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SIMULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT – JUNIOR, 8th YEAR OF THE PROJECT

Radovan Gura – Dominika Bačová*

Leaving aside the gradual institutionalisation of the European Council, a body that was not provided for in the original Treaties, the main change in the development of the political system of the European Communities and now the European Union has been the rise of the role and powers of the European Parliament (EP). The Parliamentary Assembly, which was originally created for essentially symbolic reasons and was almost powerless, has seen a steady increase in powers in the course of the reform of the Treaties. Today, the European Parliament is undoubtedly one of the most influential legislative bodies. Its role is to be able to scrutinise the executive, to amend the European Union's draft laws and budget, and to debate all topics of interest to Members of Parliament. Not only does the EP now have considerable formal powers, but the Union's institutional logic guarantees its independence from the Commission, the Council of the European Union and the European Council. (Costa, 2014)

The European Parliament represents around 450 million European citizens. Today, it is the only European institution whose members are directly elected by universal suffrage every five years in each Member State. The European Parliament essentially has legislative and budgetary powers, as well as powers of political control. In the European elections in May 2019, European citizens elected 751 Members of the European Parliament. On 31 January 2020, the United Kingdom's departure from the European

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Union - Brexit - resulted in the departure of 73 British Members of the European Parliament and the reorganisation of the European Parliament. Of these 73 seats, 46 were left empty and "frozen" in anticipation of future enlargement, with the remaining 27 redistributed among the 14 member states. France thus gained 5 elected representatives, bringing its number of Members to 79, and the Slovak Republic gained 1 seat, having now 14 Members of the European Parliament.

During their five-year mandate, Members of the European Parliament are central players in the European legislative process. Within Parliament, Members may have different roles and different levels of responsibility. An MEPs' work alternates between plenary sittings, work in parliamentary committees and activities in their constituency. (Európsky parlament, 2021) Each Member's parliamentary calendar is also allocated on this principle. In general, purely legislative matters are debated in plenary sittings, which are held on four consecutive days a month, and at least four additional days (but sometimes more) are set aside for parliamentary committee meetings. Finally, in terms of political activity, one week a month is devoted to constituency work. The remaining time is used by Members for political group meetings.

It was the plenary sessions held in public in the symbolic Parliament in Strasbourg that inspired the project "Simulating the European Parliament". All Members of the European Parliament meet there to discuss texts, to present their opinions and positions, but above all to vote on their adoption or rejection, on amendments or on supplementary proposals. Plenary sittings are also an opportunity for Members of Parliament to express their views on various topics, according to the agenda defined by the chairs of the political groups.

For the eighth time, Slovak-French University Institute (SFUI) prepared a simulation of the European Parliament, which took place on 15 October 2021 during the whole day at the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. It was the simulation of a European Parliament session, where eighty French-speaking Slovak high school students accepted the invitation to learn in a fun and practical way how the European Parliament works, to try out the demanding, dynamic, intercultural and certainly interesting job of a Member of

Parliament.

Students from Grammar school Metodova in Bratislava, Grammar school Ladislav Sára in Bratislava, International French School in Bratislava, Grammar school Jan Hollý in Trnava, Grammar school Milan Rastislav Štefánik in Košice, Bilingual Grammar school in Žilina and Grammar school Jozef Gregor Tajovský in Banská Bystrica, Polyvalent High School in Nitra and Grammar school Ľudovít Štúr in Trenčín discussed and analysed the situation regarding the recovery and reconstruction of the European Union in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The topic of the European Union's renewal or "revival" has been discussed in the professional community for several years (Slobodníková – Terem – Gura, 2019), especially as a result of several crises that the European Union has faced.

A few days before the simulation, the high school students received a file with all the procedures as well as a list of the tasks they will have to present in the simulated EP session. During the event itself, the students were divided into factions according to the political parties that are actually represented in the European Parliament. At the beginning of the meeting, they voted to elect a chairperson for the entire meeting. Then it was important to start the work of the Members of the European Parliament and the negotiations - to comment on the draft document presented. During this phase of the simulation, the students were allowed to work in factions, or equally, at their discretion, they could work with other factions on amendments. An important part was the discussion of all the amendments tabled. At this point, each faction presented and justified its amendment, which was then put to the vote in plenary. The result of this part of the European Parliament session was a successfully agreed amended document, which was adopted unanimously among Members of the European Parliament.

The end of the event was dedicated to the evaluation of the first year of the Lycée d'Europe project. The main goal of the project was to enable the winning pair to travel to Strasbourg for a week and represent the Slovak Republic abroad, on international platform. Selected pairs from high schools presented their reasons why they should travel to Strasbourg during the time limit. The performances of the pairs were both entertaining and well-reasoned and it was the final vote that decided that the pair from Žilina, who will undoubtedly represent Slovakia at a very good level, will travel to Strasbourg for a week in 2022.

The Slovak-French University Institute, which prepared the event, currently

brings together nine faculties from six Slovak universities that offer double or joint Francophone studies in cooperation with 6 French universities. The aim of their cooperation is to promote and develop teaching in the spirit of French higher education and culture in Slovak high schools and universities. The European Parliament Simulations project combines all these objectives and, in addition, the project aims not only to reflect on the challenges facing the EU, but also on the processes that the different agendas have to go through at European level. The intention was also to present students with the possibilities of studying these topics at Slovak and French universities.

SFUI prepared the event in the premises of the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica in cooperation with the Institute of Political Science Campus in Dijon, the French Institute in Slovakia, the French Embassy in Slovakia, Efpolit, Direct EU, and Alliance Francaise in Banská Bystrica, Europe Direct UMB Banská Bystrica, and last but not least with the Chancellery of the European Parliament in Slovakia, which financially supports our project every year.

The event was opened by several prominent representatives, among them the Vice Dean for International Relations and Public Relations of the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations of University of Matej Bel in Banská Bystrica – Associate Professor Mgr. **Jaroslav Ušiak**, PhD.; Assoc. PaedDr. **Radovan Gura**, PhD. - Director of the Slovak-French University Institute, **Róbert Sermek** - Head of the European Parliament Office in Slovakia, **Lukáš Macek** - Director of the Sciences Po campus in Dijon. All of them addressed the students in person, at the premises of the Faculty.

Due to the work duties and pandemic measures, the Member of the European Parliament, **Róbert Hajšel**, addressed the students by video greeting, and at the same time the new Ambassador of France to Slovakia, Mr **Pascal Le Deunff**, who officially took up his mandate on 19 October 2021, also joined in the video greetings. They both wished the students successful negotiations and an unflagging curiosity for knowledge and interest in what is happening in the European Union.

Recently, young people have become more and more visibly involved in political, social and environmental issues, but they are also interested in cybersecurity and green mobility. Also at this event, participants from a total of nine Slovak high schools proved that they can actively work with verifiable facts

and information and present them in logical and argument-based draft resolutions.

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