

Reflection on Allianz Summer Academy 2015 by Michelle Nedashkovskaya

ASA 2015 from the perspective of an American Participant:

For five idyllic yet engaging days, five teams of students from five elite universities around the world gathered in Kempfenhausen on the shores of Starnberger See close to Munich, to discuss and debate some of the most salient issues of our time: the issue of European integration, migration and the plight of refugees and asylum-seekers, as well as the future of European identity as a whole.

Our arrival in Kempfenhausen itself was something out of a storybook. Weary from our journeys to reach Munich, the lot of ASA participants of 2015 gathered outside of Ostbahnhof to engage in preliminary introductions; already, we began to bond over our academic and professional interests, immersing ourselves in each other's passions and major goals. (Indeed, I would argue that it is truly the dynamic amongst ASA participants that most greatly contributes to success and individuality as a summer program.) Germany's reputation for preservation of nature and greenery even in major cities was evident during our bus ride from Ostbahnhof to Starnberger See, as we retreated from the city center to the serene and isolated location, where we would reflect and engage with each other for an intensive several days. Far more than a luxurious conference center – though one would not be mistaken in calling Kempfenhausen luxurious –, the location was also purposeful in itself. In order to profoundly and effectively engage with each other and our own creative selves, we withdrew from the very European civilization that we would be pondering and analyzing.

Stepping away from the issues, we could scrutinize them from new perspectives – and we each introduced a perspective all our own. On the other side of this coin, however, the beauty of our conference venue felt simultaneously too perfect to me, and too much of a privilege given the subject matter that we were deliberating. How was it that five groups of students from elite universities around the world were given the chance to gather in a setting so gorgeous and manicured – only to discuss issues relating to human rights abuses and waves of refugees fleeing persecution? This was, in my opinion, a great irony underlying our program at Kempfenhausen. More importantly, however, this irony is not unique to the summer academy but rather extends to and reflects real-life public policy deliberations by world leaders. This, too, served a purpose: How did Kempfenhausen inform our interactions and ideas? Do we take issue with this irony, or is it ultimately a purposeful element to negotiations among groups of people? Such questions are valuable take-aways from the summer academy.

Once settled into our beautiful venue, we were formally introduced to the Allianz Summer Academy of 2015, and to the brilliant teams of students that we would have the pleasure and privilege of interacting with and learning from. The members of our student delegation from Princeton University occupied a unique place in the overall composition of student delegates, as we were all primarily American, despite being tied to Europe through our personal backgrounds or interests. This peculiarity of the Princeton team was reflected in the manner in which our presentation, focused on the potential role of European youth in European integration, contrasted with the other four presentations both in style and content. It occurred to me that we

were contributing an American perspective in a particularly American manner; apparently less formal, arguably less structured, and objectively less technical, our presentation was delivered in a way that sought to appeal to the creative optimists among our audience members. Perhaps given our degrees of removal from the European Union in everyday life, our words carried a great deal of positivity and, dare I say, idealism. Our European colleagues, too, seemed keenly aware of this contrast in our presentation styles. At the conclusion of our opening presentation, they offered eloquent, justified constructive criticism of our ideas as well as commentary underscoring the profound differences in our cultural approaches to issues of integration. Inherently a lesson about the merits of cross-cultural collaboration and the exchange of ideas from vastly differing perspectives, I believe the proceedings of the Allianz Summer Academy left a very profound impression of all of us.

We may not have left Kempfehausen with a blueprint for the ideal form of the European Union – but we certainly left broadened perspectives, new sources of inspiration, and treasured memories with new friends.