Undergraduate EU Study Tour Report, May 2026

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Of all the different institutions that we visited on our tour throughout Brussels and Luxembourg City, the one institution that stood out to me the most was surprisingly the least consequential in terms of impact across the EU. Not that this institution is not important, it is, but rather that it has been relegated to being structurally insignificant. This institution is the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). The EESC exists to represent employers' associates, workers/trade unions, and civil society organisations (or NGOs) throughout the EU, and each third is represented equally in membership.

The reason why this institution has smaller impact on broader issues within the EU is that, as revealed by our presenter, the European Commission at times must deprioritize policy recommendations from the EESC as a result of external pressure from powerful lobbies in the EU. This small moment of transparency by the civil servant was the most honest thing we had heard from any of our various host presenters throughout these many institutions.

While we, as a group, were already privy to the EU's function as a supranational organization and economic union, our hosts highlighted the tensions which emerge when trade issues must be weighed against humanitarian ethics.

The civil servant at the EESC handled our questions with transparency and candor. This meeting was especially refreshing because it allowed for us to hear in more detail the history and employment of human rights within the EU's institutions. The EU has a rich developmental history, where founding states – Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, Italy, and Western Germany – once came together after World War Two to rebuild Europe. As the Cold War began, it became clear there was a need to strengthen trade and diplomatic ties so as to remain a competitive power vis-à-vis the United States and Soviet Union, but also so as to prevent further war and violence in Europe.

The United Nations, our guide shared with us, was an important backdrop to this development, as human rights language became institutionalized through the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, signed into law November 4, 1950.

Since then, the EU has institutionalized human rights through the codification of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which was ratified on the December 7, 2000. Human rights language remains instrumental to how the EU presents itself for its member states, internationally, and even to Canadian students attending study tours.

However, human rights language only goes so far as the EU's borders, as beyond the Schengen area, institutional language shifts to that of security and development. There was a dissonance in language that a few of us on the study tour could recognized, which placed EU foreign development and border policies under a microscope during question periods. This was a fascinating takeaway from my time on the study tour and will inform how I approached the rest of my course work, as well as my views on the EU from across the Atlantic while I continue my studies at Carleton.

The discussions that I had between my peers, our shared professor from the University of Victoria, and the presenters at the EESC, have become an important episode in my development as an academic and as an international. This study tour is a wonderful opportunity to get your feet wet if you plan on entering the public service, pursue a graduate degree, or to meet a colourful cast of characters who will be unique to your time within the EU. The tour may also present to you new knowledges and insights to the functions of a global juggernaut, if you keep your ears perked.