



In dialogue with Ms. Maria Rosa Sabbatelli, FPI Deputy Head of Unit, FPI4



Q You are currently a Visiting Professor in the European Political and Governance Studies Department at the Bruges campus of the College of Europe. What issues regarding the future of the European Union do your students raise with you?

A The experience of being a visiting professor allows me to be in direct contact with young Europeans interested in the EU and its future. Students want to ensure their voices are heard by decision-makers at the EU level therefore the issues relating to democracy in the EU are of big interest. Climate change is a big concern for students, and they see the EU as a champion and would like the EU to continue its work in this field. As a result of the Covid pandemic, students now also ask about the resilience of the EU and what can be done to increase it and to work on our strategic autonomy.

Q In December 2019, Ursula von der Leyen became the first female President of the European Commission. Christine Lagarde took office as the head of the European Central Bank in November 2019, making her the first female President of the ECB. Although there are females heading both the EU Commission and the European Central Bank, what more can the EU Commission do to assist women to break glass ceilings within the organisation?

A The European Union has put women at the heart of the recovery from the pandemic. Stronger engagement in gender equality is key to a sustainable global recovery and building fairer, more inclusive, more prosperous societies.

There are also invisible barriers, such as continued societal expectations that childcare should fall on women. That is why the EU is taking the lead on international action on gender and is a global leader in this regard – with 14 of the top 20 countries worldwide on gender equality being EU Member States.

Equality between women and men is a fundamental value of the European Union, dating back to its foundation, which established the principle of equal pay for equal work. And through the strong leadership of the president of the Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, gender equality continues to be a top priority. Thanks to policies tackling gender-based discrimination, today Europe is one of the safest and fairest places for women in the world.

Yet, we are not immune to gender-based discrimination and glass ceilings. And women continue to face obstacles in climbing the career ladder and balancing family life. 44% of Europeans think that the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family, while only 7.7% of CEOs in the EU's largest listed companies are women. The gender pay gap remains high with women earning on average 14,1% less than men across the EU. And there is still a long way to go when it comes to women being equally represented in decision-making positions in politics and business.

In this regard, women must be supported and empowered to take their fair share and their rightful place in our societies through robust laws and gender-sensitive policy-making. Great progress has been made, and many legal and practical barriers to gender equality have been removed but there is more to be done.

Barriers to participating in the labour market and caregiving responsibilities of many women and other social barriers are some of the reasons why women tend to work less than men and in lower-paid sectors, take more career breaks, and face fewer and slower promotions.

To help close this gap, the EU has adopted the Work-Life Balance Directive, a new law, which aims to improve families' access to family leave and flexible work arrangements. It seeks to better support a work-life balance for parents and encourage more equal sharing of parental leave between men and women. Building on this, the EU has set a new goal for Europe – cut the gender employment gap in half by the end of the decade.

The EU has adopted six Directives covering equality between women and men in the workplace, in self-employment, in access to goods and services, in social security, on pregnancy, maternity, and family-related leave, and flexible working arrangements for parents and carers.

To address pay inequalities, the EU has proposed a European Directive for Pay Transparency (already approved by the Council in December last year). It is built on two simple principles - equal pay for equal work and transparency to ensure employers treat women fairly.

Together these laws have progressively set a legal standard across Europe ensuring broad protection from discrimination. Numerous cases brought to the European Court of Justice have further strengthened the principle of equality and delivered justice for victims of discrimination.

Q

The European Union's Foreign Policy is dealt with by two organisations, the European External Action Service and the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments. Can you explain the different roles of each and the complementarities between their activities?

A

The Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) is in a unique position: it is a Commission Service working hand in hand with the European External Action Service (EEAS), under the authority of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell HR/VP (who is the head of the EEAS). We work to act as first responders to foreign policy needs and opportunities.

The European External Action Service is the European Union's diplomatic service. Since 2011, the EEAS carries out the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy to promote peace, prosperity, security, and the interests of Europeans across the globe. The EU's foreign policies are steered by the European Council and defined by the Foreign Affairs Council, which brings together the Foreign Ministers of the EU member states at least once a month.

The HR/VP chairs meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council. Once policies are determined by the Council, the EEAS, where appropriate, is mandated to implement and follow up on these. This is when the FPI comes in to operationalise foreign policy priorities.

The mission of the FPI is to put EU foreign policy into action, fast and flexibly, in a policy-driven and integrated approach, with global, geographical, and thematic scope, as part of a comprehensive geopolitical vision.

Q

You have had a very distinguished career heading the FPI Americas Regional Team between 2017 & 2021, based at the EU Delegation in Brasilia. You have recently moved to a senior position handling Industrialised Countries & Foreign Policy Support to countries including those of the GCC. What similarities do you see between the regions you have been responsible for?

A

Culturally the countries are very different, but something that fascinated me about visiting the GCC countries is discovering their great hospitality, which is a common element in South America. Since I am a food lover another striking difference in a positive sense is food, very different but excellent in both regions.

Let me add, that I have lived in Brazil for ten years but have only visited as yet some of the Gulf countries for a few days; when you are posted in an EU Delegation abroad, you are really exposed in your professional and personal life to a different culture. This is very different when traveling just for professional trips but I am certainly looking forward to learning more about the region and discovering the characteristics of each of the GCC countries.

Q

The EU published earlier this year a Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council detailing a Strategic partnership with the Gulf. Significantly this Joint Communication proposes a stronger partnership in a series of key policy areas and sets out a number of concrete proposals for the EU and the GCC and its Member States to strengthen their cooperation in their mutual interest, with a clear focus on delivering results. How is FPI proposing to action this document with the support of the other Directorates-General in the Commission?

A

The EU Joint Communication is a strong signal to step up our cooperation and dialogue with the Gulf and take our partnership to a higher level. The Gulf region has been an important region for the action of the FPI as we are in charge of supporting EU dialogue and cooperation with high-income countries. This is why prior to the joint communication we had already projects in place.

The EEAS monitors the actions of the different directorates and services of the Commission aiming at implementing the various segments of the Joint Communication. Each directorate is responsible for areas of the Joint Communication within its remit. The EEAS, in its dialogue with the Gulf Cooperation Council member countries, presents and discusses progresses under the different areas of the Joint Communication. In addition, the EU and the GCC have endorsed in February 2022, a 5-year Joint Action Programme encompassing a wide range of areas for sectoral cooperation across the board of the political dialogue.

We have three main FPI projects in the GCC, put in place with different directorates of the Commission and our EU Delegation on the ground: this project on **EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification**, another comprehensive project to enhance **EU-GCC Political Dialogue, Cooperation, and Outreach**, delivering activities in numerous areas of our cooperation arrangements with the GCC countries (judiciary cooperation, youth, and gender empowerment, education, culture, good governance, people-to-people contacts).

We also had a 6-year-long project on Clean Energy, which built a strong network in this area between partners from both Europe and the GCC (with both State and non-State stakeholders). We are putting in place the follow-up of this project, the **EU-GCC Cooperation on Green Transition and Decarbonisation** which will start in a couple of months, to deepen EU-GCC engagement and exchanges in areas of green transition, decarbonization, and climate change mitigation.