



## **SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT**

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 02/16

Project manager: Stefan Svallfors

Project title: Politics by Other Means

### **1. Purpose of the project**

The project investigated the work of policy professionals. They consist of political actors who, although not elected to office, are nonetheless employed to affect policy and politics on a partisan basis. Through an analysis of the influence and power they wield, our project sheds light on how the growth of this group represents a major transformation of the organization of politics and policy-making in advanced democracies. Taking a comparative and longitudinal perspective, we examine a combination of qualitative and quantitative data from countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands, Ireland and Latvia in order to explore what skills policy professionals deploy, the motivations that drive them, and the demand and use for their skills in various organizations. We link this analysis to fundamental questions about the current state and future of democracy, demonstrating that the work of policy professionals is key to understanding how contemporary political influence and democratic accountability function.

### **2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them**

1. Policy professionals, that is, people who work with politics and policy advice as employed and not as elected, is a growing, increasingly important but understudied group of political actors. They include groups such as political advisers, interest organization experts, political consultants, lobbyists and think tankers. Their particular skills regarding politics include framing political and social issues in a way that benefits their employers or customers, knowing the details of political decision-making and how to approach political decision-makers, and knowing where and how to access vital information. What policy professionals do has a “glocal” character: what they do and how they do it is very similar across national contexts, at the same time as they are highly dependent on their local networks and local information.

2. Policy professionals are motivated both by a striving for influence, by a wish to be in the centre of power and a will to retain control over one’s work. They rarely want to become elected politicians, but prefer to influence without being highly visible and without being ultimately responsible for decisions and actions. They almost always have an ideological commitment and a strong loyalty to specific persons among the political and organizational leadership

3. The skills of policy professionals are nowadays for sale in a politically defined labour market, where their skills find buyers not least in the growing lobbying sector. At the same time, they suffer from a “golden cage”-problem, in that their specific skills may be hard to evaluate for organizations (including private companies) that are not directly involved in political issues. Here, the public affairs-sector often works as a “bridge” to other private companies and organizations.

The project highlights the often problematic democratic effects of the undertakings and careers of policy professionals, such as the diffusing of fundamental institutional boundaries



(for example, between government and private business), and the strengthening of links between economic and political inequality. The results from the project has an immediate bearing on the questions of transitions between the public and the private sectors in this line of influence work. We argue that such transitions have to become more visible and subject to a more efficient regulation, in order to advance equality and democracy.

### **3. The project's contribution to the international research frontline**

The results from the project concern three broad themes: the skills and resources of policy professionals, the motivations and attractions of life as a policy professional, and the careers and career considerations among policy professionals.

We highlight the 'glocal' nature of policy professionals. Their skills are highly generic across contexts, but at the same time, the application of such skills and resources is very much locally dependent on access to relevant networks and information. The skills of policy professionals can be summarized as the ability to frame problems (describing contemporary society from an angle that benefits the values and groups that one represents, and to suggest possible policy solution), to know the game (knowing where in the complex political system decisions are made, who the key actors are, when you have to act in the policy process, and how you should best present your concerns to political decision makers), and to access information (to be used in the political battle).

The key driving force of policy professionals is power, in its different guises. This includes power as agency, to be able to make a difference as a political actor; power as proximity, to be close to power and in the rooms where important decisions are made, and power as self-determination, to be able to keep control over what one does and says and organize work as one sees fit.

Most policy professionals have little desire to become elected politicians, but the reasons why they hold this view vary between national contexts. Swedish policy professionals emphasize the slow and boring nature of political careers combined with relentless media pressure; their Latvian counterparts detest the semi-corrupt, uneducated, and unseemly aspects of politics; Irish policy professionals are bothered by the needs for politicians to pander to the petty issues of local constituents; while their Dutch colleagues are bored by the hollow and personalized politics in a consensus-driven polity.

Furthermore, policy professionals typically claim that they are not politicians. But a minority actually claim that they are politicians, and even among those who claim they are not politicians, attitudes are ambivalent. They are politicians in the sense that they affect political decisions and processes, but they are not politicians because they are not ultimately responsible for decisions and responsive to voters.

In policy professional careers, it is power rather than money that is the main driving force behind decisions to remain in a position, to move to other policy professional positions, or to exit from the field. There are clear ideological barriers in the field; no one ever moves between political parties or between think tanks, and transitions between trade unions and business associations were extremely rare. There is considerable flux among different positions in the policy professional field, where the specific skills of policy professionals are in demand across a broad segment of employing organizations. And yet, policy professionals face a 'golden cage' problem in that their true skills and abilities are hard to evaluate for employing organizations outside the policy professional field. Here, the PR and lobbying sector act as 'bridges' to the world of private business. Very few policy professionals ever become full-time politicians.



#### 4. New research questions that the project has led to

The contributions of Joanna Mellquist and her PhD thesis highlights the role of policy professionals in civil society organizations in Sweden, Latvia and the Netherlands. This is an understudied topic and her thesis is as far as we know the first Swedish attempt to analyze this. Here, the tensions between the democratic character of member based organization and the professional skills and activities of policy professionals are in the focus. This is clearly an extension of the project as originally conceived.

#### 5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

The project has highlighted the particular aspects and problems of policy professionalism in an environment characterized by small resources and low organizational density, Latvia. The fleeting nature of the political party system and the comparatively weak public administration imply both constraints and opportunities for policy professionals working in this system. They become much more flexible in terms of organizational positions and often combine several part-time commitments

#### 6. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

*The results from the project has been mainly targeted at the international research community, but we have also made presentations to policy makers and public authorities, as listed below.*

##### **Publications**

##### **Monographs:**

Svallfors, Stefan *Politics for Hire. The World and Work of Policy Professionals*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2020. <https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/usd/catalog/product/view/id/16775/s/politics-for-hire-9781800375185/>

Mellquist, J. (2022). *Policy professionals in civil society organizations: Struggle for influence* (Södertörn doctoral dissertations, 212). Huddinge Södertörns högskola\*  
<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1719570/FULLTEXT02.pdf>

##### **Book chapters:**

Svallfors, Stefan, "Politics for Hire: Policy Professionals in the Age of Neoliberalization", s 35-40 i Andersson, Jenny & Olivier Godechot (Eds.) *Destabilizing Orders – Understanding the Consequences of Neoliberalism: Proceedings from the MaxPo Fifth-Anniversary Conference*. Paris: MaxPo Discussion Paper 18/1. \*

Garsten, Christina; Bo Rothstein & Stefan Svallfors, "De policyprofessionella. En okänd politisk elit?", s 273-304 i Bengt Erik Eriksson, Mikael Holmqvist & Lena Sohl (Red.) *Eliter i Sverige*. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2018.

Svallfors, Stefan "Trump och de policyprofessionella – medeltidens återkomst?" s 34 i Bolin, N., Falasca, K., Grusell, M., & Nord, L., (red.) *Sj järnspäckat - reflektioner från amerikanska presidentvalet 2020 av ledande forskare*. Sundsvall: Mittuniversitetet, DEMICOM, 2020.\*

##### **Refereed journal articles:**



Jezierska, K. and A. Sörbom (2021) Proximity and Distance: Think Tanks Handling the Independence Paradox, *Governance*, 34 (2), 395–411. [Proximity and distance: Think tanks handling the independence paradox - Jezierska - 2021 - Governance - Wiley Online Library](#) \*

Mellquist, J. (2022) The Game of Influence: Policy Professional Capital in Civil Society. *Journal of Civil Society* 18, no. 1: 105-23. [Full article: The Game of Influence: Policy Professional Capital in Civil Society \(tandfonline.com\)](#)\*

Mellquist, J. (2022) Role Orientation and Organizational Strategy among Policy Professionals in Civil Society. *Interest Groups & Advocacy* 11, no. 1: 136-56. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-021-00147-8>\*

Mellquist, Joanna. 2023. “Do communicators take over? Mediatization and conflicts in civil society.” *Politics & Policy* 00: 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12527> .\*

Mellquist, Joanna, och Adrienne Sörbom. 2023.” Policy Professionals in Civil Society Organizations: Organizational Hypocrisy and the Myth of Member Centrality”. *Sociologisk Forskning* 59 (4):363–386. <https://doi.org/10.37062/sf.59.24464> .\*

Sörbom, A. (2018) Från snack till organiserade nätverk: Om tankekedjors arbete med att värva andra för sina idéer. *Sociologisk forskning*, 5 (2–3) 365–387. <https://doi.org/10.37062/sf.55.18197> \*

**\*= Open Access**

***Seminar and conference presentations:***

Stefan Svallfors

2018-01-13 “Politics for hire: policy professionals in the age of neo-liberalization”, Presentation at the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of MaxPo Research Centre, Paris.

2018-04-25 “Politics for hire: policy professionals in the age of neo-liberalization”, Presentation at the Quality of Government Institute, Göteborg University.

2020-11-25 ”Politics for Hire: the World and Work of Policy Professionals”, Södertörns högskola

2020-12-10 ”Politics for Hire: the World and Work of Policy Professionals”, Statsvetenskapliga institutionen Göteborgs universitet

2021-02-17 ”Politics for Hire: the World and Work of Policy Professionals”, K3, Malmö universitet.



2021-03-18 “De policyprofessionellas liv och arbete”, Statskontoret, Stockholm.

Joanna Mellquist

Mellquist (2019) The Field of Policy Professionals in Civil Society. Paper presented at Conference of the European Sociological Association, Manchester

Mellquist (2020) The Game Of Influence: Following Policy Professionals In Civil Society. Paper presented at seminar on civil society elites. Lund University

Mellquist (2020) Professional identity and organizational strategy among policy professionals in civil society. Paper presented at Conference on Civil Society Studies 26-27 January, Lunds universitet.

Mellquist (2020) Professional identity and organizational strategy among policy professionals in civil society. Paper presented at Stockholm Center for Civil Society Studies. Handelshögskolan.

Mellquist (2021) Professional Identity and Organizational Strategy Among Policy Professionals in Civil Society. Paper presented at Conference of the European Sociological Association, Manchester.

Mellquist and Sörbom (2022) Members in Policy work: Legitimacy and Organizational Myths. Paper presented at research seminar at Score, Stockholm University

Mellquist, J. and A., Sörbom, (2022) Policy Professionals in Civil Society Organizations: Upholding and Reinforcing the Myth of Active Members” Paper presented at Sociologidagarna 2022.

Mellquist, J. (2022) Do communicators take over? On policy professionals’ strategic tensions and mediatization of CSOs. Paper presented at organizing the world, Score conference, Stockholm university 6–7 October 2022.

Mellquist, J. (2022). Policy professionals in civil society organizations: Struggle for influence. Presentation of dissertation at Ideell Arena 14<sup>th</sup> of mars 2023.

Mellquist, Joanna, och Adrienne Sörbom. 2023.” Policy Professionals in Civil Society Organizations: Organizational Hypocrisy and the Myth of Member Centrality”. Sociologisk Forskning 59 (4):363–386. At the Conference on Civil Society Studies 2023 - Center for Civil Society Research, Stockholm 19-20th of April 2023.

Mellquist, J. (2022). Policy professionals in civil society organizations: Struggle for influence. Stockholm Center for Civil Society Studies. Handelshögskolan. 4<sup>th</sup> of May 2023

Adrienne Sörbom

Jeziarska, K. and A. Sörbom (2019) *Constructing Independence: Think Tank Handling the Independence Paradox*. Paper presented at Political Resources: Autonomy, Legitimacy, Power, A Multidisciplinary Conference on the Role of Economic Resources for Political Organization, Södertörn University, Sweden, May 17, 2019

Sörbom, A. (2020) *Accountability of Intermediaries: The Case of Think Tanks*. Paper presented at the symposium Intermediary Resources The Brokering of Values, Ideas and Resources in Political Contexts, at Center for Civil Society Researc Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, in cooperation with Center for studies of Political Organization at Södertörn University, Berlin, February 13–14 2020.

Sörbom, A. (2020) *Global Horizons: The Role of Think Tanks in Global Governance*. Presentation at Swedish Collegium of Advanced Study, Uppsala University, September 2, 2020.



Mellquist and Sörbom (2022) *Members in Policy work: Legitimacy and Organizational Myths*. Paper presented at research seminar at Score, Stockholm University.

Mellquist, J. and A. Sörbom (2022). *Policy Professionals in Civil Society: Upholding and Reinforcing the Myth of Members*. Paper presented at Swedish Sociological Association Annual Meeting 2022, March 16–18 2022, Uppsala University.

***Other outreach activities:***

”Makt utan mandat”, Podcast for Akademikerförbundet SSR, Published 171012,  
[https://akademssr.se/reportage/makt-utan-mandat-0?v=frontpage&d=block\\_2](https://akademssr.se/reportage/makt-utan-mandat-0?v=frontpage&d=block_2)