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Introduction

An MA student in International Relations and Organisation, specialising in International Political Economy, this report describes my experience during my placement that I undertook as part of my studies. It describes the search for the placement and my work during it.

My placement was at the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union, the administrators for two EU institutions: the Council of the EU (formerly the Council of Ministers) and the European Council (the bi-monthly summits of the heads of state and government of the member states). It also assists the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU (Slovakia and Malta during my tenure) and the President of the European Council (Donald Tusk). It plays a significant role in the policy-making process of the EU, though is less commented on and takes on just a fraction of the trainees of the European Commission. Working here, therefore, can allow for a reasonable amount of individual influence. Working in communication, as I did, offers the ability to gain a broad-based understanding of the Council’s workings and meet with different actors. This report describes my search for a placement, practicalities, my role, the extent it met my expectations, the work-life balance and the opportunities it has presented.

The trainee intake, including myself, and European Council President Donald Tusk
1. Choosing where to work and finding a placement

So as to build upon my specialisation in International Political Economy, it was important for me to secure a placement that involved public affairs. With a bachelor’s in European Studies, I have knowledge of the European institutions and policy-making processes, so working in a public affairs role in a European-wide actors would have been ideal; it would allow me to build upon both my undergraduate and postgraduate academic skillsets in a professional environment. For networking purposes, as it’s the base for the largest amount of EU-related activity, being located in Brussels was preferable to the other cities where EU institutions, agencies, missions and other European actors were based.

Many EU institutions and agencies only recruit on an annual or bi-annual basis, which limited me in to make applications for bureaus where such recruitment patterns fitted into my schedule. The process overall was straightforward, but I did complete a large amount of applications and managing to find an internship did take perseverance. I devoted a large amount of time to ensuring that my CV, cover letters and LinkedIn profile were as convincing as possible before starting on applications. I would recommend future students applying for similar positions do the same – they are intensely competitive and you will be competing against many people for the role. Investing time in the applications is time wasted, therefore, if you are not able to demonstrate your professionalism and have learnt how to sell your abilities. Once I had completed this stage, I moved onto to make as many relevant applications as possible – again, the field is competitive. I applied for those available, including in the European Parliament, the EU mission in Washington D.C. and the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union. I also applied for various private- and third-sector organisations. The responses were frequently non-existent at first, but after a while, the communication directorate of the Council of the EU, where I had written a general application, wrote to me to offer me a position, which I accepted.
2. Practicalities

Finding a place to live in Brussels was initially challenging. There were a variety of places online, but quite a few came across as scams and it was difficult to verify their quality. In the end I decided to stay with a friend, who lived in the city, for a couple of days and fit in as many visits as possible. I would strongly recommend this approach as it was a lot more fruitful; if you do not have a friend in the city it is worth renting a bed in a hostel or Airbnb for a couple of nights. The quality of places I visited varied in quality dramatically. The place I chose is quite small, but relatively affordable, modern and very central. I pay €460 including furnishes and utilities, excluding internet, which seems to be at the lower end of room prices in the city. Locals I have spoken to are more knowledgeable of lower-priced accommodation than fellow foreign interns, so I would recommend seeking advice from Belgians already living in the city if you can. Personally I prefer to live in the city centre and commute to the European quarter, which is a few kilometres away. There are more activities going on and better nightlife in the centre, and commuting the couple of kilometres Schuman is not difficult. Nonetheless, some people I spoke to prefer to walk to work and prefer the more upmarket vibe around the institutions. Rent costs are similar.

For living costs, as my internship was with an EU institution I was not eligible for Erasmus funding. I was, however, eligible for Marco Polo funding, which pays a similar amount. In terms of moving here, while I did not have a huge amount of belongings, I did have certain items, such as a bicycle, that would have required more than one train journey. As the train journey is long, not particularly cheap and has two changes, it made more sense to rent a car. I would recommend Avis, as their one-way charges are not too high and they do not charge extra for greater distances.

City registration is legally mandatory if you are staying here for over three months. You register in the commune, of which there are 19. The level of bureaucracy varies dramatically in each. For the central one, where I live, registration is possible in English and can partially be undertaken online, while others may require all forms to be done in hard-copy and in Dutch or French. All registrations require some form of in-person visit (mine after a five month wait) and everyone receives a police investigation.

In terms of a sim card, I would recommend Orange and their ‘Temporal Giga’ plan, which is quite affordable and can be ordered online. For transportation, I use my bicycle (tip: there is an outdoor elevator by the Palais de Justice that allows you to avoid cycling or walking up the hill to the East of the city). The cycling infrastructure is nothing like the Netherlands – if that does not suit you then public transportation here is quite comprehensive, though it stops around midnight.

Brussels is quite an easy-living city and rental costs are lower than comparable capitals. Personally I very much like living here and if you are someone who enjoys chilling and talking over a beer (or chocolate or waffle) you should find the city great. Those who prefer cities more salubrious or intense may find it a bit dirty or quiet. There is a fair amount of bureaucracy, but it also tends to function effectively and the infrastructure is reasonably good.
3. Working at the Council of the EU

The first day of my work at the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union was mostly comprised of introductory sessions. These introductory sessions covered the workings of the Council and European Council as well as the working practices there. They were useful for get an initial overview of the institutions. They also served the use of getting to know the other new trainees.

After this, I was introduced to my unit – web communication. This included my supervisor – the head of editorial sector – as well as the head of unit and ten other staff. These included colleagues of communication officer grade, who I would frequently collaborate with, as well as a higher-level member of staff who specialised in economic issues, who I would in future undertake work for. There was one other intern in my unit. The office was friendly and, in comparison with other units, younger, more equal in gender-balance and less formal. I was provided material that covered the working of the unit and how it fitted in within the Council.

I was eased into my work relatively slowly, with tasks initially set for me that were manageable. The team was supportive and assisted me in quickly learning what was needed to undertake the work. My colleagues were very friendly and welcoming.

In terms of work assigned to me, a substantial portion of it consisted of writing policy pages that were to be published online, for an audience primarily composed of national ministers, academics and students. They were descriptive pages that covered European Commission proposals that were being discussed, negotiated and amended in the Council. Writing these involved researching the proposals and liaising with the relevant policy units. My supervisor offered me freedom in terms of which policies I worked on. I was therefore able to research and write papers on policies that were of most relevance to my specialisation of International Political Economy. These policies included the EU’s 2017 budget, which involved comprehensive research into all areas of spending; the Digital Single Market issue of geoblocking; and substantial regulatory updates to anti-money laundering measures. I also wrote a policy page on ‘Circular economy’ legislative proposals, which involved learning about interesting and innovative ideas in how the private sector is adapting to tighter emissions standards through end-to-end transformation in supply chains and refocussing on added value. This project was particularly useful as it assisted me in securing the paid traineeship in a consultancy, in transport and energy policy, which I will be working in hereafter.

Writing the policy pages required reading a large variety of documentation. This included the European Commission policy directive and amendments posed by national permanent representations. I made notes during the progression of the implementation process in the Council, which could include attending the working parties to fully comprehend the situation. Sometimes, it was necessary to liaise with different actors to gain an understanding of the direction in which policies were likely to take. For example, if a common position in the relevant ministerial Council was likely to be reached, or it was possible for it to be passed with time and amendments, or was there was a good chance it would be ‘thrown into the long grass’ and never happen. Knowing the chances of a success of a proposal, and how quickly the success would be realised, helped the team to devote resources to the most important proposals. With a bachelor’s in European Studies, I was knowledgeable about EU processes. Nonetheless, the legislative process is of a substantial nature, and there where certainly topics that I had not learnt about or had forgotten. Where this was an issue, there was reading material in the
Council library that I used to gain an understanding of topics. Alternatively, my colleagues were open and very helpful when I came to them with questions, and they were happy to double-check my work where I was not sure of the quality of my output. This supportive nature positively contributed to my work, and overall I was happy with my ability at delivering there.

It was necessary to be able to write about the proposals in a clear manner – this meant it was important to have and comprehensive understanding of them. It was also necessary to write in a manner that was both persuasive of the new laws while at the same time coming from a position that would be supported by all member states’ governments. This could be particularly challenging, as often policies were the result of compromise – writing persuasively from one perspective would be politically offensive to those who may have negotiated away some of their position, or who may be selling it in a different manner to a domestic audience. In addition, a text that merely explains the resultant compromise not likely to be at all persuasive. An example would be China’s role at the World Trade Organisation (WTO), where it was expected agreement would be made on its attainment of market economy status. This would require a common position between member states, including those whose government was of a more liberal bent and those of a more protectionist one. A likely outcome was that compromise would be reached on China being granted the status, but with additional ‘defence instruments’, such as anti-dumping duties, being created that were in line with WTO rules. Publishing a paper that focussed on the purported benefits of the freer trade that market economy status would bring could be controversial in member states whose government was less supportive of the trade agreement. At the same time, focussing on the new instruments could be understood as a protectionist move in member states where the governments were advocating freer trade. Such dilemmas represent the difficulty of communicating to 28 countries in an institution that represents 28 different governments. What was necessary in the end was to briefly explain both the benefits of freer trade and of maintaining tools to offset resultant issues, and then write persuasively how the Council has met such criteria. The policy pages had to summarise the issue in a way that explained the reason for the proposals, how it fits into the existing acquis and how it is consistent with the treaties and competences of the EU.

Developing positive communicative output on EU policy issues requires a significant amount of research, and often I would be tasked with researching specific issues for colleagues that contributed towards their work. Again, I was able to direct such work towards the area of my specialisation, with research on work such as comparing the economic data of member states and the effects of free trade agreements. This work could require attending press briefings, it also required liaising with relevant members, such as having a meeting with the Head of Coordination for the legal service to discuss a communication effort that described the legislative process in the Council. Brexit was an important ongoing process, and I was tasked with monitoring the situation on an ongoing basis, which involved looking into the relevant British departments’ plans and legal barriers which may arise, both domestically and internationally. The department had to be prepared for the use of Article 50, a so-far unused protocol, and I was tasked with researching how this could unfold, as communication output needed to be ready for a large variety of eventualities. This was a challenging topic as there were split opinions and limited information sources, but was nonetheless extremely interesting.

Communication techniques were something I have not studied, so adapting to them represented a steep learning curve. Certain tasks I found manageable with my prevailing skillsets, this included work such as conducting editorial analysis of existing policy pages. However, other work, such as being able to provide positive feedback in meetings, was more challenging and, in addition, I wanted to be certain that my writing style was strongly
communicable and persuasive. To this end, I asked my supervisor for recommended reading on the subject, which I read, partly at work and partly in my spare time. This included learning about demographics, which was of interest to me, as I was able to apply it to my existing knowledge of different political bases and groupings, and it helped me understand the reasoning behind the Council’s editorial policy and improved my political communicating ability. I was able to apply this improved understanding at meetings on the Council’s promotional strategy.

Lower level administrative tasks thankfully did not make up a substantial portion of my work. I had to keep a calendar of Council events up to date and once had to take the minutes of a fortnightly unit meeting, but most of my work was of a more substantive nature. One administrative event which I chose to undertake of my own accord followed on from a visit to Google’s Brussels headquarters. It transpired that a former trainee at the Council was now at Google, where he worked with someone who assisted the European Commission with their communication on YouTube. With a degree of perseverance, I was able to set up an informal meeting between the Council’s communication team and Google. This helped create a foundation between the two actors which can be built on for future cooperation, I hope to remain in the loop for such developments. Regardless, it was particularly informative in terms learning about Google and the work it does in public affairs.

Work also included being involved with the European Council summits, where I had specifically requested to be involved. My tasks were not particularly strenuous for these events – it was primarily comprised of writing press releases. However, it was nonetheless very interesting to have a front-row seat for speeches from the likes of Theresa May, Donald Tusk and the exiled Mayor of Aleppo Brita Hagi Hasan. It was also an opportunity to meet and talk with prominent journalists.

Trainings on the workings of the Council and other EU institutions were available during my time there, and I ensured I attended as many of them as possible. Three early and important ones concerned the organisation of the General Secretariat of the Council, the legislative process in the Council and EU project funding, including Horizon 2020. There were also trainings on other institutions, including the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions; I had not previously known the manner in which the Commission consults with civil society and local actors so this was particularly useful. One training concerned risk management, an important factor in all public affairs work as knock-on effects can be significant, where I learned how to categorise and development solutions for project risks.

Lobbying is a particularly important topic in Brussels, and I was fortunate to have the opportunity to meet quite a few representatives of them during my work. This included a senior representative of the European Public Affairs Consultancies’ Association, the primary representative group. There were visits to the British and Slovakian permanent representations, which was very informative as it offered a national perspective on the operations of the Council. There was also a visit to the Russian embassy, where their representatives (perhaps unsurprisingly) delivered a markedly different narrative towards the workings of the EU. In addition, there were two longer-term training opportunities. One in Strasbourg, which included lectures on the workings of the European Parliament, European Ombudsman and Council of Europe, including the European Court of Human Rights. The other was in Luxembourg, where lectures taught the legal processes both in the Court of Auditors, General Court and European Court of Justice. We were able to attending a hearing and speak with prominent members, including the Advocates-General and an ECJ Judge. Towards the end of our time at the Council,
all of the interns partook in a mock Council simulation, which was useful in understanding the processes of COREPER and Council meetings.

Conferences were sometimes available to attend, something I tried to make full use of. These were useful both to learn about ongoing work in the EU institutions, but also meet important actors. Conferences I attended including one on tackling populism and extremism in Europe as well as another on transformative technology.

Lastly, in further relation to my studies, I requested to undertake work shadowing in the Economic and Financial Affairs Directorate. This required the agreement of the Bureau de Stage, my supervisor and the head of the relevant unit, and having attained that I was able to observe the work that they did and attend a pre-working party meeting with members of the European Commission and a member of the Portuguese representation (Portugal had an issue with the concerned regulation), which was particularly useful in further understanding the legislative process and how economic measures are approached. I would recommend work shadowing to future trainees, as it allows a perspective of work at different departments.
4. How reality met expectations

Not having worked in public affairs previously, my expectations were relatively limited as to what to expect. Assumptions were that, as an important institution, it would be a relatively stressful job and, as an intern, I would inevitably be consigned to a large amount of lower-level tasks. These expectations were not particularly accurate. The job offered quite flexible hours and was in a collaborative and supportive environment. My own time-management skills, which I had developed from working in finance for half a year before university, were sufficient in planning ahead and I was able to meet all deadlines during my time there. Concerning the tasks required of me, there was actually little in the way of lower-level tasks that I was given. I was pleased with the amount of research-oriented tasks I was provided with. This particularly applies to my Article 50 work, which was an important subject. Something that I had hoped would be the case, and indeed was, was the broad-based institutional understanding I would garner from being in communication. Working in that field gave me the ability to liaise with various other units; this was particularly useful in meeting members from different policy areas and learning from them.

Communication strategy is an area I think is particularly important; it is an area that is undergoing profound change due to the internet, as is evident in the successful Brexit and Trump campaigns. With a political science background, and not one in communication, the strategy of communicating public affairs policy is something that is of a greater interest to me than communicative technique. I was able to contribute to this regard, for instance in regards to communicating free trade policy I was tasked with researching how other international and national organisations talked about its purported benefits. In addition, research I conducted was used by the unit and I was able to give strategic input in meetings. Nonetheless, my expectations would have been for strategy to have had a slightly more flexible nature. I came to realise just how important the communication output of the EU Council is – a campaign that delivers a message that does not resonate in just one member stage can have potentially huge repercussions. For this reason, strategy is mostly kept to high-level decision making, which is understandable. Despite this, there was still room for tactics and a certain amount of freedom in how I, for example, wrote policy pages, so this was welcome.

Something else I was not prepared for was how quickly work can become out of date, or redundant. For example, the aforementioned work on China’s prospective WTO market economy status was not needed when their attainment of the status was delayed. Economic research I did on the effects of free trade, to potentially be used on future campaigns on CETA and TTIP, could not end up being used following the Wallonian vote and election of Donald Trump. This taught me to understand the importance of being fully prepared for events and understanding which developments are likely to occur.
5. Work-life balance

Overall, my traineeship at the Council of the EU offered a strong work-life balance. The working week was 40 hours, two above the standard Belgium full-time hours. Hours were flexible, and it was my responsibility to meet them. I was allowed to leave the office to attend job interviews and necessary private commitments, such as city registration, without having to contribute to time missed. The culture, openly expressed by the directorate-general, was one where the quality of output was important, instead of time spent on it. I was not asked to take work home with me or complete it over the weekends and I was able to finish work during office hours. Occasionally I might be sent a private email to ask for a clarification on some of my work, for example, but this was not something problematic.

The holiday allowance at the EU institutions is generous, so this is not something that was a problem. There was no specific notice period that I had to give to receive time-off, I just had to ensure that I informed people who could be affected by my absence and necessary work was completed prior.

The only times when work-hours were greater was on voluntary occasions. These included the trips to institutions in Strasbourg and Luxembourg, both of which I was glad to go on. The other time was during the European Council summits, which I had requested to be part of. These typically lasted until very late into the night, but I was there for my own accord.

There where around 55 trainees in the whole Council and were from a variety of backgrounds. The size of the cohort was small enough to know everyone; it was a friendly and social group and we often went to events together. It served as a strong grounding when moving to a city where I knew very few people. It also assisted with networking and meeting other people working in European affairs. The culture of the work and networking was relatively casual, which helped allow for a good work-life balance.
Conclusion and moving forward

The traineeship at the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union afforded me an insight into the work of the European institutions. I learnt about how the national governments represented themselves in the institution, and how the institution assisted them in their work. The multiple trainings provided was also hugely informative as to how the Council works with other EU actors. While I had learnt these processes at an academic level, working within them provided a pragmatic demonstration of how the legislation-making is delivered in practice. The work itself was interesting and flexible; I was pleased that I was allowed to choose work most relevant to me, and that the tasks were both within my ability while at the same time very informative. I was particularly pleased that the team I was part of was open and supportive, and that my supervisor was very helpful in allowing me to make the most of my time there.

Working in an international public affairs institution has supported my IRIO programme by developing my understanding of how countries cooperative together. The research work, the trainings and the visits to related institutions have been extremely informative. In addition, the ability to concentrate work on areas that relate to International Political Economy were particularly useful in building upon my specialisation.

In terms of the future, it has allowed me to progress onto a six-month paid traineeship at a reputable Brussel's public affairs office, where I will be working in transportation and energy policy, a policy area that is regulated internationally and closely linked to the international economy. I am confident that my academic study should contribute and my ability should be further built on by this experience, therefore. Communication is very important in public affairs, having developed that skill I am now looking forward to deepening my policy knowledge.

Overall, my traineeship taught me a great deal, improved my professional ability, introduced me to like-minded and supportive people and proved successful as a bridge between my academic studies and professional career.