



Report EU@Work Seminar on EU Affairs

Brussels, 12-15 November 2018

Introduction:

During the past 12-15 November 2018, the TEPSA office in Brussels organized an EU@Work Seminar for BA students on European Union (EU) affairs. This 4-day training co-funded by the *Europe for Citizens* Programme took place at the heart of the EU politics: the city of Brussels. Twenty students from different EU Member States and beyond, and from diverse academic disciplines had the opportunity to gain first-hand insights from researchers, EU practitioners, policy-makers and officials on the current top priorities and trends of EU politics. The seminar was largely devoted to visiting practitioners from several EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the EU and the European External Action Service) and think tanks, in order to ultimately complement what students learnt during the lectures delivered and coordinated by Prof. Jaap W. de Zwaan, Emeritus Professor of European Union Law at Erasmus University Rotterdam, Lector in European Integration at the Hague University of Applied Sciences and Secretary General of TEPSA.

The content of each of the days had been carefully planned in order to follow a certain cohesion that would aid in its acquisition by the participants. The first day was devoted to the presentation of the seminar, its logistics and TEPSA's activities by Prof. de Zwaan and the TEPSA office team. Prof. de Zwaan also delivered an introductory lecture on the institutional functioning of the EU. The following two days were structured so as to fit both academic lectures and visits to institutions and think tanks, in order to let students gain theoretical and practical knowledge on the European Union. This knowledge was ultimately implemented in the last day of the training during a group exercise on possible responses to the violation of Article 2 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU by a Member State.

A more detailed report on each of the days follows these lines:



Day 1: Lecture *The EU institutional infrastructure and decision-making process* & session on the European Solidarity Corps

Day 1 of the EU@Work seminar started with an introduction of TEPSA, its objectives and its role, which was followed by a *tour de table* of the participants. Whereas their national backgrounds were highly diverse, their academic backgrounds were relatively homogeneous, most of the students coming from the International Relations or Economic Studies discipline. After a brief explanation of the agenda for the forthcoming days, Prof. de Zwaan delivered the lecture *The EU institutional infrastructure and decision-making process*, which would serve as a solid foundation for the whole seminar. Among several other elements, topics of great relevance for the comprehension of the functioning of EU institutions were tackled, such as the different types of competences; the supranational level of the EU and its hybrid characteristics of both a state and an international organization; the Treaty of the European Union (TUE) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFUE), which set the legal foundations of the current Union; the advantages/disadvantages of consensus in supranational decision-making processes; etc.

The academic context of this introductory session was followed by a more informal discussion on the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). Mr Lope Gallego, Project Manager at the Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture in the European Commission, and Ms Manon Levrey, former volunteer at the Danube Transnational Programme in Budapest, and the first ESC volunteer, presented this new initiative of the European Commission. By participating in this programme, which succeeds the former European Voluntary Service (EVS), young people aged between 18-30 have the possibility to go to a Member State of the EU or one country part of the European Neighbourhood Policy and perform a voluntary service or a traineeship. This experience can be related to a wide range of possible topics, and is financially supported by the EU..



Day 2: *Lecture The Council of the European Union, key decision maker and the European Council, the driver of EU's political agenda & visits to the Council of the European Union, the European External Action Service and the Centre for European Policy Studies*

Day 2 began with a visit to the European External Action Service (EEAS), where an EU civil servant working of the Western Balkans Task Force at the Strategic Communications Division gave a presentation on the history and structure of the EEAS. The EU diplomat explained EEAS' importance within the framework of the EU foreign policy. Elements of pertinent relevance were named, such as the role of the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, or the EU delegations all around the globe, which represent the European Union abroad. As some participants came originally from the Western Balkans region, numerous interesting questions were raised. For instance, one participant asked about the role of the EU in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, which, as the presenter pointed out, is of particular difficulty due to the lack of commitment of both countries once bilateral meetings are over. Another stimulating question referred to the EU strategy to get closer to the citizens of the neighbourhood. The presenter of the EEAS addressed the fact that, in spite of being the first donor in the Western Balkans, the work of the EU there is not visible, and that communication has therefore now become a core element of the strategy in the region.

The visit to the EEAS was followed by a lecture on the European Council and the Council of the EU by Prof. de Zwaan. He explained the legal basis of these institutions, their composition, responsibilities and decision-making processes, and addressed their relevance within the Ordinary Legislative Procedure of the EU, as established in the Article 294 TFEU. In the afternoon, students visited the Council of the European Union. The Council visit was presented by an EU official of the General Secretariat of the Council. The presentation was opened with an explanation of the role of the European Council and the Council of the EU, and the differences between both of them. The European

Council is in charge of defining the political direction and priorities of the Union as a whole and is represented by Member States' heads of state/government. The Council of the EU adopts legislation and is composed by ministers from every Member State. Topics such as council configurations, voting rules or rotating presidencies were also addressed. The presentation was concluded with an explanation of the supporting function of the General Secretariat of the Council. Students actively participated in the presentation, introducing relevant points such as the legitimacy of such short European Council presidencies or the reasons behind their short duration.

Afterwards, the group visited the European think tank "Centre for European Policy Studies" (CEPS), where participants learnt more about the role of think tanks in EU policy-making. After a brief introduction of their research focus, the researcher welcoming the TEPESA group presented the structure of CEPS and its main activities, highlighting their flagship event: *CEPS Ideas Lab*, an event bringing together national think tanks around Europe, representatives of governments, businesses, NGOs and European institutions in Brussels in order to debate key policy issues for Europe.



Day 3: Lectures *The European Commission, initiator of EU policy and guardian of the Treaties* and *The European Parliament, mandate/competences and its democratic dimension in view of the 2019 European Elections* & visits to the European Commission and the European Parliament

Day 3 of the TEPESA seminar started with an insightful lecture on the European Commission by Prof. de Zwaan. As it was done with the Council, the treaty foundations for these institutions, as well as its composition, tasks and decision-making processes were explained to the participants. Worth emphasizing is the fact that the European Commission is a unique institution on its own, with no precedent in any international organization or state. As participants adequately pointed out, one main critic to the Commission is its lack of democratic basis, since it is not elected in any way by the citizens of the Union, although in the last years the EU is trying hard to overcome this deficit through

the implementation of the Spitzenkandidat system, where the “head of list” or “lead candidate” of the most voted political party in the European Parliament elections will be appointed president of the European Commission with the approval of the European Council.

The theoretical basis of this session was immediately followed by a visit to the actual Commission, where our group was received and introduced to the institution by a Commission’s official. The presentation was full of details and depicted the multiple characteristics that turn the Commission into a unique institution, such as its role as initiator of EU laws and policies. Several topics were addressed during the visit, which undoubtedly provided the students with a comprehensive overview of the institution: the Juncker Commission and its 10 priorities, the EU Budget for the Future, the State of the Union Address, or the White Paper on the Future of Europe.

In the afternoon students visited the European Parliament, where an EU official from the Parliament’s Communication service welcomed the group. In addition to a presentation on the general role of the European Parliament, participants were shown several interesting facts and figures, such as the percentage of popular support of democracy in Europe, which in the period from the 30s until the 90s decreased, or the number of female MEPs, which is today higher than ever before. Some hot topics with regard to the current Parliament were also discussed, particularly the redistribution of the British MEPs after Brexit. The administrative element of this session preceded the more political dimension that the subsequent presentation of an MEP (Member of the European Parliament) assistant contained. The parliamentary assistant debriefed participants on his daily work at the office of an MEP and explained its structure. Participants were particularly engaged and asked multiple questions.

The day ended with a lecture by Prof. de Zwaan on the role of the European Parliament. As with the other EU institutions, the legal basis, structure, responsibilities and decision-making processes were addressed, as well as the characteristics that turn it different from any national parliament. Prof. de Zwaan underlined the fact that the next EP elections will be taking place in May 2019, which will most likely introduce new political configurations.



Day 4: Group exercise *The Rule of Law in the European Union*

Day 4 and last day of the seminar was devoted to a group exercise on the Rule of Law in the European Union and how the treaties deal with a possible breaching of the rule of law in a Member State. Students were divided into different groups, representing the European Commission, the Council and European Council, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and those EU Member States accused of infringement of the rule of law. Students discussed the idea of including the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg or the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg in order to allow other authorities to assess the existence of a possible breaching of the rule of law within the European Union.