



The first trip for school pupils to Berlin and Brussels

On 1st May 2016, European Exchange and the Open Dialog Foundation launched the project 'Support for young people as a stimulus for the strengthening of democracy in Ukraine'. The project has, as its goal, motivation of the Ukrainian youth to develop a keen interest in political processes and activities and to become engaged in civil societal matters in Ukraine through the promotion of democratic values and the sharing of knowledge as regards politics, the legal nature of the state and society.

The organisers planned two study tours for school pupils and one for students in Brussels and Berlin. The choice of institutions and organisations will help to maximise awareness and understanding of modern European democracy. Lessons learnt in Europe will be built upon in Ukraine through a study week for students in Kyiv and 10 workshops for universities and schools. Finally, there are two conferences planned: one in Berlin and one in Brussels.

From 30th May till 3rd June 2016, the first of the two planned study tours for school children took place in Germany and Belgium. The first group of students came from the Ivanofrankivsk region: 4 girls from a specialist German language school in Ivanofrankivsk and 11 boys and girls from several other schools in the region.

Firstly, there was a meeting at the Goethe-Institut chapter in Brussels, with Mrs Angelika Schenk, Communications Manager. The Goethe-Institut sets internationally recognised standards in the teaching and learning of German as a foreign language. It runs language courses, compiles teaching materials, trains teachers, contributes to scientific research and participates in politicolanguage initiatives. The children learned about the importance of German language and culture in the modern Europe. They were interested in how often people chose to study German as a foreign language. Mrs Angelika Schenk explained how the German language was becoming increasingly important. It is currently studied by 22m people globally. The students asked about the different certificates and scholarships needed to study the German language abroad and the conditions of study.

More information about Goethe-Institut Belgien can be found at:
https://www.goethe.de/ins/be/de/index.html?wt_sc=belgien (in German).

On the same day, we met Daria Bezugla and Yana Brovdiy, the leaders of UAct. UAct is a Brussels-based apolitical NGO with the ambition of bringing together representatives from civil society, businesses, local authorities and grassroots initiatives across Europe in order to empower local stakeholders and support actions in the fields of education, culture, human rights and community building in Ukraine. In a friendly atmosphere, the children asked about how they could change the state themselves and about the best way to combat corruption. Other interesting questions included: "How would you like Ukraine to be in the future?" and "What can WE do to achieve that?". Both Daria and Yana emphasised that one must start from within, by changing one's own daily habits. There are also new laws that can be used by citizens to demand greater transparency and responsibility of the authorities. Interlocutors emphasised the importance of choosing wisely in elections and of critical thinking. People should verify all that they read or hear in the media.

More about UAct and the meeting you can find at:
<https://www.facebook.com/uactngo/photos/a.423024231201311.1073741828.413942365442831/447451575425243/?type=3&theater>.

Next came a meeting with Olena Prystayko, the Executive Director of the Ukrainian Think Tanks Liaison Office in Brussels. The Ukrainian Think Tanks Liaison Office in Brussels was established in March 2014. It is an association of Ukrainian think tanks with a unique focus on joint action at EU level to advance reforms within Ukraine and the European integration of Ukraine. The Mission of the organisation is achieved through advocacy, communication and partnership building with EU member states and EU institutions. Children asked, among others, about how the perception of Ukraine had changed over the last 2 years. Mrs Prystayko explained that the states of Central and Eastern Europe understand Ukraine especially well as they have already been through similar processes of regaining statehood and freeing themselves from Soviet influences. Representatives of the Ukrainian Think Tanks Liaison Office confirmed that thanks to advocacy efforts, EU officials are showing increased support for increasing the independence of the Ukrainian energy sector and for economic reforms.

To read more about the meeting, please follow this link:

<https://ukraine-office.eu/ukrainian-students-visit-ukrainian-think-tanks-liaison-office-in-brussels/>.

The group visited the headquarters of the European Endowment for Democracy. The European Endowment for Democracy (EED) is a grant-giving organisation that supports local actors for democratic change in the European Neighbourhood and beyond. Students learned about projects aimed at supporting Ukraine and the history of the EED. The institution was created to speed up the process of democratisation through more efficient and faster allocation of funds for civic organisations in developing countries within the European Neighborhood Policy. The EED aims to grant funds for projects which have no chance of securing funding from other sources and aims to issue decisions on funding within 14 days. The biggest beneficiary of the EED is Ukraine which receives funding for 49 projects including Automaidan, Nova Kraina, Svidomo, and Hromadske TV. Children asked how they can make Ukraine more democratic. Representatives of EED answered that the first task in this regard is to treat corruption as the root of all evil in the state.

For more information about the EED visit: <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/about-eed/>.

Afterwards, children were hosted by the office of the Ukraine Support Group of the European Commission. The Support Group for Ukraine was established by the decision of the President of the European Commission in April 2014. Its role is to support Ukraine in the implementation of the Association Agreement with the EU (including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area), and the Association Agenda which stems from it.

Nadia Vertebna, an expert of the group, spoke about the history of the USG and gave details about the Youth Program. It was an opportunity to learn about the numerous opportunities for students to travel abroad and volunteer opportunities for young Ukrainians, in particular with respect to Erasmus and the European Volunteer Service. Children asked a lot of questions about formal requirements and other technical specifics of the projects, expressing great interest in joining them in the future.

Read more about USG at:

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/ukraine/sgua/index_en.htm.



In front of the European Parliament.

On the afternoon of the same day, the group visited the European Parliament where MEP Rebecca Harms and her assistant relayed details about their daily work and decision making processes in Brussels. Mrs Harms relayed a story about how she became interested in Ukraine and about the many places she had visited so far as well as the projects she had participated in. The children asked many questions about visa liberalisation, the possibility of joining the EU in future, and how to fight corruption in Ukraine and whether there remains a possibility to end the war and to regain the occupied territories. Mrs Harms expressed the opinion that however imperfect, facing the fact that Russia is a nuclear power, the Minsk negotiations constitute the only means of solving the problem of Russian aggression in Ukraine. In Mrs Harms' opinion, Ukraine should focus on structural reforms of the state to become more independent and better-equipped to face future challenges. In her opinion, changes can only be implemented if civic society groups work collectively, as only groups are capable of creating sufficient pressure to bring about lasting changes.

Find out more about MEP Rebecca Harms at:

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/28233/REBECCA_HARMS_home.html.

On the morning of 1st June, there was a brief meeting with MEP Anna Fotyga, the head of the Committee for Common Security and Defense Policy and a policy advisor from Poland, Wojciech Danecki. Students asked, amongst other things, about the prospect of Great Britain leaving the EU and whether the EU could disintegrate. Mr Danecki emphasised that increased equality in terms of decision making processes is needed for the EU to survive and that he personally hopes that if Great Britain does leave the EU, this should be seen as a sign that the challenges ahead for Europe need to be resolved more rapidly.

The second part of the tour took place in Berlin.

The group met with Mr Christopher Fuchs of the Ukraine Task Force of the Federal Foreign Office. The Ukraine Task Force was established within the Eastern Policy Department of the Federal Foreign Office after the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea to enhance bilateral policy efforts in support of Ukraine. The most interesting questions posed concerned the priorities for Ukrainian reforms: Where should they start? What should be the first step? Mr Fuchs responded by saying that the establishment of independent media and reforms of the justice sector are the top priority as the media influence what people think and the courts are able to slow down the process of reform. Other interesting questions

concerned the war in Donbas, possible means of ending it and what measures Germany is taking to help Ukraine. Mr Fuchs explained that the top priority for German diplomats is to secure energy independence for Ukraine in order to help it become resistant to further Russian aggression. In his opinion, the sooner Ukraine implements important reforms, the more efficiently it will be able to defend itself.

More about the activities of the Federal Foreign Office can be found at: http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Startseite_node.html.

Later, there was a meeting with representative of the Eastern Department of the Federal Chancellory, Gabriel Deutscher. The children had the chance to learn about the day-to-day tasks undertaken by Chancellor Angela Merkel in support of Ukraine and other aspects of German diplomacy. Since the beginning of the year, there have been 35 bilateral meetings and phone conversations between Foreign Minister of Ukraine Pavlo Klimkin and Chancellor Angela Merkel. The Minsk Agreements helped reduce levels of violence in the east of Ukraine and diplomatic negotiations are the only realistic solution for the conflict.

Visit the website of the Federal Chancellor of Germany:

https://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/Webs/BKin/EN/Homepage/homepage_node.html.

We also met with Julia Eichhofer, the Project Coordinator of ChildFund, who gave an interesting presentation about her work. ChildFund has been operating for over 30 years and cooperates with more than 50,000 sponsors and donors from over 40 countries to deliver aid to needy children around the globe. Currently, the organisation helps more than 80,000 children and their families. Children asked how they can join the network and expressed great interest in supporting projects of ChildFund in future.

More information about the organisation can be found at:

<https://www.facebook.com/ChildFundDeutschland/>.

In the Bundestag, the group met with MP Arnold Vaatz, a former political prisoner and Eastern German dissident, known for his continuous support for the states which have regained independence from Russian domination. Mr Vaatz spoke of the danger of recreating the cult of Stalin in Russia. He was asked about the Ukraine's prospects of joining the EU. He answered that, although no date has been discussed yet, the implementation of comprehensive reforms will not only help to achieve this but will also help to minimise the threat of Russian aggression inside Ukraine.

To stay up-to-date with the work of Arnold Vaatz, visit his website at: <http://www.arnold-vaatz-mdb.de>.

Michael Heidrich, Personal Assistant to Arnold Vaatz guided the group around different parts of the Bundestag where all were able to see how Germany preserves memories of the past and builds heritage to rely upon in future.

Finally, we were given a very detailed presentation about the MitOst Project by Olga Kotska. MitOst promotes cultural exchange and active citizenship in Europe and its neighbouring regions. With 1,400 members in 40 different countries and, along with its various partners, the organisation forms part of a dynamic European network. It organises international programmes and projects and serves as a platform for new forms of social engagement. Each project requires cultural exchange and helps promote active citizenship. The annual International MitOst Festival brings the MitOst network together. In 2016, the festival will be held in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia.

Follow the latest news from MitOst at: <http://www.mitost.org/en/cultural-exchange.html>.



MP Arnold Vaatz with the group from Ivanofrankivsk, 4th June 2016.

Apart from formal meetings, there was also plenty of opportunity for sightseeing. The students were given a guided tour around the Grand Place in Brussels as a wonderful tour of the Bundestag.



In front of the Bundestag

Below are the most striking quotes from the opinions on the trip:

“...Do you know what dreams are? Do you know how it feels when they come true? The seventh piece of heaven opens in you which had previously only ever been a thought; which you were presented with only one opinion about how it should be cherished. This piece of heaven was the project 'Support for young people as a stimulus for the strengthening of democracy in Ukraine'. We all flew to Brussels and Berlin with dreams in our minds, hope in our eyes, full of desire to meet new friends, get more information about social activities through the enrichment of our knowledge of politics, law, and civil society and the coordinators and organisers made these dreams and hopes a reality. As if by magic, within a moment we

became a team which acts as a strong mechanism and helps each member at every moment... ” - **Myhaylo from Ivanofrankivsk region.**

“Visiting the European Parliament, European Commission, Bundestag, Federal Foreign Office, Federal Chancellery, representatives of the NGO and other organisations is a stimulus for self-improvement and triggers a desire to study social sciences and foreign languages”. - **Maria Klimyn from Ivanofrankivsk.**

“I cannot put into words all these impressions we formed during the 5 days. The trip was very intensive, exciting and informative. The route the trip took gave us a chance to see states that are second to none; culturally rich and very diverse .Every country and every city will be remembered differently. The tour allowed us to recall history and to immerse ourselves in beautiful historic architecture. The brightest memories we have are perhaps from the days when we visited the European Parliament and the Bundestag; the discussions with politicians and public figures, which remain in our hearts to this day, have created opportunities for our self-development. So, everything was great. Once again, I wish to thank Lydia Hutnyk the project coordinator for the effort she exerted in organising this trip. I hope that everyone who took part in this trip will strive to build Europe in Ukraine...” - **Andriy Kudreychuk from Ivanofrankivsk**

The next trip will take place between 4-8th July 2016.

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Project ‘Support for young people as a stimulus for the strengthening of democracy in Ukraine’:

<https://www.facebook.com/jugendprojektKDODF/>

Open Dialog Foundation: <https://www.facebook.com/ODFUKR/>

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