

# **Advancing the Rule of Law in the European Union (and Beyond)**

**3 December 2021**

**Belval Campus, University of Luxembourg**

Co-organised by the UNESCO Chair in Human Rights and the Robert Schuman Initiative for European Affairs at the University of Luxembourg and the European Parliament Liaison Office in Luxembourg

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## **Summary**

The event was organised so as to offer a forum for students to engage directly with members of the European Parliament and experts from various social sciences fields around topics of public interest, such as democracy, European values, human rights, and social inclusion. The event took place within the wider framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe, participating in the continent-wide dialogues launched in the spring of 2021 on the future directions and priorities of the European Union.

During the event, 15 students drawn primarily from the Master in European Governance (MEG) at the University of Luxembourg had the opportunity to engage in a lively discussion, pose their questions directly and exchange their views with MEP Marc Angel and Professor Robert Harmsen, holder of the UNESCO Chair in Human Rights at the UL. The discussions were also facilitated by the participation of Jochen Richter and Sergiu Vintila from the MEG teaching staff. Jonathan Ponchon of the European Parliament Office moderated the discussions.

## **The discussion revolved around the following main topics:**

### *1. What should the role of the EU be in terms of human rights?*

This topic opened the sensitive yet important questions and discussions around inclusion, antiracism, gender equality and LGBTIQ+. Participants and panel speakers debated whether human rights are universal. Some of the views and conclusions shared were that even though the EU has shared values on human rights in theory, yet very different standards are visible across the community when it comes to human rights enforcement.

Some of the participants pointed to the example of double standards within the EU in relation to Poland and Hungary. Namely, participants shared their concerns around the case of Hungary, where there appears to have been a pattern of deliberate political polarisation undermining the rights LGBTIQ people. Some of the views and recommendations shared were that the governments of Poland and Hungary should be isolated, and that local governments should be funded in order not to penalise citizens in those countries.

Also, there were recommendations that more gender sensitive and inclusive language should be adopted, noting the need for a pragmatic adaptation according to context. One of the conclusions shared was also that gender equality is not just limited to male-female equality, but is rather a broader concept.

## *2. What role does civil society play in the establishment of the EU policies?*

During this discussion, there was a broad consensus on the crucial role that civil society organisations can play in reinforcing and implementing EU policies. A more specific example of the underutilised potential of the CSO sector shared was the conclusion that there is a rich civil society in Poland and Hungary, for which additional funds could usefully be provided. The discussion further suggested the potential to broaden the scope of such CSO funding, moving beyond existing circles of NGOs in receipt of EU funds, so as to reach wider segments of civil society where appropriate.

## *3. EU Enlargement Policy*

Another important topic raised was the question of the enlargement of the Union, mostly concerning the Western Balkans region. Participants shared their views that the European Union is a success story because of its capacity for reconciliation and making compromises. Judicial reform and democracy should be and remain the two fundamental chapters in the enlargement policy. There was a debate around how the EU can help the Balkans on their way to joining the Union. While the majority of participants were supportive of further EU enlargement, some doubts were also expressed about whether the countries concerned or the EU itself had the capacity to do so successfully. Some of the participants also shared their views that potentially a new Dayton Agreement is necessary for Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to ensure stability in the country and the wider region.

## **Conclusions**

The general conclusions and recommendations that stemmed from these specific questions and the wider debate are:

- Participants expressed their hope for Treaty changes, particularly so as to better secure the protection of fundamental rights.
- Participants stressed the role which should be played by pro-European political parties, particularly in shaping debates and mobilising support at the national level.
- Participants called for greater transparency in the functioning of the Council of the European Union.
- Participants were supportive of giving the EU greater competence and responsibilities in a number of fields, for example in the domain of health.
- Participants were broadly (but not unanimously) supportive of further EU enlargement, in terms which secure the respect of fundamental rights and democratic norms.
- Participants emphasised the enormous potential of civil society as regards the implementation of EU policies, encouraging deeper support for a potentially wider spectrum of civil society organisations as a means to invigorate European governance processes.