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By Alvise Armellini and Cristina Marconi

Pino Arlacchi is not afraid to take risks and has some very grand plans.

Even to his detractors, Pino Arlacchi is a man of extraordinary qualities. As a budding sociologist in the late 1970s, he published ground-breaking research on the Mafia's entrepreneurial skills – three decades before Roberto Saviano's "Gomorra" became a worldwide sensation. In the 1980s, as he rose through the ranks of academia, he entered the inner circle of Italy's anti-Mafia movement, striking up friendships with iconic figures such as Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, two pioneering magistrates whose murder by the Mafia shocked the nation in 1992.

In the aftermath of those tragedies, he entered politics, serving in both chambers of the Italian parliament for the formerly communist Left Democratic Party (PDS). This earned Arlacchi, a father of two, death threats from Totò Riina, the jailed head of Cosa Nostra. "Until then, I had fought the Mafia by crafting the bullets that others used to shoot. Now it was time for me to take the gun into my own hands. I was no longer, and could no longer be, just a professor," he recounts, dramatically, on his website.

Tana de Zulueta, a former correspondent for The Economist (a sister publication of European Voice) and a colleague in the Italian parliament, says that top magistrates and policemen looked up to Arlacchi. "He had the trust, the friendship and the attention of these people, who saw him as somebody who could bring a wider perspective on criminal matters," she says.

Born in 1951 in Gioia Tauro, a small Calabrian port long plagued by organised crime, Arlacchi became an international figure in 1997, when Romano Prodi's government secured his appointment as under-secretary-general to the United Nations and head of its Vienna-based anti-drugs and crime outfits. He jokes that it was only then that his conservative father – who never approved of his studies and of his left-wing militancy – finally conceded that his son had made it. "We people from Calabria are stubborn, you know," he chuckles.

On taking up his post at the Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (ODCCP), he set himself the ambitious target of wiping out all heroin and cocaine production, worldwide, within ten years. Arlacchi pursued the goal with unconventional methods, courting controversy with his efforts to involve the Taliban in the fight against drugs. Ultimately, he failed. “I just did 12 years ago what everybody is trying to do now, using a carrot-and-stick strategy and never forgetting to talk about human rights,” he says now.

But his out-of-the-box methods and impatience with procedural niceties earned him the ire of some of the staff, who complained that Arlacchi was not following the rulebook. In a well-publicised resignation letter, a senior official, Michael von der Schulenburg, acknowledged Arlacchi's “exceptional energies and political qualities”, but labelled him “the worst manager [he had] come across”. He also raised questions about his recruitment choices and the connection between Arlacchi, who is himself a transatlantic sailor, and a Swedish captain who was to receive \$500,000 to sail around the world to raise the UN agency's profile.

In subsequent enquiries, the UN's internal watchdog (OIOS) cleared Arlacchi of serious wrongdoing, but found fault with his “over-centralised and heavily personalised decision-making”. It also backed criticism from von der Schulenburg and others about Arlacchi's tendency to launch projects without sufficient funding, citing cases of overreach in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. In the wake of the controversy, which in Italy was fuelled by the anti-drug prohibition Radical Party, Arlacchi left the UN in 2002, but he remains unrepentant about his record. “I would repeat exactly what I have done,” he insists, claiming that the British government and its secret service plotted his downfall because he refused to bow to their policy prescriptions. “Powers that were friendly with the UK warned me in private about ‘plans to neutralise’ my actions in central Asia and Afghanistan, and about the ‘long knives’ that were being sharpened against me at the UN headquarters,” he recalls on his website.

He rejects suggestions that he left the ODCCP a discredited man, and recounts that Ban Ki-moon, the UN's secretary-general, was “very happy to see him” when they recently met again. Ban had seen Arlacchi at work while South Korea's ambassador to Vienna in the late 1990s.

Arlacchi spent the next seven years, 2002-09, as an academic and consultant, advising – among other things – on security at the Beijing Olympics and drafting, for the European Commission, a plan for an anti-money laundering agency in Kosovo.

Arlacchi is now a busy member of the European Parliament's foreign affairs committee. He entered the Parliament in 2009 under the banner of Italy of Values (IdV), a party founded by former anti-corruption judge Antonio Di Pietro. He fell out with Di Pietro in September, and crossed over to the Democratic Party (PD), a successor to the PDS.

Last year, he made waves with a report calling for a radical change of strategy in Afghanistan, which he claims Catherine Ashton, the EU's foreign policy chief, "has not got at all". He has also been bitterly critical of Ashton's choice of Vygaudas Ušackas, rather than of Arlacchi's fellow Italian Ettore Sequi, as her man in Kabul. Ušackas has been more generous, calling Arlacchi's report a "very welcome" contribution to "raising the awareness about the needs, challenges and opportunities Afghanistan poses for the international community".

Arlacchi is known for not mincing his words. In columns for the left-wing newspaper L'Unità, he displays unconventional views, including the suggestion that the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 were "an isolated event, with no precedent nor catastrophic consequences". Similarly, he depicts China as an "inherently peaceful power", and lambasts Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Vladimir Putin's arch-enemy and the pin-up boy of the European Parliament, as a "dangerous Mafia boss".

He also admits to a fondness for visionary plans, such as the creation of a universal parliament and the introduction of a world currency. "These are the things I like the best," he says, clearly undaunted by the size of the challenges. "I have been at the top of the United Nations, and if there is one thing I have learned from dealing with the world's tragedies it is that there are no man-made problems that mankind cannot solve," he assured L'Unità readers in November.