

Council of Europe, Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights

I wish to express my utmost gratitude to the Human Rights Lawyers Association (HRLA) for the bursary award which enabled me to complete a traineeship at the Council of Europe's Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights. Without such financial support, I would not have been able to complete the traineeship and benefit from the unique exposure I had to the leading human rights organisation at European level.

I studied Law (LL.B, Hons) with Spanish language at the University of Glasgow, completing my third year abroad at la Universidad de Granada in Spain. In my Honours years I took mainly human rights, international and European law courses. In particular, I did the European Human Rights Project, an academically challenging student-led course involving team-work to present a mock case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg. This was my first real insight into the Council of Europe's (CoE) remarkable work and it left me wanting to contribute to it with a view to preparing me for a career in the human rights field in the UK. I therefore decided to apply to the COE traineeship programme.

The Council of Europe (CoE) is an international organisation dedicated to protecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law in 47 member states, 28 of which are part of the European Union. Each member state has signed and ratified the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty which enshrines the aforementioned principles. The ECtHR is the organisation's judicial body which oversees the implementation of the Convention in each member state. Any individual can bring a complaint of a violation of their Convention rights to the Court providing they have exhausted all the domestic remedies available within the member state concerned.

I was a trainee at the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights for the CoE. This is an independent non-judicial body of the CoE created in 1999 with a mandate to raise awareness and promote respect for human rights in each member state. This is achieved through country visits; dialogue with national authorities and civil society; thematic reporting; advising on the systematic implementation of human rights; and awareness-raising activities, such as the publication of topical issue papers. The Commissioner's Office (CommHR) also promotes the protection of human rights defenders in member states, human rights education and cooperates with national ombudsperson institutions, national human rights structures, other international organisations, NGOs, universities and think tanks. Every six years, a new Commissioner is elected by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). The current Commissioner is Mr. Nilz Muižnieks, who succeeded Thomas Hammarberg (2006-2012) and Álvaro Gil-Robles (1999-2006).

Throughout my traineeship, I was supervised by one of the Commissioner's advisers. I had 'country work', which involved conducting research and drafting briefing notes concerning human rights issues in the United Kingdom as well as in Spain (where my language skills were useful). Issues I worked on concerning the UK included the debate concerning the ECHR, the Scottish independence referendum and transitional justice in Northern Ireland in light of the Commissioner's visit there in November.

I also did 'thematic work' on race and migration issues. I focused on the situation of 'boat migrants' in the Mediterranean as well as racial profiling in the context of border controls. I attended meetings of the Committee of Migrants, Refugees and Displaced persons during the PACE sessions, as well as the European Roma and Travellers Plenary Assembly, and debriefed my colleagues afterwards. I carried out background research for the Office's work on racism, with a focus on extremism. I also helped prepare the Commissioner's contribution in a debate on hate speech at the World Forum for Democracy.

In general, I conducted daily country and thematic monitoring and reported on international events of general interest. I gained an insight into country visit planning and reporting. During my traineeship, the CommHR had their annual strategic retreat at which I actively participated, gaining an insight into the planning, communication and development within the CommHR. I helped suggest developments to the CommHR's website and social media work. I was able to attend various inter-secretarial meetings, a Court hearing and meetings of other CoE bodies, where I appreciated the wider work of the CoE. At the CommHR meetings, I was exposed to the scope of the Commissioner's work which I found fast-paced and fascinating. I took the opportunity to meet with other advisers from the CommHR to discuss issues they were working on which particularly interest me, for example; concerning intersex peoples, human rights education and NGOs.

Some personal highlights of the traineeship include having such a 'hands-on' experience and the satisfaction of feeling like I had contributed to the extraordinary work of the CommHR. The work I was given was really engaging and I felt I got an exclusive insight into how the CommHR operates. Nils and the team were welcoming, friendly and inclusive. I am particularly fortunate to have been present at Pope's visit to Strasbourg in November. I managed to improve my French through practising with colleagues and being exposed to it as one of the CoE's main working languages. I also made some lifelong friends.

The traineeship helped me enhance my abilities to research, work on my own initiative, communicate, manage my time effectively and work both independently and as part of a team. My experience will be invaluable in my future career. The induction week was particularly helpful where trainees had presentations and visits to the different bodies and departments within the CoE. We were always encouraged to attend the many frequent events at the CoE which deepened our understanding of the scale of the organisation and its work. The traineeship affirmed my desire to work in the field of human rights, asylum and immigration in the UK. It has also opened my mind to many other human rights issues and I was glad to be able to apply my pre-existing legal knowledge to my work.

For these reasons, I would highly recommend applying for a traineeship with the CoE, especially if you would like to experience working in an international organisation and are committed to improving human rights protection. For me, it was a truly inspiring and unforgettable experience- one which would not have been made possible had I not been awarded the HRLA bursary, for which I am eternally grateful.

Laura Pasternak, 2015