



# **EUCN European Parliament Internship Report**

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# Introduction

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Previously administered by the National Centre for Research on Europe (NCRE), the European Union Centres Network (EUCN) has, of 2007, taken over the responsibility for the organisation of European Parliament internship opportunities. Two placements are now available not only to students of the NCRE but to those from EUCN Partner Universities also. The EUCN states that the programme aims to better “New Zealanders’ awareness and understanding of the European Union”,<sup>1</sup> as well as obviously providing the successful students with a unique and valuable insight into the workings of the European Parliament and the opportunity to further their own research with regards to the EU.

This report shall outline my personal experience as a parliamentary intern for the two Members of European Parliament (MEPs) that I was assigned to during my three months in Brussels – Mr. Roberts Zile and Mr. Andres Tarand. I hope it shall provide a useful insight for future interns on all aspects of the European Parliament internship experience.

# Motivation

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At some point during their studies, students of the NCRE and/or EUCN Partner Universities will have undoubtedly delved into the workings of the European Parliament. This, coupled with the allure of a three month, expenses paid trip to Europe, would be enough to convince many students of the merits of putting an application forward to be considered for this unique opportunity. However, having suspended my studies for a period the year before, I was a little unsure as to whether I wanted to take more time out from working on my Masters thesis. It wasn’t until I discovered that it was possible to be placed with an MEP whose responsibilities lay within my field of research that I realised what a great opportunity this really was. In addition, I could see that the chance to be based in Brussels would give me access to key personnel within the EU institutions and enable me to meet with my thesis-related informants – something I would not have been able to do otherwise.

Upon having my application accepted, then, my interest in being placed with an MEP working within the Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) Committee was registered, in order to complement the topic of my thesis – the New Zealand-EU relationship in the field of science and technology. The fate of my placement was then in the hands of Janet Lowe who, amongst her other duties at the New Zealand Embassy, was the Brussels-based internship coordinator.

# Preparation

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I experienced some delay in acquiring an internship placement and, when it came to the crunch, was requested to arrive in Brussels as soon as possible given the fact that the length of my

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<sup>1</sup> “EUCN European Parliament Internships, *New Zealand European Union Centres Network*, <<http://www.eucnetwork.org.nz/activities/internships/>>, accessed 10/09/2007.

internship was being reduced by the day in the lead up to the Parliament's summer holidays in July. Within a six day period, my feet were on European soil and I was desperately trying to get my bearings. This section, I hope, will therefore provide some useful information for future interns concerning preparation for everyday life in Brussels.

### **Accommodation**

Acquiring accommodation was my foremost worry as I had little opportunity to research my options before I arrived in Brussels. However, I discovered that finding something once "on the ground" seemed to be the most effective route anyway, as it enabled me to inspect available rooms and meet potential flatmates. I booked myself in for five nights at a youth hostel and on my second morning, after having attempted to sleep off my jetlag on the day of my arrival, I located a newsagent's and bought myself a copy of *The Bulletin* and *Vlan*.

*The Bulletin* is a weekly magazine, written in English and largely designed for expats. It advertises accommodation listings as well as upcoming events, and prints some interesting articles. See <http://www.thebulletin.be/> for more details.

*Vlan* is another weekly magazine but is solely devoted to advertising rooms for rent. It is possible to find some advertisements written in English but the majority seem to be penned in French. However, these ads are usually decipherable even with a minimum capability in French language – just check the asking price for the room and keep an eye out for the word "meuble", which means "furnished". <http://www.vlan.be/> is the online version of the magazine.

This simple step paid off for me and I spent only two nights in the hostel before I found my abode for the next three months – a handy fifteen minutes walk from both Parliament and the city centre. However, it is possible to do some research and even organise something before you go. "Langues Vivantes" are a language tutoring organisation and also offer rooms to rent (<http://www.languesvivantes.com/lviimmo/English/RdlC31main.htm>) and the "Stagiaire" (intern) Information site (<http://www.stagiaireinfo.eu/en/>) is also useful. European Parliament *stagiaires* now have their own association (<http://www.epstage.eu/news.php>) which lists accommodation advertisements from time to time and you can also find them on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2240180844>).

### **Public Transport**

The city uses an integrated transport system comprising of metro, tram and bus. The fares are relatively cheap compared to other European capitals but if planning to travel to the Parliament via metro every day, it would be advisable to purchase a monthly ticket for €40. Bear in mind, however, that Brussels is a compact city and often walking is a viable (and cheaper) option.

Metro maps are available from ticket desks within the stations. They also distribute plans for the entire metro/tram/bus network.

Transport throughout Belgium is best undertaken via train – it is fast (unless taking a regional train) and cheap. Fares are half price on weekends and the "Go Pass" is a great option – ten rides for €45. You can also use the Go Pass to travel internationally, by using it to the last stop

within Belgium's borders and then paying the difference between that stop and your destination. Be sure to acquire this second ticket before you board the train, however! You can access Belgium's very good national rail site at <http://www.b-rail.be/nat/E/>.

## **Everyday Life**

### **Language**

Although the European Parliament works in English, in terms of life outside Parliament, having even a basic level of French certainly does help. Although Belgium is bilingual, French is the dominant language in Brussels and I found that often French speakers are less proficient in speaking English than Flemish speakers. So, whilst not totally necessary, being able to speak a little French would certainly make the Brussels experience more enjoyable.

### **Eating and Drinking**

If you want to sample Belgium's national dish of "moules frites" (mussels and fries), be prepared to pay upwards of €20 for a main course. Chez Leon on Rue des Bouchers is, apparently, the place to go for them.

If you want to try just "frites", don't listen to the hype about Maison Antoine on Place Jourdain. Chez Martin is the winner hands down – just make sure you don't overlook him! He's based in a small, non-descript frites stand on Place Madou.

Eat Belgian waffles. And lots of them.

Eating and drinking at the Grand Place can be expensive – but worth it, just once, for the beautiful surroundings. The Bourse and Place St Gery host some great bars and the Sablon district is also definitely worth a visit.

In terms of groceries, there are three main "supermarkets" in Brussels – GB Express, GB Contact and the Delhaize. The GB Express is the most expensive of the three but is more likely to be open on a Sunday. GB Contact is the cheapest, with the Delhaize falling somewhere in the middle but which often has a better range of foodstuffs. Be aware that most supermarkets in Brussels are no bigger than the size of your average Four Square but you can find a "Super GB" on the ground floor of City2 mall on Rue Neuve.

### **Shopping**

Rue Neuve is Brussels' main shopping drag and is also home to the city's main shopping centre – City2.

Chaussee d'Ixelles also plays host to some good shopping and, if you can afford it, Avenue Louise is the place to go for designer gear.

Brussels' array of markets are also worth a visit. Midi market on Sundays is Brussels' biggest, Place du Grand Sablon hosts an antiques market during the weekends and Place du Jeu de Balle's flea market runs daily.

## **Communication**

Your Telecom phone won't work in Brussels and roaming on Vodafone isn't worth it. But you'll need a cell phone to keep in contact with all the friends you're going to meet at Parliament and, chances are, there won't be a landline in your flat. When you leave the country, make sure you're in possession of a Vodafone mobile and, once on the ground in Belgium, invest in a Belgian simcard. There are no charges for the simcard itself – the money you pay is for the credit already stored on the card.

There are three mobile companies operating in Belgium – Base, Mobistar and Proximus. Base is the cheapest and seems to be favoured by most stagiaires. If you're planning on texting home to Telecom numbers, make sure the card you buy isn't a Proximus one. And keep an eye on the charges – it is much more expensive to send texts internationally than it is in New Zealand. Roaming can also be a killer, although thankfully it is still free to receive text messages. When abroad, it is best to avoid making or receiving calls and to text sparingly!

## **Social Life**

Unless your MEP is a particularly hard task-master, you will still get time to have a social life. Choosing to share an apartment with others is a great start to meeting people.

The European Parliament is teeming with other stagiaires and it's also possible to befriend an Assistant or two! Make the most of any opportunity you get to mingle with others – you're all in the same situation.

As previously mentioned, European Parliament stagiaires now also have their own Association which helps with Parliament orientation, the welfare of stagiaires and social occasions. Not only can you make the most of the what they have to offer, if you are particularly motivated you can even become involved in the Association itself by sitting on one of the Committees. You can find more information concerning what they do at <http://www.epstage.eu/news.php>.

Finally, the Staff bar drinks, organised by the European Parliament's Stagiaire Association, are a great way to meet other stagiaires and keep an eye out for the occasional stagiaire party hosted by the Parliament or the Commission.

## **Placement**

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I was offered two placements with two rather different MEPs. The first offer came from Mr. Roberts Zile, a Latvian MEP for the Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN) party. The party is a small one, has a national conservative background and is generally regarded as euro-sceptic.

Mr. Zīle's main responsibility lay within the Transport (TRAN) Committee but he also sat as a substitute on the ITRE Committee with which I was hoping to become involved with. However, as the office was planning to close earlier than usual to make time for a party conference in Calabria, I was presented with the option of splitting my internship in two.

My second offer came from an MEP from another Baltic state – Mr. Andres Tarand, an Estonian MEP for the Party of European Socialists (PES). The Socialists are unlike the UEN in almost every way. PES is the second largest group within the European Parliament, has a socialist democratic ideology, and is generally in favour of ceding responsibility to the European Union. Mr. Tarand is actually a former Prime Minister of Estonia but within the European Parliament he was a full Member on not only the ITRE Committee but also on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) and Climate Change (CLIM) Committees.

Wanting to get the most out of the internship, I decided to accept both placements and spent five fascinating weeks in each office.

## The Internship

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### Mr. Roberts Zīle

#### Orientation

As previously mentioned, although Mr. Zīle's primary responsibility lay with the European Parliament's Transport Committee, his position as substitute on the ITRE Committee meant that I could still follow Parliamentary issues related to my field of interest. My first week plunged me headfirst into the workings of the ITRE Committee, as I arrived during the hustle and bustle that is "Committee Week". Guna, the sole Assistant in the office, briefed me on Mr. Zīle's interests in this field and I was thus charged with following Committee issues related to energy in addition to sitting in on topics that might prove useful for my own research.

During that first week I also spent my time coming to grips with the orientation and everyday life of Parliament – getting my stagiaire's badge, how to find my way to the office, how to decipher where particular rooms were from their "codes" (which, at first, seemed to be just a confusing jumble of letters and numbers), learning what foods to avoid at the Parliament canteen and where to get a mid-afternoon chocolate bar.

#### ITRE Committee

After I had settled in I gradually became accustomed to finding things to do with myself. Unlike previous interns, I was assigned to an office that did not work in English as its first language and was not able to speak or understand the language used. As a result, I could not engage myself in undertaking administrative duties nor prepare press releases or assist in drafting questions and speeches. For the same reason I was also unable to provide assistance in terms of constituency work. My main focus was therefore on collecting relevant information for Mr. Zīle and conducting research. I had to keep up to date with issues being discussed within both the TRAN and ITRE Committees and ensure I kept the office informed of issues relevant to the

Baltic states in particular. During Committee Weeks this often meant some long hours of sitting through both TRAN and ITRE meetings and then having to make sense of all the data I had recorded and present it to Mr. Zīle.

During my time in Mr. Zīle's office the main issue the ITRE Committee was working towards was that of creating an EU Roaming Regulation. The Commission had put through a proposal to ITRE, as the Committee responsible, in 2006 after recognising telecoms market competition was failing to drive roaming charges down. To address this situation of "market failure", the Parliament passed a final vote on 23 May 2007 in favour of reducing roaming charges by up to 70 percent. I had followed the issue through ITRE Committee meetings since my arrival in Parliament in April and Mr. Zīle spoke during the final voting session in Strasbourg. Being able to observe the Parliamentary process through to its completion was a fascinating experience.

### **TRAN Committee**

In terms of my involvement with TRAN Committee issues, I often attended meetings in place of Guna who was heavily involved with administrative and organisational duties. I had not expected to find transport matters particularly exciting but, surprisingly, I enjoyed observing the often heated exchanges between Committee members and found the topics of discussion interesting to follow. A personal highlight for me in this field was receiving thanks from Mr. Zīle following my write-up concerning a hearing held at Strasbourg on the transportation of fluid on aeroplanes – Mr. Zīle's colleagues in Latvian domestic politics were particularly interested in this topic and apparently found my report very useful. It's not hard to feel at a bit of a loss within the bureaucratic machine of Parliament and so it was great to receive such feedback!

### **Strasbourg**

During my time in Mr. Zīle's office I was also lucky enough to be taken to Strasbourg, thus getting to experience the chaos of Parliament in Session. Aside from the work I completed on the aviation hearing I definitely felt surplus to requirements here. The MEP, Assistant and any stagiaires that accompany them all share one office, one desk and one computer. The days are often long, as Sessions start late and can run until midnight. I was lucky, however, that Mr. Zīle and Guna were aware that there was not a lot for me to do at this point and even granted me a day off to allow me to explore the pretty town of Strasbourg (and free up some space in the office no doubt!)

### **Latvia**

If I wasn't grateful enough to Mr. Zīle and Guna for accommodating me in their office for the first period of my internship, they extended their generosity even further by inviting me to Latvia during Constituency Week. This was a perk that I was not expecting! At the end of May, therefore, I found myself stepping off the plane in Rīga where I was met by Guna and graciously hosted by her sister Laura for the week. Mid-week I even travelled up to Tallinn to take in little bit of Estonia since I'd be transferring to Mr. Tarand's office in June. My "Baltic experience" was absolutely fascinating and it was great to be able to visit the countries and get a better

understanding of the cultural, historical and political background of the MEPs that I was working for.

### **Mr. Andres Tarand**

#### **Orientation**

As previously mentioned, working within Mr. Tarand's office and political group could not have been much more far removed from my experience with Mr. Zile. Being on one of the Socialist floors was much more lively than the UEN section of the building. Employing two Assistants, Mr. Tarand's office seemed busier too, with Julie and Peep coming and going as they tried to keep on top of their respective responsibilities. In addition, whilst Mr. Zile was heavily involved in domestic politics, Mr. Tarand, as a former Prime Minister of Estonia, was no longer so involved and seemed more focused on Parliamentary affairs. Not only was Mr. Tarand a full member of ITRE and ENVI Committees but he had most recently become involved within the Temporary Committee on Climate Change (CLIM).

#### **CLIM Committee**

Preceding my arrival, Julie and Peep had been juggling Mr. Tarand's Committee responsibilities between them which proved a hard task as, strangely enough, these related fields often held meetings simultaneously. Julie and Peep seemed relieved at my arrival as it meant assured attendance on all ITRE, ENVI and CLIM related gatherings and immediately assigned me to follow CLIM issues. More specifically, Mr. Tarand wanted me to focus on the rather controversial issue of tracking arguments disputing Climate Change. I was to gather opinions aired within ITRE, ENVI and CLIM Committees over the last twelve months and report on which MEPs held these views and what evidence they drew on to support them.

Committee meeting recordings, however, did not produce many results and so I was sent along to hearings as well. I attended a conference lunch disputing the feasibility of reducing airline emissions other than CO<sub>2</sub> and, most controversially, attended notorious MEP Roger Helmer's conference titled "Climate Change: A Second Opinion". Not surprisingly, both gatherings gave me many points of view to work with!

#### **Green Week**

As part of my Climate Change focus I also attended "Green Week" at the Commission, hosted to celebrate 50 years of EU environmental policy with the aim of providing a forum for the presentation of information and fostering debate on the topic. As expected, the issue of Climate Change was much discussed. It was a really interesting week and gave me a great insight into how the EU views environmental issues and what their priorities are for the future.

#### **Other Responsibilities**

Also unlike Mr. Zile's office, Mr. Tarand's office worked in English and so I was more actively involved in processing amendments and assisting in the drafting of speeches. I had to quickly get up to speed with Mr. Tarand's Member State priorities as well as Socialist ideologies when it

came to considering tabled amendments. In addition to this, Julie and Peep took advantage of hosting a stagiaire that spoke English as a first language and I was put to work editing Mr. Tarand's amendments, speeches and reports. I found the task useful as it allowed me to get a better idea of his priorities and I was therefore able to be more effective in assisting Julie and Peep as they assessed amendments.

## Acknowledgements

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My experience as an intern within the European Parliament was incredible and now, as I sit writing this in my NCRE cubicle, it all seems very surreal.

I would like to thank the many people that made all this possible – Professor Martin Holland for encouraging me to “throw my hat into the ring” in the first place; the EUCN for providing students like me with such an amazing opportunity; Janet Lowe for her efforts in hunting down *two* MEPs in my desired field of interest and giving me “on the ground” support; Sarah Coleman for organising the financial side of things and making sure I had money to live off; Mr. Zile and Guna for hosting me, for their help in making my introduction to Parliamentary life as painless as possible and their amazing generosity; Mr. Tarand for hosting me for the second period of my internship and charging me with such an interesting task; Peep for all his help in getting me up to speed with the workings of the office and answering all my silly questions and Julie for her friendship, guidance, her insistence in assisting me improve my French and tirelessly helping me track down key-personnel to talk to about my thesis. To my friends and to Brittany, Christian, Yoonah, Annick and Rebecca at the NCRE in particular, for always keeping in touch and never making me feel too far away from home; Dan for putting on a brave face and doing without me for three and a half months; and finally my parents for their continued contact, support and newspaper cuttings... thank you.