

NGO LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP WARSAW

MARKING
10 YEARS
OF EMPOWERING
NGO LEADERS

OCTOBER
21—24
2025

FINAL REPORT

NGO LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP WARSAW

OCTOBER 21—24, 2025

In October 2025, civil society leaders from 11 countries across Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia gathered in Warsaw, Poland for the 15th NGO Leadership Workshop.

Throughout a dynamic, immersive week, participants explored how to lead more effectively in increasingly complex and high-pressure environments. At a time when civic space is shrinking and democratic values are under pressure, the need for resilient, well-connected NGO leadership has never been more critical.

The four-day workshop equipped participants with tools to lead through complexity and uncertainty. Topics included values-based leadership, systems thinking, stakeholder analysis, innovation, and navigating political and economic change. The workshop also explored how to strengthen organizational culture, align teams around purpose, and lead with authenticity and resilience.

Some of the most powerful moments took place beyond the classroom sessions — over shared meals, coffee breaks, in evening conversations, and during our retreat to the nearby Wilanów Palace and Museum. Participants forged cross-border relationships and laid the groundwork for continued cooperation and support. The NGO Leadership Workshop is now 370 alumni strong.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

The NGO Leadership Workshops are sponsored by the University of Michigan's Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia (WCEE), in partnership with the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at the University of Michigan. The workshops are organized in partnership with the Slovak-based NGO Hekima, which supports civil society change-makers and activists, and addresses gender-specific issues through entrepreneurship and education.



Hekima

ABOUT OUR PARTICIPANTS

The participants were selected through an invitation process and attended at no charge. They represented the following organizations:

- AZERBAIJANI BAR ASSOCIATION
- BYSOL (Belarus)
- Chesno (Ukraine)
- Europe in Law (Armenia)
- Ezgulik – Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan
- Foundation in Support of Local Democracy (Poland)
- Georgian Young Lawyers' Association
- Legal 100 (Ukraine)
- Legal Resources Centre from Moldova
- Levan Mikeladze Foundation (Georgia)
- Promo-LEX Association (Moldova)
- Regional Center for Human Rights (Ukraine)
- Statewatch (Ukraine)
- The Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (Uzbekistan)
- The International Foundation for Freedom of Speech Protection «Adil soz» (Kazakhstan)
- Transparency International Georgia
- Transparency International Kyrgyzstan
- Union of Informed Citizens NGO (UIC) (Armenia)
- Wings of Liberty Public Foundation (Kazakhstan)

CONTENT

DAY
1

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP: NAVIGATING CHANGE IN NGO MANAGEMENT

INSTRUCTOR: Frank C. Schultz (University of California, Berkeley, USA)

This session focused on the skills NGO leaders need to effectively and efficiently lead their organizations when change is happening at many levels — externally, internally, and personally. It examined the powerful but relatively limited number of tools that NGO executives have at their disposal to adapt their organizations to ever-present changes.

SELECT FEEDBACK:

- *The module was well-structured and delivered at a high level.*
- *The content was highly relevant and struck an excellent balance between foundational leadership theory and practical, actionable strategies.*
- *Very inspiring and a good way to know my classmates better!*



Special guest speaker Ambassador Daniel Fried (former U.S. Ambassador to Poland).

DAY
2

STRATEGIC FUNDING MIX ESSENTIALS: RETHINKING NGO SUSTAINABILITY

INSTRUCTOR: Mirella Panek-Owsiańska (Warsaw, Poland)

This session explored strategies for building financial sustainability in NGOs, including mapping global funding opportunities and forming effective partnerships. Participants learned how to diversify income through corporate, grassroots, and digital avenues. They also began designing a six-month funding diversification plan aligned with their organization's mission and legal framework.

SELECT FEEDBACK:

- Very useful session with practical knowledge and feedback from a great expert!
- The module was very practical and well-structured, with clear examples and useful tools.
- Motivating session that helped me look at fundraising more strategically and creatively.



DAY
3

PEER LEADERSHIP LAB: SCENARIO-BASED SIMULATION

Facilitated by participants with guidance from Frank C. Schultz

This session immersed participants in real-world NGO leadership challenges, where they worked in teams to analyze complex scenarios and present strategic responses. Drawing on leadership and strategy frameworks from earlier in the week, participants practiced decision-making under pressure. The exercise strengthened their skills in collaboration, communication, and problem-solving while deepening peer connections. The session was followed by an outing to historic Wilanów Palace, where the group minted their own coins and celebrated with a closing dinner.



DAY
4

USING INNOVATION TO DRIVE POSITIVE GLOBAL IMPACT

INSTRUCTOR: Tanya Popeau (UK)

This session explored how innovation can help mission-driven organizations tackle complex social and environmental challenges. Participants learned practical tools and techniques for designing, testing, and scaling creative solutions. Through real-world case studies, they examined how innovative approaches drive impact, sustainability, and organizational growth.

SELECT FEEDBACK:

- *I LOVED IT! So practical and productive, I learned so many things and can't wait to implement them in my work.*
- *I very much enjoyed the delivery of this lecture. The enthusiasm was great, and the interactive exercises were awesome.*
- *The combination of reflection, practical advice, and open discussion made it both useful and motivating.*



INSTRUCTORS



Frank Schultz

is a Faculty Member and Distinguished Teaching Fellow at the Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley, and a Faculty Affiliate with the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan. He teaches courses on strategy and leadership and has served as Faculty Director of Berkeley's Center for Teaching Excellence and International Business Development program. A former MBA instructor at the University of Michigan, he has taught around the world, including in Japan, India, Saudi Arabia, China, Brazil, and across Europe.



Mirella Panek-Owsiańska

is a consultant and trainer specializing in CSR/ESG, social communication, and fundraising. She has served as president of the Responsible Business Forum and a board member of CSR Europe, and she co-authored the Positive Impact Startups project. Her diverse experience includes serving as press officer for Amnesty International in Poland and co-founding the Cosmos for Girls foundation. Mirella supports NGOs in developing fundraising strategies, building partnerships, and designing income-generating initiatives. She is also an academic lecturer, mentor, and juror in communication and social responsibility competitions. Her work bridges the nonprofit, business, and public sectors.



Tanya Popeau

is the Director of Synthesis, an award-winning innovation and sustainability agency. She has worked globally with leading corporations, nonprofits, governments, and academic institutions to design breakthrough solutions to complex challenges. She previously advised the UN's largest agency, leading innovation strategy across 15 Asia-Pacific countries and spearheading the region's first innovation fund. Her work spans urban poverty, energy efficiency, social cohesion, and women's economic empowerment. A frequent guest lecturer, she has taught at UCL, Warwick Business School, the University of Chicago, and the University of Exeter.

WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

In line with the goals of the workshop, the participants:

- Strengthened leadership and decision-making skills for navigating complex organizational challenges.
- Learned practical tools to adapt NGO operations amid internal and external change.
- Mapped the global funding landscape and explored creative, mission-aligned financing strategies.
- Developed approaches for building effective partnerships with foundations, corporations, and communities.
- Gained hands-on experience applying strategy and innovation frameworks to real-world NGO scenarios.
- Discovered practical innovation methods to design, test, and scale impactful solutions.
- Enhanced collaboration, communication, and peer learning across a diverse international network.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS SAID

"This workshop is not only about leadership skills but it's a space for reflection, connection, and real learning with people who face the same challenges."

"I had a transformative experience. I am not exaggerating when I say there was a "before" and "after" this program... the cultural evenings, the late-night conversations, the long walks through Warsaw, and the genuine connections built with leaders from across the region... all priceless. A much-needed boost of energy and purpose for everything we continue to do."

"It's a great opportunity to learn from others, especially when there are countries with a similar background and situation."

"It was well organized, informative, and provided valuable insights that I can apply in my work."

"It was a fully-tailored and funded programme with awesome lecturers and organisers that facilitated contact between different NGOs, as well as new friends along the way."

WHAT THE ORGANIZERS SAID

The NGO Leadership Workshop is the cornerstone of outreach programming at the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia, which is critical to our center's mission. Together with the William Davidson Institute and Hekima, we were proud to welcome and support leaders from Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus who courageously pursue and protect democratic values at home despite increasingly challenging conditions.

—Geneviève Zubrzycki, WCEE Director



Marking ten years of this work in 2025, I am struck by how consistently this network rises to meet the moment. The 20 participants in Warsaw showed remarkable resilience and purpose, engaging fully with the tools, frameworks, and with one another. In a period when civil society is under profound strain, their leadership reminds us that impact often begins with brave individuals who choose to show up, work together, and push for change. It's also deeply meaningful to work alongside our partners – the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia and Hekima. Their commitment and partnership make this workshop such a rewarding part of my year!

—Amy Gillett, WDI Academy

For the program participants, defending rights and democratic space is not an abstract mission – it is their daily reality, often lived under immense pressure and, too often, in isolation. In Warsaw, we saw how quickly a trusted regional community can turn that isolation into shared strategy, courage, and care. As a partner rooted in Central Europe, Hekima is particularly proud that this workshop not only strengthens leadership and funding skills, but also gives human rights defenders the reflective space and practical tools they need to stay resilient, protect their teams, and sustain their impact over the long term. We are deeply grateful to our donors and to our partners at the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia and the William Davidson Institute, whose trust and support make this kind of long-term investment in civil society leadership possible.

—Ivana Uličná, Hekima CEO & Founder



ONLINE LEARNING

Online learning modules dedicated to the following topics were offered on ExtendEd, the program's online learning management system. Participants will continue to have access to this elearning content for one year:



NETWORKING & ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

Participants joined the NGO Leadership Workshop alumni network, connecting them to over 370 civil society leaders across the region. They also gained continued access to online learning modules via the ExtendEd platform and remain connected through informal WhatsApp and Facebook groups.

FUTURE PLANS

We plan to continue offering the NGO Leadership Workshop in 2026 and beyond, with an upcoming workshop to be held in Bratislava, Slovakia in May 2026.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED



The NGO Leadership Workshop is offered by invitation only. If you are an NGO leader interested in being considered for a future workshop, please contact **Ivana Uličná** at ivana.ulicna@hekima.sk



We welcome interest from **sponsors** who want to support civil society leadership across the region. To learn more, contact **Amy Gillett** at gilletta@umich.edu

