Interview with Dan and Yamuna, EMA Students Representatives

The Press Office had the opportunity to interview Dan and Yamuna, the Global Campus Europe EMA Students Representatives, sharing their experiences in the European Master’s Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation (EMA) and some topics of interest.
Could you tell us more about yourself and your roles as EMA student’s representatives? Could you describe the experience of studying in Venice during the first semester of the master?

Dan is from the UK and studied BA History at Lancaster University and Freie Universität Berlin. His EMA thesis will be an international law perspective on climate refugees and state responsibility. Yamuna is from Bangalor, India. She studied history and law at University College Utrecht and her EMA thesis will try to frame the farmer suicides in India as a human rights issue, particularly focusing on a potential link to the right to life. Communication between students and the EMA team is our focus as representatives. We do our best to be open and available to listen to students’ concerns and check-in on their wellbeing. We engage with the EMA governing bodies throughout the year to provide a comprehensive account of the experiences of the student body. Constructive criticism is taken seriously and attentively discussed by the governing bodies. Our responsibility extends our colleagues’ academic and social engagement; we aim to create a healthy and safe environment for all students vis-à-vis participation and the ethos of the student body. Living in Venice is like living in a museum; with its stunning verandas and scenic canals, the city has few parallels in the world and it took us some time to realise how lucky we were to live there. Living in a museum comes with challenges too; the city sometimes lacks a soul, being run according to the needs of tourists. We will discuss this further in question three. Nevertheless, the Monastery of San Nicolò on Lido feels like a second home to EMA students, and it has been a privilege to have such a unique venue.

Which topics could be interesting to address in relation to your human rights and democracy education during these particular times of war conflicts, economic, environmental and health crises? Which will be the most important challenges in relation to promoting human rights and democracy in the years to come?

We have recently passed the one-year anniversary of the war on Ukraine, and this is just one war currently being waged. With 20 ongoing wars and 25 minor conflicts, we are reminded that instability and violence continue to be a regularity in the 21st century. Conflicts occur as a result of a plurality of contributing stressors, for example food and water insecurity and economic instability due to long-term onset effects of climate change in vulnerable geographical regions. Inertia of international/national organisations regularly strengthens anti-democratic movements as people turn to populists and demagogues to provide solutions. We cannot continue to see the world with tunnel-vision; we need micro and macro approaches to tackle the challenges humanity faces. It is difficult to single out a topic when they are all interconnected in the same way that human rights are. Our education teaches us to consider all contributing factors, as well as the importance of a human rights based approach to governance. In a broader sense, it has become clear that reasoning in international politics needs to be reimagined. There is a need for intersectionality to become a central tenet of international human rights so that people’s specific issues are recognised and action is based on a nuanced understanding. Foreign intervention needs to be rethought, with introspection into the hypocritical reasoning of global powers: couching action as being motivated by humanitarian or human rights concerns, but in fact basing decisions on strategic and economic interests. Furthermore, we must continue the upliftment of economic, social and cultural rights to a position of equal importance to civil and political rights. Given that our generation faces these challenges which are present before us today, but also those that are yet to show themselves, our biggest challenge will be in the fight against apathy, indifference, and inaction.

How do you envisage the Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) being integrated into the sustainable future of the city of Venice and the Veneto Region? Do you have any specific concrete ideas? How might EMA students continue to help at the local level in the possible sustainable future scenarios?

The Veneto region, dependent upon its environment but also on mass tourism, faces an acute crisis. Facing environmental issues, like increasingly regular flooding, the region serves as an illustration of the consequences of inaction. At first glance, contradictions and ambiguity within the SDGs make a conclusive response difficult: tourism limitations could address SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and 14
(Life Below Water), yet the region’s economic security depends upon tourism to the extent that limitation would negatively impact SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Consideration of the needs of Venetians before action is taken is a must – what future do they see for the city? One suggestion involves investment of funds earned through tourism into protecting the livelihoods of residents, which would require considerable political willpower. The current investment focus on climate adaptation strategies such as the sea wall leaves the root cause unaddressed. Climate mitigation and other forms of preventative action are a necessity if the SDGs are to be implemented in the Veneto region, yet the Italian national government (like many states worldwide) has not delivered on its commitments. EMA students and our role as advocates and representatives stand at a meeting point between our studies and an ongoing sustainable development debate, and this is exactly where we can be involved. The power of our voices and the impact of our actions as a community would support the demand for increased attention to the degradation of Venice. Local and national politicians are mandated to act upon the needs of the people, and right now the people of Venice need every supporting voice they can get to drive forward change.

Could you share a message with the Global Campus of Human Rights Community (professors, experts, alumni, staff) and to their students in particular?

What ties us all together, what makes us a community - each of us with our particular focus in our respective hubs all over the world - is that we care. Beyond the law, beyond theories of democratisation or securitisation, we care deeply about people and about the planet. Our message is to hold tightly onto that caring, using it to inform our work, using it to seek nuance and think from outside our own perspectives. Without meaning to be pessimistic – it is a difficult and emotionally challenging path we have chosen for ourselves. Let us extend our caring to each other, let us make connections within the Global Campus community so that we may support each other’s work, help each other see things in new ways, and be understanding of each other’s struggles when it seems that no one else is.

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