

Global Young Academy

Young Scientist Ambassador Programme (YSAP)



Ambassador:
Koen Vermeir
@KoenVermeir

Country of Origin:
France

County of Destination:
Romania

Time of Visit:
10-16 April 2019

Title: “From Scientist to Ambassador”

Aims

When I suggested the YSAP ambassador proposal “From Scientist to Ambassador”, I was co-chair of the GYA Science Advice working group. We were working on new ways to train scientists and policy makers in "science brokerage", so they start learning to make the bridge between science, policy and politics.

One of our ideas was to pair scientists with diplomats, and this proposal was a pilot test case. The idea was to create an exchange between France, a country with a long tradition in evidence-informed policy making, and Romania, a nation that struggles with finding an advisory role for science. Given that I have contacts with former high government officials in Romania, this looked like an ideal setting. The original idea was to exchange openly with a group of around 10 young diplomats on science-informed policy making, and potentially shadow one diplomat/ambassador during his/her activities for one or two days.

What is at stake:

- testing out possibilities and pitfalls of interactions between scientists and diplomats

- exploring the potential use of the humanities for policy and diplomacy (usually, only the natural sciences are seen as relevant in this context, so a lot is at stake here)
- creating a connection between western and eastern Europe in a time of political divergence between these regions and in a time of fragmentation of Europe.
- capacity building in science advice and science diplomacy
- starting to create a network of young diplomats the GYA can work with in future
- testing out relations between scientists and diplomats with different nationalities
- test case for a new GYA initiative, to learn from, so we can up-scale this in the context of the Science Advice working group

Political context of implementation

This YSAP project proved to be a useful lesson in science – policy interaction.

When I started the planning phase of the project, the political situation in Romania was shifting rapidly.

In the preceding months, the Romanian senate had proposed laws reforming the judiciary that would negatively impact anti-corruption safeguards in the country. The Council of Europe’s anti-corruption body has repeatedly expressed deep concern about the situation. But the situation would become much worse, and protests against the government would upend the whole country (see e.g. the New York Times published the article: “Violence Erupts as Tens of Thousands Protest Corruption in Romania”, 10 August 2018).

Romania’s leaders were also accused of corruption, but Liviu Dragnea, the leader of the governing party, accused investigators, using well known rhetoric, of being part of a “deep state” engaged in a political “witch hunt”, while his party sought to make changes to the judicial system that threatened to undermine the rule of law.

In the same period a national referendum took place to change Romania’s constitution.

It aimed to change the constitution to define marriage as strictly between a man and a woman. Although Romania currently bars marriage and civil partnerships for same-sex couples, this constitutional change would prevent same-sex couples from securing the right to marry in the future. The government-backed campaign led to social unease and to a rise in hate speech and violence against the gay community. Critics have said that

the referendum was a government strategy to avoid public scrutiny of the corruption charges and build more popular support for the government.

In this politically tense atmosphere, it proved impossible to find a group of diplomats to work with scientists on what turns out to be a politically inflammable topic: evidence-informed policy making. On the other hand, the situation also made very clear the need for capacity building in science advice and for strengthening the science-policy connection. We therefore decided to go ahead with the YSAP mission and organize a capacity building workshop on science advice for a diverse and interdisciplinary group of Romanian scientists. That workshop took place on 15 April 2019. This period was chosen because Romania held at that moment the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which increased scrutiny on the government, and it allowed the workshop to take place in conjunction with EU meetings.

A month after the YSAP mission, after three years of court cases, Romania's most powerful politician was convicted to a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence by the Romanian Supreme Court. Recently, Romania's Prime Minister Viorica Dancila was ousted in a vote of no confidence after complaints of corruption in connection with Dragnea. But the real work of building a government that is based on strong democratic principles and evidence-based decision making still lies ahead.

GYA Science Advice Workshop

The workshop was widely advertised in universities in Bucharest and 10 participants were selected. Participants varied from young PhD students to a senior scholars, including a director of a department, and they came from disciplines as diverse as political science, philosophy and biological sciences. The location was the Research Institute of the University of Bucharest, an interdisciplinary institute ideal for such interdisciplinary collaboration and capacity building.

These quotes come from the motivations submitted by attendees:

- „I am highly interested in bridging the gap between the academic research community and policy makers, such that the former find ways to better capitalize research results and the latter understand the practical relevance of scientific research.”

- „I would like to participate at the Science Advice training for a complex world because I am interested in the ethical evaluations involved in propaganda, post-truth and expertise.”



To start the workshop, I gave an introduction to the GYA and its role in science advice.

I introduced the theme of the workshop and gave an overview of how scientists can become active in science advice. Science advice often starts from the presumption that governments are more likely to make better decisions when they use well-developed evidence wisely. This presumption is challenged by populist politics and media and by the vilification of elites and experts. I explained the need for an effective and trustworthy science advisory ecosystem taking into account that policy making is messy.

There is a special role for the humanities and social sciences for making sense of science. They can help give insight in explaining the scientific method and the social embedding of science, the difficult boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity, as well as ethical questions. One of the themes explored in detail was that science is not values-free: scientists make values-based decisions all the time. I also explained the

skillset needed if scientists want to work at the science-policy interface based on a JRC report (to which GYA gave input).

In the second part of the workshop, I used a role play to show how science advice works in practice. This allowed the participants to experience the difficulties faced by policy makers, and the various considerations that need to be taken into account besides the scientific evidence. The use of such imaginary scenarios illuminate the complexity of the issues faced at the science/policy nexus.

We used the role play “Changing Demographics: Retirement Age and Evidence-Informed Decision Making”. The Original scenario was created by INGSA, with assistance from the Joint Research Centre, European Commission. I tested this material beforehand at the IIASA-JRC-GYA-INGSA EVIDENCE AND POLICY SUMMER SCHOOL 2018, which I co-organized. This summer school was held on 5-7 September 2018 at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), Laxenburg, Austria, where I already moderated this role play.



The role play features a fictional country Gerontaria, and the 10 participants play the roles of minister or science advisor of the ruling Government of the country of Gerontaria. Gerontaria is facing changing demographics, an aging workforce, increasing automation, and a generous pension system. It is becoming critical that Gerontaria also make a decision on the issue of retirement age. The Prime Minister calls together his Cabinet. In meeting 1, the Cabinet meets to identify knowledge gaps and commission

research that will help inform a decision. In meeting 2, occurring 12 months later, the Cabinet is charged with making a decision. Each of the participants manages a Ministry that will be affected by the decision. They also have individual political leanings and priorities that will influence their decision. Participants are asked to fill the shoes of their character as authentically as possible.

Playing the role play took us 4 hours. The play was designed with an aim of illustrating the decision making process surrounded by a multitude of scientific claims, and it was a great success. At the end, the participants had a much better understanding of how to better integrate scientific evidence into policy-making and they understood the difficulties policy makers faced in finding science relevant to their field, how to interpret it, and what can be expected from researchers.

Apart from organizing the Science Advice Workshop, I took this opportunity of my visit to Bucharest to co-organize more events, represent the GYA, and deliver keynotes.

A public keynote on “post-truth”

I delivered the departmental lecture at the faculty of philosophy of the University of Bucharest on 10 April 2019. We are living in a post-truth era with diminishing trust in science and in experts more generally. I talked about how epistemology has unexpectedly become central to politics and the practice of science. In order to empower epistemology in the *vita activa*, however, we need to expand its domain and revisit its goals. I focused on ways to better understand knowledge by asking how knowledge can best be faked, looking at masters of epistemic trickery and deception.

Roundtable discussion: Open Access (OA) and Digital Infrastructure

I co-organized this *Roundtable discussion* on the digital transformation of science on 10 April 2019 at the Research Institute of the University of Bucharest. The roundtable discussion hosted by the Humanities division of the ICUB aims to stimulate a debate along two of the key components of DI: the promotion of open access (OA) and the need of strong digital infrastructures at the university level.

Representing the GYA at OSPP meeting in Bucharest



I also represented the GYA at the European Commission's Open Science Policy Platform (OSPP) meeting in Bucharest on 11 April 2019, organized by the Romanian presidency. The future of scholarly communication and new indicators for open science were discussed.

Representing the GYA at the discussion panel on Next Generation Metrics, Next Indicators



I participated in the discussion panel on Next Generation Metrics, Next Indicators, Next Science of the OSPP-organised stakeholders consultation event 'New indicators to support open science' in the neoclassical Biblioteca Carol I in Bucharest on 12 April 2019.