


Issue 30 - March 2022

Marie Curie Alumni Association

Newsletter



Special
focus:
Supporting
Democracy

MCAA
Annual Conference
and General Assembly

MSCA Anniversary –
fellows remember

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Message from the Board

Dear Member,

While writing this message to you, we are all in shock and disbelief observing the devastating events in Ukraine. Together with Eurodoc, we jointly [issued a statement](#) calling European policymakers and all relevant organisations to stand against this aggression and provide support to the citizens and researchers of Ukraine. In addition, we are in touch with our partner organisations and neighbouring chapters to provide adequate support to the researchers of Ukraine. MCAA also opened a restricted group at our portal to provide safe space for the MCAA members who are from Ukraine or were in the country as part of their fellowship. As a volunteer organisation, we have very limited resources, but we are committed to and will try our best to support our members and fellow researchers. To this aim, a [fundraising campaign](#) has been launched to support two projects led by our members and an MCAA-led project that will help displaced researchers resettle in safe countries.

On a different note, this message will be the last message from this board. As you are reading this, the MCAA is scheduled to elect a new board during its [General Assembly](#) on 27th March, 2022. So, let's look back at this board's achievements.

The current board was elected at the very beginning of the pandemic, when our scheduled 2020 Annual Conference needed to be cancelled. Like everyone at that moment, we were juggling through the new norms. It was particularly challenging as many of our activities and members' engagements happened during face-to-face meetings. As a result, we quickly provided platforms for our global chapters to organise online meetings.



Photo by Mostafa Moonir Shawrav

We organised our 1st [Virtual Conference](#) in November 2020 with the support of our Croatian task force members. During our 2020 reporting year, our global chapter and working group organised over 120 events, attracting more than 6,000 participants. Among those events, 28% were focused on science policy, 22% on research funding, 19% on career development and 21% on diversity. In this period, we have offered microgrants to our members for online/onsite courses, conferences, and open science publication fees. Our [2021 Annual conference](#) attracted more than 500 participants [online](#) joining over 15 sessions.

We quickly realised the need to provide online career development opportunities, which is why we initiated MCAA Learning and provided complimentary access to LinkedIn Learning, Coursera and eCornell platforms to the members belonging to different groups, such as active volunteers, differently-abled researchers, researchers at risk and

researchers from developing and widening countries. In addition, we started working on the development of a mentoring platform. We are very happy to announce that currently the pilot phase of Mentoring (MCAA Academy) is ongoing and after the evaluation, we would be happy to provide different mentoring opportunities focusing on career paths (e.g., career in policy, industry, non-profit) as well as on different topics (e.g., Open Science, Science Diplomacy).

Over the past two years, MCAA was very active and vocal on different policy issues, starting from the [budget cut](#) on Horizon Europe, the discussion on [Open Science](#), ERA governance structure, inclusion of the UK in Horizon Europe, researchers' assessment and many others. We have provided [structured feedback](#) to policymakers as well as other different stakeholders. Some of our initiatives saw a very successful outcome - budget increase to Horizon Europe, inclusion of the UK in the Horizon Europe programme. One such initiative was the inclusion of seven different stakeholders groups in the ERA Forum for transition. One of our members, Renaud Jolivet as a representative of ISE, will provide the voice for individual researchers on this platform. Also, Karen Stroobants is currently part of the core drafting group of the Reformation of Researcher Assessment initiative. In the last two years, MCAA also [became a member](#) of the International Science Council (ISC) and the [European Science Diplomacy](#) initiative.

From an organisational perspective, we created a Management Working Group to restructure support to the chairs of chapter and working groups. This working group already organised a Chairs Conference in 2021 and provides continuous onboard training to new MCAA leaders. We created an ethics group who prepared a code of conduct for the board members, which is due to be approved by the next General Assembly. To efficiently communicate with internal stakeholders, we also started an internal newsletter for

the chairs of chapter and working groups. In addition, we have started the work to change our Article of the Association. We have also created two new working groups - Survey and Career Development Initiative.

In the past two years, the pandemic didn't stop us from working to establish a sustainable future for the Association. Our effort was recognised by the relevant stakeholders, who invited us to take part in numerous events and consultations. Recently, two of our proposals were granted funding: one focusing on Citizen Science and the other on researchers' assessment.

In addition, the structure of the support from the European Commission to the Association will change. We just submitted a proposal as a mono-beneficiary as part of the call to support MCAA. If positively evaluated, MCAA will be able to receive funding from the Commission in the form of a grant, without the need for a contractor. That would give MCAA more flexibility in its operation, but would also come as a challenge. If the grant is provided, MCAA will need to manage its own operation by hiring or receiving service from employees or service providers. So, I kindly ask you to provide your full support to the new board managing this Association in this transitional phase.

Looking forward, I see a few areas where the Association can create major impact in the future:

Operational Management: So far, the Association was managed by volunteers. With the exponential growth the Association has experienced, volunteers need to spend a lot of time on operational management. From my personal experience, Chair needs to spend on average over 80 hours/month on the Association. As reflected in the last election calls, vice-chairs also need to invest more than 40 hours/month. This is not sustainable for the longer term. This is why, when possible, the Association should ensure that sufficient personnel is available to provide

support covering the overall operation of the Association, policy advice, community management, relationship management and other necessary areas. In addition, the Association should invest in raising its own funds by organising events, crowdfunding or even traditional fundraising activities.

Structured Feedback and Policy work: In order to understand the challenges of researchers in general and of MCAA members in particular, regular surveys would help the Association understand our members' as well as researchers' needs. This will allow structured policy feedback to relevant stakeholders.

Members' engagement: Active volunteers are the heart and soul of this organisation. Based on the feedback from our members, activities dedicated to engaging members across borders and discipline will be designed. The Association could work as a hub for the members to jointly develop ideas to provide opportunities in career development or collaborate on a range of different topics. In addition, the Association could formalise the support it provides to the various underrepresented groups - unemployed members, researchers at risk, differently-abled researchers and many others.

Relationship Management: In the past four years, the Association collaborated with various national and international organisations working in diverse areas. These relationships need to be nurtured and strengthened in the future. The Association could be proactive by offering collaboration opportunities to various partners, collaborators and stakeholders by acting as an intermediary. One option could be to take part in proposals or projects which are aligned with the strategic vision of MCAA.

In the past two years, I had the pleasure of collaborating with so many members, partners and stakeholders, it would be impossible to mention each individual name.

The work we have done together could not be achieved without the support of our active volunteers, Chairs and members of chapters and working groups, former and current MCAA support team, different task forces and group members (GA task forces, Sponsorships, Policy, Research Funding) and YOU. I would like to thank all our external and internal stakeholders for their continued support to the Association, Partners, Sponsors and many others.

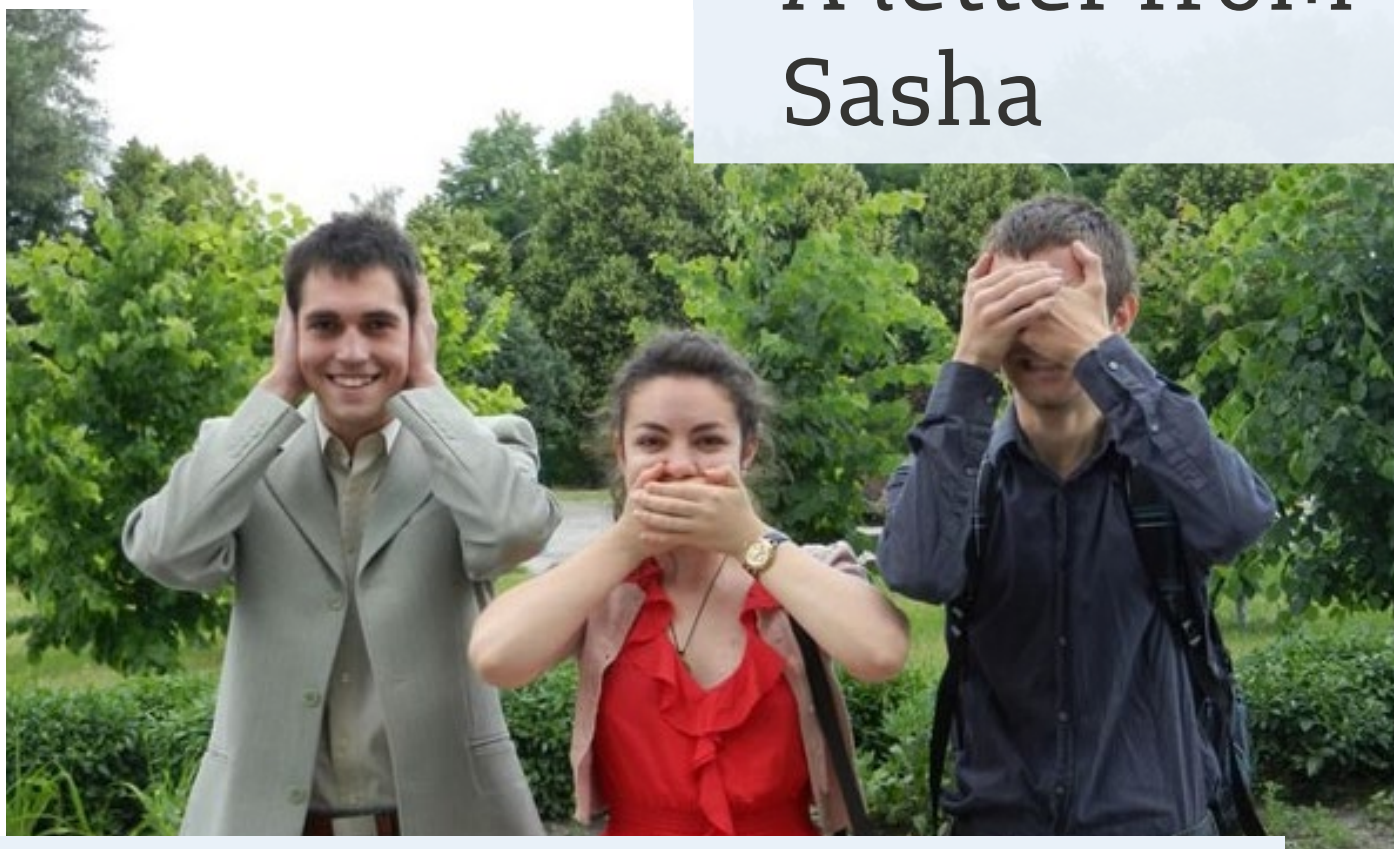
I would like to personally thank all our current board members for their contribution to the MCAA, a very special thanks to the two awesome vice-chairs Fernanda Bajanca and Valentina Ferro, and our board member Gledson Emidio for their extraordinary support in past years.

Personally, I joined this Association at its beginning and have actively contributed to its progress. It's been a pleasure and a privilege to lead this Association over the past four years, two years as a chair and two years as a vice-chair. It has been a roller coaster ride, I have tried my level best and given my all efforts to make it an inclusive and diverse organisation. I truly hope that whatever I did will make a long-lasting impact to create a better and sustainable MCAA.

Thank you for being with us and I invite you to actively take part in the Association and be part of shaping the exciting future of MCAA.

Mostafa Moonir Shawrav 
Chair of MCAA

News from the MCAA

A letter from
Sasha

Sasha and two of her best friends impersonating 'the three wise monkeys' after graduating in Kyiv, as the graduation gave them full freedom to express themselves as they wish.

Dear all,

Getting things down on paper was never my strong point (just ask my promoter) and I was always complaining about the ongoing struggle affecting all of the scientific community, the never-ending writing! Well, your perspective can change very fast...

Never have I imagined that I would be writing this letter, and it is definitely the most difficult one to date.

On February 22, as I was flying across the Atlantic and enjoying a high-speed internet connection, I watched Vladimir Putin order the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, far less pleasant I must say. After that, all I could do was sit and keep refreshing the news button,

while seeing more and more messages about the attacks appearing. Many of us were shocked by the horror and the simple fact that a real war in Europe in the 21st century could become a reality. The well-known slogan for the World War 2 Victory Day celebration is:

"Never again!" Well, the 'again' is happening today.

I do not know how the situation will develop and unfortunately it is one of those cases where a single individual cannot do much, but united we can. Like many of you, I am the lucky one, the one who watches it from the outside, just like a surreal movie. Millions and millions of people in Ukraine are not so lucky. They are scared, disoriented and, to be honest, they have nowhere to go. They are at home,



they love their country. In addition, many Ukrainians, like me, have family ties to Russia and care deeply about its people. Ukrainian and Russian people don't hate each other, they have a lot of respect and appreciation for each other!

This makes the whole situation even more distorted, and that is why they are so shocked. While the average European might say this was coming, the average Ukrainian would never have expected their neighbour or their distant family to do them so much harm. Many still can't get their heads around it.

I think what I am trying to say is that I am asking you to show your support. Please stand with the people affected by this war, show how you feel to those who are against it! Just make sure that truthful information exchange reaches everyone, including many areas in Russia where the situation is misrepresented in the news. Information is power! By suppressing it the Soviet Union was controlling a huge country, but it's the 21st century now!

It does not take much, just place a post on Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook or any other media source you have. It does not matter what you do, just do something! Every post you make will have an effect on another person and might, just might, help end the war with fewer casualties.

Ukrainians say:

"Together we are many, and we cannot be defeated!"

My heart and support to the people who have suffered from the Russian aggression and those who are against it!

Sasha Ivashchenko

Leiden University Medical Center
MCAA Editorial team member

(Разом нас багато, нас не подолати!)

Supporting Democracy

The EU is committed to supporting democracy worldwide

In 2021, the European Commission announced the allocation of EUR 119.5 million to boost European support to democracy and human rights around the world.



Photo by TheVisualsYouNeed on Shutterstock

Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen is clear about the importance of building strong democratic institutions. "Democracy is essential for sustainable development and equal opportunities. This means strong democratic institutions, social inclusion, and participatory societies. With these EUR 119.5 million, we renew our commitment to global democracy. I am also proud that the EU will continue to support the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and to help empower local civil society organisations, democracy activists and human rights defenders, youth and women, around the world."

MSCA fellows bring their contribution to the democratic process with their outstanding expertise and academic skills, by constantly

reflecting on our societies. We met Alina Cherviatsova who analyses human rights and memory studies. Marino De Luca reflects on involving members of political parties to counter the rise of populism and has chosen Brexit as a case study. To Eline de Jong, diversity is key to enhancing solidarity. She conducts research in the field of social enterprises. Eventually, Ryan Kopaitich aims to use populism as a lens to analyse contemporary politics in democracies. Meet all of them in our special coverage 'Supporting Democracy'.

For more information, read the [Press release](#)

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Supporting Democracy



Photo by Alina Cherviatsova

Questioning our statues and monuments

Alina Cherviatsova conducts research on human rights and memory studies. To her, European States play the main role in the legal regulation of collective memories, prescribing by law ('memory' or 'memorial laws') what should be remembered and how. To help Member States navigate the troubled waters of monument protests, she is currently working on guidelines aiming at addressing this issue.

Alina Cherviatsova in her own words

I am an MSCA Fellow at the Ghent University, Faculty of Law and Criminology, Human Rights Center, Programme for Studies on Human Rights in Context.

I am originally from Ukraine. Prior to MSC Fellowship, I was an associate professor at the V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, where I lectured on comparative public and international law and was an academic coordinator for three Jean Monnet Modules.

As a Ukrainian legal scholar and researcher, I am coming from a post-Soviet system of legal education that tends to be self-centred and insular. To go beyond Ukrainian legal academia and develop the skills of international researchers, I have participated in different international programmes.

In 2016, I received the Georg Forster Research Fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. In 2019-20, I was granted research fellowships from the University of Turin and the Max Planck Society for European Legal History, as well as a renewal Humboldt Fellowship.

They are everywhere: on our streets, at the local parks or inside public buildings. Commemorating the actions of great men and women of our history, monuments can sometimes express a more symbolic message. Statues and monuments are therefore part of our collective memories.

In summer 2020, spontaneous demolitions of monuments related to the colonial past arose in the United States and in some countries within Europe. And those events resonated with Alina's research on memory policy and personal experience in her country. "Ukraine's Euromaidan in 2014 was accompanied by the so-called 'Leninopad,' or 'Lenin fall,' when Lenin's monuments and other communist symbols were toppled down," she explains.

Monuments as bridges between the past and the present

Those protests made her realise that monuments, with their strong symbolic meaning, are not only about the past, but also about the present, reflecting a society's understanding of itself, its values, priorities and hopes. "Monuments can be used as a lens to analyse States' memory policies, and the fall of monuments means a tectonic shift in historical narratives, as well as a deep social conflict," she adds.

Those reflections led our fellow to draft the first sentence of her project: 'When the past is contested, the monuments are the first to be destroyed' and to frame a research question: 'Over centuries, the totalitarian regimes removed the monuments they did not agree with. Should the democracies then follow this path?'

Developing a taxonomy

This is how Alina's MSCA project, [MELoDYE](#) started in May 2021. Currently working on its first implementation's stage, Alina is conducting research on a taxonomy related



Photo by Alina Cherviatsova

to the main European memory conflicts and memory wars.

According to the historical and political context, Alina has identified several groups of 'controversial' monuments:

- monuments associated with the communist past (Lenin, Stalin, Dzerzhinskiy, etc.);
- monuments related to the legacies of the Second and First World Wars (Soviet military graves) in countries of the former Soviet Union;
- monuments to anti-Soviet fighters, 'national leaders' who, at the same time, collaborated with the Nazis;



Photo by Photostock by Leonardo Em on Shutterstock

- monuments associated with the colonial past and racial discrimination;
- monuments related to the glory of the past whose sense of national belonging is contested (the confrontation between Greece and North Macedonia over the legacy of Alexander the Great is an example).

Defining guidelines to address monuments' contestations

For Alina, analysing different practices on dealing with controversial monuments from all around the world makes it possible to define several guidelines needed to address the monument controversies. Therefore, several solutions can be put in place, such as retaining the status quo, contextualising (for instance, explaining a new symbolic meaning of a monument), altering a monument's original meaning or use, creating counter-monuments, relocating the monument, removing it from the public space or destroying it.

In this context, the MELoDYE project will establish a set of principles to guide decision-

makers on what to do with controversial monuments to ensure transparency, social justice and protection of cultural heritage.

Alina is happy to share some publications related to the project such as [Smothered by Russia's Brotherly Embrace](#) and [Controlling the Past: the recent developments in Russia's memory policy](#).

In her own words: the MSCA journey has just started, and the adventure is to be continued...

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Supporting Democracy

Involving members of political parties to counter the rise of populism



Photo by Marino De Luca

Reflecting on the challenges posed by the rise of populism, Marino De Luca analyses Brexit as a case study and proposes an active involvement of political parties to tackle this phenomenon.

Marino De Luca in his own words

I'm currently a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow at the Department of Politics in the School of Law, Politics and Sociology at the University of Sussex. My supervisor is Paul Taggart, Professor of Politics and one of the most respected scholars on populism.

I hold a PhD in political and social science from the University of Calabria, a Master of Science in internationalisation and communications from the University for Foreigners of Perugia, a post-graduate qualification in international election observation & electoral assistance from the University of Basque Country and a Bachelor of Arts in political communication from the University of Perugia.

I was also visiting research fellow in political communication at the Université Paris-Est Créteil Val de Marne as well as adjunct professor in public policy analysis and postdoc in politics at the University of Cagliari, and a research fellow in political communication at the University of Torino.

Before starting my MSCA, I worked in the socio-statistical-economic field at the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (Legislative Office and the Independent Office for the Evaluation of Performance).

I'm currently on the scientific committee of the Italian Society of Electoral Studies (SISE) and a member of the Italian Journal of Electoral Studies (QOE/IJES) editorial board.

My main research is about political parties, elections, intra-party democracy, political communication and populism.

In 2016, the United Kingdom (UK) voted to leave the European Union by 52% to 48%, creating an unprecedented situation. Very often, the results of this election have been depicted as a victory of populism, and some parts of the media have been blamed for having played with the general public's emotions. How can we avoid the repeat of such events in the future?

Populism, media communication and democracy

With his MSCA project called 'Populism in post-Brexit Europe,' Marino is currently analysing populism through the link between media communication and democracy, using the Brexit context as a case study. "Brexit represented a critical phenomenon both for stability and increased populist reactions in the UK against the European Union and vice versa," explains Marino.

The main purpose of the project is to understand how to counter the rise of populism and how political parties can help.

The research involves the analysis of populist issues in the media and examines how party members perceive and evaluate them. Eventually, the project will test how intra-party democracy can influence populism.

Marino investigates how the Brexit topic

POST BREXIT

#MSCA

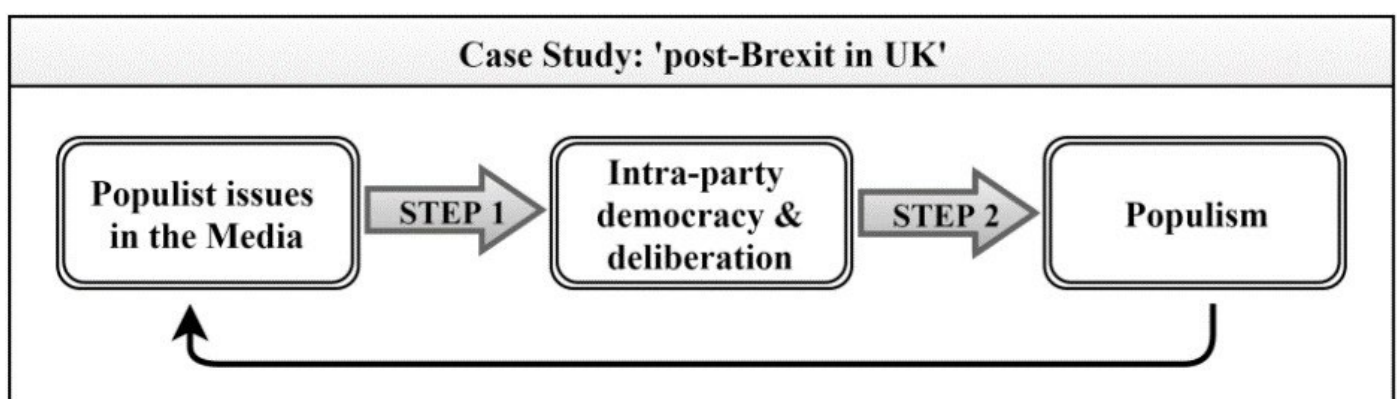
has been debated within the media, by analysing the three most important features of 'populist discourse:' an appeal to the people, anti-elite feelings, and exclusion strategies. "In this way, it is possible to examine the interpretative frames that politicians, journalists, and observers rely on within public debate. We focus on news items in which Brexit is described from a populist perspective," adds Marino.

Interviewing members of political parties

For Marino, it is key to understand how members of political parties define their position against populism. In this scope, he plans to conduct the first computer-assisted web interviewing of UK party members by trying to identify their approaches to 'populist' issues identified in the media.

"After this, the whole study sample will be invited to participate in an online forum to discuss these issues and explore solutions. Finally, I'll conduct a second survey of the

Comprehending the 'Populism in post-Brexit Europe' project



whole study sample, considering similarities and differences between those who did not participate in the debate and those who did. The aim is to understand how to change party members' approach to populist issues," explains Marino.

Analysing conspiracy theories as a next step

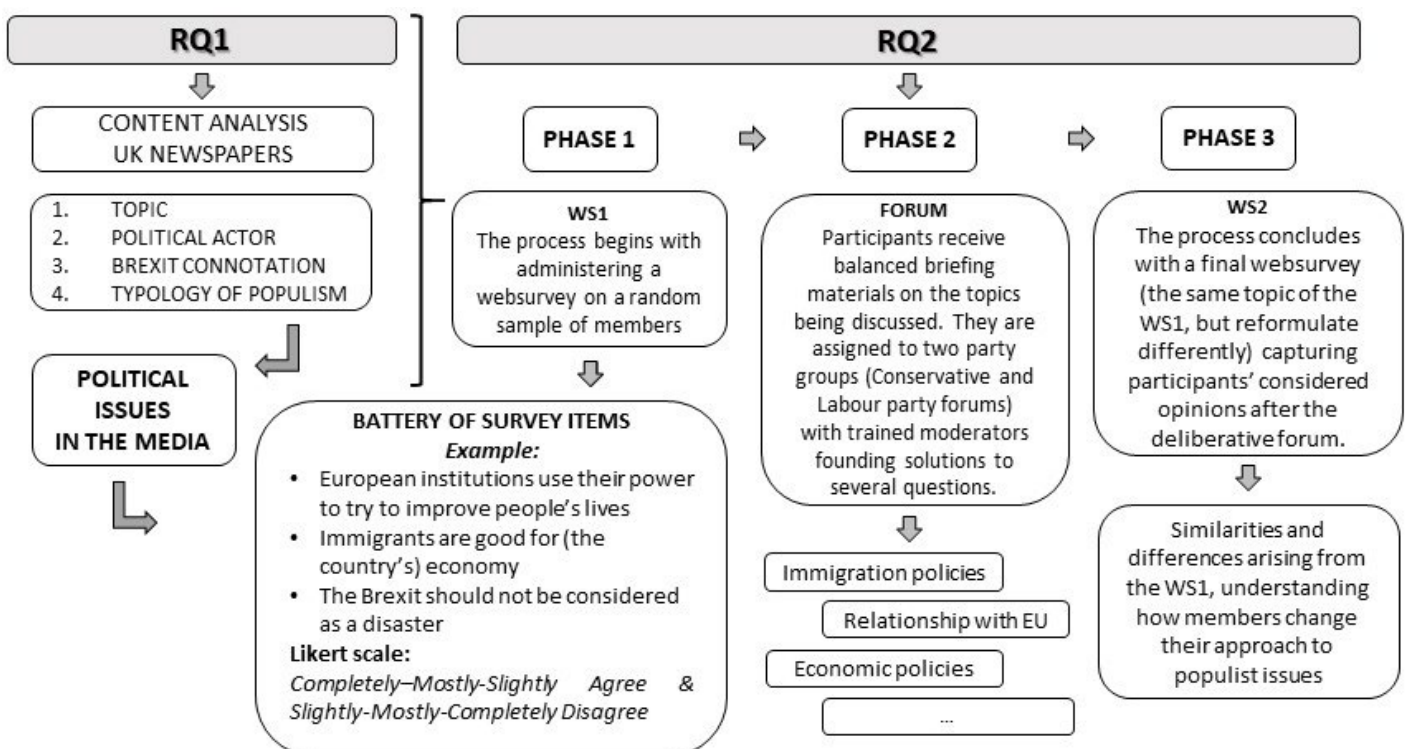
While focusing on the UK, the project has the ambition to go beyond borders. "The UK research will be developed through a comparative analysis of the next European Parliament elections. Indeed, the relevance of this research is linked to the rise of populist actors in Europe and the impact that arguments for leaving the EU have on the whole area. The present project also allows me to compare the UK system with others already investigated, for example those in Italy and France," adds Marino.

Marino is happy to share with us what comes next for him and his supervisor: "My supervisor

Paul Taggart and I are working on a new and exciting project that aims to examine the relationship between conspiracy theories and populism in order to understand how to debunk them by using political parties' internal processes." He adds: "This new project represents a further significant challenge for European research, and we hope to talk with you about this in the future." We look forward to hearing about this new project very soon!

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Comprehending the 'Populism in post-Brexit Europe' project



Supporting Democracy

Promoting new forms of solidarity

We met Eline de Jong who is conducting research in the field of social enterprises. She says understanding diversity is key to promoting solidarity.



Photo by Eline de Jong

Eline de Jong, in her own words

I am a social anthropologist from the Netherlands. My research interests include questions of identity, belonging, power dynamics, and (social) inequalities, particularly as these play out in organisational and institutional contexts.

After obtaining a Bachelor's degree in literary and cultural analysis at the University of Amsterdam, I continued with a Masters at the University of Oxford's Institute of Social & Cultural Anthropology (United Kingdom), where I graduated with distinction in 2020. Upon completing my studies, I worked at the Erasmus University Medical Centre, where I conducted research into the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 policy interventions in the city of Rotterdam (the Netherlands). Before commencing my academic career, I studied and worked in musical theatre for several years.

With my recent move to Belgium, I now have the experience of living in four different countries – both an enormous privilege as well as a bureaucratic challenge!

Is solidarity currently under pressure in Europe? According to Eline, the rise of an exclusionary rhetoric that has become ever more normalised through the politics of far-right and national populist parties, is putting this concept into jeopardy.

"These parties draw heavily on an 'us versus them' narrative, whereby 'they' are usually people of ethnic-cultural or religious minority groups whose presence is construed as posing a 'threat' to the ethnic-cultural majority," she explains.

With this narrative expanding in Europe, it seems that solidarity, classically understood as a willingness among people in a society to share and redistribute resources, is being put under strain.

To counter this tendency, the project "[Solidarity in Diversity](#)" (SOLiDi) aims to understand how different forms of solidarity between various groups are formed, and to see what lessons can be learnt from these forms of solidarity.

Social enterprises in the spotlight

Together with 14 other early-stage researchers (ESRs) who all work on solidarity in diversity in different contexts, Eline is carrying out research in the field of social enterprises.

"A social enterprise is a form of organisation that functions in a market context, on the one hand, but pursues a social objective, on the other. In my research project, I take a closer look at particular social enterprise initiatives in Flanders, Belgium, and analyse how,



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within these initiatives, possibilities for solidarity in diversity are generated and nurtured," she says.

For Eline, it is important to conduct research on social enterprises, because of their specific organisational context. "Social enterprises employ market strategies to achieve financial sustainability, but these strategies cannot – or at least they should not – come at the cost of the organisation's social mission and the solidarity strategies that are being employed to attain that mission. So, I think this hybrid organisational context – the tension between market- and Solidarity strategies – forms an interesting object of study," she explains.

When it comes to solidarity within social enterprises, Eline muses that this concept is likely to be understood differently by the various stakeholders. "How different stakeholders understand solidarity is also of great significance in trying to understand how social enterprises carry out their dual mission of achieving financial sustainability and making a social impact," she adds.

Emphasising ethical implications of research

The SOLiDi project has developed a training and research programme to train 15 ESRs in relevant theories, research methods and ethics from a variety of disciplines. Eline tells us how this works: "within our training and research programme, we focus, for instance, on theoretical concepts such as intersectionality, interculturalism, and of course solidarity and diversity, but we do so from a variety of disciplinary lenses ranging from sociology to educational sciences, human geography to anthropology (to name but a few). The benefit of combining these different disciplinary insights is that it allows for new ways of looking at 'old' problems, and it enriches each of our understandings of a particular concept or phenomenon," she says.

The project emphasises the ethical implications of the research. Eline explains how: "we ask, for instance, about power dynamics involved in doing research (particularly when it involves communities that may be considered vulnerable), about how knowledge is produced and legitimised, and we consider what it means to speak with instead of about people. These are, in my opinion, extremely important questions for any researcher, and to be able to explore these issues through the SOLiDi network is just as exciting as it is necessary."

Even though the SOLiDi project has just started only recently, Eline is confident about the expected results. "We are looking to build a platform that provides meaningful insights gained through our research and, as such, we hope to advance the policy of inclusion. If you are interested in SOLiDi's work, be sure to follow us! You can find us on www.solidi.eu, @SOLiDi21 on Twitter and @solidi2021 on Instagram," she concludes.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Supporting Democracy

Photo by Ryan Kopaitich



Analysing populism to understand contemporary democracies

Newcomer in Rotterdam to work on his MSCA project, Ryan Kopaitich aims to use populism as a lens to analyse contemporary politics in democracies. He explains why it is important to develop new tools to comprehend democratic societies.

Ryan Kopaitich, in his own words

I am currently a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow at the Erasmus University, Rotterdam (the Netherlands). More specifically, I'm based in the Erasmus School of Philosophy where I work with the project supervisor Sjoerd van Tuinen.

Born and raised in San Diego, California, I completed my PhD at the University of Bern (Switzerland) in 2018. Between then and the beginning of this project, I was out of academia for reasons outside my control and was able to submit my proposal to the career restart panel, allowing me 3 years of research funding.

With his project "Articulations of Desire: Populism and the Future of Democracy," Ryan approaches populism as the "eruption of a repressed collective desire." He explains what is behind this concept: "Repressed desire is almost a place holder term, or rather, a term for the closest way to describe it that I've thought of yet."

Ryan explains: "I think that institutional democracy needs to exclude political desire in ways that cause it to become expressed as populism."

By developing a concept of 'political desire' and examining the nature of populism, Ryan seeks a new understanding of democratic collectivity that challenges so-called 'dominant liberal models.' In this scope, populism is used as a tool to better comprehend collectivities.

Ryan adds that it is important to analyse societies with tools adapted to their context, which is currently not the case. "Liberal democracy has done a lot, but its conceptual tools are outdated ontologically, ethically, and even semiologically. This is maybe my most contentious point," he explains.



Photo by Day Of Victory Studio on Shutterstock

Developing new conceptual tools

Ryan's project aims to provide useful conceptual tools for further inquiries into political philosophy and democracy. He explains: "I think 'collective desire,' thought politically, can provide a basis, or a start, to rethinking the conceptual metrics by which we measure and conceive of democracy."

Currently, Ryan and his project supervisor are working on an edited collection that examines the relations between populism, desire, and democracy from a variety of perspectives. Our fellow is also refining his book's proposal and finalising the first article of his project.

When asked about the next steps, Ryan says he hopes to publish the edited manuscript of

his dissertation shortly. "I'm approaching this research from multiple angles, all with a view to further understanding how the institutional mechanisms of democracy interact with desire," he concludes.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

News from the MCAA



It's good to meet again

After 2 years of pandemic and online events, MCAA members have the opportunity to meet, face-to-face and online, at the next MCAA General Assembly and General Conference from 26 to 27 March 2022 in Lisbon, Portugal. Mostafa Moonir Shawrav (Chair), Fernanda Bajanca (Vice-Chair) and Gledson Emidio (Board member) are looking forward to seeing you there.

Welcome to the first hybrid MCAA General Assembly and General Conference! With a special focus on 'Sustainability and the Post-Pandemic Workplace', this event will be an opportunity to leave the past 2 years behind and to look forward.

Worth noting that the chosen theme mirrors the [International Year of Basic Sciences for Sustainable Development 2022](#) which aims to shed a light on the links between the basic sciences and the Sustainable Development Goals.

MCAA members' resilience

Looking back at the past challenging years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mostafa is proud of what the MCAA has achieved, despite the difficulties caused by the numerous lockdowns.

"I need to focus on one point - that would be the resilience of the volunteers of MCAA. Even during the pandemic, the members showed their true capabilities - be it organising events on topics affecting researchers or taking part in various policy initiatives. So, working

towards shaping the future of research with the contributions from all our active volunteers is the greatest achievement," says Mostafa.

Finally gathering

Mostafa, Fernanda and Gledson strongly encourage MCAA members to come and celebrate, together, at the General Assembly and General Conference. "This is a unique opportunity to meet MSCA alumni that experienced the same challenges and share a similar profile as yours," they note.

High level speakers have been invited to this very special event. The European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth Research and Innovation, Mariya Gabriel, will be one of the plenary speakers, and several European research and higher education institutions are expected to join as speakers.

Key sessions are in the pipeline, such as:

- Communication & Engagement within Hybrid Working Environment;
- After the MSCA fellowship - What Next?
- The role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in doctoral education;
- Creating Research Environments that foster Mental Wellbeing;
- Transitioning from Research to Careers in Policy Advice;
- How to be an entrepreneurial researcher;
- Science Diplomacy for Sustainable Development;
- New European Research Area (ERA) - a dream or reality?
- Writing an ERC Synergy Grant Proposal;
- Researchers with disabilities: Towards a sustainable workplace;
- Next generation and VR-assisted research, training and networking tools and their application potential.



MARIA CURIE ALUMNI

SUSTAINABILITY AND THE POST-PANDEMIC WORKPLACE

MCAA ANNUAL CONFERENCE & GENERAL ASSEMBLY

LISBON MARCH 26-27, 2022
HYBRID EVENT

#MCAACONF2022

Onsite and online networking

During the sessions, participants will have the opportunity to interact with the speakers. What's more, chat rooms will be made available outside the sessions, both collective and private. Sponsors and stakeholders will have the possibility to exhibit their projects via booths.

Exciting career development activities will take place, like free professional LinkedIn photo shoots!

The three organisers Mostafa, Fernanda and Gledson, highlight however the pitfalls related to the organisation of such an event. "Organising an event during a pandemic, without being able to foresee how the situation will look months ahead is a big obstacle. Measures for guaranteeing the security on site in this situation require a larger budget and organisation. Also, guaranteeing high level speakers is not as easy when the people are reluctant to travel. The whole hybrid event organisation is a big challenge, but a worthwhile one, as it also opens a lot of opportunities for future events," they explain.

The MCAA GA taskforce is happy to announce that participants will spend plenty of time together. "We have increased the interval in between sessions and the slots for networking," they say.

Ensuring safety

All efforts have been made to guarantee a safe space. A complete vaccination scheme has been required to all onsite attendees, with testing every 24 hours, as well as mandatory use of FFP2 masks. Tests and masks will be provided at the event.

The organisers note that online attendees will also have opportunities to digitally network.

According to Mostafa, Fernanda and Gledson, MCAA members shouldn't miss

this opportunity to catch up at the event and online.

"We are working to provide a safe space for networking and a welcoming environment for people to learn and exchange ideas. We hope our attendees will leave the conference feeling energised with great ideas, and the good feeling that they helped us to make our most sustainable conference ever," they conclude.

[Read more about the 2022 MCAA Annual Conference and General Assembly.](#)

[Register for the Annual Conference](#)

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

News from
the Chapters



Poland Chapter – Future networking opportunities with COFUND recipients

We caught up with Michael Nones, Chair of the Poland Chapter since September 2021. We discussed with him his plans for the Chapter and the perspectives of a potentially growing membership thanks to future COFUND recipients.



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Michael Nones, in his own words

I am currently an associate professor at the Institute of Geophysics PAS, in Warsaw. Here my research focuses on river hydro-morphodynamics, integrating numerical modelling with monitoring, mainly via remote sensing.

I arrived in Poland in 2018, after many years of postdoc spent between Italy (where I was born) and Germany. I have been involved with MCAA since 2014, as I was an early-stage researcher (ESR) in an Innovative Training Network (ITN), and worked in a private engineering company in Germany, mostly dealing with river restoration and connected legislation.

Photo by Michael Nones



before I became the Chair, and even more after having accepted the position," he explains.

Connections and membership

Now that Michael is the Chair of the Poland Chapter, he aims to support and promote the presence of MCAA members in Poland, and also to attract researchers from abroad, offering them help and support. "I am trying to establish connections with scientific and funding agencies like the National Science Centre (NCN) and the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA)," adds Michael.

Currently, the Chapter has 146 members, but the chair hopes to increase this number. "Two COFUND programmes were recently financed in Poland and the calls for applicants are ongoing. Within these two programmes, it is planned to recruit 170 scientists between 2022 and 2023. We are in touch with the respective programme coordinators to provide these fellows with all the information to join the MCAA and our Chapter in particular," he explains.

Hangouts and the Habilitation Workshop

Even though Michael has only been the Chair of the Poland Chapter since September 2021, he has already organised a few activities for members of the Chapter, like hangouts. Those events usually take place every 7th of the month, in a pub in Warsaw, to discuss the situation of the Poland Chapter, as well as science and society in Poland in general. "These informal meetings are a good opportunity for networking and planning future activities," he says.

Michael also organised the annual meeting in January 2022 and the Habilitation Workshop. For our Alumnus, having such an event taking place was paramount. "This year we decided to organise the Habilitation Workshop as the legislation changed recently in Poland, and many young researchers are still struggling

Michael was living in Germany when he started his journey with the MCAA. Involved in the first steps of the Germany Chapter, our alumnus was keen in pursuing a good collaboration with the Association.

Trustful relationships between MCAA members

After having moved to Warsaw, he attended several of Poland Chapter's hangouts, as well as the annual meeting in 2019. He also cultivated solid relationships with some of the MCAA members - especially the previous Chair of the Chapter, Rohan Soman.

"Networks like MCAA are very useful at any career stage. A major reason for my decision to apply to be the Chair of the Chapter was because I knew and trusted the people already involved in the Chapter. They helped me a lot

to understand the requirements to further develop their careers.”

Michael considers this event as a success, because 50 people attended, the majority not being MCAA members. “All the presentations were really well received. The first two speakers (Hubert Izdebski and Grzegorz Węgrzyn) discussed what researchers should and should not do to obtain their habilitation, while the third speaker (Katarzyna Pietruszyńska) presented the NAWA programme for mobility, as this is a major point in the new habilitation procedure,” he adds.

Looking forward

In the current pandemic context, Michael highlights the difficulties of chairing a Chapter whose ‘raison d’être’ is mainly based on offline connections. However, he is hopeful that the Chapter will carry on a significant number of activities.

“We are planning activities in the next months, such as co-organisation of conferences or roundtables, but the majority will be online, as the pandemic is still hitting hard in Poland. We are also involved in the MCAA Around the World webinar series, as the Poland Chapter will hold an event in June, focusing on engaging the young generations in science,” says Michael.

The Chair strongly encourages potential members to join the Chapter. “We are offering support for incoming and permanent researchers, and we would like to provide even more opportunities to meet and exchange knowledge to benefit society,” he concludes.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team



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News from the Chapters



Western Balkans Chapter – chairing six countries

We met Ornela Bardhi, the new Chair of the Western Balkans Chapter. She shared with us past and upcoming activities, including an exciting Wikipedia edit-a-thon. She is looking forward to organising more physical meetings, if the current sanitary COVID measures allow it.

Ornela Bardhi, in her own words

I recently moved back to my home country, Albania, to be part of a leadership fellowship called LEAD Albania where, besides training in leadership skills, I work as a scientific advisor to the Minister at the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Albania.

Previously, I was a Marie Curie PhD fellow where I focused on the application of artificial intelligence in medicine, specifically in cancer, as part of the CATCH ITN project. During this period, I worked closely with patients to understand their cancer journey, identify the factors influencing these journeys, and do survival predictions. I also worked on object recognition, detecting colorectal polyps using colonoscopy images and videos before they turn into colorectal cancer. My work was primarily in Spain, but I had to conduct part of my research in Finland, Ireland and the US.

Before my PhD, I was part of the joint Erasmus+ MSc. programme in Pervasive Computing and Communication for Sustainable Development in France, Finland, Russia, and Sweden.

During my Masters, I founded and co-founded two start-ups in Sweden and Finland, respectively. I finished my BEng. in computer engineering in Albania and the UK.

I joined MCAA the same month I started my PhD, and since then I have been an active member. I am one of the founding members of the Western Balkans Chapter (WBC) and I am the current Chair of the Chapter. I have organised events to promote scientific research, MSCA grants, and MCAA in Albania and abroad.

I have been involved with the EU R&I Days, European Researchers Night, Science is Wonderful, and MSCA Falling Walls Lab.

Picture a Chapter that incorporates six countries, with the majority of the members outside the region: this is how Ornela perceives the Western Balkans Chapter she is currently chairing.

Praising the work done by the previous Chair

Initially representing Albania within the Chapter, Ornela decided to take up the challenge of becoming the Chair, following the previous Chair's example. Radenka Krsmanović Whiffen, was a source of inspiration: "Our founding Chair did an

amazing job leading the Chapter. She has been a role model in this regard. So, I thought why not try it. I had full support from the other board members as well. Without their support, I do not think I would have done it," she reflects.

Encouraging synergies

Ornela has ambitious plans for the Chapters. The Board is currently working hard to attract more members and to connect them. It has already organised networking events, but wishes to encourage researchers from different countries in the Western Balkans to



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collaborate among themselves and with the EU institutions as well.

"We are working towards establishing partnerships with science policy stakeholders in the region. We want to contribute to bringing the knowledge of the Western Balkan diaspora back to the region," notes Ornela.

The Chapter has 109 members, with most of its members living outside the region. "We now have representatives for North Macedonia (Ivo Djidrovski) and Kosovo (Besa Emini) on our board. We are growing every day. The target is to have all MSCA fellows and alumni from and in the region joining the Chapter," says Ornela.

Hybrid and online activities

Our newly elected Chair has started her mandate with a busy agenda, with the organisation of an information session event in North Macedonia, the first one in the country, where participants discussed the MCAA Western Balkans Chapter and MSCA grants.

Ornela also refers to a meeting with the PhD Fellows of NOWELTIES in Serbia about entrepreneurship, as another career path after a PhD: "The event was hybrid. We presented the Chapter and answered any questions the fellows had regarding joining the Chapter, our vision, activities, etc., and the two invited speakers, Ivo Djidrovski and Generoso Ianniciello talked about their entrepreneurship experiences after the PhD," she outlines.

Also worth noting is the Wikipedia edit-a-thon that took place during the month of August 2021, which enabled addition of five new articles, editing of six articles, and addition of relevant references to the more-than-famous collaborative platform. "We are very proud to have around 400 better-informed viewers. We are considering having another Wikipedia edit-a-thon again. We welcome everyone to

join us when we launch it," says Ornela with enthusiasm.

The Chair adds that like many other Chapters, most of the activities became digital during the past 2 years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The large variety of countries in the Chapter added another challenge. "We had to follow every countries' rules and regulations regarding COVID-19," explains the Chair.

Post-COVID plans

She however looks forward to the next MCAA hybrid events, such as the MCAA Conference and General Assembly in Lisbon. "I hope we will have more in-person events. I think everyone is tired of online webinars. But we will see how the MCAA Conference will go and prepare accordingly," she adds.

Moreover, Ornela was happy about the outcomes of a recent collaboration: "As part of the MCAA Around the World webinar series, a collaboration between the Communications Working Group and the chapter, we organised a webinar on the 11th of February about post PhD careers where four speakers talked about their different career journeys," she says.

Ornela also mentions the meeting with researchers who became mothers recently, entitled 'The tough bridge: motherhood and science' which took place on 8 March. Finally, Ornela adds that "the main plan is to have at least one in-person event for the Chapter, if COVID-19 permits."

The Chair strongly encourages MCAA members to join the Chapter. "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together," she concludes.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

MSCA Anniversary – fellows remember



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Working on a dream research project

On 29 November 2021 we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. On this special occasion, we reached out to fellows to ask how the MSCA has benefitted their careers. For Cihan Dizdaroglu, the MSCA adventure was a unique opportunity and freedom to devote time to research.

Cihan Dizdaroglu, in his own words

I am an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Baskent University, Ankara, Turkey. I am a Turkish scholar interested in critical peace and conflict studies, youth, peacebuilding, critical security studies and Turkish foreign policy, with a focus on Turkish-Greek relations and Cyprus.

Cihan embarked on his MSCA journey thanks to his supervisor and mentor Sinem Akgul Acikmese, a professor of International Relations. It all started when he was just about to complete his PhD at the Kadir Has University in Turkey.

The success of a 'Dream Team'

For Cihan, the success of his application is due to wonderful teamwork. "I am thankful to Akgul Acikmese and several of my colleagues

who had the privilege of being MSCA fellows as well. They took the time to read my proposal, and to share their valuable feedback with me. The excellent match between my research topic and the research interests of my supervisors (Alpaslan Ozerdem and Bahar Baser Ozturk) helped me realise my dream project," explains Cihan.

But challenges have also been part of the journey. For instance, his application received positive feedback 'only' at the third round of

review by the supervisor and host institution. Cihan joined his research team at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, in the United Kingdom, in October 2018. That's when he started working on his project dedicated to 'the Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: The Cyprus Case (YOUPEACEBUILDER)'.

Dedicating time to research only

Focusing on the Cypriot youth, Cihan's project aimed to foster debate among academics, policy experts, civil society organisations and international third-party actors.

For him, winning an MSCA gave him the opportunity to dedicate his time to research only. "During my early career, I worked both in academia and civil society and did not have the chance to solely focus on my academic research. The MSCA fellowship thus allowed me to allocate all my time to focus on my research, to have intense training and to improve my skills. At the end of the day, I got more than I expected from the fellowship," he explains.

Cihan enjoyed each moment of his fellowship even though he had to spend eight months under lockdown, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "I can honestly argue that my MSCA fellowship was like a dream journey. Throughout this journey, I was able to focus on my research, travelled numerous countries, deepened my knowledge, lived in a new country, became acquainted with British bureaucracy, spent a couple of months in Cyprus for my fieldwork, and met wonderful people. I still share my reflections with my students, colleagues and friends, as well as continue to benefit from my research outcomes," he says.

According to Cihan, the training and knowledge he acquired through the MSCA fellowship opened up new opportunities, networks and roles. "I had the chance to build new academic networks that resulted in new



Photo by Cihan Dizdaroglu

publications and collaborations, to assume roles as contributor and advisory Board member on various research projects, to gain teaching experience in the UK, to act as mentor for both early-stage researchers and potential MSCA fellows, and finally to secure an academic position in my country," he adds.

Cihan also highlights the freedom that the Action procures. "The MSCA fellowship is a unique opportunity, and it provides a real freedom for the researcher to focus on their dream research project. While the application process might seem complicated, it's worth it. Never give up from your ideas that you truly believe in," he says.

Sharing memories

Back in Turkey, after having completed his MSCA fellowship, Cihan started work in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the Baskent University, Ankara, as an assistant professor. "Thanks to the MSCA fellowship, I have so many memories and experiences to share with my students," he concludes.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

MSCA Anniversary – fellows remember

Growing as a mature researcher

On 29 November 2021 we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. On this special occasion, we met fellows to ask how the MSCA benefitted their careers. For Tanja Vuckovic Juros, it was a turning point. Guess what she's doing now?

Tanja Vuckovic Juros, in her own words

I am a Croatian sociologist whose work is most frequently focused on the intersections between institutional frameworks, normative orders, and the active meaning-making of individuals.

I earned my PhD in Sociology from Indiana University Bloomington, US. Before receiving my MSCA Individual Fellowship, I worked briefly at the University of Rijeka and then, for several years, at the University of Zagreb, in Croatia.

Growing and learning

Considering the advice and tips she received at the workshop, Tanja's decision to apply for an Individual Fellowship in 2015 was an easy one. She presented a project on same-sex families of Central and Eastern European lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) migrants in Belgium (and later expanded to the Netherlands), and on the perceptions and reception of these families in different socio-institutional contexts. Two years later,



Photo by Tanja Vuckovic Juros

she successfully started working on it at the Université Catholique de Louvain, in Belgium.

Looking back on her experience, Tanja feels grateful to have had this opportunity. "My MSCA experience gave me the means to push myself and also to push my research where it wouldn't have gone without it," she says.



Photo by Sergey Nivens on Shutterstock

conference turned out as I hoped it would. I learned a lot, both about organising and about state-of-the-art from the scholars I admired, and most importantly, this is the moment where I started to feel as if I belonged,” she says with enthusiasm.

Researchers should take up the challenge

Tanja says that all researchers should apply for an MSCA fellowship. She highlights the multiple aspects to consider before stepping up. “This is a short-time mobility scheme and, as such, involves many real-life and administrative challenges, especially for researchers with children or family obligations. Therefore, in seeking out potential host institutions, it’s important to openly discuss the issue of both academic and practical support. Keep this in mind, but still go for it,” she explains.

Tanja was also happy to share with us more good news. She’s about to embark on a new MSCA-IF adventure! “I’m back to Croatia, at the University of Zagreb, and I am just preparing to start fieldwork on my new project, *Sense AGENDa*, which examines how ordinary people talk about gender and sexuality in different socio-institutional contexts of Croatia and Belgium,” she says.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

A turning point

The MSCA experience was also a turning point in Tanja’s career. “This experience certainly was transformative. I see it as a period that gave me tools to grow into a mature researcher, funds to do innovative research I wouldn’t be able to do otherwise, and the confidence to step outside my comfort zone, including reaching out to other researchers in my field and also publishing in journals to which I previously might not have dared to send my work,” she explains.

She remembers precisely the moment that brought her to consider her MSCA experience as a springboard for her career. “If there is one moment I always think of as a turning point, this is the first international conference I organised, mid-fellowship. Starting out relatively unknown in the field, a junior researcher coming from a small academic community, the title of ‘MSCA Individual Fellowship’ was what gave me the confidence I needed to plan this conference in a rather ambitious way. Small hiccups aside, the

Research

Flying without shaking

Who has never experienced a delayed flight because of a sudden thunderstorm on the way to the plane? Those extreme and localised phenomena are expected to rise with climate change, but the good news is that scientists are currently working to improve the predictions of these episodes. We met Riccardo Biondi to find out more.

Riccardo Biondi, in his own words

I have a Master's degree in electronic engineering and a PhD in atmospheric physics. I have always worked in remote sensing of the atmosphere focusing on extreme atmospheric events such as thunderstorms, tropical cyclones and volcanic eruptions.

Mobility characterised my career since I started working as a fellow at the university where I got my Masters. Then I moved to the European Space Agency doing less science and more managerial work. Deciding to get a PhD, I moved to the Danish Technical University and then back to Italy working for the UNESCO International Centre for Theoretical Physics.

At this stage, I got my MSCA grant at the Wegener Center for Climate and Global Change - University of Graz (Austria), and an AXA Research Fund grant at the Italian National Research Council.

In 2018, I moved to the University of Padova (Italy) where I'm currently working at the moment.

I was the founder and Chair of the Marie Curie Alumni Association Austrian Chapter, and co-founder of the Italian Chapter and the current Chair.

So far, I have been principal investigator of five European and two national projects.



Photo by Riccardo Biondi

Have you ever experienced severe turbulence on an airplane? This can be very traumatic. Very often, this turbulence is caused by severe thunderstorms.

Weather is indeed the cause of about one fourth of en-route air traffic delays and half of airport traffic delays. "With climate change on the rise, the frequency of storms, winds and rainfall are increasing and they become more intense with a larger expected impact on aviation," explains Riccardo Biondi.

Our Alumnus mentions other sources of disturbances for planes like fire smokes, desert dust, volcanic ash or sulphur dioxide (SO₂) plumes. "They are not as frequent as severe weather but the effect can be extremely disruptive, because they drastically reduce visibility and they can damage the aircraft engines," he adds.

Solar activity can also affect airplanes' trajectory. "It can disrupt the radio/satellite communication and degrade the navigation systems (GNSS and magnetic compasses)," notes Riccardo.

To help the aviation sector to face all these challenges, Riccardo has been working for the [SINOPTICA project](#), as Principal Investigator and Work Package Leader.

Predicting severe weather phenomena

Standing for 'Satellite-borne and IN-situ Observations to Predict The Initiation of Convection for ATM', the SINOPTICA project aimed to develop a short-term forecasting system (called nowcasting) allowing to predict severe thunderstorms. Thanks to this technology, air traffic managers should be able to adjust the flight trajectories and to ensure the planes avoid critical zones.

"The main objective of SINOPTICA is to predict severe weather, for the first time merging a radar-based nowcasting algorithm in synergy with a very high resolution model assimilating

GNSS, lightnings, in situ weather stations' data to achieve the needed performance in forecasting severe convection," explains Riccardo.

Our Alumnus notes some challenges related to the execution of this project. "Scientists must clearly understand the needs of the air traffic managers/controllers and the air traffic managers/controllers must understand the capabilities of the actual science. For this reason, several preliminary meetings were necessary to synchronise the actions, to understand each other and to prepare a final product that would be scientifically feasible and practically usable," he says.

The project's scientists worked on case studies concentrating on northern Italy, which is one of the most affected areas by extreme weather events in Europe. "One of these case studies focused on the Milano Malpensa airport, where in the last decade, air traffic was halted due to hail storms. Our algorithm was able to nowcast with high accuracy the [hail storm](#) that happened on 13 July 2021 and which badly damaged the Boeing 777-300 EK205 travelling from Milano to New York," explains Riccardo.



Photo by Stefano Garau on Shutterstock

Developing algorithms

His alumnus journey doesn't stop with SINOPTICA, as he is also working for ALARM, a project developing a prototype global multi-hazard monitoring and an Early Warning System.

Standing for 'multi-hAzard monitoring and earLy wARning systeM', the ALARM project aims to monitor phenomena like volcanic ash and SO₂, dust clouds from sandstorms, smoke from forest fire, severe weather or space weather, by facilitating the exchange of information between the relevant stakeholders.

Working as the principal investigator and also work package leader within this project, Riccardo is developing a nowcasting algorithm for severe weather. "We are a team of four scientists working on it and we are developing algorithms based on machine learning techniques able to provide high performances in extreme weather predictions," says Riccardo.

Our Alumnus highlights that the collection of meteorological data has been challenging, as it involved several institutes with different rules and different data formats. What's more, the COVID-19 pandemic caused the cancellation of a campaign aiming at implementation of measurements in an international airport.

Despite these challenges, the project can already boast some great results, like the [Early Warning System](#) which collects outcomes and allows to visualise all the possible volcanic events threatening aviation safety. The website also intends to include weather events.

Riccardo is happy to have conducted research on both projects. "I like projects in which the research can be combined with 'real world' problems. I like to see how the research can be applied to daily life, and to keep in touch

with different audiences to understand their perception of my work as a scientist. These two projects together gave me the possibility of getting these feelings," he reflects.

Training the future generation

Riccardo is also spreading his knowledge, as in 2015 he founded the training school 'Convective and Volcanic Clouds (CVC) detection, monitoring and modeling' addressed to young scientists, with the objective of training future generations.

He could happily involve the school in both projects. "The collaboration between the CVC school and the two projects was beneficial for both parties, the school was enriched with the expertise coming from the projects, and the projects got a relevant occasion to disseminate the results," he says.

To him, all this work involved was worth it. "Today I can say that it was a good vision, the school has been organised annually, it was well recognised by the scientific community receiving the support of the European Geosciences Union and other scientific and governmental entities and so far it trained almost 200 young scientists coming from all the continents," he adds.

We wish him and the school a lot of success to make our future airplanes' trips as smooth as possible!

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Research

How renewable energies can improve labour sustainability

MCAA member Paolo Tomassetti discusses his GRETA project about the labour-environment nexus.

The project GRETA (Ground-breaking Research on Employment and Environmental Transitions Ahead) investigates labour law and industrial relations implications of the energy transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. By combining a variety of legal approaches and methods, this Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action contributes to advancement and integration of the existing research frontier on labour and environmental sustainability. It also helps to breach silos approaches to sustainable development and foster policies to contrast global warming and climate change.



Photo by Paolo Tomassetti

Who am I?

My name is Paolo Tomassetti, I am a 37-year-old Italian labour law researcher, living between Aix-en-Provence (France) and Bergamo (Italy) with my partner Lisa and our 3-year-old daughter Anna. I was raised in Rome, the capital of Italy, a country that has given birth to, among others, Leonardo da Vinci. Leonardo was a systems thinker. He believed the key to understanding the world was in unfolding the hidden connections between phenomena. This is precisely the kind of holistic approach that inspires my research on labour and environmental sustainability, which is currently funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions.

Project overview

The GRETA project focuses on the intersection between two normative systems: labour law and environmental law. It draws on novel literature that sees energy sources as a core analytical referent. The project investigates, on the one hand, how and why different energy paradigms contribute to shaping labour law and trade unions' ways of being. On the other hand, it examines how and why labour sustainability varies greatly depending on the possibility of socialising the political and economic power of energy sources and natural resources.

I am carrying out my fellowship at the Centre de droit social of the Aix-Marseille



Photo by Proxima Studio on Shutterstock

University (France), under the supervision of Alexis Bugada. My project benefits from the cooperation with the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), where I am an associate researcher and where I will spend my secondment.

The project so far

Preliminary results of the GRETA project show that different energy paradigms and their political economies have differently affected the quality of working conditions over time. During my research I was able to identify several energy and institutional trajectories.

The possibility of labour control over the energy flux of coal has favoured the development of both democratic institutions and the welfare state in Western jurisdictions. On the contrary, 'petro-capitalism' has contributed to dismantling labour rights as

well as to the crisis of classical labour law and industrial relations institutions. Oil is a highly capital-intensive resource, transported around the globe and far from the sites where work takes place. It has become the energy of globalisation, weakening human ability to interfere with economic activities. Without social and political control over oil's value chain, the redistribution of economic growth stimulated by petroleum and its by-product synthetic goods has been uneven.

In contrast to fossil fuels, solar power and its derivative renewable energies could help the transition from an extractive economic model to one that is generative and authentically participatory. By re-socialising the political and economic power of energy, renewables might be able to better serve human welfare, to re-empower workers and unions capability to advance sustainable working conditions. The transition away from fossil fuels, therefore, is not to be seen as a societal goal beyond the ontology of labour law and industrial relations. It is inherently consistent with the interest of workers and organised labour.

How being part of an MSCA impacts me

This MSCA fellowship has offered me a unique opportunity to concentrate full-time on my research and interact with the leading experts in my field and other disciplines. Thanks to the cooperation with my supervisor and with the ETUI, my fellowship is truly contributing to sharpen my critical thinking and freedom of thought. I am fortunate to spend my fellowship in Aix-en-Provence, a city full of culture and tradition, located in one of the most charming areas of southern France. This environment is definitely inspiring my research while enriching me culturally.

Paolo Tomassetti

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Research

The superpower of beaches and forests on mental health

If you are currently organising your next summer holidays and hesitating between renting a cottage in Sussex or spending some time in the apartment of a friend in Santorini, keep reading! Claudia Damiano, MSCA Fellow working on the PSYNAT project, is investigating whether spending time in the countryside or on the coast is best for our mental health.



Photo by Claudia Damiano

Claudia Damiano, in her own words

I am Canadian. I obtained my PhD in psychology at the University of Toronto in 2019. Before that, I completed a Masters in psychology (also from University of Toronto) in 2015, and a Bachelor of Arts and Science, majoring in cognitive science, at McGill University in 2014. I have been a postdoctoral researcher at KU Leuven since autumn 2019. My main area of research is at the junction of perception and cognition (for example, in broad terms, how does what we see influence how we behave?). More specifically, I focus on studying the visual features (e.g., symmetry, complexity) that contribute to the aesthetic pleasure of natural scenes.

Have you ever wondered why it is so pleasant to walk barefoot in the grass, surrounded by trees and singing birds? Why do we feel fully recharged when we are by the sea, smelling the marine air along the coastline and gazing at the rolling waves? Scientists can explain what happens in our brain when we are close to nature.



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Why it feels good to spend time out of town

A first theory, called the 'Attention Restoration Theory,' suggests that nature has an influence on the two forms of human attention: bottom-up and top-down attention. Bottom-up attention is automatic and driven by the physical features of the environment (noticing a flickering light, for example), whereas top-down attention is a controlled form of attention (choosing to deliberately ignore the flickering light, for example). According to this theory, nature is able to capture bottom-up attention moderately. "Natural scenes trigger a form of attention that is undemanding and effortless, thus enabling people to rest and restore the more effortful forms of attention, resulting in a positive experience," explains Claudia.

The second theory, the 'Stress Reduction Theory,' suggests that nature reduces our stress levels, allowing us to restore attentional resources and to boost our mood. "According to the Stress Reduction Theory, people prefer natural scenes with views of food, water and shelter, and feel calm in such environments, because those were the safest environments in which humans evolved," says Claudia. Conversely, she suggests that urban environments lead to more stress because they are relatively new, meaning that we still need to properly adapt to them.

Beaches versus forests

The PSYNAT project aims to further explore this bond between human wellbeing and nature. As the principal investigator of the project, Claudia expects that the project

will help determine what types of natural environments are most beneficial to emotional wellbeing. In other words, do forests and beaches have the same 'healing properties'? And if so, why?

Using virtual reality as an immersive experience

To reach the project's goals, virtual reality (VR) will be used to create an immersive experience for the participants of the study, who will explore 360-degree videos of real-world environments, such as beaches, forests, lakes or waterfalls.

According to our interviewee, this technique is perfect for measuring the behaviours and the outcomes of human interaction with nature. "We will always compare the outcomes of people exploring nature to those of people exploring urban environments."

Before and after the immersive VR experience, participants will perform a series of tasks on the computer to measure their attention, working memory, and mood.

"During the VR experience, we will use the eye tracker in the VR headset, as well as a portable electroencephalography (EEG) headband, to record where participants look within the scene and what their brain activity is like. Eye tracking measurements will tell us how participants explore different types of scenes and what they pay attention to," explains Claudia.

The project foresees that EEG measurements will unveil how 'relaxed' a participant feels in different environments.

The consequences of lockdowns and isolation on mental health

The PSYNAT project also aims to focus on people who don't have the opportunity to live close to green spaces or to take regular breaks in the countryside. With the many

lockdowns over the past 2 years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant number of people have found themselves 'trapped' in urban environments and tiny apartments. This situation can lead to very dire consequences for human mental health.

Claudia explains how she and the team of scientists will measure the long-term effects of this type of situation. "We decided to use deep convolutional neural networks (DCNNs), which are based on the connective architecture of the human brain, to study the potential impact of not seeing nature for long periods of time. To do this, we will use a pre-trained DCNN that is trained to predict aesthetic pleasure labels from photographs of scenes, and we will retrain it by only showing it images of urban scenes," she says.

For Claudia, the PSYNAT journey has just started. "Data collection is about to begin, so we will have some results soon."

Meanwhile, we can look forward to learning whether we should book our next holidays at the beach or in the countryside to best recharge our batteries!

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Career

Enhancing researchers' wellbeing



Photo by Gábor Kismihók

Gábor Kismihók is the Chair of the ReMO COST Action network 'Researcher Mental Health.' He tells us what the network is doing to improve researchers' mental health within academia.

Gábor Kismihók, in his own words

Since I obtained my summa cum laude PhD in management sciences (information management) in 2012, I have been concentrating my research efforts on the multi-disciplinary area of matching processes between education, the labour market, and individuals.

I am an active member of the Marie Curie Alumni Association and chair the Career Development Working Group.

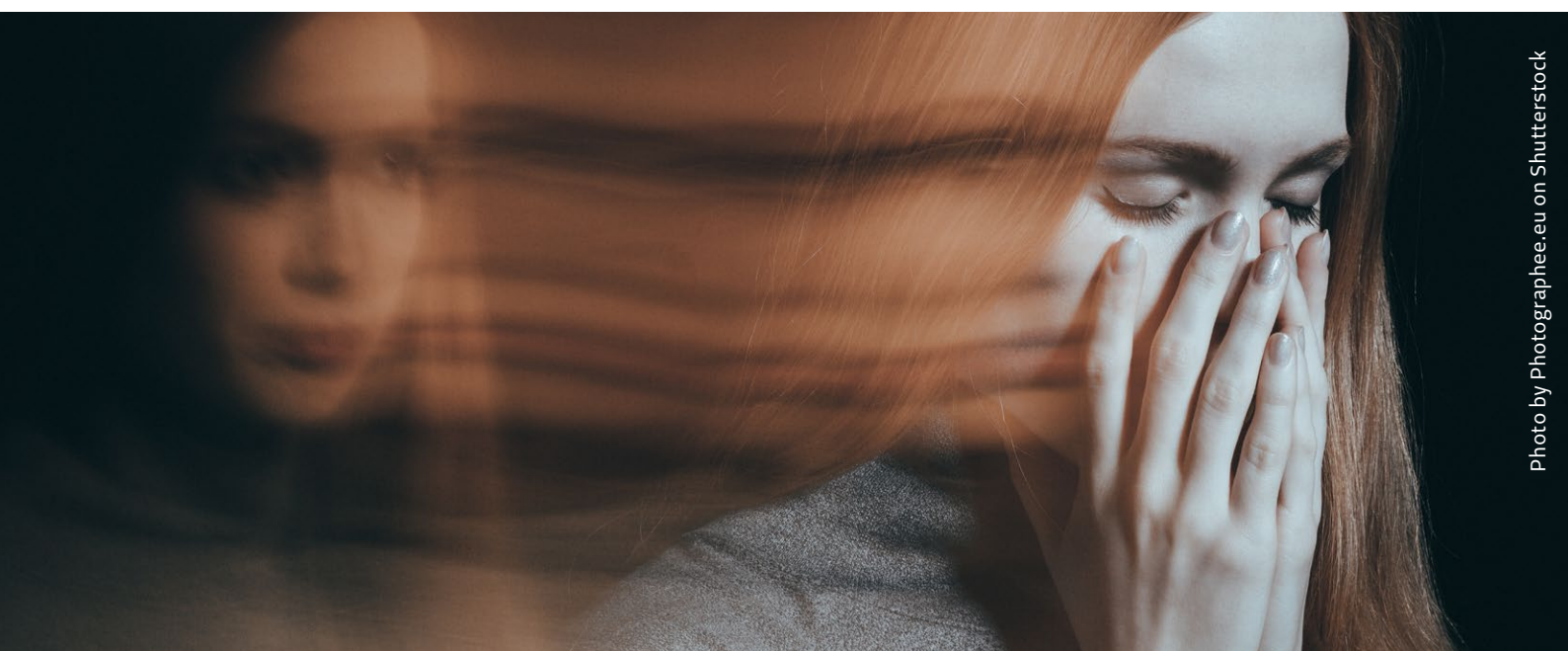


Photo by Photographee.eu on Shutterstock

With important workloads, difficulties of maintaining a balance between professional and personal life and temporary contracts, researchers face numerous challenges. And their mental health can suffer from this situation.

Researchers impacted by mental health issues

For Gábor, mental health issues are frequent among researchers. "Oftentimes the research environment is not designed to take care of the wellbeing of the researchers. This can be fuelled by a number of factors like poor communication among team members or insufficient supervision," he explains.

According to the results of a survey conducted in the United Kingdom (between April 2018 and November 2019), which was published on the 9th December 2021 in Humanities & Social Sciences Communications journal, 71 % of usual students and 62 % of working professionals had experienced signs of depression. What's more, 74 % of usual students and 62% of working professionals reported some level of anxiety.

Reinventing the academic working environment

To tackle mental health issues among researchers, the European Cooperation in Science in Science and Technology (COST) programme is funding the [ReMO COST Action CA19117: Researcher Mental Health](#) with the support of the Horizon 2020 Programme. Gábor is currently chairing the network.

This initiative focuses on the causes of workplace wellbeing and mental health to be refined with contextual specifics to develop tailored, effective, and efficient prevention and action programmes.

Among different initiatives already taken by the network, a [Manifesto](#) was published in October 2021 calling all stakeholders

part of the research 'ecosystem' to engage in developing policies aiming to monitor, improve, and maintain wellbeing and mental health in the research environment.

Gábor adds that the ReMO COST Action contributes to diverse initiatives, such as the [OSCAR project](#), which focuses on teaching mental wellbeing and career development skills of researchers with the help of Artificial Intelligence. "We have also been contributing to the development of new training for sustainable research careers via the [OEduverse](#) consortium, including topics in open science, mental health and communication skills," he explains.

Gábor is not the only MCAA member active within this network. Stéphanie Gauttier is the Vice-Chair of ReMO COST. The core team of the network comprises many other MCAA members including Darragh McCashin, Murat Güneş, Maria Bostenaru Dan, Radenka Krsmanović Whiffen and Brian Cahill.

"We want to contribute to the reinvention of the academic working environment," concludes Gábor.

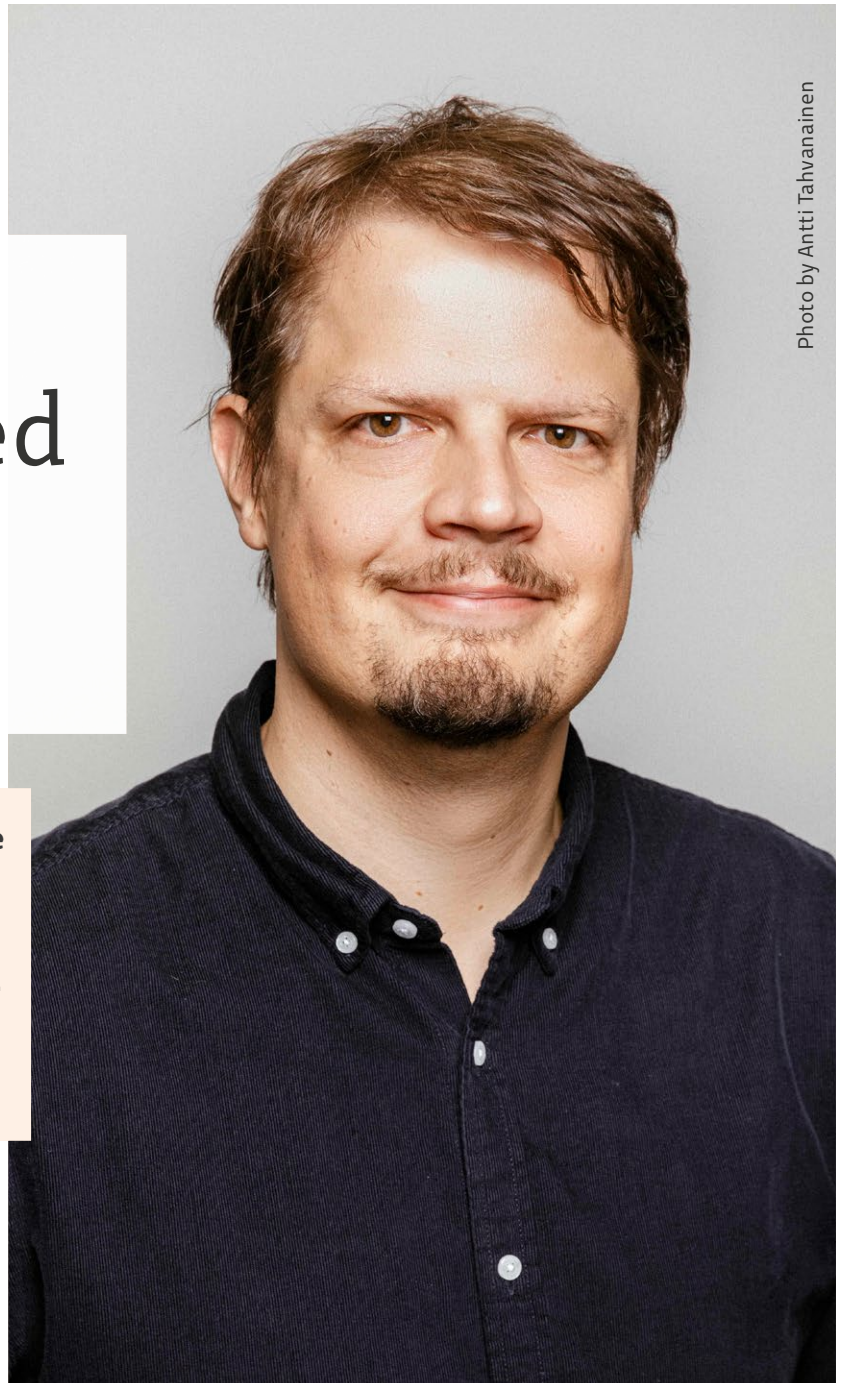
[Interested? Learn more about the ReMO COST Action network.](#)

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Career

Tackling gender-based violence in academia

Gender-based violence is everywhere in our societies and the world of academia is no exception. We met Antti Tahvanainen and Sofia Strid who are conducting surveys to better measure this phenomenon among researchers, to be able to develop tools to combat it.



Antti Tahvanainen, in his own words

I am the project manager for project UniSAFE at the European Science Foundation (ESF), and my background is a somewhat mixed heritage of research, and management of research. In UniSAFE and other projects, like ACCTING and RESISTIRÉ, I specialise in ethics and data management issues. This is largely as a result of having moved from working in government research departments to getting a PhD in history, and on to science management.

My PhD is from the University of Helsinki, Finland, which is also my country of origin. However, I did my research in Strasbourg, with research spells at University College London, Warburg Institute, and the European University Institute.

Sofia Strid, in her own words

I'm a social science researcher with a disciplinary background in philosophy, political science, gender studies, and sociology. I'm an associate professor in gender studies and senior lecturer in sociology, with previous positions as lecturer and researcher in five disciplines in four countries; Austria, Belgium, Sweden, and the UK, and I'm the director of the Centre for Violence Studies at Örebro University in Sweden.

My research profile is international, multi disciplinary and collaborative, and I engage in the supervision of PhD students and postdoctoral students. I'm currently leading a Swedish Research Council funded project on violence regimes, a Swedish prevalence study



Photo by Sofia Strid

on men's violence against women, and I am the partner in a research project on so-called 'sugardating' in Sweden. I work with Antti with the scientific coordination of the EU H2020 projects UniSAFE, RESISTIRÉ and ACCTING.

Gender-based violence can be defined as a global social, political and economic problem connected to power, health, capital and crime.

"In following the Istanbul Convention, the United Nations and the European Union's definitions, we define gender-based violence as an expression of power and structural dominance, rather than as an expression of the loss of power and individual marginalisation. Gender-based violence is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality," explain Antti and Sofia.

Gender-based violence can have multiple expressions, such as physical, sexual, economic, psychological, and online forms of violence, violations, as well as gender and sexual harassment.

Gender-based violence in academia

According to both our interviewees, early-career stage scholars on temporary or visiting contracts may be particularly vulnerable to these forms of violence, especially when

they are on mobility schemes and without a social network in the country where they are temporarily working.

"We are particularly interested in the direct or indirect experiences of international postdoctoral researchers on temporary contracts," they note.

They highlight that not handling gender-based violence can have bad consequences. "Gender-based violence decreases the personal health and wellbeing of managers, employees and students; hinders research and educational (teaching/learning) performance, productivity, careers and career development; lowers the quality of the work environment and working conditions; and affects the excellence of research [and] teaching," they explain.

Gathering data

In this context, the Horizon Europe UniSAFE project aims to provide up-to-date and reliable data on gender-based violence,

including emerging forms of violence, in universities and research performing organisations. "These results will then be translated into recommendations and a toolbox for universities and research organisations intent on eradicating it," add Antti and Sofia.

Surveys are currently being conducted in the framework of the UniSAFE project until April 2022.

"Our call for interviews is open to researchers all over Europe, including those who don't work or study in the participating organisations, but nevertheless wish to share their experience. For this qualitative data-gathering, we are particularly interested in recruiting researchers from groups more at risk of experience in gender-based violence," explain our interviewees.

Antti and Sofia are confident that the results of the surveys will benefit research performances. They expect to develop sufficient knowledge and tools to contribute to a reduction of gender-based violence in academia.

"These results will be translated into policy recommendations and a toolbox for universities and research organisations to use to combat gender-based violence," they conclude.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Learn more about the UniSAFE project

To provide measurable evidence on the prevalence of gender-based violence, UniSAFE is coordinating a survey among 46 universities and research organisations in a total of 15 European countries, including the Marie Curie Alumni Association. Alongside this large-scale survey, the project is conducting a series of online interviews with researchers all over Europe who have experienced or witnessed GBV, particularly in one of the following situations:

- at an early-career stage (including PhD students);
- on a non-permanent contract in a university or a research organisation;
- as a mobile researcher visiting a university or research organisation abroad, including Marie Curie fellows.

**Gender-based violence
in universities is a reality.
Help measure
its evidence.**



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Accessibility Statement

The MCAA believes in a society based on diversity. A society where diversity is the norm, not a deviation. A society where diversity is a strength, not a weakness. Access barriers are created by a society that does not acknowledge the value of diversity. Diversity and access are foundational elements of the flourishing of the research endeavour.

As a community of researchers, the MCAA is committed to increase the accessibility of its products, services, and events. Under the leadership of the Editorial Team of the Communication Working Group, with the support of other Working Groups and the MCAA Board, the MCAA has been promoting a series of actions aimed at increasing the inclusivity of its community and reducing access barriers.

Since the June 2021 issue, the MCAA Newsletter has a new layout. The new design should make the reading experience more accessible by reducing a number of barriers our readers may face.

The new layout complies with many requirements of major print and digital accessibility standards and guidelines. For example, background and foreground colours were selected and paired so as to fulfil the AAA level requirements for colour contrast devised by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1). Colour selection and pairing also complies with requirements for colour blindness. The text is not justified in order to keep the spacing between words consistent and regular in the entire text. Line spacing and font size were revised and increased too. Each macro-section is identified by a different colour so as to provide the reader with a map of content organisation. The layout adopts TestMe, a font inspired by the Design for All principles. Last but not least, the PDF file now complies with PDF accessibility requirements and can be used by screen readers.



Editorial information



About

The MCAA Newsletter is the main communication channel for and about the MCAA community. It is a publication venue for science communication and public outreach. Its main aim is the dissemination of information about past and current MSCA projects, as well as activities of MCAA Chapters and Working Groups, events, and members' achievements.

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