



# Capacity building program for young liberals from the western Balkans

Brussels: 12-18 October 2018

## Why did you organise this event?

Since February 2016 The European Liberal Forum in partnership with Centre Party International Foundation has initiated a regional program for young liberal politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Republic of Macedonia, Republic of Serbia and Montenegro. The overall objective of this regional program is to enhance the political participation and influence of the 21 participants in their home countries. A total of three capacity building sessions annually, compose this so called “Regional Liberal Political Academy”. The generous contribution from ELF has enabled a key component of this academy, namely the third capacity building session in Brussels, exposing the participants to the nexus of political EU institutions, and for most of them, the first international political environment that is extremely relevant to current situations in their home countries. This project was therefore organized as a key capacity building and international networking component, that would further encourage young liberals to influence politics in their home countries, within and beyond the seven political parties represented in the program (Nasa Stranka (BiH), Hrvatska Narodna Stranka (Croatia), Istarski Demokratski Sabor (Croatia), Liberalna Partija Crne Gore (Montenegro), Liberalna Demokratska Partija (Serbia), Nova Stranka (Serbia) Liberalno-Demokratska Partija (Macedonia), Alternativa (Kosovo)).

## Which objectives did you intend to achieve with this project?

The overall objective was to provide an international networking opportunity for the selected participants and enhancing their knowledge and understanding of the following:

- I. political structure and systems in the European union,
- II. institutional structures of the European parliament,
- III. the history and influence of liberal parties within the European union structure,
- IV. the entry requirements to join the EU and the relative status of countries in the western Balkans,
- V. the ALDE party.

## What audience did you want to reach with this project?

The participants of the event were young members of liberal parties from Western Balkans. The idea was to show them the organisation of European institutions, the current topics that are discussed, and the position of the participants’ countries in the EU integration process. The participants could speak with Member of EU parliaments about many important topics, such as the processes of western Balkan EU accession, European liberal values, transatlantic matters including peace and security, green policies and current global issues, human rights, LGBT rights etc.

## Who were the most relevant speakers and what were their contributions?

The participants could meet relevant representatives from many EU organisations, including European Liberal Forum, LYMEC, ALDE representatives, NATO, EU Strategic communications in the Western Balkan and MEPs. Similarly to previous years, the most interactive and influential part of



the program was visit to the European Parliament, where the participants had a chance meet several Members of the European Parliament, as well as the introductions made by the ALDE Party, LYMEC and ELF. Some more details on each of the contributions and results of those meetings/speakers are provided below:

#### **Susanne Hartig, Executive Director, European Liberal Forum**

During the visit in Brussels, the participants had the immense pleasure of meeting the Executive director of ELF, Susanne Hartig. During this session, the functions of ELF and its key principles, particularly of subsidiarity, were presented. The opportunity to meet the Executive director of ELF gave the participants a good understanding of the organization, and Susanne's warm welcome to Brussels also set the positive and meaningful tone to the rest of our visit. Ms. Hartig and the participants further discussed transatlantic issues and liberal European values in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While visiting the ELF offices, participants also had the opportunity to query about current projects – how they selected, financed and monitored. Overall, this session created curiosity within the group which was further harnessed during remainder of the program.

#### **European Liberal Youth, Ms. Antoaneta Asenova, Political Adviser**

This meeting gave the participants the opportunity to meet the political advisor of LYMEC and better understand the organizations work, and most importantly how these young liberals from Balkan could seek LYMEC membership for their political party's youth wings. This was an incredibly rewarding session, and it gave participants an opportunity to compare the structures, priorities and overall work of the various youth wings. Antoaneta was also able to relate with good examples from her own career, including experiences from liberal youth movements in Bulgaria, but also during her time as an assistant to a MEP in Brussels.

#### **ALDE party, Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party, Andrew Burgess, Political Adviser and Daniel TANAHATOE Communication Adviser.**

During this session Mr. Bruges who is a political advisor for the Western Balkan countries, facilitated a discussion on various issues that are of concern to young politicians seeking political influence in the region. Of interest was ALDE's perspective on matters related EU accession, the future of liberalism in Europe as well as how to counter populism and growing nationalism. Beyond Mr. Burges contributions, participants also met Mr. Daniel Tanahatoe, the ALDE party's communication advisor who provided some valuable insight to key strategic and political communication methods. the participants were given insight on the ALDE party's projections on the future and how liberal parties, and young members of liberal parties can mobilize their capacity to tackle ongoing global challenges. Overall it was a very interesting and inspiring session, with excellent networking opportunities.

#### **NATO, Mrs. Tanya Hartman, Political Affairs and Security Policy Division**

As in 2017, meeting representatives from NATO and visiting the headquarters was a challenging, interesting and valuable experience. Coming from the Western Balkans, the historical perspectives of the Balkan war and NATO's interventions, were of course central to the discussions. Additionally, participants were interested in understanding the various partnerships structures within the NATO family, and how the network of NATO members can ensure enhanced global security. During the discussions, many questions were asked with a view to seek mutual understanding between NATO's mission and the current situation and political balance of power in the Western Balkans.



### **EEAS - EU Strategic communications in the Western Balkan, Sanja Marinkovic, Strategic Communications Officer**

The EEAS was one of the new additions for the Brussels program this year and proved to be a great success. Because of the excellent knowledge and political insights that EEAS representatives could provide, the meeting resulted in very active and fruitful discussions. Current affairs of the Western Balkans, including: recent elections in the region, the shrinking democratic space, various stages of each country's accession process, complexities of EU-Western Balkan negotiations and the contradictory perception regarding the future of the Western Balkan countries. The political landscape and representation of each country was analysed and discussed with the perspective from Brussels and in connection with current EU and global affairs.

### **Parliamentary event: "Life = Freedom" "Freedom = Life "**

The entire youth delegation was invited to attend an event in the parliament, regarding women's rights, as well as sexual and reproductive health, with specific focus on the anti-abortionist movements spreading throughout Europe. The discussion panel included members of civil society and representatives from the ALDE group (Ivan Jakovcic and Angelika Milnar). The anti-abortion movements in Croatia were central to the discussion and encouraged the political youth from the Western Balkans to provide perspectives from their own domestic context and analysed the connection between religion, populism, individual freedoms and the lobbyist movements who enable rooting of anti-abortion movements across Europe.

### **Ilhhan Kyuchyuk, Member of European Parliament (Bulgaria)**

As one of the youngest and (by reputation said) one of the most likable MEPs in the ALDE group, it was a great honor for the participant to meet Mr. Kyuchyuk's. His interest in human rights, especially with regards to the discrimination of ethnic minorities led to very interesting discussions, with much relevance to the participants' home region. The human rights-based approach, which is a central part of liberal politics, relates very strongly to the key areas of this MEPs work in the parliament. Mr. Kyuchyuk's background and experiences as a former leader of political youth movements, was also a very positive factor, which inspired and encouraged the group of young politicians from the Western Balkans.

### **Ivan Jakovcic, Member of European Parliament, Istarski Demokratski Sabor, Croatia.**

As an MEP from Croatia, meeting Mr. Jakovcic was extremely relevant and contributed to a tangible perception of how international politics and the work in the EU parliament affects the Western Balkans. With his knowledge of the Balkans in general, Mr Jakovcic was able to engage the group in discussion that connected current affairs in Montenegro, Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia with overall political trends in Europe. The discussions focused in large on the political changes that have happened during 2017 within the liberal party HNS, as well as the election results in Bosnia, particularly the elected Croat representation in the national government. Jakovcic also provided his personal views on the various stages towards EU accession that the represented countries are facing.

### **Frederick Federley, Member of European Parliament, Centre Party Sweden.**

Considering the recent elections in Sweden and the pending negotiations to form a government, Mr. Federley provided some insight related to challenges of respecting principles of democracy, while



simultaneously juggling the increasing political participation and influence of the nationalist party, the Sweden Democrats. As the vice president of the Swedish Centre Party, Mr Federley also highlighted what the political climate in Sweden entails in terms of promoting liberal values and the important role that the Swedish Centre party could have in the formation of various coalitions. Mr. Federley also addressed some of the current affairs which dominate the work within committees of his engagement in Brussels. As a young MEP, former leader of the Swedish Centre Party's youth wing, and an advocate for diversity, LGBT rights and green politics, Mr. Federley managed to capture the participants and encourage their political engagement. As usual Mr. Federley's contribution to the program provided a very personal dimension to the Brussels visit.

#### **Sophie In 't Veld, Member of European parliament (Netherlands), Democrats 66 Party**

Overall, Sophie made a very strong impression on the participants as she managed to capture her audience by addressing the gender perspective within politics and sharing her own experiences as a woman. Beyond the personal reflections of gender and politics, Sophie also described the various dimensions within the Parliament and particularly the influence that nationalistic movements have on women's political participation and influence. It was particularly interesting to see that male participants were interested in the gender perspective and asked concrete questions about practical measures to achieve gender equality within politics and beyond.

#### **Jasenko Selimovic, Member of European Parliament, (Sweden)**

As an EU representative for the Swedish Liberal Party, with roots in Bosnia, the meeting with Jasenko was very inspirational and organically enabled a frank and open discussion about the status of liberal values, power structures in Brussels and the future of the Western Balkan countries. Considering his dynamic and complex background, as a former refugee who came to Sweden at a young age, in combination with his intellect and past engagement within the arts, Jasenko was able to capture the participants' attention and interest in a variety of ways, and additionally inspire their engagement in liberal politics.

#### **Ivo Vajgl, Member of European Parliament (Slovenia)**

It was also the first time CPIF was able to engage MEP Ivo Vajgl as a part of the program in Brussels. Considering his vast political career, including his previous appointments within ministries as well as an ambassador (in Sweden among other places), participants were able to source valuable information and learn from Ivo's experiences. Discussions partially centered around the political transitions that the ex-Yugoslav countries have undergone over the past 25 years, and where it is currently heading. Similarly, Ivo provoked discussion on the existing political culture within the western Balkan countries and how this affects liberal values, accession to the EU and the overall state of democracy in the region

### **What were the outcomes/ results of the project?**

In general, the participants demonstrated enhanced understanding of the various themes addressed during the visit, including: political structure and systems in the European union, institutional structures of the European parliament, the history and influence of liberal parties within the European union structure, the entry requirements to join the EU and the relative status of countries in the western Balkans, NATO, Central and Eastern European Trade relations, as well as the ALDE party.

In addition to this, the project has delivered the following results:



- 1) A video was created (which is in stage of finalisation), illustrating what the participants have learned during the project. This video will be further spread to illustrate the meaningful support provided by ELF.
- 2) All participants have expressed that the experiences from this project is likely to increase their level of political participation in their home countries.
- 3) Exposing the participants to the politicians in the parliament has enabled them to see a potential future of politics internationally. We have already understood that participants with potential and drive to work in the international arena are now even more inspired to pursue this political path.

### **What conclusion/ policy recommendations can be drawn from this project?**

The participants will benefit from the information received within the project in way that they are familiarised with the EU processes and EU political structure and system in the European union. They can use the acquired knowledge to influence politics within their parties, and beyond. The Centre Party International Foundation and the Boris Divkovic Foundation, would very much like to suggest the continuation of this program, as we are confident it will have long term impact on the young liberal movements in the Western Balkans, and expose youth to important aspects that will enhance their empowerment and capacity to grow as responsible and accountable politicians.

