

What is it like to be a director of a think tank, Dr Fabian Zuleeg?

This interview was conducted by Lara Breitmoser & Florian Lenner, Co-Founders and Co-Editors in Chief of the Young Journal of European Affairs (YJEA).



Dr. Fabian Zuleeg is Chief Executive and Chief Economist at the European Policy Centre (EPC) in Brussels. He holds a master's degree in Economics and International Relations from the University of St Andrews, a master's degree in Economics from the University of Glasgow and a PhD in Economics from the University of Edinburgh. Prior to joining the EPC, he worked in the private and the public sector, including for the Scottish government.

YJEA: For those of our readers who don't know you yet, could you start by briefly introducing yourself?

Dr Fabian Zuleeg: My name is Fabian Zuleeg and I'm the Chief Executive and Chief Economist of the European Policy Centre (EPC), a think tank based in Brussels. We are an independent think tank providing advice on EU policies across a whole range of activities of the European Union.

When did you decide that you would like to pursue a career in International Relations? Was there a specific moment that motivated you to follow the path of IR and Economics?

I started being interested in the wider world, Europe and beyond relatively early. I grew up in Germany but left the country when I was 15 and haven't been back since. I had an interest in travelling abroad and seeing what is happening in other countries. I come from a very political family as well, so it was natural to go in the direction of International Relations and Politics. I also had a very good teacher at school who sparked my interest in Economics. So, that came together, and I then decided to study both Economics and International Relations.

How did your studies in IR and Economics prepare you for your current position at the European Policy Centre (EPC)?

I think it's both the process of studying and the content of the studies. Studying abroad already helped me gain a different orientation. The content of my studies was on topics that have also played a role in my career, but it differs. There is less need in my day-to-day work for the more theoretical and academic areas. In particular, I did a lot of theoretical Economics and Econometrics, which I don't use at all in my day-to-day work, but some other aspects have been very helpful. So, it's mixed. But I think the most important thing is not necessarily the content, it's about the approach to studying, how you make sense of the world. I have had an analytical career ever since university, so those skills have been very important.

Before joining the EPC, you worked in academia, the public and the private sector. How did your previous positions influence the work you do now?

They were all important. In academia, I was simultaneously working on my PhD, so that taught me a lot about research discipline. A PhD is a challenging thing to do and I would only advise people to go down that road if they truly want to do it. It's a major investment of time and when you look at the return you get, it's not necessarily as great as people hope. You can learn the skills that are necessary to do research if you like the discipline. But my other work – I worked in government as well – was extremely relevant for the work of a think tank. It's important to be able to understand how the other side thinks. As a think tank, you're always trying to influence policymakers, and that includes people who work in government. But also, my work as a consultant in the private sector has been very important because you learn several skills about project management, about project acquisition, about finances, all of which you then also need in the think tank world.

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What would you generally say is the value of academic experience for careers outside of academia? Why should students bother investing time and resources in academic work outside their curriculum if they are not planning on pursuing an academic career (or should they at all)?

I've always believed that it's important that people do the things they find motivating and genuinely enjoyable. The first question for me would be whether someone really

wants to do that. I think if people are trying to pursue something simply because they think they need to tick that box, it's usually not so helpful and often also not that successful. So, motivation is very important. Does it help in terms of a career? Of course, when you are selecting people for positions, you look at the whole portfolio of what they have done. And relevant academic work can also be an important factor. For me, what is very important is whether it shows motivation or not. It's not so much about the topic but about how people have pursued things. Nevertheless, you can also prove your interest in other ways. It doesn't necessarily have to be academic work. I think when you look at the kind of internships many people do, those also help. There is a wide variety of things that employers look for in the end.

To specify: What is the value of academic experience, specifically when working in a think tank? Would it be very useful to have done some research on the topics you're working on?

I think for a think tank, it's always a question of how that research is applied to the policy questions we are facing. We don't do pure academic research, and we don't want to do that. That's why we choose to be in a think tank and not in academia. Academic research can be important for us, but it must have relevance to policy questions. Very often, it is also about translating what academic research means for policymakers. I would also say that at the beginning of one's career, I wouldn't expect employees – when conducting academic research or other kinds of analysis – to come up with new things that haven't been thought of by the people who work in that field. That usually takes several years of experience. So, again, it's about demonstrating what someone's skills are, what someone's motivation is, what the interests are rather than the content of the research itself.

But I would always try to see how things can be applied. What does that mean in the real world? How can you actually get policymakers to change? Some of the things about academic research are difficult to use in the think tank world. Academic research, for example, tends to have very long time frames, while the think tank world has very short ones. Policymakers want answers now. And they want more definitive answers than those that academic research often produces. They want to know whether they should do one thing or the other. It's not helpful to say: "Both of them have advantages and disadvantages." So, it's a very different way of working. If you do work in a think tank, a lot of it is about informal exchanges, it's about trying to find effective ways of getting to the policymakers. It is also about learning specific skills, for example, writing summaries. If you cannot write a summary, it's almost guaranteed that no policymaker will read your work because they are not going to sit down and read a 20-page paper. Policymakers are extremely busy; they will read one paragraph. And if that paragraph interests them, they might read a bit more. But they are certainly not going to read a long academic paper.

How important is your resumé and research in academia for being perceived as an expert in your field? Does a PhD matter?

Certainly, some people think that a PhD is important, that it is a particular signal. I would question that a little bit. It doesn't get you very much in terms of additional employment chances or additional income. There are several studies that have looked at this over time. If you look at a PhD from a career perspective, then it is only worth doing if you want to stay in academia because there, it is somewhat of a requirement. When you look at think tanks, there is a good mixture of people who have a PhD and those who don't have a PhD. And that comes back to what I was saying about the nature of think tanks being different from academia. The kind of skills you need is not necessary in the academic sphere. But that sounds a bit too negative. Firstly, I would say that you should only do a PhD if you really want to do one. It's a very long and painful process, so if you don't want to do it, don't do it. It's not going to help you that much with your career. But if you do want to do it, then it's a worthwhile thing to do. What it does teach you are incredible research discipline and incredible focus. You learn how to deal with a particular issue in a lot of detail. But as a career tool, I wouldn't advise people to do it unless they want to stay in academia.

Would you say the value of a PhD is even less when you work in government or the private sector?

It depends a little bit. Firstly, I think it depends on what kind of PhD. When you look at life sciences, in particular, a PhD is still much more common, and I think it also does have an impact on the career trajectory. I think it can also help in government, but it also very much depends on the way a government is organised. In some governments, there is somewhat of a bonus you get by having a PhD. It's questionable whether all the time invested is then compensated, but in some others, there is no such thing. Of course, there is always a reputational gain. That does have an impact, but I don't think it has a great long-term influence. Because in the end, if people want to consider you for a job, they look at you as a package, not just a particular title. So, it's important what you have done what your interests are. And yes, your PhD can be a signal for that, but the PhD on its own doesn't necessarily do that.

How do you balance being the Chief Executive (i.e., Director) of the EPC while continuing your position as Chief Economist? What's the focus of your day-to-day work and how much time can you still allocate for research and political consultancy?

Overall, if we look at think tanks, there are essentially two different models. One is to have the management of the think tank done by people who focus on management. And the other is to have analysts who then also take on management tasks. For the EPC, we've always considered it important to have both, so that our senior management is

also from the analyst side. The drawback of that is that it is double pressure. Managing time is very difficult because there will always be management tasks that need to be done and that can mean that the analysis suffers. I think I have the advantage of having been doing this for quite a long time, and experience helps.

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A typical day? There is no typical day. Certainly, there wasn't a typical day even before COVID. The reality is that, as opposed to academia, think tank work changes very rapidly. Even before COVID, we were doing about 200 events each year. You have to plan those, you have a number of different projects, some shorter-term, some longer-term, you have the management tasks etc. Now, in some way, there is a more typical day because all of us have spent most of the past 1,5 years in front of the computer without actually meeting people face-to-face. But in terms of the variety of things we do, it's probably even greater. The pressure has increased, we're now doing about 240-250 events a year. In a think tank, you

have a lot of pressure, but you also have a lot of variety. The one constant is being in contact with policymakers. In the end, we always have to recall what a think tank is for: We're here to influence policy. If we don't influence policy, there is no justification for having think tanks. That is the only way you're going to get your analysis, your thinking, your recommendations into the policy process. It's about knowing the right people, being able to talk to them, also understanding them and making sure we give them what they need at the right moment in time. Thus, all forms of communication are a huge part of what you do in a think tank, whether in management or in analysis.

Many students are interested in working on political consultancy projects after graduating: Which key qualifications should one acquire and what are possible ways of doing so while studying?

I can only really talk about the European think tank scene. The first thing I would say is that it is challenging, but people shouldn't be discouraged by that. It's challenging in the sense that when you look at think tanks, we're actually a rather small segment. Much smaller, for example, than academia, which mirrors in terms of the opportunities.

For me, one of the key things is that applicants need to stand out. We have EPC programme assistantships which are our paid internships. If we advertise for a programme assistantship, even under the worst circumstances, we get hundreds of applications. And the vast majority of these applicants are qualified. There is no question that they have done the appropriate degree, that they have also done well enough in terms of their academic work. The challenge then is, how do you stand out from the crowd? What makes you different from what everyone else has sent in? I would

say there are two things: One is what you do outside of academia. That could be many different things. It could be internships, for example, but it could also be engagement in projects.

I think what also is very important is that one comes across as enthusiastic. I know, of course, that people are applying to more than one place, and that is perfectly fine, but if I'm getting a letter of motivation that doesn't even mention EPC and the work we do, which comes across as they haven't even looked at the website, the letter immediately goes onto the rejection pile. People need to invest a bit, and, at times, they also need to overcome their own limitations and fears. Making personal contact can be extremely important. If there are people in their environment, university professors, other people they have worked with, who can establish contact, use these contacts. It is much easier to get into something.

Also, don't wait for things to be advertised. What happens quite often with EPC assistantships is that someone leaves and we choose not to advertise because we don't want to go through 500 applications. But we look at the CVs which have come in over the last couple of months. Very often, we then appoint someone whose CV we have received earlier.

And the final point is that it doesn't necessarily have to be directly after university. The way you get into think tanks is not necessarily by getting onto the career ladder after university. Sometimes people get an internship, they get promoted and they develop an analyst career. But on many other occasions, they come from somewhere else. But if you have an interest in that career perspective, then even if you're going into another area, you should also keep an eye on what is happening in the think tank world, what is happening – in our case – in the European policy world. Show that you continue to be interested in that, start building the networks. In the end, when you're applying for a position at a think tank like EPC, that is the kind of thing we will look for.

The LSE European policy blog recently published an article that analysed the impact of academic research on policymaking. How well would you say does your work resonate with EU policymakers? And do you have specific strategies – if you can disclose them – to make your voice heard?

It's a perennial question for think tanks. What kind of impact do you have? And how do you demonstrate that impact? These two questions do not necessarily have the same answer. For those of us who have been working in the think tank field for a long time, we know that we have an impact because we can often see it. We know that we talk to the right people. Just to give you one anecdote: Hermann von Rompuy, the former president of the European Council, is now our president at the EPC. When we talked to him about taking this role at EPC, one thing he mentioned was that very often, before a summit, he would receive a commentary from the EPC, and he would always read those with interest. This represents impact because this is someone who will then go into that meeting, talk to the heads of state and governments and make decisions going forward. But it's not something we can measure.

That is one of the big problems with funders, as they very often ask for key performance indicators. They want to see how many website hits, how many media mentions we get. I personally don't think that tells you very much because if one influential person reads what you have done or if one influential person has met you at lunch and you've talked to them, that probably has more impact than ten thousand people reading an article. But it is still important that you are recognised as a voice, so in a sense, media mentions are still important and very often, politicians will look for what is in the media.

There are several cases where I've even found particular passages that come from us in official policy or strategy papers. Have they been referenced? Absolutely not. But that is the real influence because, in the end, you have given them something useful for their work. They might not even know that they have done this. They might have put something into a passage that just stuck in their head, remember an event they have taken part in, a publication they've read or a conversation they've had, and they might not even be aware that they are using or quoting something someone else has done. But we are aware of it, and we can see it. It is a much more clandestine way of trying to influence policy and, very often, you don't get public recognition. But you do get private recognition.

Is there anything extraordinary in particular that people should know about working in a think tank? Maybe a question that is connected to that: What would you say is the best and the worst part?

In a sense, the worst part is that it is quite precarious and that you don't tend to have the kind of long-term career prospects that you have in other sectors. It certainly doesn't have the stability of public sector employment. You won't receive the remuneration which you would get in the private sector. But that's also what makes it exciting. You are in between. You are not academia, you're not the public sector, you're not the private sector. You are doing something rather unique, and it is something which is exciting: To be involved in policy, to be able to influence it, to do all these things behind the scenes, to know that, for some of the big things which have happened in European politics, you've been there, and you've been a part of it. If you are interested in policy, that is a buzz. I don't think you get that anywhere else.

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As a wrap-up, is there anything you'd like to share with the readers of our first issue or any advice you would have liked to have received at the beginning of your career or when you were a student?

Pay attention to details. The one thing which astonishes me, again and again, is when we get applications and, for example, the first thing you see on the first page is a spelling mistake or that the application looks awful, it's addressed to the wrong person or the name of the person it's addressed to is spelt wrongly. These are small things, but they are an important signal to the people who are looking at them. So, pay attention to these small details. They actually matter.

The other important thing to me is to show enthusiasm. When I pick up an application, it should come across that this person wants to do this and that this is a dream for them. We had one case where someone had applied for a programme assistantship at EPC, and she had accidentally sent an email that had me copied in and wasn't intended for me. She was sending the email to a friend, writing that she was so excited about this application. Maybe it was a strategy. But if it was, it was a very good one because, in the end, we did employ her. It was obvious that this was what she really wanted to do. Yes, you must have the right qualifications, yes, you must have the languages, you must have all the things which are part of the package. But if you don't have the enthusiasm for it, there is no point in applying.