

The 15th International Youth Leadership Conference – Conference Report

By Irina Kolodizner, February 2008

As the international political landscape becomes consistently more volatile and the divide between the developed and developing world grows, never before have vision, direction and leadership in both national and international political arenas been so crucial.

It is in recognition of this that Civic Concepts International organises the International Youth Leadership Conference, the IYLC, the 15th edition of which I attended in Prague in January 2008.

Introducing the IYLC

According to Sarah Saleh, a participant at the 11th IYLC, the IYLC and other such conferences are cross-cultural forums for educating tomorrow's leaders about contemporary global issues and fostering learning and awareness beyond individuals' own social and national boundaries.

The aim of the IYLC is to bring together aspiring youth from all over the world, gathering them together in a single forum and facilitating a vibrant exchange of ideas, knowledge and divergent perspectives through a structured conference program.

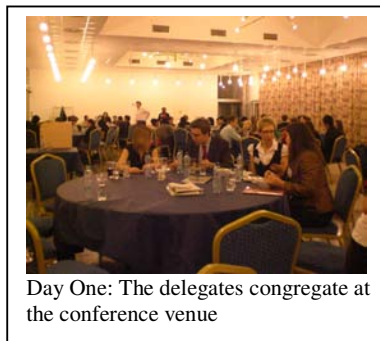
Prague

The venue for the 15th IYLC was beautiful Prague, situated in the region formerly dubbed 'Bohemia'. As the capital of the Czech Republic, Prague represents the culmination of European politics, situated at the cusp, both geographically and politically, between Western and Eastern Europe. It is also a cultural hot-pot, playing host to visitors of various nationalities, ranging from native Czechs, to Slovaks, Germans, Italians to name a few, and of course the odd Australian.

The Conference

The cultural diversity pervading Prague set the perfect stage for the 2008 conference, where 96 delegates from approximately 33 countries congregated, debated and made life-long friends.

Highlighting the cultural diversity of the conference is the story of my arrival in Prague. Having been kindly picked up at Prague's main bus terminal and escorted to the conference venue by the IYLC logistics director, Tomas Lapacek, I was fortunate enough to meet another group



Day One: The delegates congregate at the conference venue



Day One: Exploring Prague before the conference

of early arrivals, some of whom subsequently became my room mates and all of whom became close friends – Oksana from Ukraine, Joelle from Lebanon, Ashley and Ivan from the US, Elvira from Russia, Rohan from Canada...as well as the 11 other Australians at the conference. The assortment of nationalities reflects the focus of the conference upon diversity and cultural exchange.

The fast pace set at the outset of the conference, reflected in the story of my arrival, was maintained throughout the conference, which required delegates, who were separated into multicultural groups, to engage with a hefty program divided according to three focuses – diplomacy, media and international law. The core of the conference program consisted of embassy visits, guest presentations by high profile speakers and three political simulations – an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council, proceedings of the International Criminal Court and a session of the European Parliament.

The days were filled with interesting events, exposing delegates to divergent perspectives on topical European political issues, such as the lack of free press in numerous, primarily ex-Soviet, states as discussed in presentations by the senior management of Radio Free Europe, as well as recent issues surrounding the removal of Germany's borders with Poland and the Czech Republic, as discussed by the German ambassador to the Czech Republic during a visit to the German embassy in Prague. A stand-out presentation was that given by Simon Panek, president of the People in Need Foundation, an NGO founded in the wake of the fall of communism in the Czech Republic which now operates globally, discussing changing attitudes to civil society, the notion of global leadership and the many alternative paths and contexts in which such leadership manifests itself.

The evenings, after dinner, were occupied by preparation for and engagement in the three simulations. The first simulation, an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council, required delegates to engage with the issue of nuclear disarmament in Iran – a currently topical and contentious issue on the world stage. The second simulation, a mock International Criminal Court tribunal, involved discussion of the jurisdiction of the court to try a specific war criminal for human rights abuses. The culmination of the conference's evening program was, however, the third simulation, a model European Parliament where the previously separated groups of students each represented particular political parties who lobbied each other to secure amendments to draft environmental legislation. It was in this simulation that the leadership and negotiation skills of all the delegates were put to the test. The proceedings of the European Parliament simulation took place in the Czech Senate, adding authentic political flavour to the simulation.

Socialising and Sightseeing

The simulations and associated activities reflected the serious aspects of the conference, providing delegates with an opportunity to hone their ability to work in teams, their communication skills and their leadership



Days Two and Three: An array of speakers – above: the German ambassador to the Czech Republic with his attaché, below: a panel of speakers at Price Waterhouse Coopers in Prague including Vaclav Bartuska, Czech Foreign Ambassador for Energy Security and Radek Spicar, Skoda Auto External Affairs Director



Making new friends

skills. However, the conference was not without its fun. Throughout the week of the conference there were ample social gatherings, opportunities for sightseeing and even group preparation sessions were as much about making new friends and mixing with as many new people and faces as possible, as they were about preparing for simulations and contemplating topical political issues. After the evening simulation sessions, delegates congregated to explore Prague, getting to know each other socially. It was this mix of the serious and the social which made the conference such a wholistically satisfying endeavour.

In sum, the 15th IYLC was culturally, socially and intellectually an interesting and stimulating experience. It offers something for everyone – ranging from foregrounding key modern political issues for the budding politicians and future leaders among us to providing an opportunity to meet and cultivate relationships with political and business leaders as well as students from all over the world. Attendance at the conference is definitely something I would recommend to everyone – as an invaluable experience which cultivates leadership, communication skills, and, of course, international contacts.



The Last Day: Combining work and play as the delegates socialise with each other and the conference's sponsors on the Price Waterhouse Coopers balcony in Prague

