

NGO LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP BRATISLAVA

LEADING THROUGH
UNCERTAINTY:
STRATEGY, NEGOTIATION
& RESILIENCE

MAY
26 – 29,
2026

FINAL REPORT

NGO LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP BRATISLAVA

MAY 26 – 29, 2026

In May 2026, 22 civil society leaders from 13 countries across Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans gathered in Bratislava, Slovakia for the 16th NGO Leadership Workshop.

Over an intensive week, participants worked on how to lead effectively in complex, high-pressure environments while strengthening the resilience and sustainability of their organizations. Interactive sessions covered adaptive leadership and change management, strategic negotiation, and stress management and burnout prevention, alongside the real challenges leaders face today, from staff turnover to alternative funding sources and stronger fundraising communication. Beyond the formal sessions, meaningful exchanges continued over shared meals, the opening reception at Restaurant Štefánka and a group outing to Svätý Jur. A highlight of the week was an afternoon with former Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová, who took part in a fireside chat and one-on-one conversations with participants.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

The NGO Leadership Workshops are sponsored by the University of Michigan's Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia (WCEE) and delivered in partnership with the William Davidson Institute (WDI). On-the-ground organization is led by Hekima, a Slovakia-based NGO dedicated to empowering civil society leaders and activists, with a focus on addressing gender-specific challenges through entrepreneurship and education.



WITH SPECIAL THANKS

We are especially grateful to Marysia Ostafin, who helped bring these workshops to life in 2015 and has been a steadfast advocate for the program ever since. This year, her personal gift made it possible for Ukrainian leaders to take part.

ABOUT OUR PARTICIPANTS

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

- **Women's Perspectives Center (Ukraine)**
- **Gender Alliance for Development Centre (Albania)**
- **E-Romnja (Romania)**
- **Women's Information Consultative Center (Ukraine)**
- **D.O.M.48.24 (Ukraine)**
- **JurFem – Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association (Ukraine)**
- **Human Rights Action (Montenegro)**
- **SEMA Ukraine (Ukraine)**
- **La Strada Ukraine – National hotline on prevention of domestic violence, trafficking and gender discrimination (Ukraine)**
- **Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (Montenegro)**
- **Sun Centre (Slovakia)**
- **Feminoteka (Poland)**
- **Center for Protection of Victims and Prevention of Trafficking in Human Beings (Kosovo)**
- **Association of Roma women Osvit (Serbia)**
- **Kosovo Women's Network (Kosovo)**
- **Dignita Foundation (Bulgaria)**
- **The Foundation United Women Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina)**
- **Centre for Civic Education (Montenegro)**
- **PATENT (Hungary)**
- **Institute for Human Rights (North Macedonia)**
- **Ukrainian House/We Are Together (Slovakia/Ukraine)**
- **Forum for Human Rights (Czech Republic)**

CONTENT

DAY
1

SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT: NAVIGATING CHANGE IN NGO MANAGEMENT

INSTRUCTOR: Frank C. Schultz

Stable, predictable operating environments are no longer the reality for many NGOs. This session focused on the skills leaders need to guide their organizations through hostile or politicized conditions that directly affect their ability to deliver services and advocate for their missions. Participants explored a limited but powerful set of seven tools executives can use to drive change, and considered how to apply them in their own contexts. A central theme of the day was that the leadership habits behind past success may not fit new conditions, prompting participants to reassess not only their organizations, but their own leadership approaches.

PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE:

... *"The module exceeded my expectations. I found it very well-structured, practical, and thoughtfully delivered. The combination of strategic thinking, interactive exercises, and opportunities for reflection made the learning process engaging and highly relevant to my professional work."*



DAY
2

STRATEGIC NEGOTIATION: PARTNERSHIPS, FUNDING, AND CONFLICT IN COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS

INSTRUCTOR: Haniyeh Yousofpour

Leading NGOs in complex and often politicized environments requires leaders who can negotiate effectively under pressure. This session focused on strategic negotiation as a core leadership skill for protecting an organization's mission, securing funding, aligning expectations with partners, and managing high-stakes conversations.

Through a highly interactive, simulation-based format, participants explored how to prepare, read power and stakeholder dynamics, and stay purposeful when conversations become tense. They practiced navigating funding negotiations, institutional cooperation, and difficult conversations, and built self-awareness through a conflict-resolution style assessment that showed how their own habits shape negotiation outcomes.

The session emphasized that leaders often develop negotiation routines that have served them well in the past. As environments become more volatile, it encouraged participants to reassess not only what they negotiate for, but how they negotiate and protect their mission while maintaining relationships.

PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE:

... *"It was very engaging, interactive and widened my perspective on negotiation. I am now excited to go and apply what we have learned."*



DAY
3

RESILIENCE UNDER PRESSURE: MANAGING STRESS AND PREVENTING BURNOUT

INSTRUCTOR: Zuzana Šimeková

Today's demanding and constantly changing environment places significant strain on physical and mental wellbeing. This session focused on how ongoing internal and external pressure affects performance, communication, and relationships with others. Participants explored how resilience can help them regain control of their responses when expectations increase and stress begins to affect their ability to act calmly and intentionally.

Participants deepened their understanding of how emotional regulation and resilience shape reactions, communication, and decision-making under pressure. Participants explored common and often overlooked drivers of burnout, including workaholicism and perfectionism, as well as their long-term impact, such as chronic exhaustion, loss of self-worth, reduced effectiveness, and the deterioration of personal and professional relationships.

PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE:

- “Zuzana is a great presenter – engaging and caring for the audience. I will definitely be reflecting on the pillars of sustainable wellbeing and leadership. A bold focus on autonomy and practicing to say “no” as an act of care, not rudeness.”



**DAY
4**

PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING LAB: AN ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP APPROACH

INSTRUCTOR: Frank C. Schultz

This dynamic, instructor-facilitated session adopted an Adaptive Leadership approach to sharing and exploring leadership best practices. The session focused on leadership techniques for navigating times of crisis and uncertainty, supporting participants in reflecting on how leaders can respond to major challenges within their organizations.

Participants shared approaches that had helped them adapt to significant organizational challenges. These ideas were combined with best practices from other NGOs to identify potential new practices that participants could consider applying in their own organizations. Peer-to-peer learning topics included reducing staffing burn-out and turnover, identifying and exploring alternative funding sources, and refining fundraising messaging in new communication channels. In small peer groups, participants shared their experiences with colleagues, discussed provided NGO best practices, and identified new approaches to take back to their organizations.



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:



INSTRUCTORS



Frank C. Schultz

is a Faculty Member and Distinguished Teaching Fellow at the Haas School of Business at the 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 both the Center for Teaching Excellence and the International Business Development program at Berkeley. Previously, he taught in the MBA program at the University of Michigan, where he also earned his MBA. Frank has taught in diverse global contexts including Japan, India, Saudi Arabia, China, Brazil, and across Europe.



Haniyeh Yousofpour

is a Harvard-educated professor and global consultant with a track record of guiding organizations through complex transformation. She specializes in strategic negotiations, organizational change and influential leadership, drawing on decades of experience advising Fortune 500 companies, public institutions, and nonprofits. Beyond her consulting practice, she is an award-winning faculty member recognized for her ability to bridge academic rigor with real-world application. She is the author of the book *Negotiating with Confidence: It's Within You: Ask the Right Questions, Analyze Every Situation, and Adapt Your Strategy to Succeed in Negotiations*.



Zuzana Šimeková

is a Bratislava-based accredited coach, mentor, author, and lawyer. She focuses on personal development, achieving professional goals, strengthening soft skills, and supporting individuals through career transitions, as well as in the search for life vision, values, and effective communication. She lectures at various forums, seminars, and workshops and works with both teams and individual clients. She is the author of the novel *Beautiful People* which addresses issues of mental health and the consequences of a high-pressure work pace, while offering a path toward balance. Her second novel, *People Are Not Trees*, continues to explore themes of life change, finding one's own path, work-life balance, and the fragility of relationships. She was named one of the 12 Inspirational Women of the Year 2022 by Forbes Women Voice.

ZUZANA ČAPUTOVÁ: COURAGE AND HOPE IN PUBLIC LIFE

One of the highlights of this year's NGO Leadership Workshop was a conversation with former President of Slovakia Zuzana Čaputová on a question many civil society leaders face every day: how to remain principled, resilient, and hopeful in times of uncertainty. The conversation was moderated by Geneviève Zubrzycki, Director of the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia at the University of Michigan.

Drawing on her journey from public interest lawyer and environmental activist to the presidency, President Čaputová reflected on the close connection between civil society and public leadership. She spoke about how many of the qualities needed to lead effectively – building trust, listening to people, and persevering through setbacks – are first developed through civic engagement.

Particularly powerful was her reflection on leadership during crises. Having led Slovakia through the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, political instability, and deepening social polarization, President Čaputová spoke openly about the emotional burden of leadership. She challenged the common perception that strong leaders always project certainty, arguing instead that leadership often requires acknowledging uncertainty while still providing direction and reassurance to others.



The discussion also explored a topic rarely addressed in leadership conversations: the personal cost of public service. Participants were especially interested in how leaders can protect their integrity, mental well-being, and sense of purpose while facing hostility, criticism, and relentless public visibility. President Čaputová shared lessons on setting boundaries, remaining anchored in one's values, and distinguishing between criticism that should be heard and hostility that should not be internalized.

Another important theme was the role of women in democracy. Reflecting on her experience as Slovakia's first female president, she discussed the gender-specific challenges women continue to face in public life and why democracies cannot reach their full potential when women's voices remain underrepresented in leadership and decision-making.

The session concluded with a lively exchange between President Čaputová and workshop participants, many of whom are themselves leading organizations under increasingly difficult conditions.

WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

Participants:

- ✓ Strengthened their strategic leadership and left ready to revisit their organization's mission, strategy, and Theory of Change, applying adaptive-leadership thinking and a structured set of tools for leading organizational change in complex and politicized environments.
- ✓ Built practical negotiation skills for donor, partnership, and advocacy conversations, learning to identify their strongest alternative, map stakeholders, and prepare thoroughly for high-stakes discussions.
- ✓ Gained emotional-regulation and resilience techniques, including a structured method for pausing before reacting and setting clearer boundaries, to communicate calmly under pressure and sustain sound decision-making in tense situations.
- ✓ Developed a personalized burnout-prevention toolkit to support sustainable leadership for themselves and their teams.
- ✓ Exchanged best practices through peer-to-peer learning with leaders facing similar challenges across the region, surfacing both shared problems and a shared sense of purpose.
- ✓ Forged new partnerships and joined a growing NGO leadership network to support one another well beyond the workshop.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"Once in a life time experience! I will grow as a person and as a professional with the knowledge and experiences that you have provided us with."

"The opportunity to learn something new is always valuable, and when it happens in a warm, supportive atmosphere, with skilled trainers and meaningful networking, it becomes even more so. This workshop offers a spark for reflection and change: a reminder that having a strong voice is not a privilege, but a skill that can be developed."

"It was a very valuable experience. I learned being a leader on the go, and this workshop provided me with actual tools and helped me become more confident with how I was leading before based off of intuition. Great experts, excellent organisation and a lot of care for the participants. Meeting other leaders and hearing their experience was another incredibly valuable factor."

"I would definitely recommend this workshop. It was a very valuable experience for me. I learned new things, got useful practical tools, and felt inspired. It also helped me see new perspectives for my work and personal development."

"The authenticity of organisers reflects a lot on how the group is developed, and in this training I was absolutely fascinated by the team and representatives of all organisers. I learned not only from the workshop, but also from your communication, support and discussions. And the meeting with the ex-President was the most remarkable experience!"

WHAT THE ORGANIZERS SAID

Our work at the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia is deeply rooted in building connections beyond campus, and the NGO Leadership Workshop plays a vital role in that effort. Alongside the William Davidson Institute and Hekima, we were privileged to bring together civil society leaders from Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, whose dedication to democratic values remains steadfast, even as they face growing pressures in their own communities.

— Douglas Northrop, WCEE Acting Director



I left this workshop deeply inspired by the NGO leaders in the room and the work they do, often under difficult and even dangerous conditions, to defend democracy and counter gender-based violence. Over four days, this group engaged fully with the sessions, and just as importantly, with one another, building the kind of trust that lets people speak candidly about the challenges they face. A highlight was the visit from former President Zuzana Čaputová, who generously spent an afternoon with us, meeting the organizers and sitting down one-on-one with participants. It was a powerful reminder of what principled leadership looks like. It is also deeply meaningful to do this work alongside our partners, the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia and Hekima, whose commitment and partnership make this workshop possible.

— Amy Gillett, WDI Vice President of Education

Civil society organizations are only as strong as the people who lead them. Today, leadership is about much more than managing projects or running an organization. It means helping people navigate uncertainty, building trust, making difficult decisions, and finding the strength to keep going even when progress feels slow. The NGO Leadership Workshop is built on a simple belief: if we want stronger civil society, we need to invest in the people who make it possible. When leaders have the opportunity to reflect, learn, connect with peers, and strengthen their skills, the benefits extend far beyond the individual. Their organizations become more effective, their teams more resilient, and their communities better equipped to face the challenges ahead.

We are deeply grateful to our donors and partners at the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia and the William Davidson Institute, whose long-term commitment to civil society leadership makes this investment possible. At a time when many organizations are facing growing uncertainty, their dedication to supporting those working for democracy, human rights, and positive social change is more important than ever.

— Ivana Uličná, Hekima CEO & Founder



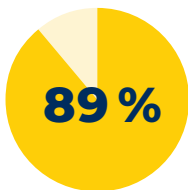
RESULTS



Participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Every participant left the workshop better equipped to lead: 100% reported that the program helped them identify capability gaps in their organization, and 100% said it helped them address those gaps, evidence that the content was not just relevant, but genuinely actionable.



Asked how likely they would be to recommend the workshop on a scale of 1 to 10, every participant rated it a 9 or 10, and nearly three-quarters gave it a perfect 10.



Just as valued was the community itself. 89% of participants said the connections they made during the workshop would support their growth as leaders, a reminder that the network forged in the room is one of the program's most lasting outcomes.

NETWORKING

Participants from the Bratislava workshop are now members of the NGO Leadership Workshop alumni Facebook group, connecting them with a network of over 370 past participants from across the region.

GET INVOLVED IN THE NGO LEADERSHIP WORKSHOPS!



AS A SPONSOR:

Your support directly equips NGO leaders across Central and Eastern Europe and Ukraine, many working under real pressure, with the tools, networks, and resilience to lead through it. Sponsors help us reach more leaders, keep the program free for participants, and sustain an alumni network now 392 leaders strong, built over more than a decade. Whether you give as an individual or on behalf of an organization, we would welcome a conversation about how you can get involved.

Contact **Amy Gillett** at gilletta@umich.edu.



AS A PARTICIPANT:

Each year, the workshop brings together NGO leaders from across Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia for four days of practical learning, peer exchange, and connection, all at no cost to those selected. Participation is by invitation, and we are always glad to hear from leaders interested in joining a future cohort.

Contact **Ivana Ulicna** at ivana.ulicna@hekima.sk.

