

PhD candidate in the spotlight:

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Could you briefly introduce yourself and your research project (in laymen terms).

My name is Irene, I am Greek and live in the Netherlands. My PhD is a joint project of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (LSTS) and the Tilburg University (TILT). The project explores the impact of soft law on the protection of fundamental rights in the European Union, by focusing on technical standards and the right to protection of personal data. Standardisation, which started as a merely technical activity in the beginning of the previous century, is claimed to have transformed into something different today: a tool to help regulatees comply with their legal obligations, a mark of trust for cross-border transactions, an audit mechanism for the supervisory authorities. I am researching the conditions under which standardisation may have a role in the protection of the right to data protection, and the boundaries of such a role.

Have there been times where your research wasn't really working out the way you expected it to be? How did you cope with this difficulty?

Throughout the PhD trajectory there are many moments of self-doubt and periods when things are not really working as expected. Sometimes the reasons are even external, and thus not in the control of the PhD researcher. For the things that are in the control of the researcher, what has helped me is first, is planning in advance for the unexpected (meaning always have a plan B, and even C), and second, taking distance from the problem. Work on something else, write an article, attend a conference, take some time off and relax. And always put things into perspective: the difficulty might seem like the end of the world, but in the end of the day the PhD is a project, a dissertation, no matter what the scientific and societal significance. If people around you manage with all kinds of severe survival problems, well, you can manage a methodological hiccup or a paper acceptance with major revisions.

Do you have a healthy work-life balance? If so, could you share the secret ingredient(s)?

I believe I do, even though one can always do better. My take on doing a PhD and working in academia is that one cannot see this as a typical nine-to-five job. There are times you have brilliant ideas in the weekend or during holidays. This makes it certainly more challenging to maintain a balance. What I do is that I always try to compensate for the 'extra' time I work. If I feel like writing on a Saturday, I will then not work or take it easy on a weekday. I also work in alternating high-low intensity periods. When I expect a heavy work period, I make sure to plan a small break afterwards. Even a weekend get-away helps. Having an understanding partner and friends for my weird schedule is also key for both making progress and maintaining a balance.