

In April 2023, I participated in the FuturEU Observer Track in Berlin, within the framework of the CIVICA for Ukraine project. This project is implemented by the Warsaw School of Economics SGH and funded by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange NAWA. This is an extraordinary achievement for me and I'm deeply grateful to everyone involved in this project. FuturEU is a unique community of special people and I am thrilled to be a part of it. Read more about the incredible individuals I had the chance to meet below.

Justine, Simon, and Thomas are studying Policy and Politics Analysis at Bocconi University in Milan. They proposed the idea of adding a clause to the ABER (Agricultural Block Exemption Regulation) that would permit state aid to finance new projects meeting the criteria of Resource Efficiency, Climate Resilience, Social Inclusion, and Economic Development. This proposal arises from their belief that the current financial system is inefficient enough. Europe is committed to becoming climate neutral by 2050, a commendable but ambitious goal that may disadvantage smaller players. Small farms struggle to finance their transition independently, and they often fail to meet the stringent requirements for receiving state financial aid. Therefore, Justine, Thomas, and Simon propose a more flexible and targeted system for financing the fair transition of agriculture.

Their presentation was the one that stood out most to me. They delivered the opening speech in the first semi-final, impressing me with their profound understanding of the topic and the confidence radiating from each participant. Consequently, it was a pleasure to conduct a brief interview with them.

Why did you choose this topic?

We didn't choose this topic because we were experts on EU agriculture, it was more the contrary! Rather, we picked this niche question of state funding in funding the green transition and green agriculture because we did not know much about it. We thought it could be a fun challenge to discover a new theme that is extremely relevant nowadays with agriculture being responsible for 10.3% of EU emissions along with the EU's ambitious carbon reduction goals. Furthermore, we quickly realized in our research that agriculture would not only be an environmental challenge in the transition, but also socio-economical. With its large rural-urban gap and omnipresence of small farms, we wanted to highlight the need for the EU to intervene to make sure the latter are not bearing the whole burden to a greener transition: we need a socially just one.

You, Simon, and Thomas represent one idea. How did you collaborate on this project?

Simon, Thomas and I collaborated really easily on the project, we worked efficiently and in a cheerful manner. We individually spent a lot of time researching and taking notes of existing measures and mechanisms in place as well as intricacies in EU agricultural policy. Afterwards, we met a few times to discuss what we found and quickly agreed on a skeleton for the policy brief with our main points and evidence to accompany them. The writing was done by all of us with Thomas doing an amazing job at unifying the language and style all over. Afterwards, when we found out we were going to the semi finals, we met once in Milan

to prepare our presentation slides and script to select the most important points. Once in Berlin and with a few hours of sleep and after traveling, we found the strength in ourselves to rehearse a few times and make sure we were on time! Overall, it was an amazing experience, stress free and which reinforced friendships for sure!

What do you think could be the biggest challenges in this process of integrating climate-focused criteria into state aid funding?

There are already climate-focused criteria in state aid funding rules, but unfortunately, they exclude agriculture. I think the biggest challenges are to

1) convince states that it won't cause market distortions and negatively impact their agriculture. Indeed, the countries with less fiscal capabilities might be worried that the investments made by richer countries in their own agriculture might lead to poorer countries having a competitive disadvantage. This is especially tricky for agriculture because it often is a strong political symbol.

2) Define what projects would be eligible, as there is always a trade off between how many projects are eligible and how many objectives each project tackles. The current system advocates for having few projects be eligible, but they would tackle several of the EU's goals, whereas we believe that the EU should finance projects even if they tackle only the most important priority of the EU.

Why are student initiatives like futurEU important?

I think initiatives like FuturEU are very important because they push students like us to think about the bigger picture, rather than only focusing on what's taught in class. It's important for young people like us to be aware of what more can be done to tackle issues like climate change. Also, it is very enriching to hear the ideas of everyone else in the competition. Also, the competition aspect and time constraint lets us develop valuable skills.

What were your impressions of the FuturEU conference and Berlin in general?

We were made to feel very welcome, and I found the atmosphere warm and friendly. I found all the proposals relevant and well argued, and the informal discussions we were able to have afterwards were very instructive in gaining a deeper understanding of everyone's ideas. We were lucky enough to be able to visit the city of Berlin with the whole team, discovering authentic places and learning more about anecdotes about the city

What would be your advice to other students who wish to engage in initiatives like futurEU?

I would recommend them to be original and not to hesitate to take an interest in subjects that are initially foreign to them. The European Union needs the point of view of its young citizens if it is to function fully as the democracy it wishes to be. Initiatives such as futurEU really help to connect students with different backgrounds, which is very enriching. You have to come up with a precise, personally relevant idea so that you can defend it fully and practice the exercise in advance so that you can shine as brightly as possible on the day. There is no right or wrong idea at the outset, it's all about how you defend it and show its relevance.

