

Final Reflective Report

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Part 1: Leadership-in-Action Impact Report

I completed my leadership-in-action experience with the Jerzy Regulski Foundation in Support of Local Democracy in Poland, spending six weeks working on the Foundation's 'Building Bridges – Civic Capital in Local Communities' project. The project, funded by the EU's CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) programme, aims to strengthen the potential of local civic society organisations (CSOs) and to promote European values and rights in Poland. The project has three main components, consisting of 1) training and advisory support for organisations, 2) grant programmes and 3) the National Congress of Local Cooperation.

The project's training and grant programmes aim to support local CSOs – especially in small towns and rural areas – and increase their capacities to carry out beneficial activities in their local communities. The programmes support a variety of small to medium-sized organisations working in the field of democracy, equality, human rights and many others, as well as encouraging activities relating to European values such as those increasing citizen awareness of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

During my LiA, I worked on putting together the official training programme for Polish CSOs, ensuring that the most urgent needs of organisations were addressed, and courses were made accessible to organisations all across Poland. In a survey prior to the introduction of the programme, over 83% of Polish CSOs declared the need for training – most often in the area of fundraising and cooperation with other institutions and entities. The created training programme addresses these needs with over 20 courses to take place between September 2023 and May 2024 with both online and on-site options available across all Polish regions. The training sessions deal with topics ranging from 'How to obtain funds for your organisation's statutory activities?' to 'What do we gain from EU membership?'.

The project's grant programme was designed to address the under-financing of Polish CSOs, a problem made especially urgent by the COVID-19 pandemic and recent legal changes made by the Polish government. The aforementioned survey of Polish CSOs saw 67% of organisations declaring difficulties in obtaining funding or equipment, 26% struggling to conduct paid/economic activities and 15% struggling to cover the cost of rent and utilities. I

was able to participate in the project's dissemination of small grants given to organisations carrying out intervention activities. Two organisations were provided with funding during my time with the Foundation, proposing projects in the areas of consumer rights protection and humanitarian relief on the Polish-Belarussian border. I was later able to participate in an educative workshop with the grant recipients prior to the start of their project activities.

The final component of the 'Building Bridges' project, encapsulating both training and grant needs of Polish CSOs was the National Congress of Cooperation. The Congress brought together over 250 Polish CSO and local government representatives for two-days of workshops, panels and networking events in Warsaw. The Congress was an opportunity for participants to learn more about available grant programmes, participate in workshop sessions relevant to their activities and learn about the possibilities and importance of effective collaboration with one another.

By far the greatest amount of my LiA was dedicated to the organising of this event. I worked on all aspects of the event's logistics, including putting together the event programme, inviting speakers, overseeing the registration of participants, social media promotion, sourcing Congress materials and creating English translations of key documents. Perhaps the greatest achievement of my leadership placement was the creation of an informative booklet on the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which was disseminated to organisations at the Congress and continues to be used as the basis for educative social media posts by the Foundation. I additionally had the opportunity to participate in a week-long socio-political event bringing together young people from all across Poland, where I was able to promote the Congress as well as myself attending workshops relevant to the project's educative aims.

I was delighted to have also had the chance to return to Warsaw and attend the Congress in September. I found it immensely gratifying to see the event come together as well as to have the opportunity to meet the diverse group of speakers and participants in attendance. During the first day of the Congress, aside from some organisational tasks early in the day, I was able to fully engage in the speaker and workshop activities. I learned a lot about the situation of civic society organisations in Poland, the role of local governments in supporting civic society activities and strategies for overcoming challenges through cooperation on a local level. I was also especially encouraged by the great level of engagement seen from our many participants.

During the second day of the Congress, I worked primarily as an interpreter for the EU Commission official responsible for the 'Building Bridges' project, both ensuring she was able

to communicate with the participants and guiding her through panels and workshops. While interpreting proved a particularly exhausting task, I very much valued the experience and learned a great deal about the EU's perspective regarding the funding civic projects during the process. As someone highly interested in pursuing a career within EU institutions in the future, I found this particularly insightful and was inspired by the tangible link between EU bureaucracy and the ability to make an impact on the local level.

Ultimately, the Congress doubtless proved a success as an educative forum, encouraging new partnerships, developing new skills and creating a tangible dialogue between civic society organisations and local governments in Poland. It was further successful in encouraging applications for grants and training sessions carried out by the 'Building Bridges' project and has already been renewed to take place in both 2024 and 2025.

An additional element of my LiA experience was the valuable opportunity to get to know some of the other projects being undertaken by the Foundation. While not directly involved in them, I got to oversee a number of inspiring projects being worked on by my colleagues, including the 'Active Citizens Programme', supporting civic society in Poland through international cooperation and the 'Decentralisation Offering Better Results and Efficiency' project, supporting the development of local government institutions in Ukraine. I was very grateful for just how integrated I was in the work of the Foundation and how much was able to learn about its valuable activities in Poland and beyond.

Part 2: Leadership Attributes and Personal Development

I came into the Laidlaw programme at a time when I was experiencing series of personal and academic setbacks. While in many ways feeling like a leader and certainly believing in my leadership potential, I found myself doing many things which I thought I was supposed to do, but that ultimately did not make me feel fulfilled or increase my confidence. The Laidlaw programme was a huge turning point in that pattern. From the beginning of the application process, I knew that the programme was what I wanted to be involved in and that it was something I was perfectly suited for. As such, my leadership journey over the last 18-months has in many ways been quite simple – and looking back, that simplicity of knowing what I want to do and who I want to become is exactly what I needed to develop into a better version of myself.

To start with, the leadership sessions played an important role in increasing my self-awareness and confidence, bringing my attention to a) what my strengths are and b) how to play to these strengths in my academic and personal life. Some activities which especially stood out to me include the ‘resilience and self-care in leadership’ workshop, which taught me about my personal leadership style and how I can most effectively manage setbacks and the ‘exploring trust’ workshop, which I have found extremely useful for communication when working in teams. I was also encouraged by the public speaking workshop, with public speaking being a skill I had been less exposed to during my university experience. My enjoyment of the workshop and ability to speak confidently at the front of the room has had an effect on my willingness to engage in such activities since.

I also benefited a lot from the leadership components relating to networking, a set of skills which I had not been exposed to previously. It is amazing to think that creating a LinkedIn profile was one of my Summer 1 goals, given how many opportunities I have genuinely been exposed to on the platform since then. The networking workshops were also particularly useful during the Laidlaw Scholars Conference at the LSE, where I was able to connect with a range of inspiring people who I continue to be in touch with. I additionally have found it incredibly inspiring to keep up with Laidlaw alumni and the many things they have been able to achieve. This is something which has certainly made me feel much more optimistic about my capabilities and what is possible for my future.

As would be expected, however, some of the most valuable lessons I take from the programme, came from my greatest setbacks. While I definitely found many aspects of my research project to be more enjoyable than I had previously envisioned, I struggled quite a bit at first when it came to receiving feedback. Completing the project made me recognise that negative feedback is just an inevitable part of such an endeavour and does not actually reflect negatively on my abilities as a person. This lesson has already been invaluable to me in starting my final-year dissertation and is something I will definitely take with me into my postgraduate studies and my career.

I also struggled quite significantly during the process of finding an organisation to complete my LiA with. Looking back, this was a very important experience for me because I do tend towards fearing rejection or being told no in any capacity. After what felt like thousands of LiA rejections, this fear did disappear significantly and the fact that I was able to secure a fantastic leadership placement despite these struggles will be something I remember the next time I face

such a challenge. The experience was also a lesson in patience – I tend to be a bit controlling and struggle with not knowing exactly what my future plans are. As it turns out, there are a lot of organisations which were ultimately willing to offer me a placement but got back to me much later than I would have wanted. Adjusting my expectations with regards to having a solidified future plan will be hugely beneficial for me going forward.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity the programme gave me to truly delve into my interests, as both the undertaking of my research project and my work in Poland would have been impossible for me to replicate without the generous funding of the scholarship. These experiences have made me increasingly self-aware about the kind of activities I would like to be involved in throughout my career and significantly widened my perspectives. My research project in particular reignited my passion for democratic promotion, while my LiA brought my attention to the importance of institutions and policies in bringing about democratic outcomes. There is now no doubt in my mind I want to pursue a career in policymaking and public governance, a specialisation I would be much less certain of without the programme. My confidence in my ability to break into this career path would also doubtless be much lower.

Overall, my experience with this programme has been nothing short of transformative. I am leaving the experience extremely grateful, with a significant range of new skills and a much greater sense of the kind of leader I want to be in my life. The people I have met during this programme are nothing short of inspiring, and I hope to be able to call some of them my life-long friends. I have gained a truly amazing mentor during my research experience and met so many people during my LiA who made me feel seen and appreciated. Ultimately, I feel extremely confident in who I am, have a much clearer idea of what my real interests are, and I feel ready and motivated for the next step!