Boot Camp Political Activism

a toolkit for young political activists July to October 2021



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PREFACE

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the issues youth activists have been facing in the political environment for decades. When organisations like ours needed to shift their work into the online sphere at the beginning of 2020, structural issues of youth participation in politics surfaced that we felt needed to be addressed.

Throughout the pandemic, we and our partners were observing that an online learning environment cannot accommodate all the dimensions of political youth work. While we were able to discuss topics, such as shrinking civic spaces or climate change, online and formulated policy briefs through the means of remote learning, we lacked the approaches and tools to further the hands-on skills of our activists, ranging from political communication and rhetoric to one of our core identities as IFLRY: political education through non-formal education.

Apart from that, we observed that youth leadership has taken a backseat role during the pandemic. While there was a certain momentum for this topic in regard to climate change and the rise of individuals like Greta Thunberg, the COVID-19 crisis has reinforced traditional decision-making structures. This intuition is supported by empirical research that shows that positions of power (in politics, business, and academia) do not only tend to be occupied by older people; but that these "older people" are even getting older on average. In other words, young people have a harder time to get in positions of power than ever before. From our experience in youth work, we see that the sheer lack of relevant skills is a major contributing factor to this development.

This environment encouraged us to conduct a four-fold work plan event series together with the Council of Europe, the European Youth Foundation and the Centre Party International Foundation, addressing skills we felt are lacking in political youth work. Events in Istanbul (civic activism), Berlin (political communication), Lisbon (political education) and Lviv (local leadership) tackled these issues in boot camp-styled events, ultimately resulting in the creation of this toolkit. It is supposed to serve as a framework for political youth, seeking guidance for their careers as political or civic activists. We also hope that this toolkit is nudging the important discussion of how to include youth in political decision-making, encouraging them to act and to make their voices heard.

For freedom on the behalf of the International Federation of Liberal Youth

Michel Nentwig Secretary-General

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ABOUT IFLRY

The International Federation of Liberal Youth (IFLRY) is the global umbrella for liberal youth organizations. IFLRY's aim is to promote liberalism and globalize freedom. With over 80 member organizations from North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, IFLRY comprises more than 2 million young liberal activists.

CHAPTER 1

Civic Activism: Take Ideas to the Streets

BACKGROUND

Quite naturally, resulting from the diverse IFLRY's backgrounds of member organizations and individual participants, we are working with a broad range of activists. Their personal backgrounds, the societies they have been growing up in and the overall political environment determines their approach to politics and activism. Especially in countries with more established democratic systems, we often lack the perspective of actual civic activism - simply because it is not on our members' every-day agenda to fight for their basic human rights.

In general, we perceive IFLRY as a platform on which everybody can learn from each other - civic activists from young politicians and vice versa. Thus, this seminar conducted in Istanbul was targeted at the different skills which are significant for successful civic activism. For us, these are, for example, social movement coordination, mass communication. issue-based communication. issue branding and political action. As such, this chapter of the toolkit is supposed to serve as a starter package for everybody who wants to become active in civic activism: either as the start to their political career or as a means to achieve political change in their home countries. At the same time, we would like to reflect on the challenges, vulnerabilities, and opportunities of being a youth leader with experience in activism;

sharing and engaging with their development process and vitas.

CONTENT

In IFLRY's special case, we are primarily focusing on how to transfer experiences from other contexts (i.e. the international work or work on different political levels) to local reality.

A core strength of international political networks lies in the exchange amongst individuals. like-minded As little as experiences from different political contexts applied can simply be to other circumstances, we believe in the power of inter-personal connection and collaboration. For IFLRY, political education through Non-Formal Education (NFE) builds the foundation for this kind of activism (more on that in Chapter 3). NFE, in contrast to formal or informal learning, "refers to planned, structured programs and processes of personal and social education for young people designed to improve a range of skills and competencies".¹ The COVID crisis, on the one hand, has made us struggle to go forward with the events as planned in 2020, but on the other hand also opened up different tools and opportunities to teach civic activism. We are convinced that in-person meetings are still the most powerful means to attract and inspire a new generation of political activists. Hybrid methods of working, however, can be a useful addition to prepare content beforehand and to be in more constant exchange.

In the past, the follow-ups to our seminars have lacked consistency, often leading to

¹ Source:

https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation/definitions, April 2022

wasted opportunities and less stable connections amongst our participants. With these new working methods, we would like to establish a continuous feedback process to analyze these weaknesses and guickly react to them. By doing so and by identifying and documenting these successful patterns, we are aiming at paving the way for easier community building and the merger with important allies. Civic activism incrementally gains strength through a broad and sustainable network, in- and outside your own sphere of influence.

We are convinced that there are two essential pillars to successful, liberal civic activism: learning how to connect with one's community (learning from the international context) and how to implement liberal values into civic activism.

In general, the channels to reach out to a potential audience are manifold. Especially Social Media opens up a wide field of opportunities that are often powerful and cost-efficient. This includes, but it is not limited to, the contact with influencers, paid ads, virtual events and the more informal use of meme pages. Besides that, depending on the target group, there should also be a focus on traditional media coverage. The past has shown, in the case of the *#metoo* movement for example, that short and simple messages can spread rapidly through media, guickly attracting broad attention to one's cause. These messages do not have to be primarily political in order to increase the audience. The #metoo debate created a forum of exchange for like-minded individuals from all different backgrounds, then paving the way for actual societal change. Although

² The Overton Window describes all policies which are accepted in open discourse by society. It ranges from "popular" to

not uncontroversial, the usage of Social Media was certainly also playing a role in the uprisings which later led to the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East. What makes these movements very powerful, however, are the personal connections amongst individuals, eventually leading to social phenomena such as mass movements or protests. We believe that regular team building activities, socializing events, a mix of fun and serious events and a strong visual identity are the winning formula for successful civic activism. Self-evidently, the sustainability of these movements is key to their success. Many social movements have failed in the past because of poor infrastructure and a top-down, undemocratic management of their daily operations. Meanwhile, small barriers to engagement can increase overall commitment and further increases the probability of success. In summary, an overall clear message, open fora for participation and an inclusive environment (both on a personal level and regarding political topics) determines political success.

In this process, we also see a challenge for the adherence to a specified set of values. Regardless of the movement's main cause, it is in the interest of liberals to shift the Overton Window² in their favor. As a force in the political center, liberals should educate society about the agenda-setting power of far-right and -left groups and thus try to put radical but well thought-through ideas on the political agenda. This way, it is to skew the Overton Window in possible the liberals' favor. At the same time, it is important to educate voters by explaining the consequences of radical policies which mostly seem "easy" at the beginning but

[&]quot;unthinkable" and thus classifies the implementability of political ideas (more on <u>https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow</u>), April 2022

turn out to be harmful to an open society at the end. Storytelling is an important skill in this regard, giving the opportunity to make discussed policies more relatable. The climate and COVID crises have shown that the exchange with scientists is both important and challenging at the same time. In democracies, the ideas which are scientifically backed are not necessarily those who get a majority the easiest. Thus, a platform of scientists, public figures and members of the civil society can help promote liberal ideas. All of this adds to a better approachability as а political organization before communicating policyheavy resolutions.

DOs & DON'Ts

DOs

- ∀ All vanity aside: merger or cooperation with important alliance
- ∀ Use of NFE to attract and train interested individuals
- ∀ Diverse and intelligent usage of online, hybrid and offline events
- ∀ Establishing feedback cycles to monitor the movement's progress
- ∀ Identifying successful patterns for recreation
- ∀ Make use of the strength of Social Media: powerful campaigns
- ∀ Small barriers for interactions and democratic infrastructure
- ∀ Educate society about the power of democracy
- ✓ Regular check on underlying values and realignment if necessary

DONTs

- ∀ Overestimating the efficacy of online events
- ∀ Reliance on "old" leaders without building up next generation
- ∀ No follow-up of events or monitoring of events' efficiency
- ∀ Being "too political" and therefore being less approachable

SUMMARY

The motivation of individuals to become active in civic activism are manifold: as a protest against authoritarian regimes, to raise awareness for social evils or to nudge political change.

Regardless of the original reason, however, most of these movements follow the same rules. This chapter of the toolkit presents a framework which civic activists can use to transform their initial endeavor of activism into an impactful group of individuals which eventually will be able to obtain change. The DOs & DON'Ts in this section are a summary of best practices we have collected over the past years, quite obviously requiring an adjustment to each individual cause.

In general, we believe that civic activism builds the backbone of political action, regularly reshaping political and societal practices. The most successful activities of civic action IFLRY conducted were those where we managed to unite like-minded activists and create a platform of collaboration and exchange. Above all, this should be the guiding principle for future civic activism.

Political Leadership: Empathy, Branding, Twitter

BACKGROUND

Political leadership itself has become an increasingly important topic for IFLRY's member organization as well as in society more generally. The COVID-19 crisis and the response by public officials have brought the features of leadership to the table again. While political leaders such as Angela Merkel have tried to use scientific reasoning and public justification to communicate lockdown and social distancing measures to their populations; other leaders (who remain unnamed) have retracted to hard top-down measures that led to massive distrust and public disengagement. In the Berlin seminar, we therefore reflected on the features and characteristics of a youth vision of political leadership and make one of the most important contributions in the current leadership discourse on and the responsibility of leaders.

As important skills in the field of political communication, we were focusing on practical skills such as public speaking, branding, storytelling, issue spin and the like in a "BootCamp Setting"; as well as being able to exchange knowledge and experiences with other youth leaders.

CONTENT

In the seminar, we identified that the term leadership should not be associated with talent but rather with a set of skills one can learn. There are three main categories of decisive leadership skills: psychological and social skills, project management skills and inspirational skills.

In the category of **psychological and social skills**, a leader is somebody who

CHAPTER 2

ensures a productive and inclusive work. These skills include, but are not limited to: empathy, emotional intelligence, conflict management, active listening, self-care and self-awareness, giving room for other to develop, understanding the power of body language, the ability to compromise, social networking and creating an environment in which people openly deal with their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. In Chapter 1 of this toolkit, we already highlighted the importance of the social sphere in civic activism movements. At the core of every of these movements, there is an individual or a group of people who are able to create something greater than themselves. Especially in light of the challenging environment in politics, in which the egos of the protagonists often limit change and progress, these skills seem to be even more important.

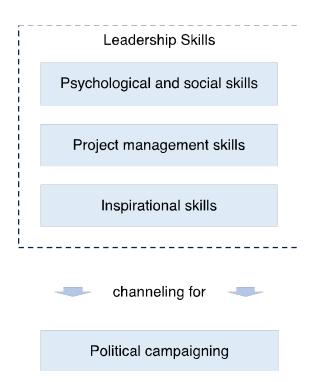
On the more practical side, project management skills are crucial for successful engagement in politics and society. This is, above all, directed at managing available resources (financial, time etc.) and adequate risk management. In greater detail. this comprises the ability for problem solving, accepting and embracing failure along the way, effective decision making, ensuring transparent communication within the project, and enabling all team members to thrive and work at their best.

Without a doubt, a leader's charisma decides the magnitude of attraction this person is able to create – not only for potential voters but also for the followers of the respective movement or organization. Thus, **inspirational skills** represent the third category of useful leadership skills. Although charisma itself is hard to grasp and conceptualize, it broadly describes the ability to spark interest and motivate people. For that – and this again is to be

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observed from a perspective aside from talent – having a vision and being able to communicate this is amongst the most important pillars of successful leadership. This can be applied for work in the analogue or virtual sphere. A leader in politics or society is able to establish their own brand, simultaneously taking action and being mindful in their cause.

Figure 1: Leadership skills and their importance for political campaigning



All of these skills can and should be channeled when it comes to political campaigning. Since no campaign is like the other, the required leadership skills also have to be adjusted to each individual case. Thus, it needs to be understood under which circumstances campaigns are organized, who needs to be addressed and whom you want to reach. However, there are a few basic principles that can be observed along a red line of successful political campaigns: a certain persistence to achieve the campaign goals, being visible, creative and provocative, creating a unified visual identity, a professional yet approachable appearance, an economic use of funding, a loyal and united team, control over the narrative and keeping enough room for adjustments of the campaign.

Campaigns are an intense experience with a lot of hard work. There is no shortcut to convince voters but when done right, campaigning can be a fun and rewarding experience. In the end, working on a political campaign is an essential part of the democratic process which should also be communicated as such.

From our perspective, the power of international networks is crucial when discussing political communication. What makes international networks stable and sustainable are a mutual set of values across borders and continents. Globalization, of travel and communication, made the mere process of connecting with like-minded individuals all around the globe considerably easier. International networks are powerful because they help to understand different points of view and enable us to gain knowledge about different countries and cultures. This allows us to increase the pool of expertise with skills from different regions and different approaches to, for example, knowledge sharing, funding or campaigning. Often underestimated, making these experiences first hand has a material effect on the common experience and skills of those involved. This does not only train storytelling and empathy but also gives the opportunity to forge long-lasting and meaningful relationships. If done correctly, it creates an international community which can be inspirational, supporting and enriching. It helps to understand your own content better and the effect it has on other people. Ultimately, these networks can also be used for support for your own campaigns. Its greatest power, though, lies

in the fact that it is a "common" network after all, continuing to grow, including more people, more resources, more causes, more struggles, more stories, more expertise and more experiences. These benefits will always have a ripple effect in the international community.

DOs & DON'Ts

DOs

- ∀ Be aware of the impression you make on your surrounding: be empathetic and create inclusivity
- ∀ Listen and give room for others to develop
- ∀ Embrace failure, weaknesses and vulnerabilities
- ∀ Be reliable and be able to take over responsibility
- ∀ Create, adjust and sell your story also across borders and continents
- ∀ Make use of your networks: home and abroad

DONTs

- ∀ Creating a cult around one person, ultimately limiting the room to thrive and grow
- ∀ Strong hierarchies without room for criticism and feedback
- ✓ Unthinking handling of political competition and limited possibilities for adjustment
- ∀ Unwillingness to learn and broaden one's horizon

SUMMARY

Political leadership has many facets: it is equally observable in the handling with one's political opponents and allies. It describes the ability to inspire and motivate, to lead, but also to follow. In IFLRY's case, the international perspective of leadership is at the core of our work. Cultural sensitivity has become more important in recent years, and, in our opinion, will become even more crucial in the future. Political campaigns are more than just posters, slogans, funding and voter outreach. It is the movement which is created around a mutual idea, fascinating political activists from all different backgrounds to engage and commit their time. As specific as one issue might look at first sight, it is most likely applicable to questions in other countries and regions in one way or the other. Keeping that in mind, while creating networks and forging connections, political campaigns can become significantly more impactful.

CHAPTER 3

Political Education: Leading by Teaching

BACKGROUND

The main aim of the activity in Lisbon was to enhance the skills of young leaders in the field of Non-Formal Education (NFE).

Over the past years, NFE played an increasingly important role in the daily work of IFLRY. We have found from experience that intense and participative seminars of four to five days are an excellent opportunity to spark the interest in youth for political activism and a broad range of political topics. Thus, by training more individuals to be able to facilitate these seminars, we were hoping to scale up our training capacities and inspire more youth to join our journey.

This chapter of the toolkit is meant to give an overview of the most important skills when organizing these kinds of seminars, ranging from the moment of conceptualizing a seminar to its actual execution and the right methods to reach the pre-defined goals and objectives.

CONTENT

Most of the time , the idea for an event, conducted with methods of NFE, stems from an issue observed in politics or society: be it the shrinking of civic spaces, populism, anti-migration sentiments or the attack on basic human rights. As diverse as these topics are, as tailored the training concept, the content and the trainers have to be.

Thus, as a key skill, every trainer needs to be aware of cultural peculiarities and personality types. Quite naturally, this also has to play a major role in the training of these trainers. Often, issues tackled in our seminars are sensitive in one way or another, requiring well thought-through concepts, pre-defined objectives and carefully selected methods. The selection of trainers, methods and communication channels, therefore, has to match the overall objective of the training.

As with many other things in life preparation is key here. The concept of a seminar is usually prepared by a small group of people, influenced by their own experiences, their standpoints and convictions. In an international context, this, on the one hand, guarantees a more nuanced approach of the topic, but, on the other hand, requires a considerable effort straightforward and for transparent communication with the participants. The audience rarely consists of equally experienced individuals, which, in practice, needs to find its consideration in the training methods and the accessibility to information and learning outcomes.

For a smooth flow of the seminar, the single sessions need to build up on each other, creating an overall setting which is a mix of team building, substantial input, creative learning, the practical application of what has been learnt and its presentation or visualization. Although previous trainings can always be an inspiration for the overall framework, there is no one-way-fits-all solution. Every training needs to have its very own rhythm, design and execution. The following graphic is supposed to visualize the milestones of a seminar: starting from the first idea to its final implementation.





When it comes to the leadership skills required for the organization and execution of these events, they, at first sight, don't look considerably different from general skills required in political or human rights work. Since there is a strong focus on interpersonal work, we are highlighting the most important abilities which we think are

the Council of Europe: https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass

³ Innovative and inspiring training methods can be found in the human rights work manual of

essential for becoming an influential leader in the field of NFE.

In general, good leaders can be trainers, facilitators or moderators. Organizational, time management and communication skills are the foundation of becoming an impactful leader. They have an intrinsic motivation to make a difference by creating social, political or any other significant kind of change. We note that this change does not necessarily have to be of a quantitative kind and thus might be more difficult to measure.

Ideally, leaders are able to leave a strong and positive impact behind, encouraging others to support them and not do everything alone. This - in our case - should be backed by a strong conviction of liberal norms and values. We believe that NFE seminars are an effective tool to cultivate new leaders, precisely because of the close and intense exchange between trainers and trainees. This way, trainers have the unmatched opportunity to monitor the skills which are passed on and can adjust what is supposed to be learned. In this capacity, they should be respected but not feared, creating a positive learning environment for everyone involved. lt seems worth mentioning that we see an incremental difference between showing leadership and being in power. As much as a leader in NFE needs to have a certain extent of authority, this person ideally understands their role as the link between the trainers and trainees, ultimately forming a collaborative learning atmosphere.

We also acknowledge the importance of sustainable training material which can be passed on to future generations of trainers, facilitators and moderators. Toolkits, such as this one, can help to summarize knowledge and experience that has been accumulated over years of seminar organization and execution. These toolkits can comprise grant application guidance, how to guarantee training flow, the structuring of sessions and content, offline, online or hybrid methods, theoretical and practical methods, different types of group work and the combination of all these elements.

DOs & DON'Ts

DOs

- ∀ Clearly formulated goals and objectives
- ∀ Set-up of diverse teams and a diverse program
- \forall Detailed preparation
- \forall Mix of serious and informal parts
- ∀ Use of substantial input and sustainable materials
- ∀ Transparent communication: of schedule and expectations

DON'Ts

- ✓ Forcing a fixed schedule or format, disregarding the participants' backgrounds and experience
- ∀ Set-up of a team consisting of strong personalities who don't work well in a team together
- ∀ Overloading seminars with too much input / input that is not necessary for the success of the seminar

SUMMARY

In the world of NFE, no seminar is like another. This, on the one hand, gives the opportunity to adjust the content and flow of the seminar to the individual group that is supposed to be trained. On the other hand, this comes with a considerable effort and entails the risk of miscalculation and miscommunication before and during the seminar. In general, we believe that NFE seminars are a great opportunity to create leaders of all kinds, contributing to the overall success of the liberal agenda across different levels of political engagement.

Although it seems as if the organization of these seminars is associated with a lot of prior experience and knowledge, nobody should shy away from giving these seminars a try. There is a lot of expertise in NFE easily accessible and the experts in this field are typically willing to help you kick-off your endeavors.

CHAPTER 4

Local Leadership: Running for City Council

BACKGROUND

When looking at the lack of youth participation in politics, we observe the following: youth is not only retracting from the pre-political arena in general; but they also retract from politics, more specifically from local politics. And this has many repercussions as the representation of youth matters particularly on the local level where lived realities of young people are shaped (as most of them do not leave their hometowns until they reach age 18). We see that this is partly due to the fact that decision-making still regional lacks fundamental tools of youth representation (i.e. youth councils); but also, that young people usually have less of a sense of rootedness in a globalized society. Yet, we think that this is also some reverse causality because this lack of rootedness is often due to the very fact that young people are discouraged from being engaged on a local level.

Thus, the event in Lviv focused on leadership and local participation. It was a combination of the previous Work Plan activities as local leadership is a more inclusive term—which could potentially include political leadership as well as civic activism and campaigning. We, hence, try to highlight the peculiarities of local campaigning in this chapter. However, we think that local leadership is not only an application of these leadership skills but requires a different approach that takes elements from other leadership types (e.g. grassroots elements from activism) and builds upon them. We understand the comprehension of local governance, running a local campaign, tools of youth participation on a local level, and local issue campaigning (i.e. finding a cause that matters) as key skills that are needed when running for a local parliament.

CONTENT

In comparison to campaigning on a higher political level in one's country, running for local parliament has the advantage of a better approachability of the voter audience. Thus, it is important to introduce yourself, your team, your program and the ideas to inspire the community you are working in. The team set-up and a clear division of tasks is key for a successful campaign, especially considering the high visibility of this endeavor. Furthermore, it is essential to create a project plan for a set amount of time to outline activities and content of the campaign (who, what, when and where). This is rather supposed to be short term planning: on a weekly basis with a celebration of milestones, well-structured and scheduled meetings, a disciplined execution of the plan, the definition of working spaces, regular media meetings, school visits etc.

The campaign itself has an even greater importance because of the proximity of issues to the real lives of citizens. It is thus crucial to know the audience in utmost detail, set the tone of the campaign accordingly and use practical examples of local realities. Voter data from municipalities (if available) can help to talk to potential voters directly, eventually increasing the voter output in one's favor. Quite literally, being a leader as a "person of the people" helps to keep close contact with the electorate. Being charismatic (as this might be from culture to particular as culture), extroverted, respected and approachable additionally helps vour cause. From the mere skill perspective, we are convinced that a leader on the local level should be able to easily involve people, persuade voters, convince authorities, debate with opponents, make people follow and radiate self-confidence.

Local as well as regional or national elections can only be won with good knowledge about the opponents' programs, strategies and intentions. This can be used to identify both strengths and weaknesses in order to bolster your own campaign and highlight areas of special interest. At the same time, this offers the opportunity to find potential fields of cooperation with political allies, also to channel resources and to not waste unnecessary capacities.

Fundraising on the local level often can be challenging – on the one hand because of a general scarcity of funds and on the other hand because larger corporations or individual donors rather direct their financial means towards the higher political levels. Hence, everybody in the team needs to commit to strict and timely financial management, plan in advance, and create a comprehensive budget.

Youth especially are often accused of using politics as a sole career opportunity, thus overshadowing or even jeopardizing their own ambition and noble motivation. Although we do not necessarily agree with this notion, we acknowledge the advantage of not being reliant on the political career to maintain integrity.

DOs & DON'Ts

DOs

- ∀ Know your opponents, allies and audience
- ∀ Be approachable and build a legacy of trustworthyness and seriousness
- ∀ Set up a diverse team with a wide range of qualities
- ∀ Strict financial management and deployment of funds
- ∀ Have an ambitious but realistic program

DON'Ts

- ∀ Underestimate the importance of personal contact and visibility
- ∀ Loose the sense of the big picture and the role of local politics in the greater, overarching political context
- ∀ Give the impression one's career would depend on political success

SUMMARY

Running for local parliament is an exciting yet challenging project. The proximity to the electorate on the ground opens up possibilities to more activism-styled activities, concluding this toolkit with a field in politics that serves as a blueprint and starting point for politically active youth.

Starting a campaign, dealing with electoral bureaucracy and facing all kinds of hardships can be discouraging. We hope, however, that the best practices, DOs & DON'Ts and experiences we have shared in this document give you a framework and guidance future political for your engagement. There is no doubt that being active in politics is a long and often painful journey. But with the right people around you, mentors, supporters of all kinds and the right amount of persistence, we think that there is a great chance and opportunity for youth to make a change.

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