

Short report on European Liberal Forum's seminar: United in Diversity

Bratislava, Slovakia 13-15/09/2019

The Young Leaders' Meeting: United in Diversity brought together a total of 19 participants, from a total of 17 member organisations of the European Liberal Youth (LYMEC) in Bratislava, Slovakia. The aim of the event was to bring together youth leaders from across Europe to share experiences and discuss how to embrace and promote diversity in our societies and especially in our own organisations. In addition to the active discussions, two expert speakers and one party representative provided in-depth insights into the topics Diversity, Gender and Diversity Management during the two-day event.

Leading up to the event, the participants were sent a draft for an Equality and Diversity Plan, functioning as the inspiration and basis for discussions during the event.

Lena Höglund, the Treasurer of the European Liberal Youth – LYMEC opened the seminar and welcomed the participants and the local organisation – Youth of Progressive Slovakia, as well as thanked the Open Society Foundation, which are active in the region and who hosted the first day of the event. After the opening words, Höglund gave the floor for a welcome from MEP of Progressive Slovakia, Martin Hojsik and for a greeting from a Board member of Youth of Slovakia, Daniar Rusnak.

Afterwards the participants were invited to present themselves during a Young Leader Roundtable and describe with a few words their motivation for attending the event and where they stand on diversity management in their own organisation. Many of the presentations spurred discussion on various topics and ideas, such as co-presidency and its challenges, mentoring programmes and good practices in the field, the importance of involving disabled people and even, arranging family-friendly Congresses.

The first day continued with an Expert Session with Senior Advocacy Officer Sarah Chander from the European Network Against Racism (ENAR), who gave various definitions to the term 'diversity', but also delved into polarization in society and that it is a value in itself to be diverse and representative. Some of the conclusions of the session were that identity is not just confined to diversity, meaning 'diversity' representation is no guarantee to 'diversity'

rights being defended by those seemingly representing ‘diversity’, rather identity is layered and diversity representation and equal opportunities should be defended by all. The debate in Europe today focusses more on gender equality at the expense of diversity, thus some perspectives are left out of the discussion on rights and discrimination. The session lifted a few words of advice moving forward: the value of understanding your basis and using data, to not underestimate the importance of interpersonal connections and finally, the need for true self-reflection in organisations and individually.

On the second day of the event, Chair of the Hungarian Women’s Lobby and Board Member of the European Women’s Lobby, Réka Sàfràny spoke on the topic of gender, describing the current state of play in Europe, mentioning effects of the #metoo-movement and digital harassment being an increasing phenomenon of today. She spoke of concrete methods to taking charge of eg. digital harassment, such as representing rules for interaction, setting up support groups in digital interactions, but also for handling harassment at events, such as through named ombudspersons. The methods led into discussion amongst the participants and linked onto the methods in the draft Equality and Diversity Plan discussed during a later session.

During the following interactive session, led by Lena Höglund, the participants presented their faced challenges and solutions to enabling representation, being inclusive and truly giving a voice to diversity in their respective organisations. The output was followed by a discussion on the variety of views shared.

The next session analysed and debated the proposed draft Equality and Diversity Plan, catching on to the core practical aspects of keeping an open, inclusive and self-reflective organisation. The actively participants took part in the session, debating on the spirit of the document as a whole as well as on concrete aspects like co-presidency and gender quotas for leadership. The session concluded overall in favour of the proposed plan.

‘Diversity Management’ was the topic of the final external speaker, MEP Michal Simecka, who spoke of the need to take action to change the face of the organization, set up minority platforms and empower community representatives who in turn can open up the party to others. The final message of the session was that an internal debate in a party is always healthy, no matter the end outcome.

The second Young Leader Roundtable interactively summed up event and the challenges faced in the organisations represented at the event, what the possible solutions could be,

while distinguishing between what is meaningful to do on a national versus an international level. Some of the mentioned actions for the national level were to use minority languages in communication, to set up branches for specific minorities, to set up digital action groups to impede aggressors from dominating the debate online, to introduce moderated debating competitions in high schools and to set up mentorship programmes to build confidence in members. On the international level, the participants thought it meaningful to emphasize storytelling in communication on minority issues, maintain digital modes of participation and budget for equal opportunities to participation at events.

Finally, the last two closing speeches by LYMEC's Vice-president Edgaras Mascinskas and LYMEC's President Svenja Hahn lifted the power in diversity and the pathways to reaching truly equal and diverse organisations across Europe. The speeches concluded, active diversity management is not just brave and smart, but just and represents the Europe of today.