

THEORIZING THE ROLE OF EXPERTS IN SHAPING EURO-MEDITERRANEAN POLITICS, AT A TIME OF EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY AND EMERGENCE OF CONTESTED ISSUES. EVIDENCE FROM THE IEMed - EuroMeSCo CASE STUDY

Anna Longhini, IEMed associate fellow

## 1. Introduction

*“Behind this flood is an enormous corps of policy experts. The experts have many designations – researcher, analyst, scientist, economist, professor, advisor, staff member. Many do not work for Congress directly, but are located in think tanks, lobbying organizations, corporations, universities, and, most important, in the agencies of the executive branch.”*

– Bruce Bimber (1996)

The main objective of this article is to understand if and how experts are contributing to shape EU foreign policy, with a specific focus on Euro-Mediterranean affairs. Questioning how experts move ideas through the political space, and how they manage to have their ideas accepted and eventually implemented by political actors is relevant for the understanding of how foreign policy decisions are shaped and to what extent expertise is at risk of being politicized. Indeed, at a time of profound transformation and challenge regarding the political future of Europe, the role of policy experts in shaping discourse, especially around contested policy issues, raises inevitable questions regarding their accountability. The accountability of policy experts matters: they do not usually count as single individuals, but their voices are more recognizable and better heard when working for organizations, which means that they are never truly independent. In other words, experts need to balance their personal and institutional positions, as is argued later in the

article. In this context, the organizations under analysis are not only think tanks, but also academics, former diplomats, EU agency officials and ministerial bureaucrats, all of whom belong to the realm of policy experts.

This article proposes an initial examination of what is a rather under-researched topic: the role of expertise in shaping EU foreign policy decisions, examined with regard to the EU's democratic deficit debate, which relates to the way decisions have been taken in the EU. Indeed, these days the need to understand who is making or influencing decisions is emerging more strongly in Europe, especially as contested issues are at stake and have become increasingly relevant on the EU agenda. One of those issues is the management of migration flows to the EU, framed through a security approach (securitization of migration), which is paradoxically becoming a major driver of cooperation among EU Member States. Empirically, the analysis is based on the study of a single case: the *European Institute for the Mediterranean*, understood as both a foreign policy think tank based in Barcelona (Spain) and the Secretariat of the *EuroMeSCo Network*. The article first examines the 'democratic deficit debate,' by suggesting why this argument seems not to hold water for making EU foreign policy. Subsequently, in the third paragraph, the phenomenon known as the politics of expertise is placed under close examination. Finally, the case of EuroMeSCo is examined, thanks to the survey conducted on the IEMed's internal staff.<sup>1</sup>

In a nutshell, the wider research question behind the purpose of this article is: to what extent would expertise favour or undermine democratic representation in EU foreign policy decision-making? In the Euro-Mediterranean area, experts are relevant as promoters of dialogue, as they contribute to enhancing regional cooperation, for example with the southern Mediterranean countries, that would otherwise be completely external to the EU process. But do similar efforts translate into effective policy influence? Moreover, are experts sufficiently independent and able to challenge the policies of the executives? Thanks to an increased networking capacity, today, foreign policy think tanks are increasingly involved in contributing to the EU's foreign policy agenda, but are they able to make any policy impact on the development of Euro-Mediterranean affairs? To this end, this article has looked at two specific attempts by experts to influence the EU's agenda: the first deals with their contribution to revising the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2015, and the other is related to the EU Global Strategy, as will be discussed later.

<sup>1</sup> Due to time constraints, the analysis was not able to cover a significant sample of the think tanks participating in the network.

## 2. The Democratic Deficit Debate in the EU and Foreign Policy Decision-making

*Globalization has profoundly changed the meaning and the handling of foreign policy in Europe. Foreign ministries and traditional foreign policy elites have lost ground, while the chiefs of the executive branch—prime ministers and, in some countries, presidents—have emerged as the central foreign policy actors. The separation between external and domestic policy that existed when the European Union (EU) was formed has broken down.*

*Stefan Lehne – Carnegie Europe*

The idea that the European Union is suffering from a democratic deficit has been a hugely debated argument by scholars, media and, not least, ordinary citizens (Follesdal and Hix, 2006). In public and academic debate, the democratic deficit in the EU has been connected with a range of important decisions that affected the life of the entire continent, such as the adoption of a common currency, the EU enlargement and integration process, and the increasing delegation of political power to many depoliticized agencies charged with formulating and implementing EU policies. EU institutions have fought to fill this void, but it has become increasingly evident that, on a political level, the EU has not been that successful.

The democratic deficit has long remained a marginal issue in the domestic politics of Member States, the EU being described as a 'sleeping giant' (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2004) given the low saliency of European issues in national election campaigns and the broadly pro-integrationist agenda of mainstream parties across Europe (Hoglinger 2016). Although an evident trend toward the politicization of European issues has been visible since the Maastricht Treaty, the global economic recession and the broader crisis of governance in the EU has been a 'game changer' in this respect (Verney 2015). As Kriesi and Grande (2016) underline: "the euro-crisis has indeed intensified the politicization of the integration process." The public perception of the EU's democratic deficit indeed reached an unprecedented level following the eurozone crisis and its socio-economic and political implications, which opened a favourable window of opportunity for political entrepreneurs to question the European project on ideological grounds, especially in the form of anti-system parties (Zulianello, 2017).

Within this context, jihadist terrorism on European soil and migration flows to the EU (according to Eurostat, the number of asylum applications in EU Member States has more than doubled between 2014 and 2015 alone, approaching 1.3 million) have further contributed to increasing the tension between responsiveness – as a capacity to react with effective solutions and policies - and representation of government activities. On the one hand, the erosion in the support for pro-

EU political actors and the breakthrough of openly anti-EU formations has furthered widened the legitimacy crisis of the EU, both in terms of political polarization and the public visibility of EU issues. On the other hand, anti-EU actors have been able to transform the deficit debate into political pressure on the agenda of ruling parties. As a result, a solution adopted, or simply identified, by domestic policy-makers to tackle the gap between EU decisions and citizens was found in the referendum instrument, as has been clearly demonstrated in the case of *Brexit* in the UK.

At the same time, the distinction between issues that are only relative to domestic politics and those with an international relevance has become far less evident, as today's global challenges have intensified and complicated the domestic-international entanglements. Not surprisingly, all these conditions have increased the need for experts' advice in shaping decisions that are becoming more and more complex. The questions surrounding the politicization of expertise, however, have also amplified the debate on what kind of actors have the right to contribute to policy-making in a large democratic polity, such as the EU political space. The working hypothesis of this article is that when it comes to EU foreign policy, the debate concerning the deficit of political representation in enacting policy decisions, paradoxically, should not hold for at least two different reasons. Firstly, on a formal level, Member States' executives have increased their role and dominance in the EU's external agenda, so that the role of the EU Council is central in foreign affairs decisions and executives in all EU Member States are accountable to voters through Parliament.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, while there are many different sources of expertise – both externally and internally to EU institutions – it is hard to say that they are influential, although some efforts have been made in this area, as will be discussed later. A closer look at the role of professionals in EU foreign policy is the scope of the next paragraph.

### 3. The Role of Professionals in EU Foreign Policy

*“Think tanks, are mostly small or mid-sized, independent institutions whose purpose is to study and analyze policies, generate new ideas and data, stimulate expert and public debate, advocate for particular socio-political changes, and educate a specific audience about a policy idea or issue. They are a quintessential outgrowth of modern, democratic and open societies, though they do sometimes have a presence in more closed and restrictive political environments.”<sup>3</sup>*

Pavol Demeš

<sup>2</sup> <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2015/02/16/are-prime-ministers-taking-over-eu-foreign-policy-pub-59070>

<sup>3</sup> See: [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_the\\_role\\_of\\_think\\_tanks\\_in\\_shaping\\_eu\\_policies\\_demes](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_role_of_think_tanks_in_shaping_eu_policies_demes)

The *politics of expertise (PoE)* pervades different aspects of the contemporary political life of advanced democracies. *PoE* includes experts that are internal and external to institutions, but it is the latter that have attracted greater attention, largely because they cannot always be studied as a component of a rigid organizational structure. Such experts are apparently freer to express their views and beliefs than bureaucrats working for a government institution. Furthermore, bureaucrats can no longer be considered the only supplier of expertise to policy-makers. There are other actors that perform these tasks, like think tanks, media or interest groups. The politics of expertise, indeed, has been connected to what has been called the process of the 'privatization' of politics (Hilton et al., 2013), which is directly related to the new forms of engagement in the political and institutional life of the 21st century, particularly concerning the role played by actors that are not relative to the institutional apparatus.

In Europe, experts like lawyers or economists have had a central role in the process of European integration, moving between academia and institutions (Mudge and Vauchez 2012). Experts' activity, however, is also connected to less technical disciplines. There are issues, like those connected to security or international cooperation, that pertain to a comprehensive category known as 'foreign policy,' a terrain in which the State's role has long been seen as dominant. However, today non-State actors are posing great challenges to the way we understand how foreign policy is made. By adopting an actor-centric perspective, foreign policy can be framed as the terrain in which the political salience of an issue may erupt instantly and uncertainty relative to the policy process is high. It is exactly in this domain, for instance, that the role of the *epistemic community* may turn out to be the most relevant (Radaelli, 1999).

Epistemic communities are "professional networks with authoritative and policy-relevant expertise," which derive their policy goals from their expert knowledge (Cross, 2013, 137). This concept dates back to the nineties and particularly to the work of Peter Haas and the issue of *International Organization*, which appeared in 1992.<sup>4</sup> In other words, epistemic communities are one possible provider of information and advice for policy-makers. According to Haas (1992, 4): "*As demands for such information arise, networks or communities of specialists capable of producing and providing the information emerge and proliferate. The members of a prevailing community become strong actors at the national and transnational level as decision makers solicit their information and delegate responsibility to them.*"

Whether we refer to an epistemic community (with the distinctive traits that Cross has identified<sup>5</sup>), or a much less homogeneous *community of expertise*, experts, since the Barcelona process

<sup>4</sup> "Knowledge, Power and International Policy Coordination," *International Organization*, vol. 46, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 1-390.

<sup>5</sup> D. M. Cross, "Rethinking epistemic communities twenty years later," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 137-160, 2012.

in 1995, have played a central role in promoting dialogue, cooperation and an evolution of the ENP towards the southern Mediterranean countries. As such, the resilience of the ENP, a key part of EU foreign policy, is partly tied to the role a huge community of experts has played in not only providing harsh criticism, but also keeping a focus on this highly important policy.<sup>6</sup> As Balfour stated, the ENP is: “a policy which is undergoing a phase of crisis and lack of direction but has resilience thanks to its “identity”; and “identity” should perhaps be more appropriately described as a loose network of interests, institutions, non-governmental organisations, and experts which gravitate around the policy.”<sup>7</sup>

So, as we have already seen, non-state actors are challenging the traditional conceptions of international relations as a discipline which has mainly focused on the role of states (Miskimmon et al., 2014: 41). The existence of actors like experts, think tanks (TTs), corporations, media, NGOs or religious-oriented groups, has shown that it was no longer possible to avoid the analysis of the role of non-state and transnational actors. State actors alone are struggling to identify effective policies to address salient and complex issues. In this context, the role of professionals is that of a sort of facilitator of dialogue between SA and NSA. In particular, according to a narrative approach, experts would use knowledge to narrate causal stories to their audience (Blyth, 2007, 762): “*Inter-elites use persuasion to do more than introduce ideas to provide road maps, they use them to narrate ‘causal stories’ that “provide agents with an interpretive framework within which they can define, diagnose, and explain a crisis as an event which necessitates a particular set of actions.” Ideas presented as causal stories function to both identify problems and propose solutions, thereby becoming arguments promoting particular courses of action.*”

When knowledge is applied to politics, though, not only is the transfer mechanism simple, but also tensions between the former and the latter are likely to emerge. As scholars have underlined, indeed, expertise operates in an increasingly bureaucratized and politicized environment (Radaelli, 1999). Even when operating in independent institutions, experts need to find a balance between personal and institutional positions. That is even more true when very sensitive topics are on the table of discussion. “There is always the need to find a good register, because from this point of view think tanks are not NGOs,” a think tank expert once argued.<sup>8</sup> “There is always the need to maintain an acceptable level of criticism with respect

<sup>6</sup> The IEMed has contributed to the ENP revision by responding to the consultation framework document sent by the European Commission on 4 March 2015 to a wide range of organizations and associations: Member States, parliaments, civil society organizations and think tanks. See: <http://www.iemed.org/actualitat-en/noticies/I2019iemed-contribueix-a-la-revisio-de-la-politica-europea-de-veinatge>

<sup>7</sup> See: [http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/historic-de-publicacions/enquesta-euromed/euromed-survey-2015/Euromed%20Survey%202015\\_Rosa%20Balfour.pdf](http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/historic-de-publicacions/enquesta-euromed/euromed-survey-2015/Euromed%20Survey%202015_Rosa%20Balfour.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Interview too place on 21 November 2016 at the IEMed in Barcelona.

to the issues you're dealing with." When it comes to think tanks, as long as they need to maintain dialogue with different parts, the way to find a balance in their discourse is to frame topics under the light of a positive agenda.<sup>9</sup>

In general terms, experts can share common ideas and beliefs, and try to inform or affect policy-making, mainly in two phases of the policy process: agenda-setting and policy formulation. In the agenda-setting phase, the style of participating actors tends to be more pluralistic, as it is when new issues emerge and decision-makers are still deciding how to cope with such issues. It is in this phase that experts can work to push their argument into the government's agenda. In the policy formulation phase, however, policy-makers need more carefully selected advice. If already considered as a qualified interlocutor, it is in this case that some external actors might participate by giving their contribution. Overall, the role of think tank experts here is different from the one of bureaucrats as they are rarely or never involved in another phase of the policy process, i.e., policy implementation. Knowledge transfer in the policy process, however, is not so simple, as it happens in a non-coercive way. In other words, given the work of experts, it is the policy-maker that must be willing to hear and, then, follow the experts' advice. In this case only, when there is knowledge transfer, it allows for policy convergence, as experts can exert normative pressure in the policy processes they are involved in. Nonetheless, this process is complex, as it is important to note that experts can always be used by policy-makers. As O'Bryan, Dunlop and Radaelli (2014) have observed, the experts heard at Parliamentary hearings in the UK and in the US at the time of the Arab uprising "are not truly independent experts, they are people who reflect the skills and the policies of the executive, rather than reflecting social and intellectual pluralism. There is a problem in how expertise and usable knowledge are identified and selected by parliaments."<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. The Case of EuroMeSCo

*EuroMeSCo* is possibly the biggest network of think tanks in the Mediterranean region, working on Euro-Mediterranean affairs. It has been operating since 1996, but was "financially re-born in 2015" thanks to a grant co-funded by the European Union and the European Institute for the Mediterranean (IEMed).<sup>11</sup> The EuroMeSCo network currently has 106

<sup>9</sup> There are many cases of think tanks trying to frame policy discourse using the term 'positive agenda.' See for instance: <https://rome-med.org/news/rome-med-2016-beyond-turmoil-a-positive-agenda/> or <http://www.iemed.org/observatori-en/arees-danalisi/documents/arxiu-externs/2012/the-danish-presidency-and-turkeys-accession-turning-the-page-towards-new-positive-agenda> or <http://www.iemed.org/actualitat-en/noticies/02-11-mediterranean-agenda-of-the-2017-malta-presidency-of-the-eu-discussed-in-valletta>

<sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.radicalparty.org/en/rnn-news/3/news/why-experts039-hearings-do-not-help-parliaments-establish-truth>

<sup>11</sup> Based on an interview that took place on 14 December 2016 at the IEMed headquarter in Barcelona. See also: [http://www.euromesco.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2237&Itemid=105&lang=en](http://www.euromesco.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2237&Itemid=105&lang=en)

members from the EU and Eastern and Southern Mediterranean (Istituto Affari Internazionali, Chatham House, Carnegie Middle East, Carnegie Europe, ECFR, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Al Ahram, ORSAM, Institute for National Security Studies, among others) and it has mainly operated as a forum for dialogue among researchers and to a lesser extent with policy-makers. The Secretariat of EuroMeSCo is based at the European Institute for the Mediterranean (IEMed) in Barcelona.

Numerous research, dialogue and outreach activities are carried out by the network with the objective “to increase the political research capacities and the influence of think tanks and research institutes in the framework of the EuroMeSCo network and to promote dialogue and understanding on key political trends and challenges of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and their dissemination to relevant stakeholders, policy-makers and civil society.”<sup>12</sup> To this end, the network’s main event is the EuroMeSCo Annual Conference, both a dialogue and advocacy event, that also serves to increase the network’s visibility. The EuroMeSCo Annual Conference 2016 “Towards a Security Architecture for the Mediterranean,” held in April in Brussels, was aimed at contributing to the debate in the final stretch before the release of the *EU Global Strategy*. The short version of conference report was sent as a contribution of EuroMeSCo to the EU Global Strategy and published on the respective EU website.<sup>13</sup>

Besides the annual conference, presentations of research results are also held at the local level in order to reach a wider public, given by academics, policy-makers, researchers from EuroMeSCo and other think tanks (2015 presentations were held in Cairo, Amman and Rome, while in 2016, presentations were carried out in Istanbul, Helsinki and Budapest). Recently, there has been a renewed focus on the network’s advocacy mandate. Specifically, this was done through the development of the “*EuroMeSCo Policy Briefings*,” which consist of meetings of the best experts from the network with EU28 representatives in the EU Council working group dedicated to Maghreb and Mashrek (‘MaMa Group’) focused on one particular issue.<sup>14</sup> These new efforts are being made with the aim of increasing the network’s impact on the decisions taken in Brussels. However, it must be recognized that the European External Action Service (EEAS) is not used to working systematically with think tanks, as a former EEAS official admitted.<sup>15</sup> Instead, the hearings with experts tend to be left to personal ideas, convictions and a sensibility to the research world. Another reason why the work of think tanks

<sup>12</sup> Source: IEMed internal report.

<sup>13</sup> This very short report outlines seven outstanding points that emerged from the debates. See: <https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/euromescos-contribution-eu-global-strategy-foreign-and-security-policy-0>

<sup>14</sup> For instance, the second edition of EuroMeSCo Policy Briefing took place in the headquarters of the EEAS in Brussels on 21 October 2016. The meeting, whose focus was on Tunisia, was attended by the representatives from the EU Council working group dealing with Maghreb-Mashrek (‘MaMa’). At the time, EuroMeSCo was represented by Hamza Meddeb (ECFR, London) and the meeting was held under Chatham House Rule.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a former EEAS official that took place on 17 November 2016 in Barcelona.

is tough in this field is because “there is usually no regional perspective in the selection of bureaucrats (and specifically diplomats).”<sup>16</sup> In other words, it is hard for think tanks to start a close dialogue with certain people that they know will be working within a region, such as the MENA, for a large part of their career.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

Today, efforts to influence EU foreign policy-making have been possible thanks to the creation of research organization networks. Although having the chance of becoming more structured and better known than single organizations, networks do face other problems: firstly, advocating with one single voice; and secondly, being able to have an impact. In this context, also, most think tanks suffer from the fact that their financial stability is heavily dependent on public funds, which is connected to the risk of being reasonably critical about highly politicized issues. As such, the risk of being used at a government’s convenience is a variable that cannot be overlooked in any analysis. Officials’ interest in the work of think tanks in Europe remains quite low, and it appears to be connected to the possibility of using them as validators of policy-decisions already taken elsewhere, rather than for actually getting fresh advice. In conclusion, are think tanks thinking or tanking? Have think tanks been able to democratize the EU’s foreign policy agenda?

Looking at the very peculiar case of EuroMeSCo, it seems that think tanks are mostly following the EU agenda and trying to have a say in it, as is evident in the two cases mentioned in this article, related to the ENP review and the EU Global Strategy. However, they are in no position to set the agenda. Nonetheless, influencing EU foreign policy-making for actors that are not Brussels-based is a tough job. Despite all these difficult conditions, of which think tank practitioners are well aware, their work is always committed to keeping the dialogue alive in very sensitive areas of policy-making, such as Europe’s southern borders. At a time when immigration and asylum in Europe is perceived as a threat to the European welfare state, experts’ capacity to promote dialogue between diverse types of actors seems fundamental for our democratic practices. Today, although the premise of the Barcelona Process in the mid-nineties prefigured better political scenarios twenty years down the line, in the Euro-Mediterranean area, experts are at least keeping a dialogue alive with southern parts of the Mediterranean that would otherwise be completely external to the EU process.

For instance, analysing the work of decentralized EU agencies could represent an important validation of my previous assumptions connected to the little impact expertise has on EU foreign policy decision-making, and the dominance of executives in policy decisions that concern salient

<sup>16</sup> Based on an interview that took place on 14 December 2016 at the IEMed headquarters in Barcelona.

and contested issues. In details, considering the institutional diversity within EU institutions, further research could focus on how a contested issue like migration is currently affecting the work and relations of EU agencies like the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX).

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