Interview – Marta Migliorati

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, DEC 1 2024

Marta Migliorati is a Lecturer at the University of Malta. Her research and teaching interests cover European integration, executive politics in the EU and other multi-level systems, legislative oversight, EU immigration and asylum policies, and EU foreign affairs. In 2025, she will join ETH Zürich to contribute to the SNSF-DFG project "IMPLEMENT.EU." Marta's recent publications have appeared in leading academic journals, including the Journal of European Public Policy, European Union Politics, Regulation and Governance, and Comparative Political Studies. Her recent publications include "Concepts and measures of bureaucratic constraints in European Union laws from hand-coding to machine-learning", "Differentiated participation, uniform procedures: EU agencies in direct policy implementation", and "New Nordic pathways? Explaining Nordic countries' defence policy choices in the wake of the Ukrainian war".

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Methodologically exciting things are happening. Examining large corpora of data is becoming easier (and/or faster) thanks to machine learning and AI. For example, some colleagues from University of Milano and I have analysed thousands of EU legislative acts to detect the tasks delegated to EU and national actors and the relationships between them. It took a long time to design, train and validate the machine learning model, but now it performs very well, and we can corroborate our previous research on a much wider scale. Topic-wise, a lot has changed as well. Geopolitics, for one thing, has become ever-present in academic debates, but also the comeback of protectionism and the crisis of Western democratic systems. All very exciting topics, if only they weren't reflecting a very rough landscape in today's international relations. Another subject that fascinates me personally, perhaps quite naturally given current policy and technological developments, is technology and how this is used by policy makers as means of control and/or empowerment over citizens.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I would say I became far more pragmatic (or less idealist?) than I used to be, and more critical of certain political actions and behaviours. When I entered the field of European politics I was driven by great passion towards the European project, I thought it was just wonderful. But when I started studying it in depth, I became aware of the very many flaws and contradictions that underlie it. Eventually I came to realise that in Western Europe, we often grow up with preconceptions of what values are the 'good ones' and trust in the exceptional ability of our institutions to uphold them. Over time I understood that, borrowing Ian Manners' terminology, there is no real "normal" in international relations, and being a norm-setter doesn't necessarily mean that you are "good". The EU has been self-promoting through a rhetoric of protecting democracy and human rights which is currently fading in the face of its (in)actions (think of migration and asylum policy, think of the ongoing Middle East conflict), and I believe the EU might end up paying a high price for this, in the medium and long term.

In 2022, Denmark decided via referendum to commit to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). What were the key domestic factors that allowed this shift to gain public and political support?

In two articles published in JEPP, I discussed how Danish citizens are generally resistant to the EU expanding its

sovereignty, unlike their political elites, who were prepared to join the CSDP long before 2022. What changed domestically, was public opinion– the Ukrainian crisis was much more significant in scale and proximity than any other conflict since Denmark gained the opt-out in 1993. Two years ago, elites saw a window of opportunity and took advantage of the broader geopolitical context and an increased perception of collective security needs within Europe to put CSDP to public scrutiny, and they won their bet this time. Unlike in 2015, when a similar referendum on Justice and Home Affairs failed, the Ukrainian crisis really reshaped public sentiment and priorities.

How has the Ukraine war influenced the EU's approach to differentiated integration, particular in areas such as defence, energy security and foreign policy?

Differentiated integration (DI) means many things, but in its most traditional understanding, it refers to the non-uniform application of EU law. After Brexit happened, and Denmark gave up the opt out on CSDP, several accounts argued that this kind of DI is in decline, and I agree– not much left to differentiate! However, this might change if the EU, in response to the Ukrainian conflict, continues revamping its commitment to enlargement to the point where new countries indeed join (see recent developments in Moldova)—as DI most commonly occurs when new countries join the bloc. Also, we could expect some new differentiation happening in the field of immigration and asylum with the Schengen regime being questioned by founding members such as the Netherlands and Germany (though this may be more related to the Middle East conflict and global migration trends rather than just Ukraine).

Regarding defence and foreign policy, it is hard to predict, as the field is still intergovernmental and therefore, by definition, differentiated—in many initiatives, each state collaborates in the way and to the extent that it chooses. Perhaps we will indeed see less differentiation than there used to be if the policy starts becoming truly more supranational—we never had a Defence Commissioner before the newly assembled Commission. That also depends on what will happen in Ukraine and to NATO after Trump's re-election.

In your article you highlight both long-term defence trends and immediate responses to the Ukraine war. Do you see these shifts in Nordic defence policy as reactionary, or reflective of deeper structural changes?

From my analysis, it appears that Nordic countries have been undergoing slow but steady changes since joining the EU, although these changes were not always apparent to their societies. Especially in Sweden, neutrality has been deeply rooted in national identity and seeing it formally vanishing has been an enormous adjustment for people. This gradual shift was driven by evolving security priorities, the changing role of NATO in western Europe, and external pressures such as Russia's foreign policy since 2014. Eventually, the informal participation in NATO initiatives laid the foundation for joining the alliance. Structurally, changes might be deeper and wider now, since they have committed much more resources to defence and to NATO operations than they used to– but then again, lots of European countries which already were in NATO did the same in last couple of years to meet at least the 2% target.

What will be the long-term security implications for the Nordic region following these shifts in defence policy? Are there any specific challenges or opportunities you foresee?

One important implication is the increased military cooperation and interoperability among Nordic states – for example Sweden has taken up the task to lead the establishment of NATO land forces in Finland to boost defences against Russia. Challenges might include facing increasing military expenditure in both states to accomplish a higher defence capability. Also of course boosting the military potential in the region might create further tensions with Russia at the border (and Finland shares a very long border with Russia!). Recently Finland has denouced cyber espionage coming from Russia, and accused the Kremlin of purposely sending migrants and asylum seekers across border.

What could the Nordic countries do to effectively deter Russia from enacting further expansionist policies.

Frankly I don't know what they could do beyond what they are already doing. Joining NATO was already a very

strong signal from the two nordics, which is being accompanied by further actions including deeper military cooperation, higher expenditure, investment in more advanced cyber security systems, participation in the EU sanctions regime…

In your work on the European Parliament and free trade agreements, you highlight increasing politicization. How do you see this impacting on the EU's global trade relationships?

Currently global trade relations are precarious–from EU and China clashing over electric cars to Mr Trump saying that "tariffs" is "the most beautiful word in the dictionary", we seem to be entering an era where the debate between protectionism and free trade becomes increasingly polarised. This polarization could impact the EU's trade relationships with key partners, potentially severing ties with export-reliant economies or causing shifts in supply chain strategies in key sectors. From the EU side, it looks like the new Commission's approach will be more openly protectionist than it used to be, and not everybody supports this approach, starting from large industries such as Saab, and EU member states like Germany and Hungary.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

With the immense amount of data now accessible for analysis, it is more important than ever to have a comprehensive understanding of the discipline, balancing both empirical and theoretical knowledge. I'd recommend always first "digging" into the empirics to get an idea of what's going on, but without forgetting how theory can (or cannot) be helpful to explain what the data suggests. Empirical research needs data and benefits from inductive methods, but it would be problematic if we shift to an entirely data-driven approach and lose touch with the scientific endeavour of understanding the reasons behind phenomena.

Collaboration is also essential, especially for young scholars. Academia can be highly competitive, and research can sometimes feel isolating—but in my experience, the best ideas often come from collaborative work. It fosters broader thinking, constructive critique, and ultimately learning, providing insights into writing, reading, and navigating academic priorities. Eventually, the scholars I collaborate with have become some of my most brilliant and cherished friends. Publishing independently is satisfying, but co-authoring can bring real joy.