

Political Scientists as Research and Training Experts: Angela Liberatore

Angela Liberatore has a PhD in Political and Social Science from the European University Institute, and is now Head of Unit at the European Research Council, European Commission.

IPS: Could you please briefly describe your professional role and your main responsibilities?

I lead the Unit on Social Sciences and Humanities at the European Research Council (ERC) Executive Agency. The ERC manages the Excellence ‘pillar’ of the EU Framework Research and Innovation Programme “Horizon 2020”. It funds frontier research in all scientific domains (social sciences, life sciences, physical sciences) in a bottom up way (topics are chosen by the researchers themselves) and the grants can cover any part of the life cycle of a researcher’s career (from Starting Grants to Advanced Grants). The Unit, composed of twenty-five colleagues, provides support to the Scientific Council on any matter related to the evaluation of proposals, monitoring of research projects, tackling cross-cutting issues (from gender dimensions to open access, interdisciplinarity or widening participation) in relation to social sciences and humanities.

Currently we are working, also with Units in other scientific domains, on a Conference on Science Diplomacy. This is an emerging topic in the EU and beyond, and one that I have been working on also in my previous job as deputy head of the Unit on international cooperation –with focus on European Neighbourhood, Africa and the Gulf- at the Directorate General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission (from which I am currently seconded). During more than twenty years at the European Commission I had several jobs, all related to supporting research in Europe and internationally, and linking research with policy and societal needs and actors. For example, I was part of the Commission team at the Kyoto Conference on climate change, served as rapporteur of the group on ‘Democratising expertise’ for the Commission’s White Paper on Governance and co-organised with EEAS conferences on the regulation of private security companies, on the impacts of climate change impacts in the Middle East and on EU-US relations.

My background in political and social sciences –and philosophy- has been a key asset in all jobs I took on, including my current one. It provided me with basic knowledge, analytical tools and critical mindset to initiate and implement initiatives on a range of research and policy issues in a complex –and very diverse and interesting- institution.

IPS: Have you ever thought of doing your current work while you were a PhD student?

Frankly speaking, during my PhD – earned at the European University Institute – many of my friends had as a goal to work in a EU institution, while I was rather thinking about a research career. I simply love research and the cooperation in an international research project with Harvard University/Kennedy School of Government –where I also spent a semester with a Fulbright Fellowship- gave me even more appetite for further research.

Back to Italy the options to pursue research were not very bright though. I was told that I was too interdisciplinary (surely this would be much less of an issue now) as the PhD was in political and social sciences, my first degree was in philosophy – with application to economic theory, and I had been working on issues that at the time were seen as non-mainstream such as environmental policy and risk management... So I started considering the ‘classic option’ of migrating to the USA.

But then I saw an announcement in the newspapers about the European Commission looking for candidates to work on a to-be-launched new research programme on socio-economic and policy aspects of the environment. Initially I was not sure I wanted to pursue a career at the Commission, even if the position looked interesting and somehow ‘matching’ my CV, and I also thought it was probably not worth trying given the very harsh competition (later I learned that there were 600 applications for one post – it can be even worse...). But some friends encouraged me, I started liking the idea to work in the institution that has been driving European integration (yes, this has been a main motivation) and I considered (with my partner) that migrating to Brussels was less far away from my beloved Bologna and Florence than going anywhere in the USA. So I decided that I should not have to regret -one day- not having even tried! So I did, and got the job – temporary first and then permanent. I do not regret the choice, and when I felt tired with the job I had (yes, it happened –as in most jobs probably), I found ways to move to another, and also got a fellowship to do research again for one academic year.

IPS: Have your Political science studies influenced your career? What can be the competitive advantage of a background like yours in your profession?

Yes, my studies in political (and social) sciences made me interested in and familiar with European integration and institutions; the first was the basis for the motivation to join the Commission, the second gave me a competitive advantage when applying to my initial position as well as the following ones.

By knowing EU institutions, policies, decision making I have been able to contribute to various EU initiatives (e.g. Kyoto Protocol and White Paper, mentioned above, but also in linking research to policies in the fields of foreign affairs and home affairs) and somehow find my space in our admittedly not always easy administration.

Also in my current job, more focused on curiosity-driven research, my background provides a very good basis to guide my team, keep an overview of the research we support and work on issues such as science diplomacy.

A background in political science can be seen as a specialist one (to deal with issues such as citizenship, democracy, elections, international relations, etc.) but also as a generalist one (having the tools to tackle a wide range of policy areas, institutions, levels of governance, stakeholders’ positions and interests). Both aspects are useful!

IPS: What kind of interaction do you think there can be between your professional community and the academia?

Well, all my work has been characterized by links between EU policy (research policy and, through it, several other policy domains) and academia. Universities are the main beneficiaries of EU funding in the social sciences and humanities (whether in collaborative research under the ‘societal challenge’ part of the Framework Programme or research funded by the ERC).

Academics can choose what kind of interactions they want to have with the European Commission and ERC: get the funding to do their research and advance the frontier of knowledge or also engage in using knowledge for policy advice and respond to social needs.

For political scientists it is maybe easier than for academics with other backgrounds (let’s say anthropology, linguistic or psychology) to pursue also policy advice. However, this is an ‘art’ in itself that requires deep knowledge of the policies and actors to be advised, good skills in ‘translating’ scientific evidence in useful (avoiding ‘reinventing the wheel’ kind of papers...) and usable information and recommendations (if this is the problem, what are the options to tackle it?). Surely these are obvious issues for the readers of this journal...

IPS: From your perspective, what skills would you recommend should not be missing in a political scientist curriculum nowadays?

Flexibility! Go international and for ‘brain circulation’! Let me explain...

Flexibility relates to the content of knowledge, the links with other disciplines and communities, the choice of profession. One may start focusing on any topic during PhD studies, but then it is important to be able and willing to explore (the links with) other topics; the point is not to replace ‘deepening’ with ‘widening’ (to take a dichotomy often used concerning European integration) of knowledge, but to push the frontier of knowledge and also identify other users or even co-producers of knowledge beyond academia. Many issues need cooperation with other disciplines to be seriously addressed: European integration itself can hardly be understood without links with law, economic, sociology or history; the same applies to the development of international environmental negotiations and agreements or of migration policies – just to mention some examples. And one may start thinking of a profession in academia and then pursue one in diplomacy, policy or business – or vice versa – depending on opportunities that may arise, if one is ready to see and size them. In this regard, communication skills as well as language and IT skills and the ability to work in multicultural environments can turn out to be very useful for many different professional venues.

‘Go international’ means that without some study and research experience abroad and some publications in English, the opportunities become much more narrow (whether one likes or resent the ‘lingua franca’, the need to know it is a fact of scientific life – quite obvious to readers of this journal as we are mostly Italians writing and reading in English...). It also means to develop networks that help expanding one own research, professional and personal horizons. It does NOT mean ‘brain drain’ but rather ‘brain circulation’: in many cases and countries (while admittedly not all), an experience abroad and a good CV with publications in English is an asset and ‘return’ of qualified researchers is actively promoted. As Italy has a long tradition of ‘brain drain’, I would like to conclude with a constructive note: some measures have been taken to encourage return of researchers and recent debates

indicate that while problems persist, attention is being devoted to this. In addition, measures to engage with Italian 'scientific diasporas' abroad can enhance mobility, knowledge sharing, networking and innovation (here one could also learn from the experience of other countries such as Ireland or, not to look too 'Eurocentric', India). Similarly, engaging with 'knowledge workers' who came to Italy from other countries, can be one of the useful ways of harvesting the potential of migration and gain first-hand knowledge of their countries of origin; something that can, in turn, have broader cultural, economic, policy implications. Perhaps a topic for further study by political scientists?