



# Young European Lawyers Academy – A spotlight on training young professionals in EU law

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## 1 Gap in training for lawyers in EU law

In its European strategy for judicial training 2021-2024, the Commission highlights the importance of EU lawyers as “justice practitioners play an essential role in upholding the rule of law.” Therefore, lawyers should “keep pace with the EU *acquis* in this area, including the fast-developing case-law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), so they can implement it in their work.”<sup>1</sup> In order to become familiar with the *acquis*, training in EU law is considered particularly important at the beginning of a career, as young professionals need to “a grounding in the EU legal system and legal culture in the course of their initial training. This should help build their practical understanding of the role of EU law in national legal systems, the rule of law *acquis* and their role as European justice practitioners.”<sup>2</sup> However, this urgency does not necessarily translate into practice. The Commission’s 2021 and 2022 annual reports on the training of legal practitioners show that the provision of initial training for lawyers in EU law varies widely. While some Member States provide sufficient initial training opportunities, in 23 Member States initial training in EU law is very

<sup>1</sup>European Commission, Ensuring justice in the EU — a European judicial training strategy for 2021-2024 (2020). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0713>.

<sup>2</sup>European Commission, Ensuring justice in the EU — a European judicial training strategy for 2021-2024 (2020). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0713>.

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low or non-existent.<sup>3</sup> Training opportunities for lawyers in EU law are similarly low: Despite the target of reaching 15% of all EU lawyers per year with training in EU law by 2024, only a small number of Member States are meeting this target, according to the Commission.<sup>4</sup>

The training situation for judges and prosecutors is very different. Already 12 years ago, in 2011, ERA organised intensive two-week training courses for young judges and prosecutors. The training was designed to provide intensive training for these judicial professionals at the beginning of their careers. A similar initiative is continued today by the European Judicial Training Network (EJTN): the Aiakos programme.<sup>5</sup> This programme brings together young judges and prosecutors for one of four one-week courses in either spring or autumn. In addition, the EJTN provides a range of training opportunities for European judges, prosecutors and court staff. In addition to the EJTN, judges, prosecutors and their trainers can also use the European e-Justice portal. This portal, set up by the Commission, gives explicit priority to “judges and prosecutors responsible for enforcing European Union law.”<sup>6</sup> The portal contains a variety of resources, including information on training networks, national systems, good training practices and national methodologies.

## 2 Filling the gap: Young European Lawyers Contest and Academy

For a long time, there have been no similar training opportunities and offers for young members of the European Bar. Despite the emphasis on the importance of lawyers for the rule of law and human rights in the Commission’s European judicial training strategy for 2021-2024, the Annual Reports for 2021 and 2022 show that the training needs of young lawyers remain under-served. At the same time, young lawyers operate in an increasingly interconnected world and need to develop cross-border working skills and a “European law reflex” in the same way as prosecutors and judges. ERA therefore continues to work towards a better understanding and acceptance of EU law by the younger generation of legal professionals through two main projects: the Young European Lawyers Contest and the Young European Lawyers Academy.

While the intensive training in 2011 was a first step in training young professionals, the Young European Lawyers Contest (YELC), which was piloted in 2018, was the first training project aimed exclusively at young lawyers. During the competition, participants receive basic training in EU law and public speaking skills, and then work in teams to solve and argue cases based on EU law. The main aim of the competition is to raise awareness of the rule of law, to promote new experiences and to

<sup>3</sup>European Commission, Annual Report on the training of justice professionals (2021), p. 14-15. Available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-09/european-judicial-training-2021-2nd\\_edition\\_0.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-09/european-judicial-training-2021-2nd_edition_0.pdf).

<sup>4</sup>European Commission, Annual Report on the training of justice professionals (2022), p. 15. Available at: <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/European-judicial-training-2022-2nd%20edition.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup>EJTN, Aiakos Programme. Available at: <https://ejtn.eu/activity/aiakos-programme/>.

<sup>6</sup>Nevertheless, the website continues that training is “also essential for other legal practitioner, such as (...) lawyers”; European Commission, Training of justice professionals. Available at: [https://e-justice.europa.eu/120/EN/training\\_of\\_justice\\_professionals](https://e-justice.europa.eu/120/EN/training_of_justice_professionals).

exchange new perspectives on European law issues. In addition to developing their critical thinking and communication skills through several rounds of actively using their knowledge of EU law to debate cases, the competition also fosters relationships and networks between participants. Currently funded mainly by the EU Justice Programme 2021-2024, the YELC is a long-standing project organised in cooperation with the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE) and 20 national and local bars.

The Young European Lawyers Academy (YELA) complements the YELC since 2023. On 22 March 2022, ERA, together with the European Young Bar Association and other co-beneficiaries<sup>7</sup> and supporting institutions,<sup>8</sup> submitted a project proposal in response to the European Commission's call for proposals on judicial training 2022, addressing the training needs of young lawyers in private practice in the area of EU law. The proposal foresees two intensive 10-day courses on EU law per year with 30 participants each. The small size of the group allows participants to receive intensive attention from the trainers and to form close bonds with each other. In 2023, the first participants were welcomed in two courses in June and November/December respectively.

### **3 The importance of project partners for international trainings**

The organisation of YELA in a consortium with national bars as project partners is crucial for its success. While ERA takes care of the organisational aspects of YELA and the project management, the national bars are the link to the participants and speakers. Consequently, the project partners contribute in two ways: by selecting participants and by connecting national experts as speakers. As regards the selection of participants, the national bars have a broad membership and therefore reach a large pool of potential applicants. They will use the marketing materials provided by ERA, or create their own, to reach out to their members and law firms to invite applications. As the number of places available is limited, the national bars are also in the best position to evaluate the applications received and select suitable candidates. Due to the diversity of national bars as project partners, each YELA has a diverse group of participants. Coming from different legal systems, each participant has had a different legal education, thus enriching the discussions with their different legal perspectives.

The synergy between ERA and national bars is also important in the selection of speakers. While ERA has a large pool of expert speakers, national bars enrich this pool with national lawyers and experts specialised in EU law. They bring not only knowledge of EU law, but also how EU law is received in the respective jurisdictions and what role it plays in practice. Moreover, as speakers act as mentors to participants, it is of immense value to connect participants with practitioners from their own jurisdictions. These synergies can then act as a gateway to further networking and cooperation between lawyers interested in EU law at the national level.

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<sup>7</sup>Barcelona Bar Association (ICAB), Slovak Bar Association, Paris Bar Association.

<sup>8</sup>National Association of the Romanian Bars (UNBR), Budapest Bar Association, German Bar (DAV), Slovenian Bar Academy, Czech Bar Association.

## 4 YELA's training methodology for the young generation of lawyers

As YELA is aimed at young lawyers, it is important that the training methodology takes into account their needs as lawyers and young professionals. This means that the transfer of knowledge of EU law into its practical application is central. Given that lawyers work in many different fields, training must cover the basics and deal with knowledge relevant to all fields. Moreover, improving their understanding of EU law does not only refer to theoretical knowledge, but also means enabling participants to apply EU law in their practice. For lawyers, it is essential to be able to translate the knowledge acquired into usable arguments in court. Consequently, training must include practical elements that practise this transfer of knowledge.

YELA's training methodology addresses these needs through a wide range of topics, an online library of resources, a practice-oriented methodology, a diverse group of trainers and multiple opportunities for networking. As lawyers have different areas of specialisation, the topics taught need to reflect this range in order to be useful to practitioners. Therefore, YELA provides a foundation in topics relevant to lawyers regardless of their specialisation. It starts with EU institutional law, where participants will not only learn about the composition and actions of the Court of Justice of the European Union, but also practical tips for lawyers on how to bring an action. The rule of law is also covered. The role of the rule of law for private lawyers is discussed, as well as issues such as the independence of the judiciary and fair trial guarantees. Other topics include fundamental rights and data protection, where participants explore the respective legal frameworks and how they relate to national jurisdictions. Participants will also be introduced to the legal profession in the EU, where they will discuss the regulation and mobility of lawyers, as well as EU standards on professional secrecy. Finally, digital skills are irreplaceable in the modern workplace and digital information is proliferating. Therefore, YELA includes sessions on the use of electronic research tools to guide young lawyers. During these sessions, participants learn through short, practical exercises how to navigate through the increasing amount of information and find the documents they need efficiently.

To further exploit the digital opportunities, the theoretical sessions on EU law will be recorded and converted into e-presentations. These e-presentations are then made available on the YELA website, where participants can access them even after YELA. In addition, any young professional can access these materials and use them for self-study to deepen their knowledge of EU law.

In addition to deepening participants' knowledge of EU law, YELA emphasises the practical application of EU law. In order to prepare participants to use this knowledge in practice, the training methodology uses different methods. For each topic, participants take part in at least two practical exercises, such as case studies and/or workshops. During these exercises, participants work in groups to solve cases involving EU law and represent different parties in a dispute, such as representatives of the government, EU institutions or clients. Participants will not only learn how to apply theory to realistic cases, but will also have to adapt to working in teams of lawyers of different nationalities and legal backgrounds.

This effect is reinforced by the diversity of the trainers. Speakers involved in the training of young lawyers are not only important as experts in their field, but also

as mentors who guide young professionals by giving them valuable insights into the application of EU law in their daily practice. In order to maximise this effect, the diversity of trainers should include different aspects such as profession, nationality or place of work and gender. To achieve this, each YELA will feature a different set of speakers. For example, the first YELA in June 2023 had two national judges, four lawyers and five researchers as trainers. In terms of gender, seven trainers were female and four were male. Furthermore, the trainers came from eleven different jurisdictions, including Austria, Belgium, Romania, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Germany, Luxembourg and Slovenia. In contrast, the second YELA in November/December 2023 included six lawyers, three researchers, one national judge and one legal secretary. The gender balance was also balanced, with five women and six men. The jurisdiction covered Austria, Germany, Ireland, Hungary, Poland, Italy, Croatia, the Czech Republic and Luxembourg.

To further enhance the practical relevance for lawyers, YELA also includes visits to European courts and EU institutions. At the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), participants experience a hearing of a case, followed by a presentation on access to a lawyer, legal representation and legal aid before the CJEU. In addition, the young lawyers are welcomed to a meeting with judges of the ECJ so that the participants can put their questions directly to them. Similarly, the participants visit the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), where they receive an introduction from a lawyer working for the ECHR and meet with a judge. Taking full advantage of the proximity of the institutions, the visit to Strasbourg also includes a visit to the European Parliament (EP). The programme at the EP includes not only a guided tour of the building, but also an interactive exercise on the law-making process at the EP. In this exercise, developed by the EP, participants become members of the EP and negotiate with each other to shape legislation. By consulting stakeholders, forming alliances and speaking to the media, participants will have to work together and make difficult decisions on legislation on data protection and water solidarity. Through these excursions, participants gain experience of all the stages of a law: they experience the legislative process before a law is passed, and how laws are challenged in the courts after they have been passed.

## **5 Social component: the importance of soft skills and networking for young lawyers**

In addition to improving their knowledge of EU law, training for young professionals must also pay attention to improving the soft skills of its participants and give them the opportunity to expand their networks. Necessary soft skills include, for example, the ability to formulate arguments on the spot and the confidence to defend one's position. In addition, the social component should not be underestimated. Mentoring and networking with peers and other professionals are essential to the development of young lawyers. In the early stages of a career, networking is not necessarily about business opportunities, but also about gaining guidance and knowledge about other areas of law. By building relationships with other lawyers, young professionals gain insight and awareness of other areas of law and jurisdictions. They also build trust by

working together on case studies and workshops, which facilitates future international collaboration.

YELA incorporates soft skills training as much as possible. In case studies and workshops, the young lawyers work in groups of different nationalities and legal cultures. They become aware of cultural and legal differences and learn to adapt to them in order to successfully complete their assignments. During these activities, the participants also benefit from interaction with their trainers, who give them tips from their own practice, encourage them and help them to formulate arguments based on EU law. These links with peers and trainers are further strengthened during the social programme. In addition to joint lunches and breaks, participants are invited to several dinners in the cities of Trier and Strasbourg. Participants also take part in wine tastings and city tours to experience the history and culture of the regions they visit during their training. The young lawyers also have the opportunity to participate in seasonal activities, such as the famous Christmas markets in Trier and Strasbourg.

The visits to Strasbourg and Luxembourg are also important in terms of networking. Thanks to the commitment and efforts of both the ECJ and the ECtHR, the young lawyers not only get to see European law in practice, but also have the opportunity to interact with experienced judges and lawyers working for the courts.

## **6 Synergy with other projects: YELC and Young Friends of ERA**

By the end of the YELA project, 120 young lawyers will have received intensive training in EU law. To ensure long-term impact and benefits, YELA is building synergies with other existing programmes.

As a pioneer in providing training specifically for young lawyers, YELC continues to contribute to the training of the younger generation. Through pleading exercises and moot courts, where participants compete in teams of different nationalities, YELC emphasises the application of EU law to cases and trains participants' soft skills. Success in the competition requires not only theoretical knowledge, but also the ability to work effectively with different legal backgrounds and cultures, to think on the spot and to formulate convincing arguments. With an emphasis on argumentation and negotiation, the finalists, who will be invited to defend a case before the General Court of the European Union, will be trained in litigation and persuasive argumentation. Mirroring real-life scenarios, participants must listen to other teams' points of view and try to reach compromises during negotiations. As with YELA, participants are coached by a range of mentors, including lawyers, judges and legal secretaries. Building on the basic knowledge of EU law gained through, for example, YELA, YELC allows for a deeper understanding of EU law and training in soft skills by offering different types of practical exercises, including arguing cases and conducting negotiations. Ideally, participants could train in the basics of EU law during YELA and then intensively train their "EU law reflex" during YELC. These synergies could be felt as early as 2023. Although YELA training events did not start until 2023, YELA and YELC have already welcomed participants from both events. It is hoped that such exchanges will continue in the future to foster networks of young lawyers interested in EU law.

Another hopeful sign to further engage young lawyers interested in EU law is the “Young Friends of ERA” organisation. Initiated by former YELC participants, Young Friends of ERA aims to create a network of young professionals interested in EU law. Unlike YELC and YELA, this initiative is open to all legal professionals, including lawyers, judges, prosecutors or legal staff of NGOs, IOs or governments. The aim is not only to foster further links between young legal professionals, but also to provide continuing education in EU law through lectures and similar events. “Young Friends of ERA” is closely inspired by “Friends of ERA”, which has agreed to take the young lawyers under its wing and mentor them during their first events. Friends of ERA is a long-standing organisation that brings together legal professionals with the aim of promoting the good application of EU law.

## 7 Conclusion

As seen above, the initial and continuous training of lawyers in EU law remains a gap in the landscape of legal training in the EU. This unfortunate situation is also explicitly recognised by the Commission in its judicial training strategy and annual reports. While training at national level has stagnated, cooperation between ERA and national bars is working through collaboration on international projects such as YELA. Both YELA and YELC are prime examples of bringing together and training the new generation of lawyers in EU law to ensure the application of EU law at all levels. The success of these projects shows that young lawyers are hungry for training in EU law. They are even organising themselves to further their networking and training in EU law through initiatives such as the Young Friends of ERA. In order to prepare young lawyers for an increasingly interconnected working environment and to ensure the good application of EU law in the long term, it is to be hoped that the current attention to the young generation of lawyers will not be short-lived, but will be continued in future calls from the Commission.

## Declarations

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