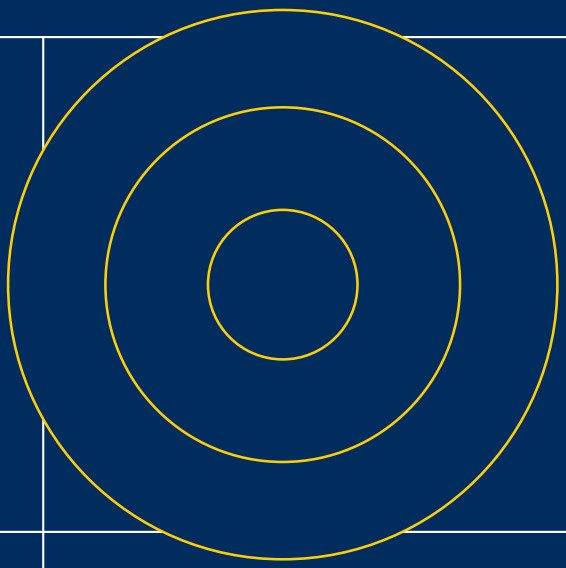
# NGO LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP

## LOOKING BACK AND AHEAD



# IMPACT REPORT

LSA WEISER CENTER FOR EUROPE & EURASIA UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

WDI WILLIAM DAVIDSON INSTITUTE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Hekima

# NGO LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP

## LOOKING BACK AND AHEAD

**In 2015, the NGO Leadership Workshop was launched with a simple but powerful belief: stronger civil society begins with stronger leadership. Inspired by Ambassador Ronald Weiser's experience in Slovakia during the post-communist transition, and made possible through the support of the Weiser family, the program was created as a forum where civil society leaders could learn from leading experts and one another, strengthening their capacity to grow their organizations, innovate, and lead through difficult times.**

Across **16 workshops**, the program has brought together **392 participants** from Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Central Asia representing **358 organizations**.

Over the past decade, the NGO Leadership Workshop has equipped civil society leaders to think more strategically, build resilience, make difficult decisions, and lead their organizations more effectively. It has also grown beyond a training program into a trusted network of civil society leaders. Participants have built lasting relationships, exchanged ideas, and formed partnerships, continuing to draw on one another long after the workshop ends. At critical moments, the program has also found other ways to support this network. In 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic placed extraordinary strain on the NGO sector, the program provided $50,000 in emergency mini-grants to ten alumni organizations. In this way, the program has contributed not only to stronger individual leaders, but also to a more enduring and robust civil society across the region.

At the same time, the context in which civil society operates has grown more demanding. Democratic backsliding, war and insecurity, social polarization, financial uncertainty, and growing pressure on civic actors are testing both organizations and the people who lead them. In this environment, civil society needs capable, strategic leaders more than ever. The future of the NGO Leadership Workshop, therefore, cannot simply be a continuation of the past. It is entering a new phase, with a focus on deeper alumni engagement, stronger regional cooperation, and continued support for civil society leaders navigating an increasingly complex landscape. The pages that follow tell the story of the program's first decade of impact: its reach, its learning, and the people and partnerships that will shape its future.

# THE CASE FOR LEADERSHIP INVESTMENT IN CIVIL SOCIETY

## INVESTING IN PEOPLE WHO LEAD CHANGE

NGO leaders are expected to respond to complex social and political challenges while working with limited resources, fragile teams, and significant pressure. The NGO Leadership Workshop was therefore designed as a strategic investment in leadership. When leaders are better equipped, organizations become stronger. They are better able to make sound decisions, support their teams, adapt to change, and create lasting social impact.

## THE VISION: STRONGER LEADERS, STRONGER ORGANIZATIONS, STRONGER SOCIETIES

The workshop is built on the belief that leadership development can have an impact far beyond the individual. When NGO leaders become more strategic, self-aware, and confident in difficult decisions, they are better equipped to strengthen their teams and sustain their organizations through uncertainty.

Over time, these effects can extend outward. Stronger organizations are better able to serve their communities, work across borders and sectors, and contribute to a more resilient civil society.






*"When NGO leaders gain practical tools, strategic insight, self-awareness, and access to a trusted regional peer network, they are better able to lead their teams, adapt to change, make difficult decisions, and sustain their organizations. Over time, this contributes to stronger civil society organizations and more resilient democratic communities,"* says Geneviève Zubrzycki, Director of the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia.

# THE LEARNING MODEL BEHIND THE WORKSHOP

## LEARNING BY DOING

The workshop goes beyond traditional lectures to encompass simulations, case studies, peer exchange, leadership reflection, and discussions of real organizational challenges. This practical approach helps leaders apply new knowledge directly to their work.

## A CAREFULLY CURATED COHORT

Bringing together leaders from different countries, sectors, and organizational backgrounds broadens perspectives and encourages cross-border collaboration. In some cases, the program has also used thematic cohorts to enable deeper discussion among participants facing similar realities. Workshops designed for Ukrainian civil society leaders, for example, created a space for honest exchange, shared problem-solving, and stronger support networks.

## A SAFE SPACE FOR HONEST LEADERSHIP CONVERSATIONS

NGO leaders rarely have the chance to speak openly about uncertainty, pressure, burnout, ethical dilemmas, failure, or difficult strategic decisions. The workshop provides a trusted space where participants can share experiences, learn from one another, and build meaningful peer support networks.

## GLOBAL EXPERTISE GROUNDED IN PRACTICE

A defining strength of the workshop is its ability to connect civil society leaders in the region with new ideas, practical tools, and expertise from around the world. The emphasis is always on relevance: approaches that are globally informed but grounded in the real challenges leaders face.

## INSTRUCTORS HAVE INCLUDED



**JULIE FELKER**

William Davidson Institute, University of Michigan, USA



**FRANK C. SCHULTZ**

University of California, Berkeley, USA



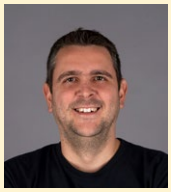
**OLIVIA HURBANOVÁ**

HighBrõws, Slovakia



**LINDA GASSER**

William Davidson Institute and Cornell University, USA



**PETER ŠEBO**

PS, Slovakia



**TANYA POPEAU**

Synthesis, UK

# OVER A DECADE OF RESULTS

Over the past decade, the NGO Leadership Workshop has evolved into a trusted regional platform for civil society leaders, advancing leadership development, organizational resilience, and cross-border cooperation. More than a series of workshops, it has become a long-term investment in the people and organizations shaping democratic and social change across the region. The figures below capture the scale, reach, and cumulative impact of this work.

## BY THE NUMBERS

| | |
|---|---|
| **11** | years of implementation |
| **16** | workshops organized |
| **392** | participants supported |
| **112** | participants from Ukraine |
| **23** | countries represented |
| **358** | organizations engaged |
| **30** | trainers and experts involved |

## WORKSHOP TOPICS COVERED

- Strategic planning and organizational strategy
- Adaptive leadership
- Sustainable management
- Strategic negotiation
- Burnout prevention and resilience
- Fundraising and revenue diversification
- Human resources and people management
- Organizational change and assessment
- Advocacy
- Public relations
- Marketing strategy
- Digital marketing
- AI strategy
- Program design and evaluation
- Civil society and democratic transition

## PARTICIPANT MAP



# FIVE DIMENSIONS OF IMPACT

The following findings are based on responses gathered in May-June 2026 from 84 alumni who participated in the workshops from 2021—2025. Together, they illustrate how the workshop creates lasting impact across five interconnected dimensions: leadership, organizations, networks, resilience, and democratic impact.

## 1 Stronger Leadership

**Participants report greater confidence, stronger strategic decision-making skills, increased self-awareness, and a better ability to lead through uncertainty and change.**

*"Since the workshop, I have moved into a management role because I felt more confident and was able to unlock my true potential. Taking a more active role in managing processes has allowed me to influence them more effectively. As a result, I have seen a positive impact on our organization's resilience and adaptability. In turn, this has significantly improved my self-confidence and outlook on key areas of my life."*

**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Košice, 2024 (representing Ukraine and Slovakia)**

*"The program helped me gain a deeper understanding of my role as a leader. Since the workshop, I have taken on a new leadership role within my organization, leading the department responsible for shaping our strategic direction."*

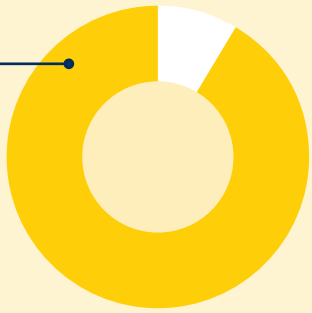
**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Warsaw, 2024 (representing Ukraine)**

*"I learned to take a step back and be less emotional when making decisions for myself and my team, and instead use evidence-based techniques."*

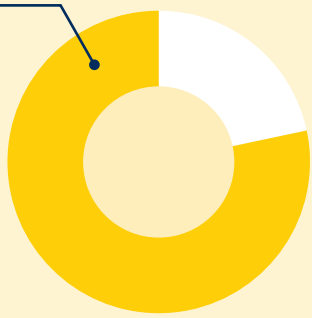
**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Warsaw, 2024 (representing Poland)**

**KEY FINDINGS:**

**90.5%**
of graduates agreed that the workshop increased their **self-awareness as a leader.**



**78.6%**
of graduates agreed that the workshop strengthened their **ability to make strategic decisions and lead under pressure.**



# 2 Stronger Organizations

**Many participants have introduced new approaches to strategic planning, team management, organizational culture, communication, and long-term sustainability within their organizations.**

*"The NGO Leadership Workshop offered really inspiring insights, fresh perspectives and a much-needed reset for rethinking our strategies and approaches to funding and project development. It was a welcome break from our everyday, fast-paced work rhythm and created space for new ideas to emerge. It was enriching not only for myself but for our organization as a whole, and it brought ideas especially to our internal structure and way of working."*

**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Bratislava, 2023 (representing Czechia)**

*"Participation in the NGO Leadership Workshop contributed to improving our organization's work, strengthening relationships with donors, and gaining a deeper understanding of the importance of recognizing opportunities for prioritization and action planning in the workplace."*

**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Bratislava, 2022 (representing North Macedonia)**

*"Overall, the workshop was a catalyst for refining both our internal processes and external partnership strategies. I left with practical, actionable tools that I am already implementing in our current project cycles."*

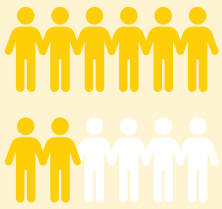
**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Warsaw, 2024 (representing Ukraine)**



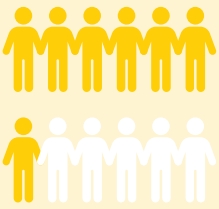
## KEY FINDINGS:

Beyond strengthening individual leaders, the workshop also contributed to organizational development.

**Two-thirds** of participants **(67%)** reported **improvements in their organization's strategy, management, or internal culture**,



while **56%** said the program strengthened their **organization's ability to adapt to change and improve its long-term effectiveness through stronger planning and sustainability.**



These findings suggest that participants are applying their learning to strengthen not only their own leadership, but also the organizations they lead and **support**.

# 3 Stronger Networks

**The workshop has helped build lasting relationships among leaders across countries and sectors, creating opportunities for future cooperation, knowledge sharing, and mutual support.**

*"Meeting people from different countries and organizational cultures gave me a much broader understanding of civil society in the region. What I appreciated most was the openness of everyone involved. People were genuinely willing to share experiences, challenges, and practical advice. The relationships built during the workshop also led to long-term cooperation. Today, our organization collaborates with Hekima on an Erasmus+ project."*

**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Bratislava, 2022 (representing North Macedonia)**

*"It was a great opportunity to learn from others, especially from organizations working in countries facing similar challenges. The connections we built have remained valuable, and I know I can reach out to fellow participants whenever I need advice or a different perspective."*

**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Warsaw, 2025 (representing Poland)**




*"The workshop helped me to think strategically regarding external challenges and human management. I met kind and competent people and am still in touch with some of them to explore opportunities for joint projects. The organization I work for is now more stable than a year ago and I think the training has contributed to that."*

**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Bratislava, 2025 (representing Bosnia and Herzegovina)**

*"The workshop provided an excellent opportunity for NGOs to expand their regional networks and establish long-term cooperation, for example as consortium partners for EU-funded projects."*

**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Bratislava, 2025 (representing Hungary)**

## KEY FINDINGS:



**83.3%**

of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the workshop helped them **build valuable professional relationships across organizations and countries.**

# 4 Stronger Civil Society Resilience

**Leaders have used the knowledge and support gained through the program to navigate political pressure, shrinking civic space, social tensions, war, funding challenges, and organizational stress and burnout.**

• • •

*"Being surrounded by experienced NGO leaders from across Central and Eastern Europe was both inspiring and reassuring. It reminded me that many organizations face similar struggles—uncertainty, funding challenges, and burnout—but also that there are creative ways to respond to them."*

**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Bratislava, 2022 (representing North Macedonia)**

• • •

*"The workshop served as a safe space to learn, ask questions, and openly share the challenges I face in my organization. It reminded me that I am not alone in dealing with difficult situations and gave me renewed energy to continue our work."*

**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Warsaw, 2025 (representing Ukraine)**

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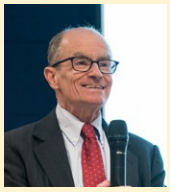
## MEETING INSPIRATIONAL LEADERS



**ZUZANA ČAPUTOVÁ**
President of Slovakia (2019-2024)



**ALEKSANDER KWAŚNIEWSKI**
President of Poland (1995-2005)



**DANIEL FRIED**
U.S. Ambassador to Poland (1997-2000)



**KUBA WYGNAŃSKI**
Founder and President of the Board, Shipyard Foundation, Poland

+

Former heads of state, seasoned diplomats, and prominent civil society activists have delivered keynote addresses to workshop participants.

# 5 Greater Social and Democratic Impact

**By strengthening organizations working on issues such as human rights, transparency, civic participation, humanitarian assistance, and vulnerable community development, the program contributes to broader social and democratic resilience.**

*"The workshop meets a very important need. NGOs should be professionalized in order to be sustainable and impactful in the long run. The program is highly beneficial for civil society organizations, especially in countries where civic space is shrinking and democratic values are under pressure."*

**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Warsaw, 2025 (representing Poland)**

*"NGOs in Ukraine are growing fast. They need qualified managers and strong leaders. That is what makes this workshop so important."*

**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Košice, 2024 (representing Ukraine)**

*"The workshop genuinely changed the way I think about these issues. After returning home, we began exploring consultancy work as an additional organizational activity. Over time, it became an important source of stability for us and helped sustain the organization during difficult periods."*

**Participant from NGO Leadership Workshop in Bratislava, 2022 (representing North Macedonia)**

## KEY FINDINGS:

**75.0%** of graduates agreed or strongly agreed that the workshop strengthened their **ability to contribute to social and democratic change through their work.**

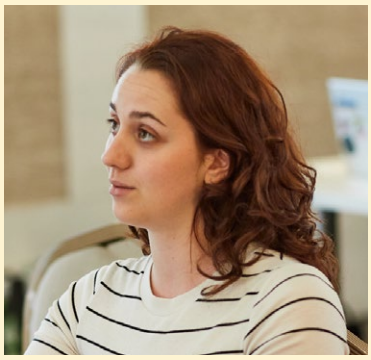
# The Lasting Impact of the Program

The survey findings demonstrate that the NGO Leadership Workshop creates lasting impact at three interconnected levels: leaders, organizations, and civil society. Participants consistently reported stronger leadership capacity, with 91% saying the program increased their self-awareness as leaders and 79% reporting greater confidence in making strategic decisions under pressure. These individual gains were reflected in organizational improvements, with 67% introducing new approaches to strategy, management, or organizational culture. Beyond their own organizations, participants built lasting regional connections, with 83% reporting valuable professional relationships that continue to foster collaboration, knowledge sharing, and mutual support.

## WHAT WE LEARNED

- **Leadership confidence proved to be the program's strongest outcome.**
- **Networks became one of the program's most enduring outcomes.**
- **Organizational change takes longer—but the foundations are being built.**

# ALUMNI STORIES: LEADERSHIP IN ACTION



***"The Workshop Changed How I See Leadership and What Our Organization Could Become"***

Interview with

## MARIJA CHEKREDJI

- Program Coordinator, Institute for Human Rights, North Macedonia
- NGO Leadership Workshop Bratislava Participant, 2022

**From a young project collaborator in North Macedonia to a more confident and strategic NGO leader, Marija Chekredji's story reflects the long-term impact of investing in civil society leadership. For Marija, the NGO Leadership Workshop became a turning point that reshaped how she approached sustainability, collaboration, and organizational growth.**

**Can you introduce yourself and the organization you work for?**

My name is Marija Chekredji and I am a Program Coordinator at the Institute for Human Rights in Skopje, North Macedonia. We are a small NGO working on human rights, democracy, rule of law, and civic education.

Our projects focus on issues such as access to justice, discrimination, hate speech, and human rights education for young people. Because we are a small team, every opportunity for learning and professional growth has a direct impact on the organization itself.

**What motivated you to join the NGO Leadership Workshop?**

One of my colleagues had attended the workshop and spoke very highly of it. At that time, I had only been working in the NGO sector for a few years and most of my experience was limited to the local context in North Macedonia.

I wanted to meet NGO professionals from other countries, understand how they worked in different environments, and learn how organizations across the region approached challenges such as sustainability and leadership.

Looking back, the workshop exceeded all expectations.

**What impact did the workshop have on you personally as a leader?**

The workshop genuinely changed the way I think about these issues and I returned home highly motivated and with a much broader perspective. One of the most valuable aspects was having the space to step outside daily routines and think strategically. In civil society work, especially in small organizations, there is rarely time to pause and reflect.

The workshop created exactly that kind of safe space.

It also gave me much more confidence. Being surrounded by experienced NGO leaders from across Central and Eastern Europe was both inspiring and reassuring. It reminded me that many organizations face similar struggles—uncertainty, funding challenges, and burnout—but also that there are creative ways to respond to them.

**Were there any concrete lessons that influenced your organization afterward?**

Absolutely. One of the biggest eye-opening moments for me was the discussion around NGO sustainability.

In North Macedonia, NGOs often depend almost entirely on grants. During the workshop,

I realized that many organizations across the region had developed alternative funding models, including consultancy services and other income-generating activities.

That completely shifted my perspective.

After returning from the workshop, we started exploring consultancy work as an additional organizational activity. Over time, it became an important source of stability for us and genuinely helped sustain the organization during difficult periods.

The workshop also strengthened our thinking around communication and strategic planning, helping us present our work more effectively to both donors and the public.

**How important was the international and peer-learning aspect of the workshop?**

For me, it was one of the most valuable parts of the experience.

Meeting people from different countries and organizational cultures gave me a much broader understanding of civil society in the region. What I appreciated most was the openness of everyone involved. People were genuinely willing to share experiences, challenges, and practical advice.

The relationships built during the workshop also led to long-term cooperation. Today, our organization collaborates with Hekima on an Erasmus+ project focused on strengthening civic competencies and democratic participation among young people, especially girls in secondary schools.



This is a concrete example of how the workshop creates learning opportunities as well as meaningful regional partnerships.

**Looking back today, how would you describe the overall value of the NGO Leadership Workshop?**

I would describe it as a transformative experience.

The workshop offered something NGO leaders rarely receive—a supportive space to reflect, exchange experiences honestly, and think strategically about the future.

I still recommend the program whenever I can because I truly believe initiatives like this strengthen not only individual leaders, but also organizations and civil society as a whole.



## *"Strong Leaders Build Stronger Teams, Especially in Times of War"*

Interview with

## TYMUR PISTRIUHA

- Founder and Head of the Ukrainian Deminers Association (UDA), Ukraine
- NGO Leadership Workshop Košice Participant, 2024

**When Tymur Pistriuha joined the NGO Leadership Workshop in 2024, he was already leading one of Ukraine's largest humanitarian mine action organizations under the pressure of full-scale war. Yet even for an experienced military officer and NGO founder, the workshop became a catalyst for new thinking about leadership, organizational culture, and the importance of developing future leaders.**

**Can you introduce yourself and tell us about your organization?**

My name is Tymur Pistriuha. I am a former military officer, reserve lieutenant colonel, and war veteran. In 2018, I founded the Ukrainian Deminers Association (UDA).

Today, UDA is one of the largest humanitarian mine action operators in Ukraine, employing around 200 people. Our work goes far beyond demining itself. We also focus on explosive ordnance risk education, first-aid education, and support for victims of mine-related injuries.

We are, first and foremost, a humanitarian organization operating in an extremely demanding environment.

**What motivated you to join the NGO Leadership Workshop?**

Leadership has interested me for a long time. My first exposure to leadership training came during my military education in Australia.

When I saw the opportunity to join a workshop designed specifically for NGO leaders, I immediately recognized its value. Military leadership and civil society leadership are very different environments. In the military, leadership is often connected to command structures. In civil society, leadership requires a different kind of flexibility, communication, and organizational culture.

I wanted to continue growing as a leader and better understand that difference.

**How did the workshop influence the way you lead your organization today?**

The workshop strengthened something I already believed—that leadership development must be continuous.

After returning from Slovakia, I became much more intentional about developing leadership inside our organization. Today, we actively encourage program managers and senior staff to participate in leadership education and professional growth opportunities.

One of the strongest ideas I took away from the workshop is that strong leaders should create new leaders. Leadership is not about protecting your position (a legacy of post-Soviet hierarchical structures where leadership was traditionally linked to authority and protecting one's position rather than multiplying leadership capacity). However, the more leaders you help develop, the stronger the organization becomes.

The workshop also stood out because it was not limited to theory—it combined practical tools, networking, and honest conversations about organizational challenges.

**The workshop in 2024 was specifically focused on Ukrainian civil society leaders working during wartime. How important was that environment for you?**

It was extremely important.

What made the experience powerful was not only the training itself, but the people in the room. We were surrounded by leaders facing very similar realities—uncertainty, pressure, exhaustion, and the constant need to adapt.

At the same time, everyone came from different sectors and organizations, which made the conversations incredibly valuable. We could exchange experiences and practical approaches while still understanding each other's realities.

The workshop also reminded me how strong and resilient Ukrainian civil society truly is.




**Looking back today, how would you describe the overall value of the NGO Leadership Workshop?**

For me, it represents investment in people.

Not only in technical knowledge, but in human potential, confidence, and organizational resilience.

The workshop reminded me that leadership is something you continue learning throughout your life. It also reinforced my belief that organizations become stronger when they create opportunities for people to learn, reflect, and lead together.

And personally, the workshop became meaningful in another unexpected way as well.

It was actually there, in Košice, that I met my future wife. We were both participants from different organizations, and today we are married and expecting a baby.

So, in many ways, the workshop helped build stronger organizations in Ukraine as well as a new family.

# THE PARTNERSHIP BEHIND THE PROGRAM'S STRENGTH

**The program has been shaped by a collaboration that brings together international excellence, regional knowledge, and a shared commitment to supporting civil society leaders in demanding environments.**

The cooperation between the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia at the University of Michigan and the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan, with Slovakia-based organization Hekima, connects the region's lived realities with ideas, innovation, and expertise from leading global institutions, making the program both internationally informed and deeply grounded in practice.

The NGO Leadership Workshop has remained strong over the years because it has built trust, sustained continuity, and adapted to changing needs. As the context facing civil society has evolved, the program has continued to respond with flexibility and purpose. This long-term relevance would not have been possible without the commitment of partner organizations, expert instructors, and the generosity of the Weiser Family, whose continued support has enabled the program to grow and expand its impact over time.

## WHAT THE YEARS HAVE TAUGHT US

- **Leadership support must go beyond technical training.** Leaders need more than practical tools. They also need confidence, resilience, peer support, and time to think strategically about their organizations and their role.
- **Peer learning is one of the program's greatest strengths.** Participants often learn as much from one another as from formal sessions, gaining new perspectives, ideas, and encouragement from their peers facing similar challenges.
- **Short-term intensive learning can create long-term change.** A few days of focused learning and reflection can lead to lasting changes in leadership practice and organizational development.
- **Civil society leaders need spaces where they are not only expected to give, but also be supported.** Opportunities for honest conversation, reflection, and mutual support are especially valuable in demanding and high-pressure environments.
- **Thematic cohorts can deepen impact.** Bringing together organizations working on similar issues increases relevance, strengthens trust, and creates opportunities for future collaboration.

## LOOKING AHEAD: LEADERSHIP MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

In the years ahead, we aim to strengthen the program's role as a regional platform for civil society leadership. We will invest in our alumni community through mentoring, peer exchange, webinars, and opportunities for continued collaboration across countries and sectors.

We also recognize that the challenges facing civil society are evolving. From democratic resilience and human rights to humanitarian response, transparency, and social cohesion, leaders need support not only to respond to change, but to help shape it. The program will continue to adapt to these realities while strengthening its ability to measure and sustain long-term impact.

Above all, the next chapter will remain focused on people. We believe that when leaders are supported, organizations become stronger, communities become more resilient, and positive change becomes possible.

That belief inspired the program back in 2015, and it continues to guide our vision for the decade ahead.




## GET INVOLVED IN THE NGO LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP!

Your support makes it possible to equip NGO leaders across Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Ukraine—many working under extraordinary pressure—with the tools, networks, and resilience they need to lead effectively through challenging times.

Every contribution helps us reach more leaders, keep the program free for participants, and strengthen a growing community of changemakers. Today, our alumni network includes 392 leaders, connected through a program that has been building leadership, solidarity, and lasting relationships for more than a decade.

Whether you are giving as an individual or on behalf of an organization, your support can help ensure that more leaders have access to this vital community and the resources they need to make a difference. We would welcome a conversation about how you can become part of this effort.

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