

EUROPEAN YOUNG LEADERS (EYL40)  
ALUMNI MEETING

# Countering extreme digital narratives in Europe

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At the end of the 2025 edition of the Festival of Politics and Ideas, our cohort of European Young Leaders met to discuss digital narratives in Europe, the role of opinion leaders, share experiences drawn from their diverse expertise, while reflecting on different, more active – rather than merely reactive – ways of structuring political communication.

This conversation unfolded as an interactive workshop, followed by a brainstorm session designed to jumpstart our work in the coming year on the themes of digital narratives, democracy and technology.

The interactive workshop was led by **Thomas Coombes**, founder of hope-based communications, who guided the European Young Leaders in reflecting on how hope can be harnessed as a practical strategy to address the challenges created by fear, social isolation, polarised discourse and disinformation.

The concept of 'hope' was presented as a mindset that can be trained and perfected – a deliberate response to fear-driven narratives designed to provoke a reaction from their targets. Unlike simply being optimistic or pessimistic about the future, being hopeful means maintaining full awareness of the present while cultivating the ability to shape alternative outcomes.

Coombes stressed that this shift in mindset is grounded in neuroscientific evidence. Recent examples, such as Zohran Mamdani's electoral campaign in for New York City, show why effective political communication must go beyond simply focusing on problems to clearly articulating solutions and making the case on what should – and can – happen next.

In a historical moment when social media and digital platforms generate an overwhelming volume of information and content, the only way for specific ideas to gain traction is through depth, consistency and authenticity. Storytelling rooted in real people and real experiences, sustained overtime, is essential to turning specific messages into shared common sense.

The discussion on media dynamics emerged as a central concern for many European Young Leaders, particularly politicians and experts who actively engage on social media and grapple with the challenge of cutting through the noise while communicating positive and constructive messages. **Denis "Jaromil" Roio**, founder of dyne.org, quoted Canadian scientist Marshall McLuhan's famous statement "the medium is the message," highlighting that narratives cannot simply be transplanted from one platform to another. Each medium structures audience attention differently and therefore demands its own approach to communication; without this adaptation, even well-crafted narratives struggle to take hold.

With democracies across the continent facing challenges from both within and beyond, a fundamental question has become increasingly urgent: how do we engage citizens, build trust and foster a sense of belonging in an era marked by deep polarisation and rapid digital transformation?

## “The medium is the message.”

**Denis “Jaromil” Roio**, founder of dyne.org

The open discussion began by acknowledging the immense influence of social media, and the way platforms like TikTok, X and Instagram can both connect and divide, amplifying extreme voices while leaving moderate, constructive narratives struggle to get traction. In candid exchanges, participants dissected how online echo chambers are fuelling polarisation and how algorithm-driven outrage threatens the very foundations of healthy democratic discourse.

**Wiebke Winter**, Member of the Bremen State Parliament and Founder of KlimaUnion, voices particular concern, calling for a reassessment of the role of social media in our societies. As she noted: "Social media is so addictive and it might be used against our system, against our democracy, in order to spread values that we don't want in Europe. I think [...] we should really discuss whether we want to have social media in our lives".

Yet, the conversation did not all doom and gloom. The benefits of social media were also recognised. As **Bora Muzhaqi**, Member of the Albanian Parliament and former Minister of State for Youth and Children, reflected, “If I go on a TV station, nobody will watch me. If I post something on Instagram [...], then you can get a lot more out to them, especially to young people, with Instagram and TikTok”.

## “Social media is so addictive and it might be used against our system, against our democracy, in order to spread values that we don’t want in Europe.”

**Wiebke Winter**, Member of the Bremen State Parliament and Founder of KlimaUnion

Moreover, drawing on personal stories and recent campaign experiences, the group examined how hope-based narratives rooted in empathy and authenticity can serve as an antidote to fear and division. Reflecting on her own experience, Croatian politician **Nevenka Lastric-Durić**, Croatian State Secretary for Internal Affairs, explained: “It’s always a challenge to go beyond the image of the institution, to actually be present among citizens and to show that we care.” She added, “Building trust isn’t about flashy campaigns, it’s about being consistent, open, and showing that, even in a big national Ministry, there are real people listening on the other side”. This was echoed by Bora Muzhaqi, noting that “Sometimes you have to do things which are not normally things politicians should be doing. But if you want to be there with people you represent, then you also have to pick up the phone on a Saturday evening”.

## “It’s always a challenge to go beyond the image of the institution, to actually be present among citizens and to show that we care.”

**Nevenka Lastric-Durić**, Croatian State Secretary for Internal Affairs

Much of discussion focused on the need to reframe political messaging: building strategies that do not simply reject negativity and hate but intentionally amplify what communities stand for values like inclusion, dignity and shared prosperity. Case studies – from integrating digital engagement with real-life town hall interactions to the creative use of public institutions like museums – demonstrated that lasting democratic change happens when citizens feel seen, heard and empowered. The group highlighted examples such as structured listening tours in remote communities, participatory youth councils and innovative community events that bridge divides and foster a sense of belonging.

Crucially, participants insisted that new technology – such as artificial intelligence, data-driven communication and open-source digital platforms – must be harnessed to serve collective interests, not just private profit. As examples from Europe and beyond showed, communities thrive where policy meets compassion and where institutions invite citizens to co-create solutions. The workshop reinforced a central message: if Europe is to withstand the challenges of polarisation, it must aim to build hope both offline and online, grounded in human connection and shared purpose. To guide Europe towards this goal, the following recommendations can be drawn from the discussions:

**1. Strengthen regulation and transparency of social media platforms.** European policymakers should adopt robust regulations requiring social media companies to increase transparency around algorithms and content promotion. This includes mandating clear labelling of political advertising, curbs on algorithmic amplification of harmful or extreme narratives, and accountability measures to tackle disinformation. Complimentary digital literacy initiatives, especially for young people, are essential to build resilience against online manipulation.

**2. Invest in community spaces and offline civic engagement.** Governments at all levels should allocate resources to develop and maintain physical spaces such as community centres, museums and open civic forums that foster

meaningful, face-to-face dialogue among citizens. Participatory programmes should be supported to actively involve marginalised or rural communities into decision-making processes.

3. **Promote hope-based, participatory political communication.** Public institutions and political leaders should be encouraged to move beyond fear-driven or purely reactive messaging, adopting hope-based strategies that emphasise solutions, empathy and shared values. Training and resources for politicians and civil servants should be developed to guide narrative reframing and co-create policy with citizens, which are critical for rebuilding public trust and fostering a positive, inclusive vision for Europe's future.



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