to develop this reflection in such a way that, on the one hand, an honest and well-balanced story of Europe in the world is given to students, while at the same time, a destructive self-criticism blaming Europe for all the evils in the world is avoided. European Studies are in the process of developing their new, updated identity, while Europe at the same time goes through a similar process of constructing its new identity in relation to the world.

What should European Studies focus on today? Europe in the globalised world, in the historical and contemporary perspective, seems to be a stable tendency. The process of European integration, the unique case of the EU, which is the most successful non-imperial integration in history, must be studied, with all the challenges of the EU today, including the difficult relations between the Community and the inter-governmental aspects of the Union. The dilemma of enlargement and the ultimate boundaries of Europe are among the issues which must be researched as well. But Europe is not only the EU, but also European history, European civilization with all its great achievements and ideas but also dilemmas

and ambiguities, European identity and heritage, in all their complexity, which must be studied and taught, so that Europe presents itself in our minds as a historical, cultural, social and economic entity, in its unity and diversity. Even if we are now living in a more complicated and unstable world than the world we remember 25 years ago, Europe is still a major global player, and I am sure there will be enough able students for whom European Studies will be an attractive option to spend a few years at the University.

What Is Europe for Me

Milica Zindović

To begin with, when I speak about Europe, I am not just talking about the European Union. Not strictly geography either. We're talking about something much broader — a historical space, a cultural legacy, a set of values and contradictions. That eternal question — *where are Europe's borders?* — reminds us that Europe was never only about institutions or treaties — it has always been a layered space of cultures, ideas, and shared (and contested) histories.

That's why, for me, Europe isn't just a place on the map. It's a reference point — an identity, a framework for how I think, live, and work. It's something deeply rooted in how I see the world.

Montenegro has always been part of Europe — culturally, historically, and intellectually — even if not yet a member of the EU. But we do strive toward that particular concept: one of integration, cooperation, shared rules, and common values.

But there is something even more fundamental that Europe represents for me — something that is often taken for granted, but which feels increasingly urgent today: order, rules, standards.

In a world where we are witnessing the erosion of the international legal order, where power often speaks louder than

principle, Europe — or at least the European project — still stands for the idea that politics must be bound by norms. And for those of us who come from post-Yugoslav, transitional societies, this is not abstract. We carry the lived experience of the 1990s, when the absence of rules — or their selective application — led to instability, violence, and long-term democratic erosion. We know, firsthand, what happens when institutions fail and when norms collapse.

That's why Europe, for me, is also a framework of stability — not just political or economic, but normative. It represents the belief that governance can be principled, that law matters, and that standards protect both dignity and peace.

When narrowed down to the EU context, Europe becomes something even more personal: an educational framework, a professional challenge, and — very concretely — apolitical goal, especially for someone coming from a country still waiting to join.

My personal “European journey” began in Kraków — quite literally. It was through the Centre for European Studies at Jagiellonian University that I entered the world of European politics, institutions, and ideas. But what CES truly offered was more than curriculum. It was access: to new ways of thinking, to new people, to networks. It also led me to the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's in European Politics and Society, which brought together four universities (including Jagiellonian again), and connected me to a truly pan-European academic community. By then, Europe had already stopped being abstract. It had become personal. Tangible. And in many ways, transformative. And it wasn't just an academic milestone — it was a turning point in my life.

When I returned to Montenegro, it was clear that I wanted to keep working in that direction. After several years working on EU integration from the civil society side, I now pursue that same commitment from within government, as an adviser in the Prime Minister's Cabinet for foreign policy and EU affairs. My day-to-day job deals with the EU accession process, reform agendas, screenings, and benchmarks. But behind the acronyms and policy language, there is still that same animating force: the idea that Montenegro belongs to the European family, and that becoming a member is not just a strategic goal, but a generational responsibility.

It's demanding work, and the context is shifting. The EU of today is different from the one we imagined fifteen years ago. The consensus is weaker, the enlargement fatigue is real, and internal fragmentation has become harder to ignore.

But still — the idea of Europe remains powerful. Not just the institutional one, but the values behind it: rule of law, human rights, solidarity, cooperation, peace. And the EU, despite all its flaws, still has transformative power and it still means possibility — both globally and in places like Montenegro. However, it also means conditionality, asymmetry, waiting. And so we have to hold both truths at once: *Europe as aspiration, and Europe as negotiation.*

European Studies gave me more than knowledge of how institutions function. It helped me understand how they evolve, how they're perceived, and where they fall short. It gave me the ability to think critically, to translate abstract processes into real-life policy work, and to remain grounded in a bigger picture — even when the details are overwhelming.

So what is Europe for me then?

It's work. It's commitment. It's also still a promise — one that isn't automatic, but needs to be earned, argued for, and constantly redefined.

And no, it's not that a small group of EU enthusiasts — myself included — are singlehandedly bringing Montenegro into the Union. But I do believe in the project enough to work on it every day, in small, practical ways. Because in the end, Europe isn't just where we go. It's also something we choose to shape — and something that shapes us back.

Machteld Venken

'To survive the Borderlands
You must live *sin fronteras*
Be a crossroads'

Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands.
La Frontera. The New Mestiza*.
San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books,
2012, 4th edition, p. 217.

I still remember when I read Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* for the first time, on the train back from a scientific conference in Budapest. The book weaves together autobiography, poetry, history, and theory to illuminate the layered identities of Chicana women navigating life along the U.S.-Mexico border. By dismantling rigid binaries—such as male/female, white/non-white, and straight/queer—Anzaldúa reimagines identity as fluid, intersectional, and ever-evolving.

Her concept of the “new mestiza” has been endorsed by those who live at the crossroads of cultures, languages, and histories, among others since it embraces contradiction as a source of resilience. The metaphor of the “crossroads” used frequently throughout the book represents a dynamic space of transformation, negotiation, and resistance. The book includes a call to become a crossroads; to become the embodiment of multiplicity, contradiction, and creative tension—a living site where borders are not just crossed, but reimaged.

Anzaldúa’s work shaped my thinking and scholarly path, guiding me toward the field of Borderlands Studies and anchoring my work in the rich, complex scholarship Anzaldúa started. After an academic Odyssey across five European countries, I received a Professorship in Contemporary Transnational History at the University of Luxembourg, a liminal zone where cultural, linguistic, and intellectual borders blur, offering fertile ground for critical inquiry and transformation.

In my professional role, I embrace the position of a European crossroads. I see it as my responsibility to equip students not only with disciplinary knowledge but also with the cross-cultural competence essential for navigating today’s interconnected world—encouraging them to think critically across languages, cultural practices, and perspectives in every field of study. At the University of Luxembourg, multilingualism is indeed a cornerstone—courses are held in English, French, and German, reflecting the country’s rich cultural tapestry.

My Chair feels like a microcosm of Europe itself—a vibrant meeting place of diverse perspectives and experiences. I’ve had the privilege of bringing together early-career researchers and more advanced scholars from across the European

continent, spanning East (Poland and Ukraine), South (Italy), and West (France, Luxembourg, and Germany). While most of them hold degrees in history, others—coming from fields such as anthropology, photography, or data science—have found their way to my Chair through a shared passion for exploring the past. It is my belief that a dialogue between and potential convergence of these voices is a precondition to generate innovative research outcomes.

On any given day, I switch between multiple languages, often without pause. Using Dutch, my mother tongue, has become a rare luxury. Instead, I adapt my language to that of my interlocutor—English, French, German, or Polish—depending on the context, the people, and the institutional setting. This linguistic flexibility is not just about communication; it is about connection. It is about making others feel seen and heard in their own academic and cultural idioms, about tailoring advice to fit the academic community a researcher is or aspires to be part of—whether that is a PhD candidate writing a thesis in co-tutelle with a university abroad, or a Ukrainian scholar navigating temporary refuge and academic uncertainty.

My days present themselves as mosaics of several academic environments. I might begin with an onsite meeting for the Ukrainian interview project I lead, working closely with, among others, four Ukrainian students and scholars. Later, I shift to a board meeting of the C²DH management team, where scholars holding six different nationalities converge in English to shape the institute's future. Then, I find myself in a technical meeting in French at the University of Luxembourg, discussing contract handling for subcontractors.

By afternoon, I am online with the coordinators of a trina-tional doctoral network in the Greater Region, after which I support a PhD candidate preparing his German presenta-tion for a conference in Vienna. At night, I join a meeting of the Board of Directors of the global Association of Bor-derlands Studies, where I am one of the two representatives of Europe.

Each transition demands linguistic agility, cultural sensitiv-ity, an awareness of different institutional practices, and emo-tional intelligence. It is a constant balancing act—between roles, expectations and connections. Although not always easy—one must be prepared to encounter and live with tensions—it is within this fluidity that my contribution to Europe lies.

Antonluca Lecce

It may sound like an exaggeration, but for me, Europe is eve-rything.

It is where my roots were planted, where my mind found its calling, where my work takes shape, and where my future unfolds.

Europe is not a shape on a map, nor a line drawn in treaties.

Its borders may be debated—among scholars, statesmen, and street corners—but for me, it is not defined by fences or flags.

Whether in the warm light of the Mediterranean, the winds of Central and Eastern Europe, the peaks of Scandina-via, or the hills of the Balkans, I feel at home.

Not because the place is familiar, but because the people are. Because culture, cuisine, music, memories, and gestures carry a shared rhythm—an echo that says, you belong.

This is not just an idea. It is lived experience.

I was born in Sicily, in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea—a bridge between continents, a mosaic of civilizations.

Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans, French, Spanish—all passed through my island, leaving behind not conquest, but contribution.

This inheritance taught me that Europe is not limited to the legislative reach of Brussels or the contours of Schengen.

It is a civilizational space, a dialogue across centuries, rooted in shared memory, layered identities, and the simple fact of people living together on the same soil.

I still remember my father speaking to me about the Maastricht Treaty.

Back then, I couldn't imagine how this distant "European project" would become the compass of my life.

As a teenager in love with history and politics, I chose to study International Relations, even though I barely knew a foreign language.

Then in 2014, I visited a friend on Erasmus. In that brief encounter, the contours of my life shifted. I saw what it meant to live Europe, not just study it.

In 2015, I moved to Krakow for an Erasmus semester at the Centre for European Studies. That leap changed everything.

In the ten years since, I have earned degrees from four European universities, learned four languages, and worked in four EU countries.

At just 25, amid the turbulence of the pandemic, I began my career at the European Commission—a time when the world was shifting dramatically, and Europe's role became

more critical than ever. Until February 2025, I had the privilege of serving with dedication—first at DG SANTE during the health crisis, and later at DG AGRI during the challenging period of farmer protests. Brussels became my home, just as Kraków had once been. But over time, I felt the need to return—not backward, but deeper.

I left what many would consider a dream job, to ask a different question: How else can I serve this project we call Europe?

In 2023, I returned to academia at the Université libre de Bruxelles, drawn by a belief that one of our society's greatest challenges is not just economic or political, but educational.

Too many still lack access to knowledge—too many have never been shown that Europe could be for them.

That calling brought me back to Krakow, as a Marie Skłodowska-Curie doctoral candidate at the Centre for European Studies to explore the transnational rise of populism and its impact on global governance.

My journey now takes me to new corners of Europe—Germany and Greece—where I will undertake two secondments as part of my PhD programme. I am looking forward travelling allows you to see that we live in a time of transformation.

The European project is tested—by internal illiberalism, external power shifts, and a sense of fatigue.

Its institutions are questioned, its ideals often forgotten. But it is precisely now, in this age of rupture, that we must remember:

Europe was never meant to be defended with weapons, but with words. With ideas. With the courage to think together.

Today, we celebrate the Centre for European Studies—
a place that has shaped me more than any other.

I am grateful to be part of its legacy.