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Travel diary - Rebecca Harms, Greens/EFA Co-President's visit to Eastern Europe

Building the Green fight back against fossil and nuclear energy

What an intense week: Warsaw, Katowice, Prague, Paks and Budapest. Many wonderful encounters, interesting conversations and events. In all three countries I visited during my Central Europe tour (27th to 31st October) I met committed, highly motivated Greens. They are the ones we need in these decisive times and dynamic societies! During the whole trip we focused on energy questions and the future of the European Union in times of crisis. The journey began in Warsaw with a meeting with experts that focused on the state of relations between the EU and Ukraine “EU-Ukraine relations after Eastern Partnership Vilnius Summit” co-organised by the Institute of Public Affairs and the Böll Foundation. This discussion once again confirmed the group’s view that the EU must not sign a treaty of association with Ukraine as long as Yulia Timoschenko is still behind bars. We need first for the Ukrainian government to make a commitment to the rule of law.

The second event in Warsaw dealt with “The future of EU integration”. The panel discussion took place at the University in Warsaw and was co-organized by several partners, including Kultura Liberalna. Here, I underlined the important role that the Central European countries play in renewing the European Union; a fact I also emphasised in the discussion I had with the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Radoslaw Sikorski. We also discussed the upcoming International Climate Conference in Warsaw and I recommended he join our COP conference “Citizens Energy for a good Climate”.

A particularly exciting excursion took us, the next day, to the coal-mining region of Katowice. We spent a day in the town with Agnieszka Grzybek and Margolzata Tkacz-Janik of the Polish Greens – who by the way is doing her upmost to advance the Green agenda in a rather conservative Regional Council which she has had a seat on since 2010. Indeed, many of the region's political decision-makers cannot yet see an alternative to coal. To them, innovation and climate protection appear more of a threat than an opportunity. We used examples from the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia to show that a coal-based socio-economic system can indeed be transformed. And there were positive signals as well, such as our meeting with women who are campaigning for more female empowerment in politics ("Energy for female citizens"), and a visit to a low-energy office building.



After a long six-hour train journey we finally arrived in Prague where I had the pleasure to meet Ondrej Liska and his colleagues from the Czech Greens. At the Institute of International Relations I participated in a Round Table on "Prague and Berlin on a new EU Course?". The debate revolved around the so-called opposition between "national" and "European" levels and the EU-wide impact of domestic election results. We finished our Central Europe tour in Hungary. I was particularly happy about the fact that activists and Parliamentary Members of both the green LMP party and the new PM party accompanied me on my visit to the Paks nuclear power plant. All are united by the struggle against nuclear energy. This is something we underscored in a joint press conference on the shore of the Danube. In terms of energy policy and profitability, expanding Paks would be sheer madness especially when you think about the accident that occurred in 2003!



We also had a very interesting debate on the freedom of the press in Hungary “Media Freedom – A European fundamental right at risk?” at the Central European University and co-organised by the Böll Foundation. Hungarian reporter Attila Mong was clear and explicit: the media legislation looks ugly on paper. But for the journalists on the ground, it looks even grimmer. We need an authority like a “Copenhagen Commission” at European level to monitor and guarantee fundamental rights such as freedom of the press and freedom of speech in all EU member states. We need to follow up on the report of my Green colleague Rui Tavares and continue to monitor the situation in Hungary and other EU member states very closely. Thank you to everyone in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, to the Greens, the Böll Foundation and all the others for their warm welcome and for organizing everything and making all these interesting meetings and events possible!

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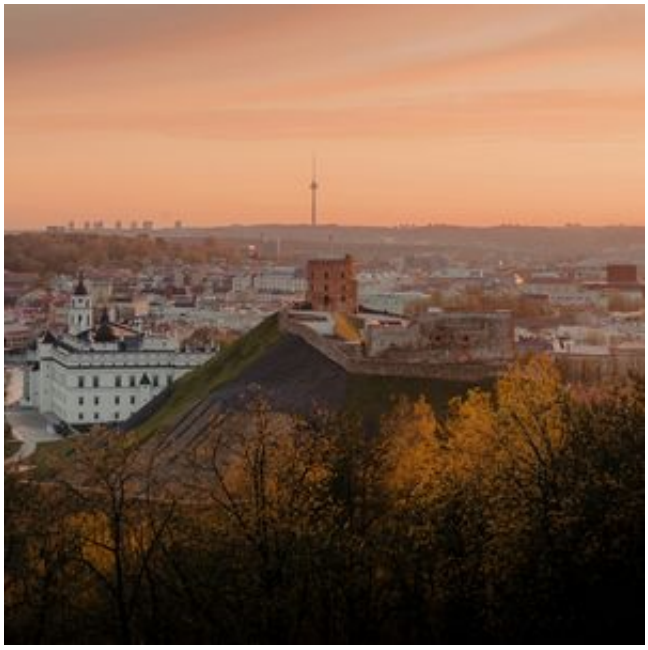
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