

# observant

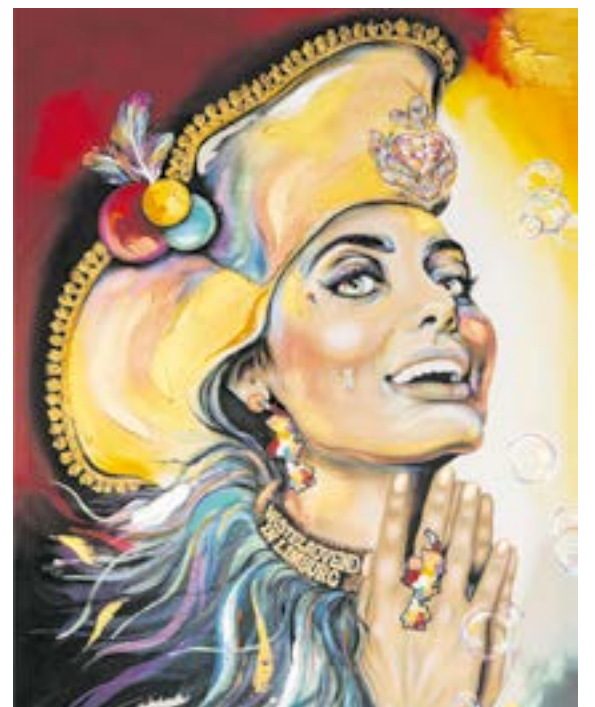
INDEPENDENT WEEKLY MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

VOLUME 45 / FEBRUARY 27, 2025 Nr 20



American Transatlantic relations expert  
Roberta Haar:

“Right now, the only requirement for a job in  
the US government seems to be: do you love  
Trump?” P 6-7



The *Observant* editorial  
office will be closed next  
week due to carnival.  
We will be online again  
on Monday, March 10,  
the new paper version  
will be published on  
Thursday, March 13



Staff members of **Ukrainian  
universities** visiting UCM:

“Not everyone can go  
to the battlefield. We  
continue university life in  
the best possible way. That  
is also resistance” P 5



## “I don’t like having my picture taken”

A former student recently emailed us with a request: could we take her picture down from our website? “It’s ten years old – I don’t look like that anymore”, she explained. Unfortunately, we had to say no. Our website also serves as an archive, and we want to keep it intact and searchable. We only make exceptions in rare cases. Photos can be a bit of a sticking point. You ask someone for an interview, and they happily agree – until they hear their photo will be taken. Suddenly, there’s hesitation. “I don’t like having my picture taken”, they say. Why not? More often than not, it’s because they’re uncomfortable being in the spotlight.

I get it. I’d rather not see my face in a newspaper or on a website, either. Maybe that’s part of why I became a journalist – to stay on the other side, behind the scenes. I still remember when our editorial team decided that our “About us” pages should include not just short bios with a few personal details, but photos too. There were plenty of grumbles and protests – was that really necessary? Well, yes, for the same reason we include photos with our interviews: readers like to see who they’re dealing with. So, we had a photo session. And then another one a few years later, to keep our pages up to date. I was never entirely happy with the results – let’s just say the image I have of myself doesn’t quite match the photos. And I wasn’t the only one who preferred to steer well clear of my own bio page. One colleague even quietly swapped their photo out for a more flattering one after a while. To be clear, the issue isn’t with our photographers. They take stunning portraits; just look at our up-close-and-personal interview series. Seeing how great their work turns out often helps put interviewees at ease about having their picture taken.

There is one thing to note, though. In the past, your photo would appear in the paper one day and be used to wrap potato peelings the next. The article – and the picture – would disappear. Today, everything is online and always just a search away.

But when it comes to pictures, I actually see that as an advantage. Ten years later, I usually feel much better about an old photo of myself.

Riki Janssen

Every week, the editor-in-chief writes about what has been happening at the Observant office



Collage: Simone Golob

## “If you establish clear agreements, a triad relationship can work perfectly well”

How healthy – or unhealthy – are triad relationships? UM sexologist Marieke Dewitte shares her insights.

“What do you mean by a triad? Are we talking about being in a sexual or romantic relationship that doesn’t involve your partner? Then the key question is whether your partner knows about it. If they don’t, you’re actually having an affair – you’re cheating on them. That’s not a triad. But if your partner knows and you’ve established clear agreements, it can work perfectly well.”

The term Dewitte uses is “consensual non-monogamy”, referring to partners who have mutually decided to have an open relationship. “Some people say, ‘My partner is free to do what they want, but I want to know about it.’ Others prefer not to know. It’s fine if their partner gets drunk on a night out and ends up kissing or sleeping with someone else, as long as it doesn’t threaten the relationship. Then there are swingers, where the focus is on sex, and polyamory, being in multiple committed relationships. Polyamory is more about ‘I have a lot of love to give – I care about this person, but also about that person, so why not be with both?’ Some polyamorous people have a ‘primary’ and a ‘secondary’ partner, while others live in communities where everyone is considered equal.”

Triad relationships are becoming more popular, Dewitte explains. “It’s not a new phenomenon, but because people are talking about it more, more people are giving it a try. It’s also becoming increasingly common for young people to bring it up with their partners.” However, Dewitte believes we should be careful that it doesn’t become the new norm, “that traditional heterosexual monogamous relationships are written off as boring”.

For those in long-term relationships who are interested in sexual variety, it’s worth exploring what might work for you and your partner. “Maybe you’re a great team, a great family unit, but you still feel like something is missing. In that case, opening up the relationship could be a solution. There’s no need to blow up the foundation of your relationship or emotional bond.” She recalls

a couple where one partner had BDSM fantasies that the other didn’t share. The latter didn’t want an open relationship, but they also didn’t want to deny their partner’s desires. “So they agreed that the partner could visit a dominatrix once a month – but not always the same one, to

minimise the risk of emotional attachment.” That said, being in an open relationship isn’t for everyone. A strong foundation is essential, says Dewitte. If you’re having insecurity or attachment issues in your relationship, things could go wrong. She also wouldn’t recommend it for couples who struggle with communication. “There needs to be complete openness and clarity.”

Another thing to consider is whether the arrangement is sustainable in the long run. What if one of you starts resenting the fact that the other occasionally has sex with someone else? “It’s a problem when it becomes a threat to your relationship.” Finally, some people only go along with their partner’s wishes to open up the relationship because they don’t want to risk losing their partner. “That’s where consent becomes a grey area. It’s crucial to make sure that everyone involved is genuinely on board.” Research has shown that open relationships aren’t necessarily healthier or less healthy than monogamous relationships, says Dewitte. “People in open relationships aren’t any less satisfied, nor do they experience more sexual problems. Jealousy is more common, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing; it’s normal and healthy to have feelings about your partner being with someone else. The opposite feeling is known as ‘compersion’ – finding joy in your partner’s joy. Their happiness makes you happy.”

Wendy Degens

Marieke Dewitte is a clinical psychologist and sexologist at Maastricht University. In this weekly series, she answered questions about sex from students. This is the last episode.

## news

## Over a month of uncertainty

Still no decision on *A-tijd* by UM; student societies inaugurate prospective members prematurely

More than month after calling a halt to all activities involving prospective members of student societies, Maastricht University still hasn't made a decision regarding next steps. In the meantime, student associations have chosen to cut their losses: almost all prospective members have been inaugurated prematurely.

The university reported a month ago that it had received "multiple reports of misconduct" about "more than one incident" during the so-called *A-tijd*, a period when prospective members are introduced to a student society. Two meetings followed with the chairs of the four largest student associations (Saurus, Tragos, Circumflex and KoKo; each with their own student societies) and with Onafhankelijk Maastricht (OM), the umbrella organisation that represents over thirty independent student societies. However, since that last meeting, three weeks ago, there has been no news. The chairs have also "heard absolutely nothing from the university", they told *Observant* when asked.

After multiple attempts to reach the university for comment, UM spokesperson Koen Augustijn said that UM is "exploring next steps and possible measures. We think that now is a time for careful consideration over hasty decisions." And that the university will be basing that on "what the student association boards shared with us". After all, after the initial conversation, the chairs were given 'homework' to ask all their societies about possible misconduct.

However, "nothing was revealed" that could be construed as misconduct as a result, said the chairs. Although, they did admit it is hard to judge: the university was not forthcoming with details about the reports, so what sort of behaviour was considered misconduct was something of a guess. It raises the question what concrete 'evidence' UM has to consider



Archival image of student hockey tournament and festival Us Leef Vruike, in which traditionally many student societies participate Photo: Joey Roberts

possible measures.

In the meantime, the university's request remains not to hold any activities in relation to the *A-tijd*. In practice, however, nothing is really being halted. The *A-tijd* for many student societies had already ended. Those that had not yet finished have decided to inaugurate all their prospective members prematurely. "It is a shame, of course, as it means they do miss a part of their *A-tijd*," said Circumflex chair Joost Mol. "But at least this way, they can take part in a society's activities." Some of the independent student societies start a second 'intake' for *A-tijd* in February, but this has been postponed for now, said OM chair Kiki Büttner.

What is continuing apace are the rumours and

unrest caused by the uncertainty, all the chairs confirmed. Two weeks ago, they asked the university in an article in *Observant* to be more open about the situation. "If the student associations are worried about the rumours, then they can let their members know what they shared with UM," said UM spokesperson Augustijn. But that ignores the fact that there is speculation outside the associations, "in all of Maastricht student life", responded the chairs. "UM probably has a very good reason to tackle it in this way," said Tragos chair Floor van Son. "But this does tar all the associations with the same brush – we're all in the press in a negative light."

Dennis Vaendel

## HRDD framework to assess which partner institutions have clean hands

## University Council backs policy instrument for evaluating institutional partnerships

Despite objections from two speakers at last week's University Council meeting, a large majority voted in favour of adopting the Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) framework.

The HRDD framework is a tool designed to provide an informed assessment of whether partner institutions anywhere in the world are involved in human rights violations or other international crimes. The Executive Board first announced the framework in early 2024, prompted by pro-Palestinian protests at universities including UM. However, UM President Letschert has emphasised that the framework does not exclusively apply to Israel. As early as autumn 2023, a working group started developing a global engagement policy regarding partners in "sensitive" regions such as Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The University Council publicly discussed the assessment tool for the first time in January. During that meeting, no fewer than three guest speakers took the floor to urge members to

vote against it. Shouldn't it be up to the International Criminal Court to determine whether a country has "clean hands", one speaker pointed out. "Such investigations take years, and now UM wants to take matters into its own hands. Is that diligent?"

At last week's meeting, two of the three speakers took the floor again. Eliyahu Sapir, assistant professor in Social Science Research Methods at UM, finds it unacceptable that the university will first determine whether a country is violating human rights before assessing the involvement of its partner institutions. "This is discrimination based on nationality", he argued before the council, adding that the introduction of this policy instrument is clearly linked to the war between Israel and Hamas. He pointed out that UM has been collaborating for years with countries – "take Turkey and Saudi Arabia" – where human rights are not guaranteed.

Assistant professor Ewout Meijer from the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience stressed that the university as an institution should be politically neutral – a principle he believes

UM is now abandoning. "We should strive to be a platform for individual expression that embraces rather than suppresses dissent. That's the only way a university can thrive." Like Sapir, he urged council members to vote against the framework, but only two did. With fifteen votes in favour, the HRDD framework has now been adopted.

This year will serve as a pilot phase, during which all existing administrative partnerships with institutions that have signed contracts with UM administrators will be reviewed. This process will hopefully be completed by October, Letschert previously said. Israel is one of the first three cases to be evaluated. The process will be overseen by a newly established body, the Sensitive Partnerships Committee, which will include the chairs of three subcommittees on human rights, knowledge security, and fossil/sensitive industries. The University Council will be closely involved in the evaluation of the pilot.

Riki Janssen

## column



## More Than a Detour

“

Two weeks ago, I was rejected from a master's programme at my dream university. To say I was devastated would be an understatement- I had spent weeks on my application, painstakingly crafting an ideal image of myself, only for it to be shattered within a single email. Reading the dreaded words, "we regret to inform you...", felt like being punched in the stomach- a dull, stomach-churning pain that intensified with each passing second.

I read the email once, twice, seven times, letting the finality of the situation sink in. Then I called my parents. Ever the supportive caregivers, they shared my disappointment and acknowledged my loss. However, they also made it very clear that this loss didn't define my worth, nor my academic potential. In the grand scheme of things, I had applied for a highly competitive degree, designated for decidedly experienced writers. In retrospect, I should've considered the fact that as a bachelor's student, I wasn't qualified for such a degree- yet. So, I gave myself a day to wallow in my disappointment, before picking myself up and moving on.

Given my lack of experience, the next best move is to apply for a traineeship. That way, I can take a 'break' from studying, gather some valuable hands-on experience, and reapply for a master's degree when the time feels right. And the more time I've spent researching potential options, the more optimistic I feel about my situation. As it turns out, some of the best German broadcasters and newspapers are located in Munich. That means, aside from having the chance to apply for a range of excellent traineeships, I get to re-experience the city I grew up in- a prospect that feels bizarre, yet exciting.

What makes this new chapter even more meaningful, is that I'll most likely be moving into an apartment with my older brother. Most siblings only get to share a home for a fleeting moment- a childhood spent inseparable, before going separate ways. My brother and I get another shot, not out of obligation, but by choice. And although I know it won't be all sunshine and rainbows, I'm grateful to navigate this in-between phase of life with him by my side.

”

Robin van Wasen,  
student at UCM

## series sing, fight, cry, pray, laugh, work and admire



Yannick Smolders  
(1998, Bergen op Zoom)

/ Master's student of  
Medicine

/ Relationship status:  
living with Simone

/ Lives in:  
Den Bosch

Photo: Observant

“  
My student adviser said,  
‘I’m not going to flog a dead horse’  
”

**I spend most of my money on...** rent. Living anywhere is terribly expensive. My girlfriend and I share a place and split the costs, although I pay a bit less than she does. I don't have a steady income while I'm still studying. In eighteen months, I'll qualify as a junior doctor. We recently moved to Den Bosch, which is a central location for both my hospital placement in Helmond and my girlfriend's job. The city reminds me of Maastricht. Moving in together was probably the best decision I've ever made. I was stuck in the student lifestyle, and living with Simone gave me the structure and routine I needed to break out of that cycle.

**I'm the one who cooks at home.** I used to have a side job as a waiter at the Kruissherenhotel in Maastricht, where I often watched the chefs at work. When I first started university, I learnt to cook and discovered how much I enjoy it. Now, I regularly prepare six- or seven course meals. My friends and family always know where to find me at Christmas, though I don't like spending the whole time alone in the kitchen – I'll pull someone away from the table to keep me company. A good dinner takes a lot of preparation and time, but I also want to enjoy it myself. By the way, my favourite food is pizza. It's a guilty pleasure.

**All people with ADHD are hyperactive.** That's a common stereotype. I have ADD, a subtype of ADHD characterised by a quieter, more inward-focused nature. I may seem very dreamy, but my mind is always racing with thoughts. I was diagnosed eighteen months ago, after a long period of uncertainty. I'd known for a while that

something wasn't right, and during the pandemic, I developed panic attacks and anxiety. I went to see a psychologist, but things didn't improve – I became depressed. My therapist asked if I'd ever been tested for ADHD, as undiagnosed adults often develop anxiety. After a whole battery of tests and interviews about my ability to focus when I was in school, I was eventually diagnosed with ADD.

**The diagnosis was a relief.** It was, for those around me as well – my girlfriend had a partner who was no longer himself. I finally had a name for what I was experiencing and could learn to manage it with cognitive behavioural therapy and medication. It was such a relief to finally have some quiet in my head again. It's impossible to focus when you're constantly struggling with anxiety and panic. I fell behind in my studies. At one point, before I was diagnosed, my student adviser told me, "I'm not going to flog a dead horse." Things are very different now – I've completely turned my life around.

**When was the last time you laughed out loud?** Just the other day, watching a show by Dutch comedian Ronald Goedemondt. A lot of comedians rely on insults and mockery to get laughs. He keeps it personal. I relate to his struggles with everyday life.

**I always turn up the music.** Definitely! My taste in music is really varied. I listen to everything from Chopin and hardstyle – fast electronic music similar to hardcore – to chart hits. I have a curious mind, and certain songs bring

back good memories. I didn't grow up with classical music, though – my parents find it boring.

**The hardest conversation I've ever had with my parents...** [Pauses] ...was about whether I should drop out of university. I had to repeat my first year three times. After the second time, my parents asked if maybe I should quit. By the third time, they wanted to know if I had a plan B. But I was determined to study Medicine – I wouldn't settle for anything else. I'm proud that I stuck with it. I've just completed my clinical rotations, and I'm hoping to specialise in gynaecology. My mother saw me struggle, watched me go from a happy child to a struggling student. She was afraid she was losing me, but now my parents can breathe easily again.

**When we were younger, my brother and I were always at each other's throats.** I have a full biological brother, a half-brother and two half-sisters. My full brother and I used to fight all the time. I was the youngest and rather jealous. If he built a toy racetrack and I couldn't, I'd destroy it out of spite. I'd get mad when I lost a game, but when we were old enough to play video games together, we became best friends. And we still are. We're very different – he's quieter and more reserved, whereas I'm more outgoing and social in group settings. But he's always there for me when I need him.

**What makes you a good friend?** I'm very loyal. I don't judge; I'm mostly just curious. I like to know what's going on with my friends. They tell me things they wouldn't share with anyone else. They say I'm someone they can truly open up to.

**What makes you nervous?** Telling my story. Especially when it comes to medication – people have all sorts of assumptions, like, "Oh, you're just popping pills to help you study." The first time I opened up about my story and diagnosis, I was very nervous. But the reactions were positive. It's nice to think I might be able to help others who are going through the same thing by creating more understanding.

Deborah Blekkenhorst

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

## How Putin's war affects life on Ukrainian campuses

# "We're carrying on university life as much as possible. That is also a form of resistance"

How do you run a university at a time of war? And how does the constant threat of violence affect the staff and students? In Ukraine, three years since the Russian invasion, they know all about it. Staff members from Ukrainian universities visited University College Maastricht (UCM). "We are not just teachers but psychologists, emergency responders, and parents."



Larysa Chovnyuk (left) and Hanna Slozanska. "Ukrainian universities are trying to carry on university life as much as possible. That is also a form of resistance against Russia" Photo: Ellen Oosterhof

In the common room, the central area of UCM, there is a sense of peace on Monday, 24 February: students are working on their laptops or eating something, one or two are taking an afternoon nap on the sofas. This peace is quite a contrast to the story told at one of the tables by Hanna Slozanska (professor at Ternopil National Pedagogical University) and Larysa Chovnyuk (head of the International Office of the National University of Kyiv). They are part of the delegation of five Ukrainian universities visiting Maastricht, in part to get inspiration from UCM for the liberal arts programmes they're setting up with EU support.

### Bitterness and hope

Inevitably, the main topic of conversation is the war with Russia, which invaded its neighbour exactly three years ago. It feels weird not to be in Ukraine, particularly on this day. Slozanska calls it a mix of bitterness and hope. Bitterness at the ongoing war and at the geopolitical situation: American president Trump called his Ukrainian counterpart Zelensky a dictator and is negotiating peace in Ukraine with Moscow without involving Kyiv. And hope, because she hopes that setting up liberal arts programmes will help build the future of her country. She is convinced that Ukraine will win, and then open-minded people and critical thinkers will be needed to rebuild the country. "A liberal arts programme will help." Chovnyuk nods in agreement: "Not everybody can take to the battlefield. We are teaching the people who will make a signifi-

cant impact now and after the war. That's our contribution to victory."

### Air raid sirens

That teaching is not without its challenges. Right from the start, the war has had a major impact on university life in Ukraine. Universities in the east, in occupied territory, had to move – sometimes more than once, as Russian forces advanced. Government funding is scarce, institutions survive thanks to foreign aid, and recruiting new students is hard, because many young Ukrainians have fled the country. The threat of drones and rocket attacks hangs over the entire country: in Ukraine "nobody is entirely safe", says Slozanska.

In Kyiv, the air raid sirens sound multiple times a day, says Chovnyuk. As soon as the siren sounds, lectures are halted and students and staff head to the air raid shelters. "Having them is compulsory. We also can't have more students on campus than we could house in those shelters. That means half the students have online lectures. There is a whole generation now that has never been inside a lecture theatre." And then there are the staff and students who took up arms and headed to the battlefields. Every Ukrainian university now has a memorial to their own fallen. "Unfortunately, the last page of this story has not yet been written," says Slozanska.

*"Not everybody can take to the battlefield. We are teaching the people who will make a significant impact now and after the war"*

### "Our form of resistance"

The two say that their students have learnt to deal with all of this, however hard it may sometimes be. "They make jokes about the sirens, sing songs in the shelters. You can't be tense all the time," says Chovnyuk. Slozanska has noticed that there is a huge desire for contact with others, especially among students who live in student accommodation and don't see their family much. That has changed her own role: "Not every student is going to talk to a psychologist, so they go to

their tutor or another member of staff instead. We are now also psychologists, tutors, emergency responders, parents..." You'd be forgiven for giving up in the face of all that and wonder what the point is of investing so much time and effort in a new liberal arts programme. Chovnyuk shakes her head, saying with conviction: "The opposite is true. Many universities are more active now, instead of sitting down and complaining. The situation is bleak, but as strange as it sounds, that is also an impetus for change." "We're trying to carry on university life as much as possible," adds Slozanska. "Everybody has their own form of resistance, this is ours."

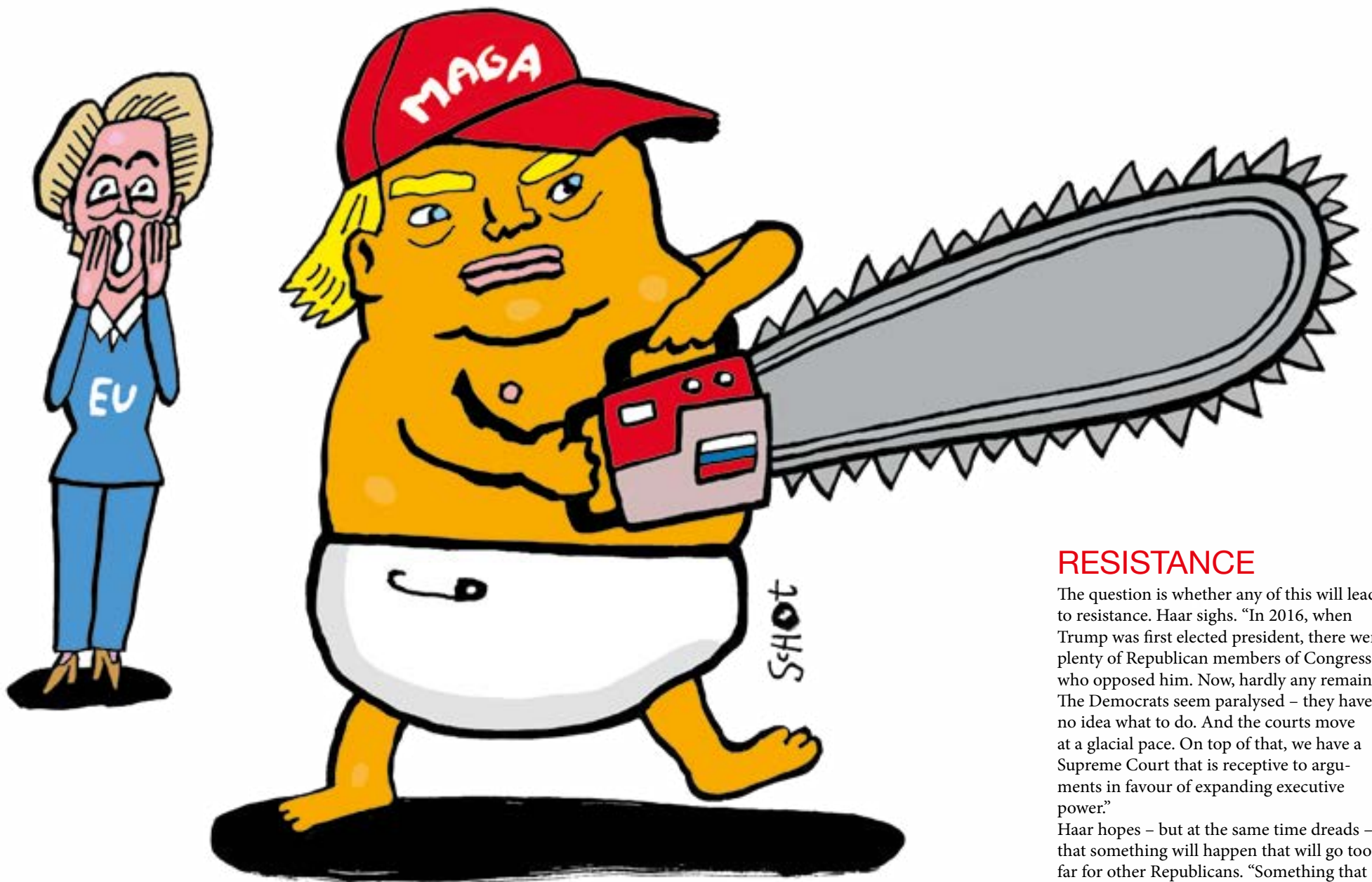


*Photo: archive RH*

Transatlantic  
relations expert  
**Roberta Haar** on  
Trump's America  
and Europe

“EUROPE  
SHOULD  
FINALLY GET IT  
TOGETHER”

She had predicted that the US would become more nationalist under an “anti-political” leader. She had anticipated that a second Trump term would be chaotic. But even so, the new US administration has managed to alarm Roberta Haar, professor of Foreign Policy Analysis & Transatlantic Relations.



TEXT: CLEO FRERIKS

ILLUSTRATION: BAS VAN DER SCHOT

“I learnt a new word just after the election: ‘kakistocracy’, says Roberta Haar, herself an American, in her office at University College Maastricht. “It means government by the least suitable, most unscrupulous people. Right now, the only requirement for a job in the US government seems to be: do you love Trump?”

It’s incompetence, she says, combined with a total lack of empathy and a desire for self-enrichment, that underpins many of today’s policy decisions. “Why does Trump want to relax crypto regulations? Because he and his wife both have their own ‘meme coin’ [crypto coin that is inspired by internet trends]. Or take the decision to cut off USAID [the principal US agency for international aid] – a cruel move that will cost lives, but also an illogical and self-defeating one. If you want to reduce migration, it won’t help to with-

draw aid from the very regions migrants are coming from. And viruses don’t recognise borders. More cases of for example HIV/AIDS in Africa will mean more cases in the US.”

## GENUINE PAIN

And yes, says Haar, part of why Trump appealed to American voters was because he’s a “norm-buster”. “But I’m not sure this is what they had in mind. There’s a lot of genuine pain in the American heartland [the sparsely populated, largely rural central region of the country]. Globalisation was good for the stock markets, but not for the small towns that lost their industries to countries like China. People there can no longer make a decent living, and that leads to frustration and a loss of dignity. Trump struck a chord with them, but a lot of people only saw in him what they wanted to see.” Even those voters are now starting to feel the negative impact of Trump’s policies. Haar points to a fund set up by Trump’s predeces-

or Biden to combat inflation. “Much of that money went to Republican states. Now that Trump has frozen those funds, those projects might be in trouble as well. Republicans are all in favour of small government, but perhaps not if it affects their piece of the pie.”

## FAR RIGHT

What worries Haar is how openly far right the people around Trump are this time around. “There was always an aspect of racism in the people around Trump, but before, you also had people like former Vice President Mike Pence, who weren’t as openly offensive. Now we’ve got Musk allegedly giving a Hitler salute and Vice President JD Vance telling Europeans off at last week’s Munich Security Conference for not embracing far-right politicians.” She was also taken aback by Trump’s handling of peace negotiations over the war in Ukraine. “He gave Putin everything he wanted before the negotiations even began. Does he realise how weak that makes him look?”

## RESISTANCE

The question is whether any of this will lead to resistance. Haar sighs. “In 2016, when Trump was first elected president, there were plenty of Republican members of Congress who opposed him. Now, hardly any remain. The Democrats seem paralysed – they have no idea what to do. And the courts move at a glacial pace. On top of that, we have a Supreme Court that is receptive to arguments in favour of expanding executive power.”

Haar hopes – but at the same time dreads – that something will happen that will go too far for other Republicans. “Something that will make Trump voters and members of Congress say, ‘Enough is enough.’ But I fear it will take something catastrophic, like bird flu spreading to humans on a large scale or a major terrorist attack.”

## EUROPE

What role does Europe play in all this? “Europe should finally get it together, starting with increasing its defence spending. America has been fed up with being Europe’s military safety net since the 1970s, long before Trump. The European Union should have taken serious steps when Russia annexed Crimea more than ten years ago. Poland did, and now its army has doubled in size and is the third largest army in NATO, after the US and Turkey. The EU defence budget is around €326 billion – no small amount, but only about a third that of the US, and it’s spent inefficiently.” Beyond that, strong leadership is needed, Haar argues, both in the US and in Europe. “We need people who emphasise the importance of having allies, who insist on upholding international law, who don’t believe that those in power are always right and who want to help the most vulnerable in society. Boris Pistorius, the German defence minister, gave me hope that he could be such a person when he flat out told Vance that his interference in the German elections was unacceptable. And in the US, we need someone who understands the pain of the heartland, someone who can be a president for everyone. I would have liked to see Gretchen Whitmer [the Democratic Governor of Michigan] run for office.”

## background

## Debate: how does Maastricht feel about internationalisation?

## “When I asked my neighbour if I should learn Dutch, he told me not to bother”

*Has the internationalisation of Maastricht University been a blessing or a curse for the city? Over a hundred people gathered to debate this question at Centre Céramique on Wednesday evening, from students and Maastricht residents to university employees and local politicians. They didn't reach a clear consensus – perhaps unsurprisingly, given the diverse group of participants.*

Equally diverse was the range of topics discussed during the debate, hosted by Debatcentrum Sphinx. Student noise problems, Maastricht's multilingual history, the positive impact students have on the city, the pressure on the housing market, the university's language policy... Participants also discussed what “internationalisation” actually means and whether it might be more fitting to refer to “Euregionalisation” here in Maastricht, where most international students come from just across the border in Belgium and Germany. Naturally, there was also talk of the government's plans to curb the internationalisation of, and increased use of English in, Dutch higher education through measures such as the proposed Balanced Internationalisation Act. Attending the debate, UM President Rianne Letschert once again criticised the government's plans. In her view, the situation in Maastricht – with UM focused on expanding in Sittard, Geleen and Venlo – is already balanced. “So these measures are entirely unnecessary for us.”

Do the residents of Maastricht see things the same way, though? After all, as one local claimed, “That's what it's about: people no longer feel at home in their own city. UM is



Photo: Observant

losing local support; the university is too international for the kind of city Maastricht is.” His proposed solution was for the university to

offer more education in Dutch – as advocated by his own party, Nieuw Sociaal Contract, one of the governing parties. The idea is that this

would encourage international students to learn the language, integrate into Dutch society, and become more likely to stay in the Netherlands after graduating. If they'll still want to come in the first place, that is: ironically, one Dutch student remarked that the reason why he moved here was to pursue an English-taught degree.

And it's not that they don't want to learn Dutch, several international students explained. But language classes are expensive, and they must prioritise their studies – and besides, they pointed out, Dutch people tend to switch to English as soon as they realise their conversation partner isn't fluent in Dutch. “I asked my neighbour if I should learn Dutch”, one student recalled with a laugh. “He said, ‘Don't bother. We'll reply to you in English anyway.’” Even the critical local quoted above admitted to speaking English with the expats on his street. A German lecturer at FASoS asked the Dutch attendees to have “a little more patience” with international UM employees. They are willing to make an effort to integrate into Dutch society, he said, “but we're getting a lot of heat from the government. People are scared.”

Letschert, for her part, acknowledged that there is room for improvement in the relationship between UM and the city. But as she pointed out, it's unlikely that the friction between town and gown – from noise complaints to bike chaos – will ever disappear completely. “We're a young university in a very old city. The universities of Leiden and Groningen are 450 years old and still struggle with the same issues. We've already come a long way here.”

Peter Doorakkers

THE ANNOUNCEMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY, FACULTIES, SERVICE CENTRES AND STUDENT ORGANISATIONS CAN BE FOUND ON

[WWW.OBSERVANTONLINE.NL](http://WWW.OBSERVANTONLINE.NL)

Agenda  
academic  
ceremonies

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