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An impression of the Study Visit to Brussels

Complementing theoretical knowledge with practical experience is always interesting. This is what happened during the study visit to Brussels held from 1-3 December 2014. The visit was intended primarily to allow students to familiarise themselves with different EU institutions and also to have first-hand information about the institutions' work on human rights and democracy for which all 80-plus E.MA Masterini travelled together with the some of the EMA staff.

After a long and exciting though exhausting 16 hours travel by bus on 29 November, we had a little rest before starting the formal evens on 1 December. Different EU officials, representing the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) unit under the Development Cooperation (DEVCO) division; European External Service (EEAS); and parliamentary secretariat; and also the secretariat of the EU Special Representative for Human Rights facilitated the sessions from 1 – 3 December 2014. Inthe afternoon on 3 December, we participated in an event – *Reflexions on the 30th Anniversary of the Convention Against Torture (CAT)* - organised by the EU. We travelled back the same evening with almost the same excitement and exhaustion that we experienced on the way to Brussels.

The visit helped the diverse body of E.MA students to familiarise themselves with different EU institutions and their role in the field of human rights and democracy. This was an opportunity to get an overall idea of the EU mechanisms, tools and means to translate into practice the policies and strategies on human rights and democracy. However, it was not possible to get a complete picture of the EU institutions as a whole and full clarity on their roles and coordination and coherences between each other, which was partly due to a lack of time. In any case, the study visit was successful in terms of getting more practical information for the E.MA classes about the EU institutions, policies and their role in promoting democracy and human rights globally.

Open and frank sharing of the EU officials was encouraging in addressing the gaps observed in terms of qualitative contribution rather than formative compliances and also the inter-institutional coherence and coordination required. Interactions with EU parliamentarians would have been much more profitable than the discussions with their advisors. In any case, it was interesting and also inspiring to learn how the former E.MA students are playing a crucial role within different EU institutions in promoting human rights and democracy. Attendance at a panel discussion on torture - the last event of the visit, was equally important to see how the policy discussions happen at the Brussels level. The diverse approach of different stakeholders to the issues like 'torture', which is a non-derogable and absolute universal human right, was a very good example to see the challenges associated with the realisation of human rights. However, a more interactive session would have been advantageous for making our participation useful.

Overall, the trip was successful in broadening our understanding about the operationalisation of human rights and democracy within the EU and also learning different dynamics of policy formulation and policy execution. E.MA 2014/2015 is very grateful to the organisers and also to all persons involved for making the visit successful. It is very important that this trip is continued for future generations of masterini.

(Article written by Shiva Datta Bhandari, E.MA 2014/2015)

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