

Conference Report

**“Contestation of Expertise in the European Union: Policy-making between
evidence-based decision-making and post-truth politics”,
Second Annual CERiM Conference, 20 April, Maastricht**

On 20 April 2017, CERiM had the pleasure of welcoming a number of key experts and practitioners from several academic and professional backgrounds such as law, political philosophy, and political science during the Second Annual Conference which took place in Maastricht. Expertise increasingly faces a contested role in decision-making and public debate. On the one hand, hardly any policy can be conceived today without expert consultation, yet on the other hand, expertise seems too readily to be disqualified in public debate even in most important national or European decisions. This contested position of experts has become apparent in the context of a number of recent referenda campaigns, such as in the Netherlands, Hungary and the United Kingdom, and has also played a role in debates on many salient issues such as the regulation of genetically modified organisms or the negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). The overarching aim of the Conference was to examine the role and position of expertise and experts in the EU context of law and policy-making and offer a response from a multi-disciplinary perspective, drawn from a variety of national and international experiences. The Conference was organized by CERiM research coordinators Dr. VigiJilena Abazi and Dr. Johan Adriaansen.

The Conference consisted of three panels, each addressing a different aspect (e.g. legal, epistemological, and scientific) on the relationship between expertise, knowledge, and policy-making in the EU. In the first panel, which considered “Epistemic and Public Contestation of Expertise”, the first presentation was given by Dr. Marija Bartl (University of Amsterdam). She addressed how post-modern studies on knowledge, such as the constructivist approach by Science and Technology Studies, has led to the common misunderstanding of knowledge as being relative. This has led to many criticisms about how postmodernism’s treatment of the role of expertise is an attempt towards nihilism. Bartl offers a more nuanced approach and argues that if one wishes to understand how knowledge is used and validated, specifically in organizations, one must look to the organizations’ institutional set-up to see how knowledge is generated and evaluated. The

second speaker, Dr. Johan Christensen (Leiden University), examined policy-making trends in Norwegian advisory organizations and the changing role of academic knowledge in those processes. He argues that academic literature and resources are increasingly being cited in reports in order to gain legitimacy by presenting reports as academic studies rather than opinions. The panel was chaired by Dr. Anna Herranz-Surralles, with Dr. Johan Adriansen acting as discussant.

The second panel, “Political Contestation of Expertise”, addressed topics such as the use of expertise by the European Union External Action Service (EEAS), presented by Dr. Sophie Vanhoonacker, and politicised nature of European agencies as they use both political and expert knowledge, presented by Dr. Ellen Vos, Co-Director of CERiM, and Dr. Michelle Everson (Birbeck University of London). The panel was chaired by Dr. Aneta Spendzharova, with Dr. Esther Versluis acting as discussant.

In the third panel, “Legal Contestation of Expertise”, the speakers addressed the role that scientific knowledge plays in issues regarding environmental (e.g. climate change) issues. The first presentation was given by Dr. Mariolina Eliantonio on how scientific knowledge is used in environmental litigation. This was followed by Dr. Lukasz Gruszczynski’s presentation, during which he examined the scientific measures used by the WTO to evaluate disputes on scientific knowledge. In the third presentation, Dr. Alessandra Acurri addressed how safety claims of glyphosate are challenged by different regulatory agencies and how the choice to do so is an act of ‘repoliticisation’. The final presentation by Dr. Marjan Peeters looks into a recent controversy in the Netherlands regarding an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report’s role in national courts. The panel was chaired by Dr. Vigjilence Abazi, with Arjen Meij (Former Judge in the General Court of the EU) acting as a discussant.

The conference ended with a roundtable, chaired by Dr. Ellen Vos, on the role of expertise in EU policy-making. Participants were Luc Soete, Tannelie Blom, Anthony Teasdale (Director-General of the European Parliament Research Service) and Arjen Meij. The reception was held at Crowne Plaza. The contributions made during the Conference are currently in talks of being turned into an edited volume.