

Founder Spotlight - Ariane Olschak, Farah Saad, Marianna Mkrtchyan and Philipp Schmidtmayr from frida - Impact Hub Vienna

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Since 2015, we have gained completely new perspectives on the topic of barriers to inclusive societies. While we are more aware of the existing hurdles and manage to build bridges in the job market, we are also still innovating the best possible solutions to making the entry obstacles easier to overcome. For a person who arrives in Austria without knowing the language or the culture, the first contact with Austrian legal system and paperwork can be really tough. This is why social impact startups like [frida](#) are helping to increase inclusivity.

frida offers free and independent legal counselling for refugees and migrants, combining the two areas of law. Today we are happy to share an e-mail interview with the co-founders of frida: Ariane Olschak, Farah Saad, Marianna Mkrtchyan and Philipp Schmidtmayr.

frida is also [one of the ventures participating](#) in the [2020 found! program](#) by [Deloitte Austria](#) and Impact Hub Vienna.

Who's behind frida?

Our key team members of co-founders of frida are Ariane Olschak, Farah Saad, Marianna Mkrtchyan and Philipp Schmidtmayr.

Ariane Olschak is frida's chairlady and legal expert. She has a Law Degree from the University of Vienna. Ariane has been working in different NGOs dealing with Asylum Law and family reunifications, as for example the Red Cross, for the last four years. Before joining the Red Cross, Ariane had been the head of the legal department of Asyl in Not for a year. She is currently working at ARGE Rechtsberatung.

Farah Saad has a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science as well as Transcultural Communication. Currently, she is doing her Master's Degree in Clinical Social Work. She has been active as a volunteer in several organisations and fields, such as tuition projects for asylum-seekers and refugees, legal aid and projects for vulnerable women*.

Marianna Mkrtchyan is also part of frida's legal team. Born in Armenia, she went to school in Vienna and Brussels and is currently studying law at the University of Vienna. During her studies, she has gained four years of experience working as a legal advisor at the NGO Asyl in Not. Growing up in an international environment and studying as a foreign student, facing issues, such as limited access to the labour market, she provides an important insight for frida.

Philipp Schmidtmayr studied Law at the University of Vienna and has four years of experience in legal counselling in alien and asylum law. Having not only worked for several NGOs, but also for law firms, he has gained an even broader

insight into legal affairs.



(Top row, left to right) Farah Saad (frida), Ariane Olschak (frida), Petra Aji (FoodStories), Rosa Haltmeyer (Vienna Hobby Lobby), Leila Salehiravesh (Ahl@n), (Bottom row, left to right) Valerie Mühlenburg (the CONNECTION), Diana Reuchlin (the CONNECTION), Denise Diex (ÖkonoWie?), Jasmin Abou Ahmed (ÖkonoWie). Photo © [Lea Fabienne Photography](#) – [View the press release announcing the 2020 cohort](#)

If you were to explain Frida to a stranger, what would you say?

Frida is an NGO that specializes in asylum and migration law. We are a group of people of different professional backgrounds, such as legal and social workers as well as translators, and we offer free and independent counselling for refugees and migrants. What might be surprising to some is that our clientele is pretty varied – we consult, for example, also EU-citizens, students or people wanting to reunite with their families in Austria.

What was the initial feedback to your startup idea?

We feel that people liked the idea a lot and also understood the general sense of our approach. We were also very soon confronted with questions in regards to our revenue streams, sustainability and recruiting more team members.

How did you meet your co-founders?

Most of us met professionally, though Marianna and Philipp were roommates before we founded frida. We got to know each other because each of us was working in different fields of legal and psychosocial consultation. Because there

was no organization combining these different areas of law (asylum and migration law), we were already working together closely, while being employed at different organizations. We started meeting outside of work and became friends, and that's when the idea of founding frida arose.

What was the decisive impulse to become a social entrepreneur and, finally, a company?

We were all working together before founding frida and were therefore very aware that there was no organization combining our different work fields. So the idea to start a new organization had actually been in our heads for a while.

When the Austrian government announced that starting with 2021, funding for independent counselling for refugees will be cancelled and taken over by a quasi-governmental institution, we made the final decision to take action. Of course, the founding process required a lot of planning – we had to find an office, recruit more team members, set up a website etc. But the motivation was there and we're very glad the idea was realized and the word about frida spread so quickly.

What was the most helpful in your journey to becoming a social impact venture founder?

Our team had absolutely no experience in founding a social business, so it's been difficult at first. We entered the Social Impact Award Program in 2019, where we got to meet many experts on the topic, as well as many peers, who were also in the process of establishing their social business ideas. The program helped us a lot in terms of professionalization, as is the found! program helping us right now.

A very important lesson we learned is to always get as many opinions as possible on issues we're not sure on or experienced enough with and to always stay true to our principles and to who we are as an organization.

As a social entrepreneur, what moments of your job keep you going?

The answer to this question will probably be the same with everyone working in the social field: to see the impact you're achieving with your project.

Since most social businesses are non-profit– with frida maybe being even more of an exception, since we are not aiming to make any profit at all – making an impact is the motivation behind most of our projects. With frida, there is of course a lot of frustration that comes with the fields of asylum and migration, but we get a lot of good feedback from our clients, which plays a big part in staying motivated.

Based on your experience, what legal issues are most common among the people you help?

As said before, our clientele is very diverse and so are the issues that we help them to deal with. At the moment, a very common issue is that of status cancellations.

In 2015, a high number of refugees came to Austria, many of whom now have international protection. For some reason, since around 2018, the authorities

started to terminate that protection for many people and are ordering deportations. This is often not understandable to us as well as our clients, since the situation in their countries of origin is mostly the same as in 2015, if not worse. We support these clients in keeping their protection or applying for long-term residency permits – in these cases it has again proven very useful that we combined asylum and migration law, so we can offer them different alternatives.

The found! program of Deloitte Austria and Impact Hub Vienna entered its fourth round this year. How did you hear about it?

Last year, we were one of the teams to win the Social Impact Award, which is also part of the Impact Hub Vienna. One of our team members, Farah, went to the SIA Summit in Kiev, where she got to meet many other social entrepreneurs. She heard about the found! program there and got very positive feedback on it, so we decided it might be a good fit for us and frida's further development.

Your favourite moment of found! so far?

We very much enjoyed the kick-off, because we had read about the finalists' projects beforehand, but were very curious to meet the members of the individual teams. As happy as we are about our mentors and all the experts offering their expertise to us, a big part of accelerator programs like found! is always connecting and learning from your peers. It was also one of the few times we saw each other in person, since everything is taking place online now, so that was much nicer as well!

COVID-19 changed everything. How do you deal with the new reality?

It does affect us of course – we usually have open consultation, meaning everyone can come without an appointment and just talk to an advisor.

There is no possibility to offer that now. We are of course still reachable for our clients through e-mail and social media and we offer consultation via video chat in emergencies, but we would like to be as accessible to everyone as possible, so we are currently working on even better solutions.

Since the COVID-19 measures have been loosened a bit in May, we can offer more appointments again and not just restrict it to emergencies.

Thank you for taking the time to share the story of frida, Ariane, Farah, Marianna and Philipp! [Good luck with the found! program jury event in June!](#)