

Training Civil Society Leaders and Managers

Experiences learned from implementing an Online
Course designed for civil society organisation leaders

Public report, 2021



September 2020 through January 2021 the Office for European Expertise and Communications was implementing its **Online Course on Leadership for Civil Society Organisations** within the framework of the [EU-funded Project](#) Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility – Regional Action.

Following the results of the Course, some CSO leaders have improved their competences in:

- understanding the leadership theories and adapting their own leadership styles;
- team management and motivation;
- negotiation techniques and strategies;
- conflict transformation and building trust; and
- strategies intended to empower women.



Call for applications announcement on eapcivilsociety.eu.

Online Course on Leadership for Civil Society Organisations

168 applications were filed from all the Eastern Partnership countries to take part in the course

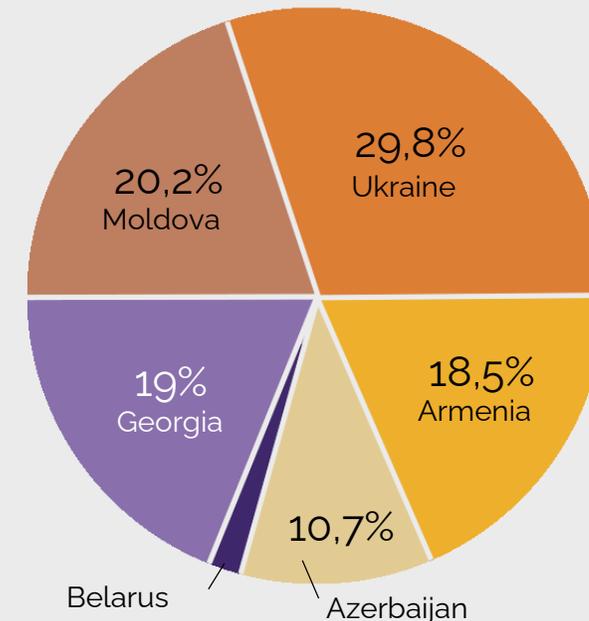
65 persons were invited

52 persons commenced their platform training

31 persons successfully completed the Course, including

23 persons who were granted Certificates with Honours

Distribution of applications submitted for the course by country:





Valeria Volkogonova,

Course Coordinator and Programme Manager, Office for European Expertise and Communications



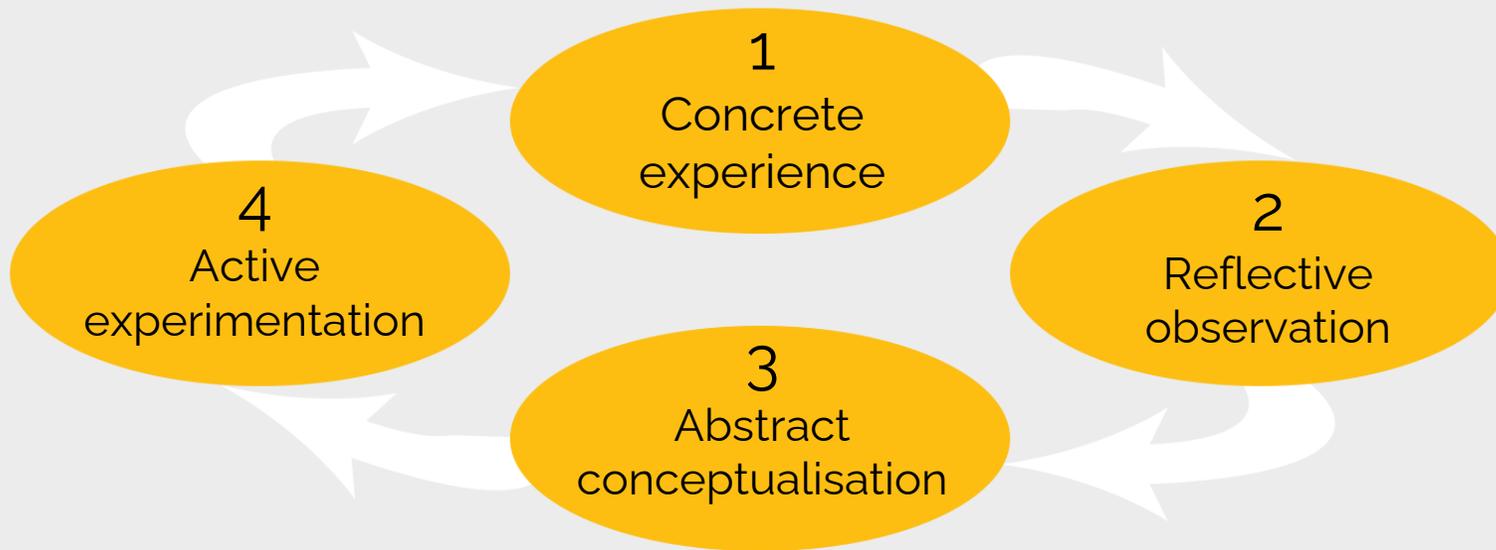
“I often hear some people saying that after a year of the COVID-19 pandemic just everyone is sick and tired of distance learning. Staying online means a broad outreach but a feeble motivation; an easy access but a casual engagement in the process; and a wide-reaching geography but a low completion percentage.

This publication is intended by us to show an approach to arranging online training that is non-formal education principles-based and intended to transform the trainees' mindsets and attitudes. We are confident that the online courses are capable of developing skills and changing attitudes to the topic learned, not only providing knowledge. What really matters is the methods you choose.

A crucial issue we faced was how to teach those who already lead a CSO or a civic initiative or why should we teach leadership to those who are leaders as that.”

Experiential learning

'Learning from experience' was the Course's underlying principle. When selecting applications, we gave preference to those who had already had a solid experience of organisation or team management.

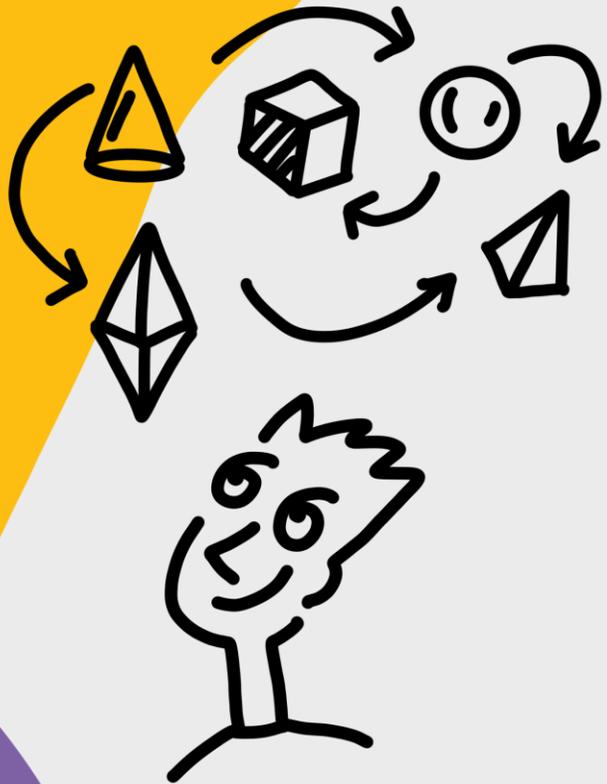


The Experiential Learning Cycle by D. Kolb.



The *experiential learning* model has been formulated for the first time by David Kolb, an expert in adult learning psychology. According to his model, the learning process represents a cycle. It includes personal experience accumulation, reflection and conceptualisation, and, ultimately, experience transfer to real life and specific actions.

Experiential learning



It is true that many competences and skills are developed with experiences gained; however, it is useful to corroborate one's experiences against theoretical concepts and to be alert and reflective to one's experiences. The latter provides the only way to making conclusions for future reference and to using knowledge in a fully-fledged manner rather than by intuition.

This kind of learning is instrumental in making one feel assertive, especially when one sees that everything she or he does is correct. Or else it assists in revisiting some challenging situations and getting outside them so as never to repeat any mistakes any more.

Leadership Is Sometimes Non-Conscious

Valeria Volkogonova,
Course Coordinator



“It is far from always that people consciously choose a leader role in their organisation or initiative. Sometimes it is about a turn of events, sometimes it is about a choice, and sometimes it is just about lack of any other options. It is neither good nor bad. Yet, as time passes by, some internal issues pile up and they need working out.

As they were undergoing our Course training, the participants used to say that it was for the very first time that they succeeded in making a halt and thinking about themselves; and, on top of that, not as an organisation leader but about themselves as persons. The CSO sector people are used to thinking like this: everything we do is meant, in the first place, for our target groups and, in the second place, for our team. But leadership is about self-cultivation.”

This is why the Course raised such crucial questions as how to motivate and lead a team, how to settle conflicts and negotiate with stakeholders, and what gender stereotypes women encounter on their way to leadership.

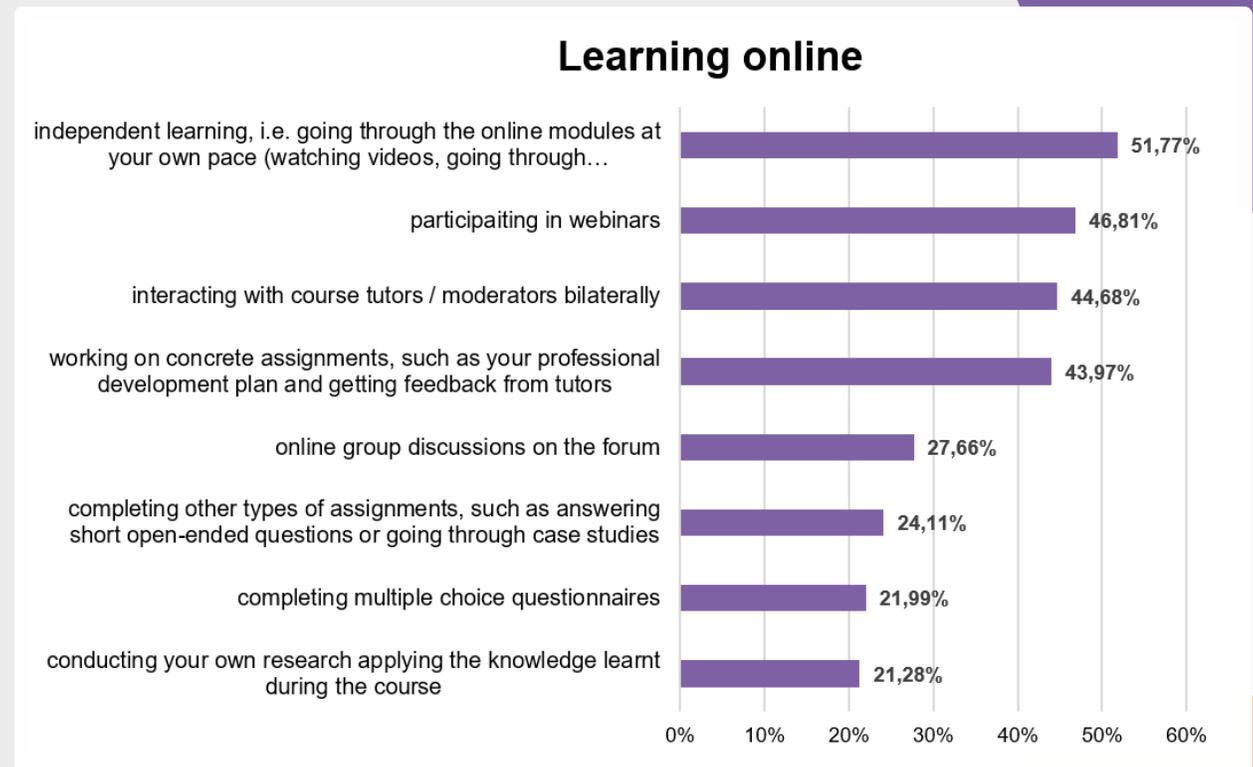
We shall use this publication to share our small '**back office secrets,** **outcomes** and **participants' feedback,** as well as some of **our own reflections** on online training.

'Back Office Secrets': Preparation

Back in June 2020, before the Course was launched, we had [assessed the needs](#) of the Eastern Partnership countries' civil society organisation leaders. We had received, on aggregate, **141 responses**.

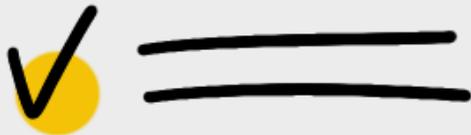
The respondents had noted that during the online training they expected to complete a course independently, participate in webinars, interact and work on concrete assignments related to their organisations' operations.

Distribution of the answers to the question "What types of online activities do you think would help you most in the context of the leadership course?"
(It was possible to select up to three answers)



'Back Office Secrets': Preparation

This is what helped to design an overall integrated Online Course made up of the below components:



- **5 Moodle platform modules**, including text materials, short videos and minor assignments to be completed independently at any time;
- **weekly Zoom workshops** intended for experience sharing, group discussions, difficult case debates or practical skill development;
- **individual coaching sessions** (3 hours on average per every participant);
- **a toolkit** to assess one's own leadership style under the **DISC** methodology; and
- **virtual study tours** for experience sharing and networking, where the participants presented their NGOs and their operations in the respective countries.

'Back Office Secrets': Course Team

Professionals with rich experience in the field of non-formal education, online learning and capacity building of civil society organizations worked on the course program.

A good understanding of the context and experience in the Eastern Partnership countries helped to create a course that met the needs of CSO leaders from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

The program and methodology of the course were developed by:



Maryna Korzh (Belarus / Georgia), experienced facilitator, trainer, and coach. Maryna is leading the campaign "March, babe!" advocating for the law on counteracting domestic violence in Belarus, runs empowerment and leadership courses for young women from civil society organisations, political parties, grassroots movements and underrepresented groups.

'Back Office Secrets': Course Team



The program and methodology were developed by:

Yuliya Stankevich (Belarus), non-formal education trainer, facilitator and consultant. Yuliya has been active in civil society from 2000 (NGO "Youth Education Center "Fialta"), working with Belarusian CSOs and in international projects. She has been involved in online courses for civil society since 2018.



Laimonas Ragauskas (Lithuania), facilitator, supervisor and coach mainly in the area of non-formal learning and training for various youth work organisations as well as local and European institutions. Laimonas is recently working a lot with various online solutions for the youth work field as well as building and facilitating online courses.

'Back Office Secrets': Course Team



The program and methodology were developed by:

Ekaterina Sherer (Spain), trainer, facilitator, and designer of non-formal education programmes (offline, online and blended courses), with a long experience of coordinating local, national and international projects in the fields of leadership, volunteering, human rights education, conflict transformation, intercultural dialogue, anti-discrimination and global education.

Ekaterina has been active in civil society since 1998, first as a trainer and programme coordinator of leadership programmes in Russia, and also as head of the Interregional NGO "Association of young leaders". Since then she delivered more than 40 training courses in the region.

In 2011 Ekaterina moved to Spain where she continued her work as trainer and projects coordinator.

'Back Office Secrets': Course Team



Coaching sessions were conducted by:

Martyna Kwiatkowska (Poland), trainer, certified coach, social innovator. In 2008 – 2016 Martyna has been working as a Coordinator of International Programs at Education for Democracy Foundation in Warsaw, she was managing projects with partners from Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. She worked in several programs on CSOs capacity building in Moldova, Tajikistan and Belarus. Now she is working in the Eastern European Democratic Center.



Wojtek Tworkowski (Poland), has been involved with the non-governmental sector for the last 18 years, focusing mostly on social and international development, human rights and leadership development. He worked for several organizations in Poland and Central Asia before starting out as external consultant and coach in 2009. He has coached groups and teams on strategic and planning processes, dealing with conflicts in teams, developing leaders, and coaching for creative solutions. He has graduated from coach trainings from ICF accredited schools Coachwise Poland (two levels of training on one-on-one coaching completed in 2015 and 2017) and NOVO School of Group and Team Coaching (2018).

Are Leaders Born or Made?

The very first leadership theories used to state that “leaders are not made, but leaders are born.” However, the contemporary approach sees it the other way around: “Leadership is about skills, knowledge and attitudes, that is to say it is about developable competences.”

Module One, entitled “Understanding the people you lead and adapting your leadership style”, introduced all the major leadership theories and terminology, described the leadership theories and told the story of how a leader's behaviour influences those she or he works with.



“At this stage we proposed to explore and fill out a DISC methodology-based questionnaire. It is a commercially available tool, a free access to which was ensured to all the Course attendants who completed a required assignment minimum. How does it work? For half an hour one answers the questions and receives at the end a detailed analysis of one's behaviour as a leader.

Valeria Volkogonova,
Course Coordinator

All this is needed to approach managing an organisation or a team in a conscious manner: where one exerts an excessive pressure and leaves no space to her or his colleagues or else where one provides insufficient support and shifts responsibility to others without sharing control or access to the resources.

All the assignments could be discussed during a personal meeting with one's coach so as to talk through all the failing elements.”

Are Leaders Born or Made?

Nadezhda Dudaronak, a Course participant and Director of the Lake District Traditions and Innovations, Social Information Institution from Belarus has displayed her leadership traits since 2000. Then she had a public sector job: chaired an Education Department, then managed a day-care centre and later worked as a cultural institution director.

Since 2017 she has run a non-profit organisation involved in tourism development, historical and cultural heritage protection, environment conservation and local community development.

Nadezhda Dudaronak,
Course Alumni, Belarus



“Thanks to my work with the coach I began understanding myself better, and I even used to cry... I realized what I really wanted from my colleagues and partners, but what matters most of all I learned how to know what they expected from me. It is a very important thing because I am sick and tired of spreading myself too thin and want to focus on the main things.”

Unfortunately, now I am the only one person in my organisation, but I have to communicate on a permanent basis. The Course has changed my approach to selecting the people I would like to work with. I have absorbed 3 main things: ask to know what they expect from you; a leader is not a responsibility, but ability; and no need spreading oneself thin – one must find one’s own niche and people.”

No One Can Be Made to Become Part of a Team

When applying for the Online Course, many among those involved stressed their priorities, such as addressing some internal organisation issues, streamlining communications or building positive attitudes within their teams, which all served as their motivation to complete the course.

This is why **Module Two**, entitled “Managing and motivating teams”, was used by the participants to discuss what made teams really successful and how to create that same old ‘dream team.’

Valeria Volkogonova,
Course Coordinator



“In adult education no one can be taught or, moreover, made to learn. The people are free to make an independent decision, which is why we have never expelled anyone, even if a person did not complete her or his assignments or did not always attend our meetings.

Voluntary basis is a non-formal education principle and an approach that underlies our Online Course. It means that the people themselves are free to make decisions on their training.

To put it in plain terms, every person took the knowledge to the extent she or he needed. Frequently, people used to resume their learning after a break that was several weeks long.

The voluntary basis principle is in general crucial for NGO activity, not only for education, because people like volunteers, supporters or even paid staff members come to the civil society sector not for the sake of money, but because they feel affinity with an organisation’s mission or values.”



No One Can Be Made to Become Part of a Team

Our weekly online workshops were participants' experience-based. We gave up the webinar format, when there is just one expert, who makes a presentation and later answers questions. That being said, every Course participant had a lot to say or share, because they all had a colossal experience.

The format, where the participants jointly create a product with their trainers and coaches, is always more viable than a passive information consumption. And our Online Course was exactly intended to provide some ego trip insights and to show us how different we all are in terms of our learning habits.

The most valuable education component is the contributions provided by the process participants, i.e. the time and efforts they contribute to a course. It is not at all about a formal assignment completion, but about application of useful practices in our lives.

Active participation is yet another non-formal education principle. It means that the people themselves are there to influence their learning process.



No One Can Be Made to Become Part of a Team

How one cannot make people learn, one cannot make them stay in one's team. It does matter, because if a leader does not have a team around, it should make her or him wonder why.

We have selected some optimum practices related to team motivation and management. Besides, we have touched upon the issues linked to missions and values of organisations themselves, because it is exactly they that provide the feeling of ownership and commitment.

Tamar Jangulashvili, Executive Director, Social Innovation & Entrepreneurship Center (SiNC) from Georgia shares her ideas on how she could learn to delegate thanks to training.



Tamar Jangulashvili,
Course Alumni, Georgia



“I have been in charge of the organisation since 2017, but what I have applied for the Course for was to change and improve the on-going processes within our organisation. We have had some problems, which exactly have to do with collaboration and mutual understanding.

Coaching sessions have helped me to drill deeper into my leadership traits. We have also discussed these issues within our organisation's team and introduced some corrections into the organisational policies. All that should assist our team in reaching a better understanding and mutual support.

Besides, I have tried to delegate. The Course's significant conclusions have become for me as follows: close cooperation, team work, conflict resolution capabilities and an ability to listen to others”.



Conflicts and Negotiations

The Course, among other things, has sought to unify and create partnerships among the Eastern Partnership leaders. We have come out with a virtual study tour format, when all the participants were provided with an opportunity to take some time and speak in detail about their organisation and to show it, and to share attractive or untypical cases.



Valeria Volkogonova,
Course Coordinator



“Yet, multinational participation is always unpredictable. Reality sometimes demonstrates other things that those initially scheduled. And, occasionally, a political context provides a backdrop to training.

For example, out of the total of 168 Course applications just two have been received from Belarus, because we announced recruitment in August 2020, at the very height of the country’s civil protests.”

Conflicts and Negotiations

Our training process has highlighted such issues as conflict settlement and negotiating both inside a team and with stakeholders, other organisations, businesses and the governments.

We have looked into the conflict transformation theories, approaches and cases, but, first and foremost, we tried to find an answer to the question what in general should be done about a conflict. We have touched upon the topics of mediation and non-violent communications, and even piloted them during our practical workshops.

Ekaterina Sherer,
Course Designer
and Trainer



Nowadays, you can find a lot of materials about conflicts and negotiations, but it is not so easy to find a group of colleagues to discuss the conflict, share experiences, and doubts about which strategy is best to choose in each situation.

Where can I practice conflict mediation safely and beneficially? Where can I get feedback on my style of behavior in a conflict?

At online workshops, we tried to provide this opportunity to the participants. And on the platform, they could try new tools for analyzing conflict situations and developing a behaviour strategy for them.



Conflicts and Negotiations

Zakir Soltanov, Senior Corporate Relationship Manager, SOS Children's Villages Azerbaijan, came to an NGO from the business sector. Has enjoyed the prominent position for two years now, but could value highly the mediation format, really, just thanks to the Online Course.



Zakir Soltanov,
Course Alumni,
Azerbaijan



“Our group session on mediation has provided to me a unique opportunity to take a different viewpoint of my past conflicts. I did realize that listening to all opinions and being not fearful of a closer cooperation with people does matter very much.

In early January I conducted some vacancy job hiring interviews. Frankly speaking, I used certain skills acquired during the Course while interviewing the job seekers.”



Female Leadership

The last Online Course module has been dedicated to women's leadership and gender theory, although it was not conceived as a mandatory one. Nonetheless, it has become for many both a topic to rethink themselves and an issue to touch to the quick.

Anna Kotenko, a Course participant and a leader of the Charitable Organisation 100 Per Cent Life Network from Rivne admits that she has joined the Course exactly because of the female leadership session.



Anna Kotenko,
Course Alumni, Ukraine



“I have never positioned myself as a leader, although I have been working as an organisation's executive director and bearing some liabilities, legal ones included.

In general, I joined the Course while being terribly offended by my colleagues. I thought I had contributed so many efforts in the development of our organisation's image, but all in vain. Yet, thanks to Martyna'a coaching I gave the subject a second thought.

Now I do my best to talk more about my personal achievements and about my personal contributions, but I rather do it to explore some new opportunities for our organisation than for the sake of political infighting. I do not mean to say that my internal conflicts have all been resolved or my offences all alleviated, by I am now better off with my easier and calmer living.

I have understood that I really am a leader. Because a leader is not he or she who can push an idea through and over-persuade just everyone around, but the one who determines strategies. If I do not understand somebody's behaviour, I can just go on and ask about her or his motives or needs. And as far as the problems that I considered to be mine are concerned, for example, the imposter syndrome, are not mine, really; in fact, they rather represent a public pressure exerted on women.”

Our Tips for Organising an Effective Learning Online



Laimonas Ragauskas,
Course Designer, Trainer

Conclusions and recommendations on the **design and development** of the online course similar to this one:

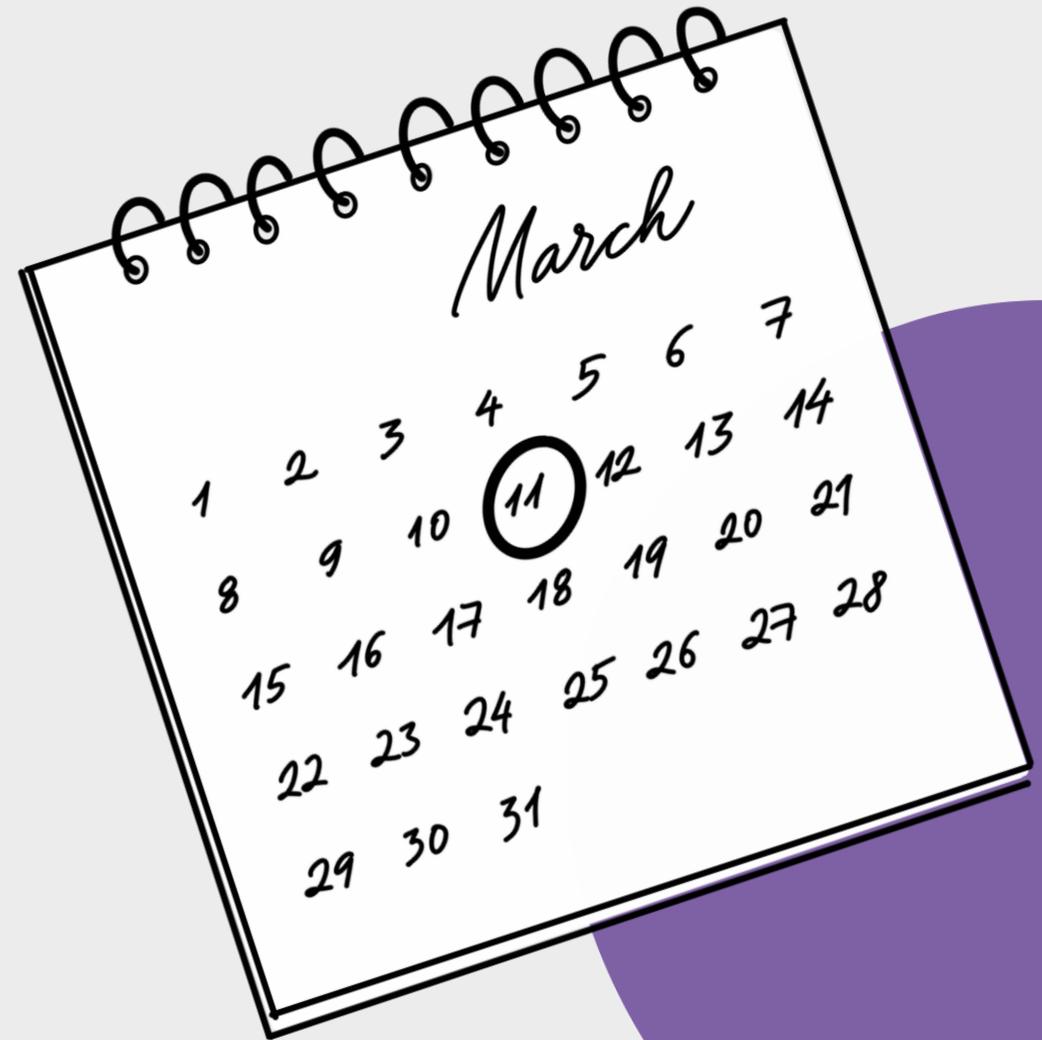
Consider higher dropout rate. Over the last few years we can notice that there is a higher drop-out rate in the online courses comparing the residential one. We recommend always selecting 30-50% people more than you plan actually having in your training group. For example, if you expect to have 20 participants finishing the course, you will probably start with 35-40 people at the beginning of the course. And you will invite 60-80 people to participate. Usually only approximately 50% of selected people show-up for the first course.

Our Tips for Organising an Effective Learning Online

Time and pace of online learning.

When you run a course with participants from different time zones, consider all the time zones where they are from. Plan your synchronous online learning sessions not too early in the morning and not too late into the evening. Collected feedback after your first meetings if such timing is acceptable for your group.

The pace is important too. Make your first online meeting a bit slower for people to catch up with online tools and technical setup. Always check at the end of the session if the meeting pace is optimal for learning.



Our Tips for Organising an Effective Learning Online

Keep the patterns. Online learning is good for structuring learning materials, delivering synthesized learning and keeping the content available over the time. However it is important not to overwhelm course participants with too many diverse activities. It's good when people can see certain patterns in online learning.

For example:

- every module has similar amount of content
- every module starts with an intro and perhaps finishes with practical task or a discussion forum

- every synchronous learning activity like meeting on Zoom would have similar duration and follow a certain logic of starting with the check-in questions, intro to the topic, then couple of main content related activities, and finishing with the follow-up steps and evaluation.
- using not too many digital tools every meeting and making your tool of choice for note-taking, voting, etc. In this way participants will learn a few tools, but won't be overwhelmed with new tools every time.



Our Tips for Organising an Effective Learning Online

Accessibility. Keep in mind that people can have difficulties learning in your course language. Even if you choose content in English and Russian, both languages can be foreign for most participants. Consider adding visuals, subtitles for videos, make video scripts available for download. It will allow people to use services like Google translate to read course content in participants' native language easily.

Also some people might be hard of hearing - subtitles can be helpful in following the content. Transcripts for download can be helpful in using text-to-speech tools by people with sight challenges. Make sure that your online learning platform has accessibility certification and people are able to change the size of the text or use text-to-speech tools for all the content uploaded to your platform.



Our Tips for Organising an Effective Learning Online

Contextualise your content. Get to know your participants, their profiles, and expectations. Spend time during first online meetings to get to know them, the way of thinking and learning. It will provide you as a course facilitator with ideas for learning activities and it will also help to set a level of content complexity – should you go for basics or should you start with intermediate or advanced level? Always check with participants as you progress in the course – ask for their feedback and adapt. Bring local examples or case studies from the countries of participants – it will help them to connect to the content easier. Furthermore, people will feel that this is possible to achieve in their context.

Keep the content fresh. When preparing the content for the online course, choose theories and examples, which are relatively new. Although some theories are classics from the mid-twenties century, try to look for new applications of these theories. Use rather new articles, videos, which might not be known by your audience yet. It will keep your content fresh and up-to-date.



Our Tips for Organising an Effective Learning Online

Be flexible and stay creative!



Maryna Korzh,
Course Designer, Trainer



“With colleagues we talked about finding the balance between voluntary participation, responsibility of trainees and involvement in the course. Anything that is not necessary for attending online frequently becomes less visited.

For example, after the first two modules, it was difficult for us to mobilize and engage people. And then I made posts with funny GIFs in our Facebook group to revive the official tone of communication.

We also came up with Zoom group meetings for completing home tasks, as people found it difficult to do their homework on the platform on their own and these extra 'after-school' meetings were very helpful.”

Our Tips for Organising an Effective Learning Online

Be flexible and stay creative!

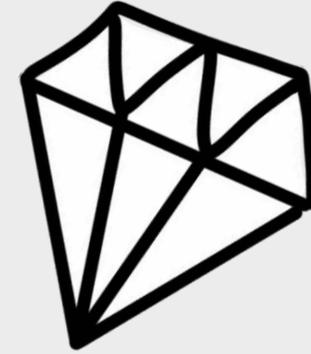


Ekaterina Sherer,
Course Designer, Trainer



“Feel free to experiment and transfer simulations and role-playing games online.

With some adjustments, almost everything can be done online using the possibilities available at the moment. And don't forget the debriefing part at the end. Yes, perhaps you will need to conduct it in parallel in smaller groups, the participants will not be so active in their statements... But the main thing is to give them the opportunity to analyze what they have learned in this exercise and how it can be used in their everyday life.”



Our Tips for Organising an Effective Learning Online

Be flexible and stay creative!



Valeria Volkogonova,
Course Coordinator



“When conducting online learning we relied on the principles of non-formal education. This is the principle of voluntary basis, experiential learning, orientation on the needs of students, and others.

We used an open call for applications, and participants applied of their own free will. To create learning experiences online, we used the Zoom platform and the function of breakout rooms, Mentimeter, Kahoot, Padlet, Jamboard, Miro services... As organizers, we were open to remarks and suggestions from the participants, and of course, we ourselves learned from them!”



Coaching Sessions

One-on-one coaching was an excellent addition to support CSO leaders. It strengthened learning through giving the participants a chance to focus on how the course applies to their particular situation, and where their challenges are.

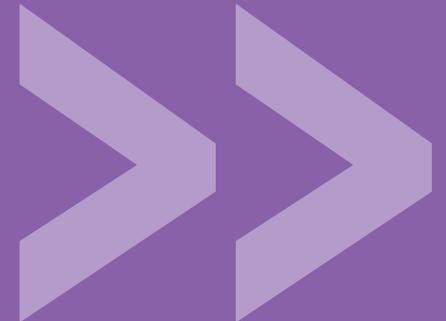
For some participants the challenges discovered during coaching went far beyond things taught at the course, and the process dug into exploring their social status, issues with work/life balance, as well as personal or even emotional struggles.



Wojtek Tworkowski,
Coach of the Course



“Many leaders suffer from loneliness. It seems like a good idea for future programs to experiment also with elements of group coaching, where, instead of just working one on one, they could work with a small group of peers, and possibly mix it with individual coaching sessions.”



Conclusions

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the Online Course on Leadership for Civil Society Organisations has been successfully completed by almost one half of its selected participants: **31 out of 65 persons**. That being said, **35%, or 23 persons**, have been awarded a Certificate of Completion with Honours. It is a high percentage, because anything produced online always presents a self-motivation challenge.

An important point was achieved by making all the Course materials available **bilingually**, in English and in Russian, while simultaneous interpretation was provided for all the online meetings. The latter fact has helped to include non-English speakers, who otherwise would not have had access to many materials or books.



Conclusions

One should bear in mind that no great transformations ever happen overnight, which is why we shall be able to gauge the learning long-term effects several months or half a year after the Course is over.

Here are some more feedback from course participants:

I now better understand my colleagues, I am able to negotiate taking into account other people position. I am also more empowered now as a leader, I am more aware of who I am and what I know, were are my area of competence.

This course came in the right moment. Course helped me to understand my leadership style. DISC and coaching were very helpful. Was very useful to read experiences of other members of the group.

The course helped me to analyse my previous experience as manager, to discover the weaknesses I should work with to become a real CSO leader, to find out the mistakes in communication with my team and learn from them, to understand better the critical situations and conflicts within the organisation.

Thank you!



Screenshot from the Miro board

Learning results // Результаты обучения

Individual level: what has changed for you as a person and/or leader?

Organisational level: what has the course changed in your organisation? What have you implemented in your organisation's work?



We wish you success and stunning breakthroughs on your way to the exhilarating online learning!

If you are interested in the program, text and video materials are available as a self paced course on the [Moodle platform](#).

The Online Course on Leadership for Civil Society Organisations was developed by the Office for European Expertise and Communications (Belarus) according to its contract with GDSI Limited (Ireland), leader of the consortium implementing the EU-funded [project Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility - Regional Actions](#).

This report was translated into English by Alexander Kartel.

Office for European Expertise and Communications is a non-profit non-governmental organization from Belarus, providing trainings, developing and strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations and grassroots initiatives.

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