

Laidlaw Final Reflective Report

Aminata Sarah Roth

Talking about lobbying regulation

My second summer in the Laidlaw scholarship consisted of undertaking an in-field application of my research. My summer 1 project had looked at the strengths and the weaknesses of the EU's lobbying regulation. Through this work, I realized that the existing measures to assess the effectiveness of a lobbying regulation were not sufficient. Furthermore, I became increasingly critical of the premise that underpins most lobbying regulations. The literature widely assumes that ordinary citizens will scrutinize the information interest representatives disclose in lobbying registers, and having learnt about the interactions between lobbyists and policymakers, will come to trust the government more. However, I quickly realized that most people do not know how lobbying is regulated in their country, and even fewer have ever looked at a lobbying register. Motivated by the conviction that transparency is somewhat ineffective if nobody knows about it, I decided to design a project that would introduce citizens to the world of lobbying regulations and make transparency regulations more accessible. The end-product was www.lobbymeter.eu – an online platform that allows you to explore the effectiveness of lobbying regulation in your country, using my newly developed measure. In addition to providing general background information on the topic, it tackles common misconceptions about lobbying and lobbying regulation.

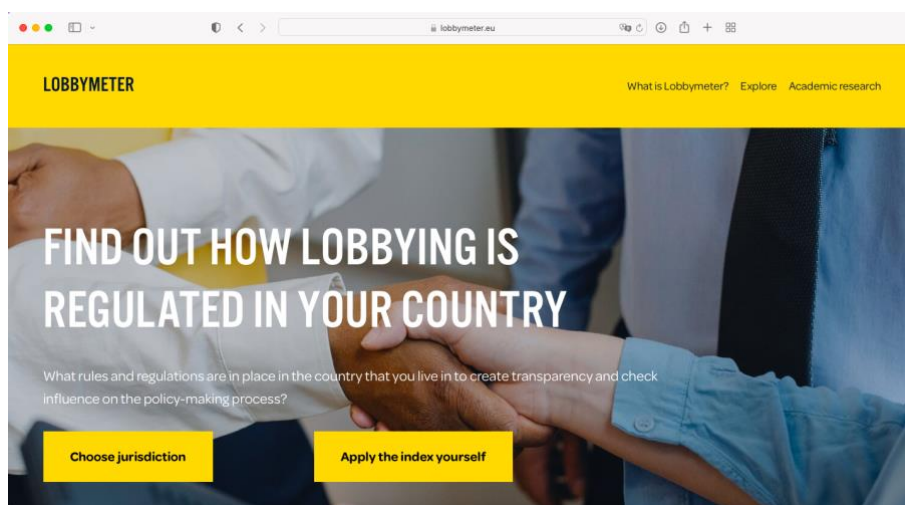


Figure 1: The finished Lobbymeter.eu website

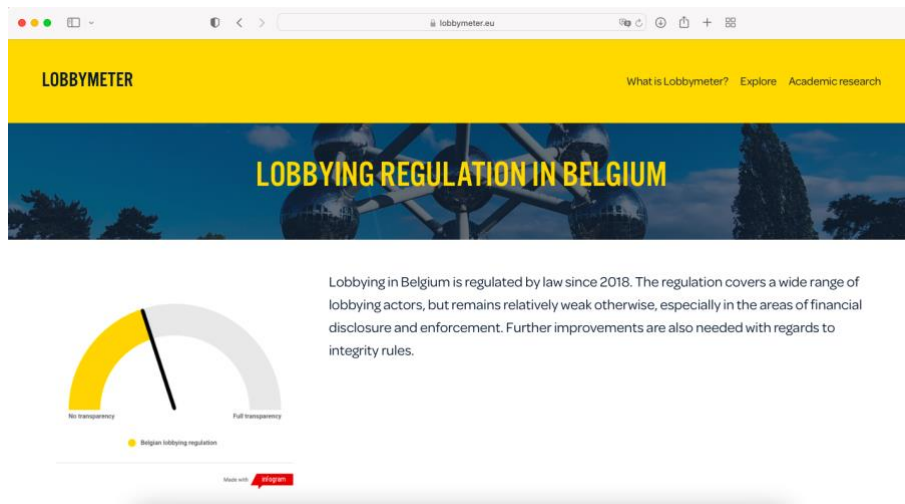


Figure 2: Country profile on Lobbymeter

Figure 3: Online scoring sheet to apply my new lobbying regulation robustness measure

Initially my plan had been to aim for a placement in an international organisation working on transparency during my second summer. Discovering the gaps in the academic literature's approach to lobbying regulation led me to change my plans and undertake a self-directed in-field application of research. This allowed me to be more flexible when undertaking the work remotely, but certainly also had its disadvantages, as I will go into later. Working on my own project, with the same supervisor as I had during summer 1, meant that the work was in many ways similar to my research project. The main difference was that I collaborated with a wider range of people and had to focus on the end-product, and its impact, throughout. Instead of looking to criteria established by my academic discipline, I was constantly thinking about what information is valuable to the public, which points I need to get across, and what are details that only a political scientist would care about.

Looking back, I would say that I built a tool that achieved most of things I set out to do. At the same time, I think a lot more work could be done. Lobbymeter has the potential to educate individuals of all ages on transparency policies and I took first steps to disseminate the resource among the public. Over the past 18 months, I have talked to countless people about lobbying, its regulation, and why it matters. I have perfected my elevator pitch (or several really, depending on who my audience is) and know which questions I need to ask to make others think about their preconceptions on interest groups, the democratic process, and lobbying regulation. Lobbymeter drew on these experiences, but I believe there is more that can be done to further discussion on these policies that are designed to enhance public trust.

Throughout my time in this scholarship, I have developed the knowledge I have in my chosen subject area, my skills as a researcher, and my abilities as a leader. Overall, I would summarize the most important things I am taking away from this learning experience in the following three lessons:

Lesson 1: Find power in diversity

One of the greatest benefits of the Laidlaw scholarship have been the interactions with other scholars and experts in the field. Witnessing the different perspectives and leadership styles the other scholars have brought to their projects has been incredibly rewarding. I have learned to appreciate the power that lies in diversity in completely different ways. My ALS group was particularly pivotal in this regard, as I never would have anticipated how much my political science project could benefit from lessons my friends provided by drawing on their totally unrelated disciplines, such as drama or midwifery. These interactions also taught me to be able to break down my findings in a way that is accessible to people not familiar with the discipline, a skill that is arguably indispensable when it comes to the study of politics.

In a way, this lesson also fed into the way my conception of what constitutes good leadership has changed. In my opinion, a good leader should know how to capitalize off this diversity. They should be able to spot the potential and different talents in their team. They should have an overarching goal, as well as the ability to direct a team so that its members view this goal in a way that allows them to grasp what contribution is needed from them to turn this vision

into reality. Lastly, I believe that a good leader should be embedded within the team and be a driving force from within rather than from above.

Lesson 2: Take up space

The second lesson I am taking away from my experience in the Laidlaw scholarship relates to the way in which the programme has built my confidence in various ways. Some of the most challenging leadership sessions were those that aimed at enhancing self-confidence. The two workshops with the Lir were among the high points in the programme for me. The reason for this is simply that I realized how much progress I had made between them. I felt wholly uncomfortable during the first session. Although Cathal really did his best to make the experience as enjoyable as possible for everyone, I just wanted the workshop to end. I was therefore not very happy when I found out we would be having another Lir workshop during our residential weekend. However, much to my surprise, I felt quite at ease during the second workshop, enjoying telling different anecdotes, and even feeling indifferent about the various icebreakers that had previously been the bane of my existence. I realized that I had become more comfortable owning my space, and speaking out, even if it meant making a fool of myself in front of my peers by having to mime the word 'figure skating'.

But it is also in other context that I have built confidence and learned to take up space. On the one hand, I became more confident in networking. Laidlaw forced me to reach out to all kinds of experts, that I thought would never give me the time of day. I had discussions with academics, policymakers, and activists that were willing to share their insights and keen to listen to my perspective. The one piece of advice I pass on most often is that when you ask politely, no matter who, people are generally more likely to say yes than no. Being a Laidlaw scholar at Trinity opens a lot of doors. But so does taking up your space. People will not be able to meet you at eye level if you think it is not a possibility. Taking up my space has allowed me to make these connections, built my confidence, and expanded my frame of reference.

Undoubtedly, these developments have affected what kind of leader I am. When stepping into leadership roles in college or my personal life, I try to lead in line with the qualities of good leadership I have set out above. But the main thing is that I am confident enough to step into these leadership roles, whether they are assigned to me, or because I seek them out myself. I

think it is fair to say that one of the many obstacles to increased female leadership, is that a lot of women are afraid of being labelled bossy, overbearing, or demanding when they step into these roles. A part of me still flinches internally when I say that I am part of a leadership scholarship. However, I have learned that leadership can take many different forms, and that I can own my unique leadership style. Granted, being surrounded by people that champion female leadership has also played a significant role. I now know that I can bring my own strengths, such as my ability to observe my surroundings and dynamics within different groups, to the table and lead in a way that suits me.

Lesson 3: You can do anything, but not everything

The last lesson I am taking away should be preceded by an important admission. This programme, and the second summer in particular, were often demanding, challenging and exhausting. Without shifting the entire blame on the workload of my project, I can truly say that working on it has pushed me to the limits of my capacities like few other things have. Having already had a good grasp of the issue and previous experience in leadership, as well as project management, I felt quite confident going into the second summer. However, getting my own project off the ground, proved harder than I expected. Crucially, I realized that even though none of the tasks needed to complete the project were beyond my capabilities, completing all of them by myself, in a limited time period, and to an arguably unrealistic standard, simply exceeded my capacities.

Going forward, this experience has definitely altered my approach to working and leading. Being a perfectionist with a pronounced need for control, I was used to never handing over big tasks, and to battling my own way through challenges, rather than asking for help. My Leadership in Action experience was probably one of the first major instances where this approach failed me. Looking back, I wish I had realized this sooner. Committing to asking for help early on and getting more people on board would have not only saved me a lot of stress but would also have allowed me to take the project even further. In a way, completing this programme during the pandemic pushed me out of my comfort zone in other ways as well. Working remotely meant I was not able to keep an eye on whether people were completing the tasks I had asked of them, and had to put a lot more faith in them actually putting in the work, which they did. Going forward, I know that delegation may be difficult, but pays off in

multiple ways, and that will-power and discipline may allow me to be able to do (almost) anything eventually, but not everything at once.

I should pre-empt my conclusion with two statements. First, I think that TED talks are somewhat overrated. Secondly, I know that any piece of writing is worsened by the use of grand quotations. Still, I will now quote from John Green's 2015 TED talk. Talking about learning communities, he said "The great thing about imagining learning as cartography (...) is that you see a bit of coastline, and you want to see more.". In many ways, the Laidlaw scholarship has done just that for me. I have learned to think about my academic discipline in new ways. I have seen the unexpected value of diverse perspectives on a topic. I have built my confidence and have expanded my networks in various directions. I have experienced that reaching your limits can push you out of your comfort zone in meaningful ways. Most importantly, I am excited to do more, and take these lessons further. Laidlaw has put issues, opportunities, and possibilities on my radar, that I would have never considered otherwise.