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# Interview with Professor Paul Lemmens

The Press Office had the occasion to interview Former Judge at the European Court of Human Rights Prof. Paul Lemmens about his experience as one of the founders of the EMA Master Programme twenty-five years ago and why it is still relevant.

**How was your experience as one of the founders of the EMA Master Programme twenty-five years ago? Please share some details and stories you remember with our audiences.**

*The programme was conceived in 1996-97. It was at a time when there was a growing interest in human rights in Europe and the world. This had been translated into the setting up of human rights master programmes and human rights research in a number of universities. And human rights had become part of the EU foreign policy.*

*It was in that context that Antonio Papisca and Daniela Napoli met: Antonio, the idealist from the University of Padua, and Daniela, the "activist" from the European Commission's unit for Human Rights and Democratisation. They are the "father and mother" of the programme. Unfortunately, they both passed away, Antonio in 2017, Daniela in July of this year.*

*They brought together a group of ten universities. Or better: a small group of academics, who shared their ambition to set up a master's programme in human rights and democratisation, initially for three years, and who were supported by their universities and by the European Commission. Among them were Antonio Papisca and Marco Mascia from the University of Padua, Horst Fischer from the University of Bochum, Florence Benoît Rohmer from the University of Strasbourg, Attracta Ingram from the University of Dublin, Jaime Oraa and Felipe Gomez from the University of Deusto, Markku Suksi (Abo Akademi) and Fred Grünfeld from the University of Maastricht. At that time, there was also Aisling Reidy from the University of Essex. I represented the Catholic University of Leuven.*

**How was the launch of the programme prepared?**

*We set up the programme in the Spring and the Summer of 1997, basically during three meetings.*
*Our first meeting was in Venice, in the Palazzo Ducale. I remember that we met in an office from where we had a view on San Giorgio Maggiore. When we began our meeting, the idea was to have a programme with common courses taught during the first semester in Padua. But then, during our stay, the mayor of Venice came with an offer to host the programme in Venice. Needless to say that we were more than enthusiastic about that offer. And so, when we left our meeting, we were aiming at setting up a programme in Venice.*

*Some weeks later, we had a second preparatory meeting, this time in Bilbao. We became more concrete: we worked on the basis of a number of reports written by each of us. But the more the ideas became concrete, the more a certain anxiety became felt around the table. What would happen after the first year, which was supposed to be a "pilot year"? What would the commitments of the universities really be, in the next two years and in the long run? We got cold feet. It was then that the Vice Rector of Deusto, Julia Gonzalez, asked the rhetorical question: "After having heard all of this, shall we bury the idea?" That changed the mood. After all, no one wanted to be responsible for a failure. And so, with renewed energy we continued to work on the practical aspects of the programme. One of the big challenges was: how to find students for a programme that had no reputation and that was to take off in only a few months?*

*Finally, we had a seminar in Venice, at the Villa Hériot. It took place during a full week, in July, with the participation of quite a number of colleagues from our universities as well as experts from international organisations and NGOs. In part it was a brainstorming session: what were the needs of international*

*organisations as far as their human rights practitioners were concerned, and what could the universities offer in response? I remember in particular that one of the experts, from the UN, told us that it was important that students were taught not only about the practical aspects of human rights, but also about their theoretical foundations, because human rights operators had to be be able to convincingly counter criticism from opponents. This is still valid nowadays. The other part of the meeting was to draft a concrete programme for the first semester of the first year, with names of weekly responsible persons and lecturers during the weeks. The meeting was closed with the adoption of the Venice Charter, on 26 July 1997. It is the foundational document of the E.MA. Programme, setting out its objectives and the basic features of the inter-university cooperation.*

*And so, we could start the academic year 1997-98. The solemn opening took place in the Palazzo Ducale, in October 1997. Classes during that first year took place in the class rooms of a former secondary school on Giudecca. The next year, we moved to the monastery of San Nicoló on the Lido. It was situated in an area that had played an important role in the defence of the city, for many centuries. We were going to add a new, more peaceful, chapter to its history. In the beginning, there were still a few monks, whom we rarely saw, and who regarded us -understandably- as intruders.*

*And the rest is history.*

**Why is it still relevant to keep promoting the EMA Master Programme and human rights education nowadays?**

*When the E.MA. programme was set up, there were a number of reasons for doing so:*

*We believed in human rights and democracy. We were aware that they needed to be defended and promoted. We agreed that universities had a responsibility to form people who could explain what human rights meant and what they required, and who could help with the construction of a society and a world based on human rights and democracy.*

*We believed in a multicultural Europe, based on common European values. A programme with professors and students from various (mostly) European backgrounds could advance European integration.*

*We believed in inter-university cooperation. We brought our strengths together, and thus were able to offer a broad and multidisciplinary programme, something we could not possibly achieve in our own, individual universities.*

*And finally, we believed in the combination of theory and practice. With the support of international organisations (in particular the EU) and NGO's, we wanted to let the students see how human rights operated in practice.*

*Each and all of these reasons remain valid today.*

**Could you say something more about the importance of human rights today?**

*Sure. Human rights play a role on various levels.*

*First, human rights are important for each of us. They allow us to live our lives with a reasonable degree of autonomy. They allow us to develop ourselves, to find happiness, to love, to share. They protect each and every individual in society, especially those who are not in a position to defend themselves properly (minorities of all sorts).*

*Second, human rights and democracy are also important for our societies. A society is built on certain principles. It can function as a "group" when each member knows what he or she can expect from the other members, and what is expected from him or her. Human rights, together with the fundamental duties, form the basic "social contract" that keeps people together, and that allows societies to develop. In short, human rights are essential for a "democratic society", where everyone can feel that he or she is "included" and has something to say.*

*Third, human rights are also essential for the preservation of peace within societies and between societies. Without respect for human rights, minorities of all kind feel excluded, and take up the law in their own hands. And a regime in one country could invoke the bad treatment of a minority in another country, as a justification for a military intervention in that other country. It is not a coincidence that the international law of human rights, starting with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and then continuing with the European Convention on Human Rights (1950) and other treaties, was developed in the aftermath of the horrors of the second world war, as a means -an essential means- to preserve peace in the world and in the various regions of the world. Here in Europe, we may for years somewhat have forgotten this primary aim of human rights. This year, we were brutally reminded of the link between human rights and peace.*

**What will be the most important topics and challenges ahead that will need to be addressed in the field of human rights in Europe?**

*It seems to me that the basic challenge is simple: how to make sure that everyone can enjoy his or her fundamental rights? There may be a need to slightly adapt the catalogue of human rights -I am thinking of collective rights, such as the right to a clean environment and to a stable climate-, but there is above all a need for a better implementation of rights.*

*This is particularly important for the vulnerable people, those who do not know the ways how to obtain respect for their rights, who are insufficiently represented by interest groups. We are witnessing a transition in Europe: generational, political, economic, strategic, etc. Many people can find themselves in a difficult position, even excluded from the benefits of living in a given society. I think of people who have lost their work and thereby some of their dignity, elder people, immigrants, …*

*Populism and nationalism are also a big challenge for human rights. These are political movements fuelled by dissatisfaction with the current situation. Human rights, and the institutions set up to protect them (like the judiciary, national human rights institutes and international control bodies), are seen as the opposite of "common sense". They are an easy target. "Easy", in the sense that criticism is usually formulated without any sense for nuance. A challenge is: how to show that human rights are relevant today, for each of us?*

**Could you give a message to the students, professors, alumni, partners and staff of the Global Campus of Human Rights?**

*Let me go back to the history of the Lido. The fortress of San Nicoló was built on the primary defence line of Venice. I would say that the monastery of San Nicoló should now become a place from where to defend human rights.*

*To work one year in Venice, to study one semester in Venice, to teach during one week or a few days in Venice: these are fantastic experiences. To those who start that experience or continue with their engagement: enjoy whatever the E.MA. can bring for you: the widening of your horizon, the sharing of festive moments, the formation of friendships, and many more things.*

*But please, let us not forget the very specific nature of this programme. It is a programme on human rights and democratisation. It is based on certain fundamental values. All of us who are part of the E.MA. family, and of course also all those who form part of the wider Global Campus family, we have a certain responsibility: a responsibility to live according to these values, and to defend them, whatever the position is that we may occupy, now or later.*

*That is my wish to students, alumni, staff, colleagues and partners.*

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