

## **Student organizing within an integrated university**

Firstly, I wish to express my thankfulness to prof. Ladislav Novak and organizers of the conference for kindly inviting us to speak. European Students' Union, representing more than 11 million students around Europe, does find the issue of governance and institutional reforms as a crucial one, with the new developments in the European Higher Education Area but moreover the reforms being carried out on national levels, where our members act and try to ensure their partner and stakeholder position.

When deciding on the name of my presentation, there was discordance whether we should name it "student movement" or "student organizing". Why was this dilemma brought up? Besides the fact that we see the student movement as the overall activity of students, pushing for their rights within academia but further within society, as has often occurred in SEE, I also believed it would be a good starting point for emphasizing one of our main positions – there should be rigid standardization of how students are organized. Diversity is here a key to development of a responsible democratic culture and quality of the student politics. Also, national contexts should be respected. On the other hand, this does not mean there shouldn't be a clear legal framework for democratic procedures of student participation and organizing as such, framework for support and services for students, legal framework for funding and a platform for various forms of organizing.

ESU welcomes the discussion on student democracy and student participation in this important conference, and as previously pointed out, we are thankful and excited to take part of it. But I cannot continue without noticing the lack of national/university student representatives here with us. If we wish to talk about integrated partnership fora, then all the actors should be involved in the common rethinking of the concept and solutions. Already in 2001, the Prague communiqué has emphasized that "students are full members of the academic community" and should be perceived as "competent, active and constructive partners".

Students are expressing their wish to actively participate as responsible citizens and there are 47 unions in 36 countries. In most of these countries there do exist legal mechanisms for student participation at the level of HEIs, in two thirds there are legal or constitutional mechanisms for student participation at the national level. The average and usual participation quota is up to 20%. In EUA research, Trends V, it has clearly been stated that no matter that there are 65% formal student involvement in central decision-making and 52% faculty/department participation, there stays a question if the formal structures are always the ones where the real decisions are being made and if students are satisfied. Also there is a lack of provision of student services (such as career guidance or academic orientation) or participation in important questions such as quality assurance – it is crucial to recognize the equal rights for student participation on all matters, and not the ones traditionally noted as "student" ones. What we could have concluded from our research Bologna with Student Eyes, is also another worrying situation – the student independence gets lower from the representation on the national to the representation to the university/faculty level. When discussing student organizing, we must not forget how often even if the legal frameworks are in their place, the attitude of the academic community can endanger or even prevent the real student influence in the decision making process. The development of a participative democratic culture is a task for all members of the academic community.

Independence of the student organizing needs to be ensured formally. How can we achieve this independence? Besides ensuring a framework on the national, as much as on the university level, we also need to ensure basic student rights. As we have identified in our Students' Rights Charter, the most basic student rights providing initial conditions for real student participation in a democratic manner are: the right to organize freely in legally recognized entities, the right not to suffer any consequences stemming from such involvement, the right to co-governance in all decision making bodies, right to be informed about all higher education affairs in a transparent manner, the right to have their opinion considered as that of a stakeholder on equal footing and the right to freely express themselves not limited to academic matters. Finally, as the issue has come up a few times, we need not to forget the financial autonomy where I certainly do understand as a responsible and transparent usage.

The importance of common principles while encouraging democratic culture is immense, but also we want to stress that diversity is as important in order to achieve wider access and higher quality. Autonomy of universities brings responsibility, but we must not forget the initial conditions, especially when discussing the development in the SEE (case of Croatia where autonomy prohibited the creation of an integrated university).

I wished to bring up a few diverse examples of student organizing, thus to see that our members can do come from within different backgrounds and different frameworks but still remain respective and respected partners in the academia.

In Austria, student representation exists at the faculty level, the university level and the national level. On the national level, OH has to be consulted any time a law is planned/changed that affects students. Elections for student representatives are held every 2 years. For the places in the parliament, different student parties are competing. The legal status of student representation is based on a federal law which defines the different organs, how they are set up, the rights and tasks of OH and the election procedures of OH on all four levels of students representation. Furthermore, it regulates financial and organisational issues. Membership is compulsory for all students studying at an Austrian university or Academies, for Austrians as well as for foreign students. When registering at the university, every student in Austria automatically becomes a member of ÖH by paying EUR 14,86 per semester. This compulsory membership provides ÖH with financial independence, guaranteed political rights and high importance within the academic bodies.

In France, FAGE and UNEF are two national student unions, equally represented in ESU and equally recognized as stakeholders within France.

FAGE, la Federation des Associations Generaux Etudiants, is responsible for coordination and national interests' representation of numerous local and professional associations existing on the university level or networks of same professional affiliations. UNEF, Union nationale des etudiants francaises, is gathering members, student unions at university levels, with a stronger syndical profile. Both of the umbrella organizations are participating in elections for representatives in the bodies within the French system of higher education. Both of the organizations have a long history, they are freely receiving funds from different sources and freely deciding its activities. This all however did not stop the new government from enacting a new Law on HE where overall number of the members of the highest HE bodies was lowered, the number of external representatives seated in these bodies was augmented and there is no more an assured position of vice-president of these bodies for the students. Even more, the Law was published for the public debate only for three days so we can severely

question the transparency and democracy within its process of enactment. This unfortunate case reminds us that the vision of students as equal partners within the HE Area is still not achieved and always has to be won over and over again.

In Serbia, where I come from, we have had the old socialist system in which existed one and only student organization, funded by the government, being the only recognized by the universities and faculties, moreover controlled by the government. In 1992 first independent student unions have started to emerge. Since 1998, the independent unions have united into Student union of Serbia, network of university and faculty student unions, now a recognized member of European Students' Union. SUS has always been funded by private and foreign donors, working as a non governmental organization as there was no other framework under which we would be able to operate. This has severely influenced the scope of our activities and put us in a constant danger of losing finances. On the other side, the Student Alliance exists only on faculty and university level, nevertheless until this very day they are the only student organization officially recognized as such and receiving funds from the Ministry. Another serious problem is the emerge of radical right student organizations which were at some faculties freely carrying out activities which could be sanctioned by the criminal law. Students were united in their wish to end this chaotic situation, which was mostly evolving around case to case – from faculty to faculty, from university to university. Unfortunately, even after one year of hard work of all united student vice rectors of all state universities in Serbia, representatives of the biggest student organizations and representatives of the Ministry of Education which has resulted in an excellent proposal for the Law on Student Organizing, the academic community has showed no support to the work of their students and the work was abruptly stopped which has lead to no Law on Student Organizing. Now student parliaments are being organized on the basis of very vague provisions from the Law on Higher Education, still on a case to case basis.

What is important? It is important that the student organizing within an integrated university stays autonomous, free in its expression and actions, based on principles of democracy, autonomy and transparency, moreover promoting active citizenship and an open society of equal opportunities. But this can be achieved through many different forms of student organizing, many different frameworks which are providing incentives for democratic student representation and partnership within academic community.