

Winners of Online Democracy Activity 3.0 in Brussels

Photo report on the latest ODA 3.0 program

Online Democracy Activity is a social awareness contest for grammar school pupils organized by the Barankovics István Foundation and its main prize has traditionally been a trip to Brussels. This year we rewarded the winners of our third competition with a trip to the heart of Europe, the capital of the European Union. After several months of online rounds of O: DA 3.0, the final took place on December 5, 2015 at St Margaret Grammar School, and the well-deserved journey took place in the first days of March this year. The most successful contestants this time were the team of Szilágyi Erzsébet Grammar School "First among equals", Budapest II. district Klebelsberg Kunó Primary School and Grammar School "We have a dream" team and the "Pillars of Democracy" team from the Bethlen Gábor Grammar School in Nyíregyháza.

The purpose of Online Democracy Activity is to contribute in a playful and interactive way to preparing young people for social roles. While the first online stage of the contest focused on the issues of local community and possible alternatives to action by the civilian world, the face-to-face finals featured issues of the national political life as well. After experiencing some aspects of local and national identity, the competition was completed by current issues in European politics and the wider supranational community. So the aim of our trip to Brussels was not only to learn about the city and have fun, but also to boost the participants' knowledge in our game. In addition, we wanted our winners to gain such experience that an average tourist in Brussels would not get. The following is a summary of our excursion report.

The first day was about getting to know the city where the members of the 1848 Hungarian emigration spent years and where the Hungarian diplomatic service, "the Hungarian press office" was operating in the house of Miklós Jósika between 1859 and 1861 after the defeat of the Hungarian revolution of 1848-1849. Probably few people know that the statue of the Hungarian musician, Béla Bartók stands in Place D'Espagne near the main square in memory of his stay here. Our hotel was close to both sites.

Our accommodation, Hotel the Moon, is located in the center of the capital of the European political life, just a few hundred meters from Grand Place, hidden between Belgian chocolate shops and cozy restaurants. We really lived in the heart of Europe.

Our first night host was György Hölvényi, Hungarian MEP, who briefly introduced us to the political issues of the EU. The group dined out in one of the most popular restaurants in the city, Chez Leon. Those who ventured to taste the excellent Belgian national dish, the moules frites, mussels steamed in spicy sauce, were certainly not disappointed.

The first stop of our Brussels democracy walk was at the entrance to the European Parliament, where European heads of states and world leaders are welcomed. The buildings of the Parliament have been named after those outstanding figures of the European history who have made a significant contribution to the present form of the European Union. In 2008 it was decided that one of the new buildings would bear the name of József Antall, recognizing that he had made a significant contribution to the enlargement of the Union.

During our visit to the European Parliament, we gained, among other things, a comprehensive picture of the most important rules for the functioning of the EU institutions. The picture

shows Péter Láng, a communications officer, who could answer the group's questions as a real insider. This knowledge will certainly come in handy when preparing for the matriculation exams.

An unmissable program point of the visit to the Parliament is the photograph with the EU flags. The photo of the 'First among equals' team from Eger was really good.

Pák Csáky, ethnic Hungarian MEP from Slovakia, gives a presentation to the group. The politician is a member of the European People's Party group in Brussels, and a member of the Hungarian Community Party back at home in Slovakia. For those used to the media news in Hungary, it was really fascinating to listen to how a politician from the European People's Party sees the current issues of the Union, such as the migrant crisis, the Brexit or the internal affairs of his own EPP group.

Another team photo in the European Parliament meeting room. The "Pillars of Democracy" team from Miskolc brought their own labeled t-shirts to Brussels for the sake of this picture. Big respect for that.

The next stage of our democracy walk was the Parliamentarium, which is a great success for all ages. This unparalleled interactive exhibition, extensively utilizing the possibilities of digital technology with personal multimedia guides, touch screen solutions, 360 ° cinema and a host of other creative ideas shows and demonstrates to visitors what makes Europe the world we live in.

The exhibition guides us from the past fifty years to the future, starting with the often not-so peaceful past, continuing with the present policy, which is already reshaping the future. On the way to the first hall, for example, we can go through the "tunnel of sounds", which was compiled from the 24 official languages of the Union, so that we can experience what the Union's slogan, "united in diversity", means.

In this picture, the members of the "We have a dream" team are already in the present. The hideaway computer desk can be pushed around on the map of Europe so that the pupils can learn about the most important current statistical indicators of each country.

This picture was taken at the entrance to the European Commission meeting room, where the winners of O: DA met with EU Commissioner for Youth, Education, Culture and Sport, Tibor Navracsics. Of course, we immediately occupied the chairs of the commissioners at the negotiating table. Jean-Claude Juncker was replaced by our mentor, Miklós Simon.

Tibor Navracsics explained the work of the European Commission in a nearly one-hour presentation and spoke in detail about the issues on his agenda. High youth unemployment has been identified as the biggest problem for European youth, and reducing it is one of the top priorities of EU policy. As far as European education is concerned, he emphasized that schools almost everywhere fell victim to cutting social spendings, while developing countries, such as China, are increasingly investing in training for the future. This will result in a serious disadvantage for the continent. He also talked about the need for schools to become key players in the migration crisis by helping to integrate the migrants and by preventing young people from becoming isolated, which is the first step towards radicalization.

During the meeting, the organizers of Online Democracy Activity received a strong confirmation of the goals and methods of the contest. The EU Commissioner emphasized the importance of preparing young people for social roles and developing competence, which, in his opinion, is unduly de-emphasized in Hungarian knowledge-centered schools. O: DA works indeed as gap filler when building upon pupils' creativity and initiative.

One of the main messages of the nearly one-and-a-half-hour conversation was to stimulate the renewal of the Hungarian political culture, to eliminate the well-known Hungarian pessimism and political incompetence and to lay the foundation for future trust, as most things start in the mind. Likewise, as Tibor Navracsics said, no one thought twenty years ago that a group of Hungarians would be sitting here in the European Commission meeting room discussing the affairs of the Union and Hungary.