Master’s degree
International Relations & International Organisation
Specialisation in International Security

PLACEMENT REPORT

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1. Introduction

As long as there is oppression, tyranny has a witness. With researcher in every continent, reporting on human rights abuses, Human Rights Watch (HRW) makes its mission to name and shame the abusers as well as the supporters of the abusers. It does so by scrupulously investigating abuses, exposing the facts widely, and pressuring those with power to respect rights and secure justice. Every year, close to 100 reports are published, covering some 90 countries. Regular meetings between HRW and governments, and organisations such as the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, or even financial institutions or corporations takes place. The aim of those meetings is to press for changes in policy and practice that promote human rights and justice around the world. At the HRW Brussels office, the advocacy team works with the European Parliament as well as the Commission and European External Action Service (EEAS) in order to raise human rights issues in third countries where the EU intervenes. Frequently, HRW researchers come to Brussels and meet with key EU and governmental officials, to discuss the human rights situation in a particular country.

I highlighted these basic facts about the organisation in order to lay down the basis for a description of my work experience as part of the HRW advocacy team. To develop better my experience over the past months, I will first explain my motivations for applying to HRW. Then, I will further explain what was expected from me, and what I was expecting from this internship, expressing my first impressions on the work and the organisation. Moreover, I will give a description of the work environment, the dynamics inside the office as well as outside. Indeed, although a big part of my job took place inside HRW office in Brussels, a relatively important part of my task was also to go to meetings at the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the EEAS, amongst others.

2. The search for a placement

Having chosen the specialisation of International Security, I had the opportunity to study every aspect of this field. In addition, the placement program offered me the chance to deepen my knowledge and interest in a specific field, to experience how the theory works in practice. Although I am personally interested in terrorism, I found the relation between human rights and security highly interesting. In particular, I find interesting the thin line between what is acceptable to do for security reasons and when does these security measure become human
rights abuses. This has awakened an interest in how human rights can be respected under crisis situation, such as a high terrorist threat in the country. During my internship at HRW, I had the opportunity to research this topic by taking the case study of Belgium, but this will be further developed in the following part of this report.

I first applied for an internship at Human Rights Watch in their EU Advocacy department in Brussels in April 2015, before the start of my Master degree. Having no availabilities, my application was then rejected, but the organisation was still interested in my application. When I applied again in November 2015, they invited me for an interview in their office in Brussels, where I met my current supervisor Ms Claire Ivers and her associate Claudio Francavilla. During this brief interview, I was asked various questions concerning my motivations and the interview quickly turned into a friendly chat. Following this meeting, I had to write a short essay of maximum two pages about the EU Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy, to assess my English skills. Two weeks past until I received a call from Mr Francavilla asking me if I would be available for an internship at their Brussels office from September onwards for a period of four months. I was first surprised to receive this call, and I gladly accepted the offer. On the same day, I received an e-mail from Mr Francavilla regarding all the documents required in order to start this internship with them. One of their requirements was that I receive a grant from my university, and this was non-negotiable. I was therefore faced with a new application procedure.

Applying for the Erasmus + grant was more difficult than initiated as I was living in Brussels and the internship was in Brussels. As I was returning to Brussels for my internship, in addition to the documents for the Erasmus+ grant, I had to write a letter of motivation for this so called “return to home” placement. The application procedure was then slowed down due to the summer break. During that time, being still unsure about where I will be in September, I kept on searching for other internships in case I would not receive the Erasmus + grant and would not be able to start at HRW. In July, I had a reply from the French National Counter Terrorism Coordination Unit to which I had applied earlier that year. They invited me for an interview in Paris with the deputy head of unit. The interview took place in late July, and it went really well, although it was rather short. In August, I still found myself with no internship confirmed for the month of September. Eventually, after overcoming many administrative obstacles, and filling out numerous documents, I was finally granted this grant and was thus allowed to do my internship. This news came as a great relief for me since I finally had an internship confirmed. Only a few weeks later, in late August, I received a reply
from the French National Counter Terrorism Coordination Unit which informed me that they would gladly have me as an intern from January onwards for a period of six months. This meant that not only did I have a confirmed internship in an outstanding NGO from September onwards, but I also had an amazing opportunity starting in January.

3. Working at Human Rights Watch

On my first day at Human Rights Watch, I was welcomed by Claire Ivers, my supervisor. She kindly explained me how the office works, what she and her associate Claudio were doing for HRW, and so on. She then introduced me to every member in the office. HRW shares its office with three other NGOs: The Human Rights House Foundation, the International Coalition for the Criminal Court and Crisis Action. Although we were several NGOs in the same office, the amount of people was rather small, we were around 25 people in total. The Advocacy department of HRW was composed of Lotte Leicht, the HRW EU Advocacy director, Claire Ivers, HRW Senior EU Advocate, and Claudio Francavilla, HRW EU Advocacy associate. Once I was introduced to everyone, I had to deal with all the technical procedures, such as log in account details and entrance badges.

I was the only new intern arriving in the office in beginning of September. We were a total of about 8 interns, from three different NGOs. Although most of them had already been working for a couple of months together, I was quickly included in the group. The atmosphere in the office was extremely friendly. I was nicely surprised when I started to work for HRW: Although there was a defined hierarchy in the office, Claire and Claudio always referred to me as their colleagues and introduced me as such. I immediately felt like I was part of the team.

My first task consisted of taking notes of the European Parliament hearing, more precisely the Foreign Affairs (AFET) committee meeting on the attempted coup in Turkey. I had to watch this hearing online, on the European Parliament website. I was not used to take notes of parliamentary hearings, therefore I spent an excessive amount of time on it. At first, I was not sure to understand why it was important to take such extensive notes about which Member of the European Parliament (MEP) said what on a specific topic. Yet, after a few weeks at HRW, I understood that these notes help us identified key MEPs who are important or attach great important in specific issues, such as human rights violation in a third country with which the EU is involved. Another important part of my internship was to help organising the visit of HRW researchers to Brussels. This meant that I was in charge of contacting all the relevant persons in the EU institutions and arranging meetings with them. Once this done, I
would go with the researchers to the different meetings to the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the EEAS.

A major highlight of my internship was working with HRW Senior Researcher on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Letta Tayler on her report on Belgium’s response to the Paris and Brussels attacks. Indeed, Ms Tayler’s research found that several of Belgium’s new counterterrorism laws and regulations introduced in the aftermaths of the Brussels attacks threaten human rights including the rights to movement, liberty, freedom of expression and privacy. Moreover, some police operations have involved apparent beatings or other use of excessive force. Ms Tayler came over to Brussels at the end of September to conduct video interviews, and I had the opportunity to accompany her during the week. During 4 days, we interviewed victims of alleged verbal or physical police abuses, as well as lawyers representing suspected terrorists, and international organisations such as the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre (ESISC). This experience allowed me to discover the other side of HRW work, specially how HRW researchers investigate human rights abuses, conduct interviews, and finally reach the advocacy phase where they meet with key EU actors to discuss and share their findings. This project concerned a topic which interests me greatly, and I was really grateful to work on it. After this short week of video interviews, Ms Tayler asked me to keep working with her on this report until its release, and help her with various tasks including translation tasks. Although translation was not part of my internship description, it was extremely interesting as I was reading on specific topics which were of my interest and learned how to use this information in HRW advantage. The report was finally released on November 4th 2016, and in that same week was met with the relevant Belgian ministries as well as key EU actors. This experience enabled me to fully understand how HRW researchers investigate the human rights abuses, report on it, and finally advocate to relevant EU and national actors.

4. Contrast between expectations and reality

I was expecting my tasks to be a lot of desk work, doing research on specific issues or specific countries, and do some administrative work. The reality was a bit different. I organised many schedules for HRW researcher coming over to Brussels, which included many e-mails and phone calls. However, once the schedule organised, I would have the possibility to assist the meetings with the HRW researcher. This opportunity allowed me to experience the work of HRW EU advocacy team. During those exchanges, the researcher would describe the human
rights situation in the particular country discussed, and would make suggestions and push for amendments to be made to EP resolutions. This part is probably the most important and it can often be frustrating since not every meeting leads to changes. Over the months, I realised how important advocacy is, and how easily it can be overlooked by key actors who can actually influence important decisions.

One key aspect of the HRW EU Advocacy department is how the team jumps from one country to another, and never focuses on one particular region or country. Researchers from Asia, Africa, and Middle East came over to Brussels, and each time I helped organising their schedule and meetings with EU officials. One could see this as a problem, but I considered this as an opportunity to broaden my curiosity and my knowledge. I was nonetheless hoping for long term projects on a specific country which would help me understand better the work of EU advocacy. In a sense, I had this experience with Ms Tayler and her report on Belgium’s response to the Brussels attacks. But this project did not need every day work, as I mainly worked upon request from Ms Tayler. While some of the days could be hectic with a great amount of work, some days could be really quiet with little work to do. This is why I decided to talk to my supervisor Claire Ivers to discuss possible long term projects.

Claire understood my concerns, and directly arranged a meeting with me so we could discuss future projects. She asked me to make a table of all the elections taking place in European Member States over the next few years, and provide an analysis of the current situation for each Member States who had upcoming elections this year. The table I started will be used by HRW staff who is not familiar with the EU and its politics, and will be regularly updated by future interns. This task was quite challenging, especially when doing an analysis of the situation, since it was not always easy to find information in English or French. Nonetheless, this was a continuous project I worked on until the end of my internship. But I was also assigned smaller tasks such as organising meetings, attending conferences, translating short texts when necessary. Claire and Claudio were always paying attention to my needs, frequently asking if everything was okay, if I was happy with the work I had, and so on. I never felt like I could not express myself freely, or request anything from them. They were really open and happy to help me if needed.

5. Finding a balance between work and life
Throughout this report, I have developed the professional experience I gained by working at HRW. However, this experience was not limited to the work done in the office. This internship
at Human Rights Watch has definitely enriched my life in a number of ways, which go beyond the set of tasks assigned by my supervisor that enabled me to gain work experience as well as learn from the accomplished staff I had the pleasure to work with.

First, the initial image I had of Brussels, and especially the European quarter where the HRW office is, was a really formal one, yet this was quickly dismantled. Indeed, Brussels being the capital of Europe, one can find over 180 different nationalities, which creates an impressive international environment. Having grown up in Brussels, I already knew the city. However, I left Belgium when I was 18 to study abroad. Therefore, once I came back, I rediscovered the city and realised all the opportunities it offers. The European quarter is probably the most international neighbourhood of Brussels. Living abroad in an international environment for four years, I was afraid to come back to Belgium and lose this international atmosphere, but I was pleasantly surprised when I started my internship since we were almost 10 different nationalities represented in the office.

From my first week onwards, I was introduced to all the interns. I quickly realised that HRW staff as well as the other NGOs present in the office are all friends with each other. I was immediately included into this group, and introduced to the office tradition: the monthly get together drink in the office. During those monthly events, newcomers had the possibility to get to know the other staff members. I rapidly bounded with the other interns, and created great relationships with them. We often see each other outside the office, and we have developed great friendships. During those months, I have never felt like I did not belong there or looked down by anyone. Interns as well as other staff members were interested in engaging professional and personal conversations. I have met open-minded and interesting people who were all passionate by their work. Something that almost everyone in the office had in common was language classes. As a matter of fact, many people in the office were learning French or Chinese or another language, and I also started Arabic classes. This lead to tandem discussions where I would teach French to my colleagues, and I would in return practice another language such as Dutch. This helped creating an additional link between us.

6. Conclusion

Choosing the International Security specialisation of the Master IRIO, and personally specialising in counter-terrorism, I always focused on this particular field. However, the placement program helped me discovering new possibilities and widened my interests.
Working at Human Rights Watch enabled me to understand the reality of human rights abuses currently happening across the world. Working at HRW taught me many valuable lessons.

First, how HRW researchers analyse the situation, and report on human rights abuses, and finally come to Brussels to meet key EU actors and address those issues to them. Over the past months, I have learned what advocacy means, how does the theory works in practice, and how an NGO can make a difference at a EU level. The contrast between my expectations and the reality of the work was rather small. My expectations were all met, and even more: the fact that I had the opportunity to go several times to the European Parliament, the Commission or the European External Action Service enabled me to fully appreciate HRW’s work.

Second, it thought me to be responsible and organised. During my internship, I was often in charge of organising schedule for HRW researchers or local activists and this required a lot of organisation, you need to be able to re-arrange your schedule on the spot. Although the workload can sometimes be really small, the advocacy department is really unpredictable and more than once I found myself arriving in the office just to leave minutes later for an unexpected meeting at the EEAS or the Commission. I found this aspect of the internship extremely exciting. In addition to that, I also from time to time asked Claire if I could attend an EP public hearing or conference, and she would agree to let me go.

Finally, this internship allowed me to work in a professional environment and more importantly to widen my horizons and field of interests. Over the past 4 months at HRW, I have met inspiring people from different NGOs, as well as numerous EU officials from the EP, the EEAS, Commission, or even the Council. They all had one thing in common: they were passionate by their work. This environment not only motivated me, but it also made me aware of all the opportunities in this field.