



STUDY TOURS TO VISEGRAD 4 COUNTRIES AND BRUSSELS

Short overview

By Daria Gaidai, New Europe Center

In Ukraine, there is a growing demand for high-quality journalism in covering international affairs, especially EU-related issues. Before 2014, only few Ukrainian media outlets had the foreign policy correspondents, and regularly published some articles on Ukraine's foreign policy, but almost none on European integration. The situation has changed dramatically in the last few years, and now we observe the public and media interest to the EU, Ukraine's relations with Brussels, and internal European issues. Taking this into account, the project "Communicating Europe: Making the EU Understandable", initiated by the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy, provided much needed training to young Ukrainian journalists, and thus supported the Ukrainian media in communicating the EU and European integration.

The participants of the training program were young Ukrainian journalists who are writing for the leading Ukrainian media outlets (Segodnya, Liga, Radio Svoboda, Ukrainian Week and others), and their primary focus is the European Union and its relations with Ukraine. The training program helped to deepen their understanding of issues and procedures within the EU, the matter of their daily work, as well as revealed the problems and challenges that the EU and member states are facing today.

The study tours to Visegrad four capitals and Brussels gave them a unique opportunity not only to dig into internal political and social developments of the EU (for almost all of them it was their first visit to those countries), but also to establish direct contacts with their European colleagues, EU experts, officials, and politicians. Such networking is extremely valuable, since it guarantees sustainability and long-term effect of the project. The journalists will be better prepared to cover EU-related issues or domestic affairs in EU member states, having a bunch of contacts inside the EU.

The visit to Visegrad countries coincided with a number of important events, which had a direct impact on Ukraine's relations with these countries and probably with the EU as a whole. So, the group was engaged in lively debates about internal situation of V4 countries, their relations with the EU and Ukraine, and even future of Europe. There were always lot of questions to the speakers, follow-up comments, besides the participants were happy to share their own views on the issues. All those fruitful meetings resulted in a number of articles and interviews, of course, unless a meeting was conducted off the records.

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The visit to Czech Republic took place right before the important parliamentary elections in this country. So, it was a unique opportunity for Ukrainian journalists to get a first-hand information about political contestants, their stance in relation to the EU, Russia and Ukraine, as well as to discuss the problem of Euroscepticism and nationalism. The group was particularly interested in the reasons for the decline in support of European integration inside the Czech society. In this respect, the discussion with prominent Czech journalist Ondřej Soukup (*Hospodářské noviny*) was particularly useful and informative. His deep engagement with Ukraine and knowledge of media landscape made the discussion very profound.

Then the participants learned the practical tips on how to cover EU affairs from experienced journalist Kateřina Šafaříková (*Respekt*). During the meeting with Jana Mydlilová, who works at the Prague local council, the journalists learned about the distribution and use of EU funds on local level, unknown topic for Ukraine. After the visit, journalist Oleksand Kostryba continued working on this topic and soon [published an article explaining](#) the mechanism of distribution of EU funds.

Russian influence and interference were among the main discussion topics through the entire visit, since it directly effects European integration of Ukraine, its relations with neighbors, and internal stability of the country. The first meetings on this subject was a very practical discussion with Radka Pudilová (*OSF*) about the narratives and tools of Russian propaganda in the Czech media. The participants were particularly interested in the mechanisms, used by Russia to influence public mood and political elites in the country. After the visit, Yevgeniya Tyukhtenko (*Radio Svoboda*) published a series of articles about Russian propaganda in Visegrad 4 countries.

Slovakia might be considered as least known country in Visegrad four for the Ukrainian journalists. Despite Ukraine and Slovakia share the border, the links between two states are particularly weak and there is obvious lack of information. In a way, the visit helped the participants to discover Slovakia, learn about its internal development, mutual interests and challenges with Ukraine.

In Bratislava, the group met with Miroslav Wlachovský, Head of the EU Communication Strategy Unit at Slovakia Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The discussion was off the records, so Mr. Wlachovský was able to speak freely and give straightforward answers to some hard questions. Aneta Világi from the department of Political Science of the Comenius University gave a comprehensive presentation on EU perceptions in Slovakia, and Samuel Goda, research fellow at the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, explained the participants the internal EU debates on European security. The expert discussions were followed by the visits to the prominent Slovakia media outlets, such as TASR (Slovak Press Agency), RTVS (public TV & radio), and SME. Tomáš Prokopčák, Deputy Editor in Chief of the SME, urged Ukrainian

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journalists to investigate the topics which connect Ukraine and Slovakia. Such stories might be published by SME.

In Poland, most discussions were focused around the current state of Ukrainian-Polish relations, and its impact on Ukraine's European integration. High-profile speakers provided the journalists with valuable insight into Polish politics, defining the factors that influence Warsaw policy toward the EU and Ukraine.

The key event of Warsaw visit was the dinner discussion with former President of Poland Bronisław Komorowski. The discussion was very frank and profound, addressing the major issues in bilateral Ukrainian-Polish dialogue, Polish-EU relations and current challenges in the region. In result, there were 5 articles just on the points made by former President. However, the real value of this meeting was that it gave the participants better understanding of European affairs, deepening their understanding of the EU, and Ukraine's stance. The Warsaw program also included the meetings with Paweł Kowal, former MEP and Deputy Foreign Minister of Poland, Polish think tank experts and journalists working on Ukraine and CEE. These meetings were particularly useful in terms of networking, thus creating a ground for future cooperation. In Hungary, Ukrainian journalists learned about current political, social and economic situation of the country. However, the main issue of all discussions was recently adopted Ukrainian law on education, viewed by Hungary as discriminatory in relation to Hungarian ethnic minority in Ukraine. After a series of meetings, the journalist were able to report better on the issue, understanding the context and position of Hungary.

The key event of Budapest visit was the discussion with Zoltán Kovács, Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Relations of the Ministry of Administration and Justice and Spokesperson of the Hungarian Government. The journalists had a chance to ask directly all hot questions and get a firsthand information about Hungarian position on a number of issues. The discussions with Hungarian politicians (in particular, Zsuzsanna Szelényi) and experts were very frank and informative. Among all meetings, the dinner discussion with former Foreign Minister and European Commissioner László Kovács and professor András Inotai deserves a special mention as it provided a valuable insight into Hungarian-EU relations. It should be noted the weak links between experts and journalist-communities of Ukraine and Hungary; so the visit was a significant step for bridging this gap.

In Brussels, the group visited all main EU institutions, having chance to look at their daily work and communication with the media. The visit took place right after the Eastern Partnership summit – an important event in Ukraine-EU dialogue. Thus, the participants were able to make a follow-up of the Summit, in particular to verify the stories circulated in Ukrainian media. However, the major result of Brussels visit was a better understanding how EU institutions work, the differences between them, and how policies are developed. This

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knowledge will help the participants to cover Ukraine-EU relations in a more comprehensive, grounded and unbiased way.

In Brussels, the journalists met with Maja Kocijancic, spokesperson at EEAS at Cabinet of Federica Mogherini, member of the Cabinet of Johannes Hahn, European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, and members of the European Parliament Tamás Meszeries (Greens/EFA) and Dita Charanzova (ALDE). From experienced journalists they learned about journalists' daily work in Brussels and challenges in covering EU issues. The visit to the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) resulted in broadening their knowledge about the current social and youth movements in the EU as well as provided an insight into daily work of Brussels think tanks. The off-records meeting with Jakub Kalensky on the effects and the fight against Russian propaganda deserves a special mention. This meeting summed up the previous discussions on Russian influence in Visegrad four countries and provided a pan-European perspective on the issue.

The participants found the program to be extremely informative and interesting, covering wide range of issues from current problems in bilateral relations to strategic visions of the future of the European Union. Also, the study tours contributed a lot to strengthening the links between Visegrad 4 countries, EU institutions and Ukraine.

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