

EU Today Podcast 8 Transcript

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[Intro music in theme of piano playing Ode to Joy]

Katie Lindner: Hello, and welcome to EU Today, a podcast from the Center for European studies, a Jean Monnet Center of Excellence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Thank you to the Erasmus+ program of the European Commission, the EU Delegation to the U.S., and the U.S. Department of Education for supporting our center and its programs. On this podcast, we sit down with scholars and policy leaders to discuss pressing issues facing the EU. We hope you enjoy it.

Allison Haskins: Hi listeners. My name is Allison Haskins and I'm the International Education Program Coordinator for UNC-Chapel Hill's Center for European Studies. In this episode of EU Today, I'll be interviewing Dr. David Sirakov and Sarah Wagner from the Atlantic Academy Rheinland-Pfalz of Germany. The Atlantic Academy is a non-profit institution that was founded by the Rheinland-Pfalz state government in 1996 and is supported by a non-partisan association. This association is funded by the state and is concerned with maintaining transatlantic relations and providing comprehensive information on US politics and society. The Academy is located in Kaiserslautern adjacent to Ramstein Air Force Base. Dr. David Sirakov is the director of the Academy. He studied political science and public law at the University of Trier. His research focuses on the polarization in US congress and American society, US- Russian relations, and theories of international relations. Dr. Sirakov is a member of the advisory boards of the Rheinland-Pfalz state center for political education as well as the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies. Sarah Wagner is the education manager of the Academy. She studied political science, English, and education science at the University of Trier. Her research focus lies on civil-military relations, transatlantic relations and US domestic politics.

[Ode to Joy plays in the background]

Allison Haskins: Alright, welcome everyone to another episode of our EU Today podcast. My name is Allison Haskins, and I am the International Education Program Coordinator with UNC Center for European Studies. And I'm joined today by Dr. David Sirakov from the Atlantic Academy in Rheinland-Pfalz, as well as Sarah

Wagner. David is the director and Sarah is the education manager at the Academy. Thank you guys very much for joining us today. I guess I'll go ahead and kick things off and ask you to explain to us a little bit about your work with the Atlantic Academy.

David Sirakov: Yeah, thank you. First of all, thank you for having me and having us on your program. The Atlantic Academy, we're a non-profit institution which was founded in 1996, the middle of the '90s, as a reaction to the end of the Cold War and the changing circumstances in world politics. The Atlantic Academy was founded by the state of Rhineland-Pfalz. We are a state and privately funded nonpartisan organization. And the main goal is to foster transatlantic relations by educating the public about US-American politics and society. Our work rests, first and foremost, on three pillars. It's encounter, education, and expertise.

Allison Haskins: Very interesting. As you were saying, that you educate a lot on US-American politics. Can you talk a little bit about the region that the Academy is located in and maybe your special constituents that you have there?

Sarah Wagner: Yeah, maybe if I may jump in here real quick because I could already elaborate a little bit on the pillars that David mentioned because it fits in really nicely. So the first one is "encounters," and the goal here is really to bring Germans and Americans together to have them engage in critical discussions. Be it on you know policy issues or cultural things, everything that is of interest to both parties. It's really natural for us to do that because here in Rheinland-Pfalz, we have over 50,000 Americans actually that are living here. A big segment of those is here as active duty troops with the military, with the armed forces. We have big areas— We have Ramstein Air Base, which I'm sure a lot of people are familiar with. We have Spangdahlem Air Base, we have Baumholder, we have a mix of air force and army. So one of the pillars, "encounters," really aims to bring those service members as well as their families as well as civilian employees together in a variety of events. Here we have actually a very specific program. It's called "Welcome to Rheinland-Pfalz." If you're interested in it, feel free to check it out online. And here, really, the idea is to support local German communities by helping them integrate Americans into German life, right—support them in terms of informing them about events, language questions, questions about German recycling. Also invite them maybe to join hikes, these kind of things. So "encounters," it's not just, hey, let's talk together about drone policy, but it's also about hey, let's get to know each other. Let's talk about transatlantic relations. And make sure that you have an amicable time being stationed here in Germany. And then just to briefly wrap up, before I hand it back over to David. "Education," obviously, is our programs where we have lectures, seminars, policy discussions, panel discussions, exhibits. Whatever you can think of that tackles questions of US society, history, and culture. So these are events all over the States right now. First and foremost in a digital format. And then last but not

least, "expertise," just means that we talk to the media or we help the local state government when there are questions about US politics. If they need advice or expertise, then we're here to answer their questions.

David Sirakov: Yeah. When we look at our program, we're very fortunate to be recognized by the federal agency, the German Federal Agency for Civic Education. And this means that our institute and our program has been checked by the agencies for a quality purpose and found to be worthy of funding. And I think it's like a seal of quality, so to speak, for educational events. As a matter of fact, we are the only recognized institution that deals exclusively with the transatlantic relations.

Allison Haskins: Very interesting. So as the only one that deals with transatlantic relations, do you have any other partners you deal with that also deal with maybe European-American? Because that's also transatlantic, right, but maybe specifically European issues or German issues that you work with in the region?

Sarah Wagner: Yeah, absolutely. We have a wide variety of corporation partners, so schools, for example. Other think tanks, civic education institutions, German-American spaces, really a broad range of partner institutions. And we really make an effort to seek out these bridge-building topics when it comes to transatlantic relations. So it's not just Germany and the US, but that will also take a closer look at the European Union. And what is happening here and how transatlantic relations are undergoing changes—not just under the recent administration, but overall. And a lot of our cooperation partners really focus on these EU-centric topics. So right now, for example, we are planning some digital seminars that deal with NATO, or the role of Turkey, or the role of the United Nations, for example. We are trying to look at all these different institutions, and how transatlantic relations are influenced by them or challenged by them, these kind of things.

Allison Haskins: Very interesting. And maybe building off of that—In the past few years, or maybe you know maybe the past one or two years, what are the topics that have been coming up a lot that you find people are wanting you to educate on or you feel like you really need to reach out to the community about?

David Sirakov: When it comes to programs, I would say we focus on current and recurring topics in US politics and society. And the last couple of years, of course—when we talk about this year, of course, our program includes dealing with the corona pandemic, or the question of systemic racism and Black Lives Matter of protest, but also the ongoing primary elections and the upcoming presidential and congressional elections. And of course, in addition to those heavy political issues, we always dedicate ourselves to the US culture and the country. So for instance, we offer lectures on national parks, or organize art exhibit exhibitions with the US military schools here in this region.

Allison Haskins: Very interesting.

Sarah Wagner: Yeah, I think it also really depends. Sometimes certain topics really spark a big discussion or debate within Germany, right. So, for example, a few years back, and this also ties into your EU question, TTIP—right, sort of this idea for a transatlantic trade partnership. Was just covered everywhere in the news, and there was lots of misinformation surrounding it. There was just a high demand—people wanted to talk about it and discuss it. So that was very successful for our programming, because we could invite experts to talk about the trade deal. We invited proponents and opponents of the trade deal to have a debate on stage to talk about the benefits for the EU, potential disadvantages. So we're really trying, also to keep an eye on what are people concerned with, what are they maybe afraid of. And also where there's a lot of misinformation surrounding a specific topic. And especially in the EU context, I'd say TTIP was a big topic that influenced our programming.

Allison Haskins: For sure. And so in terms of when you do your programming, do your attendees—right, the guests that come to your events—is it always kind of the same group or do you tailor some to the younger crowd, to the older crowd? Do you tailor some events to maybe the local Germans and then some to military community? How do you go about that?

David Sirakov: Yeah, it depends on the program and it depends, of course, on the location. Now we are online, and we have online seminars, so we can address a lot of people with different background. But, of course we have programs for younger people, for students and schools, or in universities. We have recurring programs like the Atlantic Forums, together with the political science section or department at the Technical University in Kaiserslautern, where we deal with political and economic issues in the transatlantic relations or in the US domestic sphere. So it really depends on the program and of course the location.

Sarah Wagner: Absolutely. And again, it's all about knowing your audience, the different age groups. We are making an effort to expand our audience, so that it's not just people who are already very familiar with these topics, who have a higher maybe educational background. And who sort of naturally gravitate to these types of events. And who are very often also have a very positive attitude concerning the United States. So really trying to reach new audiences, go more into schools, talk to younger people about the image they have—sort of this idea of creating new transatlantic narratives, engaging in discussions and also being very open. So, our events are not sort of advertisements for the United States. The idea is really to bring people together with opposing viewpoints, or expose them to different viewpoints, and then take it from there.

David Sirakov: Yeah, I think little has changed over the decades. Many, many Europeans and especially Germans see the United States as a longed-for site, *ein sehnsuchtsort*. And they still see the United States as the land of opportunity and they want to visit the national parks, cities like New York, Boston, San Francisco, you name it. And they love US sports movies and TV shows—Netflix and Amazon Prime and all that stuff. I think that this is connected with a deeper interest in US politics and society. And to be honest, the interest in US politics has increased enormously with the election of Donald Trump. The motivation might be different, but the bottom line is that people want to know why Trump was elected. What drives his voters, what drives the United States as a country, where the United States will be heading socially, economically, politically. And what does that mean for Europe, and especially for Germany. And all these questions are questions asked by our participants.

Sarah Wagner: Exactly, and especially in this context and also sort of with the new administration. I mean, some of the demands, you know, that they formulate regarding our defense policy, for example, are not new. The tone with which they are being asked is new. But at the same time, it forces our attendees, or Europeans, to reflect more on their own systems of defense, on their own defense spending. So, that is also a new challenge, but I think that we do embrace—that it's not just that we're talking about what is the United States doing and these kinds of things, but also really talk about what does it mean for the European Union, what does it mean for Germany? What does it say about our defense spending? Are we required to step up more? Things like that. So to really make sure that also people reflect on their own country, on their own political systems when they compare to United States.

Allison Haskins: Certainly. So maybe shifting gears a bit to talk a little bit about politics, because you guys have set that up really well. You talked a lot about how the interest in the US has grown after the election of Donald Trump. But, and it might be a bit too early to tell, because these are fairly recent phenomena. But with COVID, with the coronavirus and the recent protests in the US, Have you been noticing any shifts in interest in the US or shifts in opinions?

David Sirakov: You want to start?

Sarah Wagner: Of course, and that is a very good question, I think. And this just pains my heart as a political scientist, but this is more anecdotal, I'd say, and sort of what we can gather from the events and from social media. I think it's not necessarily the opinion has changed. But there's more worry amongst Europeans and Germans when looking at specific developments. So, especially if we look at COVID-19 and how the pandemic has been handled, or has not been handled, to be

quite frank. We have the new developments where it looks like Americans will not be able to enter the European Union because of that fact, along with visitors from countries like Brazil or Russia. So to see this development in a country where people will not have expected that, or maybe would have expected in light of the current administration, but I think that concerns a lot of people. And they are worried, and especially looking ahead to the election. I'm wondering what another four years of the administration might mean, especially for transatlantic relations which really have been strained by the past four years in this context.

David Sirakov: Yeah, it's challenging at the moment. And so as I said before, we are in a lucky position that we try to explain US foreign security policy, domestic politics. In a time when a lot of people want to hear that. And this has absolutely something to do with Donald Trump. But on the other hand, it has some very, very remarkable consequences for the US and in world politics. And yeah, so it's a mixed feeling.

Allison Haskins: Yeah, certainly. Speaking of mixed feelings about things—Maybe going to another political topic that's also been in the news over here and I'm certain over in Europe as well. There's been talked about, and there's been talk about this for a long time, right—but there's been recent talks about removing some US troops from Germany. If I'm not mistaken, the area around Ramstein is the biggest American installation in Europe, correct? And so what does that mean for your work? How do you guys see this possible withdrawal? And then, you know, how do you see—maybe in a bigger picture—the US military relations have been over there in the past, and what that looks like in the future?

Sarah Wagner: I'll let David take the lead on this one because speaking about one of our pillars, "expertise," that for sure is a hot topic right now. And there's a lot of media requests coming in, and sort of mixed feelings on the German side, but I'll let David elaborate.

David Sirakov: I think what when we talk about reduction of troops, we first of all have to talk about US military presence in Germany. And of course in the Rheinland-Pfalz—in our state home state. And I think we talk about separate dimensions. The first dimension is absolutely a symbolic aspect that we see German American coexistence over more than 70 years now. And when we talk about the regions in Rheinland-Palatinate where US troops are stationed, we can clearly say the Americans are an integral part of this federal state. And this is a symbol, as such, but then there is of course the economic mentioned—the economic factor for Germany, and for Rheinland-Pfalz, Rheinland Palatinate, cannot be underestimated. The US facilities, so the bases and all that, are predominantly located in regions where the economic strength is limited. And this is true for the kinds of Kaiserslautern region. And this is true for Baumholder, for Spangdahlem. For example, as an employer, the Kaiserslautern military community—So the largest military community outside the

US with 50,000 people—Americans—there, had more than 6,000 host nation employees in 2015. And now it's maybe 6–5,800 or something like that. There are, when we take a look at Germany as whole, there are approximately 14,000 host nation employees. And you can imagine that the purchasing power of Americans make a few sides of contribution to the local economies in those places. The Americans shop in the supermarkets. They eat at restaurants. They rent apartments and houses. The military awards construction service contracts and all these things have an economic effect of about three to 3.5 billion US dollars annually. And this is something for those regions. And a third, probably most significant, dimension can be seen or found in the security policy—I would say security policy self-image of the United States. When you take a look at a nation that tries to represent its own interests globally as a world power, then you get an idea that such a nation or the United States depends on the global network of military bases. And Germany offers special conditions for this. On one hand, the United States, they have bases that have been developed and continuously modernized and expanded over the last 70 years. These facilities are ideal for the branches, so the army and the air force. And on the other hand, Germany is a politically stable, safe, friendly host nation. And therefore you find here in Germany, not only the European commands of the army and air force, but also the respective Africa commands of the army and air force. And I think these are factors for the US military which are very, very important. It's all about readiness. And I think with a partial withdrawal of US troops, we will see economic, social—and we will see security policy consequences. And when we talk about security policy, and the White House decides to relocate troops, from my perspective, it will weaken the readiness and it will cost both time and money.

Allison Haskins: Yeah. From maybe from the local perspective, is there concern just within the Kaiserslautern community about this? Are people—is there an unified opinion on this, or are people you know on either side of the fence about troops leaving? You'd mentioned that it's a huge economic boon for the region, so surely people have opinions on this.

Sarah Wagner: I think what we can see for sure is that opinion is a bit divided. So of course military presence comes with a lot of perks. If we look at, you know, the economic situation, where David has mentioned. But if we look closer, of course, there are also some complaints. But usually comes along with a military installation, you know, disregarding what nationality it is. So there, there are some Germans say now there's no need for the US presence here in Germany for—a lot of times, because they have a different threat perception. So they don't regard Russia as a threat in this case, and they feel very secure. They don't understand why do we need this military presence. And then we have more concrete examples. If we look at specific airbase installations, where we talk about obviously noise complaints. It's a huge issue if they have training flights and all of that. And the other aspect is environmental issues. So there have been some issues regarding drinking water and

things like that, sort of pollution that is due to this military presence. So there are some local issues that are definitely hotly debated. And we oftentimes see that. So, for example, now David is getting these interviews about the potential troop reduction, and then we see in social media the responses to it. So yes, people on the one hand are concerned and say, "Jobs, the livelihood of this region depends on it." But there are also voices, for sure, who argue in favor of a troop reduction.

Allison Haskins: Interesting. So there's a lot going on in your region right now. I guess, is a way to sum it up.

Sarah Wagner: Yes, but I mean to also put it in perspective, into sort of larger transatlantic relations, however you want to phrase it—This also wouldn't be the first drawdown. So throughout administrations in the past, this has happened before. I mean, we've had a huge military presence here still after the end of the Cold War that has continuously been downgraded so there's also experience here. If we look at local governments about how to lead this effort of conversion, about what to do in case troops do leave. But at the same time—So for the state of Rheinland-Pfalz, for example, the prime minister here has already made the case, or sort of argued, then we might need financial assistance from the federal government to sort of cushion the blow a little bit before there would be a phase of conversion.

Allison Haskins: Yeah. All very interesting points. And we'll just have to see what happens, right?

Sarah Wagner: Exactly. Wait and see.

Allison Haskins: Yeah.

David Sirakov: Yeah, maybe we learn today which units or which bases are on the list. Because as far as I know, is that Secretary of Defense Esper will tell the President what's the plan in the Pentagon.

Allison Haskins: Very interesting. So this is a very timely day to be recording this podcast. Maybe as a final wrap-up question—We've talked a lot about these things happening in US–Europe, US–German, transatlantic relations. How do you see your work in the future? How do you see you know your institute growing with these different relations? Because I guess people could argue that, you know, the region you're in and the US has always been tied together. How do you see that going forward in the future and how your work will fit into that?

David Sirakov: I think talking about and discussing democracy and democratic institutions, and their role in our state and our political systems, will be much more important than it already is at the moment. And I think that maybe some topics will

change. But overall, I think we over the years, and maybe decades, we talk about the same challenges for our systems. And I think this will be true for the next five to 10 years. Maybe the things we see may be different. But I think the underlying conditions, these are things we should discuss, and we should think about. And it means democracy, institutions, good governance. How to cope such a pandemic, How to cope social inequality in the state or in the countries, in the United States, in Europe, in Germany. And how to make oh yeah how to make this a better place for all of us.

Sarah Wagner: Very nice. I like the last sentiment—to really also focus on sort of the aspects, the challenges that impact both actors, both sides—be it the EU or the US—that also unite us, that we have to confront together. So as one aspect and then maybe two other smaller points. I think the challenge for us will also always be to highlight the US in its entirety. So that we're not just focusing on the most current tweet, or outrage, scandal, or development—but that we also shed light on topics, be it LGBTQIA issues, right now, obviously systemic racism has always been a topic that we each year have various events on, to drive home that point. Or be it Indigenous rights. To really make sure that we are able to represent, or to show to the German public, all these different aspects of the United States, so that they don't have the impression—Oh, it's just the administration, that they see on national TV. And then my next point would be—the biggest challenge I would also see, is to really make sure that we engage young people with the topic. All these generations that were not brought up with Cold War memories or that have taken the transatlantic relationship a bit for granted. And also a generation that I think is awesome. You can see Generation Z, that's much more critical when it comes to political institutions, when it comes to civic education. They're really asking tough questions and things like that. To have them engaged in the process, inform them, and also hear from them what their vision is for the transatlantic relationship.

Allison Haskins: Yeah, certainly. Great. Well, I think that's a great note to wrap up on. Thank you guys so much for joining us today. This has been really incredibly interesting. I really appreciate it.

Sarah Wagner: Thank you for having us. And everyone listening, if you're interested in our work, feel free to follow us on social media. You can follow us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. And check out our home page. And you can find much more information about our programs. We have a blog where we also publish in English every now and then. And if you're interested to get involved, or if you're in Germany at one point in the future, maybe as a study abroad or anything like that. Please stop by, come say hi.

Allison Haskins: Come say hi. Yeah.

David Sirakov: Absolutely, absolutely.

Allison Haskins: Great. Thank you, guys.

[Ode to Joy fades in]

Katie Lindner: Please note that any opinions expressed in the EU today podcast are solely those of our guests and our hosts, and not of the UNC Center for European studies, which takes no institutional positions. Be sure to tune in for more episodes, and subscribe to *EU Today* wherever you listen to podcasts.

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Co-funded by the
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