

Interview - Sarah Wolff

Written by E-International Relations

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Sarah Wolff is Director of the Center of European Research (CER) and Senior Lecturer at the School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London. In 2019 she has been awarded as principal investigator a prestigious Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence award for the program NEXTEUK (2019-2022) that will fund research, teaching and public engagement activities related to the future of the European Union (EU)-United Kingdom (UK) relations. She is editor of *Mediterranean Politics* (together with F. Volpi and M. Buehler) and has held visiting positions at the Transatlantic Academy in Washington as a Schuman-Fulbright Fellow, at the CEDEJ in Rabat Morocco, and the IFPO in Amman and in Cairo. She has published extensively in the field of European Union external migration and border policies, particularly towards the EU's Southern neighborhood, as well as Justice and Home Affairs. She received the LISBOAN Prize (2012) for her co-edited book on Freedom, Security and Justice after Lisbon and Stockholm. Her current research, which has benefited from a Leverhulme grant, investigates the role of the religious and the secular in EU foreign policy. She is currently preparing a manuscript on *Secular Power Europe and Islam*. Sarah is also Senior Research Associate Fellow at the Netherlands Institute for International Relations. In the past she has worked at the European Commission and the European Parliament. She blogs and tweets @drsarahwolff.

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

In the field of EU studies, and in particular EU foreign policy, scholars have started to debate the rather narrow and Eurocentric approach that has dominated the field so far. Traditionally EU scholars tend to analyze the development of a Common Foreign and Security Policy either from an institutionalist perspective or from a social constructivist perspective assessing if the EU lives up to the claims made by scholars like Manners that it is a Normative power. Yet this literature has somehow developed in isolation from other disciplines and tends to overlook the fact that to be a relevant power in the world EU policy-makers and academics also need to learn from the other (including non-state actors) and to be more self-reflective. In that endeavor, it is useful to explore critical geopolitics, anthropology and engage in a discussion started by my colleagues S. Keukeleire, N. Fisher-Onar and K. Nicolaidies on how to 'decentre EU foreign policy'. Without negating the values and norms vehicled by the EU, there is a need to understand how best to engage with the other in a genuine way. This is to me the most challenging step I think for EU researchers, to engage more inter-disciplinarily and to use new methods to investigate a richer understanding of the EU as a security and global power.

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

My interest in decentring Europe has actually started during my PhD. While researching the way the EU has externalised its Justice and Home Affairs policy to North Africa and the Middle East, I spent quite some time in the region interviewing and talking to various stakeholders. With the Arab uprisings it was clear that the EU's claim to be a democracy promoter was severely challenged as it had for too long favoured stability over democracy in its bilateral and regional engagement. I felt that to play a greater role in the world, the EU should engage differently with third countries, paying more attention to societal dynamics in third countries as well as third countries' citizens' perceptions of domestic and regional scenes in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, etc. Without losing sight of strategic influence, engagement with everyday politics and social movements beyond the EU is crucial if the EU wants to

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remain true to its values such as democracy and human rights. For instance, in my case, I started to get interested in the role that the religious and the secular play in defining EU's international identity and to question to what extent the EU is able to engage with religious actors who might be strategic actors when it comes to peace building or on gender and LGTB rights.

In your role as Director for the Centre for European Research, how do you facilitate long-term dialogue between citizens, academia and practitioners and encourage public engagement? What is your assessment of the links between academia and policy-making in the area of European studies and more broadly?

Since I took over the Centre in 2016, our research and public engagement have naturally, as a UK-based institution, focused on Brexit. We've had plenty of events related to the negotiations, but also the reasons why it happened and the consequences it will have. We have initiated a Debating Europe series, as well as some podcasts and videos that have helped us reach out to a wider public. In the UK sadly enough Brexit has created a renewed interest in public opinion on Europe, which has prompted a higher involvement of the wider public in our debates. The NEXTUK project that we have just been awarded will capitalise on our work so far and will for instance reach out to the wider public by hosting more World Café events, which provides a unique opportunity to debate in an informal and innovative way about the EU.

Another initiative that I have prompted a real reflection upon the link between citizens and academia is the course I have designed on *Researching Everyday Politics*. It teaches students what manifestations everyday politics takes (engagement, resistance, social media, culture, identity, symbols, emotions, values, political practices) and in what ways everyday politics influences the formal and informal practices of politics. Instead of teaching who wins and who loses elections or just focusing on social movements, this new approach helps to understand how daily practices and individual decisions of citizens can shape politics (i.e. on climate change or Brexit). We will have a British NGO involved this year in the course, and delivering lectures and seminars on some of their campaigns.

In general I think that academics should be able to be more prone to have a 'policy literacy' which enables them to influence the policy agenda, instead of following the course of political events. I think we should also stop thinking academic career is only about academia. My experience as a practitioner at the European Commission and the European Parliament has been incredibly valuable and I do not think I could have become the same kind of academic without this insider understanding of EU policy. Like inter-disciplinarity, I think that EU studies in particular benefits from diverse and non-linear career paths between academia, think tanks and policy-making.

You are currently working on a research project that investigates the role of secularism and religion in EU foreign policy. How are you analysing this role and what have you found so far?

In my next book, based on extensive fieldwork in Washington, Rabat, Tunis, Paris, London and Brussels, I explored the role of the secular and the religious in EU foreign policy and question whether (i) the EU has a secular identity (ii) whether it shapes its foreign policy towards Islam. This interest arose from the realization that religion has a role to play in international relations and is increasingly claiming a role back in international relations (as explored by J. Haynes, E. Shakman Hurd, etc.). For instance, religious actors have been quite actively involved at the United Nations General Assembly, which is traditionally considered as a secular space. They are also increasingly vocal on 'moral policies' such as bioethics, marriage, euthanasia etc. in various domestic settings. In recent years, faith-based actors have been importantly involved in debates over climate justice (Glaad, 2017). At the same time religion is sometimes seen as a destabilizing factor in fragile states, conducive to polarization when instrumentalized politically and when adding up to weak societal and economic structures. Some foreign policy actors in the West may also have an oversimplified vision of the religious and for instance cluster Muslims between Shia's and Sunnis when the reality is way more complex.

The questions that my book aims to answer are the following: What happens when religion is claiming back a voice in international relations? In a rising religious world, how is secularism shaping the European Union's (EU) relations with Islam? Is Europe's secular identity being strengthened by its foreign policy towards Islam? What are the

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consequences of EU's secular view on the treatment of religion as an object of international relations (IR)? Drawing from ontological security theory I find that Islam disrupts the sense of order, security and continuity and that EU's diplomatic and foreign policy engagement with Islam is shaped by a secular view of international relations.

What significant changes have been made to EU migration policy since the crisis in 2015? What more could be done?

I am rather critical of EU migration policy so far and the way its governance fuels populism and Euroscepticism. The 2015 'crisis' was more a crisis of governance with little EU ambition and leadership on the difficult decisions that should have been taken. Except for Germany, EU member states were very reticent towards relocation and resettlement schemes. Probably the most important reform has been the transformation of the European Asylum Support Office into a European Asylum Agency with more competences. Internationally, though the crisis has prompted the conclusion of the Global Compact on Migration, which is a very interesting initiative albeit voluntary in the field of global migration governance. There is in my view more to do in improving the legal channels for migrants to come to Europe. It seems that everyone overlooks the fact that criminalizing and sanctioning carriers for transporting irregular migrants is necessarily related to the rise of human smuggling into the EU. Another aspect on which I am working is the extent to which the security sector in the EU and beyond in third countries should be better trained in relation to migrants and asylum-seekers and consider how to improve security sector governance.

What will be the focus of the new Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence project you and your colleagues have been awarded?

We are thrilled that CER has been awarded a Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence award 2019-2022. The project that I will lead as principal investigator is called NEXTEUK and will deliver research, teaching and public engagement activities related to the future of the European Union (EU)-United Kingdom (UK) relations. As the UK heads towards a possible no-deal exit from the EU, this is a recognition of the high-quality work of CER. NEXTEUK will offer a structured space for academic and policy reflection on the future of the EU-UK relationship. Specifically, the project will assess the historical achievements of the EU-UK relationship so far and identify best practices. It will analyse the roots of Brexit and its implications for European integration and British politics while offering forward-looking analysis on the future of the EU-UK relationship and formulate policy-relevant recommendations. NEXTEUK will create new avenues for enhanced academic and policy cooperation between the EU and the UK and promote a better understanding of each other's mutual interests and common future in a rapidly evolving global order. Details about the team and project can be found [here](#).

What is your interpretation of the European election results? Do you foresee any significant shifts in EU politics?

As I discussed in a recent op-ed, the European election results were historical in terms of turn-out and because the extreme-right did not win the predicted landslide victory that pollsters had announced. The important victory of the Greens was also quite striking, including the 'greening' of most of the other political parties' programs. The approval by the European Parliament of the next European Commission will be interesting to watch, in particular to what extent the fringe parties can really shake traditional consensual politics. I think though that European leaders should not forget too quickly about the far-right and the rise of populist parties in deciding upon the next European Commission's policy priorities. In particular there is an absolute need to invest more into Social Europe and to work towards a renewed social contract where citizens feel involved through more participatory democracy, and where social inequalities in Europe are seriously tackled.

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

Go out to the field to grasp the richness of your topic, doing and practising research is engaging with the other and learning from your interviewees.