

European lessons for high school students in Florence by Gyula Hegyi

It is always encouraging to meet young people who are interested in European affairs. The Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU), which is based in Florence, Italy, frequently organises special educational programmes for students from secondary schools (known as a ‘gymnasium’ in certain countries in Europe), in addition to its scientific and research activities.

Usually there is one student class participating per session, during which the Archives experts run a class and answer questions from students and teachers. Sometimes former MEPs are invited to hold a session, and on 18 and 19 February 2020 I was fortunate enough to take advantage of this opportunity. On the first day, I met two different classes and I met another one on the second day.

After introducing myself, I spoke about my experience working at the European Parliament and the European Commission. I also spoke about the scholarship and job possibilities for young people at the different European institutions – in my experience, this is something that always interests young students. Although, it is always worth emphasising that, generally speaking, young people have to finish their university studies before applying for jobs or scholarships at the EU. Many questions were raised in every session. Most of the students asked their questions in English, and some of them asked them in Italian. Although, it turns out that those who asked their questions in Italian did in fact understand my answers, which I gave in English. I was informed that some of them were also fluent French speakers.

As I am from Hungary, I was asked some rather pointed questions about Mr Viktor Orbán and his friendship with Mr Matteo Salvini. Neither I nor the students (at least, those who spoke up) shared the views of those politicians. We all agreed that Europe should be more democratic and united. I followed this up by saying that we have to strengthen our common European values, but stressed that we should be proud of our national heritage, our culture and mother tongue. They asked me how many assistants and trainees I had worked with during my years at Parliament and how they were recruited. This is a topic that always comes up whenever I meet students.

I also talked to their teachers and they told me that these educational programmes run by the HAEU are very useful. The beautiful location of the HAEU, the famous Villa Salviati on the Via Bolognese is an impressive place for such programmes. Once my sessions were over, we all had a guided visit of the extensive archive and we attended an additional session led by one of the guides. The HAEU do an excellent job with these informal but also serious and valuable educational programmes.

On the second day, I was also asked to visit the nearby European University Institute (EUI) in Fiesole. As part of the Thoughts for Europe debate, I gave a short introduction entitled ‘The EU at a critical juncture: a Hungarian perspective’. After my introduction,

we had a good debate with experts and researchers from the EUI. Some of them had already studied the situation in Hungary on and the dangers posed by the antidemocratic tendencies of the Orbán Government. I tried to give a balanced picture of the situation and reiterated the responsibility of the European institutions and the European People's Party. For instance, the independent Hungarian media do not get any help from the EU while the Government-controlled media receive a considerable level of support from the state.

I left Italy just before the pandemic hit. I would like to express my sympathy and solidarity to everybody I met during my visit to Florence.