

EUROPEAN YOUNG LEADERS SEMINAR (EYL40)

# How democracy ends (and begins again)

BUCHAREST 2025



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

In a year fraught with change and uncertainty, drastic changes in governance are reshaping the world in ways not thought possible for the last 50 years. The political upheavals, economic uncertainties and shifting alliances of the last months compel every social actor to step in and step up, and to reflect on the state of our institutions, security and societal trust.

The EYL40 seminar in Bucharest occurs in a critical period. The annulment of the first round of presidential elections in Romania at the end of 2024 created widespread shock in the country and placed trust in policymakers and transparency at the core of the political discussion. We are navigating the aftermath of the biggest election year in human history and Romania's presidential elections. Internationally, the United States has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organization, and the announcement of the freeze of USAID funding and Ukraine support has sent shockwaves through international politics. These actions raise, among many others, a most pressing question: what is Europe going to do? Facing evolving geopolitical dynamics, Europe can either be caught in the headlights, or work in a 'post-US' world to take action and position itself for the future. Following its first withdrawal from international climate diplomacy, it was indeed the US that suffered the most in terms of credibility on the world stage, even damaging its internal federal unity, while countries like China, India and EU member states took a much stronger stance on the green transition.

Navigating these challenges, the European project has been able to connect high levels of economic integration and human development with lower economic inequalities, deliver on the application of the rule of law, reach high standards for health outcomes such as life expectancy and infant mortality, and is a world leader for environmental quality. At the same time, divides and asymmetries persist in Europe; from an incomplete Single Market to rising internal political polarisation, the EU has much progress to make on its historical divides and learn from the richness, diversity and expertise of its local and regional contexts.

In an era of polarisation and misinformation, and in some cases even erosion of truth itself, it is imperative to pursue science-based, citizen-centric policymaking and leadership, essential elements in the renewal of Europe's social contract. The focus shifts from questioning democracy's decline to exploring how a Renewed Social Contract can strengthen and revitalise democracies thanks to the passion, diversity of backgrounds and innovative thinking brought by scientists, artists, journalists, entrepreneurs, economists and policymakers.

Over three days, the EYL40 Class of 2025 will join EYL alumni, senior decision-makers, key European and Romanian actors to delve into these critical issues, examining how we can rebuild trust, bridge societal divides and reimagine governance for the future.





*From left to right:*

1. **Ciprian Stanescu**, President of Social Innovation Solutions; **Oana-Silvia Țoiu**, Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs; **Dacian Cioloș**, former Romanian Prime Minister and European Commissioner, Trustee of Friends of Europe – Photo credit: Adel Al-Hassan
2. Palace of the Parliament, Romania – Photo credit: Adel Al-Hassan
3. **Daniel Daianu**, Advisor to the Governor of the National Bank of Romania, President of the Fiscal Council and Trustee of Friends of Europe





# Democracy begins again – A postcard from the European Young Leaders seminar in Bucharest

At the end of May, we gathered in Bucharest for the [European Young Leaders \(EYL40\)](#) seminar to confront the daunting question of how democracy ends and explore how it begins again. There was no better place for it than Romania, where, just days before, the country turned away from the far right in a pivotal presidential election.

In this context of renewed hope, more than 80 participants from 28 countries joined us to tackle some of the most pressing issues facing democracy today – from cybersecurity and artificial intelligence (AI) to mounting geopolitical tensions, leadership in times of crisis, war, inequality and more.

Over three days, the [EYL40 Class of 2025](#) met with EYL alumni, senior decision-makers, key European actors and Romanian citizens to examine how trust can be rebuilt, societal divides bridged and governance for the future reimagined.

The meeting highlighted the EYL40 programme's unique mix of backgrounds and expertise bringing in young talents from business, tech, politics, academia, journalism, civil society, science, sports and the arts.

## Fighting wars

One of the most urgent and widely discussed issues throughout the seminar was the growing reality of global warfare. Particularly pressing for Europe is the fate of Ukraine, as it is the closest victim in a landscape of conflicts deepening or erupting in various corners around the world.

The militarisation of international relations will either deter potential conflicts or fuel them. However, Europe needs to get ready, because “it is significantly behind the game in terms of investing in security and adjusting



From right to left: **Vladimir Kara-Murza**, Political activist, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, author, historian and former political prisoner; **Uk Nihad**, Prime Minister of the Canton of Sarajevo

to the strategic shift that is happening [with the Trump administration]”, warned **Amanda Sloat**, Professor of Practice at IE University and former senior director for Europe in the US National Security Council and special assistant to President Biden.

This point was echoed by **Thomas Wright**, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, former special assistant to President Biden and senior director for strategic planning at the National Security Council.

“I think we are closer to a major conflict now than at any point since the early 1980s, and maybe for the rest of our lifetimes.” Addressing the many EYLs in attendance, Wright stressed that “it’s important to think about questions such as ‘How would Europe fight Russia alone in the next three and a half years if the United States isn’t there?’”.

European leaders should thus also have in mind a vision for what comes after the war in Ukraine. While using Putin’s frozen assets for the country’s reconstruction and publicly condemning perpetrators of war for their crimes are necessary steps, they are not enough. British-Russian political activist and former political prisoner, **Vladimir Kara-Murza** shared his conviction that “a free and democratic Russia will be the strongest guarantee of Europe”, thus underlining the need for preparing the roadmap for the time of Russia after Putin.

## AI: friend or foe?

Although combat remains outside the EU’s borders, the continent is engaged in a different kind of warfare – informational.

In the 2024 ‘super year’ of elections, critical to determining whether support for Ukraine would grow or not within its European counterparts, Russia has demonstrated its ability to boost disinformation and destabilise the continent’s already fragile democracies.

While AI can be used to fuel this digital war, there are also solutions to fight back. One example is United 24 Media in Ukraine, which its News Director, **Eugene Slavnyi**, described as a powerful response:

“We were forced to create a tool to oppose Russian disinformation, and we were doing it in the first six months of the full-scale invasion. We are an English-speaking media completely focused only on international

broadcasting and we have [a reach of] 75 million unique accounts per month now. We are so successful because we were focusing on social media, and that’s where most of the internet traffic comes from. We are huge on YouTube, we are huge on Instagram, but we are also always using new platforms. If some new social media is created, we need to be there first to produce material and gather an audience, so when the Russians come inside the same social media platform, we are already there [to counter their misinformation].”

But the media alone cannot solve this issue, governments have to intervene as well. With more and more applications of AI, from face recognition and computational empathy to research and autonomous contract negotiations, legislators have a difficult role to play in establishing guardrails to ensure its ethical and secure development.

**Dragoș Tudorache**, Member of Cabinet of European Commission Executive Vice-President Stéphane Séjourné and former Chair of the European Parliament Special Committee on Artificial Intelligence in a Digital Age explained some of the difficult questions he faced as rapporteur for the EU AI Act:

“We went from agriculture to space exploration to understand what AI can do. The issue is not what the



Ciprian Stanescu, President of Social Innovation Solutions





Public session – Rebuilding trust in a polarised society

technology of AI can do, because it can and will be able to do almost everything. The question is what should we do? You can't just regulate the technology without looking at how to use it and addressing the potential risks."

## Europe's ambitions in a new global reality

Many times throughout the seminar, participants heard that the EU stands at a historic crossroads, and that it has an opportunity it should seize to lead globally on tech, defence, competitiveness and most importantly, the green transition.

"We are at a moment of acceleration of change in Europe, let's step up our game," said **Benjamin Haddad**, French Minister Delegate for Europe and 2025 EYL40.

Looking at the necessity to accelerate decarbonisation in Europe, **Jack Chambers**, Ireland's Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and 2025 EYL40, pointed out that the European Green Deal frequently failed to resonate with ordinary citizens by presenting primarily negative consequences rather than opportunities.

"Farmers, people and communities on the periphery don't necessarily see a stake in a greener and climate neutral future. How do we align the digital and green transition with that sense of purpose and opportunity?"

Experts also frequently stressed the complex geopolitical reality in which the EU must now compete. Old-time friends, like the US, are no longer the steadfast partners they once were – whether on climate action or collective defence through NATO.

The role of the European Union "is to stimulate and give a new life to multilateralism", according to **Dacian Ciolos**, former Romanian prime minister and European commissioner, and Trustee of Friends of Europe. Yet, multilateralism today seems to exist just in theory, because the world, in fact, is managed through bilateral agreements, he added.

## Security from another perspective

But to counteract the increasingly individualistic approach to policymaking, the EU must advance its enlargement agenda. **Bora Muzhaqi**, Albania's Minister of



State for Youth and Children and 2025 EYL40, made it very clear in her intervention:

“If you don’t have the Western Balkans in the EU, how strong are you, when you have Russia on the other side?”

Underscoring the frustration felt in the region, she added that “the EU is not very fast at acting” and that people in Albania feel “unseen and left behind”. This is a common reality across the EU too, where citizens are turning to extremist rhetoric as a response to feeling unheard or unrepresented.

Addressing Ukraine’s EU integration, **Dacian Ciolos** urged Europe to confront the elephant in the room: “We have to recognise that there’s a problem with Ukraine’s agriculture. [...] If we think outside the box, and have the courage and ambition to have a strong agricultural production [we could find a solution.]”

Despite improvements in living standards for many in the Union, European institutions and governments across the continent still struggle to communicate these gains effectively to citizens in each member state. As **Sarah Jones**, journalist and EYL40 alumni, noted:

“With the rise of populism, from a grassroots level, so many people are attracted to it, because they feel like the government isn’t representing them.”

## So, how does democracy begin again?

In a [public session](#), local stakeholders from Romania and the European Young Leaders explored the growing polarisation of political debate and the transformative power of the arts and cultural sector.

In the words of **Jakub Skrzywanek**, Artistic Director of the National Stry Theatre in Krakow and 2025 EYL40, “Our job is to tell the stories that will inspire and give hope. Globally, we now live in a situation where most of the visionaries are populist, authoritarian, fascists. What was important for us was to start convincing society that we could propose a better version of the world.”

At the same time, policymakers hold great responsibility in how dissatisfaction and simplistic, polarised visions of the future are exploited. **Mihai Popșoi**, Deputy Prime

Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Moldova and 2025 EYL40, pointed to the consequences of wealth disparities:

“Despite the enormous economic success that Romania has gone through, this wealth is not shared equitably. [...] The GDP of Bucharest is almost on par with the GDP of Bulgaria, but this is not to say that all corners of Romania feel this growth. The same is true about the Republic of Moldova. [...] When you have this disparity, people cannot help but feel this angst, this ‘besieged fortress’ and ‘us versus them’ mentality.”

As the seminar drew to a close, participants left the seminar enriched by new connections and inspired by leaders across Europe and beyond who are demonstrating that democracies can be revitalised and strengthened. Through the passion, diversity and innovative thinking of scientists, artists, journalists, entrepreneurs, economists and policymakers, democratic renewal is not only possible but already underway.

Friends of Europe was proud to bring them together.



**Natalija Stojmenović**, Member of the Serbian Parliament, and anticorruption and environment campaigner – Photo credit: Adel Al-Hassan



From left to right:

1. **Kosta Karakashyan**, Director, choreographer and LGBTQ+ activist; **Ūla Ambrasaitė**, Publisher, curator, and founder of LAPAS Books; **Jakub Skrzywanek**, Artistic Director at the National Stary Theatre in Krakow, theatre artist and curator
2. **Eugene Slavnyi**, Editor-in-Chief at United24 Media; **Maria Nefeli Chatzioannidou**, Member of the Hellenic Parliament; **Megi Fino**, Albanian Deputy Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs
3. **Thomas Wright**, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and former special assistant to the president and senior director for strategic planning at the National Security Council in the Biden administration; **Min-Sung Sean Kim**, General Partner at NGS Capital; **Sarah Jones**, Emmy winning journalist and author of 'A Kids Book About War'
4. **Mihai Popșoi**, Moldova's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs; **Andrei Popoviciu**, Investigative journalist and foreign correspondent reporting across Europe, Africa and the Middle East
5. **Claudia Olsson**, Founder and CEO of Stellar Capacity
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