Message from the Director

The last few months have been busy and exciting for the EUPS program. In June, we celebrated the graduation of the EUPS Class of 2012. It was, as always, a delightful occasion. Parents, friends, faculty members, representatives of EU institutions and local universities, staff members, internship supervisors, and, wonderfully, a handful of alums gathered to celebrate the achievements of our fifth graduating class. Outgoing JMU President Linwood Rose delivered the commencement address and commended graduates for their many accomplishments—for mastering notoriously complex academic material, for embracing the challenge of pursuing a degree outside of their home country, and for faithfully representing the best of JMU in Florence, Brussels, Strasbourg, and beyond. Along with everyone else in the salone, the president wished students well in their burgeoning careers.

In addition to celebrating our students’ accomplishments, President Rose was in Florence to sign agreements that help to deepen our partnerships with various institutions. After the commencement ceremony, for example, the president sat down with the president of the European University Institute (EUI), the rector of the University of Florence (UNIFI), and the deputy mayor of the City of Strasbourg to sign a series of agreements. We have a strong history of collaboration with the EUI and UNIFI, but the new agreements will deepen our relationships in important ways—they will allow us, for example, to increase the frequency of interactions among students, faculty, and staff members from the three institutions. The agreement with the City of Strasbourg is also an important first step. In addition to enriching our annual trips to the city, the agreement should generate concrete opportunities (e.g., internships, traineeships) for future EUPS students and alums.

Faculty, staff, and student assistants have also been busy, over the summer and fall semesters, freshening up the program’s online presence. We now have a new web site (www.jmu.edu/eupolicystudies), an active Facebook site (www.facebook.com/JMU_EUPS) and an active Twitter feed (www.twitter.com/JMU_EUPS). If you’ve not done so already, please go ahead—friend us on Facebook, subscribe to our Twitter feed! I guarantee, dear alums, that the sites will make you smile; you’ll be reminded of the rhythms of the program and the sites, sounds, and flavors of Florence. I’d also continue to encourage those of you who have not joined our LinkedIn site (www.linkedin.com, group name: JMU European Union Policy Studies) to do so today—it’s a good way of keeping up with fellow alums and monitoring networking opportunities.

Having asked you to join the program’s online networks, I’d make one final exhortation—please take a few minutes to complete the online EUPS Alumni Survey. I know that many of you have completed a survey like this one in the past. Repeated thanks for that! Regardless of whether you have completed a survey in the past, it’s important for all alums to complete the current version. The job market moves quickly. People change jobs. They move. They get married. Their recollections of the program change as they move forward, etc. The alumni survey is, by far, the best source of information on post-graduation trajectories that we have. The more we know about our alums, the better we can communicate with others (e.g., prospective employers, prospective students) about the program and its value. Once you’ve completed the survey, you may feel free to devour this version of the newsletter. Okay, you can devour the newsletter first, but I assure you it works better as dessert! One way or the other, I trust that you’ll find the articles evocative and stimulating.

During the 2012 graduation ceremony
We have two nice “Oggi a Firenze” pieces this fall, both composed by current students. I asked Dean Jezwinski and Patrick O’Donnell to chat up some Oltrarno locals of their choosing. The goal: try to get local insights into what makes JMU’s immediate neighborhood in Florence special. Dean and Patrick have delivered! I leaned on Geoff Skelley (class of 2011) for a piece discussing his work at UVA’s Center for Politics and his sense of the ways that foreign policy issues played out at the Republican and Democratic National Conventions that he recently attended. He delivered, too. And I asked Alicia Miller, the current website and newsletter assistant, to serve up something for the mind, something about the economic crisis or the approach that some EU member-state was taking to tackle the crisis. She came through with an interesting piece about Latvia and the lessons that Greece (and, potentially, other fiscally troubled member-states) might learn from their distant northern neighbor. Three for three!

As always, I hope that this message finds you well. Stay in touch—with the program and with each other—and enjoy the fall.

Forza JMU!

Dr. John A. Scherpereel
Program Director
I decided to interview my favorite shopkeepers, Sandro and Ivana, who are located on Via dei Serragli, just minutes away from Piazza Santo Spirito. I go to Sandro and Ivana’s shop very often to buy meats, cheeses, and delicious home cooked specialties. I always enjoy talking with Ivana, and she is always very willing to help me learn more Italian. She was thrilled when I asked her to participate in an interview. This is how it went, translated into English:

Q: If you were able to describe our neighborhood, San Frediano, using only three words, what words would you use, and why?

A: I’ll need to tell you a little bit about how it was in the past, and also about how I view it today. First, these days, the neighborhood is still very picturesque; it is full of people I’d describe as a little bit particular, a bit alternative. Second, I’d say it is degraded; unfortunately, the city leaves it on its own and lets it go. Third, I would say it’s fascinating. For me, this is where I was born, and it is constantly changing, and yet it remains true and authentic at the same time. I’ve seen the changes here since I was a little girl. Some things have gotten a bit worse, but the social make up, for the most part, has remained the same.

Q: What is it that makes this area of Florence different from the other parts?

A: Like I mentioned before, the social make up is particular here. Here, the people all know each other, and, if there is ever the need, we’ll give you a hand. People are always helping each other out.

Q: How would you describe the typical mentality of someone who currently lives in or grew up in the “Oltrarno” district?

A: The people who live in the neighborhood, San Frediano, are the type of person who enjoys living their life simply, day to day. They are always attentive of every problem that arises in the neighborhood, and, like I said before, if there is ever someone in need, no matter who it is, a tourist, a student, they are ready to try their best to help others.

Q: This final question is a bit more personal. In your opinion, what is the best time of the year to be living here? Do you have a favorite season?

A: In my opinion, autumn is the most beautiful time of year here. I always say that. I prefer the fall here because it marks the beginning of very many festivals, and it also marks the season for chestnuts and mushrooms. I love to decorate my shop with all of these beautiful autumnal colors and seasonal treats.
Oggi a Firenze II

Date: Saturday September 29, 2012  
Place: Migrana (small wine and food shop)  
Person: Paolo Coppini

On Saturday afternoon I walked into Migrana, a small wine and food shop on Via Santo Spirito in hopes of buying something for dinner and a beer for the evening. The first thing I noticed when I entered the shop was an old, large Italian flag, hanging on the store’s back brick wall. The flag was different from the current Italian flag. Yes, it was a red-white-green tricolor, but it also had a crown over an emblem in the center. The crown, it turns out, was a clue: the flag was a representation of an old state flag of the Kingdom of Italy, used from 1861-1946.

The store had curving concave brick ceilings like the inside of a castle. After asking the apparent owner, Paolo, where the beer was located in the store, I inquired whether I might also ask him a few questions about this cool hole-in-the-wall store he worked in. Paolo was glad to help me out. He told me that the building was very old and that the store originally opened in the building in 1950. At that time, the store sold a variety of goods: salumi, formaggi, gastronomia specialità toscane, prelibatezze nazionali ed internazionali.

The more things change, the more they stay the same … Paolo, who has been working at the store himself since 1980, went on to explain that, way back when, the Medici had lived less than a kilometer down the road. In those days, the building was part of a very rich neighborhood. In the 18th century, the building was located outside of the walls of what was then considered “inner Florence.”

The building itself was sort of hidden from everyday life in the 18th century; it often went unnoticed due to the fact that it sort of “leaned up against” and was attached to a much grander and more visually attractive building next door. Apparently, there were nuns buried under the brick floors of the building hundreds of years ago.

In recent decades, Paolo continued, the store has seen a lot less traffic than it did when he first arrived. Piazza Pitti, where the Medici palace is located, has become such a tourist attraction, and it is no longer acceptable for many cars to travel through Paolo’s part of the Oltrarno. As a result, the amount of traffic that passes by his shop has seriously diminished, and Paolo feels like there are hardly any customers left.

As Paolo and I chatted, there were probably five other people in the small store picking out food for the evening. I assumed that the store used to be a main spot where locals would pick up culinary necessities, and I wondered whether the supermarkets in the area—the Conads, the Meta Markets, the Esselungas—had taken their toll.

Finishing the conversation, I grabbed a can of Peroni and a pre-made panino. The bill was pretty steep, and I could tell that the store was struggling to compete with the bigger, more modern stores in the area. I shook Paolo’s hand, thanked him multiple times for answering my questions, and walked back out onto Via Santo Spirito.
It’s been said that politics used to stop at the water’s edge. Although that’s a gross simplification of the history of American foreign policy debates, there can be little doubt that if that maxim ever bore some truth, it’s out the window now. As the presidential election draws closer, both sides have been highly critical of the other side’s foreign policy views, but it remains to be seen what role debates over American affairs abroad will have in the November outcome. The recent circumstances in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have, to some degree, brought foreign policy into play as an electoral issue.

I work at the University of Virginia Center for Politics, where I assist my boss, well-known political pundit and prognosticator Prof. Larry J. Sabato, by monitoring and writing about what’s going on in American politics. As I or anyone who lives in the U.S. can tell you, there is little question that the overriding issue in the 2012 election is the economy. The statistics tell the tale: unemployment is still above 8%, and quarterly GDP growth is below 2%. Stories abound about college grads sleeping in their childhood bedrooms. Many people are giving up on their job prospects and are leaving the job market, actually lowering unemployment slightly. Aside from the economy, other issues have also had brief moments in the sun: debates over birth control (among myriad women’s issues), energy policy, and immigration have popped up over the last few months. But the economic future of the country has remained mostly front and center as the chief point of debate.

So where does foreign policy come into the electoral picture? During my time at both the Republican (Tampa) and Democratic (Charlotte) National Conventions this year, discussions of international affairs were limited. I, along with my colleague Kyle Kondik, had the honor of helping brief the foreign press at one point for the State Department. Appropriately, a reporter asked about the “marginal” impact of foreign policy on the election. As it stood at the time of the conventions, the journalist was right: Americans have been looking inwardly at our economic problems and not much else. The average citizen has a limited understanding of the global economy and the impact that, say, Europe’s fiscal woe has on the American state of affairs. While former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice discussed America’s international role in her speech to the GOP convention, other primetime Republican speakers mainly focused their comments on the state of the economy under President Obama’s leadership. At the Democratic convention, talk of foreign policy mainly focused on the death of Osama bin Laden, with occasional mention of the conclusion of the Iraq War and the troops in Afghanistan. Neither side really provided a detailed vision for U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century.

But as British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan supposedly once said, “Events, my dear boy, events.” The murder of the American ambassador and three others at the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, and related anti-American protests across MENA have put foreign policy back on the front page. Mitt Romney’s imprudent attack on the President for “sympathizing” with the protestors and Obama’s inability to describe clearly our relationship with Egypt (ally or not?) show that, to some degree, neither side was adequately prepared for foreign policy developments affecting the campaign. While talk of intervening in Syria and the possibility of an Israeli-Iranian conflict has simmered for months, protests that may have started in part because of a low-budget American film insulting Islam caught many political actors off-guard. After the Arab Spring, one would think we would be more prepared to expect the unexpected in that part of the world.

Will the events in MENA matter by Nov. 6? Tough to say. A presidential debate on Oct. 22 will focus exclusively on foreign policy, and I hope that it will be a revealing couple of hours for Americans about the very different viewpoints each party has regarding international relations. But those of us interested in foreign policy, shouldn’t get our hopes up. Barring additional developments in MENA, it seems more than likely that the state of the domestic economy will remain issue number one in this election. This is both appropriate and unfortunate. There is no doubt that the economy needs to improve. But aside from debates about economic and fiscal policy, one of the principal contrasts between Obama and Romney is their respective approach to foreign policy. It’s a shame that this key difference has not gotten the attention that it deserves.
Euro Crisis: The Case of Latvia

Alicia Miller

As we all know, the fate of the Greek economy hangs in the balance, and serious questions persist about the fundamental economic health of Portugal, Spain, Ireland, and perhaps Italy. Greece is the most tragic case of all: the already slow economy is slowing down even more (despite multiple bailouts), and protests are raging. Although the situation is dire, the Greek economy may still be able to avoid complete destruction. If in need of guidance, the Greeks might consider looking north—way north—to Latvia.

In less than a decade, the Latvian economy has experienced both the fastest and slowest economic growth of the EU. The slow points have mainly been driven by poor political decision-making and the global economic crisis. However, starting in 2010, Latvia has been able to turn its economic downturn around.

After acceding into the Union in 2004, Latvia took full advantage of the common market. By 2007, the country had experienced an annual GDP growth rate of 10.3% (the highest of any EU state). However, this growth rate was very unstable, with the wage rate exceeding the productivity rate.

Pair that with a loss in competitiveness (a huge detriment given Latvia’s dependence on exports) and the global economic crisis, and there you have devastation for the Latvian economy.

2008 marked the beginning of Latvia’s descent into economic failure. Over the course of the next year, Latvia experienced a -17.7% of Real GDP growth, making it the worst of the EU member states. It also experienced a -4.6% growth rate and -7.8% public deficit. By February 2009, the Latvian citizens were so discontented that Prime Minister Ivars Godmanis, who had led the country since before the crisis, was replaced with the former Minister of Finance, Valdis Dombrovskis.

Under the direction of Prime Minister Dombrovskis, Latvia was able to turn its dismal situation around. Scandinavian banks extended aid to their Latvian subsidiaries, and Latvia qualified for a 7.5 billion euro bail-out from the EU. These steps, along with stringent public sector cuts (cuts of 26% in public administration, 22% in education, and 16% in...
healthcare and social work), allowed the Latvian economy to experience growth in 2010.

The 10% growth in 2010 was remarkable, given the country’s state just two years earlier. The growth rate was only further expanded after receiving the EU bail-out. This, along with PM Dombrovskis’ decision not to change the lati-euro exchange rate, helped the GDP grow by another 5.5% in 2011. According to current IMF reports, this rate will grow an additional 3.5% before the end of 2012.

Although Latvia has been able to make vast economic improvements, it still has quite a ways to go before returning to its glory days of 2004-2007. The country’s unemployment rate is at 16%, with the general public showing signs of bitterness and renewed discontent. However, it is important to notice just how far Latvia has come since its crisis years. Although many Latvian citizens heaped scorn on the strict cuts that Latvia enacted following the economic crisis, the country has been able to expand its economic growth. The same cannot be said for Greece, which has obtained aid from the EU and yet failed to make good on the stipulations of the bail-out. The country must still do more to cut public sector costs (i.e. reducing pensions, eliminating bonuses, and raising the retirement age). It is the slowness to enact such reforms, coupled with Greek governmental corruption, that separates the Latvian experience from that of Greece. Greece is now in need of another bail-out, and there seems no other way but for the EU to give it to them. This time around, one hopes, they will look to their northern neighbors and take a more strict and rigorous direction in order to turn their economy around.