Juela Hamati: We should not take things for granted. Freedom or democracy or liberty should not be taken for granted. It wasn't easy to achieve any of these values. And we should not take them for granted today. We should fight for them every day in our way. But the important thing is to fight.

Brock Bierman: Hello, my name is Brock Bierman. I'm the USAID Assistant Administrator for Europe and Eurasia. We're going to have some exciting guests to talk about the work that we're doing in the region. The New European Democracy Youth Network, which was established late last year in December is an effort to bring young political leaders, young civic leaders together to have a dialogue, to not only talk about the things that they believe in, but also share best practices. Talk about what they're doing in their particular areas, not just in their countries, not just in their regions, but at the very local level. What are some of the successes that they can share? What are the similar obstacles that they're facing that they can work together on solving? And then I think it's also a matter of communicating and understanding people's perspective because the more you get to know someone and understand their perspective, I think it helps solve larger problems.

Brock Bierman: The genesis really behind EDYN is my personal experience as a young political leader. My experience as an exchange participant with the American Council of young political leaders. My working with the International Republican Institute in Ukraine and talking to the young political leaders, it's just been a lifelong experience dealing with young people and how important it is to engage them at an early age and talk to them about issues that are important to them, but also the importance of sharing their, their particular issues. Are there particular values or their particular problems with everyone to try to find common ground to solve those issues? So with us, we have representatives from the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute who will talk a little bit about EDYN and the program and what we hope to accomplish. And so I'm excited to have them give us a little bit of their background and where the program is today. First off, let me just welcome Alex Tarascio from the International Republican Institute and Nadia (Nadezhda) Mouzykina. Is that Zika? I, you know, I knew I was going to mess that up in advance. There's just no way you can, but, but thank you. Before we start talking a little bit about the EDYN program, what I really wanted to do was talk to the two of you about how you ended up, at IRI and NDI and what brought you into the international world of a democracy and governance?

Nadia Mouzykina: I have an interesting background personally because I was born in the Soviet Union. So international relations by virtue of being from a different country and be in a country that has had such a varied relationship with the United States has always been something I was curious about. And somewhere during high school years I realized that I want to do something in the international realm and followed that path through a undergrad. And grad school. I wasn't quite sure exactly what I wanted to do and international development kind of fell into my lap. I think more by process of elimination than anything else. I did a couple
internships, different places and wound up at an organization called the National Conference of State Legislatures, which is the U.S.-based organization that works with state legislatures but also has a small component that deals with international programming similar to what USAID, NDI, IRI, and others do wherein a grant based technical assistance, it’s just, there was no offices in any of the countries.

Nadia Mouzykina: We would send experts out to do legislative strengthening, training, budgeting, things like that. And also we did exchanges between MPs and state legislatures all around the globe with US state legislators. And I spent several years there and I really enjoyed it and enjoyed the technical assistance component of it. I wound up actually taking a little break and going to Russia to do a fellowship myself. And then when I came back, I was looking for a job and I had always wanted to work for NDI and there was several opportunities open and that’s how I kind of came to. So, in 2009, almost 10 years ago, I joined the central and eastern Europe team. So focusing on the western Balkans, former Yugoslav states and central Europe. So basically everything that was behind the iron curtain.

Alex Tarascio: My path was a little different. I was born and raised in Oregon. I’m not quite as far as Nadia was, but I got involved in political campaigns as a volunteer in 2010. And I just always liked politics, always found myself attracted to political discussions. And then one day the light bulb kind of went off and I thought, why not get involved in myself? So I volunteered for several campaigns down in California. Eventually somebody decided to pay me to do some of them. And over the course of the next few years, I worked in 33 states in three years. After that I got a little tired of the hotel life working on different campaigns, usually for a few months at a time as a consultant. I moved to Washington DC and I interned for Kevin McCarthy. I’m from California and stayed there for about two years.

Alex Tarascio: I loved the hill, but then I had an opportunity appear at the International Republican Institute and I had always been interested in international work. And this opportunity presented itself in their Middle East division. And so I took it about a year and a half ago, I moved to our Europe portfolio. So now I work on transatlantic strategy and that means I get to work with Nadia a lot. And my portfolio is focused on all central Eastern Europe promoting democracy and the transatlantic relationship with the United States.

Brock Bierman: Tell me a little bit about how IRI and NDI are working together. And I hope that’s a good segue in terms of how we’re actually working together to talk about how we can solve problems.

Alex Tarascio: The nature of our work is that I work for the International Republican Institute. Nadia works for the National Democratic Institute. The kinds of interventions in relationships that we form with the people that we work with don’t have a Democrat or Republican leaning to them.
Alex Tarascio: There is not a Democrat democracy and a Republican democracy. It's all the same democratic principles. Basically we sit down in front of a whiteboard to figure out how can we get the most possible people involved with their government so that their voices are heard and that their viewpoints are respected. The EDYN network, it's the European Democracy Youth Network involves, 50 young people a year under 29. And from all over Europe and Eurasia, I think we're up to 11 main countries in 22 total. Something like that. And getting young people from civil society, from political parties and who, who have a history of engaging their communities already and bringing them together so that they can see how other people in other countries are doing the exact same thing. And it seems fairly simple and that's kind of the key to the success of it and why, why we think it'll work is that people in Albania or in Serbia, those two examples right now because we have participants from both countries.

Alex Tarascio: They are protesting right now for various reasons that are, that are quite different. And they were not aware these two particular individuals I'm thinking of before they started working together, that these, that their counterparts in these countries fairly, fairly nearby, were protesting for these reasons. Once they came together and they understood the reasons behind someone getting into the streets in Belgrade or in Tirana, both of them shared with me separately that it, it kind of blew them away. They just didn't understand that, that people felt so strongly about these issues in these other places because they haven't thought about before. And a lot of people who get involved in politics or in government, they focus so much on what they need to do. They focus so much on the job that they don't have time to think about what people in other countries are worrying about or doing.

Alex Tarascio: So what we do is provide a space and a period for people to work together to see the perspective of somebody else and really focus on each other and like where they are in Europe and what pieces they have and how their work is a slice of the entire European story and what it means to them be European and young people in this time of change. The way that we work together is, is very, very closely and we just are very communicative with each other about how we can get the most enthusiastic people with the best backgrounds who are going to mesh together as well as they possibly can.

Brock Bierman: And why is it important right now to work with the youth in the region?

New Speaker: I think one of the challenges that we've seen particularly in recent years is that youth have been pulling away from politics. Whereas for instance, in the early nineties, you, you know, and the late eighties, you saw all these youth movements emerging, the civil society was coming out a lot from, from the youth movement in recent years that has subsided greatly and youth are generally, and regardless of which country they're from, whether it's an existing EU member state or an aspiring, you remember, say Serbia or North Macedonia or Albania, they're feeling like they're trapped by their governments. They feel like nobody's listening to them. They feel like political parties in the way
they exist are not open to their voices and basically are completely disillusioned with the entire political system and country x, y or z. And what happened, what begins to happen is that they become frustrated. You know, maybe they'll go out and protest, but they don't want to join political parties. They don't necessarily want to join new political parties.

Brock Bierman: What is the main emphasis of their frustration?

Nadia Mouzykina: A feeling like nothing is changing. So, you know, whether it's the fact that they've seen the same person in government since they were, you know, two years old and now they're 22 years old or the same political party ruling, feeling like their, there's not enough opportunities, particularly youth employment. It's very high across the region. And they're saying that, look, we are, we want a future in our country, but you're not giving us a future in our country. You're not listening to our needs. You're not even listening to our parents' needs and we're going to go. So once you're facing that challenge of I want to stay, but there's nothing here for me, and I don't know how to make it better because I just don't see the entry points into government in any way, shape or form that what happens is they look for other opportunities.

Nadia Mouzykina: They go to Germany, they go to Italy, they go to countries where they think that at least they can find a job and maybe build a life there. And that's not what we want to see. We want people to be involved in their countries. I mean we're seeing some apathy in our own country here, you know, so how can you expect the smaller countries where there's even less opportunity and a lot of ways to, to be different. And so I think it is absolutely crucial. I think the other big challenge is that the people that we are working with were pretty much all born after the fall of the Berlin Wall. They never knew what communism or socialism was like. They don't have a point of reference, they don't know what their parents and grandparents fought for. And to them it's this amorphous past that they've kind of learned about, but not even to that extent. So they don't know that what they have right now may not be the best, but it's probably still better than what they had before. There's still a lot of corruption. There's still a lot of clientelism and there's still a lot of, sort of top down, development, sort of structures within the parties that it's all about the leader and not about the people. So how do you promote representation and accountability to the citizen if there isn't a built in system to accommodate?

Brock Bierman: So on top of that, let me ask you this, and Alex, I'll let, I'll go to you on this. Do you think there's even a larger divide within the political parties themselves? And what I guess I'm getting at is the polarization. So you know, there's the issue of the young political leaders or the young people in these countries not feeling that politicians are listening to them, but then are the politicians not even listening to themselves?

Alex Tarascio: I think it's just not obvious to people how they should get involved in the best place to make some change. I worked in a congressional office I mentioned earlier and people called all day, every single day because I think people
generally know in the United States that if there's some problem that you don't
know how to deal with, it involves government, they usually call their
congressman. And there's a disconnect where, I, I think that's a result of a lot of
the frustrations is that people just don't always know who they can call and who
cares.

Brock Bierman: So talk about how EDYN's going to help solve that.

Alex Tarascio: Our theory behind youth programming and one of the reasons why we do youth
programming is that we start with the very uncontentious premise that in 20
years there's going to be a group of people that are leading these countries.
Obviously they're willing and we can try now to identify who some of those
people are going to be. And a lot of times we can get it right. IRI and NDI have
been around for 35 some odd years and we work with aspiring young people
who are going to be the next generation of leaders or change makers is this
term that we like to use. And so we try and anticipate who those folks are going
to be and then we bring them together to interact with each other to be the
best change makers they possibly can be.

Nadia Mouzykina: Well, you, you asked about political polarization. I mean, some of these people
are from one country, but because they belong to different parties, they don't
generally connect with each other. They don't necessarily talk to each other.
This is a way to bring those sides together and have them talking to people who
are absolutely the opposite of what they are. Maybe have different political
beliefs, social beliefs. You know, we have people representing the LGBT
community who have very rarely interacted with politicians as such, whether
young or old. We have people coming from civil society who are the ones
usually outside the parliament saying, let us in. We want to, you know, we want
to improve the lives of our citizens. Let's work together. And people who can
reach out to them from inside the parliament or from the political party and say,
okay, now we can talk.

Nadia Mouzykina: You know, we have this forum of where we can connect. I mean, when we
brought the first group of 10 who, who formed our leadership council, which is
the guiding body of, of this network that we're looking to build, it was almost
amazing for us to watch this, I don't want to say transformation, but it kind of
was in a week of 10 people who knew nothing about each other, had never met
each other, who had never heard of each other, coming from countries that are
from the former Soviet Union, including Belarus and Azerbaijan, super close
communities to, you know, having an LGBT activists from Serbia or a young
politician from Ukraine who is, you know, part of the, uh, ruling coalitions, you
know, youth block and all of them working together and working across political
ideologies, you know, social norms, etc. To discuss issues that are important to
all of them.

Brock Bierman: So how would you characterize where they started when they got here? Right in
December when they visited the United States for the first time, as opposed to
how they ended up when they left.
Alex Tarascio: They, they're all experienced activists or people that are involved in political parties to one degree or another. And we intentionally chose them that way because these are the people that are going to be determining the direction of this, of this thing that we're supporting this network for at least the next two years. And then they'll hand it off to another group who will do the same. So they needed to have a certain level of experience because they were young people. And this is one thing that surprised me coming in. Because I hadn't previously worked on too many youth programs because they were young. They didn't need a long icebreaker session where people take a long time to warm up to each other and decide if this is somebody they want to trust. That happened really fast, which is a, um, an element of youth programming that I'm now going to rely on.

Alex Tarascio: And it makes it kind of a breath of fresh air to see these people come in and just instantly try and find where they share commonalities with someone else. So where they were when they started is kind of eager and interested to see what we're going to ask of them. And when they left, they understood the gravity of what we were asking of them, which was thrusting a lot of responsibility on them. We are asking them to devote a lot of time and a lot of energy because, you know, once our support has gone, I don't know when that will be, but this is a five year program and if it doesn't get extended, then we, we have the assumption that when this is done, it's done and these people will want to carry this initiative on their own. Now maybe that won't be the case, but if we have that assumption, then they know that going in that they have to carry this thing.

Brock Bierman: Well listen, I mean at the end of the day it's all about sustainability, right? It's all about how you carry on yourself. It's not a handout. It's a hand up and it's, it's, I'm, I'm glad to hear that. But when I, when I and I did have the opportunity to meet them before or just as they arrived and then just as they left and I, I agree. I was struck by their, the positive outlook that they had from each other and how they were actually feeding off the energy from one another and how they actually said that the, the barriers that they felt would be a taller than they were able to if you will get over were easily obtained during the very short time they were here. I'm really, really excited about their enthusiasm and their, just the positive, positive enthusiasm that they displayed during their time here. So tell me a little bit about the path forward and what the next year looks like. Tell me a little bit about any ongoing activities. You'd mentioned North Macedonia is coming up and there's going to be another 40 plus or minus new participants that are going to join the leadership council. And then what's, what's beyond that?

Nadia Mouzykina: Well, maybe I'll start with, with the immediate future. So, correct. We had selected the initial 10 to help ground this network. They were the people that were responsible for creating the values and principles document, figuring out what they want to see as the vision of this network, figuring out the types of people they want to join this network. Um, and we as one of the first steps, we actually did our recruitment to select the larger network. So adding in about 40 to 45 new participants who will be part of the network for the next year and
then become alumni, um, in the, in the following years and this group, um, as
the first activity where all these 50-ish people are going to meet each other will
be happening at the end of April in North Macedonia. We’re putting them
together in a hotel where they will have four days to gather all day, every day to
not only get to know each other, but build the network and build the friendships
and relationships that will help sustain the network, but also get practical
training in certain skills.

Nadia Mouzykina: You know, beyond just leadership, but whether it’s partnerships, developments,
so that they can sustain the network further, whether it’s public speaking or
media, or information, we’re going to be talking about topics such as malign
influence and disinformation because a lot of these countries are looking at
that, youth immigration and some other issues. And one of the greatest things
has been is that we really, again, made an emphasis that this is your event. We
are here to help. Of course, you know, both NDI and IRI have staff in these
countries and are doing a lot of the logistical work, because, you know, they just
don’t have the presence that they need yet. But developing the agenda that
stems from them. We had guidance, you know, kind of thinking through, okay,
well what sessions would be most valuable?

Nadia Mouzykina: And we will be using pretty much internal NDI and IRI a staff to do a lot of the
development because of the expertise that they have. Um, we will be bringing
in a couple of leaders from Europe to talk about some of the success stories that
already exists to serve as an inspiration. And one of the goals, well we have
several the goals for this event. Obviously the sort of the, the launch of the
network as a full network. But also we want to see at the end of this, you know,
one week event, what they come up with as next steps to collaborate. So what
other events would they like to hold together? What other skills based training
they would like to see because those things we can provide or we can link them
with other groups including other programming that both institutes do and our
other partners.

Nadia Mouzykina: What we can offer them because we want this to be really, again, helping us
help them if they need, if they want to see, you know, what youth
entrepreneurship looks like, we can connect them to people who are working
on that. We want them to form groups. Not only, you know, across countries,
but also, you know, if there are civil society activists working on a similar issue,
this is their chance to maybe help each other. And because we will also be
bringing one or two people from, from, EU member states, you know, the states
that have already gone through the transition but are also facing a lot of the
similar challenges. That would be a great way for them to also talk about, okay,
well, you know, we’re all looking to join the EU, but what should we be
prepared for? You know, what are some of the challenges that maybe as our
countries go through the process, we can learn from you and not make the
same mistakes.

Brock Bierman: Great. So tell me what’s beyond North Macedonia? Tell me what that looks like.
I understand there’s going to be an event in Berlin in November?
Alex Tarascio: 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. and the, so the, what's next for the EDYN network is we're going to do an event in, in Berlin around that, around that occasion, and as a capstone to the year. So that North Macedonia will be them all meeting for the first time. And then in Berlin, that will be them all meeting for the end of the year. And then, the following year we will recruit a, or we will find in a new group of people who are talented. Some of the same people will stick around, but we hit and we built in an age function to the network so that if you're older than 29 and then you'll graduate out and then you'll become an alumni and then however many people, maybe we still have 40 out of the 50 that remain, then we'll find another 10 who are the best people that we can find from each of these countries. And they will come in to join again and we'll do another event for the first opening event of the network. And then we kind of rinse and repeat throughout the year.

Brock Bierman: So here's a question I have for both of you. What does success look like in five years?

Nadia Mouzykina: I think ideally, we can walk away in five years and see that there is a functioning network of political leaders, young political leaders who continue to grow in whatever way that may be. Even if it splinters into two smaller networks, maybe, you know, one that's more focused on, you know, Eurasia, one that's focused in Europe, but there's still some sort of interaction between the two. That would also be okay. I think whichever, whichever network that takes shape, but naturally and sustainably, that will be a success because again, we can give them the tools, we can give them the skills, we can bring them together. But if it, if it doesn't take shape organically, there nothing will.

Alex Tarascio: In five years, the kinds of people that were able to bring in the kinds of of values that, that we as IRI and NDI are able to provide these people since I don't want it to be a waste of their time. I want it to be the best possible use of their valuable time that it can be. That I would want membership as part of EDYN to be something that's seen as prestigious. That when they are seeing other people in other countries who maybe they don't know, maybe in a few years, they're in a position of hiring some young applicant to be an intern for them and they see that that person was part of EDYN and they say, Oh wow, I know what that means. I know that this person comes with a certain set of values that they've interacted a lot with people from across borders and that they share, you know, my worldview, this is a network that is grounded in people who want to be involved in politics and make change in the best way they possibly can. These are people who want to win, but not so much that they want to win at the cost of the devalue each other at disrespecting each other and have kind of crossing that line into the kind of politics that turns people off. One of the ways that we try and get there with, with the project now, and this is a conversation that you and I have had an ongoing way and I'm still trying to answer is really is how to make this into the network that we're really envisioning is adding a component of historical memory so that this generation is grounded in the struggles that the last generation fought.
Alex Tarascio: That, you know, when I was a child there were democracy freedom fighters that knew exactly why they wanted to live in a democracy. And now I think, I think people have lost the story of that a little bit. So we try and have an element of historical memory in the events that we have. We're doing it in, in this event, North Macedonia. We did it in the first event that we did in December. We brought all of the leadership council to Gettysburg to show all of these, all of these participants what the consequences of of democracy falling short. What happens when people can't compromise, when they, when, when there's nothing left to talk about and you have to pick up arms and fight. And our participants from Bosnia and Serbia know exactly what that looks like. It looks a little different in every country. But in that case, every single one of those people was shocked and moved by the American experience that is, is still very fresh with the US civil war. And so that element looks different every time we do an event. But it's really important to Nadia and I to figure out how to introduce that so that we can have this sobering example that sets the tone for when we bring these people together. It's not just about the skills they are going to gain, it's not just about winning, it's also about in these are the consequences if democracy doesn't work or when it doesn't work. And, and to avoid that. So how do I define success is keeping that, that ethic in there so that this is something where people come together to take a step back from there, their political battles home, and to look at politics in a slightly different way before they do go back home and try just as hard as they possibly can to get their policy outcomes they want.

Brock Bierman: Well, you know, we've all heard that negative campaigning if you will, or just a negative approach to politics is the only way to move the needle. Right. We've all heard that. Do you think that the young political leaders that are part of EDYN feel like there's a way to make a more positive approach move the needle?

Nadia Mouzykina: I think so. I think so. I think they're specifically the kind of people that don't like the negative aspect and are looking for ways to do it in a positive light. You know, look at, look at things that are important to look at, things that can bring people together rather than divide them.

Brock Bierman: It's hard. It is hard. It's very hard.

Nadia Mouzykina: It's very hard. But they, you know, they're ambitious. So we can, we can only support them in their, in their efforts and maybe, you know, five years from now. Um, another success can be is that as we're looking across the countries that we're working with, um, and we look at, you know, the rosters on the parliamentary website or you know, who the leaders are of the top civil society organizations, we can see some of those names in there. Definitely.

Brock Bierman: Well, Nadia, Alex, thank you very much for being here today and thank you for participating with this interview. We're excited about EDYN and as we move ahead we're looking forward to seeing you in North Macedonia.
Brock Bierman: And now we're going to hear from Juela Hamati who is a member of EDYN. She's also the vice president. She is a dynamic leader and it's real privilege to have met her and talked to her on a number of occasions and I'm thrilled that she is part of the network and I'm looking forward to hearing what her perspectives are on EDYN and where it's going to go in the future.

Juela Hamati: So we are a group of people or young people who, who care about our countries and about our generation, we try to change things in different ways. For example, I personally try to change them by being involved politically. But I have also colleagues in EDYN who try to change things by being in civil society or being NGO representatives. And I think that this is what makes us different because in Europe there are many youth organizations and I've been asked this question a lot like why are you different? And I think that none of the organizations is as diverse as we are and our diversity is our strength in this case. And even though we have different ideologies, we have some common problems and issues that in our, in our respective countries that disturb us all. And if we find which these issues are, then maybe we'll try to find a solution and solve the problems in the end. If you would have asked me like maybe a couple of years ago, I would have said me working with people from different ideologies is impossible, but I would have been totally wrong because it is impossible to change things if you don't cooperate with people who don't think same like you do. It's, it's, it's impossible to ignore each other. I mean, if we ignore each other, we cannot, we cannot achieve anything. So, it is crucial to work with, with people from different social and political groups. I think that EDYN will be a great help are in every country to, to address and engage people to be active and solve the problems they have. This is not just only my, my vision, but it's also the USAID, and your partners at IRI and NDI vision to expand the network. And I'm sure that in the next couple of years we will be the most powerful youth network in Europe. And if things go well, maybe we can expand it also in other continents and share our experience. One of the things we did when we were in the states was going to Gettysburg in Pennsylvania. That was impressive. You know. I mean, all of us know a little bit about it. We spent the whole day learning about it. And it is, what I took back with me home is that we should not take things for granted. You know, freedom or democracy or liberty should not be taken for granted. It was not easy to achieve any of these values. And we should not take them for granted today. But we should fight for them everyday in our way. But the important thing is to fight, not just care because we all care about things going on, but the important thing is to act and do something about it. Because caring is not enough.