Placement Report

Internship at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bratislava, Slovakia

Trainee Policy Department

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Placement Report

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International Security Track, MA International Relations
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Introduction

In this internship report I present and evaluate the experiences during my placement at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bratislava, Slovakia. This internship took place from 12 September 2016 until 31 January 2017. These five months were very interesting for the developments of my personal, professional and academic skills and in this report I will highlight some of these developments. In order to evaluate this internship in a structured manner, the first part will pay attention to the preparation process prior to the internship. The second and most important part will focus on the evaluation of tasks and responsibilities during the placement, together with a small description of the Embassy itself and practical implications of living in Bratislava. The last part will have a look into the future and assess the role of this internship in preparing for work-live.

Part 1: Preparation Process

Orientation

In the preparations prior to the placement, I first of all questioned myself what I would be interested in and what sort of internship fits with this description. My interests are in the field of international politics, international relations, security and the European Union. Besides, the first requirement of my placement was that it should be abroad in a somewhat (western) developed country. My initial choice was to apply for international organizations in the field of security, such as the department of disbarment at the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. However, it became clear that such internships would take a lot of luck due to the popularity of these placements and that the deadlines for the application process were very early and strict.

Many of my fellow students have applied of internships at Embassies, and their experiences were often very positive. When I explored this option more, I concluded that I would like to take my placement at an Embassy as well. At an Embassy, I would be able to work with foreign affairs policies from the Netherlands, could train my networking skills and to represent a government in a foreign country. At the same time I would be able to develop my understanding of how international politics and international relations in practice work and I could do an internship abroad.

Although Slovakia not my first choice and the first Embassy I applied for, the Embassy and the country were interesting to me. The selection of the Embassy of the Netherland in Bratislava was mainly driven by the presidency over the European Council Slovakia had during my placement (from July 2016 until December 2016) which was according to me a perfect opportunity to gain more insight in European politics in a time-span where many activities tied to the EU were organized. In addition, I wrote my bachelor thesis about Slovakia which triggered my attention for the economic situation in Slovakia. Also the Central-Eastern Europe region has my overall interest since in security perspective it has an important position with regard to Russia. Besides, the Embassy in Bratislava consists of a
small team (12 staff members) with an interlinked policy team which would give me responsibilities. And last, I have never been in this region, thus with regard to travelling in my spare time, there were many new options to explore.

**Application**

The application procedure consisted of two rounds and was well organized. The first round required a written letter of motivation and CV. Since I already contacted some of the embassies after I was rejected, I had a fairly good understanding of what my strengths and weaknesses would be in this stage. This helped me in clearly defining what I had to offer and what I was looking for in the internship. The second round consisted of a skype interview with my supervisor and a staff member. This was the first skype interview I had ever done, so this stage required more preparation. I conducted extensive research on the topic of Slovakia and by preparing possible questions. For example, the referendum on Brexit had just taken place and I investigated Slovakia’s position in this. This question came back in the interview. Thus, this helped to a great extent in the interview, and in my opinion, the interview was of high quality.

**Preparation**

In the weeks before the start of the placement I started preparing by following Slovak news and exploring the political systems of the country. I also contacted the former intern at the Embassy to ask for suggestions for additional information. Accommodation was easily arranged by taking over this intern’s apartment. Financially, I have not arranged a scholarship due to the fact that the compensation which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands provided would be sufficient and made it unable to apply for additional financial support. I also contacted a fellow-student who had done his Erasmus studies in Bratislava. However, except from exploring the political system and the history of the country, I acknowledged that it is impossible to be completely prepared for every situation and that I just had to experience the new country.

**Expectation**

Due to the small composition of the Embassy, I expected to closely cooperate with staff members in organizing projects. In my motivation letter and in the interview the main focus was on the economic policy department, and the Embassy had an opportunity for me to work in the economic policy team. As already mentioned, Slovakia would preside the European Council and I therefore expected more incoming missions in which I could co-organize meetings and briefings. Besides these daily activities, I expected to attend meetings, conferences and seminars and to report back to the Embassy. I also hoped to be able to assist the Ambassador at meetings and opening events.
**Part 2: During the Internship**

*Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bratislava*

In order to better explain the tasks and responsibilities at the Embassy and to assess them in a suitable way, I will first briefly introduce the Embassy of the Netherlands in Slovakia. This Embassy can be defined as a small organization with 12 employees, including the Ambassador and Head of Mission. The objectives of the Embassy are to stimulate economic cooperation and Dutch investments in Slovakia, to promote the rule of law in Slovakia and inclusion of minorities and (in the second half of 2016) the closer cooperation on a European level by means of the Slovak presidency in the European Council (annual plan 2016).

The policy teams are thus rather small and focusing on economic, political and cultural policies. This team promotes Dutch interests in Slovakia by organizing events and meetings, or providing information to both partners. The Embassy also consisted of a consular team, although no consular affairs (such as Visa applications) were performed. This consular team mainly organized, during the Slovak presidency, the incoming missions from the Netherlands. In practical terms this included the organizational involvement of transporting, accommodating and briefing incoming ministers and state secretaries.

Since this Embassy was quite small, close cooperation existed between the various employees. This created a structure based on equality in which the Ambassador and Head of Mission fulfilled the management roles.

*Tasks and Responsibilities*

During my placement, I performed various tasks which I will describe in this part. Together with the description of these activities, I will also evaluate my working attitude and explain which tasks went well and what could have been done different.

1. The most significant task I performed during my internship was researching the relations between Slovakia and other Visegrad Four countries (Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic). The Embassy aimed at gaining more insight in the different and similar policy positions of these four countries and how that could be explained by means of the bilingual relations. Since these four countries in some cases take the same positions in debates in the EU, but in other cases have completely opposite views. In order to find the answers to these differences and similarities, I first of all explored academic writings on these relations in order to create a context in which policies could be placed. Second, I interviewed two experts on these topics to create the general policy directions these countries had. One of these experts worked for the think-tank Slovak Foreign Policy Association, which I met via a seminar. I also attended conferences and seminars on this topic and afterwards discussed this with the
speakers. Then I identified a few topics which were interesting to me to present and last I investigate current news releases to gain up to date information. This research was presented in the form of a policy paper.

Together with my supervisor I evaluated the process and the final product and he concluded that it was very useful for the Embassy for the identification of key policy topics and the positions of the Visegrad Four countries. Some suggestions were to make more use of my network and more applying some more nuances, but in general the Embassy was very positive about the result. I agree with his feedback on using my network more; this was something I found rather difficult in the research process. Mainly because interviewing in research context was new to me, and because I found it difficult to identify the suitable English speaking experts for my research.

2. Another important task I performed during my internship was the organization of a media-campaign on Facebook around the 10th of December 2016 which was known as International Human Rights Day and organized by the United Nations. The aim of this day was to pay more public attention to Human Rights abuses and to make citizens aware of their rights. Two weeks before brainstorming about this campaign, a social media report on the use of Facebook by the Embassy in Bratislava was published. This research claimed that personal Facebook-posts of staff members created more response than general posts. Therefore the aim of this media-campaign was to use this strength in order to reach and interact with as many followers possible.

This campaign I set up together with a colleague and took place in the two weeks before the 10th of December. On each of these days I posted a photo of a staff member holding a sign which said ‘I stand up for’ (this was this year’s theme) complemented with a personal message from the employee. On the 10th of December the campaign ended with a video-compilation in which all staff members performed. Together with these photos, we nominated other Embassies all over the world to respondand publish a similar photo. In order to reach these Embassies, I made use of my personal network of fellow students working at other Embassies. This campaign was very successful; the reach and interaction of the Facebookpage was 8 times higher than before the campaign. Also the nomination-campaign was very successful and around 40 Embassies all over the world were participating and nominating other Embassies. Even a few days after the end of the campaign, this nominating process still took place. The ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague reported in its newsfeed about our campaign, and also the United Nations reacted that the campaign was very successful and interesting.
When evaluating my own working attitude during this campaign, I would describe it as enthusiastic and creative. I think that this campaign was so successful due to the enjoyment and motivation we had. Especially when the nomination-challenge started to speed up, the pleasure in this project increased which stimulated to contact more and more Embassies.

3. I also received the responsibility to organize an event in Bratislava interlinked with the International Human Rights Day. However, it had to be done in short-term (one month) and there were no large financial budgets available. In order to overcome these problems, I sought cooperation with cultural institutes in Bratislava and the Polish Cultural Institute was willing to cooperate. The event we organized was a movie screening of two Human Rights related movies. The ministry of Foreign Affairs supported in providing one of these movies for free. The other movie was contributed by the Polish Institute. The movies were screened under the title of ‘Cheers for Human Rights’ in the bar of a cultural centre in Bratislava for a small amount of money. Unfortunately not many participants were present and this was mainly because of miscommunication on the promotion of the event.

When evaluating this event, the promotion was key issue and could be overcome by controlling it more and to start earlier with advertising. Besides, a problem occurred with the venue; the initial movie-screening should have taken place at a different cultural bar, but unfortunately, this location was not ready before the event. In one week time, we had to change plans and were able to still organize the event in the bar of the cultural event. This also meant that in the official promotion material, the wrong location was printed. This could be one of the explanations of the low turnout. In my opinion, I handled this setback of the venue quite quickly and well by directly contacting the Polish Institute and the managers of the locations.

4. I also co-organized a Sinterklaasevent on the 5th of December at the Neerlandistiek Department at the University of Bratislava. This event was partly organized by the students of the Department, but this year they also included the Embassy in order to create a more significant event which would also be accessible for non-students. My tasks in this event were the promotion of the event and practical organization with regard to catering and also to perform the duty of ‘Piet’. The event was very successful; there were many participants, mainly from the Dutch community in Bratislava. One issue which could be improved was the coordination with the University, since some agreements were not clear. My working attitude was enthusiastic, but in that way also missing the attention for the details.
Another responsibility I had was to manage trade requests from Dutch enterprises who were informing on the investment culture in Slovakia. This involved working with identifying the interests these Dutch companies had, investigating the legal framework and the current applicable legislation in Slovakia, finding partners and working with an online database of Slovak companies. Some examples of trade requests were investigating franchise possibilities, finding information on Corporate Social Responsibility of Slovak based Dutch companies, internet banking and biomass. My working attitude in this assignment was active and paying attention to small details. I really aimed at investigating all the important elements for the businesses. These requests I find very interesting since it combined theoretical information with practical implications and my colleagues and I were positive on my findings.

Some smaller responsibilities were updating the Embassy-social media accounts and the webpage of the Embassy. Also reading the Slovak news and reporting important events. Besides, attending conferences and seminars, taking notes and writing small reports in order to brief the Ambassador and Head of Mission on the discussions. These smaller responsibilities in my opinion were well performed. At conferences I always tried to talk to as many people as possible, my attitude was curious and aiming at learning from different people. I acknowledge that these sorts of contacts are very important, since I have just this network a few more times when organizing events.

In November the Embassy had the obligation to define a new annual plan for 2017. In this process I helped identifying key objectives of the upcoming year and to assess whether or not this should be a one of the main goals of the Embassy. Although my attitude was trying to think outside the box and to come up with new ideas, it did not always contribute to the creation of the annual plan. This can be explained by the lack of experience in the field of diplomacy.

After it was finished, my task was to visualize the annual plan in order to prevent the plan from disappearing in a drawer of the desk and forgetting it for the rest of the year. First of all I came up with the idea of creating a puzzle of which all the staff members received some pieces. Every piece consisted one of the goals as defined in the annual plan and when achieved this goal, this piece was allowed to be put in the puzzle. I presented this idea, however, my supervisor saw some limitations in it due to the small size of the Embassy which meant that interdisciplinary cooperation was necessary. With this feedback I designed an interactive poster which connected the various departments, but also allowing staff members to add their personal goals in it. Unfortunately, there was a lack of time to finish the printing of the poster before the end of my placement, but hopefully my successor is able to pick up this project.
Also in this assignment, I assess myself as a person that is able to come up with new ideas, however I am also eager to forget about the smaller details. This was very visible in this assignment.

**Evaluation**

When assessing my working attitude, I would describe it as active and eager to learn. I was enthusiastic about new projects and was able to think outside the box and come up with new ideas. Besides, I was able to work independent, but this was I think also my weakness. Since I was able to work on my own, I did not always ask for feedback or support. This could be more helpful when performing my tasks and responsibilities.

By organizing various events on behalf of the Embassy of the Netherlands in Slovakia I developed myself. During this placement I learned to pay more attention to the overall objective of the events. Since I was part of the Embassy, and thus part of the official representation of the Netherlands, it was important not only to think outside the box, but also identify why it would be important that certain activities were organized and not to forget about the smaller details. This included communicating in a formal way as well, not only in spoken language, but mainly in writing. I also learned to make more use of colleagues and my network and how networking was done. That it is easier to ask for a favour from someone you have talked to that to contact them straight away. This also meant that I developed my co-operation skills by learning to be part of a team and how being part of a team works. And last, I learned how to organize and execute projects, how to think about the organization and involvement of different parties, and how to deal with setbacks.

In general, I developed my understanding of international politics and how international relations work. For example how national policies in the Netherlands are converted in foreign policies and how an Embassy plays a role in this foreign policy. This role is not only limited to the official level of Ambassador versus politicians, but also the inclusion of the business area and the community overall. For instance how social projects organized by the Embassy on very small scale, correspond with the larger objectives of the Embassy which is established by the ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague and defined by national politicians.

My supervisor gave me room to pick up my own projects and to define them in my own way. When discussing my ideas with him, he was able to provide me with suitable feedback. He brought me various interesting projects which I could take on. At the same time, his open style of supervising me, created sometimes the feeling that he was not completely up to date with my projects and with my activities. However, as I already addressed before, that could also be part of me independent working.

Overall my expectations were satisfied. Due to small composition of the Embassy, I was able to help out with various events in different policy areas. Especially the projects which I was autonomously
organizing were meeting my expectations and helped me learn how to better manage events myself. I also understand better how an Embassy and international relations work in practice and what role this organization has within the broader national policies. What was not meeting my expectations was the level of involvement with the Slovak presidency. This was due to the nature of the organization; organizing the accommodation and transport was not part of my tasks and briefing incoming missions was often classified information which made it unable for me to attend. Also the involvement with the work of the Ambassador was not meeting my expectations; I only assisted him a few times to events. Assisting in meetings was not possible, since it covered classified work.

The connection between the placement and my degree programme was very present. Institutions which were important for my activities during the internship were familiar to me. This also applied for the procedures within these institutions. Also analytical and critical thinking was present during this internship. Besides, the historical context of Central Eastern Europe, which is defining for how politics and society work today, was addressed during the degree programme. In addition, the knowledge gained during my specialization track, International Security, was somewhat applicable during this placement by my focus in the research paper on energy security and reliance on Russia, although it was for a small extent. In general I would state that during the degree programme a theoretical framework is presented which during the internship became more applicable by seeing international relations in practice.

Practical Implications Living in Bratislava

It is difficult to find accommodation in Bratislava, but I fortunately the former intern was able to put me in contact with his flat mate. The rent for the flat was around 300 Euro, which was covered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I also received an internship compensation of around 560 Euro, which was sufficient to cover living costs in Bratislava. Additional trips and activities I have paid by my savings. Socially, I made many friends by meeting up with fellow interns from other Embassies or by young internationals from multination companies which were present in Slovakia. In general, Bratislava is a small city with a small international community which makes it easy to meet these internationals.

With the Slovak population it was rather difficult to make close contacts since most of them do not speak English. In order to really understand the Slovak culture and to experience life at, for example, the countryside, the Slovak language is a pre. This limited me to fully understand the Slovak culture, since it is essential to be able to speak to its people. On the other hand, the Slovak culture is in general closed and not really open to foreigners which could be explained by the history of imperialism. This is not only visible in private social contact with Slovaks, but also in their professional relations. It is thus difficult to get to know the ‘real Slovak’.
Part 3: Future

This placement did provide me with some clarity about future prospective, orientations and useful contacts. First of all, from this internship it became clear to me that I would like to start my professional career in an area of international politics. I enjoyed being ‘in the centre’ of were decisions were made. Especially in a government department, there is access to more (classified) information which I find very interesting since it gives more insight in why decisions are made. However, I would see myself rather in a more advising or analytical role instead of a decision-maker.

Besides, I do not prefer a professional career at an Embassy since my experience was that the structure of the organization is quite hierarchical. The decisions are made by national government in The Hague, and the representatives in other countries have to execute them. However, during my placement it appeared a few times that the national government was not completely up to date with the situation in Slovakia, resulting in inefficient policies which were non applicable in the field. In additional and interlinked to the hierarchical structure of the department, is the inflexible character of the Embassy and the Foreign Affairs ministry. Financial requests and support for projects take many procedural steps and due to the official position as a representative of the national government, decisions are made very carefully, thus taking a long time. And last, since the Embassy is a representation of the national government, the attitude of citizens is rather distant since they experience an Embassy as an official and important institute. I experienced this in discussing issues when people were less open to give honest opinions.

With regard to my future professional prospects, it became clearer to me that I would prefer an occupation in a governmental or semi-governmental organization in which there is more focus on international security issues, where I can provide with advice or an analysis of government policy, but which is still interlinked with a governmental institute.

Recommendations

I would recommend this placement at the Embassy of the Netherlands in Slovakia to future students. Due to the fact that the country is quite small, it is possible to understand its politics in a short amount of time. Besides, Slovakia has an interesting position in the conflicts between the EU and Russia, which makes this placement interesting for students of international politics. In order to make the placement a success, some useful tips are to be assertive, to ask question and to try to involve in many different projects. In that way, a better understanding of the whole Embassy and its responsibilities is possible. Second, investigate the political environment in the country. This will help in creating context for domestic politics in the country. Third, networking is very useful. It is easier to arrange issues when you have already spoken to the right person before. And last, when considering a placement in Slovakia, it is a useful characteristic to speak the Slovak language in order to be able to speak to the Slovak people.
Conclusion

This placement at the Embassy of the Netherlands in Bratislava, Slovakia taught me various new things. I am looking back at an informative and interesting time during which I met wonderful and inspiring people. Although not all my expectations were met, I would recommend this placement in Bratislava.

First of all I now understand the politics in Central and Eastern Europe to a greater extent. What can be learned from textbooks is different than experiencing this daily way of governing a post-communist country. I now better understand how corruption and Euro-scepticism is shaped in the historical and political context of Slovakia. Since Slovakia is not the exception to the rule with regard to its neighbouring countries, I experience a deeper understanding of the region in its whole.

Besides, due to my internship at the Embassy, I now have a better understanding of how representatives of countries work in practice and how this influences international politics. Foreign relations of the Netherlands do not only happen in The Hague, but are put in practice by having a cup of coffee with a fellow Ambassador in another country. I started to understand how agreements and deals are made and what reciprocity means.

In addition, I have learned more about my strengths and weaknesses. When placed in a different environment, it is no longer possible to execute things in the same way I always did. By adapting to the new situation, I learned about how I am and how I can achieve my goals. But also what are still some points in which I can develop myself more.

And last, living in another country develops an understanding of my own home state. It creates a more critical perspective on how things are done in both Slovakia and in the Netherlands; taking issues for granted is no longer a possibility. For me this meant that I started to appreciate the Netherlands more and that how this country is developed is not the standard but rather an exception. I claim this especially with regard to the large presence of corruption in Slovakia, which is visible in all layers of society and in the citizens of the country.

Overall, I had a wonderful time in Slovakia. It was a very special experience also due to the presidency of Slovakia over the European Union. I have learned some valuable lessons and was able to contribute to a government department at the same time.