



EVENT REPORT

EUROPEAN YOUNG LEADERS SEMINAR (EYL40)

# Extremities!

PARIS 2024



The European Young Leaders (EYL40) programme led by Friends of Europe is a unique, inventive and multi-stakeholder programme that aims to promote a European identity by engaging the continent's most promising talents in initiatives that will shape Europe's future.

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# Introduction

European Young Leaders (EYL40) met in Paris soon after Russia's all-out war on Ukraine entered its third year. **The seminar issued resounding calls for Europe to step up support for Ukraine, recognising that Kyiv's success is crucial for freedom and democracy across Europe.**

Under the title 'Extremities!', the three-day meeting also reflected on the profusion of other problems confronting Europe: **the climate crisis as the planet hurtles towards a series of irreversible tipping points; the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) be a force for good (or bad) in our societies; geopolitical relations in time of war and electoral uncertainties; disinformation and political polarisation; the economics of inequality.**

Despite the abundance of scary subjects, the seminar resonated with messages of hope as the more than 50 pacesetters from 30 countries brainstormed on innovative solutions to Europe's challenges, harnessing their collective talent and experience in wide-ranging fields, from city councils to national parliaments, criminal courts to tennis courts, fintech to glaciology.

**Now in its second decade, the EYL40 programme builds bonds across nationalities, areas of expertise and political viewpoints.** It enables young leaders to engage with decision-makers and gain an appreciation of leadership constraints and policy challenges.

EYL40 aims to stimulate change through creative responses to Europe's challenges and promote inspirational role models to rebuild ties between citizens and policymakers.



*From left to right:*

1. **Jovana Spremo**, Advocacy Director of Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM)
2. **Mary Fitzgerald**, Non-resident scholar of the Middle East Institute and Trustee of Friends of Europe
3. **Luka Mesec**, Slovenian Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity; **Vladimíra Marcinková**, Vice-Chair of the Slovak National Council Committee for European Affairs



# Recommendations

The EYL40 spring seminar produced a range of ideas to be taken forward by the young leaders' network and discussed with European decision-makers, including:

- ● Prioritise support for Ukraine's defence and recovery as the key for defending democracy across the continent.
- ● Expand accountability by using EU funds, to prevent graft and democratic backsliding. Suggested change: "Improve policymakers' accountability when using EU funds, to prevent democratic backsliding and mismanagement.
- ● Claim back national symbols from the extremists, wave the flag for democracy.
- ● Export Sweden's Järvaveckan political event to help bridge gaps within politics and society in other EU countries.
- ● Search for the right regulatory balance to ensure AI is used for good, without impeding innovation and competitiveness.
- ● Engender a culture of youth entrepreneurship by making it okay to take risks and to fail.
- ● Improve climate-change communication to focus on aspects that directly affect people; emphasise how citizens can make a difference; and how the green transition can improve daily life.
- ● Embrace the 15-minute city concept for happier, healthier and more sustainable urban living.
- ● Promote a more coherent European approach to international partnerships.



# Ukraine: “if they lose, we lose.”

With those words, **Vladimíra Marcinková**, Vice-Chair of the Slovak National Council Committee for European Affairs and 2024 EYL40, summed up the spirit of the EYL Paris seminar, which expressed solid and determined support for Ukraine’s resistance more than two years after Russia’s unprovoked attack.

“I support Ukraine and I hope that the whole of Europe can find a way to come together and help them in this very difficult situation,” Marcinková told the gathering. “That is the only way to keep us safe.”

There was a generalised view that only with a successful end to the war, will Europe be able to move forward again to refocus on climate change, economic progress, technological development, geopolitical relations and the other challenges it faces.

“It’s so fundamental. We are not going to deal with all the challenges we face, if we don’t continue to support Ukraine, not as some charity but as part of the defence of our own democracies,” stated **Geert Cami**, Co-Founder and Secretary General of Friends of Europe.

“There is only one issue: Europe is at war,” added **Daumantas Dvilinskas**, Co-Founder and CEO of TransferGo and 2023 EYL40 from Lithuania. “Solving that gives us a chance to do everything else, because, if that room is kept on fire, then the whole house will burn down.”

Several participants underscored the importance of prioritising Europe’s support for Ukraine, to ensure that it wins the war and that it can build a stable and prosperous future within a united Europe.

“Ever since the Ukrainian people started their march towards the Euro-Atlantic institutions many years ago, they have shown that they are really real friends of Europe.

**“Today, in their hour of difficulty, we must show we are real friends of Ukraine: as they say, a friend in need is a friend indeed”**

said **Jan Emeryk Rościszewski**, Poland’s Ambassador to France, who hosted the first day of the seminar.

Europe’s support is even more vital given the United States’ wavering position where Ukraine aid is blocked in Congress and the prospect of a second Trump presidency triggers more doubts about US commitment to Europe.

Despite its shortcomings, **Anastasiya Shapochkina**, President and Founder of the Eastern Circles geo-economics think tank and Lecturer at Sciences Po Paris, recognised that Europe is currently the best friend Ukraine has.

**“In spite of the challenges [...] Europe is doing amazingly well as a friend of Ukraine”**

she told a roundtable debate. “I cannot imagine a better friend for Ukraine, especially as America is, de facto, dumping Ukraine entirely.”



**Anastasiya Shapochkina**, President and Founder of the Eastern Circles geo-economics think tank and Lecturer at Sciences Po Paris

**Olga Rudenko**, Editor-in-Chief of the Kyiv Independent and 2024 EYL40, gave a briefing on reporting in wartime. “Trying to do independent journalism in Ukraine has always been challenging, but then the war happened and it presented a completely new challenge,” she said.

Beyond the physical dangers from Russian missile and drone attacks, are the challenge of remaining independent and the dilemmas journalists face when confronted with sensitive stories that risk having a negative impact on the war effort or Ukraine’s international image.

“There is still more freedom than you would expect in these conditions,” Rudenko added. “Something that is the cornerstone of my thinking is that there are people in my country who are fighting and dying essentially to

have the right to define themselves as [...] not living by [Russia’s] values, there is no free speech in Russia, the government controls everything.”

As Paris prepares for this summer’s Olympics, Ari-Pekka Liukkonen, Olympic swimmer, Member of the Jyväskylä City Council and 2024 EYL40 from Finland said Russian athletes should be banned. “Russians are using sports as a weapon to build their national identity,” he said. “Sport in Russia is part of their propaganda machine and part of their politics.”



From left to right: **Vladimíra Marcinková**, Vice-Chair of the Slovak National Council Committee for European Affairs; **Olga Rudenko**, Editor-in-Chief of the Kyiv Independent





*From left to right:*

1. **Ahmed Abdirahman**, Founder & CEO of Järvaveckan
2. **Frédéric Mazzella**, Founder and President, BlaBlaCar
3. **Ivan Lesay**, Head of Strategy and M&A at ESCO Slovensko ; **Katarzyna Nawrot**, Professor at the Poznan University of Economics and Business, and member Committee of Future Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences Committee of Future Studies Poland 2000 Plus; **Daumantas Dvilinskas**, Co-Founder and CEO of TransferGO
4. **Jan Rościszewski**, Ambassador of Poland to France; **Geert Cami**, Co-founder and Secretary General at Friends of Europe



# An age of extremes

Two years of war in Europe has not meant that Europe's other problems have gone away. A string of crises, from the Great Recession to COVID-19, through the war in Ukraine and subsequent cost-of-living, spiral have left voters disorientated. As European Parliament elections loom in June, populist politicians are on the march from Lisbon to Amsterdam to Bratislava. From geopolitical shifts to bewildering technological advances or disrupted weather systems, events are pushing citizens searching for reassuring certainties.

“The chairs are flying around,” warned **Luka Mesec**, Slovenian Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity and 2024 EYL40. “The real problem in our times is the feeling of losing control, a sense of powerlessness. A sense that there are forces in our world that are out of our hands, and out of our control.”

The lack of stability caused by the climate crisis, political radicalisation, and technological change is what's making the chairs fly around. At the same time, politicians have to focus on the issues that affect voters, like security, healthcare and the cost of living.

**Pascal Lamy**, Vice-President of Paris Peace Forum, Coordinator of the Jacques Delors Think Tanks, former Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and EU Commissioner, Trustee of Friends of Europe, highlighted four challenges to which incoming European Commissioners and MEPs will have to give urgent attention: the war in Ukraine, defence, the next enlargement of the EU and climate change.

**“We are in a time of formidable changes, including for the European Union, and whether the next cycle will be able to cope with that is absolute crucial”**

Lamy said. He underlined the need for Europe to create positive narratives to rebuild trust among voters and overcome the populist appeal of extremist parties.



Europe should build on the success of its united action in the face of recent crises, contended **Chloé Ridel**, Co-founder of Mieux Voter and spokesperson of the French Socialist Party.

“We responded to those crises by building more solidarity instead of division and this was a big change in the history of Europe. We were able to show to citizens that Europe was a real added value in face of the epidemic, in case of the climate crisis [...] and in the case of the war in Ukraine,” Ridel told an open session attended by citizens of Paris. “We have to build on what we did in response of all those crises we had to make that the normal way of acting in Europe.”

Beside government action, **Ahmed Abdirahman**, Founder and CEO of Järvaveckan and 2024 EYL40 from Sweden, showed how civil society can do its bit in responding to political challenges. He explained how his four-day Järvaveckan event draws 60,000 people each year for a festival of politics and diversity, designed build bridges within society and encourage political engagement and dialogue between indigenous Swedes and communities with immigrant backgrounds.

“If we are segregated, if we don’t talk to each other, then the people feel the country is being overrun, and there’s a feeling of no belonging, a feeling of not being part of the country, so we have to have a dialogue,” Abdirahman explained.

Questions of migration and relations with countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America were at the heart of a vibrant exchange of views with **Chrysoula Zacharopoulou**, French Minister of State for Development and International Partnerships, attached to the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, co-chair of the Strategy Groups of the Africa-Europe Foundation.

She underscored the importance of rethinking of traditional development practices to construct mutually beneficial partnerships. Europe has to develop a coherent approach to deal with a fast-changing world in which China and Russia have emerged as global competitors. “If we want to be a geopolitical Europe, we have to have one voice and one vision, and this is what is missing at the moment [...] global challenges need global solutions.”

Europe’s relations with the world were further developed in a series of roundtable discussions led by **Michał Piotrowski**, Director of the Policy Department of the Polish Embassy in Paris; **Holy Ranaivozanany**, Deputy Executive Director at the Africa-Europe Foundation; and **Dalia Ghanem**, Senior Analyst at the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS).



**Chrysoula Zacharopoulou**, French Minister of State for Development and International Partnerships, attached to the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Co-Chair of the Strategy Group of the Africa-Europe Foundation

While economic inequalities between countries have narrowed, the gap within nations – by some counts – has widened and plays into voter discontent. The Paris meeting held a session dedicated to the role of taxation in combatting inequality and generating societal good with input from **Annette Alstadsæter**, Professor at the School of Economics and Business at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Director of Skatteforsk – Centre for Tax Research, and Project Director at the EU Tax Observatory; and **David Bradbury**, Deputy-Director at the OECD Centre for Tax Policy and Administration.



**Marko Maraš**, Founder at [www.seljak.me](http://www.seljak.me)

The EU has to take care to ensure its pre-accession support does not fuel graft, complacency and mismanagement, warned **Marko Maraš**, 2024 EYL40 from Montenegro and Founder of Seljak.me, which supports farmers through innovation and sustainability. “The EU risks to spoil the enlargement candidate countries by pouring in too much money [...]. That is creating problems for the long term” he warned. “You keep spoiling small groups of people who are spending this money.”

Hungary’s example shows that the EU also needs tighter control on how money is distributed among countries already in the bloc, added **Péter Pető**, Editor-in-Chief of 24.hu and 2024 EYL40. “Orbán built an authoritarian regime in the centre of Europe from the money of the EU,” he recalled.





From left to right:

1. **Holy Ranaivozanany**, Deputy Executive Director at the Africa–Europe Foundation
2. **Alina Șerban**, Roma Actress, theatre and film director
3. **Clemens Gotz**, former Mayor of the Municipality of Althengstett; **Ayman Mhanna**, Executive Director of the Samir Kassir Foundation; **Lubomila Jordanova**, CEO and Co-Founder of Plan A
4. **Ryvan Alshebl**, Mayor of Ostelsheim
5. **Dalia Ghanem**, Senior Analyst Middle East and North Africa, conflict research and analysis, EU–MENA relations at the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)
6. **Michał Piotrowski**, Director of the Policy Department at the Embassy of Poland to France



# Meltdown

For a session searching for the ‘the best way to tackle eco-anxiety’ the opening words from **Heidi Sevestre**, Glaciologist, Deputy Secretary of the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) and 2024 EYL40, were hardly reassuring:

**“What I get to see on daily basis is truly a world that is collapsing, there are not two ways to describe it. It is absolutely terrifying”**

The French scientist based in northern Norway described the Arctic’s rush towards tipping points where melting sea ice and thawing permafrost will generate irreversible consequences – from surging ocean levels to erratic wind patterns. Action is more than urgent and educating people to take that action is the best way to combat climate anxiety, Sevestre said. To do that, politicians, scientists and activists have to demystify the science and show people the real-time benefits of climate action.

“We definitely need to reconnect [...] to make it tangible for policymakers, and on a very local level,” she told the group. “We definitely have a huge challenge of scaling down this knowledge, to make sure people really understand where it is going to hit them and how they can best prepare for the things to come.”

Positive approaches are the way ahead.

**“The only thing that works to motivate people to take action [...] is actually positivity”**

agreed **Lubomila Jordanova**, 2024 EYL40 and Founder and CEO of Plan A, which develops software helping businesses reduce emissions. “The only way to motivate people is to make sure that they feel they are part of the solution [...] tell them: ‘you have the chance to save humanity’.”

Sevestre said her experience working with young people gave her hope for the future. The world has to listen to young people’s ideas and give them the tools to act. “The kids I work with, they have the best ideas; they are incredible, they are full of ideas; they are fully aware of this and yet they are not crippled by climate anxiety. They are putting words into actions,” she said. “They are kicking our arses and that is exactly what we need.”

Taking a positive approach to sustainable lifestyles, the seminar held a session on the concept of the 15-minute city, which promotes urban districts where shops, schools, parks, health centres and other amenities are no more than a quarter-of-an-hour away by foot or bike.

“It’s about liberty, living the local lifestyle,” said **Annika Lundkvist**, Founder of Pedestrian Space and the Global Walkability Correspondents Network, PhD student researching the 15-minute city concept in Warsaw. “The 15-minute city is not about trapping you in your neighbourhood so you cannot leave,” she insisted.

The theme was taken up by **Florent Pratlong**, Senior Lecturer at the Sorbonne School of Management and Deputy Director of the Research Chair ‘Entrepreneurship Territory Innovation’ at IAE Paris.

“The idea of the 15-minute city was to connect time and space in the same area,” he explained. “We have to imagine a new model of the city. We don’t need smart cities, we don’t need cities connected to technology, we need cities where people are happy, everything is about happiness in the city. Everything is about a living city.”

To illustrate the French capital’s success in developing sustainable housing and mobility, Pratlong took the group on a walking tour of the Clichy-Batignolles district in the north of Paris where an ‘eco-district’ has been constructed around a central park on land previously occupied by railway warehouses.





*From left to right:*

1. **Heidi Sevestre**, Glaciologist and Deputy Secretary, Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP)
2. **Florent Pratlong**, Director of the Sorbonne Management School and Associate Director of Chaire ETI at the IAE Paris Sorbonne School
3. **Alessandro Fusacchia**, Vice-President for Social Impact at Translated; **Disa Jironet Loewe**, Public Prosecutor at the Dutch Public Prosecution Service
4. **Henrietta Moon**, Co-Founder and CEO of Carbo Culture; **Besa Luci**, Editor-in-Chief of Kosovo 2.0







1. **Sally Hayden**, Journalist, Author and Photographer at the Irish Times
2. **Steve Zammit Lupi**, Councillor at the Haż-Żebbuġ Local Council
3. **Nicolas Brien**, Entrepreneur, Chairman and Board Member





# Deliver us from evil

**Loubna Bouarfa**, Chairwoman of the Innovation Board at Envision Pharma Group and 2022 EYL40, suggested technology could be on the verge of a simple, but effective way of stopping global warming. “If we ask AI to solve the climate crisis, it will say ‘kill all humans’ because that is how you solve the climate crisis today.”

That was a suitably apocalyptic contribution to a session that contended AI is ‘the new god of all things’ and asked how to exploit its power for the general good.

Beyond that warning, Bouarfa – whose company harnesses the power of data for successful healthcare outcomes – has less gloomy view of AI. “I believe, now that we have AI, we finally can connect with that part of us that we call soul or consciousness, which has been neglected so much, because we have been so much focused on the brain,” she said.

Much of the debate featured AI’s potential to be a force for good or evil. The answer, speakers, said would ultimately depend on humans, not machines. “This technology is a tool [...] it is mainly a tool used by humans

and when you make it accessible for more people, they can use it in whatever way they want, good or bad,” said **Sarah Bérubé**, Policy Analyst at the OECD AI Policy Observatory.

The examples range from the surge in AI generated child sexual exploitation on the internet and AI guided attack drones, to the rapid advances AI is bringing to the fight against cancer and other diseases.

“AI is basically like fire, you can use it as a campfire, to cook, or to burn another person’s house down, so it’s about harnessing AI in the right way,” said **Anders Storgaard**, City Councillor in Frederiksberg, Denmark and 2024 EYL40.

The challenge facing regulators is getting the balance right between making AI safe and avoiding concentrations of power, without cramping Europe’s competitiveness at the cutting edge of the latest tech revolution.

“It’s the responsibility of regulators here in Europe to regulate AI based on a risk-based approach,” stated



From left to right: **Sarah Bérubé**, Policy Analyst at the OECD AI Policy Observatory; **Olivier Oullier**, Neurotech Entrepreneur, Investor & Brain Scientist, Founder & CEO of Inclusive Brains; **Loubna Bouarfa**, Chairwoman of the AI Innovation Board at Envision Pharma Group



**Johannes Tralla**, Journalist at the Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR); **Anders E. Storgaard**, City Councillor of Frederiksberg

**Olivier Oullier**, Neurotech Entrepreneur, Investor and Brain Scientist, Founder and CEO of Inclusive Brains. He too noted that, in the end, fallible humanity is in charge of what AI is used for. “This is a human product and there is human responsibility [...] there is no kid that I know in societies in G7 countries that earns enough money at seven or eight to buy a cell phone and a data plan: if kids are stuck to TikTok it’s because of me, parent, that put that machine in their hand. It’s my responsibility.”

Education is key to making sure citizens can optimise the potential of AI, while being able to spot its use to abuse or deceive. To that end, Storgaard said educators needed to quickly prioritise what they teach, even that means moving away from some traditional subjects and methods. “It’s nice to have the skill to ride a horse, but I would imagine it was bit more important 300 years ago, than it is now,” he noted.

## “Doesn’t AI change the things we need to teach people?”

Turning to the question of AI-generated media fakes, **Chris Umé**, Co-Founder and Chief Creative Officer of Metaphysic.ai and 2024 EYL40 from Belgium, noted that problems with media credibility have been around long

before the arrival of the new technology. “With AI coming in, it is only going to get more difficult, but that is not the cause of this issue, this issue has been with us for years and we never resolved it.”

Given that AI is made in its human creators’ image, society must be aware that it will take on human defects and prejudices.

## “AI is not a God, it is human, maybe superhuman, but it is a reflection of who we are: it is racist, it is biased”

said **Tanguy Goretti**, 2024 EYL40 and Co-founder and CTO of COWBOY, a Brussels-based start-up making the world’s most-connected electric bikes. “If we only rely on AI, we won’t be able to break away from that. AI is not a God; it is just us with all the answers and all the bias.”

For an even younger generation, AI is already a part of daily life, and they are dealing with it. “I don’t see AI as a bad thing, everybody is using AI now, especially students,” Noëlla, an international relations student said during the open session with Parisian citizens.



**Tanguy Goretti**, Founder and CTO at Cowboy

# Boulevard des Arts

Despite the EYL40s diverse backgrounds, cultural totems referenced during the seminar contained a disconcerting array of white males, including Hegel, Nietzsche, Dylan Thomas, Stefan Zweig, Arnie Schwarzenegger, the Roman god Janus, Andre Agassi, Spiderman and 'Dune' author Frank Hubert.

However, a debate on the 'transformative power of culture' over dinner in Paris' historical intellectual hub of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, put the record straight by concentrating on the role of the increasingly vital role of the arts as a bridge between cultures.

"We are experiencing a lot of polarisations, and a very particular thing about art, is that art can help you understand another perspective," said **Kirsten van den Hul**, Director of DutchCulture, former member of the Dutch Parliament, writer and 2013 EYL40.

That idea was underscored by the stories of two guest speakers from conflict zones. "It's very important to meet other people and to understand what their perspectives and challenges are," said **Sasha Baydal**, Ukrainian curator and laureate at Cité internationale des arts. **Rehaf Al Batniji**, visual storyteller based in Gaza, explained how she uses photography to document life in her city for a global audience. "I ask all the people around the world to pray for Gaza, to pray for the people and to help the people of Gaza if you can in anyway," she told the group.

Many expressed concern that cultural diversity is being victimised by the growing tendency toward identity politics.

## "The far-right's idea of culture is cancelling the difference that we have"

we have a long history of differences, of people of many cultures living together," noted **Anna Ascani**, Vice-President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and 2024 EYL40.

The impact of polarised views on the media was another topic discussed. Leaders examined how to rebuild trust in

objective, independent media at a time when people are increasingly drawing information from slanted partisan sources, and new technologies are used to spread propaganda and fake news.

"It's not only a problem for our industry, it's a problem for democracy itself," asserted **Anders Bæksgaard Christensen**, Editor and Head of Politics, National Security and Public Administration at the Danish daily Politiken and 2023 EYL40. "We are now suffering from lack of trust from the people. We see actors, politicians, organisations spreading mistrust."

Despite the concerns about declining trust in mainstream media, there was also an appreciation that the diversification of news outlets can promote a wider choice of views. "People have access to more sources; people don't just take at face value what the big media tell them," said **Besa Luci**, Co-Founder and Editor-in-Chief of Kosovo 2.0 and 2024 EYL40.

The young leaders also debated the role of sports as a unifying – or potentially divisive – element in European societies today. **Marcos Baghdatis**, tennis player and coach and 2024 EYL40 from Cyprus, outlined his views on the importance of developing sports for young people.

"One of my proudest moments is to inspire young kids, young adults, teenagers, etc. to grab a racket and go play tennis. Unfortunately, our government, our federation were not doing enough to support sport as a culture, so I feel obliged to do something about that and that is what I am trying to do," he told the seminar. "My dream is to give back in a way."





*From left to right:*

1. **Mattheo Malik**, Managing Director at Le Grand Continent; **Jessica Larsson**, Deputy Head of the Representation of the European Commission in France
2. **Nihad Uk**, Prime Minister of the Canton of Sarajevo; **Sophie Nadeau**, Head of Development & Partnerships at the United States Embassy in Paris
3. **Anna Asceni**, Vice-President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies; **Kirsten van den Hul**, Director of DutchCulture; **Dharmendra Kanani**, Chief Operating Officer and Spokesperson at Friends of Europe
4. **Marcos Baghdatis**, CEO & Founder, Marcos Baghdatis Ltd.
5. **Rehaf Al Batniji**, Documentary story teller from Gaza City, Palestine, and resident at the Cité internationale des arts; **Sasha Baydal**, Ukrainian curator and laurate at the Cité internationale des arts; **Alina Şerban**, Actress and Film Director at Untold Stories Association





# The kids are alright

In this era of extremities and multi-pronged challenges, leadership is more important than ever. The Paris EYL40 took a hard look at what's expected from leaders and how leadership can make a difference. In particular, the session open to citizens of Paris examined how today's leaders can take the decisions needed to ensure that future generations 'don't hate us'.

Leadership has to concentrate on overcoming citizens' helplessness in the face of fast-moving events, said **Leszek Konrad Jażdżewski**, Editor-in-Chief of *Liberté!* and 2022 EYL40 from Poland.

"We as Europeans, one thing we have [...] is a feeling of fatalism, the feeling of things getting out of control, out of hand, of things just happening to us, whether it is globalisation, or climate change, or populism, or even the war," he said.

**Oana-Silvia Țoiu**, Chair of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies Committee on Youth and Sports and 2023 EYL40, said it is essential to engage with young people and give them responsibility from an early age. She cited an example in Romania where kids have a say in school budgets: in one case, choosing sports equipment when education directors preferred security cameras. "The solution to politics is more politics and the solution to handling power well is to exercise power earlier," Țoiu concluded.

**Liukkonen**, the Olympic swimmer from Finland, agreed:

**"If we want the kids to trust us, maybe we should trust the kids"**

Several young leaders dug into their own experience to explain how they became leaders and why a positive approach is essential.

"Together we can build a better future. Probably I won't change the world, but in the little portion that belongs to me, I can make an impact," said Ousman Umar, 2024 EYL40 from Spain and Founder and President of NASCO Feeding Minds which uses ICT education to reshape development. Umar recounted his own story crossing



**Ari-Pekka Liukkonen**, City Councillor of Jyväskylä and Olympic swimmer

the Sahara Desert and Mediterranean Sea as a child to arrive in Europe.

Like others, he referred back to a tipping point that triggered key leadership decisions. "For all of us, I think, it was almost a moment of courage, of realising that was a need in the world and realising that our own skill sets, whether in science or politics, can meet that need," added **Aleksandra Wiśniewska**, Member of the Polish Parliament and 2024 EYL40.

The group had a chance to put their leadership and teamwork skills to the test, when three of their colleagues challenged them to come up with solutions to three real world issues: encouraging entrepreneurship among young people; rebuilding trust in the media and developing alternative economic models. Ideas flowed thick and fast.

**Alina Șerban**, Award-winning Roma actress, theatre and

film director and 2024 EYL40, recounted her background from a marginalised community to underscore the need for positive role models that encourage young people to defy society's expectations. "I still today have the fear that I will not manage, the fear that the world is not suitable for me, because I don't see people like me succeeding," she said. "We have to create the idea, that everybody can do what they want."

Recalling his move into business at the height of the economic crisis in Greece, **Lefteris Arapakis**, 2024 EYL40 and Co-Founder and Director of Enaleia, which recycles plastic unwittingly caught by fishing boats, cautioned that young people going into business should have no illusions about what's ahead. "For me, entrepreneurship came from a need, from a necessity [...] It is not a nice profession. It's hard. There are many sleepless nights," he noted. At the same time, it demonstrates the capacity to rapidly adapt to crises and a changing environment. "In 2012, unemployment in Greece was 24%. I had no other choice to stay in my country."

Developing networks of creative thinkers and forging a business culture where failure is just a step on the way to success are also key to developing a more entrepreneurial spirit in Europe. "In our society, you cannot fail because failure is a problem, I had to go out of this zone because this was blocking me," explained **Tobias Stüber**, CEO of Luxembourg-based airport transportation company Flibco and 2024 EYL40. "The earlier you can start [...] the better it is."

EYL40s from the class of 2024 briefed roundtable sessions on their areas of expertise, including **Marijus Briedis**, Chief Technology Officer at NordVPN who explained how his company works to build safe online environments and raise cybersecurity awareness; **Disa Jironet**, Public Prosecutor at the Dutch Public Prosecution Service, who outlined efforts to keeping people at the heart of criminal law systems; and **Sally Hayden**, award-winning journalist and photographer, on speaking the truth about migration.





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From left to right:

1. **Marijus Briedis**, Chief Technology Officer at NordVPN
2. **Ousman Umar**, Founder and President of NASCO Feeding Minds
3. **Aleksandra Karolina Wiśniewska**, Member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Polish Sejm
4. **Chloé Ridet**, Co-founder of Mieux Voter and spokesperson of the French Socialist Party; **Leszek Konrad Jazdzewski**, Editor-in-chief of Liberté!; **Oana-Silvia Toiu**, Chair of the Committee on Youth and Sports of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies
5. **Tobias Stüber**, CEO at Flibco



5





*From left to right:*

1. **Anna Jørgensen**, General Manager of Cortes de Cima and 2024 European Young Leader (EYL40)
2. **Lefteris Arapakis**, Co-Founder and Director at Enaleia; **Francesca Cavallo**, Chief Creative Officer at Undercats Media
3. **Loubna Bouarfa**, Chairwoman of the AI Innovation Board at Envision Pharma Group; **Wouter Vermeulen**, Senior Director Sustainability and Public Policy, The Coca-Cola Company, during a Live Challenge on the co-creation of an entrepreneurship programme.
4. **Chris Umé**, Co-Founder and Chief Creative Officer of Metaphysic
5. **Anders Rødtnæs Bæksgaard Christensen**, Political Editor at Politiken; **Marijus Briedis**, Chief Technology Officer at NordVPN2023 EYL40

# In conclusion

Europe is facing an unprecedented threat to the democratic order forged from the ruins of World War II and the collapse of the Iron Curtain.

Confronted with the external threat from authoritarian powers and the menace from anti-democratic forces within, new approaches are needed, to build resilience and strengthen the structures that underpin peace and freedom in Europe.

**“We need to understand that there is a new normal of extremes and we are going to have to contend with it. We can’t be rabbits in front of the headlights any longer”**

said **Dharmendra Kanani**, Chief Operating Officer and Chief Spokesperson of Friends of Europe. He stressed the need to forge resistance in order to cope with these extremes, from the climate emergency to political extremism. “We have not witnessed this kind of world.

**“The world has changed dramatically beyond what we recognise”**

To fight back, Europe’s young leadership needs to mobilise their talents and confidence in their ability to make a difference. “If you tell me that changing is impossible, I don’t believe it,” French Minister Zacharopoulou, told the group. “Remember who you are and your principles and where you want to arrive, without betraying yourself.”

Perhaps the spirit of seminar was best summed up by Polish journalist Jazdzewski’s quoting of Dylan Thomas in urging leaders to guide citizens out of the prevalent fatalism to fight for a better future, “Do not go gentle into that good night [...] Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”





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From left to right:

1. **Kamilla Sultanova**, Owner of ConnectUz, Workforce diversity trainer, Speaker, Mentoring and Volunteering advocate
2. **Disa Jironet Loewe**, Public Prosecutor at the Dutch Public Prosecution Service
3. **Dharmendra Kanani**, Chief Operating Officer and Chief Spokesperson at Friends of Europe; **David Bradbury**, Deputy Director of the Centre for Tax Administration of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); **Annette Alstadsæter**, Director of Skatteforsk - Centre for Tax Research, and Project Director at the EU Tax Observatory
4. **Rodrigo García González**, Co-Founder and Co-CEO at Notpla; **Samir Abdelkrim**, Founder and CEO at EMERGING Valley
5. **Ahmed Abdirahman**, Founder and CEO of Järvaveckan; **Alina Șerban**, Actress and Film Director at Untold Stories Association



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# About the EYL40 programme

Celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2022, the European Young Leaders (EYL40) programme, led by Friends of Europe, is a unique, inventive and multi-stakeholder programme that aims to promote a European identity by engaging the continent's most promising talents in initiatives that will shape Europe's future.

The European Young Leaders represent a promising European leadership from all over the continent and with a wide variety of backgrounds, including politics, business, civil society, academia, arts, science and the media. From trailblazing biochemists and budding political leaders to dot-com entrepreneurs and NGO 'stars' who are shaping the social and environmental policies of tomorrow, the European Young Leaders are a unique community that crafts innovative responses to European challenges and positively affects the lives of future generations.

Every year, the current class and alumni meet in symbolic European cities, joined by decision-makers, stakeholders and key European actors, to discuss issues of common concern and develop concrete proposals and recommendations to tackle the challenges facing Europe and its citizens.

The relaxed tone and out-of-the-box nature of the EYL40 programme have brought about salient and open discussions that have facilitated the development of a strong network of committed Europeans.

The programme also turns ideas into action. That means ongoing interactions between the young leaders, alumni and experts boot innovative ideas and, in turn, have a bigger impact on the European state by pushing forward projects that matter to the community.

The 2017 autumn seminar in Tallinn increased the programme's outreach by inviting North American, and Middle East and North African (MENA) Young Leaders to join the discussions.

Young leaders of the Western Balkan region are also included in the European yearly class, as well as representatives from the United Kingdom and Ukraine.





1. **Wouter Vermeulen**, Senior Director Sustainability and Public Policy, The Coca-Cola Company
2. **Xavier Damman**, Regens Unite
3. **Péter Pető**, Editor-in-Chief at 24.hu
4. **Anne-Solène Rolland**, Director of Heritage and Collections at the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac
5. **Monika Zajkova**, Member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the North Macedonian National Parliament





# List of participants

## Samir Abdelkrim

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Ministry of Education and Research  
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1. **Matthew Caruana Galizia**, Investigative Journalist and Director of The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation
2. **Markus Freiburg**, Founder and CEO, Financing Agency for Social Entrepreneurship (FASE)
3. **Marcos Baghdatis**, Tennis Player and Coach, **Ari-Pekka Liukkonen**, Olympic swimmer, Member of the Jyväskylä City Council, and **Malcolm Byrne**, Irish Senator for the Cultural and Educational Panel
4. **Annika Lundkvist**, Founder of Pedestrian Space
5. Roundtable led by **Olga Rudenko**, Editor-in-Chief of the Kyiv Independent. On the right, **Zarah Bruhn**, Commissioner for Social Innovation at the German Ministry of Education and Research

## **Friends of Europe**

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