

# The Business of Policymaking Podcast

**Episode 6** – In conversation with Petra Petan

**Speakers:** Jana Javornik and Petra Petan

[00:00:00] **Petra:** I think what is an outdated or a mistaken notion, is that you are just going to publish your paper in a prestigious academic journal and then policymakers are going to chase you down and invite you to collaborate on their new policy. What we are more interested in are executive summaries that have very clear policy implications or policy recommendations. What is more pertinent for the purposes of policymakers that have to respond to very concrete real-life events and solve particular problems is this more policy applied research that is a bit different.

[00:00:47] **Jana:** Welcome back to the Business of Policymaking, the new podcast from Leeds University Business School with myself, Jana Javornik, as a host, produced by Hannah Preston.

In this episode, I host Petra Petan - a policy assistant in the cabinet of Paolo Gentiloni, the European Commissioner for the Economy. Petra is a political economist who's been with the Commission for quite some time now. Turns out, Petra is a firm believer in the need to bring the European Union closer to the citizens.

She has provided some useful and rich insight into the daily work of the European Commission as well as some top tips on how academics can get involved. I hope you enjoy today's show as much as we enjoyed recording it.

It's really good to have you on today's show Petra.

[00:01:41] **Petra:** I'm very happy to be here.

[00:01:42] **Jana:** We have a huge ground to cover. So, let's get cracking on everything that has to do with the European Commission and especially the Economy portfolio. Petra, you are a policy assistant in the cabinet of Paolo Gentiloni, the Commissioner for the Economy.

This is a huge portfolio. It covers everything from Directorate Generals for Economic and Financial Affairs, Taxation and Customs Union as well as Eurostat. Among others, the Commissioner is also leading work on the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which is a new financial program.

Your Cabinet has a team of only 16 members. 10 are members and 6 are administrative assistants. Each staff would have their own portfolio and non-portfolio responsibilities and topics to cover, with your list being particularly long and diverse, I would say, ranging from ECOFIN coordination, sustainable development goals, customs, petitions, employment, international cooperation, development, European civil protection. Boy, that's a really, really long list. You work with different teams, cover different countries diverse topics, which all offers an invaluable insight into the process of policymaking and the role the evidence plays in this. Petra, can you provide a bit of an insight into your work? What does it mean to be a policy assistant to a Commissioner? How does your typical day look like?

[00:03:16] **Petra:** Of course. To start, maybe to explain what a Cabinet is. A cabinet is the group of the closest collaborators that surround a European commissioner. Like you said there's about 16 of us. Usually, we have a Head of Cabinet, deputy Head of Cabinet, then about six members of Cabinet and around two policy assistants.

The rest are quite a few administrative assistants that we have, out of the members, one is usually a cabinet expert, so someone who is more senior or has worked in this area before and has more of an expert view. One is a communication advisor to the commissioner who deals with 24/7 media activities, relations with the press, press conferences, and so on. So, we have a division of labour inside the cabinet. And then, of course, every member covers a set of files that are under our portfolio. Like you said, it's a huge portfolio. We cover three directorate generals, meaning three ministries, in a way.

We have ECFIN, TACSUD, and EUROSTAT. Each of us covers several topics under our portfolio. And then we also cover files under collegiality. That means that every one of us is responsible to cover the files under other commissioners' responsibility.

We are in contact with other cabinets on files that they are working on. So, this is collegiality files, and this is an important part of the European Commission because there is this principle of collegiality. And what that means is that all the decisions that are finally taken by the European Commissioners are taken collegially.

That means collectively; they are all responsible for the final decision. And they all have a say in the decision, even on files that are not under their direct responsibility. So, I think this is an important thing to keep in mind. That's why we follow each other's portfolios across the cabinets, and we need to know things that don't pertain just directly our individual portfolio. Our role is to have more of a bird's eye view, on this field that we cover, but we have our directorate-generals under us.

This is a huge amount of people, in the hundreds, and they are really the experts that work on particular aspects of a particular policy. And this is where our knowledge base comes from. They are people that we rely on. They are preparing the proposals and are at the heart of proposals that we put forth.

So, we are the final filter before the material reaches our commissioner. And there is an interaction between us and our DGs, which we call "the services". So, we are in daily contact with them as well translating back and forth between them and the commissioner, based on his political guidance.

There are really very different activities that we engage in a typical day, or let's say in a typical week.

I would say that the most important thing that we do is that we prepare a weekly meeting of commissioners. So, commissioners, all 27 of them, meet in principle once per week, on a Wednesday morning, in Brussels. This is the so-called College meeting, where they discuss the most pressing issues, political priorities, and take decisions.

Collectively, they take decisions on everything that is as important, that requires their discussion on it. So, first, the services would prepare a proposal based on Commissioner's initial political guidance, but they would build the proposal from the ground up. So, it's going to be a legislative proposal,

non-legislative proposal. There are different types that we do such as commission recommendations, commission communications, regulations, and so on.

So then everything that the services would not be able to resolve vis-a-vis other services, give opinion on a particular proposal, we would take up at the level of the cabinet, discuss with other cabinet members. Then the heads of cabinets would have their own weekly meeting where they would discuss the remainder of the issues and then this file would go to the College of Commissioners.

So, this is one thing where we come in - and this is what I meant a little bit by translation - so we are in constant touch with our services. For example, when they are preparing a proposal, we are then more involved. Also, from the beginning, we have a look at the draft at different stages. We give some initial comments again, based on the guidance that we have from our commissioner.

When the final draft reaches us, we are in touch between the Services and the Commissioner, we tell him "Okay, this is how it looks like". These are the sensitive topics to that DG, this is something that must be resolved, this will potentially need more guidance, whether this compromise is acceptable to us or not.

So, this would be the lifecycle of a proposal that our own DG would put forward. And again, this is all because of the collegiality principle and because we want to make sure that everybody in the end can get behind this proposal and that we can present it as a commission. So even on topics that we are not preparing ourselves, we would come into the process a bit later and give our opinion on.

If I give a made-up example, we can have a proposal on skills on upscaling and then the environmental DG would say, "we think that the digital skills are very well reflected in this proposal, but we think that more space has to be dedicated also to the green skills and how these skills are also very important to achieve the green and digital transition".

So, this is to give you the taste of the discussions that we have with other DGs. We try to make sure that our portfolio specific considerations are duly considered across the board.

[00:10:21] **Jana:** This sounds onerous. So, in that typical policy cycle, how fast would things happen?

[00:10:28] **Petra:** Everything happens very fast and probably it's been happening faster since this college. It's the only college I've ever been in, but ever since we started, we have this sense of living in a state of permacrisis, where we are constantly reacting to external events. We hardly started working there in December 2019 before Covid pandemic hit. We were in the office for a few months - we started, like I said, in December. In January, there were news coming already from China, and in March, we were out. We started with the teleworking arrangement in the very beginning of the COVID crisis, where nobody really knew what was going on, what was necessary, how to react.

So, that was COVID - we adopted the recovery and resilience facility very fast in response to the crisis, much faster than we've been used to proposing things before. So, there was this sense of heightened urgency. Also, a big consensus was that this had to be done; much bigger consensus than in the previous financial and other crises.

COVID really had this symmetrical shock, where no country was responsible for, but the impact was asymmetrical. But we decided, yes, we must have this common instrument to respond to this crisis. Then we hardly got out of COVID or not even, and another huge crisis blew up in front of our doorstep.

You know, we then had natural disasters sprinkled here and there throughout these last four years. Now Israel and Gaza. So, it's been quite intense, very action filled, and we've been, of course, trying to stay in front of the curve, but it hasn't always been easy. I would say that it's been a lot of fast paced movements, probably faster than we usually associate with public administration.

Like my commissioner also says that sometimes he's been surprised by the speed of the decision-making process that was not seen before; so yes, it's fast paced.

[00:12:59] **Jana:** Petra, this is bringing us to an entirely different level of thinking of policymaking and of the role the evidence plays in all that. Obviously, evidence comes in various shapes and forms. I wonder, in this fast paced and sped up processes, what's the role of evidence? When does the evidence come in? Who provides it? Who you seek out to get the evidence? Just generally about the role of evidence in these processes...

[00:13:31] **Petra:** Absolutely. When I was preparing for this podcast, I talked with a few colleagues that have more of a daily interaction with evidence-based and reaching out to academia and external stakeholders when preparing proposals. I was very positively surprised by the wealth of activity that is going on.

So, I'm very happy to tell you and your listeners about this because they should be interested in how to cooperate with the European Commission. I was very positively surprised because, like I said, in the cabinet, we come a bit later in the process, so we don't necessarily deal with the evidence base, which for me is really like a foundation of a policy proposal.

It's like building a house, I would say. Our experts, at the beginning, they gather and evaluate different pieces of evidence. They decide how to take it into account, how to weigh it one against the other. So, they are really the best place to do that at their level. And when we come to our level, we would not necessarily reevaluate the evidence base, or take it under questioning. We trust our experts that our best placed to do so. And then, you know, they build the foundations and we, at the end, we put a roof over the house, and we finish the façade, but the evidence must be there.

So there are different ways we cooperate with the external world. And I would say there are more structured ways of an ongoing cooperation and conversation with academics. And then there's ad hoc demand driven requests. On this structural way, there are different networks of experts that have longstanding contracts with the European Commission, and they provide papers and policy briefs on an ongoing basis so that we always have this continuous flow of information and the state of the art on a particular topic.

And just to caveat all that I'm saying that commission is such a big and diverse, formidable animal. I'm sure that different DGs have different policy needs and different kinds of scientific evidence. So I'm not as familiar with the DG Sante or Agriculture or Environment and Climate. I'm sure they have perhaps a different cooperation with academia and outside world, but what I know best is this socioeconomic family of DGs, so what I'm saying pertains, let's say, to this field of knowledge and

research. So there are these different networks that we have. for example, in DG Employment, where I worked previously also in DG EAC Education and Culture.

So for example, there's European expert network on economics of education. There is social situation monitor, and I'm sure there are many more. I'm just giving you a few examples. These are networks of experts that publish calls for new experts every now and then, and every interested academic can, in principle, apply to join that network and participate in this knowledge exchange. So this is really something we do to stay on top of the latest research on an ongoing basis.

And then when we prepare a particular policy proposal, we also look out to what is available, what are the latest studies that could inform the initial policy design of a proposal. And this is how more ad hoc, on demand calls are published. We consult the scientific community through a variety of ways to inform the policy design in the beginning and then to help us with the impact assessment.

Impact assessment is something that is required in principle for every proposal that we put forward, where different policy options, different scenarios and their impact are assessed with a view to select the best one that is the most efficient and the best way forward, also based on scientific evidence, but also on public consultation of citizens, of different interest groups, different experts. So, there's various evidence we consider. And scientific evidence is, let's say, one part of the equation.

What happens then, sometimes, in very exceptional events where we need answers to a very pressing problem. For example, my commissioner established a high-level expert group in the wake of the COVID pandemic to help him advise on the post COVID economy and how this one-off event that was difficult to compare to previous crisis would reshape the social fabric, the future economic relations. So sometimes we do this high-level groups that are also demand driven.

I would say that there are three parts, three actors in this equation, for example, the commission on our side, then the universities as groupings, and then also individual academics that can play a role to actively reach out to aid this process of cross fertilization.

So, what we do at the commission, for example, we will have an annual research conference. This is an annual event, which is a flagship annual research that ECFIN does in cooperation with JRC, which is our internal science powerhouse that also provides a lot of academic input internally. And this is a conference where academics in an open call every year are invited to submit their papers. And then a scientific jury selects, I think, 24 of them that are then presented at this conference. This is one concrete example of how an academic can make their work more visible in the so-called EU bubble. Then ECFIN organises seminar series where they invite academics to present their papers. They have academic workshops; they organise sometimes even fellowships where academics can join them for a certain amount of time. So, ECFIN is doing a lot of reach out. Some of it is based on open public calls that are accessible to everyone. And the other part is more invitation based.

So, in that sense, it helps to be in the know. Just good old fashioned networking helps attending conferences, exchanging cards, just knowing which people to target. And this, sometimes, I admit, can be a bit of a challenge for an academic that is not integrated into the Brussels bubble.

But I think there are various ways that I can also mention, what academics can do to get more in touch with this policy applied side, that we are more interested in Brussels. So then there are universities that are also proactively reaching out to the policy community. I think universities also

have a role to play if they want to more actively reach out to the policy community in Brussels. There are ways to do that.

And then individual academics - there are really several ways to do that. And I think what is an outdated or a mistaken notion is that you are just going to publish your paper in a prestigious academic journal and then policymakers are going to chase you down and invite you to collaborate on their new policy. First, we don't have so much time to read the papers in full. I mean, some colleagues do, but what we are more interested in are abstracts or executive summaries that have very clear policy implications or policy recommendations. Sure, there is value in basic research, but perhaps what is more pertinent for the purposes of policymakers that have to respond to very concrete real-life events and solve problems is this more policy applied research that is a bit different. So, like I said, it's not enough just to publish.

Perhaps you also want to target your research to journals that are more policy oriented. So there are journals that are more policy oriented in that sense. Then what is useful is also to write blog articles based on your papers that you can target to, to these websites that are quite read in the policy community in Brussels. One is Vox EU, Project Syndicate - sites like this, that policymakers really read because they distil research and make it very applied and very concrete to what we are dealing with.

So, you know, what we are dealing with is upskilling, skills productivity, innovation different issues on the labour market, how to move from temporary to open ended contracts, how to decrease people not in employment or education, how to reduce early school leaving, labour market, how to make certain parts of the population active and re-engage in the labour market, in the job search.

There's so many topics in macro and microeconomics, but this is the things that we are dealing with. So, yes, academics. There are so many ways, I think attending conferences and just networking, realising who in the commission is dealing with which topic.

I am meeting a lot of stakeholders, but not necessarily academics, because, like I said, as an academic, I would not target necessarily the cabinet, I would target really the people in the DGs that are responsible for starting to draft a proposal at the very beginning.

[00:24:42] **Jana:** So, we are back to translation. I think we've used the term translation in three different ways today, translating research into policy speak, translating policies from one element to the other, and translating from one language to another. Wow - that's just three different uses of one activity. But, Petra, in a very rich account of what you do, there's also one thing that I would like you to tell our listeners more about, and that's the European semester.

Could you please tell us how the European Semester shapes how agendas are set, what policies are being put in place, put on the agenda, if at all, and as well as the sustainable development goals that you have in place.

[00:25:25] **Petra:** Yeah, so the European Semester is a tool for the coordination and surveillance of economic and social policies that we do between the commission and member states with a view to help everyone, let's say, move in the right direction, economy wise.

We adopt a spring and the autumn package, and it's a set timeline that happens every year with a number of deliverables on both sides. On the commission side and the member state side where we

publish different types of documents and member state have to submit different types of material as well to us, that we then assess and give our opinions, our recommendations, and so on.

The European Semester starts in the autumn when we publish like a chapeau communication that is called the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey, where we set the tone for the economic priorities for the year ahead.

Then there's a number of different steps. An important party are the member states that share with us their draft budgetary plans. We assess them, we issue an opinion that hopefully then they can consider when they adopt the actual budgets.

We do a country report every year for a member state where we analyse their main challenges, and then we issue country specific recommendations at the same time. What happened with European Semester over the past years, I think it's very interesting because it travelled from being this very strict macroeconomic fiscal structural instrument that was really focused on fiscal stability, structural reforms, it evolved into this broader instrument that integrates other aspects that we today consider macroeconomically relevant.

So first, it was about integrating the European pillar of social rights. So it got expanded into the social dimension that is obviously very important. And we are very happy that today we have this broader view, which is not just about the economy as an end in itself, but also how it serves the people and the social fabric.

So this happened already under the previous commission mandate. But in this mandate, there were two very important changes to the European Semester. First is that my commissioner particularly oversaw integrating the Sustainable Development Goals into the European semester, so that we now systematically track the progress of every member state towards the SDGs, and they are now a very big and important part of European semester. And then second thing that happened to the European semester is that it was aligned with the recovery and resilience facility.

[00:28:46] **Jana:** We've covered quite a lot of ground and I just wonder - and you've provided so much precious advice to academics who would be eager and willing to work with the European Commission or any European Union institution - is there any final top tip that you would be willing to give and share with our listeners?

[00:29:03] **Petra:** Sure. In terms of getting a feel for what is happening in Brussels, which I recognise can sometimes appear as a rather opaque structure, and we are not always that good in conveying to the general public what's going on in a particular moment - it's all crystal clear to us, but sometimes it gets lost in translation again. What is happening in Brussels? What is driving the day?

I think if as an academic or just an interested citizen you would like to follow a little bit what's on the agenda and so on, there are a lot of useful publicly available documents. So, first, we are discussing evidence based today. And the Commission is committed to incorporating evidence-base or this science knowledge for policy principles in all our proposals, but at the same time, we have our political masters. We have the president of the European Commission who sets out her political guidelines at the beginning of every commission.

So the political guidelines are this foundational document where she sets out her priorities for the next five years, in very high-level big picture terms. And then she also writes mission letters to all her commissioners. And these mission letters set out their tasks and their priorities for their respective mandates.

What then happens every year is that these political guidelines are translated into a so-called commission's annual work program. And this is a publicly available document that sets out concrete proposals and the dates when they will be adopted in the following year. So in that sense, you can see at which point we will be adopting a new proposal on whichever topic that could be of interest then to get in touch with the policymakers in the DGs up to one year before because we were talking a bit about the speed, but there are, of course, emergency proposals. But there are also things that are planned and that we take several months or even a year or more than a year to prepare the entire proposal as it should be prepared. So in that sense, you can see at which point something is coming up and you can target your policy brief to the relevant policy officer or head of unit in the European Commission. This is one tip.

And then the second tip that I would also give. When I was talking about how academics can put themselves out there, I think you shouldn't underestimate being active on social media.

There are academics that are quite vocal on social media in the Brussels bubble and that have a considerate following of policy makers. And they are known for their very concrete targeted responses to whatever their field of expertise is. So, establishing your platform in a particular topic can also be very useful.

[00:32:27] **Jana:** I think we've learned so much from you. Petra, thank you ever so much for taking the time, for joining us today and sharing the wealth of knowledge and information with us.

[00:32:36] **Petra:** Thanks for having me.

[00:32:37] **Jana:** You've been listening to the Business of Policymaking podcast from Leeds University Business School presented by Jana Javornik and produced by Hannah Preston. If you'd like to get in touch about anything you've heard in this episode, contact details are in the episode show notes.