

On 26 September 2024, Olesia Gorbun defended her doctoral thesis in the field of social sciences (law) at Mykolas Romeris University on the topic "The Crimean Occupation and Dispute Resolution under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea". The dissertation was supervised by Prof. Dr. Saulius Katuoka.

Prof. Dr. Justinas Žilinskas interviewed Olesia Gorbun, who has just received her PhD.

Questions for Olesia:

**You are the first Ukrainian who has successfully defended your PhD thesis at Mykolas Romeris university. Are you happy about your achievement? How does it feel?**

I feel extremely privileged. Also, I feel grateful to everyone during my way to this achievement. I can now officially add the "PhD" to my name, but I'm not making a big deal of it yet.

**Tell us, how you have chosen Mykolas Romeris University for your studies? Was it hard to enroll, was it complicated to come to Lithuania?**

I chose Mykolas Romeris University because of its strong reputation in international law and its focus on practical legal challenges. The enrollment process was very straightforward, so it wasn't hard to apply—though I was a bit nervous about whether my application would be accepted. I love traveling, so coming to Lithuania felt like an exciting new adventure. And it really was. Adjusting to a new country, language, and culture was a fascinating experience. The university provided a lot of support, which made everything go smoothly.

**Initially, you have studied in International Law Master programme. What was your expectations when you came to study? How you imagined your studies based on your previous experience? What have surprised you during the studies? What was the hardest moments? What were the best moments that you carry on from your student's years?**

Initially, I enrolled in the International Law Master's program with mixed thoughts, mainly worried about how difficult it would be to adjust to English as the main language of communication. However, I quickly discovered that, with time and practice, everything became much easier than I had expected. We had a lot of discussions, real-life case studies, and opportunities to apply what we learned and I absolutely loved it.

The atmosphere at university is very supportive and professional. So even if it was some hard moments during my Master's Degree Studies, it is difficult to remember any of them as they were quickly addressed and solved.

Ultimately, the most memorable moments came from the incredible people I met. The lessons I learned—both academically and personally—will undoubtedly stay with me throughout my career.

**Why and how you decided to apply for PhD studies? Was it complicated to choose the topic?**

As for my decision to apply for PhD studies, I was pleasantly surprised by how much I enjoyed writing my Master's thesis. My supervisor and consultant were extremely helpful, and I found the research and writing process to be fascinating. This positive experience inspired me to further my academic journey. Honestly, I never thought I would feel this way when I started my Master's Degree.

As a result, I became interested in going further within the legal research into international law, particularly concerning the Russian aggression against Ukraine. I knew I wanted to focus on something related to compulsory dispute settlement under UNCLOS. Thus, I decided to continue my academic journey and apply for PhD studies at Mykolas Romeris University.

**Your topic is directly related to Ukraine and Russia's war against Ukraine. Was it a deliberate decision to choose this particular topic and what was the motivation for this choice?**

Yes, it was a deliberate decision. I still remember that moment in 2019, when I looked through the list of PhD topics related to the international law of the sea provided by the faculty. The topic about the Crimean occupation and dispute resolution under UNCLOS stood out among all of them. It was the only topic where I didn't have an immediate answer on how to approach it, what the results might be, or where the novelty would lie. I purposely chose the most challenging one on the list, and I've never regretted that decision, not even once.

**You took a number of internships, how can you describe this experience?**

Indeed, I took quite a few internships. I had two Erasmus internships at different law firms in Cyprus during and after my Master's studies, and I spent an entire year at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in Hamburg, Germany, during my doctoral studies. My first visit to Hamburg was a three-month internship at the Legal Office in 2021, followed by participation in the ITLOS-Nippon Foundation Capacity-Building and Training Programme on Dispute Settlement, which lasted nine months during 2022-2023. During this time I improved significantly my legal research skills and deepened my understanding of the law of the sea.

I believe these opportunities would not be possible without the support of Mykolas Romeris University. The application process for these positions was quite lengthy, but university assisted me by providing all necessary documents and certificates in time.

Overall, each internship provided me with the unique experience and knowledge - from working within an international organisation to local law firms. All these internships allowed me to apply the theoretical knowledge I gained at MRU to real-world situations, particularly in the realm of international law.

**Dissertation is a big work. What was the hardest part of it?**

At the beginning it was hard to navigate through the vast amount of information on different matters related to my topic. However, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it became incredibly hard to stay focused on topic of my thesis that involved compulsory dispute settlement by peaceful means. For a while, my PhD thesis felt irrelevant and surreal in comparison to the ongoing reality happening back home. Due to this, finding a purpose in my dissertation was the hardest part of my studies, along with the challenge of not giving up and continuing to write. I believe I eventually found that purpose, that is why I was able to successfully defend it.

**Why do you think it is important to study international law? Will you advice other students from Ukraine, other countries and even Lithuania to follow your path and choose International Law or International Law and International Relations bachelor studies here at Mykolas Romeris University?**

I can answer this question from several perspectives.

First, as a scholar, I think studying international law is really important because there are many areas that need improvement. It's essential to research and analyze these issues to create the real changes. Without this effort, progress wouldn't happen. And we're living in a time when international law needs to be stronger than ever.

From my viewpoint as a Ukrainian, I believe it's vital to examine international law in detail, paying attention to even the smallest details, to ensure that those who break these laws are held accountable. International law isn't a quick fix; it requires dedicated professionals who act as guardians of it. So, I would absolutely encourage students to consider this field of study.

Finally, as someone who has studied at Mykolas Romeris University, I wholeheartedly encourage everyone to study International law Master's program here. Ideally, this should be preceded by a specialized bachelor's degree in Law and international relations.