

## EUROPEAN YOUNG LEADERS (EYL40) PROGRAMME

### Call to the 2026 class of European Young Leaders

The European Young Leaders programme 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 the most 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.

The programme acts as a forum for those who have already established themselves at the forefront of their professions to meet, discuss and collaborate with their counterparts from other fields of expertise. Previous candidates include: government ministers, CEOs, Michelin-starred chefs, international film directors, investigative journalists and artists.

For examples of current and previous European Young Leaders, please see the last two pages of this document.

#### OVERVIEW OF THE SELECTION PROCESS

Since the launch of the programme, we have further improved the diversity and exceptional quality of its selection process. We have made sure that its comprehensive and competitive nature ensures the identification and selection of remarkable individuals.

We aim to select up to 40+ European Young Leaders of diverse backgrounds in order to enable a broad exchange of ideas, creating the basis for a new generation of engaged European leaders.

Candidates can either apply or be nominated for the selection process of the programme.

#### 1. NOMINATION GUIDELINES

Individuals can be nominated to the European Young Leaders programme by completing **the online nomination form** [via this link](#).

- Institutional partners

A wide network of European organisations is called upon to recommend high-profile individuals to Friends of Europe.

- Friends of Europe's Board of Trustees<sup>1</sup> and other outstanding personalities

Our Board of Trustees and a limited selection of outstanding personalities from different sectors (business, politics, media, science and the arts) are asked to nominate young leaders that could be considered in the selection process.

- Alumni

Every year, the alumni network of the European Young Leaders programme is called upon to send in recommendations to Friends of Europe. Given their experience of the programme, we consider the alumni extremely knowledgeable about who is the best fit for such a leadership programme.

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of Friends of Europe's Board of Trustees, please [click here](#).

- Citizens

Engaged and motivated citizens are invited to nominate leaders who inspire them.

## 2. PERSONAL APPLICATION GUIDELINES

Candidates should complete **the online application form** [via this link](#).

### SELECTION CRITERIA

- Candidates must be **between 30 and 40 years of age** (born on or after 1 January 1986);
- Candidates must be a **national of an EU member state, the UK, Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo<sup>2</sup>, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine or Moldova**;
- Candidates should have established themselves at the highest levels of their chosen profession, or be on track to do so;
- Candidates must be committed to serve society at large through noteworthy contributions and have demonstrated a record of significant achievements and outstanding professional experience;
- Candidates are also evaluated based on their ability to contribute to the enrichment of the programme as a whole;
- Candidates are required to be **fluent in English** as it is the working language of the programme.
- Candidates must commit to participating in **at least one seminar** during the programme year.

You can find the complete list of the **EYL class of 2024** [HERE](#).

### TIMELINE

To be considered for the 2026 selection process, all applications and nominations must be submitted by the **application deadline, i.e., Monday, 5 May 2025**.

### AGENDA

Spring 2026	a seminar in a European city (starting Thursday lunchtime – ending Saturday lunchtime)
Ongoing	European Young Leaders are involved in working groups (both virtually and in person) throughout the year, allowing their input from afar into the topics and projects of their choice (based on their availability and interest).
October/November 2026	Exclusive invitation to the President's Gala Dinner and Friends of Europe's annual State of Europe 'high-level' roundtable in Brussels.
October/November 2026	Participation in the European Young Leaders alumni meeting in Brussels, open to all current and previous European Young Leaders.



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2 References to Kosovo here are used without prejudice to positions on status and are in line with UN Security Council resolution 1244/99 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

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## European Young Leader alumni include:

### **Eneko Atxa**

#### **Chef at 3-Michelin-starred Restaurant 'Azurmendi'**

Eneko opened his now-renowned restaurant 'Azurmendi' in the Basque country. Within five years, the restaurant had been awarded three Michelin stars and has been named among the best and most sustainable restaurants in the world. Eneko has a creative mind, skilled hands and a work ethic based on care, precision, and speed. His intense cuisine is deeply rooted in local Basque identity.

### **Roberta Metsola**

#### **President of the European Parliament**

Roberta is the youngest ever and third woman President of the European Parliament. Prior to this, she served as Vice-President of the European Parliament, also as a member on the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, among several other parliamentary committees and delegations. A lawyer by profession, Roberta is a member of the European People's Party Group (EPP) and among the first female members of parliament to represent Malta. She is a two-time recipient of Parliament Magazine's MEP Award, receiving recognition for her work on justice and civil liberties, and hosted the awards ceremony in 2017.

### **Juan Mata**

#### **Professional footballer, Co-Founder of Common Goal**

Juan is a Spanish professional footballer and the Co-Founder of Common Goal, a charitable fund that aims to generate sustainable and equitable social change through the cultural force that is football. The movement motivates stakeholders in the football industry to pledge 1% of their income to a collective fund that supports active projects worldwide. Mata currently plays midfield for Galatasaray in Istanbul. Having previously played for Manchester United and Chelsea, he is considered among the best attacking midfielders to have played in the Premier League. Before moving to the United Kingdom, Mata played for Castilla in Madrid and then Valencia CF, where he won his first professional title, the Copa del Rey. He helped secure Spain's win at the FIFA World Cup in South Africa. Notably, alongside a Chelsea teammate, Mata was the first footballer to hold the Champions League, Europa League, World Cup and the European Championship simultaneously.

### **Valeriya Ionan**

#### **Deputy Minister at the Ukrainian Ministry of Digital Transformation**

Valeriya is the Deputy Minister for Eurointegration at the Ukrainian Ministry of Digital Transformation, where she oversees European integration and international relations, the national digital literacy programme, regional digital transformation, as well as the development and growth of SMEs. Her top projects at the ministry include Diia.Education, a national edutainment platform for reskilling and digital literacy; award-winning Diia.Business, a national project on the

development of SMEs; WinWin platform for growing global Ukrainian innovation vision; Future Perfect, a national language programme; CDTO Campus, an education project for digital leaders, and many others. Her efforts focus on launching Ukrainian digital products to speed the process of national digitalisation and to help solve complex challenges.

### **Francesca Cavallo**

#### **Bestselling Author & Serial Entrepreneur**

Francesca is a bestselling author of children's books, entrepreneur, founder and Chief Creative Officer of Undercats Media, and founder of Timbuktu Labs. She is the co-creator of 'Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls', a collection of 100 tales of extraordinary women that has become a publishing sensation. Francesca's career began in theatre, where she worked as both a manager for a theatre company and as a playwright. In 2012, she moved to California to co-find a children's media start-up called Timbuktu Labs, Inc. Since then, she has authored nine picture books that have been translated in more than 47 languages. Her most recent international bestseller is the children's book "Doctor Li and the Crown-wearing Virus".

### **John Collison**

#### **President & Co-Founder of Stripe**

John is an entrepreneur and Co-Founder and President of Stripe, a software development company that is expanding Internet commerce by making it easier to process transactions from anywhere in the world. John has been passionate about coding from a young age and has a proven track-record of applying his knowledge and skills to develop ways to improve online business infrastructure.

### **Luka Mesec**

#### **Slovenian Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities**

Luka is a Slovenian politician and activist who currently serves as the Minister of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity, and as Deputy Prime Minister. He has served in the national parliament for nearly a decade and is the former leader of the eco-socialist party, The Left. Throughout his political career, he has championed participatory economics, social corporate governance, improved social benefits for the poor, labour rights and the abolition of tax havens. Luka also initiated the establishment of a Ministry of Solidarity-Based Future, in charge of developing social housing, long-term care and economic democracy. Prior to entering politics, he was notably active in various initiatives that promoted the welfare state and workers' rights.

### **Raphaël Liegeois**

#### **Career Astronaut at the European Space Agency (ESA)**

A Belgian biomedical engineer, physicist, and neuroscientist, Raphaël is a Career Astronaut at the European Space Agency (ESA) and one of five to be selected among over 22,500 applicants in the agency's latest class of astronauts. He is also a Research and

Teaching Fellow at the University of Geneva, where he teaches courses in neuroengineering and statistics. Liégeois views science as truly beautiful and believes that it will be central to meeting humanity's collective challenges. His academic career has also brought him to École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Stanford University, the National University of Singapore and the University of Liège. His research has focused on studying brain dynamics in health and disease, developing dynamic models of brain function and defining new neuroimaging markers of neurodegenerative diseases. An aviation enthusiast, he also pilots hot air balloons, gas balloons and gliders.

#### **Alina Șerban**

##### **Roma Actress, Film and Theatre Director from Romania**

Alina is an award-winning Romanian Roma actress, playwright and director, whose work promotes social justice by tackling sexism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination. Named Best Actress by the German Actors Guild for her leading role in "Gipsy Queen", the film is one of three in which Alina starred that highlighted the experiences of Roma women. A pioneer of Roma feminist political theatre, her play "The Great Shame", which addresses the taboo topic of Roma slavery, became the first play by a Roman woman director to be included in a Romanian state theatre's permanent repertoire. Alina also made her debut as a film director with "Letter of Forgiveness", the first film about Roma slavery written from a Roma perspective.

#### **Heïdi Sevestre**

##### **Glaciologist, Deputy Secretary of the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP)**

Heïdi Sevestre is a French glaciologist, specialising in glacier dynamics, tropical glaciers and ice shelves in Antarctica. She aims to make scientific knowledge more accessible and motivate concrete, effective climate action. Heïdi is the Deputy Secretary of AMAP, an Arctic Council working group that coordinates research on climate, pollutants, contaminants, and human and ecosystem health in the Arctic. Her research on glacier surges, which was featured in *Science* magazine, strengthened our understanding of climate change's impact on glaciers. Heïdi regularly leads scientific expeditions to polar and high mountain regions and was notably awarded the inaugural Shackleton Medal for the Protection of Polar Regions.

#### **Kaja Kallas**

##### **High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy**

Today, she is High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Kaja is an Estonian politician and diplomat, who has been serving as Estonia's first female prime minister since 2021. A competition lawyer by profession, Kaja was elected Member of the Estonian Parliament and Chair of the Committee on Economic Affairs in 2011. After being elected to the European Parliament in 2014, she became a prominent proponent of innovation and frequently emphasised that regulations should not hinder the technological revolution. She

authored five reports in the European Parliament, including of an own-initiative report on the Digital Single Market. Kaja left the European sphere in 2018 to become leader of Estonia's Liberal Reform Party.

#### **Bastian Obermayer**

##### **Pulitzer-prizewinning investigative journalist**

Bastian is a Pulitzer-prize winning investigative journalist, who during his time at the Munich-based newspaper 'Süddeutsche Zeitung' (SZ) was the reporter that received the Panama Papers in 2014 - then the largest leak of offshore documents in global history - and the subsequent Paradise Papers, published in 2017.

#### **Tea Jarc**

##### **Confederal Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)**

Tea Jarc is a grassroots youth activist from Slovenia, who campaigns for social justice and actively engages in various social movements. Previously, she served as president of the ETUC Youth Committee, leading the organisation in its mission to amplify the voice of the European youth workforce. Jarc was also the president of Sindikat Mladi plus, a Slovenian youth trade union that represents working and unemployed young people and students, including high school students, and seeks to protect their social and labour rights. A freelance educator, trainer and facilitator, she also hosts a podcast, which covers labour issues and explores labour policy alternatives that prioritise the well-being of citizens and the environment.

#### **Gustaf Göthberg**

##### **Member of the Swedish Riksdag**

Gustaf is a Swedish politician and represents Gothenburg in the national parliament, where he belongs to the Moderate Party and sits on the Committee of Defence. Passionate about foreign and security policy, he supports stronger EU policies towards Russia and China, as well as defence cooperation and migration policy. Göthberg serves on the Swedish delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, where he also sits on the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights. He is committed to reducing poverty through trade, specifically free trade agreements, and increasing human rights protection for persecuted groups. Prior to being elected to the Riksdag, Göthberg worked on development in Belarus, Russia, and Eastern Europe at the Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation. He has served in several departments within the City of Gothenburg's administration, as well as the Stockholm County Council. He began his career in politics as a political advisor to the Moderate Party. Additionally, Göthberg maintains a long-standing background at the Moderate Youth Association, where he held roles as the international secretary and foreign policy spokesperson.

#### **Daumantas Dvilinskas**

##### **Co-Founder and CEO of TransferGo**

A serial entrepreneur and fintech expert from Lithuania, Daumantas is the Co-Founding CEO of TransferGo, a London-based, high-growth and purely digital global money transfer service. Its innovative digital 'local in, local out' business model works with banks worldwide to

enable cheaper, faster and safer cross-border money transfers. TransferGo's main goal is to increase the accessibility of transfers to migrant workers, who make regular payments to their families back at home, by reducing costs and facilitating same-day purchasing power. Dvilinskas challenges monopolies in the banking industry by targeting niche customers with a superior product experience. He has also co-founded Pinevio, a social content discovery platform that enables users to discover content from people with shared interests. Dvilinskas is a recipient of the Global Lithuanian Award, which is bestowed upon Lithuanian diaspora professionals in recognition of their contribution to the economy, science, culture and international presence of Lithuania.

**Tahereh Pazouki**  
**Founder of Magrid Learning Solution, CEO of LetzMath**

An Iranian-Luxembourgish entrepreneur, Dr Tahereh Pazouki founded Magrid, a pedagogical programme that develops and improves cognitive and math abilities by removing language as a barrier to learning, in order to support equal educational opportunities for all learners. The award-winning project was inspired by Pazouki's research on children with migrant backgrounds and language disorders in Luxembourg's public school system, which concluded that adapted training can support children who are disadvantaged by an education system in reaching their full potential. The Magrid programme now helps thousands of students in schools across Luxembourg and Portugal with early childhood development in math, visual-spatial and cognitive abilities. It will soon be available for parents all over Europe. Pazouki also founded a start-up, LetzMath, to continue the research and development of educational solutions that champion equal opportunities. In recognition to her innovative contributions to the field of education, she has been the recipient of the World Summit Awards, the European Investment Bank's social innovation prize, the Creative Young Entrepreneur award and the MIT Solve award.

**Jasminko Halilović**  
**Founder and CEO of the War Childhood Museum**

Jasminko is a leading conflict researcher from Bosnia and Herzegovina, who compiled short recollections from people who experienced the Bosnian War as children into "War Childhood". The award-winning book has now been translated into six languages. He went on to establish the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo, the world's only museum exclusively dedicated to childhoods affected by armed conflict. Awarded the Council of Europe Museum Prize, the museum aims to raise awareness of the specific experience through archived materials, from drawings to personal belongings, and motivate adults to consider the consequences of war. Halilović has developed the museum from a small local initiative into an international non-profit with offices in Sarajevo, Kyiv, The Hague and New York City. A serial entrepreneurial since his teenage years, Halilović has co-founded several companies. His

passion for peacebuilding and entrepreneurship has earned him spots as a keynote speaker and guest lecturer at universities and conferences in over 15 countries.

**Disa Jironet**  
**Public Prosecutor at the Dutch Public Prosecution Service**

Disa Jironet is a Dutch Public Prosecutor and author with a background in Dutch and international law. Specialised in the role of justice in society, her work adopts a new approach to criminal law by examining how societal systems and institutions can be shaped compassionately to better serve humanity. Her book "Crime and Compassion" argues for a more humane criminal climate. Acknowledging the complexity of human behaviour, Jironet remains critically optimistic that justice reform can move beyond the debate of hard or soft punishment and towards an evidence-based conversation about long-term sustainable justice and security.

You can find all alumni [HERE](#).