

## A Book by the Alpbach Scholarship Holders

In a world that constantly challenges us to think beyond the horizon, the European Forum Alpbach stands as a beacon for changemakers.

This anthology brings together the voices of the scholarship holders of the 2025 Forum, contributing their unique vision for the future.

Allow this collection to transport you into a world shaped by idealism, thoughtfulness, and vision. Join us in this journey, and let these perspectives ignite your own passion for creating a future that serves the common good.

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# RECHARGE EUROPE

European  
Forum  
Alpbach  
2025

## Reflections for the Future

Lucy English  
Naajia Amanulla  
Christine Martins  
Cassandra McLaughlin  
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# Recharging Europe

## Reflections for the Future

A European Forum Alpbach Book  
Anthology of Scholarship Holders'  
Reflections of 2025

Initiated, supported and edited by  
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All articles are the unfiltered opinion of the scholarship holders and do not reflect the EFA's opinions on certain topics.

The content of this book shall be widely spread.

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## FOREWORD

2025 marked a special milestone for the European Forum Alpbach: its 80th anniversary. What began in the aftermath of the Second World War has grown into one of Europe's most important platforms for dialogue and thought leadership - shaping the continent we know today through its commitment to peace, diversity, and sustainable development.

The guiding theme of 2025 was Recharge Europe. At a time when Europe faces both profound challenges and unique opportunities, the Forum sought to provide the energy, ideas, and collective spirit needed to strengthen resilience and renew commitment to the European project. What participants carry with them from Alpbach is not only intellectual inspiration but also a lasting sense of community and responsibility - a recognition that they are part of something greater, and that their individual contributions matter.

The European Forum Alpbach is more than an event; it is a living platform that fosters the creativity and capacity for action of thousands of participants each year. By design, it remains intergenerational, diverse, and inclusive. This book offers them an open space to share their visions, reflections, hopes, and questions in many forms: some contributions are fictional, some academic, some poetic, and others experiment with entirely new styles. The co-authors are our scholarship holders and other valued Alpbach contributors. With this book, they strengthen the spirit of Alpbach and ignite the discussions that will continue into 2026. I warmly thank every co-author, as well as the initiators and editors of this volume: Lucy English, Naajia Amanulla, Christine Martins, Martin Giesswein, and Cassandra McLaughlin.

This book is not simply a collection of stories - it is a testimony to the passion, creativity, and vision of this year's scholarship holders. Their contributions remind us that recharging Europe requires more than new policies and innovations. It also calls for new narratives, shared dreams, and the courage to imagine differently.

I invite you to be inspired by these contributions and to carry with you the Alpbach spirit - a spirit that recharges, connects, and empowers us all to build a resilient and humane Europe together.

Marie Ringler  
Vice President of the European Forum Alpbach

## EDITORS' NOTE

As long-time enthusiasts of the European Forum Alpbach, we, your editorial team, have always imagined a book that captures the impressions, ideas and creative energy of the vibrant community of scholarship holders. In 2024, this vision became reality through the collaboration of dozens of passionate writers eager to share their thoughts. The response, the commitment, and the number of contributions were truly overwhelming.

For the Forum's 80th anniversary in 2025, we were once again invited to engage with the community of co-authors and continue this unique project. The Creative Writing Seminar and the lunchtime writing-coaching sessions laid a solid foundation, enabling participants to craft their texts during and shortly after the Forum. After saying goodbye in Alpbach and scattering across the world, we refined and finalized the contributions through digital collaboration, like a global network of EFA authors connected by a shared spirit.

We have organised the many thoughtful submissions into four thematic categories across two overarching sections: *Stories and Essays* and *Poetry and Poems*. The linguistic and cultural diversity represented is remarkable; each contribution was welcomed in the form and language that best reflected the voice of its author, fully in line with the inclusive spirit of the European Forum Alpbach.

With this anthology, we hope to encourage future fellows, thinkers and creators to add their perspectives and become co-authors, not only of books like this, but also of our shared future in any format. Narrative strength does not rely solely on clarity or structure; it thrives on the deeply personal, the diverse and the multifaceted. This collection reflects that richness and the unique opportunities created by this extraordinary forum.

Our deepest gratitude goes to the EFA organisation, which has supported this project from the beginning and given us the freedom to bring it to life.

For any questions or suggestions, feel free to reach out to us at [martin@giesswein.org](mailto:martin@giesswein.org).

With gratitude and in the Alpbach spirit,

Lucy English  
Naajia Amanulla  
Christine Martins  
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## STORIES & ESSAYS

'Keynote to Kirche – a personal reflection on my journey through European Forum Alpbach' by Howard Williamson

### Introduction

It was, arguably, a rather inauspicious start. The scholarship holders who opted for my inaugural seminar at the European Forum Alpbach did not feel they had learned anything during the first half of the first day.

During the coffee break, (I was told many years later), they complained that, in contrast to their peers in other seminars, who had already benefited from a scholarly lecture from an eminent professor, they had just played 'silly games'.

Indeed, they had! Even my co-chair, the distinguished demographer Dragana Avmarov, had seemed somewhat surprised during one of our online planning sessions when I suggested that we started off with a mythical version of 'human bingo'. Normally, you know your numbers and design the bingo grid accordingly. Each participant provides an unusual, unique, fact about themselves. This becomes their anonymous entry on the bingo form.

The group is invited to mix and mingle, in order to discover which entry applies to which individual. The ‘game’ can be over once a vertical or horizontal line is called; which is usually enough time for many of the participants to have got to know one another, though it can be extended for any length of time. The ‘game’ is irrelevant.

It is an icebreaker, rather fun, and the intention is to connect participants with each another. It certainly did. Despite the early complaint, all of our scholarship holders returned after the coffee break and, out of around 70 participants, we did not lose one individual to another seminar over the next five days. We had a varied and participative ‘curriculum’, with plenty of space for group work, challenge, reflection and discussion.

#### How it all started

The invitation to lead a seminar came out of the blue. I had never heard of the European Forum Alpbach. The email from ‘Scientific Advisory Board’ chair, Peter Aichelburg, was quite stiff and formal. He required a reply within days. My reply was not affirmative.

Giving up a week or more in the middle of August to an obscure event in the Tyrolean mountains did not appeal. At least not until Peter called me by phone and, with a certain charm, persuaded me that it would be something I would enjoy. I checked out some photos of the Forum on the internet, saw the amazing soccer pitch, and noted in my diary ‘take my boots’. Yes, I would be delighted to lead a seminar.

Soon afterwards. I received a letter through the post, hand signed by the then EFA President, Erhard Busek. As I would be running a seminar, would I be willing to provide an opening speech to the Forum as a whole? The theme that year, 2012, was ‘Expectations – the future of the young’, clearly resonating with my background in

youth research, youth policy and youth work practice. It was a clever title for the Forum, cutting both ways in terms of seeking to address what young people expected from Europe, and what Europe might be expecting from young people.

Like the Forum itself, I did not know of Dr Busek but I gladly accepted his invitation. I was slowly exploring the European Forum Alpbach and learning both a little about its history and about its prestige, especially across the German-speaking nations of Austria, Germany and Switzerland and throughout the Balkans, where the reputation of EFA had been intentionally cultivated by Busek himself.

Not only did I give the opening speech that year and co-chair one of the sixteen six-day scientific seminars, but I also returned to serve on a panel on The Future of European integration, arguing for attention to the themes of mobility, faith and generation.

Everything was conducted rather formally, and I was suited and booted alongside everyone else (though the dreadlocks down to my waist did provide a visible challenge to my conventional credentials). More informally, I debated many themes with scholarship holders in Alpbach’s Jakober’ and I also took part in many ‘fireside conversations’, with small groups who wanted to know more about my background and life trajectory.

The ubiquitous Thomas Mayr-Harting kindly invited me to a lunch in Böglerhof, where I explained to the ambassadors on either side of me why I thought Alpbach was rather special: though it was technically a five minute walk back to the Congress Centre, it could well take them an hour, as they were accosted by scholarship holders who wished to ask them questions about their morning speech or panel contribution.

Where else, I said, could a political science student from Kosovo strike up a conversation with the Irish ambassador to the European Union? Where else would the ambassador have the time, or even willingness, to engage in such a discussion? On the last day of the seminars, I secretly planned a visit to a tree I had seen in many of the early photographs of the Forum.

One of the scholarship holders in our seminar was from the village. She knew somebody who could provide a trailer full of bread, cheese, wine and water. This was delivered to the meadow and our final hour of our seminar was in the sunshine under the tree.

I did not get to use my football (soccer) boots. The scheduled day of the soccer tournament was the day I had come back to Wales, though I was told it was cancelled because of torrential rain. But I did come back for the Political Symposium and on my final day in Alpbach in 2012 I bumped into Peter Aichelburg. What an amazing experience, I said to him, I would love to come back. “We don’t invite anybody back”, he said.

#### The next regime

Nevertheless, I did return, initially just for different Symposia, including one on Higher Education. Dr Busek’s Presidency had given way to a Forum presided over by Franz Fischler, and there was a new Managing Director, Philippe Narval. I was asked to be a member of a ‘strategy group on the future of the European Forum Alpbach’ and some of the reasons for my connection to the European Forum Alpbach started to fall into place.

I had not met Philippe before EFA but he was instrumental in my very first experience of Skype. He had been a postgraduate student at Oxford, preparing a thesis on the thinking of Kurt Hahn and experiential learning.

At the time I was a Trustee of the UK Duke of Edinburgh’s Award, a personal development programme for young people that Hahn had conceptualised from his experience of the Moray Badge when he was headmaster of Gordonstoun, a school he founded when he was exiled from Nazi Germany. Hahn had persuaded one of his pupils, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, to lend his name to the Award.

Philippe Narval interviewed me, on Skype, for his research. And, (unknown to me), he also put my name forward as a possible seminar chair and perhaps even as an opening speaker for the European Forum Alpbach.

One of Fischler’s Vice-Presidents was Caspar Einem, who had also taken over from Peter Aichelburg as chair of the Scientific Advisory Board, the group of distinguished Austrian and international scholars who shaped the Seminar Week (Seminarwoche).

It was Caspar who invited me to join the SAB in 2016. Some years later he told me that it had been the complaints made by scholarship holders (see above) that had led him to take a close interest in my seminar, my ideas and my approach. And some years later I paid an emotional tribute, in front of that year’s seminar chairs at a lunch in Alphof, to Caspar’s stalwart support for the seminar programme and its transformation.

My association and involvement with the European Forum Alpbach was uniquely strengthened when Philippe asked if I would be willing to ‘mentor’ and support Lara Weisz, who had taken on a dedicated responsibility for the Seminarwoche and its programme.

I had been in Portugal when my mobile rang and Philippe outlined the request. As in 2012, I was cautious in my response. It was the school holidays, I said, and it would be hard to give up two weeks for his cause. ‘Bring the family for the second week’, he said! I did.

### Building relationships

Prior to that, however, another EFA Vice-President, Sonja Puntscher Riekman, had asked me to help shape and contribute to the EFA Higher Education Symposium in 2014. My accommodation that year was in Reith.

That year I took public transport from Munich, with a train to Wörgl and then a bus. In previous and subsequent years, for different reasons (from VIP status to a lot of luggage, including a guitar), I was always picked up in a very nice car, with a very nice (one year this was the son of the President) and very nice accommodation in Alpbach.

So I found myself in Reith, dumped my bags and caught a bus to the Congress Centre to register and get my badge. Time was apparently at a premium. Philippe wanted me down at the Hauptschule (now the Mittelschule) for an event, immediately.

I said I was tired and reluctant to walk. He said there was no need for that; the Forum had two electric bikes available. We freewheeled down the hill and played our part. As I left, the heavens opened and the rain poured down. I knew I would have to wait some time for the night bus to take me back down the mountain to Reith. But right there, sitting in his big SUV, was the EFA President, Franz Fischler.

With hindsight, it was such impertinence, but I asked him for a lift. After all, I had been travelling all day, was very tired, and it was only five minutes by car. Franz took me down to Reith and as I thanked him, I joked that I had once been driven by his son and now I had been driven by the President. Franz smiled, though at the time I was not sure whether he was amused or bemused.

I think now, looking back, that it was perhaps that moment that established a relationship which, alongside Philippe and Casper, helped to transform the Forum over the coming years. Indeed, in

2025, when I had a beer with Franz, he implicitly confirmed that point.

By 2016, the year European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker opened the new Herz-Kremenak-Saal, I was deeply engaged with Caspar and Lara in supplementing around 16 scientific seminars with an increasing number of more artistic and skill-based seminars anchored around movement, sound and voice.

Philippe had been committed to what he described as the ‘art of hosting’, though these took some time to come to fruition and become integrated into the seminar programme; through the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, there were personal development seminars on leadership, working together, and performance, and others on creative writing and producing soundscapes.

I stood on the stage for the opening ceremony to announce the seminars one by one, for scholarship holders to consider their preferences: science in the morning, arts in the afternoon. The SeminarWoche was depicted in the booklet as having been curated by Caspar Einem and Howard Williamson.

### Disruption and transformation

The presentation of the seminars and their chairs initially remained formal, in compliance with Austrian traditions around the use of titles and qualifications. For someone as relaxed and informal as me, this was quite difficult.

Eventually I did consult with a very distinguished Austrian diplomat, asking how he felt people would respond if I used their first names, but his response to me was simply, “Howard, I am sure you have already made up your mind”. And so I brought seminar chairs, and later seminar assistants too, up on to the stage, by calling out their

first names, and there were no repercussions! I continued to be invited to contribute to and attend the Forum.

My primary role was to support, first, Lara and later, Bernadette Zimmermann, who took over responsibility for the Seminarwoche in 2019 and who consolidated and cemented the structure of ‘science in the morning, arts in the afternoon’. I had no managerial authority over them; I was their sounding board, to test out, provide feedback, offer reminders, and develop new ideas and approaches together.

We wanted seminar chairs to be comfortable and confident in exploring and experimenting with a range of pedagogical methods, not just traditional lectures and Q&A follow-up. The dramatic evolution of approaches to ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ in the space of just a few years led me to inform the EFA Board that, on my visits to different seminars, I hoped to witness at least some lectures, not just scholarship holders in circles on their knees drawing on flip chart paper with thick felt pens!

We also decided to experiment with different formats in terms of structuring the Seminarwoche, for both developmental and pragmatic reasons. Attendees were often late in the morning because the bus schedule from Radfeld and Brixlegg did not synchronise with our EFA timetables; they were often late in the afternoon because the lunch hour was too short if the queue in Spar, Messner’s or Jakober was too long! We reflected on how to adapt accordingly.

I had noted sometimes, right from the start, a significant gulf, what might be called a ‘status gap’ between seminar chairs and their participants. The latter group was also invariably, and desirably, very diverse, but this often produced frustration amongst those who felt left behind (if the programme for their seminar was too advanced, too soon) or those who felt it was too elementary at the start (for those who were already more advanced).

This was also a major challenge for seminar chairs, who often presumed a certain level of knowledge in their students. There were, in my view, too many requests to change seminars after the first or second session. Though some were of course for plausible reasons, some scholarship holders were expressing premature frustration with their seminar experience for these reasons. I felt we needed a bridge between the seminar chairs and their group, to sort out these and other issues themselves.

The result was the introduction of ‘Seminar Assistants’, with a role and responsibility significantly greater than just checking attendance (as some had done before), former scholarship holders appointed and invited to come again to support a particular seminar.

We had always held an introductory welcome and briefing meeting for seminar chairs, culminating in a lunch in Böglerhof. We added an introductory welcome and briefing meeting for seminar assistants, over lunch in Messner’s. My planned interventions with each group were necessarily separate and seemingly contradictory!

I snatched five minutes with the seminar chairs to tell them how brilliant their seminar assistants were and, although they had been appointed to *assist*, it would be foolish not to make use, if at all possible, of their unquestionable knowledge and experiences. I then raced to Messner’s and, over a pizza, told the seminar assistants that I did not care how brilliant or talented they were (and they certainly were!); their job was to *assist* their seminar chairs.

That was the job for which they had applied, though I hoped that their seminar chairs might make more use of their capabilities and competencies. When Nadine Beisteiner (a successor to Lara and Bernadette) decided, for different though equally important reasons, to host a joint welcome and briefing lunch, in 2024 and again in 2025, this put paid to any possibility of conveying these dual messages to the two different groups.

We extended the lunch ‘hour’ to three hours. As most of the seminars, at the time, were still held in the Mittelschule (down the hill from the village), we decided to experiment with a food truck, selling a well-priced wrap and drink, and see if scholarship holders used the space to mix and rest, rather than join the queues for food up the hill. Some seminar chairs had said to me that, given the chance, they would have liked to attend the seminars being delivered by other chairs!

This led me to suggest that perhaps there could be joint ‘short sessions’ in the Mittelschule, held by chairs from different seminars during the extended lunch break, exploring the overlaps between their topics when there were items of mutual interest.

In the event, only one such session of that nature was ever held – at the bus station up the hill, between the chairs of two different leadership seminars (one on distributive and participative leadership, the other on military leadership), during the hybrid Forum of 2021.

Nevertheless, that thinking planted a seed of thought in my mind that led to the establishment of ‘Food for Thought’ in 2018, down at the Mittelschule. We would provide a room, subject to availability, during the first four days of the Seminarwoche, for *anybody* (and I do mean anybody) to talk about *anything* (and I do mean anything). All they had to do was confirm by 0830 on the morning in question and I would advertise their slot.

We had considerable demand, from villagers, hosts, seminar assistants and scholarship holders, on topics as diverse as Austrian folk dance, Crypto currencies, climate protests, EFA for introverts, stand-up comedy, and jewellery making from salvaged material in Zimbabwean rivers. Those providing the session had complete autonomy with regard to their approach, though they had to be prepared for completely unpredictable attendance.

I have done a few Food for Thought sessions, including the very first, to get the ball rolling. At that one, about 50 people turned up; at others, fewer than 20 but more than ten. Some contributors have had just a handful, but almost everybody has been satisfied with the experience.

I thought we had lost Food for Thought when the Covid-19 pandemic struck and various changes to the programme and the location of the seminars took place (the food truck was never re-instituted) but Food for Thought has been re-established and was heavily over-subscribed in 2025, with every available slot being filled within hours of my announcing it during the opening ceremony. I finally managed to play in the soccer tournament in 2015, alongside my son and four seminar assistants, one of whom had been a student of mine in south Wales.

We were Team SEMAS (SEMinar ASSistants) and were knocked out at the group stage! It was the last year I played soccer; in the following March, I was significantly and permanently blinded in my left eye by an excellent shot. Subsequently, having qualified as a referee, I have served as the ‘chief referee’ at EFA’s scholarship holders’ soccer tournament, officiating through to the final and receiving a bottle of excellent Austrian white wine for my efforts.

In 2017, the executive assistant of the President invited me to join Franz Fischler in Alpbacherhof for breakfast. It felt like a summons to the headteacher’s study and I thought I must have transgressed some unwritten EFA protocol – a bridge too far, perhaps?

But no; Franz wondered whether I would be willing to join the Board of the European Forum Alpbach Foundation. That was quite an honour. There was no hesitation in accepting, especially given the quality of the breakfast!

Through the Foundation, I struck up an excellent relationship with its Director, Sonja Joechl and existing and subsequent members of the Board, Werner Wutscher (who served as CEO of EFA in 2021), Boris Marte, Winfried Kneip and Caroline Hornstein-Tomic. They have become good friends, and some remain on EFA's Executive Board.

Other friendships have developed through the Alpbach church. In May 2018, I received a strange email from Lara:

As you know we have every morning the *interfaith contemplation* curated by Friso Heyt (in cc). This year we will also have some contemplations during the evenings in the church, called *Abend.Stille*.

Franz (Fischler) and Friso would be honored, if you would be this year's first speaker of the Abend.Stille on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> from 18:30 – 18:50. Friso is in CC so he can explain more about the format and the details.

Friso asked me to read a passage from the Bible or the Quran and then speak to it. I replied that, given that I have no religion, I could not do this (it seems to be an EFA habit of mine to first refuse and then to accept, with adaptations). Instead, I offered a song as the text for a story behind it and then the idea of playing the song. But not on my own.

I am a youth worker and a supporting guitar player, not a performer. Friso suggested that I should engage with some members of the Alpbach church choir, which was how I met Gabi Schneider-Fuchs, who currently co-ordinates the EFA 'Into the Silence' sessions, her husband Luggi, who plays the accordion, and Andreas, today the deacon of the church.

With some improvisation, I sent them the chords and words to my proposed song (written by a youth worker and musician called Cecil Patton who, tragically, died of a stroke at the age of 41) and, when I arrived in Alpbach that year, we had a couple of rehearsals before performing it together in the church, after my short talk about conflict in Europe. The congregation seemingly valued my contribution; I was invited back at the end of the week to play the song once again!

I have played that song – called 'Hold Your Head' - since then, with different people, when Abend Stille/Into the Silence was re-established after the Covid-19 pandemic, in 2022. My talk has been different; after the full-scale invasion by Russia of Ukraine, I wanted to remember all the young men from the village who had given their lives in war, whose names are inscribed in a memorial in the Alpbach churchyard.

My fellow musicians were a seminar chair (who played the organ and could make it sound like a battlefield, as we read out the young men's names) and a seminar assistant (who had a wonderful voice). Then, reflecting on the four 'tracks' that have shaped the EFA programme in recent years, with Andreas once more, a professional double bass player (who had performed at the Forum's opening ceremony) and two seminar assistants with wonderful voices (one from Germany, one from Ukraine), I decided to change the song and talk about the climate crisis, leading into an obscure song written by a Welsh folk singer for his children about looking after the animals and the planet: 'The Keeper'.

In 2025, celebrating EFA's 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary and remembering the theme of my first EFA, I reminded people that the Forum had been established by young people with a vision for learning, democracy and Europe, that young people today face a 'polycrisis' of challenges and that we must think about how best to support them so that they,

too, can develop their own vision for learning, democracy and Europe for the next 80 years.

We – a seminar assistant, two Club board members, and a member of the Forum Alpbach Network (FAN) Committee that organizes its own contribution to the EFA programme – played ‘Forever Young’, by Bob Dylan, himself now 84 years young, but also a critical voice when he was young.

That first interfaith contemplation in 2018 was, however, particularly memorable for me. A few of us went for a drink in Jakober afterwards, including an older woman with great grace and sparkling eyes. After she left, another person asked if I knew who she was; I did not.

It was Hanna Molden. I had read up on the history of the Forum and I knew as much as I could garner about its founders, Simon Moser, Otto Molden and his younger brother Fritz. Hanna had been married to Fritz Molden. My son Alfred, who had been coming to the village since he was a little boy, later struck up a friendship with Karli Molden, Hanna’s grandson, and I became friends with Hanna, connecting through the formal invitations she always extends to different groups at the Forum.

During the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Hanna contributed her reminiscences and although the events were often held in German, I always attended – as I wrote to Hanna – for both symbolic and emotional reasons. Knowing Hanna has tied me even more to the village and to the Forum.

In 2019, the work that had been done in the preceding years to transform the European Forum Alpbach appeared to bear fruit. There were 30 seminars – 29 planned and one ‘self-organised’ in response to a group of scholarship holders who were frustrated

about not getting into the afternoon seminars of their choice. Everything else went smoothly.

I wrote to Caspar that I could not imagine things getting any better. Lara had constructed the foundations for an excellent Seminarwoche; Bernadette had not only consolidated it but developed it further. Franz and Caspar had supported them. Philippe had ensured that they were able to deliver. It was a ‘perfect storm’.

#### Covid

And then the Covid-19 pandemic struck. The 2020 in-person Forum had to be abandoned. All sessions took place on-line. Everybody did the best they could. We tried all kinds of initiatives to inspire and energise prospective participants, including a ‘Panorama’ (the EFA magazine) creative writing contest involving producing an essay or image on utopian or dystopian fundamentals, where I was a member of the judging panel.

I joined many on-line panels, just to back up those moderating them, in case the prominent panellists ran out of steam or questions from participants dried up. But it was a crisis all round, with deep financial and professional uncertainties at strategic, structural and operational levels.

It was the last Forum of the ‘old guard’, with whom I had worked more and more closely over nearly a decade. Philippe and Franz stepped down, though Caspar stayed on for one more year, as did Bernadette.

A new President, Andreas Treichl, with a background in banking and capital markets stepped in. I was unsure whether to stay involved, even if they wanted me to. The next year’s Forum was hybrid, with

a dramatically slimmed down in-person presence and Covid testing of everybody every other day.

There had been an initiative called Alpbach Challenges, where I had been a judge, and at least I wanted to see that through, as well as my now established support for the Seminarwoche, in which we had both in-person and on-line seminars. With a lot of difficulty, encouragement from Bernadette, and special dispensation from the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I travelled to Alpbach, stayed in Alpbacherhof (along with Caspar) and met Andreas Treichl who I found I liked very much.

His vision for the future of the Forum resonated very closely with my own. I immersed myself in the Forum, supporting both its in-person and on-line programme, with priority attention – as always – to the SeminarWoche. On the last day of the seminars, halfway through the Forum, a Covid outbreak in Jakober the night before led to the health authorities insisting that every Forum participant be tested by the end of the day.

If that was not done, the Forum would be closed down. We managed to get this done, with five minutes to spare. I was the first to be tested, as soon as the public health officials arrived, around 14:30. Bernadette was the last, at 19:55.

#### Post-Covid

The Covid years were just the start of four years of change. A new Secretary-General, Feri Thierry, took over from Werner, for the 2022 Forum. With Caroline and others, we met with the Balkan clubs in Zagreb, and I also attended the Forum Alpbach Network (FAN) conference in Skopje. That cemented a great relationship with a third wave of FAN Board members, who themselves stepped down at Forum 2025.

Andreas merged the Boards of the EFA Foundation and the Association and he and Feri restructured the EFA programme, running seminars over the two weeks with the aspiration that this would connect scholarship holders more closely with the other elements/modules of the programme in which distinguished scholars, politicians, diplomats, poets and others played a part.

Self-financing ‘labs’, doing a deep dive into key issues of our time, were introduced, as were year-round Alpbach Ideas (not dissimilar to the Alpbach Learning Missions that had run parallel to the seminars, in 2019), and more robust connections and ‘red threads’ between panels, stages, hikes and other components of the EFA programme mosaic.

But this didn’t quite work, despite the framing of the Forum within four tracks (Democracy and the Rule of Law, Climate, Security, and Finance and Economy) and across four modules (Euregio, Seminars, Europe in the World, and Austria in Europe). 2023 saw a return to what was, in essence, the 2019 model, though inevitably with some adaptation and variation.

Staff turnover, however, was still palpable, especially in relation to the individual responsible for the seminars. Bernadette left in 2022 and her first successor stayed only a few months, and the next appointee left shortly before the 2024 Forum. Regardless of the format determined by the Board, I immersed myself in the Forum in my time-honored way, volunteering my services wherever it might have been desired or required.

As a Board member, I welcomed panels and workshops, and I joined Democracy and Climate hikes; as a policy person, I joined diplomats and officials for dinner, when invited; as an academic, I contributed to discussions; as a youth worker, I accepted invitations to be on the jury for the fantastic Speakers’ Night (and, in 2025, also for the

Debate Night), and I continued to speak and play in the church and referee the soccer tournament.

I wrote to Andreas that I had discharged something like 80 tasks over those two weeks. I had even contributed to the arts and culture programme by recommending and commenting on George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (and more recently I recommended Aleksandar Hemon's *The Book of My Lives*). After Bernadette left I considered my own position.

It was going to be hard to develop the same strength of relationship and mutual understanding as I had done with Lara and Bernadette. I pondered long and hard, but my love of the Forum meant that I was not yet ready to abandon it completely.

Andreas then asked me to step down from the Board but to remain on the Scientific Advisory Board (where I had been all along!) as its Vice-Chair, supporting a newly appointed Chair, Michaela Fritz. I was also on the Democracy Track Committee and remained on the Seminar Committee.

I was perfectly happy to accede to that request and have worked, I think and hope, very well with Michaela ever since.

It came as both a surprise and rather a shock when Andreas told me he was planning to stand down as President of EFA and that he would be nominating Othmar Karas as his successor. I had really grown to like and admire Andreas' approach to the Forum, at every level, though I fully understood the prospective and perceived 'conflict of interests' given the major contribution being made by the Erste Group and Erste Foundation to the funding of the Forum. Othmar was duly elected as President at the EFA General Assembly in the autumn of 2024 and shortly afterwards I received a call.

He would like me to step down as Vice-Chair of the Scientific Advisory Board. I thought his next request/decision might be for

me to step down from the Forum, but instead he asked me to remain on the SAB and to continue to support the SeminarWoche, which he understood was my primary commitment to the Forum.

All of that was fine by me, especially as Michaela would continue to (co-)chair the SAB and take on the chairing of the Seminar Committee. Nadine, who took on delivery of the seminars in 2024 at very short notice was consolidating her role. Her diligence and application over a whole year, with the support of all of us, and her intern Sara, led to what I now consider to be, in 2025, the best SeminarWoche ever, enveloped by arguably the best EFA ever. I was not sure that the achievements of EFA 2019 would ever be surpassed but they have.

Feri had said that 2024 had been 'proof of concept' and, by 2025, some of the hic-cups of that year had certainly been ironed out. EFA now enlists a much larger staff team than the one Philippe had at his disposal. However, the financial resources now required do present a challenge to sustaining EFA in its current form.

### Conclusion

I am glad to have played my part over the past few years, in many respects. Franz Fischler once said that when a local farmer asks me to mow the meadow, I will have performed all tasks both at the Forum and in the village. Josef Mitterer said recently, as he observed villagers waving good morning to me as I rode my bicycle to the early morning check-in with the 50+ staff who make the Forum happen, that the less important I get with the Forum, the more famous I become in the village!

I have always tried to build bridges and consolidate positive relationships, both horizontally and vertically. I hope that will be

how my contribution to the European Forum Alpbach will be remembered.

#### Postscript

Through the European Forum Alpbach, I have been privileged to meet so many inspiring and influential people. I have to mention just a few –there is, of course, Hanna Molden, and the late Erhard Busek, Caspar Einem and Claus Raidl, who were the most senior figures on the Boards of the Forum.

And there is also Franz Fischler, Philippe Narval, Andreas Treichl, Josef Mitterer, Joseph Stiglitz, Anya Schiffrin, Cédric Villani, Charly Kleissner, Thomas Mayr-Harting, Tim Crane, Misha Glenny, Lindsay Skoll, Catherine Ashton, Kathryn List, Iain Stewart and so many others with whom I have rubbed shoulders and shaken hands, if not managed to have a beer in Jakober. Thank you. It has been an honour and a pleasure.

And my deepest and heartfelt thanks to Lara and Bernadette especially, and latterly Nadine, for their collegiality, friendship, and unbelievable hard work to make the European Forum Alpbach, and particularly the Seminar Week, what it is today. I hope I provided you all with the support you needed and valued, and I want to thank you for the mutual professionalism and trust that we established during our EFA time together – and beyond!

Howard Williamson

September 2025

#### *'Beyond Solutionism' by Andreea-Maria Ianoşiu*

Urban–rural. Echo–scream. Sound–bold. Contrasts, directions, orientation.

Alpbach is a village that whispers before it speaks. The mountains stand as witnesses, patient and still as the air. Thoughts are louder than the breeze.

Of all the grandeur European cities I've seen before (with their majestic boulevards, imposing buildings, flags as a depiction of cultural awareness, impressive palaces and parliament) it's here, in this pocket of quiet, where the European spirit breathes strongest. I never expected a small alpine village could make me feel more European than any big capital.

Alpbach leads with silence. Nature does the listening, the streets are lined with flowers rather than flags, and the air is charged with possibility.

'It is time to be more full-time Europeans, and not only part-time Europeans,' This takeaway, overheard somewhere between a morning mist and an evening conversation, resonated with me. It did not strike me as a slogan, rather an invitation, or perhaps a gentle accusation?

In the city, the urban chaos, Europe feels like a calendar of summits, a chain of new alerts, a debate in a distant chamber. Here, in contrast, Europe is intimate, almost fragile, rather tangible. It lived in the warmth of a shared bread at breakfast, in the tension of late-night arguments, in the silent nods of people who understood one another without sharing a mother tongue.

Europe was no longer a treaty, an agreement or a set of directives; it was human, breathing, contradictory. Just like us.

The theme of this year, 'Recharge Europe,' struck me at first as just another clever title, a hashtag waiting to happen. I could confirm that, slowly, I grasped what it meant. RECHARGE. Not the same as rebuild, not the same as repair, not the same as revolutionize.

It is gentler, quieter, softly spoken. It does not discard what came before, rather it prolongs the lifespan of something one trusts, something that still works, something too valuable to be given up

on. This something, nonetheless, has grown tired, overworked, dim around the edges.

I still have the tendency to distinguish between Europe and Europeans; rather, between Europe and people representing this spirit, as if it is a dissociating entity. On this note, I could presume that Europe, too, seems tired sometimes, not in the way a structure is overused—crumbling, collapsing, but drained like a human being can be: restless, irritable, quick to quarrel, unable to sleep, drowsy, and consequently able to evolve.

Tired of arguments that go in circles, of compromises that leave everyone half-satisfied, half-disappointed. Tired of crises that never seem to end but rather fade into the next one. Tired of being compared, measured, doubted, even by its own citizens. And yet, when something is tired, the answer does not stand in tearing it apart, but in letting it breathe again: to pause, to rest, to restore the energy that once made it vibrant.

Perhaps that is what Alpbach was doing to me, too: slowing me down enough to listen, to notice, to remember why any of this matters, to remind me what I might take for granted. Recharge is not a revolution. It is an inhalation, a drawing in of strength before what comes next.

In the quiet of this valley, I began to imagine Europe not as a tired bureaucracy, but as a living being that simply needs space to renew itself, to shed the cynicism, the fatigue, the sense that it is always on the defensive. Maybe this is why we come here, to this village between mountains: to remember that Europe is not just an

institution but a conversation. And conversations—just like people—need a moment to recover their breath.

A following concern would be: *recovering from what?* From crises? Absolutely. From fatigue? Certainly. What about recovering from a kind of forgetfulness or neglect, the way we have begun to see Europe just as an institutional mechanism rather than a place for dialogue—a system rather than a story.

It was in a seminar on technology and human values where I stumbled into a conversation regarding a topic I'd been circling for years without finding an entrance. At this moment I realised the dialogue for which I'd been searching was not about machines at all. It was about us. Technology has become the reflex solution to every issue, both at the narrative level, as well as at the policy level: efficiency, growth, even democracy itself. But here, in this village between mountains, surrounded by people who spoke of AI and ethics in the same breath, I began to see the outlines of a different approach.

Perhaps technology is not the cure for our exhaustion, but one of the reasons we are exhausted; perhaps our hunger for instant solutions has left us starved of reflections; perhaps our rush for delivering 'efficiency' has taught us to slow down. This is how I came across the concept of 'Digital humanism.'

This is not a policy paper or a manifesto. It is a discipline of attention—a way of designing, coding, legislating, and living developments that keep the human at the centre of the digital.

It asks us to slow down before we automate, to ask "why?" and "for whom?" before "what?" and "how fast?" It invites us to think of platforms not only as commercial spaces, but as spaces of dialogue, of dignity, of morals. It's been a period when I had been searching for a vocabulary, or more of a social movement, to describe my unease with "solutionism", or the belief that more technology is always the answer. And here it was.

We spoke of ethics, of machine learning, of the right to opacity in a world obsessed with transparency.

These aspects made me think: *If Europe is to recharge, should it not recharge this capacity as well? To insist that innovation serves life, not the other way around?* Some of us would translate this approach through the lens of nostalgia, an attempt to look retrospectively at things that will happen, sooner or later. I believe it is a choice to build a digital future where people are not data points but active participants, and where tools do strengthen the human fabrics.

What would that look like in practice? A recharged Europe rooted in digital humanism would not be defined by the number of patents it files or how quickly it rolls out new apps. It would be measured by how well technology expands freedom, justice and participation.

Instead of treating citizens as passive users, our digital spaces would treat them as co-creators. Algorithms would be transparent and accountable, and public digital infrastructure would be built with the same care as roads and bridges. I feel grateful, grateful because I have faith that education would prepare people not only to work with new technologies but to question them, to shape them, to challenge them.

Innovation would not be a race to be first, but a process of aligning progress with democratic values, of designing inclusive platforms that connect rather than divide. This is not Utopian vision; I believe it is a choice. Europe has the legal frameworks, the research capacity, and—above all—the historical memory to lead in this direction.

If it dares to be bold in setting standards and building public-interest technology, it can recharge not only its institutions but its sense of purpose.

For me, this is the lesson Alpbach left behind: that recharging Europe is not about turning back the clock or chasing the newest gadget. It is about cultivating a mindset, slower when it must be, principled when it counts, so that the digital future we build is one we actually want to live in.

'The s t o R y p Ahhh r t o hhh N we' by Antonio-Mihai Ciobanu

The s t o R y p Ahhh r t o hhh N we

“p Ahhh r t o hhh N we” as a possible symbolic addition for a poetic or fragmented reflection (e.g., “p” for pool, “r” for Romy, “t” for tennis, “N” for narrative, “we” for collective memory)

I think of Romy Schneider, her films, her pyramids, her love with Alain, her unfinished obelisk. The letters—p, r, t, o, N, we—return a code from last night’s dream. “P” for pool, “R” for Romy, “T” for time, “O” for observation, “N” for Nile, “we” for the collective who remember. Or perhaps “Pharaoh,” the word itself, is the key: a ruler of memory, commanding what we hold dear.

I step outside, the Alpbach stars sharp above. The swimming pool of *La Piscine* merges with the Nile, with K's snowy end, with Schrödinger's cat. Romy is my Pharaoh, her image eternal, her loss a wound unhealed. The tennis playground is dust, but the pool—her pool—is a river flowing through time, carrying us all.

p Ahhh r t o N e

A Quantum Summer: Romy Schneider and Erwin Schrödinger as Alain Delon in *La Piscine*

I am Romy Schneider, or perhaps I am Marianne, lounging by this sun-dappled pool in Saint-Tropez, my heart a tangle of passion and unease. But there's another voice in my mind—Erwin Schrödinger, that Austrian physicist with his maddening cat paradox, whispering of realities where I'm both alive and not, both in love and betrayed. And then there's Jean-Paul, the man I'm supposed to embody, Alain Delon's shadow, all brooding charm and hidden menace. In this story, I'm all three: actress, theorist, and character, caught in a quantum dance of desire and danger.

The villa hums with summer's heat, the pool a shimmering mirror reflecting my fractured selves. As Romy, I feel the weight of my past with Alain—our real-life love, broken by 1964, now reignited in celluloid for *La Piscine*. Every glance we share on set burns with history, our chemistry a silent script no director could write.

As Marianne, I'm Jean-Paul's lover, teasing him by the pool, my black bikini a defiance of the world's gaze. But as Erwin, I see this all as a thought experiment: am I Romy, playing Marianne, or am I

Jean-Paul, the failed writer simmering with jealousy? In this box of a villa, I'm both and neither, my fate uncollapsed until the camera stops rolling.

The story shifts when Harry arrives, Maurice Ronet's swagger cutting through our idyll. He's Marianne's ex, a music producer dripping with success, towing his enigmatic daughter, Pénélope. As Romy, I feel the sting of Alain's insistence on casting me—his pursuit, relentless even after our breakup, mirrors Harry's flirtations with Marianne.

As Schrödinger, I observe the superposition: Harry is both friend and foe, Pénélope both innocent and provocateur. The pool, this liquid stage, holds us all in suspension, our emotions rippling beneath the surface, unseen until observed.

Jean-Paul—Alain's role, now mine—stirs with insecurity. I feel his pulse quicken as Harry taunts him, calling him a failure. I'm Romy, knowing Alain's own vulnerabilities, his need to prove himself. I'm Schrödinger, theorizing that Jean-Paul exists in dual states: the lover who adores Marianne and the rival who seduces Pénélope to wound Harry. The night it happens, the air is thick with wine and resentment. Harry, drunk, stumbles into the pool.

Jean-Paul—me—holds him under the water, a quantum boundary between life and death. Did I mean to kill him? Or was it an accident, a collapse of one possibility among many?

As Romy, I play Marianne's shock, my eyes—those eyes critics call mesmerizing—betraying a truth I can't speak. As Schrödinger, I wonder: is Harry dead in one reality, alive in another? The inspector, Lévéque, circles like an observer threatening to open the box.

He doesn't buy the accident, but the evidence slips through his fingers, and the case closes. Jean-Paul and Marianne stay together, their love now tainted by mistrust, a superposition of devotion and betrayal.

In the final scene, I stand by the pool, the sun setting over Saint-Tropez. I'm Romy, exhausted from embodying Marianne's pain, knowing this film will launch my French career but haunt me with Alain's shadow.

I'm Schrödinger, contemplating the paradox: the pool is both a symbol of passion and a grave, holding all outcomes until the world decides. And I'm Jean-Paul, staring into the water, seeing not just Marianne but Romy, Pénélope, and every choice I didn't make. In this quantum summer, I'm alive, dead, and everything in between, forever caught in the lens of *La Piscine*.

p Ahhh r t t w O

#### Alain Delon's Perspective: What We Remember

I am Alain Delon, standing in the aftermath of my confession at Alpbach's European Forum, the Tyrolean air still heavy with Romy's name. The audience asked about meaning, but now, alone, I ask myself: what do we actually remember? A tennis playground or a swimming pool? The question haunts me, like one of Erwin Schrödinger's riddles, where memory is both real and not, alive and dead until recalled.

In my mind, it's always the swimming pool. Saint-Tropez, 1969, *La Piscine*. The water glinted like Romy's eyes, holding love, jealousy, and danger. I was Jean-Paul, she was Marianne, and every moment by that pool was a truth we couldn't speak off-screen.

I remember her laughter, the way she floated in that black bikini, the tension as Harry's shadow fell over us. The pool was our stage, where we drowned in each other and in the story—a murder, a love, a lie. That image is seared in me, as vivid as the day we filmed it.

But a tennis playground? I strain to recall. Was there a court in one of our films, a fleeting scene I've forgotten? Or is it a metaphor, a place of play and competition, less fatal than the pool? I think of our real life—Paris in the early '60s, Romy and I, young and reckless, maybe passing a tennis court on some forgotten afternoon.

Did we play, laugh, argue? The memory flickers, uncertain, like a quantum state Schrödinger might ponder. It's not the pool's clarity; it's a blur, a ghost of what might have been.

Schrödinger whispers to me: memory is superposition. The pool and the playground coexist, both true until I choose one. But I can't. The pool is Romy—her passion, her pain, her loss in '82.

I told the Alpbach crowd she was the love of my life, and it's the pool I see when I close my eyes, not some vague court. Yet, what if I'm wrong? What if the world remembers a different Romy, a different us, in moments I've let slip?

I walk Alpbach's quiet paths, the Alps looming like judges. The swimming pool is what I carry—its water holds her face, our story, my regret. The tennis playground, if it exists, is just a shadow, a

question mark in the vastness of what we've lost. I'll never recover from her, and that's the only memory I trust.

p Ahhh r t T w o

#### A Quantum Confession: Alain Delon at the European Forum Alpbach

I am Alain Delon, or perhaps I'm Jean-Paul from *La Piscine*, or maybe even a shadow of Erwin Schrödinger, whose quantum riddles haunt my thoughts.

It's 1982, and I'm standing in Alpbach, this Tyrolean village of thinkers, where the air is sharp with pine and ideas. The European Forum Alpbach has drawn me here, though I'm no philosopher—just an actor, a man carrying a wound that won't heal. The stage is set, not for a film, but for a confession I've never made so publicly. Romy Schneider, my Romy, is gone, and I'm here to speak her name.

The forum's theme is "In Search of Meaning," and I'm an oddity among the scholars and poets, my face too known, my grief too raw. The wooden hall smells of polished oak, and the audience—professors, students, dreamers—watches me with curiosity. They expect the Delon of *Plein Soleil*, all charisma and mystery, but I'm here as Alain, the man who loved Rosemarie Alpbach, the woman the world knew as Romy Schneider.

I step to the podium, my hands trembling, not from nerves but from the weight of her memory. "Romy was the love of my life," I say, my voice steady despite the ache.

The words echo in the quiet hall, and I feel Schrödinger's paradox creep in—Romy is both here and not, alive in my heart, dead in the world. We met in 1958, filming *Christine*, our love sparking like a

flame that burned through five years, through Paris nights and broken promises. I ended it, foolishly, in 1964, with a letter and roses, thinking I could move on. I was wrong.

The audience leans in as I speak of *La Piscine*, our reunion in 1969. Playing Jean-Paul and Marianne, we poured our past into every glance, every touch by that Saint-Tropez pool. "She was electric," I say, "her eyes holding all the joy and pain of a woman who loved too deeply."

I don't tell them of the nights we argued, or how I pushed her away again, chasing my own demons. But I tell them of her laughter, her courage, her roles in *Les Choses de la Vie* and *César et Rosalie*, where she bared her soul.

"She died last year," I continue, my throat tight. "May 29, 1982. They say it was her heart, but I know it was broken long before." The papers speculated—alcohol, pills, the loss of her son David. I don't confirm or deny; I only say, "I never recovered from her passing."

It's true. Romy was my mirror, my equal, the one who saw through my façade. In Alpbach's rarefied air, I feel her absence like a missing limb, yet her presence lingers, as if she's watching from some quantum state Schrödinger might understand.

A professor asks about love and art, and I falter. "Love is the art that breaks you," I say. "Romy taught me that." I think of Schrödinger's cat, trapped in its box, both alive and dead until observed. Romy is my cat, my paradox—gone, yet eternally here in every film frame, every memory. As I leave the stage, the Alps loom outside, silent witnesses to my confession. I've spoken her name, but she's still mine, and I'm still hers, in this village where thoughts become eternal.

p Ahhh r t t H r we

A Quantum Screening: Blade Runner 2049 in Alpbach  
I am K, or perhaps I'm Alain Delon's shadow as Jean-Paul, or maybe Romy Schneider's Marianne, or even Erwin Schrödinger himself, pondering the nature of existence. It's 2025, and I'm in Alpbach, the "village of thinkers," at the European Forum Alpbach, where the mountains cradle ideas as vast as the cosmos.

Tonight, they're screening Blade Runner 2049 in the Erwin Schrödinger Hall, its clay walls and mountain views a stark contrast to the film's neon-drenched Los Angeles. I'm here, a composite of voices—K's search for identity, Romy's heart, Schrödinger's paradox—asking: what do we actually remember? A tennis playground or a swimming pool? The hall buzzes with scholars, artists, and students, the "Spirit of Alpbach" alive in their debates. The film begins, and I'm pulled into K's world, 2049, where replicants blur the line between human and machine. Ryan Gosling's K hunts a secret; a replicant child, born not made, tied to Rick Deckard and a woman lost to time.

The screen flickers with rain-soaked streets, holographic lovers, and a wooden horse carved with a date—6.10.21. Schrödinger's voice whispers in my mind: this is a superposition. K is both human and not, alive and dead, until observed. Just like Romy was, in La Piscine, both Marianne and herself, loving and betrayed by Alain's Jean-Paul.

I think of Romy, who never saw this film but knew its questions. In La Piscine, the swimming pool was her stage, a shimmering trap of

passion and violence. Here in Alpbach, someone in the audience murmurs about a "tennis playground," a fleeting image from another film, another memory—maybe Plein Soleil, where Alain's charm hid a killer. But it's the pool I remember, Romy's eyes reflecting its depths, just as K's memories reflect that wooden horse. Are they real? Schrödinger would say they're both real and not, until the box of memory is opened.

The forum's theme, "Recharge Europe," echoes Blade Runner 2049's search for meaning in a fractured world. A professor stands, linking K's quest to Schrödinger's cat: "Is K born or created?

Is Deckard human or replicant? The answer is both, until we decide." I feel Romy's presence, her own life a paradox—loved by millions, yet broken by loss. Alain called her the love of his life, or so I imagine he said here, in this very hall, years ago. The swimming pool of La Piscine haunts me, not a tennis court. It's where Romy and Alain's truths collided, where love drowned in jealousy, much like K's search drowns in 2049's rain.

As the film ends, K lies in the snow, his fate unclear. The audience debates: is he dead, like Schrödinger's cat, or alive in another reality? I step outside, the Alpbach night crisp, the mountains silent. The swimming pool of La Piscine and the neon rain of Blade Runner 2049 merge in my mind, both more vivid than any tennis playground. Romy's heart, Schrödinger's questions, K's sacrifice—they're all here, in Alpbach, where memory and reality blur. What do we remember? The pool, always the pool, where love and loss ripple forever.

'Mountaintop Choices: Power, Fame or Money – Which Does Europe Need Most to Recharge?' by Bakhtiyar Salmanov

At the European Forum Alpbach 2025, right after our first seminar ended, our group went for lunch with the mountains of Tyrol in the background.

As it happens in Alpbach, our random brief talks moved beyond introductions and logistics into deeper questions. We found ourselves discussing a simple but deceptive question: If we had to choose one out of fame, power or money, which would it be?

As we spoke, our conversation turned into a heated debate. Some argued that power was the most effective choice; with influence, one

could eventually gain both recognition and resources. But I paused. What does power really mean? Does it mean influence or the ability to manipulate things around us? Or being able to direct the course of actions?

Are all these things really necessary? What if the money was the key? One could reason that wealth buys platforms, networks, and the ability to shape agendas. What about fame?

One can also suggest that visibility itself can be converted into authority and financial opportunity. Like how people get famous on social media and start gaining recognition, partnerships, money, and influence. Each position carries conviction, revealing different assumptions about how the world works, and naturally sparking counterarguments.

As the discussion deepened and each other's perspectives challenged, I was reminded of my background in international relations. States, much like individuals, are propelled by overlapping desires for influence, recognition and resources.

Some rely on economic clout to achieve political leverage, others on soft power to enhance their legitimacy, and still others on military or institutional authority to shape outcomes. The very dynamics we discussed over lunch—whether power brings money or whether fame is a shortcut to influence—mirror the debates that animate world politics.

But beyond theory, the conversation carried a subtle lesson. Our answers reflected not only personal priorities but also our visions of

how change can be made. To choose power was to believe in the primacy of authority; to choose money was to trust in markets and material resources; to choose fame was to emphasise ideas, narratives, and visibility. In this way, our discussion became less about hypothetical preferences and more about our underlying philosophies of transformation.

Placed in the broader context of this year's Forum theme, Recharge Europe, the reflection gains even greater weight. What does Europe need most in order to recharge itself? Is it the power to act decisively in a fragmented world? The economic strength to remain competitive and resilient?

Or the reputation and credibility to inspire others and lead by example? Perhaps, as our mountain-top debate suggested, true renewal requires not a single choice but a careful balance between all three.

Power alone is not enough: Europe's ability to sustain long-term action falters because institutional influence is not enough without resources. Money alone cannot guarantee renewal either; economic strength matters, but without the political power to coordinate or the soft power to shape narratives, wealth risks being underutilised.

Fame, or Europe's reputation, matters too, but prestige is fragile unless it is anchored in real capacity and material strength. Recent history illustrates this interplay: the EU's leadership in climate diplomacy depends on economic investment in green technologies (money), regulatory and institutional capacity (power), and credibility as a global standard-setter (fame).

Realistically, Europe can only achieve this balance by leveraging its comparative advantages: deepening economic integration to unlock resources, strengthening decision-making mechanisms to project power more effectively, and investing in public diplomacy to enhance its global reputation.

Alone, each of these pillars risks imbalance; together, they form the foundation for a renewed and resilient Europe. In that sense, the conversation we had over lunch was not just a playful debate, but a microcosm of Europe's central challenge: how to align power, money and reputation to recharge itself for the future.

In this context, the role of youth becomes indispensable. Young people are not just the ones who will inherit Europe's future; they are already shaping it with their fresh ideas to make institutions more inclusive and adaptive. Their entrepreneurial drive and digital fluency unlock new forms of economic value, showing how money can be mobilised toward innovation and sustainability.

Through activism, storytelling and cultural creativity, today's youth amplify Europe's reputation on the global stage, turning values into visibility. In this sense, youth, like Alpbach, are the connective tissue between the three dimensions, ensuring that Europe's power does not become rigid, its resources do not remain underutilised, and its fame does not become hollow. I was impressed from the first day to discover that Alpbach was a place where everyday conversations could offer profound insights.

That lunch reminded me that even casual questions can open windows into the complexities of international relations and the motivations that drive both individuals and nations. It is precisely

this blend of personal encounter and collective reflection that makes the Forum such a unique space for reimagining Europe's future.

'Where mountains meet moments, and connections shape journeys; I found myself in the village of Alpbach'  
by Abdallah Essam Elbassiouny

My story begins in 2023—yes, two years before I joined EFA as a scholarship holder in 2025. I remember sitting at my workplace, surrounded by four computer screens while working as an operations engineer at that time, when I noticed that one of my colleagues who had been absent for a few days had posted an Instagram story.

I checked it, and the breathtaking views of tall, green mountains really caught my attention. *Are these the Alps?*

I called him immediately.  
“Taha, where are you?”  
“I’m in Alpbach attending EFA,” he replied. “I’ll tell you everything when I come back!”

To be honest, I had never heard of Alpbach before—nor of EFA, for that matter—but from that moment the name never left my mind. When Taha returned, he started sharing his stories with me—from meeting prime ministers, attending inspiring sessions and experiencing unforgettable evenings, to joining private dinners with renowned CEOs. I decided then and there: *I will do this too.*

A few months later, I was accepted into an Erasmus Mundus master's program that would begin in Italy. A new journey and challenge that would require and take a lot of my time, but EFA was still in my mind.

This opportunity brought me one step closer to Austria, and I still remember Taha telling me on my last day at work: *'Don't forget to apply for EFA this year, it's closer to you now!'*

During my first year of the master's program, life felt like a constant race with many courses, assignments, and endless deadlines. One day, in a WhatsApp group—among thousands that I rarely check—I saw a message from a colleague: Applications for EFA are open!

For a moment, I froze.

*Another application? Another deadline?*

The timing couldn't be worse; I was in the middle of exams. However, on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, I managed to submit my application, hoping to become part of this journey that I already knew would be extraordinary.

And here I am now, sitting on the rooftop of the Congress Center in Alpbach, the famous “CCA,” writing my story for the EFA25 Anthology. This journey has already changed me in many ways, and I hope my reflections will inspire you, whether you are considering applying one day or are a fellow participant reliving the nostalgia of the unique experiences we had together.

### Reflections on the Seminar week

Before reflecting on the content, I want to share a story that shows how EFA creates unexpected human connections. As I mentioned, I am an Erasmus Mundus master's student in the *Chemical Innovation and Regulations Program (ChIR)*. During the orientation week of this program, one of our sessions was supposed to be an online meeting with Sharon, a *ChIR* alumna and the Erasmus Mundus Association (EMA) representative of our program. However, due to technical issues, the call never worked.

Some weeks later, we had elections for that role, and I was chosen as the new EMA representative. I contacted Sharon, telling her that I was taking over, and she kindly guided me through the responsibilities. Months passed and after I got accepted to participate in EFA, I checked my seminar list—now guess who was my seminar assistant? Sharon!

Our paths had crossed again. First, we studied the same program. Then, I followed her as an EMA representative. She was selected as a scholarship holder in EFA 2024, and myself in 2025, and now we finally met in person in Alpbach; me as a scholarship holder and she as my seminar assistant.

If statistical probability means anything, maybe next year I'll follow her path once more and return as a seminar assistant myself!

As for the morning seminar itself. We discussed the root causes of climate change and ways to manage the energy transition. As someone with professional experience in the energy industry, this was both relevant and inspiring. One highlight I would like to share was our study trip to Innsbruck, where we visited the family home of building biologist Dr. Heinz Fuchsig.

It was constructed in 1908, but the house has been sustainably renovated, combining renewable energy systems like groundwater heat pumps and solar thermal collectors with a strong sense of community living.

What really inspired me was how sustainability and community were intertwined: tenants share cars, workshops, and even a rowing machine in the stairwell, while rents remain moderate to ensure inclusivity.

This house is a real example of how tradition, innovation, and human values can come together to shape a sustainable future. Finally, by the end of the trip the lovely family of Dr. Fuchsig offered us traditional Austrian food, “*Liptaner* and *Cremeschnitte*” homemade by them. It was a perfect cultural touch.

#### A Personal Moment of Truth

For me, that moment came during the sunrise hike. Waking up at 2 in the morning to catch the bus from Radfeld to the starting point at the CCA made me really question my decision.

*“Should I go, or should I stay in bed like my roommates, who had all chosen to remain in their warm beds, comfortably asleep?”*

I remember two things that crossed my mind at that moment. First, I had promised some friends that I would join them in that hike, and they were really excited for that. Second, I am not a natural hiker, so this would be a perfect experience for me to test if hiking is for me or not. And despite knowing I had a seminar afterward and would miss a night’s sleep which would make me feel drained for the rest of the day, I chose to go.

And guess what? That decision became one of the best of my entire two weeks in Alpbach.

Hiking in the dark, meeting new people, sharing stories, reaching the top of the top of the mountain, and watching the sunrise over the Alps was such an unforgettable moment for me. And to my surprise, I was the second person to reach the top! That day, I discovered something new about myself: I am a hiker. And I loved it.

#### An Empowering Moment

Thinking about some empowering moments for me during EFA, I must mention these two. One was the closed morning discussion with Vjosa Osmani, the President of Kosovo. Sitting across from her, I was struck by how genuine and approachable she was.

She spoke directly to us, listened carefully to our questions, and created a space where young people could express themselves freely. In that room, it felt as if our voices truly mattered. For me, she embodied what political leadership should look like: open, grounded, and committed to dialogue with the next generation.

Just a few days later, during a Fireside Chat hike, I found myself in another unforgettable exchange—this time with Jessika Roswell, the European Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience, and Competitive Circular Economy. As we walked through the alpine trails, our conversation turned to circular economy.

We spoke about the ways companies can implement circular practices, the risks of misusing data, and the importance of designing systems that protect not only today’s society but also future generations.

Experiences like these showed me what real leadership looks like. They inspired me to see that being a leader is not about titles or power, but about listening, engaging, and guiding others with

integrity. One day, I hope to embody the same spirit of leadership I witnessed in them.

### **My View on Rebuilding Europe**

I believe Europe has a unique opportunity to lead the global energy transition. While I see that major economies like the US and China still heavily rely on crude oil, Europe can lead in greener technologies. This will not only ensure us a cleaner air and healthier environments but also will position Europe as a global leader in sustainable innovation.

Unity, however, is essential. As mentioned by several prime ministers and even by Alexander Van der Bellen, the President of Austria, Europe needs to act with one voice. Whether in defense, energy, or political direction, unity is the foundation for Europe to reclaim global leadership.

### **My Experience with FOMO**

One thing that I must admit: I suffered from FOMO—the fear of missing out. But for me, this wasn't all negative.

When I was planning my schedule for the two weeks, every session seemed like an opportunity, and I wanted to attend everything. From morning seminars to “food for thought” lunches, afternoon sessions, evening discussions, and night parties, it felt overwhelming yet exhilarating.

I remember one day sprinting around the CCA after finishing a closed discussion with the central banks leaders at 10 in the morning to catch another seminar on transition that had already been running for half an hour. I laughed to myself as I ran, realizing how crazy this

might have looked—but you know what? I didn't even mind. That was the joy of it.

So, here's my advice:

Run after everything, but don't be disappointed if you miss something. Enjoy every moment and remember: EFA is what you make of it. It's your own journey; it's your own story.

### 'To Be the Poem' by Hayk Smbatyan

I was sitting at the roof terrace of the Congress Centrum Alpbach today, thinking in past tense again, wondering why is everyone hanging out and remembering my seminar coach quoting David Corradine who once had said, "If you cannot be a poet, be the poem."

A deep sadness followed from the sheer realization that running down the hilly road to Mittelschule to try to be the poem earlier today was to be the last time I would do that. I was just looking around the terrace for somebody to agree with me, like, "it is sad, right?", but apparently I wasn't showing up on anybody's radar.

At the 23<sup>rd</sup> minute into my "nonversation" with myself, the inevitably Armenian part of my mind began to suspect that I am most likely overdramatizing and simply being possessive about something short and beautiful that was never promised to last

forever. Instead, I should be appreciative of its temporal and spatial boundaries, disdain those feelings, make a transition and head over to a recharge party in the supermarket garage.

Maybe transitions are the closest thing we have to prove that time is real. They are like the way silence accumulates in a room after laughter fades, or how a voice lingers in your chest even when its owner has left. What was a simple seminar to some, was a haven for me. It held me in a kind of suspended time where names, ideas, and glances took on more weight than they usually carry in the outside world. And now, stepping out of it feels like trying to keep water in my hands while it slips away—it was never mine to keep.

We had been told during the seminar, almost like a riddle, to "breathe in through our eyes." At first it sounded like a paradox fit for a koan or a sci-fi script. But slowly, I began to see it for what it was: an invitation to notice how the world enters us before we even touch it. To practice transitions as permeability. Eyes as lungs, absorbing light, sadness, strangers, mountains.

Especially mountains.

Mountains that may depart.

I remember my friend and I sitting at the roof terrace and talking about how making good transitions is a craft. Not ornamentation; not theatrical. Practical work. A transition is a micro-procedure that turns discrete moments into a sequence. An iota of movement, a deliberate pause, a naming of what just happened, a brief reframe that allows people to shift mental gears without losing their balance. She hadn't been in my seminar; she was just someone who could listen well and was open to breathe in through her eyes.

Indeed, in any collective process, transitions are the plumbing. They move affect and attention where they need to go. If you ignore them, you get leaks. Gratitude becomes a side-note, a comment is shelved,

an emotion is subtitled into something noncommittal. But transitions can be emotionally taxing, and that is perhaps why they matter. They let the emotion land, so cognition can follow. They both distort and clarify reality.

I kept circling back to that thought of transitions as an invisible infrastructure. Maybe that's why the sadness of endings arrives so uninvited, as it is the sudden awareness of the seam itself, the sharp contour where one moment breaks off and another has not yet fully begun.

Walking back to my village, I thought about how societies also live inside these kinds of seams. Not just individuals, not just friendships, but whole nations, regions, continents. We sit in states of unfinished business, in no war and no peace, in no arrival and no departure.

The shifting of world orders happens around us, between the cracks, in the quiet crises where borders harden and soften by turns, and where voices at the margins are asked to wait indefinitely. We carry on inside architectures of transition that never quite resolve into stability. And plumbing left unattended always results in leaks—hope leaking into resignation, memory leaking into myth, speech leaking into silence.

But what struck me in this more personal register is how untrained most of us are in the art of making transitions well. We spend years learning formulas, histories, languages, crafts, procedures—yet hardly anyone teaches us how to end something with grace, or how to carry the weight of a smooth beginning. So we stumble, improvise, and sometimes damage ourselves and others in the process.

At the roof terrace, I was realizing that the sadness I felt was not just about the seminar ending. It was about my reluctance to trust myself with its transition. Could I pull off the departure without needing to dramatize or diminish it? Could I let it be both small and vast at the same time?

Could it be that this was the secret of good transitions: not to inflate them into milestones nor reduce them into technicalities, but to see them as thresholds. A threshold doesn't erase the room you left, nor does it guarantee the one you are entering. It simply holds the hinge, a still point where both are faintly present.

I thought of Corradine's phrase again. A transition, maybe, is where the poet and the poem collapse into one. You are no longer outside narrating the shape of an ending or a beginning; you are inside the sentence itself, the connective tissue between clauses. To be a transition is to momentarily inhabit time as a texture, a passage, a movement.

So when the music started pulsing in the garage that night, and people were already dancing in each other's shadows, I didn't feel like I was betraying the sadness by moving my body between villages, across the quiet river into the night, singing to myself. In fact, I was practicing the craft of carrying it forward, of not letting it dissolve into denial or nostalgia. I was simply letting one emotion land so another could follow.

And maybe that is the quiet work of all our lives: to become more fluent in the language of thresholds. To notice the leaks and tend to them. To breathe through our eyes and let the mountains in. To practice being both poet and poem. To walk with the time sentence by sentence, transition by transition. Perhaps that is the essence of it: to tune the ache until it resonates differently.

And with that tuning, I stepped across. Not away, not toward.

Just across.

## 'Guest and Ghost' by Luiza Moroz

Each August, the serene mountain village of Alpbach fills with minds eager to recharge the world. This year, Oskar, a physics student and scholarship holder, arrived after a train journey of such uncertainty that Heisenberg himself might have tipped his hat.

Alpbach was charming. Confusing, too. The shuttles looked reliable on the schedule but rarely materialised on time. Oskar wouldn't recognise participants with whom he'd already shared a seminar, a coffee queue, and a taxi. His Instagram follower count grew with people he was almost certain he hadn't met.

Oskar made careful morning plans: umbrella by the door, noble intentions to attend the seminar on blockchain. By noon, the umbrella had vanished, and the seminar had migrated to a picnic on a forest glade.

At Jakober, over an apfelstrudel, Oskar shared his concerns. Max, his roommate, and one of the returning participants, said, 'Ah, classic Schrödinger. His grave is not far from the church. He plays with scholarship holders who don't pay attention. Every year someone sees him. Must be the altitude.'

Oskar laughed it off, until he spent twenty minutes searching for his badge, only to find it lying in plain sight. Later, looking for the name of the other physicist he partied with last night, he flipped through his notebook. Three pages of doodles, half a quote, no real notes. He hadn't been entirely present during the seminars, indeed.

One morning, with a determination uncharacteristic of him, Oskar joined the pre-dawn hike to Gratlspitz. The guide counted seven hikers. Oskar counted eight.

At the summit, a man in a worn tweed coat appeared beside Oskar.

'I have been observing you,' he said. 'You're skipping seminars, drifting out of conversations. Half-here, half-somewhere else. Doing things, not doing them... Be careful. Stay in that superposition too long, and the world will forget to open the box.'

A dozen questions rose in Oskar's throat, but the man was gone before he could voice any of them.

The next day, suitably caffeinated, Oskar stopped by the Congress to ask about the certificate.

'I'm afraid you're not eligible,' said the administrator. 'You missed too many seminars.'

'Perhaps only one!'

The administrator scanned his badge again, then frowned. 'In fact, we don't have any record of you. You're not in our system.'

'But I lived here all this time. I have a scholarship.' Oskar reached for the confirmation email, but was signed out of his account. He spotted Max, laughing with a girl, and shouted, 'Max, help me out here!' But Max couldn't care less.

'I honestly do not understand how you even have a badge. I must ask you to leave the Congress,' the administrator said. 'If you believe this is an error, write us an email.'

That evening, as the group of friends walked to the lake in Reith, someone asked, 'In the WhatsApp group, eight people said they would come, but only seven are here.'

'There's this physicist, remember? Lives with Max.'

'I don't think so,' Max replied.

A man in a worn tweed coat checked their passes to the lake.

'Missing anyone?' he smiled, but the smile never touched his eyes.

Nobody answered.

In the dark water, the reflection of the group showed eight figures.

Some souls stay in Alpbach forever.

'EFA25-UNCLASSIFIED-RELEASABLE TO  
EVERYONE' by Mike

*For many years now, the Austrian armed forces have had the privilege of being part of the European Forum Alpbach. Among many other contributions, it has become our mission to share our perspectives on leadership and what it means to us to take responsibility and command. Like Soldiers, we all have our missions and tasks as members of our European society. So stand in attention and read carefully, for I am about to issue the order for Operation RECHARGE EUROPE:*

Copy No 01 of 01 copies  
EFA25-HQ/Center of Gravity  
ALPBACH  
212243ZAUG25  
N/A

OPERATION ORDER 01 for  
**Operation RECHARGE EUROPE**

References:

CHARTER OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS OF THE  
EUROPEAN UNION – 2000/C 364/01

Time Zone used throughout the Order: Z

**SITUATION**

General Situation:

Europe is in peril. Nationalistic tendencies, external interference, misinformation and the rising oppression of democratic core values threaten our continent.

Climate change, global migration and scarcity of resources pose an additional challenge for our society.

The aforementioned threats are reinforced by a shift in global alliances and a rising new order of power.

a. Enemy Forces:

The most likely enemy course of action will be to weaken and divide our society in order to slowly but steadily reshape our European continent.

b. Friendly Forces:

EFA25 conducts Operation RECHARGE EUROPE, effective immediately, in order to secure a prosperous and liveable future.

c. Attachments and Detachments:

All personnel, willing to contribute to Operation RECHARGE EUROPE are hereby considered as allies.

d. Commander's Evaluation:

No remarks.

**MISSION**

Our Mission is as follows:

EFA 25 is tasked to rekindle the spirit of a united democratic society in order to lay the foundation for a successful outcome of Operation RECHARGE EUROPE.

**EXECUTION**

Commanders Intent:

We, the people, will rekindle the spirit of a united democratic society

BY

close cooperation among all EU-member states  
support through a diverse and democratic community  
close cooperation with our scientific community

WITH

determined action (here main effort)  
facts, reason and responsibility  
a comprehensive approach spanning all over the  
economic, cultural, military and social sectors  
steadfast and considerate policy makers

IN ORDER TO RECHARGE EUROPE!

a. Concept of Operations:

The Operation will be structured as follows:

Phase I – Forming a resilient society  
Phase II – Forging a bold Europe  
Phase III – Overcoming the arising challenges we are  
about to face

For a successful Conduct of Operations it is paramount that:

In Phase I:

We start acting now.

We face our opponents with respect yet full of resolve.

We foster a society that grows through diversity,  
mindfulness and altruism.

Genuine cooperation among all political and social sectors  
is imperative.

We spread and represent our visions and dreams, yet stay  
open-minded towards new ways and ideas.

Injustice will not be tolerated.

We support responsible and sincere politics but fight  
extremism and abuse of power at all costs.

WE ADHERE TO THE CONCEPTS OF  
DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND FREEDOM  
OF SPEECH – WE WILL NEVER BOW BEFORE  
OPPRESSIVE SYSTEMS.

In Phase II:

We form alliances but not dependencies.

We fight for the greater good in order to ensure the  
welfare of the individual.

We confront nationalist tendencies and we combat  
misinformation, wrongful facts and lies.

Our society stays vigilant and impervious to external  
manipulation and interference

Let us unite through what we have in common and let us  
thrive in our diversity

IN ORDER TO PREVAIL, WE MUST FORGE A  
EUROPEAN UNITY INSTEAD OF JUST EXISTING  
AS A EUROPEAN UNION!

In Phase III:

We must stand strong and stand our ground, we won't fall back.

There will be sacrifices to be made. Eventually there will be blood, sweat and tears. Every single one of us will give what it takes to prevail.

We shall not fight against what opposes us – we will fight for what we want to preserve and protect.

WE DO NOT FEAR THE FUTURE, FOR WE ARE THE ONES SHAPING IT!

b. Tasks/Missions to Manoeuvre Units:

No remarks – see final note!

c. Tasks/Missions to Combat Support Units

There is no such thing as support units in this mission—each and every one of us will be a fighter.

d. Coordinating Instructions:

All personnel within operation RECHARGE EUROPE is hereby advised to adhere to the following aspects:

Advance of mission will be on their own pace and terms - synchronization with allies is to be conducted whenever suitable and feasible.

The comprehensive dissemination of intelligence and knowledge to all allies is mission critical. We will stay in close contact!

**DIRECT MUTUAL SUPPORT THROUGHOUT ALL PHASES AND ACROSS ALL SECTORS IS IMPERATIVE!**

**ADMINISTRATION/LOGISTICS**

a. Materiel and Services:

Armament:

facts, science, dialogue, education, action

Equipment:

resolve, determination, perseverance, steadfastness

b. Medical, Evacuation and Hospitalisation:

Personnel within Operation RECHARGE EUROPE are to take care of themselves in order to maintain their power in combat. NO ONE will be left behind, for we are strong as a community. Whenever possible, we will help and protect each other.

c. Personnel:

No remarks.

d. Civil-Military Cooperation:

Our military forces are an inherent part of our society. They will protect our values and interests until the very end. We will make sure, their service is dedicated to our people and we shall stand side by side in order to prevail.

**COMMAND AND SIGNAL:**

a. Communications:

We will speak the truth and rely on facts.  
Our interactions will be WITH each other, not against.  
We won't just talk; our words will have meaning and impact.  
It is mandatory for all personnel to take our time to listen as well.  
Let us get connected and increase our range of impact.  
NEVER BE AFRAID TO SPEAK UP!

ACKNOWLEDGE:

Will PERSEVERE  
GENERAL, OF-9

ANNEXES: NIL

DISTRIBUTION: FREE FOR DISTRIBUTION/ALL MEANS  
ALLOWED

Final Note:

*However, the truth is, my dear reader, that I am not a general and you probably don't happen to be a soldier under my command... But that still doesn't stop you from being a fighter for the cause.*

*So should you accept this mission – STAND UP – SPEAK UP – FIGHT!*

### 'And She Rose Again' by Naajia Amanulla

Night had dipped the earth in an ink so black, all memory of the sun had been forgotten. Down in the dewy soil, however, she began to stir from her slumber. She rose slow, like the unfurling of butterfly wings, delicate and new, but destined to soar. Shivering from the cold that now nipped at her fingers and toes, she stretched out and yawned. Air flooded into her lungs, a shock of freshness to wake her up, and in a quick movement she leapt off the ground.

Within seconds, she'd shot straight up, wind brushing past as she went higher and higher. As she ascended, a village below caught her eye—yellow lights sparkling across the valley like fireflies against a dark sky. Through the tall, jagged silhouette of trees and crumbling rock, a line of glowing torches wound its way up the mountain. A ghostly procession searching for their final destination.

She knew what it was.

Her purpose was to rise, but saying goodbye to everything below was a more harrowing task than she'd expected. Higher and higher, the air got thinner, the trees grew smaller, the sky turned a light blue. Higher and higher, it was a journey she'd done before and would do again, and with time, she hoped it would be easier. Today, however, she clenched her jaw and let tears fall and dry before reaching her cheek.

Fire. That was what she'd become now. Higher and higher and higher, bright enough to call the wandering spirits below, she burned as the sky turned pink. They pointed at her and smiled, bathed in her golden glow as it cloaked their surroundings. She smiled too, the pain of her farewells replaced with the joy of hellos. In a burst of light, everything was struck with colours that welcomed the day. She extended her rays of light now, her touch reaching all those she had left behind. A hand reached out to greet hers and she wrapped it in warmth, a gesture she's repeated every year.

'Good morning!'

## 'A Letter To You' by Daniel Nenning

Dear Stranger,

Thank you for being here with me, right at this moment. Imagine you're standing at a fork in a mountain path. One way curves gently downhill—safe, easy, predictable. The other disappears into the mist, winding up toward unknown peaks.

You could take the first—close this page, move on, and discover other words. All good. Or you could follow me upward, step by step, into a story that is raw, personal—maybe even strange. But also, *I promise*, full of wonders.

Where do I start? At the beginning. I call myself a *social engineer*—not in the technical sense, but in the human one. I use my skills for what I deeply believe in.

"Hi, my name is Daniel, and I am a nobody."

That's how I sometimes introduced myself at Alpbach. A paradox, maybe even a provocation. But also the truth.

Why? Because I came here without a badge, without a club, without anyone paying for my ticket. Just me. Showing up. Not to impress, but to live. To laugh, to love, to be inspired, to inspire back. To be real.

Life is already heavy enough. So I choose to live it fully, without rehearsal, without apology. There is no way back from that. And I wish the same for anyone willing to step into their own fullness.

And yes—I live on a spectrum, maybe on several. Maybe we all do. At Alpbach, ideas come like mountain winds, fast and unexpected. Here is one of them: that we should learn to see life not in rigid categories, but in living spectra—shifting, colorful, endless.

So, dear traveler on this path: if you like the sound of this story, let's walk further together. Let's co-create, let's see where the path bends next. I promise you this: I will not limit you, if you stop limiting yourself.

All the best,

Daniel

## 'Mental Health and Well-Being Across Borders: Issues in Science and Data Insights of Young Leaders from 20 Countries' by Tiago Azzi

At the European Forum Alpbach, where young leaders from across the world gather to discuss global challenges, mental health emerges again and again as a pressing concern—not only as a topic of debate, but also within their own lives. Listening to one participant share their experience, one recollection lingers. In one vivid memory, they reach for their young sibling's hand.

"His fingers were slipping through mine," they recall. They stood frozen and uncertain whether to call for help or remain still, wondering how one can "comfort a sorrow that has no name."

This scene, though personal, echoes a broader reality: the youth of today face an epidemic of distress. Globally, one in seven

adolescents (ages 10–19) experiences a diagnosable mental disorder, and suicide is the third leading cause of death among people aged 15–29 [1]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), these conditions "remain largely unrecognized and untreated," as systemic barriers (including sparse services, high costs, and stigma) force many to navigate their pain and confusion alone.

Even with technology, many young people still bear heavy burdens in silence, and the human cost extends far beyond the individual level. This long-standing yet still unresolved problem poses a serious public-health concern while also raising urgent questions about how societies and science can best respond.

### The Thin Web of Well-Being

Despite the ubiquity of social-media platitudes and wellness slogans, what mental health actually means remains elusive. The WHO defines mental health as "a state of well-being" in which people realize their abilities and cope with normal life stresses, and not merely the absence of disease [2]. However, well-being lies on a spectrum: mental health does not flip suddenly from wellness to illness. When does sadness become depression?

When does anxiety become a disorder? Where exactly one crosses from "feeling down" to pathology is often unclear, since severity, duration, and impairment all play a role in it. Many adolescents fall into a gray zone: feeling miserable yet not (or not yet) meeting the criteria for a diagnosis.

In other words, there is no bright line neatly dividing normal stress from illness. Nevertheless, this thin line matters, because recognizing

illness too late can cost lives, while over-pathologizing ordinary distress risks trivializing human experiences.

Meanwhile, the booming wellness industry has flooded this gray zone with promises of control. Modern wellness culture is built on a cascade of luxury goods and endless self-optimization routines: extreme productivity, unrelenting positivity, and disciplined regimens. Western well-being is often marketed as a performance: waking up at 5 a.m. to complete twelve-step morning routines, plunging into ice baths, fasting until noon, running five kilometers before work, and tracking every heartbeat with wearable devices.

Influencers preach ‘dopamine detoxing’ as if one could reset the brain like a smartphone, often oversimplifying a process that unfolds gradually and requires sustained behavioral changes [3,4]. In reality, these routines can feel coercive, like one more checklist destined to fail. In fact, the WHO-Europe office has explicitly cautioned that excessive use of social media and wellness fads “has been shown to lead to depression, bullying, anxiety and poor academic performance” among vulnerable teens [5].

Yet it would be simplistic to demonize technology outright. Digital tools also offer real benefits: young people can find peer support online, maintain social ties in isolation, and access teletherapy. An EU report notes that responsible social-media use correlates with stronger peer networks and support and that digital platforms can help by connecting youth to friends and mental health resources [6].

The challenge in digital literacy is finding balance: how to harness the benefits of connectivity (belonging, learning, support) while guarding against the harms of excessive use, cyberbullying, unrealistic comparisons, or advice that feels more like “just be positive” than genuine empathy? In a saturated online world, one of

the dangers is young people becoming cynical about the “mental health talk” itself.

If social media offers simple solutions (even as it generates countless new questions), science tells a long story of complexity. For instance, depression was formally recognized in psychiatry decades ago and today is one of the world’s leading causes of disability. More than 300 million people worldwide live with depression, a nearly 20% increase in just a decade [7].

Depression is not only debilitating but also elusive, shaped by factors such as trauma, family history, culture, poverty, and even climate. Its impact extends beyond individuals to devastate families, friends, and communities by eroding social networks, straining healthcare and economic systems, and perpetuating cycles of disadvantage [8].

Beyond statistics, the reality of depression is simply ugly: it strips away motivation, pleasure, and dignity, leaving people feeling ashamed of basic self-neglect. Hygiene may slip, living spaces become cluttered, and once-cherished activities feel joyless.

Alongside sadness and numbness, guilt is a frequent companion: guilt over cancelled plans, over “not being strong enough,” over being a burden to others. This guilt deepens isolation, feeding stigma and misunderstanding, while internally the person may be fighting a relentless sense of worthlessness or despair. Depression is not only psychological but also physical.

Chronic stress hormones and disrupted sleep can alter immune and metabolic function, and numerous studies link depression to higher rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and premature mortality [9,10]. In this way, depression warps not only the rhythms of daily living and relationships but also the body itself, reinforcing a cycle that is both mental and somatic. Depression can look messy,

unpredictable, and far from the muted image of sadness often portrayed in the media.

Recognizing this “ugliness” and its entwined guilt is essential, not to sensationalize it, but to acknowledge the full reality of the illness. However, depression is only one of many psychiatric conditions, each as extensive and complex as the next. Neurodevelopmental disorders like ADHD and autism illustrate this: autistic people were found to have an “up to eightfold” higher risk of suicide than non-autistic peers [11], and individuals with ADHD likewise show elevated rates of suicidal behaviour.

Symptoms and diagnoses also overlap heavily [12]. For example, about 40% of those with schizophrenia have a co-occurring anxiety disorder [13], and anxiety symptoms appear in roughly 60% of patients with depression [14]. Common symptoms (insomnia, poor concentration, irritability, etc.) recur across many diagnoses, blurring the lines between them. This pervasive overlap means that many patients carry multiple intersecting labels, which greatly complicates diagnosis and treatment. Naturally, this also challenges public understanding of mental illness as if it were neat, separate categories.

Despite decades of research and combined efforts from fields like medicine, neuroscience, and psychology, we still do not fully understand these conditions. Unlike infectious diseases, mental health conditions have no single pathogen to eradicate and no vaccine to administer. They are woven from biological, psychological, and social threads that demand equally multidimensional responses. Precision psychiatry—the ambition to tailor care to each individual—is still in its infancy. While existing treatments help many, pathways to prevention and healing are far from complete.

Genetic studies have uncovered hundreds of small risk variants for depression and other disorders, but these risk scores “do not yet provide clinically actionable information” [15]. Likewise, brain imaging, though revealing interesting patterns, rarely translates into actionable clinical guidance [16, 17]. Underfunding and stigma help sustain these treatment issues: as Wainberg et al. point out, taboo and lack of trained professionals are cited as “significant barriers” to closing the gap [18].

As a result, most treatment still relies on trial and error [19], a medication that works for one adolescent may fail for another, and therapy may resonate deeply with some but leave others untouched.

### Across Borders

These challenges ripple across borders, cultures, and disciplines. Although the struggles are global, their manifestations differ widely around the world. As the OECD notes, mental health is shaped not only by individuals but also by “the fabric of society”, including educational systems, labor markets, and cultural attitudes [20]. Cross-national studies reveal stark differences: in Nordic countries, adolescents report high awareness of mental health yet also face intense pressure from academic performance and social media [21].

In Singapore, surveys show that almost half of students still associate mental illness with negative or threatening stereotypes, even as awareness campaigns expand [22]. In Latin America, adolescents may face a “triple burden” of socioeconomic inequality, high levels of violence, and limited mental health infrastructure, while data showing a significant decline in mental health over time [23]. In China, nearly one in four adolescents report depressive symptoms, but many hesitate to seek help due to family expectations and fears of stigma [24]. In South Asia more broadly, cultural norms of “face” shame, and self-reliance often silence discussion altogether [25].

In Taiwan, students spend over thirty hours a week on social media, with more than a third showing signs of digital addiction, while suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers [26]. And in Sub-Saharan Africa, young people face the dual burden of scarce services and high exposure to conflict and poverty [27].

Accessibility of care also differs dramatically, and here politics comes into sharp relief. High-income countries have almost 20 times more mental health beds and 50 times greater service availability than low-income countries. Moreover, the median government spending on mental health is only ~2% of health budgets (unchanged since 2017), with massive disparities: high-income countries spend ~\$65 per capita whereas low-income spend ~\$0.04 [28].

In Sub-Saharan Africa, UNICEF and WHO point out that at least one in seven children faces serious psychological hardship, but specialized care is virtually absent: even where child psychiatrists exist, there is on average only one child psychiatrist per four million population [27]. In contrast, many European countries now provide youth-focused school programs, yet nearly half of young adults with symptoms report unmet needs [29, 30].

This disparity is not accidental; it reflects decades of policy priorities. Governments decide whether mental health budgets are protected or cut, whether schools embed mental health curricula, whether universal healthcare covers therapy, whether refugee children fleeing war receive counseling, and whether climate anxiety is acknowledged in national youth policies.

Young people turn first to friends, family, or teachers rather than formal systems—a choice often reflecting whether governments view mental health as an integral part of public health or as a private concern left to individuals. Despite these disparities, a shared pattern emerges. The Mental State of the World 2022 report found that

young adults aged 18–24 are three to four times more likely to report mental distress than their parents' generation [31].

This generational divide spans regions, from Latin America to South Asia to Europe. For example, a recent global survey of 10,000 young people in 10 countries (including the UK, US, India, Brazil and others) found that nearly 75% described the future as “frightening,” often in the context of climate and social crises [32]. This level of anxiety underscores how widespread and deep this sense of vulnerability runs.

The reasons are many: a digital life that amplifies comparison; climate change issues that cloud the future; wars and displacement that fracture families and nations; and the lingering isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, part of what we are seeing is a shift in language and recognition. Today's youth are growing up in a cultural moment where speaking about emotions, diagnoses, and therapy has become more normalized than ever before.

What might once have remained silent now appears in surveys, conversations, and social media posts. This suggests that higher reporting rates reflect not only suffering itself but also a generational capacity to name it. This evolving landscape further complicates the question of well-being, as it also forces us to find our own language for the matter. For today's youth, well-being is not just the absence of pathology, nor is it defined by the glossy routines of influencers. It is about safety, belonging, purpose, and resilience in the face of global uncertainty. But hasn't it been before?

#### **Data from the European Forum Alpbach 2025**

To ground these global themes, the forum opens a great venue: it gathers people from different corners of the world, with different backgrounds and upbringings. In this context, 97 young leaders

(primarily current or former students) were surveyed about their mental health and well-being at the European Forum Alpbach 2025.

Respondents came from 20 countries across Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Africa (for example: Bosnia, Ethiopia, China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Italy, the UK, and more). Most now live in Europe, which reflects the forum's nature. All had at least a bachelor's degree (78% held master's degrees), making this a highly educated cohort. Approximately 54% identified as female and 44% as male, with a few non-binary or preferring not to say. All respondents were young adults, with 39% aged 18–24 and 61% aged 25–34.

87% of respondents said they had experienced significant mental health challenges that went beyond ordinary stress in the last year, and about 35% had received a formal psychiatric diagnosis (depression, anxiety, etc.). Stress levels tended to be higher in younger participants (there was a modest negative correlation with age), with 18–24 year-olds reporting the highest average stress.

By field of study, those in Arts & Culture, Humanities, and Medicine/Health reported the most stress (averaging about 5 on a 6-point scale). Two-thirds (65.2%) felt that adequate mental health support exists in their country, yet 60% also agreed that mental health is still taboo in their society. In other words, even in this global, educated sample, stigma persists alongside the belief that help is (at least theoretically) available. This suggests that mental health is as much a cultural and political issue as it is a healthcare one.

About 43% felt comfortable turning to friends or family for help, while over one-third reported feeling uncomfortable or very uncomfortable doing so. Around 52% were unsure whether they had healthy coping strategies, showing a general lack of confidence in managing challenges. When it came to rest, the majority reported

waking up refreshed *rarely* or only *sometimes*—about 60% said they almost never felt well-rested in the morning.

When asked what situations made them feel most stressed or anxious, respondents pointed above all to work and academic pressure, followed closely by relationships (romantic, family, social). Other recurring sources of stress included economic insecurity and unemployment, social gatherings and impostor syndrome, and larger-scale issues such as climate change, war, and social injustice.

When asked how they cope with anxiety or feeling down, respondents most often mentioned simple self-care and grounding activities. Common strategies included creative or relaxing hobbies, spending time with friends or family, talking with people they trust, walking outdoors, being in nature, physical exercise, rest, and self-reflection.

Few respondents mentioned therapy or medication unprompted. Keywords like “time,” “distract,” “listen,” and “thinking” appeared frequently in their answers, suggesting many rely on personal reflection and everyday activities to manage stress. Religion or spirituality seemed to play only a minor role. About half said they do not follow any religion, while 41% identified with a religion but do not actively practice. Only a small fraction (4.5%) reported actively practicing a religion.

Stepping back, a pattern emerges: well-being cannot be reduced to one factor or solution. It is neither simply the absence of illness nor the accumulation of perfect lifestyle hacks. Western “wellness culture” may tell us that waking at dawn or owning the latest gadget guarantees happiness, but the science says something humbler. True mental well-being involves vulnerability and resilience, connectedness and support.

It grows in communities as much as in individuals. While technology, psychotherapy, and medicine are tools that can help, they operate in a web of social, economic, and cultural influences. To support today's youth, societies must move beyond one-size-fits-all cures or wellness checklists. We need richer dialogue about what well-being really means, and one that honors individual experience and the realities of each community.

This means practical action—for example, integrating evidence-based mental health education in schools, embedding well-being practices in workplaces and campuses, investing in affordable and accessible mental health services for youth, and ensuring young voices are heard in policy dialogues. And still, the participant's memory returns each morning. In another life, they imagine, “I would hold his hand tighter.

I would not let go.” In the end, what young people and the next generation need is not another checklist of routines, but stronger hands: communities, policies, and systems that do not let go.

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'Fridays of Fluctuation: A Tapestry of Mysticism and Reality' by Zinab Abdelfatah

Friday has always been a paradox, a day of tumult and a day of renewal, a day that unsettles and yet lifts me. That luminous Friday, when I received my EFA25 scholarship grant, was etched into my memory as a sun-drenched chapter of hope. I was on my way to meet the Maltese Ambassador to Egypt, flanked by fellow EU delegates, at an event dedicated to the preservation of cultural heritage and held in the six hundred-seventy-three year old Emir Taz Palace at the heart of Old Cairo.

Ruminating a romanticised scene between the colossal walls of the Palace's inner courtyard—the intricate geometric design, the plant motifs, decorations that bear bands and records of the Prince's title and his insignia and giant bells emblemed by sounds of war heralds—I was goaded by the rings of my email notifications.

Opening an enormous gate structured into the foyer, I progressed in my journey through the Mamluki ancestor's murals and mosaics where the words of my EFA25 acceptance email were decorated in the pillars of the Annexed Hall and inscribed on bands of calligraphy from passages of Busiri's Sufi poem "Burda" with some parts missing.

The palace suffered shaking damage caused by the destruction of the 1992 Earthquake that swept parts of the calligraphy. It shocked me that the inscriptions left were still readable, just as it shocked me to read the words of the email I had received. However, just like Fridays—the Palace rose again from ashes, despite hopeless revival attempts by the UNESCO team who advised euthanasia. It underwent a significant restoration by the intelligence of Egyptian architects to preserve centuries of Old Cairo Mamluki authenticity as a venue for culture, history and art. In that moment, as I walked across history and read through eight decades of intercultural experiences via EFA25 email, an unshakable truth settled within me: arts and culture are my sanctuary, my refuge from the chaos of the world and my amplifier for the speechless moments.

As a scholarship holder, my EFA25 experience exceeded my expectations, even before stepping in Alpbach. I avidly embraced every seminar and session aligned with my passions. I opted in for policy debates, intercultural dialogues between the EU and the Neighbouring South, the vibrancy of the International Evening, the bustling International Bazaar, the soulful African Soirée, the art of Cultural Diplomacy, and the magic of Theater. Only the Creative Writing seminar eluded me, conducting me here, to this memoir, where words have become my anchor.

It was during another radiant Friday that my performance proposal for the International Evening was embraced with open arms. Soon after, FANC followed with a request to involve an enthusiastic Egyptian fellow, eager to join our story. I poured my heart into every

theme, stage direction, and poetic rhythm, weaving ancient Egyptian melodies and historical narratives into a tapestry that sailed our audience on a voyage—guided by the Nile, the timeless witness of Egypt's grandeur since the dawn of history.

Arriving in Alpbach on a scorching Friday, which marked The Flooding of the Nile Day, *Wafaa El-Nil*, was sublime. The commemoration begins on 15th August annually and is observed for two weeks, celebrating the treasury of gems upon which the Egyptian Civilization was constructed—the Nile River. Prosperity and abundance the River has flowed, which enriched my days at the forum.

In my reminiscence of early days, it started with a heart-warming cable car trip with my three amazing roomies, with strolls in the woods, a meal at the heart of the mountains, wild raspberry picking and charming conversations on arts, music and nature preservation. I am also transported back to meeting my partner, our rehearsals, and the endless meetings that stretched till the CCA's closing hour—every touch, every wish for perfection I opted for, and every encounter with technicians and the FANC team are all echoing in my mind like a symphony of dedication.

Yet, the night before my performance, I was caught in a storm of personal turmoil. Hurlled into frustration and confusion, I was blessed by Tirolerhof House—that warm haven where luminous companionship blossomed on that first sunny, yet calming Friday. My roommates, neighbors, and friends became my embrace. Throwing dinner arrangements at Radfeld, heartfelt check-ins, supportive texts in Arabic, lively card games, and the infectious laughter of my balcony roomies that fill the night with cracks of jokes and late-night gossip were all blissful gestures. My roommates helped me iron my dress, style my scarf, and, in the quiet hours, offered solace through late-night whispers and shared stories. By dawn, I was

wrapped in serenity, cradled by the grace of Tirolerhof's camaraderie.

The following day, my performance ignited the stage. The supportive presence of Tirolerhof's residents, my forum mates and friends was captivating. Their cheers and applause lifted me beyond the clouds. Encounters of people at the bus and during dinners out were marked by fascinating comments: "The narrative you crafted is enchanting," "a radio storytelling voice," and "I loved your performance." Those words melted my heart, weaving gratitude into every fiber imbued with the magic of my culture. They were spells of culture that permeated the souls, leaving impressions that would linger long after the applause faded—moments to be thankful for every experience Alpbach endowed on me.

The next Friday brought rain, a gentle and enriching backdrop to preparations for new engagements in the following week, including the Sunrise Hike at the peak of Gratlspitze. Ah! I forgot to tell you! I have hiked before in Switzerland, however, Tyrol's Alps is no ordinary ascent. If breath shortens and pressure drops, hesitation whispers. That night when the event commenced, I trekked upward into darkness, though my chest ached and my steps faltered. I maintained climbing up, my shoulders numbed, my breath tightened, and then all became dark. However, blessings never departed me. I was enveloped by altruistic fellas, brave and kind. Voices called from behind, asking, "Are you okay?"

Naajia's steady grip reassured me, then a voice of a woman: "Come next year, when you're more fit."

"Guys you should move on, I am ok," I said.

However, I truly was not. Then, a voice from behind, gentle and familiar though his face was unclear, said "I know you, Zinab! I am Dan."

I never accepted the idea of snatching people from their adventure, though he unwaveringly never gave in. I was happy to find someone I knew, a bond that never left me.

“I wanna come next year as well. I was awake the whole night and dying to sleep,” said Dan.

While it was freezing cold to continue lying on the soaking meadow until it was time to descend and find a means to go home, looking for somewhere warm was the best thought. Dan introduced me to a spiritual and quiet place in Alpbach, something he called “*The Temple of all Religions*.” Despite the fluttering breath and nausea I was experiencing, I felt safe and delighted. Something I called “*A Warm Conversation in the Cracks of Time and Weather*.” A cozy sanctuary where history, religions, and culture intertwined beneath a tapestry of stars, blue stripes of morning and sunrise hues—a sacred space for reflection amid the storm, ending up with mesmerising tales up ‘till the doors of my house. Exhausted yet pleased and fulfilled, I sank into sleep with my hiking clothes still on, grateful for the moment of peace amid life’s turbulence.

Towards one last Friday, days were full of joy and triumph. I won the Debate Night which was magnificent; the Fireside Chats and dinners with beloved ones, thanks to Club Alpbach Iraq and its brilliant fellows, were also outstanding. One more relieving morning that was inaugurated by a fancy breakfast with my debate partners, and blossomed into an excursion to Reither See with my dearest Naajia and Christine was also a haunting melody. As the sun shyly peeked, we dipped our feet into the cold water of the lake, contemplating the aesthetics of nature and watching schools of fish dancing around Naajia’s bread crumbs, and a larger fish stealing a tomato slice—a playful testament to nature’s unpredictable artistry.

“Oh my god! The water is freaking cold! The fish are going to bite my toes,” said Christine, freezingly.

“It is just going to be a foot massage,” I laughed.

Interwoven with fresh breeze, orchard scenery, large trees and green shrubs—a sight for a sore eye—we three have shared heartfelt laughter and stories. Our voices were trumpeting in every corner of the horizon, echoing across and slowly sliding down the hills towards our house to pack our luggage and rush fast to a final dinner organised by our sweet Tirolerhof.

The evening was deeply bittersweet. Then, I headed to the CCA for a brief moment where flocks of people were partying to see dearest ones for a final conversation, but people seemed dissociated from the event. Amidst the lively gatherings and farewell whispers, I felt the tingling ache of parting. As final drinks were being served with clinking glasses cheers, a sound from my childhood resonated—of clanking vessels during dishwashing after a delightful family reunion, while ending at the sunset time.

That retrospective moment took me back to a glimpse of the end of my Summer holiday, as a kid in Egypt, farewelling my grandma and uncles before going back with my parents to the country where I grew up. Oh God! I wanted to weep. I have been deeply missing my late dad lately. Such gushing emotions were erupted by the nostalgia of that evening, a mix of feelings concluding with his voice humming in my head, “Zozi in the Mountains, could be the title of a book.” He proudly said that to me once after I had sent him photos of my visit to Lebanon two years ago.

With the chime of the Alpbach St. Oswald Parish Church’s bells, I was reverberated to that soul-stirring moment on the walls of Emir Taz Palace with its ornamented bells and chandeliers. Nonetheless, those are not bells of war. They are rather the collective pealing of the city bells, tributing EFA’s 80th anniversary of peace and tolling the end of EFA25, to be tuned again next year in a new appealing dress and refreshing melody.

In the drapes of that night, shadows of memories danced gracefully in my dreams. Thoughts were densely thronging my head—knitted with an influx of love, contentment and maturity—visions of familiar faces smiling and promises of reunion woven into the fabric of impending journeys.

The next morning, a cold rainy Friday, I saw more familiar faces since the moment I left Tirolerhof, through the buses and trains, towards multiple encounters on my way to Munich—all of whom showered me with praises and kind words and wished to see me next year. They were all moments that tapped out the beats on the depth of my heart and interspersed with farewell bidding, though vivid ones that promised a new rebirth of these faces again, of which time and place are yet to be envisaged.

That Friday, a final chapter shuttered by a melodic epilogue, was immortalized and engraved in a photo album and postcards, scented by the aroma of a Bavarian coffee, coloured in the flames of the Fall's amber maple foliage and flavoured with overwhelming tastes of life's enthralling harmonious crossings. Winding up a fortnight of the Nile's grace, another unshakable truth has settled within me: EFA is a sanctuary for every creative spirit—an unpacking idea for recharging and refurbishment, to embark on a new experience across frontiers—where every moment becomes a stanza in the poem of life.

#### *'Africa Between the Lines'* by Dennis Kamau Muniu

Global politics and influence converge most visibly where climate pressures, demographic shifts and geopolitical rivalries intersect. Africa stands at this crossroads. The continent carries the weight of rising temperatures, contested resources and competing external interests from global powers. At the same time, African institutions and leadership hold the responsibility of turning these pressures into opportunities for resilience and growth.

Across the continent, the pace of environmental change is severe and accelerating. From 2021 to 2025, more than 221 million people across Africa were affected by climate, weather, and water-related disasters, and nearly 29,000 lives were lost. These figures are more than three times the death toll of the previous five-year period.

Events such as cyclones, heatwaves and catastrophic floods—like those in Derna, Libya in 2023—further underscore the growing

human cost from climate hazards in recent African history. In the Sahel, temperatures rise roughly 1.5 times faster than the global average. Prolonged droughts heighten the risk of conflict, while expanding deserts force migration, creating tensions in the areas which receive them. By 2050 food systems will be facing unprecedented pressures.

These stressors do not exist in isolation; they overlap with deep inequalities shaping everyday life. Women provide most of Africa's food production but own little land, limiting their ability to adapt despite their critical knowledge for community resilience. Responses that overlook this imbalance will falter because true resilience depends on those already sustaining communities. Institutions form the hinge between survival and stability.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) mediation mechanisms, and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) demonstrate what integration can achieve when cooperation functions effectively. Internal coordination lays the foundation for meaningful external partnerships. Pan-Africanism requires this institutional base to move beyond rhetoric into real implementation.

Historical legacies weigh heavily: colonial borders split communities and ecosystems, and extractive economic patterns forged dependencies that persist. These imprints shape today's realities but should not be a scapegoat which hinders forward momentum. Africa's future rests on the strength of its institutions, effective leadership and ability to manage resources sustainably.

The continent's assets are immense; it has 60 percent of the world's uncultivated arable land and the largest youth population globally. However, the risk is clear: without opportunities, the demographic dividend risks becoming a considerable burden.

Europe's future is closely tied to these dynamics. Migration flows, agricultural supply chains, and resource security link the continents whether policymakers acknowledge it or not. Too often, Europe responds by managing crises instead of building lasting partnerships. Genuine cooperation requires supporting African-led solutions: trade that strengthens industrial capacities, climate finance empowering African institutions, and migration policies addressing root causes rather than symptoms.

At this critical crossroads, agency is decisive. China, Europe and the United States compete for influence, but African choices will determine whether this rivalry fosters development or deepens extraction. Climate change accelerates all these dynamics. Political solutions must respond urgently to immediate pressures while preparing for long-term challenges. This demands coordination across local, national and regional governance levels.

The decade ahead will test whether Africa drives innovation and growth or faces destabilizing pressures that spill across borders. The demographic and environmental trends are already clear. What remains open is how governance will respond. The moment of truth is about capacity: can African systems adapt quickly enough to lead under climate stress? Can Europe move beyond paternalism toward genuine partnership? The answers will shape both continents for many generations.

### 'Fragile, yet enough' by Edlire Maloku

Train station voice: "There will be a delay. We are sorry for causing any inconvenience."

It had already been a twenty-hour journey, stretching across landscapes and borders, through waiting halls and endless tracks. Twenty hours of carrying my entire life on my back; a huge red backpack stuffed not only with clothes and notes, but with questions, hopes, and a quiet determination to see what it meant to "recharge Europe."

By the time I finally arrived, it was five minutes past midnight. The silence was thick, broken only by the wheels of my suitcase against uneven ground. The mountains stood above me, immense and almost unreal, like sentinels. I had seen mountains before, but never

ones that looked so alive. Breathing in the moonlight, holding the weight of centuries, and yet welcoming me as if I belonged there.

I paused, my breath caught between exhaustion and awe. Here I was, someone from the periphery of Europe, standing at its heart. I wondered how my voice, small and quiet, could find a place among so many others who had come with the same mission: to think, to question, and to restore something fragile we all felt slipping away.

The village was still, but not asleep. In the distance, lights from small windows glowed like fireflies, each one holding another traveler, another story. And somewhere among them, a room was waiting for me, a room I would soon learn was too small for comfort, yet big enough to change me. The room was impossibly narrow.

Two people could not stand in it at the same time without brushing shoulders, and the air seemed to carry the impatience of cramped spaces. The bed frames creaked like tired trees whenever we moved, and the narrow desk, barely wide enough for scattered notes, became our battlefield of books, chargers, and empty cups of coffee.

And then there was her.

My roommate. She arrived from another corner of Europe, carrying with her not only a different language and rhythm of life, but also a political reality that cut sharply: her country did not recognize mine. On paper, we were a contradiction, a reminder of Europe's unfinished business. History had drawn lines between us long before we ever met.

At first, we lived around each other. Her songs hummed softly in her language while I whispered mine in another. We folded ourselves into routines like dancers rehearsing separate choreographies in the same narrow stage. A nod here, a polite smile

there. It could have remained that way, two strangers forced into proximity.

But something shifted. Maybe it was the exhaustion we both carried after long days of lectures and debates, or the laughter that escaped at the absurdity of tripping over each other's shoes in such a small space. Slowly, the room began to breathe differently. Instead of irritation, warmth seeped in. Instead of silence, words started to find their way across the invisible line that divided us.

At night, when the village outside fell silent and only the faint glow of the church clock marked the passing hours, our room became something else. The walls no longer pressed in on us, they listened.

We began to talk. First, about small things: the cold mornings, the endless coffee, the strangeness of meeting so many people who spoke so quickly, as if they were racing the clock. Then, little by little, the words deepened.

We spoke of the world and how cruel it can be, how borders carve wounds into landscapes and into people. She said, 'I understand the weight of absence, about what it means to miss a place that does not always welcome you'. I said 'I feel frustration coming from a country that feels unheard, the quiet ache of carrying a flag that many pretend does not exist'.

There were nights when our words sank between us like stones. And yet, there was also laughter; sudden, unexpected, the kind that makes you forget why you were sad in the first place. In that laughter, something dissolved: suspicion, distance, the invisible map that had been etched between our countries. Inside that tiny room, Europe was not a project or an idea debated in a seminar. It was simply two people, holding each other's stories with care.

One afternoon, after another long day of listening, debating, and trying to hold the weight of Europe's problems in our notebooks, she came back carrying something small in her hands.

A flower.

It was nothing extravagant, not the kind you buy in bouquets or preserve between pages, just a field flower she had picked along the way. She placed it on my desk, next to my red backpack that always seemed too big for the room, and said quietly, almost shyly:

"You make this place feel like home. I've missed that for a long time."

Her words caught me off guard. The flower was fragile, its petals already trembling in the late-summer heat, but the meaning behind it was stronger than anything we had spoken before. For her, home had been distant. For me, belonging had often been uncertain. Yet, in that tiny room, among scattered shoes and whispered stories, something of home had grown, not from familiarity, but from kindness.

The flower dried quickly, as flowers do. But what it left behind stayed alive in me: the knowledge that sometimes, recharging the world begins with nothing more than a gesture, a single act of making someone feel at home.

That flower reminded me that Europe is not recharged by grand speeches alone, but by the quiet ways we learn to see each other. On paper, our countries do not even recognize one another. Yet in that small room, we did. We found that home can be built out of kindness, even between strangers shaped by history to stand apart.

Maybe this is where Europe's strength lies: not in erasing differences, but in creating spaces where they can live side by side and still bloom.

Two people, one tiny room, and a single flower.

Sometimes, that is enough.

'Zwischen Dialog und Exklusivität: Wie das European Forum Alpbach Stipendiat:innen, Entscheidungsträger:innen und VIPs zusammenbringt (oder eben nicht?)' by Alexander Rauscher

**Die Einzigartigkeit**, mit der das European Forum Alpbach Stipendiat:innen, Entscheidungsträger:innen und VIPs zusammenbringt, ist für mich jedes Jahr aufs Neue sehr beeindruckend. Alpbach schafft – trotz der aktuellen angespannten wirtschaftlichen und geopolitischen Lage – ein Miteinander statt eines Generationenkonflikts. Durch inhaltliche Diskussionen, politischen Diskurs, Panels, sportliche Aktivitäten oder einfach durch die lockere Atmosphäre, die zum Austausch einlädt, entsteht ein Generationenaustausch anstelle von Exklusivität.

**Immer wieder während des EFAs stelle ich mir die Frage, ob und was der Generationenaustausch für die verschiedenen**

**Generationen bedeutet – ob es etwa Vorbehalte seitens der „älteren“ Generation gegenüber der Leistungs- und Arbeitsbereitschaft der „neuen“ Generation gibt.** Nach meiner Woche in Alpbach kann ich diese Frage mit einem klaren NEIN beantworten. Jeder Mensch entscheidet selbst über sein Leben sowie dessen Inhalt – überdurchschnittliche Leistungsbereitschaft hat nichts mit Alter, Geschlecht oder Herkunft zu tun. Der „Drive“ für eine Sache geht immer von der Person selbst aus. In jedem Bereich gibt es Menschen, die diesen „Drive“ haben – und solche, die ihn nicht haben. Wichtig ist, seinen eigenen Weg zu finden. Alpbach eignet sich hervorragend, um Kontakte zu knüpfen, Einblicke in verschiedene Lebenswege zu gewinnen und vielleicht sogar Wegweiser zu entdecken – um den eigenen besten Weg zu erkennen. Die gesellschaftliche Entwicklung hat meines Erachtens langfristig eine Bedeutung, aber bestimmt nicht innerhalb von ein oder zwei Generationen.

**Das Schöne an Alpbach ist, dass es viele mutige Stipendiat:innen gibt, die sich aktiv um ein Gespräch mit der erfahrenen Generation bemühen – und genau das ist auch mein Appell an alle: Traut euch!** Oft schreckt man vielleicht noch zurück, aus Sorge, zu wenig zu wissen. Dabei ist es in den meisten Fällen genau umgekehrt: Die erfahrene Generation freut sich über einen aktiven Austausch und lernt immens von den Stipendiat:innen – denn sie weiß selbst oft weniger aus den „Bubbles“ der jüngeren Generationen. Damit meine ich, dass die erfahrene Generation aus ihrer Erfahrung lebt – Stichwort: Denken in Analogien – und dabei die technologische und digitale Weiterentwicklung und deren Auswirkungen auf die Breite unserer Gesellschaft nicht umfänglich begreifen.

**Ein Appell, den ich gerne allen Teilnehmer:innen des EFAs mitgeben möchte:**

**Initiiert Gespräche mit Inhalt – statt Prinzipien zu verteidigen.** Ziel ist es, voneinander zu lernen, einander zu verstehen und aneinander zu wachsen, anstatt sich gegenseitig kleinzumachen.

**The original – the author's style in English:**

The uniqueness with which the European Forum Alpbach brings together scholarship holders, decision-makers, and VIPs impresses me every year anew. Despite the current tense economic and geopolitical situation, Alpbach creates a sense of togetherness rather than generational conflict. Through substantive discussions, political discourse, panels, sporting activities, or simply through the relaxed atmosphere that encourages exchange, a generational exchange takes place instead of exclusivity.

During the EFA, I repeatedly ask myself whether and what the intergenerational exchange means for the different generations – whether, for example, the “older” generation has reservations about the “new” generation’s willingness to perform and work. After my week in Alpbach, I can answer this question with a resounding NO. Every person decides for themselves about their life and what it means to them – above-average motivation has nothing to do with age, gender, or origin. The “drive” for something always comes from the person themselves. In every field, there are people who have this “drive” – and those who don’t. The important thing is to find your own path. Alpbach is an excellent place to make contacts, gain insights into different ways of life, and perhaps even discover signposts—to recognize your own best path. In my opinion, social development has long-term significance, but certainly not within one or two generations.

The beauty of Alpbach is that there are many courageous scholarship holders who actively seek dialogue with the experienced generation – and that is precisely my appeal to everyone: be brave! Often, people

may still shy away from this out of concern that they don't know enough. In most cases, however, the opposite is true: the experienced generation enjoys active exchange and learns immensely from the scholarship holders – because they themselves often know less about the “bubbles” of the younger generations. By this I mean that the experienced generation lives from its experience – keyword: thinking in analogies – and does not fully understand technological and digital developments and their impact on the breadth of our society.

An appeal I would like to make to all EFA participants:

Initiate conversations with substance – instead of defending principles. The goal is to learn from each other, understand each other, and grow together, rather than belittling each other.

'Im Glashaus der Freiheit' by Alexandra Egger

„Heutzutage kennen die Leute von allem den Preis, aber von nichts den Wert.“

Oscar Wilde (Das Bildnis des Dorian Gray)

Was ist der Preis von Freiheit? Was kostet es, die eigene Stimme zum Schweigen zu bringen? Was verlieren wir, indem wir beständig Selbstzensur aus Angst vor Zurückweisung ausüben? Was bleibt, wenn die Meinungsfreiheit Stück für Stück stirbt?

In Europa sitzen wir momentan im Glashaus - und werfen dennoch mit Steinen. Dies wurde mir besonders in meinem diesjährigen EFA Seminar „Journalism's Role in Strengthening European Sovereignty“ klar, als ich Erfahrungsberichte aus anderen Teilen der

Welt hörte. Es sind Regionen, in denen Meinungsfreiheit lediglich eine erzählte, aber keine gelebte Realität ist.

Ich selbst wurde 2005 in Österreich geboren und verbrachte hier mein bisheriges Leben. Eine Welt, in der Lügen zur Wahrheit werden, war mir bisher größtenteils fremd. Niemals hatte ich Angst um mein Leben, weil ich eine Meinung besitze. Niemals hatte ich Angst, dass das Fundament unserer Demokratie stirbt. Doch es scheint mir bedrohter, als wir es wahrhaben wollen. Wir **wollen** nicht sehen, dass die Welt und somit auch Europa in Flammen stehen.

Wir erachten die Presse- und Meinungsfreiheit als in Stein gemeißelt, obwohl sie das niemals war. Wir nehmen sie zu selbstverständlich, weil wir nie in einer Welt gelebt haben, in der diese Freiheiten nicht gegeben waren. Und deswegen merken wir nicht, wenn sie uns schrittweise genommen werden. So züngeln die Flammen höher und höher, drohen, alles zu verschlingen, was sich in Europa vor 80 Jahren aus der Asche erhob.

Aber dieses Mal ist es nicht gewiss, dass wir, einem Phönix gleich, unsere Schwingen in eine bessere Zukunft ausbreiten können. Es ist nicht gewiss, ob der europäische Grundgedanke nicht nur überdauert, sondern endlich auch weitergedacht wird. Europa existiert nicht in einem Vakuum, obwohl wir dieser Illusion sehr gern verfallen. Es gibt Geschichten, die es verdienen, erzählt zu werden. Denn wollen wir den Preis des Schweigens wahrhaftig bezahlen?

Für mich ist dieser Preis zu hoch. Mit Scheuklappen durch unser Leben zu gehen, kostet uns vieles von dem, was uns ausmacht. Daher ist die Arbeit der Journalist:innen, die trotz aller bestehender Hürden Licht ins Dunkel werfen, unschätzbar wertvoll. Der

Mensch ist mehr als nur eine Zahl in einer Statistik, mehr als eine Figur, die an fremden Fäden hängt.

Doch das vergessen wir nur allzu leicht, wenn sich Sensationalismus einfacher und besser verkauft. Daher ist das Erzählen der dahinterstehenden Geschichten unabdinglich. Ungleichheiten, Ungerechtigkeiten und Unmenschliches sind nicht gottgegeben. Wir können jetzt einen Grundstein für eine noch bessere Zukunft legen und am Haus der europäischen Freiheit weiterbauen.

Oder wie es am internationalen Abend des EFA ausgedrückt wurde: „Peace is not something you inherit. "It is something you build."

Denn mit Schweigen ist nichts getan.

## 'Reflections on the Power and Dangers of Social Change'

by Eleanor Dayan

### Introduction: On Activism & Societal Change

*"Change is the law of life and those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future." - John F. Kennedy*

In this short contribution for the EFA25 book, I wish to share some thoughts and my perspective about social change, how it theoretically works, its power and dangers, and some ideas for how to navigate between them acting for change, by knowledge, responsibility and values.

It is based on my reflections from the seminar "Power, Activism, and How to Create a Change (in Europe and Beyond)" chaired by Professor Alberto Alemanno and Colombe Caben-Salvador, along with assistant of Filippou Varella, to all of which, I'm very grateful for this

amazing experience and the practical knowledge that has been learned. To the fellow colleagues of the seminar, to EFA25 participants, and to all readers, act responsible, courageous, and make change happen for a recharged future – in Europe and beyond.

Following the content in our seminar, the term 'Societal change' is *the significant alterations or transformations in the structures, norms, values, institutions, behaviors and patterns of interactions within a society*. Changes can occur at various levels, spheres, and manifest in diverse ways.

Societal change often reflects societal needs, aspirations, challenges, and opportunities and a dynamic ongoing process that shapes the trajectory of societies, individuals, communities, institutions and evolution of civilization over time. In my view, every societal change comes with consequences beyond imagination, danger, and risk. This chapter reflects on how we might be able to confront such uncertainties.

The following section explains how change happens in a very basic political, theoretical post-constructivist approach. The second section presents dangers of power and the uncertain consequences of acting for change. Therefore, it tells a story about our responsibility to be aware of our action in making a change and acknowledgment of the unintended consequences of change.

The third section discusses three ways I have reflected upon to confront these dangers and uncertainty – by 'possibilities and freedom', by 'values and good nature', and by 'expertise and professionalism'. I will not discuss the materials and tools that were taught during the seminar itself, and yet I highly recommend anyone who wishes to be an activist and make a change – to get the chance to participate in this amazing learning experience.

*“You will see, engage with and live out this imbalance of power and social injustice. Your fear will be turned into outrage before your outrage will turn into hope.”*

*- Alberto Alemanno*

*(from the book ‘Lobbying for Change: find your voice to create a better society’)*

#### *On Power and Knowledge of Change*

*“There is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives.”*

*- Micheal Foucault*

When we consider social change, power plays a critical role in it. To best understand the nature of change and how it is shaped and shaping power, follow Foucault’s conceptualization.

*Power is the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization, the process which though ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverse them, the support which these force relations finds in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another and as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in various social hegemonies.*

Power is interrelated to knowledge, and their relationship is crucial in understanding social change. As what one is possible to do with power is laid down in a certain way, then one is capable of doing the things that are possible within the arrangement of those lines, and therefore *knowledge* is more than facts and information, but also the frameworks and system that transform information into one’s sense of the world and how the world works.

As such, power and knowledge must be created and evolve together. Power as force relations that exist in the sphere are operated, transformed and reversed by us, most of them even occurring unconsciously as part of everyday decisions and actions in life. Their intentional movements – possible only in the directions and forms that extend to the boundaries of our knowledge and understanding of the universe.

Deconstructing theory into a simplest metaphor would look like this: if power is the ability and energy of a human being to use its surroundings (the existence of force relations operated in a sphere), and the surrounding is the possibilities of his/her power to use (as such; knowledge-strategies in which power takes effect), then more shire human power than knowledge will be required to, let’s say building a hut or cultivate the land.

Extensive power and knowledge will be required to build a ship and even more knowledge to tailor sails. Yet, to know that the use of sails will enable this human to sail without rowing can generate much more power with little energy invested, thus knowledge is multiplier of power.

Much higher knowledge about the navigation by the stars and sun stands at a higher level, giving one the power to know the direction of his voyage – knowledge that grants incredible power which conserves considerable amounts of energy. The ability to know where one is sailing manifests new knowledge, and so forth power and knowledge reinforce one another. With each progress, or change, or evolution, one takes higher risk and the learning process itself demands to accept incredible danger.

Beyond the physical danger that as part of the experiences and learning process, higher dangers are attributed to the effect of the new knowledge and technologies on societal power relations. Who controlled the forest and then the land with time becomes

inferior to who controls the shore and sea. And who holds power will not only act to preserve the old social relations but will use his power to achieve more.

#### On the Uncertainty of Change and Dangers of Power

*“Those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.”*

*- John F. Kennedy*

Now, discussing knowledge and power generally, the discourses, the narratives, the transformation of information into thoughts, and the limits of them by language, are all within the boundaries which is common-sense. Therefore, everything is changeable, all practices, all the facts that construct facts, and all frameworks, founding structures, and cognitive formations that construct facts in their certain form.

Acknowledging this reality puts in question everything that one might hold to as an unseparated and obvious part of life. However, it explains how changes can be so profound, and while intended to manifest specific results will have implications far greater than their intended sphere of influence.

The evolution of change, according to philosophers such as G.W.F. Hegel, is occurring in *dialectics*. In the Foucauldian sense, as power exists in the sphere and moves by and moving knowledge of the world, any change in this power relation that pushes it, must have counter force relations, which both create new reality, or change.

In Hegel's words, the movement of logic and fixity (thesis) in a moment of instability encounter a '*negatively rational*' (antithesis)

or might be one's desirable change, both creating '*positively rational*' (synthesis) that is formed by how we understood the world, that necessitates how we want to change it which confronts the rigidity of the old-rationale, therefore creating unexpected reality. Such processes may evolve and materialize even only after a lifetime and generations.

For example, the social change regarding *who gets to decide for society, who should rule, and by which prerequisites and provisions*, has changed in dialectical confrontations and transformation of power relations and knowledge. Plato and Aristotle while living in the first democracy of Athens in Ancient Greece discussed whether rules should be ruled by virtues and natural born character (Plato) or by their own ability to reach power (Aristotle).

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Tomas Hobbes, who bestowed the end of the middle edge, when kings ruled by divine authority and the power of the church, he claimed that sovereigns should rule by convents between him/them and the people and these convents shall give the sovereign the entire commonwealth power. Wars and destruction caused by kings led to the French and American revolutions. With the rise of science and enlightenment, power seemed to be in the hands of the people.

Yet in France, following the Regime of Terror, a French Empire rose, and in the US a very strong presidential regime. While power continued to move towards the people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the centralized power of governments which act by national interests, realpolitik and demand high taxes, their power moved step by step to the market, where knowledge lied with capitalism and neo-liberalism.

The socialist ideas of communism mostly disappeared, while socio-democratic governments were established in many post-monarchy nations during the 20th century. These societies or

nation-states were very liberal, and some still are. In the 21st century, in some of these same nations, we see populism on the rise, which might limit some forms of liberalism and freedom of the market, again, in the name of national interests and national identity.

#### Confronting the Danger of Power and the Uncertainty of Change

*‘Power is always dangerous. It attracts the worst. And corrupts the Best. Power is only given to those who are willing to lower themselves to pick it up.’*

- *Ragnar Lothbrok (from TV series ‘Vikings’)*

So, if societal change is not only inevitable but also desirable, how should we do the right thing for the right reason? And how to manage the dangerous (and also inevitable) dialectical nature of power relations while acting for a change? There is much uncertainty surrounding any future changes and their potential consequences.

I propose to look for three notions – the importance of possibilities and freedom of choice, the guidance of noble values of good human nature, and the importance of expertise and professionalism in relation to transformation, and desirable changes in power relations.

First, the importance of *possibilities and freedom of choice*. Activists that try to make a change may try to force change rather than reasonably propose it. The difference between demanding obedience for desirable change and providing guidance and insight into possible change lies in the theoretical orientation — the latter is much more moderate and safer from any possible counter-resistance to the given change.

In simple words, if it is right for society to make a change, society will support it, and the more pressure (the more powerful a force relation) for a certain direction, you should expect higher chances for counter pressure, immediate or future. In short, don't do the wrong thing for the right reason, it might completely backfire.

Second, to be guided by *noble values of good nature*. As Marcus Tullius Cicero said, science alone has the power to teach us the influence of nature on justice, friendship, and our relations with others. Good values are guided by knowledge, consideration and respect for ‘the other’, for oneself, and for this world. Freedom of choice is a noble value in itself.

However, while the first focuses on one's ability to consider the effects of their actions or changes, the second aspect of good nature focuses on one's awareness of the values that shape desirable changes and whether these values are noble, sustainable and in the interests of the entire affected collective. Don't do the right thing for the wrong reason.

Last but not least, the importance of *expertise and professionalism*. Expertise is intermediary between knowledge and power, science and practice. Experts are professional in their focused fields, while holding a status that validly their knowledge, and as such have at times different levels of access to decision-makers.

When acting for a change, knowledge and experience are crucial in understanding the strategies, tools, and decisions one takes in the course of activism. Alliance (as collaboration) between those who hold power for change, experts in their field of change, and activists initiating a change – be beneficial for not ending up inside the mouth of the *tiger of change*. To conclude, I wish great

success to my EFA colleagues who act for a change and be in the right way for the right reason.

*Acknowledgements: I wish to thank my bachelor mentor Professor Doron Navot, head of the Jewish-Arab Center, who inspired me for political theory and supported my career from the very beginning. So much thanks to Professor Aviad Rubin, my Ph.D. supervisor and mentor.*

#### 'Su akar yolunu bulur' by Kerem Ergün

The clouds were setting in, covering up the only visible sun rays, and just as I feared, the rain had begun. Walking downhill to the Alpbacher middle school, my umbrella shielded me from the slow, scattered drizzling, quickening to an insistent shower like pace.

The longer I walked on the narrow pavement, the more I noticed how the raindrops merged on the asphalt, forming a tiny, determined river that carved its own path downhill, right next to my feet, on the road.

It was something that I noticed from time to time, but never really gave it a thought until remembering the saying my mother tells me from time to time, "Su akar yolunu bulur", that our life is like water, it flows and finds its path, that in the end, everything will work out.

But watching that stream, I wondered, what if it's the opposite. What if we use that idea as a comforting lie, out of deep fear that things won't work, we distract ourselves with a frantic chase for success, just so we have something to control, something to hold onto?

It's something many of us learn early. Have you ever told yourself, I'll finally be able to relax once I accomplish this. Whatever it may be, maybe it's getting that acceptance letter, or hitting a certain metric.

You spent hours, even days, dedicating everything to achieve it. You put your head down, you make sacrifices, and when you're finally there, you feel accomplished, an incredible rush of validation, and truly proud, as you should. But how long does that feeling truly last? It isn't long before you already set your eyes on the next milestone.

You hit one box, and the moment you check it off; your eyes are already on the next thing. Whether it's getting that grade, that job, whatever it is, there's always another box waiting. It's like you're facing an endless wall of boxes to tick off. And every finished box immediately becomes the starting block of another goal. It feels like I'm living my life on a checklist, waiting to move on.

This constant chase of the next thing doesn't always have to be those big milestones, like graduating from high school or getting into your dream university, or getting that job; it's even happening on a smaller scale.

Maybe you're in your last period before school ends, and instead of focusing on your work, your mind is thinking about what to eat for your next meal. Or maybe when you are at home, sitting on your dining table, and instead of enjoying your food you made, your mind is thinking about the work you must get done before you can relax. And then, when you finally get to relax, you feel restless, thinking about what's next.

Maybe you feel even guilty for not being productive and not achieving all your daily goals. Or, how about you're out with friends and you start thinking about being home. And in all of that, you're not really present.

What I just described is myself. As of recently, I have noticed that for some odd reason, I evaluate every moment I am in by how productive it is, by how closer it gets me to my box that is yet to be crossed off. If it doesn't move me closer to something else, I struggle to just let it go, as if the only way a moment counts is if it is productive. Everything has become a checklist to cross off, so that I can get to the next thing.

'Alpbach and Ancient Greece: A Classical Perspective' by  
Peter Mumford

Among the many fields of study that inform our understanding of today's often turbulent geopolitical landscape, Classics (loosely defined as the study of the history, culture, literature and languages of ancient Greece and Rome) would not, at first glance, appear to rank highly. But it is nevertheless extremely relevant both to the challenges and chaos of international affairs today and to the aims and ethos of the EFA. Admittedly, my opinion of this is not exactly unbiased; I studied Classics to postgraduate level, specialising in ancient Greek history and the construction of cultural identity.

In particular, the works of Herodotus and Thucydides, the founding fathers of the discipline of history, have broadened and deepened my understanding of modern geopolitics and some of the

fundamental issues underpinning it, and also enhanced my experience of attending the EFA this summer.

Herodotus, widely considered the world's first historian, set out to chronicle the entire world as he knew it; the result is not only a historical, but also geographical and anthropological text with lengthy descriptions of foreign peoples and their various customs, attributes, myths and legends. Although he lived and wrote some 2,500 years ago, Herodotus seems to have arrived at a perspective that many today still fail to grasp.

He is able to observe and analyse cultural and societal differences without resorting to notions of inherent cultural superiority or the kind of crude xenophobia that we unfortunately still see displayed today all around the world. This is not to say that he is impartial in his observation; he freely admits that he personally finds certain customs and practices more distasteful than others, but acknowledges that, as a Greek author, he would naturally feel this way (whereas a reader from elsewhere in the world might find Greek customs incomprehensible or even backward).

He uses examples of difference not as punchlines in a derogatory joke, but as philosophical observations on human nature. This notion of cultural tolerance and the appreciation of difference (whether relating to one's background, country of origin, personal attributes or political opinions) is one that I found promoted throughout the EFA.

In a world where so many people still believe in their cultural superiority over others and define their national, political or personal identity in opposition to a foreign 'other', initiatives like the EFA that deliberately promote the opposite perspective are more important than ever. What I found at the EFA was both a celebration of difference (in all sorts of forms) and an encouragement to engage with this difference, to meet and discuss

with people whose perspectives, opinions and worldviews were unlike our own.

Studying Herodotus' work also left me fascinated by the surprising commonalities that could transcend geographical, cultural and even temporal divides. Alpbach, in providing a forum for young people across the world to interact, connect with one another and discuss some of the most challenging issues facing the global community, accomplished the same. Herodotus wrote his book in an attempt to broaden his audience's perspectives of the world in which they lived; this spirit, in my opinion, was echoed at Alpbach this year.

As for Thucydides, his writing reflects a different, yet equally significant aspect of my experience at Alpbach. Thucydides' account of the decades-long conflict between the Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC includes a passage in which the Athenians attempt to force the capitulation of the small island nation of Melos, which had opted to remain neutral in the war.

As justification for their demands, the Athenians bluntly state that "The strong take what they can, and the weak suffer what they must." Viewed from 2025, this seems disturbingly familiar; our world is rapidly becoming one where powerful nations feel empowered to act as aggressively as they wish with impunity, where the notion of 'might makes right' supersedes international law and order, and where those considered 'weak' are doomed to suffer the consequences. Such a world would undoubtedly be catastrophic for us all, including those countries that would consider themselves 'strong'.

Thucydides implies that this strength is transitory rather than permanent – Athens, for instance, was eventually defeated by Sparta – but we cannot respond to the threat of a world governed by 'might makes right' by resigning ourselves to suffer as we must and merely hoping that the currents of history may someday flow in our favour.

Attending the EFA confirmed my belief that this bleak vision of today's geopolitical landscape may be a realistic prospect, but it does not have to be inevitable.

There is still the opportunity to make a principled stand against the anarchy of a world governed by 'might makes right'. Europeans – not just from countries in the EU, but from across the entire continent – must demonstrate unity and strength in standing up for our values, our allies and the international order that so many over the last century have given their lives to build.

We must reject the notion that today's world can be dominated by the 'strong' at the expense of the 'weak'. Building a community of nations that can effectively and convincingly stand for freedom, democracy, respect for the rule of law and the international order amid a dangerous and turbulent world will undoubtedly be difficult to achieve. But the challenges we face are existential; they demand an unprecedented response.

It is not an exaggeration to state that we stand today at a crossroads in history, and that many signs indicate that the way ahead is even darker than it seems today. But I felt inspired by my experience at Alpbach that an alternate path is still possible; one which inspires hope for the future rather than the dread that many young Europeans currently feel. As many of us seek out this path, I hope that words and wisdom from the classical world will be able to help offer us a guide.

'It Can Only Be Experienced, Not Described!' by Enje  
J.V.

Before coming to Alpbach, there are two things you inevitably hear about the most: "*EFA is what you make of it!*" and another, maybe less echoed, "*There is no place like EFA!*" At first, they sound like phrases passed along by tradition, but their meaning only truly unfolds once you have lived those two extraordinary weeks. I felt this most vividly on the very first day of seminars. It was the afternoon, and the professor told us to ask ourselves: "*What did I feel today?*" I want to share what I had written down on Aug. 18th at around 4:00 pm:

*"My morning seminar reminded me of why I have always loved science and have been invested in the environment and nature! It gave me a sense of feeling energized and rejuvenated to start working on it again."*

It was raw and unfiltered—an authentic feeling that only deepened as the Forum unfolded. By the end of the two weeks, that spark had grown into something amplified, resonant, and lasting. To be surrounded by people of different calibres, yet not a trace of competitiveness in sight—only pure support and camaraderie—is a rare feeling.

A place where we are reminded of how even the most challenging ideas, projects, and solutions to the world's most divided and polarized issues can be implemented when surrounded by the brightest minds, all hungry for a fairer, greener, and more just and hopeful world.

These two weeks reminded us of the power of the people. So often in a globalized world, *they* have been successful at dividing us, or more accurately, at creating the illusion of division and polarization. But what Alpbach proved otherwise is that when we come together, even standing on different sides of the aisle, empathy persists!

We share laughter, exchange jokes, and, more importantly, listen—genuinely listen—to perspectives we might otherwise never have had the chance to see the full picture of. The European Forum Alpbach doesn't just give space; it deliberately and actively creates space for nuance.

There is joy in discovering our differences and uniqueness and realizing how much common ground we still share. Our past experiences shape our perceptions and interactions, and as someone from a background, EFA became one of the safest and most welcoming spaces. That in itself is a testament to the people: the hundreds, if not thousands, I met and interacted with during the span of the Forum. In one of the many late-night conversations, someone shared their surprise at the lack of hierarchy.

Despite all the prestige, ranks, and countless successes of participants, there was an undeniable humility in the air. I could not help but agree. The absence of ego was striking—almost rare in such a setting.

I don't know the reason, perhaps it was the misty morning air, the cascading clouds over the peaks of the enchanting Alpbach mountains, or the humbling presence of nature itself, reminding us of our truest calling: to pay attention, to listen, to care, and to love.

Immersed in a Forum unlike any other, meeting inspiring people of all ages—where science meets diplomacy, politics meets art, and culture meets economics, disciplines that rarely speak to one another suddenly intertwine. That is what makes EFA unlike any other forum, summit, or symposium. As the saying goes: "*it can only be experienced, not described.*" And though EFA may now be done, it has changed me—and so many others I crossed paths with—forever.

I will always cherish my first time and the friends I have made for life.

'How Europe was recharged' by Joseph Felix Krautgasser

*Europe* was in ruins. Militarily, economically, and in many other areas. Overshadowed by the rise of foreign powers and other continents, *Europe* seemed to have lost its direction. In recent decades, it had rested on its laurels of prosperity, security and global influence. But it was becoming increasingly clear that these circumstances would not last. It was therefore obvious that *Europe* needed a fresh start.

However, *Europe* is very diverse. When traveling through *Europe*, one could see a greater diversity of peoples who had developed in different ways. Bringing these peoples together was the EU's goal and a significant achievement – especially given *Europe's* past. A continent with many different cultures, languages, and backgrounds is united by the common bond of the *European Union* – “united in

diversity” is its motto. But in the given situation, was this diversity a strength or even a weakness?

The question of the security and defense policies of individual states was particularly relevant. Since a major regional war had raged in *Europe* years ago – the first of its kind in more than 70 years – *Europe* had to reorganize itself in many areas. For the first time in decades, the military was rebuilt and funds were allocated to other priority sectors. The goal was no longer the welfare state, but security and defense.

People had to get used to the new circumstances first. For decades—at least since the end of the Cold War—they had been accustomed to living in an era of peace, freedom and prosperity. Now they realized that none of this could be taken for granted. The population's willingness to defend itself had to be rebuilt, as did the role of the army. Whereas previously there had been some talk of largely abolishing or reducing the armies, the focus now shifted to strengthening *European* armies and securing the *European* continent's defense capabilities.

This transformation was therefore not only about a material renewal of the continent, but above all about a spiritual renewal in terms of security, defense and self-sufficiency. In particular, Europe's increasing separation from the United States of America, which had given way to a growing transatlantic axis since World War II, now found its way into the future development of Europe.

*Europe's* goal was therefore to break free from dependencies and connections that had developed over decades and to start a new chapter in European history. Whereas previously it had largely relied on the support of the United States, this had now given way to a new approach. From then on, it became more important for Europe to take a broader view and place its own interests at the center of its policies.

At the end of this development, *Europe* had found its “new” place in the world of tomorrow. The initial disorientation that it had shown at the beginning had largely been overcome. It was necessary to do this in order to secure *Europe's* position globally for the future. Until then, *Europe* had faced the problem that it no longer played a truly significant role on the world stage, which could be achieved through major restructuring in many areas (army, economic policy, self-sufficiency, etc.). However, this required a tremendous effort on the part of everyone, both those in government and the *European* people. But the path, to this point, was by no means easy.

Despite everything, a *Europe* that was not *in charge* at the beginning then became a *Europe in charge*. This development once again demonstrated what makes *Europe* so special: its ability to reinvent itself again and again in times of crisis and to look proudly toward the future.

## 'Algorithmic Echoes in the Halls of Democracy' by Mina Medjedovic

The dynamics by which technology has influenced and reshaped democratic systems have been a fascinating and inspiring process for me. Over the years, I have closely followed and often actively participated in discussions that focus on this topic, especially when it comes to improving citizens' lives. Because of my background in political science and my eagerness to see the transformation of the public sector in my home country, Montenegro, I became very interested in this topic.

Unfortunately, I have noticed that the majority of discussions predominantly focus on the problems that emerged from the incorporation of technology into democratic processes. Experts have widely emphasized the concerns about digital security and preventing the improper use of new technological resources. These

concerns have also served as the argument to support the implementation of advanced regulatory frameworks.

Similarly, today's rapid development and integration of AI is sparking discussions on the concerns rather than the benefits that this technology brings. This is evident through the topics present at the international forums. Although they are an excellent platform for sharing ideas and raising issues, they often lack focus on tangible solutions. More importantly, they frequently leave no space for dissenting opinions, which made me doubt their worth and the purpose of attending.

However, thanks to the encouragement of a close friend of mine, and despite my somewhat sceptical perception, I decided to apply for the European Forum Alpbach. I intended to concentrate on networking opportunities while enjoying the stunning Alpine surroundings. To my surprise, Alpbach turned out to be a transformative experience.

### European Forum Alpbach - an exceptional experience

Before delving into the main topic that made Alpbach such an exceptional event, it is also essential to share the concept of the forum. During the first week, all scholarship holders had the opportunity to select two topics and attend seminars throughout the week. My morning sessions were dedicated to *Beyond the Hype: Re-situating AI, Power and Democracy* seminar, which I will return to later. Meanwhile, the afternoon ones focused on action art and political expression in democratic societies. Led by Radikale Töchter, the Courage Muscle Training seminar introduced me to a more radical form of activism.

The second week at Alpbach is dedicated to panel discussions, more fireside chats, and hikes. I personally enjoyed the *Europe in the World*

Days discussions. These sessions allowed me to share my perspective with peers and leaders from politics, business, and academia on an equal footing.

What is worth mentioning here, despite my positive impressions, is that this year's program could have benefited from a broader range of topics. At times, the discussion did not encourage practical solutions, while the panels lacked diverse perspectives, especially from those who hold differing views on key global issues. But overall, my stance is that more variety would help to tackle the impression that Alpbach is overly liberal or elitist. Despite these reservations, Alpbach allowed me to raise my concerns on various issues and connect with numerous individuals with whom I enjoyed engaging.

I found myself discussing European identity, debating the limited use of the European Citizens' Initiative, questioning the significance of regulatory frameworks and digital sovereignty with the CEO of Google and other corporate leaders, and sharing thoughts on political parties with Fields Medalists. This paragraph barely scratches the surface of the conversations I had with fellow Montenegrins and other incredible peers who participated in the program. Therefore, I believe Alpbach is a platform with the potential to inspire significant actions, as it has done in the past.

#### **Do we truly understand the scale to which AI shapes our societal dynamics?**

What truly marked my experience as exceptional was a seminar led by Katja Mayer, sociologist and Elise Richter, Fellow at the University of Vienna, and Stefania Milan, Professor of Critical Data Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Their perspectives influenced my selection of panels to attend during the forum. Although they are coming from different disciplines, the lecturers

grasped the subject perfectly and explained practically how profoundly AI is already transforming societies.

Their lectures sparked my curiosity and connected directly with questions I had been asking myself long before arriving at Alpbach: Do we truly understand the scale at which AI reshapes our social dynamics? Or are we over-regulating it because we do not grasp its full impact?

This seminar also pushed me to think from a different angle. Professor Mayer, for instance, introduced the concept of socio-technical imaginaries, a collectively held vision of how technology and society should evolve together. This definition was powerful because it underscored the mutual dependence of the two spheres.

It also prompted me to explore the European Union's vision for achieving societal goals through technology. AI-powered platforms are already helping deliberation, guiding dialogue, providing better oversight, and giving stronger representation to underrepresented groups.

This is done through AI tools to improve public services, such as Ukraine's Diia platform. It has evolved from issuing marriage licences to hosting identity documents and banking details. The lecturers mentioned the EU's piloted digital identity wallet as another example. These points left me with no doubt that AI is already reshaping democratic institutions.

It is creating opportunities for citizen engagement. They also confirmed my previous stance that democracies can, and must, harness AI to strengthen the legitimacy of institutions rather than weaken it.

Yet again, every panel and fireside chat I attended later on during the forum circled back to the same dilemma: control. This naturally led me to think about a question raised by Professor Milan: Who should

have the power to own and control the digital infrastructure that underpins daily life? Governments want to be in charge, and they are doing so through regulation.

The EU's strategies, for example, emphasize digital sovereignty and strategic autonomy. It has introduced the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles, along with a variety of regulatory frameworks. While these efforts aim to protect citizens by controlling who has their data and who can use it, they also hinder in-house innovation.

Currently, the majority of the technology used for this process comes from foreign companies. At the same time, local startups and larger enterprises are complaining that they cannot reach that level of innovation due to local regulatory restrictions. At a closed network event hosted by Google, I witnessed firsthand how the EU's policies are also affecting businesses. The feedback I received from companies reflects their frustration with the complexity of the rules and their implementation, which is reducing their competitiveness and impacting their models.

### **Smart and contextual regulations**

This discussion inspired me to think more about potential solutions that will provide a balance between regulation and innovation. The answer is therefore not in stricter rules, but in “smarter” ones. Smart and contextual regulations are often tailored to safeguard privacy, preserve equality, and social rights without damaging innovation potential.

Companies and their developers should be required to explain how their systems work, document processes, and take responsibility for outcomes. Strong data standards and regular bias checks could also

address a portion of concerns, while states, and not private actors, should control data ownership.

Most importantly, as the seminar highlighted, solutions must come through coordination: governments, academics, civil society, and industry working together to establish realistic and globally relevant standards.

This is why I remain a firm believer in the transformative power of technology, especially AI. As Professor Milan reminded us, democracy is not merely a set of rules and institutions; it lives in the values, beliefs, and everyday choices of citizens and leaders.

That perspective resonated deeply with me in Alpbach, where I came to realize that our real challenge as a society is no longer whether we can find a way for technology and democracy to coexist, but how we shape that coexistence. If we succeed, and I believe we will, then we are laying the foundation for fostering innovation and building a more just, resilient and forward-looking Europe.

## 'More full-time Europeans' by Oleksandra Kobernik

This summer I found myself among new faces in an Austrian forest with mud on my sneakers and a compass in hand. The rain was relentless, the terrain unfamiliar, and the comfort zone far away. Every choice had to be made together, and fast. There were no clear answers — just trust, resilience, and teamwork.

We were in the middle of the *Centre of Gravity* exercise. This leadership challenge is designed to test decision-making under complexity, not in theory but on the ground.

And at that moment, I thought: This is it.

This is what leadership feels like.

It's not about confidence; it's about *clarity under pressure*. It's not about having the loudest voice; it's about making space for others to act.

That experience has stayed with me. It underlined the importance of bringing people along and ensuring maximum support for achieving the common strategy.

Whenever we speak about Europe's future — *our security, values, strategic autonomy* — we often talk about institutions, documents and timelines. But first and foremost, it is about people who will implement our vision and who will act when it matters most.

Leadership is not an accessory to Europe's ambitions. It is a strategic infrastructure. We need leaders in parliaments, city halls, civil society, classrooms and uniforms.

Leaders who *act with purpose under pressure*.

Leaders who *build trust across silos*.

Leaders who say: "I don't know the answer — but *I will help us find it*."

Leaders who show up, ask hard questions, and commit to actions, even when uncomfortable.

A few days later, I was in a different setting — delivering a speech on a mountain hike about Europe's strategy in the new economic order. The Alpine air lightened the weight of geopolitics while preserving the urgency of my words:

*"We are closer to 2070 than 1970, and our choices today will shape decades to come."*

The hike reminded me that in geopolitics, as in chess, there is not always a single best move. Sometimes, the unconventional path — the one no one expects — yields the greatest return.

Europe must be both a grandmaster and a street chess player, knowledgeable and disciplined in our institutions, treaties and

common rules, yet agile, instinctive and bold in seizing opportunities.

For me that is what it means to be a *full-time European*. It is moving not just when the path is clear and the sun is shining but also when the mud is thick, the compass wavers, and choices are uncertain.

It is stepping forward when it's uncomfortable, lifting others when they hesitate, and holding space for voices that might otherwise be overlooked.

Europe's future isn't written only in treaties or strategies. It is being shaped by people who are willing to carry our vision forward, no matter the weather, which we will weather together.

'Europe's Zeitgeist: Navigating in the world of disorder'  
by Patryk Litwiński

### **Introduction**

For years, Europe lived the dream of an era of perpetual peace, shaped by cooperation and respect for international law. Within that order, its normative power and economic potential placed it at the pinnacle of the global system.

Today, however, in an era of disorder—in which rules and institutions have lost their former force—Europe finds itself on the frontline of the largest armed conflict since the Second World War. It is losing ground amid intensifying geopolitical rivalry, relationships defined by transactionalism rather than shared values, and a crisis of integration marked by weakening internal cohesion.

It is high time for Europe to wake up—lest it sink into fragmentation and lose its agency on the international stage. What is needed is not merely to recharge Europe, but above all to put it in charge—to make it capable not only of confronting the crisis of the liberal order and accepting its challenges while building, upon them, instruments of its own agency. The condition for this is the consolidation of strength in three dimensions: security; cohesion—both internal and external in relations with partners; and an economy capable of sustaining strategic autonomy.

### **Europe on the Frontline**

Europe still finds itself in uncharted waters. For three years, war has been raging on its border and has unequivocally exposed the woeful state of many European armies and their defense industries. Meanwhile, the pre-eminent ally of the peace era—the United States—no longer intends to single-handedly underwrite the security of the Old Continent. Free-riding is no more. The current Trump administration makes that abundantly clear. This is a challenge for NATO as a whole, the bedrock of Europe’s security.

Europe’s dependence on the United States is, of course, multidimensional and decades in the making. After the end of the Cold War, European states cut defense spending, believing an era of peace had arrived. Funds were redirected to social spending, while the United States maintained high defense outlays, because Europe was not the only theatre of American military engagement. All the more, the current pattern of U.S. engagement in Europe should not be surprising; yet too much attention is paid to attributing its downward trend solely to Donald Trump’s transactional politics, his Republican affiliation, and the America First agenda.

While these factors cannot be ignored, America First need not—and does not—mean Europe Second. It’s been known this at least since

the Obama administration’s November 2011 announcement of the Pacific Pivot. Since then, Russia has annexed Crimea—and only after that did NATO adopt the commitment to raise defense spending to 2% of GDP. Even during his first term, Donald Trump signaled that the United States might not come to the aid of a NATO country that fails to meet the 2% defense-spending commitment.

It is worth adding that under Joe Biden’s presidency—whose commitment to NATO and Ukraine’s defense is beyond question—the Pentagon’s 2023 budget for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative—i.e., after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine—envisioned a larger sum than for the European Deterrence Initiative: USD 6.1 billion versus USD 4.2 billion. Thus the conclusion is clear: the long-signaled decline in U.S. engagement—by a NATO ally regarded as Europe’s security guarantor—did not prove as mobilizing for Europeans as the actual attack from their greatest threat, Russia, whose likelihood had previously been underestimated.

Europe has overslept again. The past few years reveal a pattern of reactive behavior. What is needed now, however, are preparatory, anticipatory, and deterrent actions—especially in light of warnings, including from NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, that within five years Russia may pose a real threat to NATO and be ready to use military force against the Alliance. Europe must be able to defend its own security independently—this is the greatest effort it must now undertake.

The critical pressure point in Europe’s dependence on the United States lies in the so-called strategic enablers. These include categories such as ISTAR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance), air-to-air refueling and strategic airlift, long-range precision fires and deep-strike capabilities, integrated air and missile defense, logistics support, as well as communications and command-and-control systems. Taken together, they form the backbone of any NATO operation.

A telling example of dependence on the Americans was NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya—at the time, the United States accounted for 80% of air-to-air refueling and ISR missions, even though it flew only about 25% of all sorties. Without America, Europe possesses primarily combat mass that cannot operate effectively. The result is a constrained capacity and credibility to deter—something Europe, as noted, can no longer afford.

The challenge in becoming less dependent is not limited to financing or institutional frameworks. The European Union is now building that enabling foundation, as evidenced by a proliferation of new mechanisms and funds designed to make Europe more self-reliant in key military capabilities. These include, among others, the Readiness 2030 defense-readiness plan, the European Defence Industrial Strategy, ReArm Europe, and the SAFE instrument.

The problem, however, is that in the short term it has been chiefly the U.S. defense industry that has benefited from Europe's increased defense spending, whereas Europe should be investing first and foremost in its own industry, which is meant to serve as the foundation of NATO's European pillar.

Europe's profusion of funds, in turn, can lead to inefficient use of resources. Europe's defense spending should be complementary and prioritize interoperability so that the bloc functions as a genuine security community. Member states' investment plans ought to be coordinated in ways that encourage specialization.

This philosophy aligns with the Coalition of the Willing concept for dividing responsibilities in maintaining peace in Ukraine once the conflict subsides—where, for example, Poland rules out having its forces “on the ground” due to the need to ensure the security of the eastern flank, but declares logistical support.

At the same time, states farther from the eastern flank, such as France and the United Kingdom, are ready to assume a leading role, declaring the participation of their troops on the ground in Ukraine. These operational declarations should be reflected already at the investment stage across the Union, enabling states to build their own areas of expertise and to fill gaps evenly in the field of Strategic Enablers.

What is lacking, however, are ready-made cooperation projects, which is why, in its first year, the SAFE loan program enabling joint EU defense procurement has effectively amounted to loans for traditional national orders. This, in turn, poses a challenge for member states: to execute such large defense budgets within the adopted timeframe, the natural solution becomes placing larger orders for commonly used equipment with the same, familiar suppliers. Yet the war in Ukraine highlights the need to adopt new priorities—above all, procurement of software, autonomous systems and weapons, and the building of cyber resilience.

The conflict has already taken on an electronic dimension, and Europe still lags behind in the face of competition from AI powerhouses in the United States and China. The EU is also not prepared for the realities of war, as its decision-making process and budget cycles were not designed for wartime tempo and dynamics. What is more, EU public finances are already clearly strained, which may generate social resistance in the absence of tangible results from these investments.

Russia's violations of the airspace of Poland, Romania, and Estonia in September 2025, together with the Russian propaganda machine, not only inflame these emotions but also shape a sense of fragility in the European security system into which Europe is investing so heavily.

Europe must build its credibility as a guarantor of security. To achieve it, it must be ready, above all, to defend itself independently against threats—without America’s involvement. Paradoxically, it is precisely this independence that now underpins the transatlantic partnership, presenting Europe not as a beneficiary of U.S. protection but as a partner shaping trends in a new international order marked by uncertainty and volatility. A secure Europe is, therefore, a flexible Europe—one capable of positioning itself not only in relation to the United States but, above all, in relation to the world.

### **Beyond the Transatlantic Strain**

The current state of U.S.–Europe relations—both at the EU level and within NATO—is, according to many critics, at its worst point in history. While this is undeniably a challenge, it is above all an opportunity for Europe not only to become more self-reliant but also to diversify its global partnerships in ways that balance past dependencies.

A natural direction would seem to be forging alliances with countries that face the same kinds of challenges in their relations with the United States as Europe does. Another dimension is making Europe more resilient to the internal political cycles of partner countries, which can dramatically affect the strength of bilateral ties—of which the United States under the current Trump administration is the clearest example. In light of this crisis in relations, Europe’s global partnerships can affirm its strategic autonomy—yet another, seemingly paradoxical, dynamic that defines the new era.

Europe’s external strength flows above all from its internal unity. A case in point was the recent visit by European leaders to the White House, just before the Trump–Putin summit in Alaska. Europe thereby demonstrated its capacity for unity and coherence in

pursuing its core interests. A comprehensive approach is its strength. The path forward is to connect still-developing capabilities—such as defense—with economic and normative power in tackling global challenges that include not only war, but also development aid, climate change, and the competitiveness and security of global supply chains.

EU initiatives serving this purpose, such as Global Gateway, give Europe a platform to amplify its influence beyond its geographic confines. The EU’s commercial heft is not its only advantage; just as—if not more—important is its regulatory power, because regulations shape markets. The Brussels Effect is a tool not only for tightening bonds among like-minded countries, but also for influencing geopolitical competitors—for example, China. In 2021, NATO leaders at the Brussels summit concluded that the challenge posed by China is systemic in nature.

At the time, China’s mission to the EU accused NATO of “slanderizing China’s peaceful development”, and insisted that China was committed to “a defense policy that is defensive in nature”. The mission also declared: “China will not present ‘systematic challenges’ to anyone, but we will not sit by and do nothing if ‘systematic challenges’ come closer to us”. Then–NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg emphasized that the Alliance did not seek a Cold War with China, yet relations have not warmed in the years since.

On the contrary—although Europe and China cooperate in areas such as trade, transport, and climate, human rights and security—especially in the context of the war in Ukraine—remain the chief domains of antagonism between the bloc and China. Beijing remains a close partner of Moscow, engaging in the war in Ukraine on the aggressor’s side—while officially declaring neutrality, in practice providing the economic cushion that enables Putin to wage war.

It is therefore no surprise that Donald Trump has recently urged European leaders to sanction countries that buy Russian oil—including China. This presents yet another chance to keep the American president’s focus closer to Europe, but for that to happen, Europe must continue to speak with one voice, while a single member state’s veto can destabilize the global order.

Another challenge is the “one-China” policy. Although the EU as a bloc does not recognize Taiwan, it maintains cooperation with Taipei, viewing it as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific—another area where Europe and the United States (on both sides of the aisle in Congress) share common ground. Above all, however, the security dimension is paramount in relations with Taiwan—in light of a potential Chinese invasion.

Such an escalation would not only wreck relations with Europe but would also pull U.S. engagement away from the continent, thereby giving Russia space to threaten NATO. While Russia needs China more than China needs Russia, a Ukrainian defeat would almost certainly embolden Beijing to move against Taipei, which is supported by both the EU and the United States. Moreover, Beijing is drawing lessons from Russia’s operations.

Europe’s security is therefore tightly bound up with the security of the Indo-Pacific—especially since Russia backs China’s position on Taiwan: not only opposing Taiwanese independence, but also signaling support for Chinese actions aimed at safeguarding China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Brussels must view Taipei through a security lens—including the security of its own investments, of which the EU is among the largest sources locally.

Russia also poses a threat to European integration through its attempts to undermine the enlargement process. Enlargement today is no longer merely a political undertaking, but above all a geostrategic imperative. Moscow views the EU’s expansion as a

strategic challenge. Local enlargement of the Union touches on two domains where Europe aspires to global influence—security and the protection of democracy. The war in Ukraine has shown that Europe cannot afford “buffer zones,” such as the one Belarus has become.

Anchoring candidate states within Western structures not only secures them individually but also makes the entire Union more resilient. Collective guarantees of countering hybrid threats could provide a key foundation for continuing the process in countries where support for accession is already declining—also as a result of Russian propaganda campaigns. Putin interferes in this process by obstructing the region’s Europeanization, which poses a direct threat to his authoritarian regime and, through the reforms required for accession, limits Russia’s sphere of influence. Moreover, accession brings new states into the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy not only as beneficiaries but also as active co-shapers.

Having faced Russian interference and hybrid operations for years, these states represent a valuable source of experience indispensable for shaping the EU’s resilience strategy. The accession process should therefore encompass not only the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* by candidate states but also their swift integration into defense coordination, ensuring the bloc’s coherence.

The growing importance of security for all of Europe strengthens the case for enlargement. This is yet another paradox of today’s disorder: Russia’s aggression, which undermines the European community of values, has in fact accelerated its integration. A telling example was the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022—just three months after their applications, at an exceptionally rapid pace compared with other candidates.

This momentum must not be lost, especially as Russia is currently carrying out more intense attacks on Ukraine than at the beginning of the war, and given that Europe now provides more support to

Ukraine than the United States. This gives the Trump administration arguments that Europe is indeed assuming responsibility for its own security and remains a credible partner.

The EU must therefore act both internally (on vetoes and support for enlargement) and externally (by convincing the societies of candidate countries that integration is worthwhile). Russia's perception of EU enlargement as a strategic challenge is reflected not only in its actions but also in the very rationale for continuing the process. Strengthening democratic institutions, the rule of law, and civil society closer to Russia's borders curtails the trajectory of actions driven by its neo-imperial spirit. For enlargement to be effective, however, two factors are paramount: internal cohesion, which guarantees a credible external image, and effective external communication.

The veto right constrains the EU in formulating a coherent strategy, without which it cannot be regarded as a geopolitical power. Particularly in the realm of security—which, as noted, further European integration strengthens—the veto does not, as intended, protect the national interests of member states that wield it, but instead serves Russia's neo-imperial aspirations.

It undermines the EU's credibility, fuels divisions between liberals and nationalists within member states, and gives Russia space to antagonize Europeans by weakening the Union from within. The EU should abandon unanimity requirements at every stage of the accession process. This practice has no firm legal basis in the European treaties, yet it enables the accession of a candidate state to be reduced to the opportunism of, at times, a single member state pursuing its own interests (as in Bulgaria's veto during North Macedonia's accession procedures).

Moreover, the introduction of conditional mechanisms dictated by the veto adds complexity to the process, increasing

bureaucratization—contradicting the direction set by the European Commission to simplify regulation. As a result, the decision-making mechanisms fail to address new directions and strategic objectives of the EU policies in a changing world.

Perceptions of the Union are also shifting in candidate countries. Public support for accession is declining—for example, in Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania. The EU must regain its attractiveness. The long-deferred promise of economic prosperity as a member of the Union is turning into an illusion, dampening enthusiasm among candidate societies. Instead of hope, the Union risks becoming a disappointment—fuel for Putin's propaganda machine.

The EU cannot allow itself to become its own hostage. The current approach to integration is not suited to today's challenges. If the Union is meant to be a security community, then within those same parameters the integration of new members must be ensured. Demonstrating that security is taken seriously can help rebuild the trust of citizens in candidate countries, whose years of waiting for accession have cooled their enthusiasm.

### **The Economics of Power**

Without question, the greatest asset of the European Union—and the foundation of its international standing—is its economic strength. Not only is it the world's largest economy by GDP per capita, it is also the largest trading bloc globally and a leader in foreign direct investment flows.

Despite the ongoing war and the massive defense expenditures it has triggered, the EU as a bloc continues to sustain economic growth—its economy is not on the defensive. This is also reflected in its trade surplus: although the balance has declined in recent quarters, the EU's trade in goods remains in positive territory, with surpluses of

around €26 billion. A positive trade balance confirms the Union’s global role, extends its reach, and provides the foundation for its relationships.

The main destination for EU exports as of last year remained the United States, accounting for over one-fifth of all EU goods exports. In terms of imports, however, the U.S. ranked second—just behind China.

The Trump administration’s push for a new trade deal with the EU is therefore not explained solely by his transactional mindset—it is, from Washington’s perspective, above all a geostrategic move, fully aligned with the America First agenda. For Donald Trump, securing a new deal is a win-win: it plays well domestically while strengthening the U.S. position internationally, where China is the principal benchmark.

There should be no illusion otherwise, nor distraction in arguments over whether the situation might have been avoided. The real question is what Europe can learn from it, how its negative consequences can be mitigated, and whether any benefit can be extracted from the agreement.

As usual, Donald Trump hailed the new U.S.–EU Trade Deal as a major personal triumph. Ursula von der Leyen, by contrast, had little reason for enthusiasm. Once again, Europe found itself under pressure from its—let’s recall—largest ally. While the EU managed to avoid the threatened 30% tariffs, it nevertheless lost out by being hit with 15% tariffs on its exports to the United States—still its biggest market. What is more, the EU agreed to purchase \$750 billion worth of American energy.

While this deepens its dependence on the U.S., it simultaneously reduces reliance on Russia. It should also be remembered that this is at present only a political agreement, which raises the risk of sudden

policy shifts by the Trump administration and complicates investment planning—particularly given the EU’s pledge of \$600 billion in U.S. investments. In truth, it is difficult to speak of a real “deal.” The EU remains a hostage to American will. For now, the crisis is merely suspended, not resolved but Europe cannot afford to be dependent on the internal political cycles of third countries.

A rift in U.S.–EU policy is also evident in the sanctions imposed on Russia. The current U.S. administration has not expanded the existing range of sanctions against Russia, while at the same time suspending financial support for Ukraine.

By contrast, since the beginning of 2025, the EU has not only increased its own defense spending and direct support for Ukraine but has also adopted three new sanctions packages against Russia.

The recently presented draft of the 19th package—the fourth in 2025 alone—would, among other measures, introduce a ban on importing Russian gas and target additional Russian oil companies. This is particularly significant now, as it overlaps with Donald Trump’s latest demands that NATO states cease trading oil with Russia and impose sanctions on countries sustaining that trade, notably China and India. Taken together with the EU and the UK sanctions imposed since February 2022, which have deprived the Russian economy of nearly \$450 billion and contributed to a GDP contraction of approximately 10–12% compared to pre-war levels, this underscores the cumulative economic pressure now being exerted on Moscow.

Russian aggression is bogged down not only on the battlefield but also economically. Faced with European solidarity, Russia has turned to Asian markets as an alternative—making Trump’s proposal to impose tariffs on countries trading Russian oil strategically justified. The EU, however, must diversify its dependence on the U.S., which limits its ability to align fully with Trump’s trade-policy agenda.

Europe cannot afford to trade one dependency for another—from Russia to the United States.

Instead, it should turn to other tools—most notably, the confiscation of Russian assets to benefit Ukraine. This step appears to be a strategic imperative, allowing the EU to gain on several fronts: easing pressure on its own budget in the face of massive defense spending, thereby relieving European taxpayers; strengthening public support and trust in the Union, which today needs unity more than ever; and sending a powerful external signal that the EU is determined to leverage its economic strength in support of its normative global role.

Confiscating Russian assets would therefore serve as a deterrent, directly contributing to the Union’s resilience. Crucially, confiscation need not—and indeed should not—occur in full immediately; it should be proportional to Russia’s continued actions in Ukraine, matching Russian military aggression with Ukraine’s defense and financial needs. In this way, Putin would be forced to finance his own battlefield losses even more starkly.

Yet such a decision would require consensus within the EU—and opposition comes not only from certain member states but also from the European Central Bank. Critics argue that such a move would undermine the international order—violating principles such as state and central bank immunity—and would send a message to countries holding assets in Europe that their funds are not safe, thereby weakening the euro’s credibility as a reserve currency.

For now, Europe allows the assets to sit idle, treating them as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Russia rather than as a direct strategic instrument. Meanwhile, the war grinds on.

An important step that would allow Europe to leverage its economic potential not only for security but also for resilience would also be

the completion of the Capital Markets Union. This would directly strengthen the EU’s economic position by boosting innovation and competitiveness—key assets in the current technological race. Leading sectors today, such as AI development and chip production, demand large-scale investments that member states cannot fully cover from their national budgets.

Europe’s bank-centered system, based on credit rather than investment, deepens dependence on the United States. Startups in search of funding are leaving Europe for transatlantic markets, where deeper venture capital and private equity pools facilitate the rollout of new innovations.

In 2024 alone, 70% of capital raised by private credit funds came from the U.S. and Canada, compared to just 20% from Europe. The new trade deal with the United States illustrates the risk: Europe cannot predict when the American administration will demand fresh injections of European investment into U.S. markets—or what threats will accompany such demands.

Moreover, wartime conditions and crises reveal that geopolitical imperatives may require the sudden mobilization of capital—capital that can be activated much faster through stock markets than through dispersed public funds. Another problem lies in Europe’s savings patterns: households mainly accumulate wealth in deposits or real estate, which do little to fuel the economy. Europeans do not invest, and as a result they lose out—especially amid market volatility driven by inflation.

In times of major shocks, the value of savings can erode faster than deposit interest accrues. Europe should therefore regard the CMU as a strategic imperative, even as a form of hard power, without which it risks irrelevance in the U.S.–China race.

## Closing Remarks

Europe today struggles under the weight of responsibility for its own future. To preserve credibility as a global actor, deep and long-term changes in the design of the European community and in its strategic planning are essential. At stake is not only consistent support for Ukraine against Russian aggression but also the real protection of NATO's allied borders in the face of the increasingly voiced risk of escalation.

Europe must be able to defend itself and its neighborhood independently—without the United States, which until now has been the backbone of the Alliance's capabilities. The European Union has both a moral and geopolitical obligation to complete the process of integration, for in this era of disorder there is no room for “buffer zones” separating the European community of values from Russian authoritarianism. Moscow's neo-imperialism reminds the Union daily at its borders that Russia does not hesitate to advance, even against economic logic.

Europe must therefore safeguard its unity and internal cohesion: adapting decision-making procedures, budgetary cycles, and integration processes to the realities of wartime. Equally important is pursuing a coherent foreign and security policy. The rivalry between the United States and China, as well as the threat of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, could both divert U.S. engagement away from Europe and simultaneously encourage Russia to escalate further aggression. Only a Europe capable of its own agency will build resilience against such a scenario.

The current *zeitgeist* is marked by disorder, uncertainty, and unpredictability. For Europe, this is a condition that has exposed an unprecedented scale of threats but at the same time has opened a chance to attain the position it has long aspired to—not as an object but as a leader of the global game.

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'Here, there, everywhere' by Priscilla Tomaz

I look for the lives of refugees, those displaced, the Aylan Kurdis. They're everywhere, in seminars about climate change, I find the lives of those displaced by the climate crisis. In seminars about security, I find those displaced by war. Refugees are everywhere.

At all times, refugeehood is an impending doom that not many appreciate because, after all, it only happens across the border and hopefully across the sea. They are a byproduct of something much larger – human cruelty or a natural tantrum. Sometimes both.

Either way, something is being done to them, and those things deserve study, science, solutions. Refugees aren't born out of war, or flooding, or whatever else destroyed their homes, their livelihoods, or their ability to live without fear. Refugees are the children of borders.

At FA, it's easy to forget borders exist. In a day, I've probably spoken to people from 40 nationalities. Some of us may face visa troubles, but we're all here, we've all surpassed the state's urge to segregate us, we're the privileged few the state considered worthy of movement. We're gifted a box with EFA-themed cakes for it, one chocolate and one vanilla.

It becomes difficult to think of the lives of those who don't have this privilege. And when we do think about them, it's always through an egotistical lens: "security should come first" or "we'll help them so that we can achieve X, Y, Z". How many more times will I have to listen about security without empathy and selflessness?

I want to hear about life in a refugee camp, life waiting in a queue for hours under the scorching sun to register for humanitarian aid, life of losing your home and then losing your privacy to a machine you didn't consent to using. Life where movement is never-ending, return is dreadful, and life is uncertain. These deserve study, science, and solutions too.

At the seminar 'Building a Global Museum of Migration', chaired by MUSMIG, we tried to do exactly that. In our collective exhibition titled 'Welcome Migration', we reflected the experiences of refugees in a game of hopscotch.

In this game, while the movement of immigrants and expats are portrayed through straight symmetrical lines on the floor, refugees are portrayed as water bottles scattered throughout the boxes and on top of those lines, testing the state's borders and control.

I thought of water bottles because of a documentary I watched a while back, in which refugees in Morocco filmed themselves at a refugee camp waiting for their opportunity to cross into Spain. A very powerful image towards the end of the documentary showed the refugee camp after most of them had left: the camp had changed

from a busy, lively place to an abandoned ravine littered with water bottles.

This essential resource was something that they treasured while in the camp, and then became something that had to be abandoned as they sought their future elsewhere. They became symbolic of the refugee experience of waiting. More widely, water is at the core of the refugee experience: refugees, mostly women, travel for an average of 54 minutes to collect water on a daily basis, and water scarcity is also increasingly a reason for displacement and refugeehood.

By portraying refugees in this game of hopscotch, of immigrant and expat, of bordering and contestation, we challenged the invisibility of refugees in contemporary politics. Refugees are here, there, everywhere. And refugeehood is just over all our shoulders.

## 'Where Regions Meet: A Shot Towards Europe's Future' by Stanislav Taran

The first sound I heard that August morning in Tyrol was a gunshot.

Men in traditional uniforms raised their rifles, and the shot echoed across the valley. For a moment, the sharpness of the sound carried a certain unease — after all, gunfire in Europe today has a deeper meaning far beyond ceremony.

Yet here it was greeted not with alarm, but with applause. It was the ceremonial opening of the Euregio Days at the European Forum Alpbach, a ritual that reminded us how traditions can be reinterpreted and how military symbols can be reframed into gestures of remembrance and unity.

That interplay between past and present ran through the whole event. Europe's post-war generations built their project on the

promise of “never again”, yet today our continent faces new pressures that test our cohesion — from security threats to shifting global balances.

The Euregio Days offered a powerful setting to reflect on how cooperation across borders remains the best answer to uncertainty. In times of challenge, we need spaces that bring people together, not only to discuss and shape policies but to reaffirm trust.

I had travelled from Brussels to Alpbach not for leisure but for a purpose. For me, this was a chance to deepen my understanding of regional cooperation in a place with a long and complicated history.

As part of my commitment to international cooperation, I help foster and strengthen partnerships among local governments across Europe. Through flagship initiatives like Bridges of Trust, which I implement, municipalities are brought together to create frameworks of solidarity that make communities more resilient.

Over the summer, I supported the work on the European Partnership Hub and the development of a digital platform aimed at facilitating international partnerships across Europe and beyond.

Attending the Euregio Days was therefore not just professional, but personal: an opportunity to see how cooperation takes root in regions that once stood divided. On my way to the opening session, I passed Alpbach's wooden chalets and flower-filled balconies. The calmness of the Alpine landscape contrasted with the energy of the Forum, which has become a crossroads of ideas for over 80 years.

I spoke with an elderly local who proudly told me that Alpbach was once recognised as “Austria's most beautiful village,” not only for its scenery but also for its tradition of hosting thinkers from across Europe. This was a reminder that beauty here lies not only in the natural surroundings but also in the culture of exchange.

The opening session itself carried this spirit forward. While the rifles had been symbolic, the discussion turned quickly to Europe's challenges of today — including the need to strengthen our capacity to act, defend, and cooperate effectively on a global stage.

The subject of rearmament, once unthinkable at such a forum, reflected the pressing need to be capable of defending democracy. Taking part in these debates, I felt the weight of contrast: Alpbach is a place of dialogue, yet dialogue today must acknowledge that security and cooperation are inseparable.

Jean-Claude Juncker, one of the keynote speakers, captured this balance in a sentence that stayed with me:

*"I believe in about 30 years, if we do not make great mistakes, we will have a Europe of regions rather than a Europe of nations."*

His words invited reflection. What would a Europe of regions mean in practice? Could the experiences of Tyrol, South Tyrol, and Trentino — territories that once faced division but now form a cross-border Euregio — provide a model for the rest of Europe? And what role could municipal and regional partnerships play in shaping such a future?

The Euregio Days have their roots in the creation of the Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino Euregio in 2011, an innovative cross-border structure that turned a complex history into a foundation for cooperation. Within the Forum, they showcase how regional integration can move from treaties into daily practice.

The format enables mayors, regional leaders, business representatives, and young scholars to sit together in sessions that are both professional and informal. Barrier-free, it felt less like a conference and more like a workshop on Europe's future.

The journey from Belgium to Austria was long but worth every moment. For me, it reinforced the belief that any place where people are willing to meet, listen, and cooperate becomes — at least for a time — a capital of Europe. That is the essence of our motto: United in diversity. The Euregio Days showed that cooperation is a lived experience, rooted in dialogue and mutual respect.

As I left Alpbach, the echoes of the opening shots returned to my mind. I hoped that such sounds would remain part of the ceremony alone, tokens of history rather than signals of crisis. And I recalled another Juncker's words at the start:

*"Europe is the achievement of former generations — the generation that came back from the concentration camps. We need to reconcile the programme of that generation and pass it on to the young. Many still believe in Europe. Only if we are convinced of Europe ourselves can we convince others of it."*

I am 100% convinced, are you?

### 'Reflections on The New in the Making – A Philosophy of Change' by Sunčica Rosić

I am a graduate student who aims to span Data Science, Policy and Economics in order to solve the interconnected nature that hard sciences and humanities respectively fail to address alone.

Working with statistics and numbers made me realise that data is not only about statistical significance levels and machine learning predictions. It is about patterns that unfold and human stories that we tell. I believe that data science is powerful to the extent that it can communicate the message to wider audiences and create a bridge between different communities.

This notion of using the tools and knowledge we have to communicate to different clusters made me willing and curious to step out of the familiarity and precision of the tech ecosystem and

immerse myself in those circles where I thought my work could contribute to change.

I materialised this need for constructive unfamiliarity, once again by exposing myself to change and choosing a seminar that offered me a step out of my existing background: The New in the Making – A Philosophy of Change.

I have lived EFA already as a scholarship holder, a board member of Club Alpbach Belgrade, and, finally, a board member of IG Wien. While these experiences were related and interconnected, they were nevertheless distinct, thus allowing me to see EFA from three different perspectives.

As a woman from the Balkans who has spent the last six years abroad, I have been able to observe how these communities I have once been part of have been represented at EFA. For example, being an active board member of IG Wien, I have realised the efforts of making EFA more inviting towards the neighbourhood and less eurocentric.

Still, as I possess a background which is different from that of most of my Viennese colleagues, I was also able to see and feel how people from various countries might have experienced EFA differently.

This contrast—between experiencing EFA as part of the Austrian youth community and imagining how I might have seen it had I stayed within the familiarity of home—has also shaped my understanding of the inner and outer representations of theatre and politics.

Sitting in the wooden chair of the Bögler Schafalm hut, hidden behind the conifers, I think of the words the actor Robert Prosser repeatedly utters. *Inner (inner), außer (outer), inner, außer...* I stumble over the meaning of these words, and how they fit into the frame of *Kschwant*, a local play where language, punk and prominent

protagonists such as Vivienne Westwood and Erwin Schrödinger intertwine.

For a moment, I'm lost between the literal meaning of the words and the message they convey. Later, I got an explanation that in the Tyrolean setting, 'Inner' refers to the area closer to the heart of the valley, whilst 'Außer' denotes regions beyond the main settlement.

A gentleman married to a Bosnian woman also offers me a parallel in my mother tongue, 'gornji' (upper) and 'donji' (lower), geographical descriptors commonly attached to city names.

The deep, robust voice of the actor brings me back to the present. Searching for an explanation, I let the interpretation rest within my own perception, stretched between the inner and outer versions of self and truth.

I recall Sara Kuburić's definition of self as the accumulation of choices, responsibility and freedom. Yet this idea of self seems incomplete without truth — sometimes impartial and objective, at other times rusty, messy, and caught between *I* and *We*.

After three years within the Forum Alpbach Network (FAN), I still wrestle with distinguishing my own inner version of truth from the truth represented by the Forum and widely accepted as *outer*.

This dualism emerges when we fail to take agency and to question the truth presented from outside. Whenever our voices go unheard, and conventional truth seems open to some opinions yet selective toward others, it not only mirrors social power inequalities but also demands an inner dialogue.

This dialogue calls us to free ourselves from insecurities, to find the courage to speak also for those whose voices remain unheard. Truth, after all, does not imply a binary division of right and wrong.

Rather, it asks for a more reconciling relationship between individual and collective realities, an integration of diverging versions of self and truth. In this search, we continue to strive for resilience, freedom and purpose, even if the completeness of 'self' always remains just beyond reach.

This tendency for completeness may distance us from the other people in our social space, as a self-exploration journey implies grasping who we are aside from our profession, Club or IG, political affiliation, and everything that might give us a feeling of belonging to the community.

Similarly, leaders who prioritise national sovereignty might make decisions that reduce cross-border dependence.

I try to step out of my self-centred approach, and realise how inner and outer versions of valley and self might map to a broader European landscape — the one that is contradictory, eclectic, yet alive. Would Europe, the EU, be as real as it is without its neighbourhood, the 'outer' countries?

Raised in a country that had been the frontier of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires — Serbia, I carry a cross-generational memory of the chaos and monotony of war, where the future always leaned forward but the past never quite let go.

This experience has shaped how I see Europe: a land of contradictions, weaving survival and displacement into a present still haunted by history. When I arrived in the EU, I hoped that engaging with people whose countries had faced similar struggles would help me lay out the full landscape and gain a better comprehension of peace.

Yet I often felt that conflict resolution was approached in a way that overlooked the tremendous human cost and the need to include diverse perspectives. Without such recognition, the emphasis on

European values and social cohesion risks creating a sense of exclusion among those still trying to get back on their feet.

What also makes Europe so uniquely truthful in its relationship with ‘self’ might be the fact that it stands in stark contrast with some of its neighbours that are still trying to reconcile conflicts from the past and pave a resilient way towards the future.

It is this sense of discontinuity in peace in the neighbourhood as a point of reference that has contributed to Europe being a symbol of harmonising nation states, peace and familiarity, thus making it a leading example to fractured realities of countries in the neighbourhood.

While the turbulent past might have contributed to the production of common knowledge and appreciation for what we have, it has equally put us in a position of a “passive observer” towards countries that are still struggling to navigate peace-building efforts in a complex geopolitical landscape.

We are in a better position to recognise goodness and appreciate peace around us after encountering chaos. Does this notion of chaos imply that recurrent conflict somewhere in the neighbourhood makes us more likely to appreciate the peace we have in Europe, or as Europe?

The idea of this makes the notion of 80 years of peace in Europe seem fragile, if this harmony has resulted from the conditional acceptance of member states who have already worked hard to establish internal peace on their pathway to membership.

It would be naive to think that Europe does not have its own internal enemies. Europe, too, faces this; it continues to evaluate embracing disruption—climate neutrality, migration, innovation, and youth voices—without hindering stability. These new ideas are not the first ones to be exposed to judgment. Novelty for the sake of creative

disruption has always been a precondition for challenging the status quo.

Consider, for example, Mihajlo Pupin, professor at Columbia University and a winner of the Pulitzer Prize, whose patent in loading coils was initially met with scepticism, yet ultimately transformed communication technology and infrastructure. This is one of many examples where novelty was questioned and understated before it came across recognition of the broader public.

Innovation has therefore rarely emerged without prior criticism, and this slippery slope within science and academia seems an almost inevitable stage between the moment scientific discovery is conceived and gains acceptance. This thought of new ideas not being appreciated enough until they are confirmed by a broader scientific body leads me to the topic of my seminar: The New in the Making – A Philosophy of Change.

Together with professors Josef Mitterer and Katharina Neges, we not only discussed what science is, but what constitutes a scientific truth and how it outlines a broader idea of the scientific landscape. These seminar sessions, nestled in the Forum’s Congress Center surrounded by layers of morning fog, reminded me that scientific discovery rarely comes without resistance.

Novel ideas are only accepted if they contribute to the expansion of existing scientific disciplines, justify the existence of the discipline itself, and hence do not require the joint efforts to co-create a new one.

Doesn’t this categorisation of knowledge and a tendency to frame it systematically take away from the novel nature of scientific discovery? When I think of knowledge as such, it has rarely been a concept that one can squeeze and fit into the borders of the *finite*.

Systematisation of knowledge has been established to align with institutional structures that attempt to mould its scientific understanding into patterns that can be presented as primarily methodological.

This is where the voice of Paul Feyerabend becomes pivotal: through his idea of “*anything goes*,” he mirrored the notion that science should not always follow a pre-described methodology. Many thinkers question the idea of truth, and it may be this post-World War quest for unpoliticized truth that made them find shelter in the foothills of the Alps.

EFA offered a safe space for conversation for many philosophers who were not accepted in Vienna during and after the Nazi regime, thus creating an ecosystem that questioned orthodoxies and provided space for ideas to be developed. I wonder what the perceptions of the philosophers who attended EFA were, and what they would think if they saw Europe today.

Would they contemplate the slippery truths, and if so, which concept of truth would provide an alternative solution?

I recall Gettier’s problem of justified true belief brought up in the seminar: the trinity of justification, truth and belief needs to be fulfilled in order to claim something as knowledge. I find myself asking how easily belief shifts; what majority is needed for an individual belief to become a universal one, and what separates a belief from, let’s say, a slogan that becomes a belief?

Is belief something that we first verify, and then accept, or do we embrace belief based on majority consent? How would Gettier’s problem lay out the landscape of this year’s EFA, and would it widen the tensions between slippery truths in both theatre and politics? On stage this clash can provoke critical reflection; in politics it can entrench power.

Regardless of the tension between truths, ideologies and decisions, one thing is for sure: all great and mediocre ideas need to be brought to the rehearsal in order to be effective in a changing and evolving geopolitical landscape.

We, too, as humans, are constantly changing, growing and adapting, and if we accept this as a dynamic journey instead of a disruption to our static states, it is more likely that we will be able to change the world we live in. Growth is messy, uncertain, and at times intangible, which is why it is sometimes uncomfortable to leave what is familiar.

But, if we, as residents of Europe, are willing to sacrifice the comfort and commit to a personal change, then it is easier to make the necessary changes in government, climate and technology.

And, before all, I am ready to have this constructive dialogue with myself, and question what my role is as a daughter, as a woman in STEM, and a person who is trying to find a balance in exposing myself to the discomfort of change and having my inner safety to face the truth.

### 'When Day Comes' by Tina Wong

I've never felt much like a singer—nor have I really seen myself as a creative person or an extrovert. When it was my turn for the required chorus auditions in 9th grade, I stood with my hands clasped tightly together and my voice barely above a whisper. I waited desperately for the teacher to shout, "Next!"—the magic word that relieved me from the spotlight.

I had come to accept this as a fixed reality, but when I filled out the seminar form for EFA25, I selected *Voices Without Boundaries* as my first choice for the afternoon seminar.

"To get out of my comfort zone," I insisted to a friend.

In the seminar, that came true. With our phones stashed in our bags, we were able to focus solely on one another. We made eye contact as we danced our names around the gym. We held each other's hands and matched the rhythms of our breathing.

We trilled, laughed, hummed, and harmonized together. I had never felt so exposed, but our seminar chairs, Deb and Joe, fostered a space that celebrated the vulnerability of expressing ourselves through movement and voice.

Deb shared that it was unfair that in some schools, if children couldn't find the right pitch at an early age, they were cast aside from singing classes and did not get the opportunity to cultivate their voices.

"Everyone is a singer," she argued.

For our final text of the seminar, we tackled "The Hill We Climb," Amanda Gorman's 2021 poem for the United States presidential inauguration. Guided by what we had learned from singing, we were to speak the words as we walked, pausing at every punctuation, and then change direction.

"When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade?" I started. As I read those words aloud, a lump began to form in my throat.

I stopped in my tracks, briefly forgetting to change direction.

The last time I had listened to that poem was when I watched the inauguration live four years ago. A full-scale war had not yet ravaged European soil. An artificial intelligence revolution had not yet been unleashed on the public, leaving the world scrambling to understand and regulate. Democracy had not yet seemed as threatened as it is today, with rampant disinformation sowing increasing sympathy for extremism.

The hope I had from that moment in time now felt like a distant memory, impossible to recapture.

Often, it is not just our voices that we place boundaries on. We tend to remember the darkness vividly and then define ourselves by it: our weaknesses, fears, and the seemingly insurmountable challenges plaguing society. *Not* a singer. *Not* a creative person. *Not* an extrovert.

*Not* a country whose divisions can be mended, nor a world that can be saved in the midst of a climate crisis. However, these negative labels limit our thinking about what we are capable of and what the future can be.

Two weeks at Alpbach proved that these labels are not set in stone. On the last day of *Voices Without Boundaries*, we surprised our seminar chairs by thanking them in the melody they had taught us at the beginning. Outside of the seminar, we exercised our own creativity by improvising steps for an impromptu dance break at the African soirée.

Over a sunrise hike alongside scholarship holders from different continents, these notions I had conjured of what I couldn't be were shed; in their place, close friendships were forged.

In a workshop I attended on countering fake news and deepfakes, panelists and participants collaborated on ideas about digital literacy efforts, rapid response teams, and joint attributions among regional partners. During lunch at the Pausenhof, I listened to a friend pitch his idea for sustainable building materials in his home country.

Away from comfort zones and digital filter bubbles, we rejected fatalism and powerlessness, and instead chose to connect face-to-face and work together to rebuild our communities little by little.

Where can we find light? In these people who I will treasure and be inspired by forever.

### 'Black Boxes: Applying AI Lessons to European Integration' by Aldan Creo

I love artificial intelligence. I studied computer science, I do AI research now, and I genuinely believe it can make the world better.

I also know this makes me biased, which is why during the EFA sessions this summer, I was excited to talk with so many brilliant people from different backgrounds about AI. Many were concerned: about artificial general intelligence (AGI), about algorithmic control, about losing human agency.

To be honest, I don't share all these fears, but I think it's normal to feel them. AI seems new and complex, so it's hard to know what to expect from it.

Interestingly, I also noticed something similar when I discussed the European Union outside of the EFA context. Just like with AI, many

of us form our views based on media, political statements, and what we hear from others.

So it's only natural that when Viktor Orbán claims that "Brussels wants to force migration quotas on Hungary" or when news outlets suggest AI will replace our jobs, people find it hard to know what to believe. In general, when we don't have direct experience with something, we're more likely to react based on fear or mistrust.

This got me thinking: if there are these parallels about how we communicate about complex systems like AI and the EU, can we learn from one to improve the other? There's a lot of research on how to build trust in AI systems, so what can we learn from that to help the EU build trust with its citizens?

### Parallels

The connection between AI and EU challenges becomes clearer when you look at the research. In fact, both fields have discovered the same fundamental truth: when people don't directly experience a system, they fill the knowledge gap with (often negative) assumptions.

I hope the intuition is clear: there are some connections here. Let's bring them down to specifics now. I see four main parallels between the challenges faced by AI and the EU:

The most obvious similarity is what AI researchers call the "**black box**" problem. When users can't see how an algorithm reaches its decisions, they assume the worst. People imagine AI as making arbitrary or biased choices because they can't see the reasoning process.

EU decision making feels like that: when the European Commission proposes new regulations or the European Central Bank changes

interest rates, the reasoning behind these decisions isn't visible to the average person. Both systems make important decisions that affect people's lives, but the process remains opaque.

There's also a fascinating pattern in how people **misperceive capabilities**. Studies show that people consistently overestimate AI capabilities in scary directions while underestimating them in helpful ones (Shulner-Tal et al., 2024). Some think AI can do more harm than it actually can and don't realize how much it already helps them.

Just like citizens consistently overestimate EU power in areas they dislike while underestimating it in areas where they need help. Surveys show that people believe the EU controls much more than it actually does, from national budgets to local regulations (Yordanova et al., 2020). Meanwhile, they underestimate EU contributions to consumer protection, scientific research, and economic stability.

Then there's what I'd call the **distance problem**. Most people rarely interact directly with AI systems in ways they recognize. They use recommendation algorithms, fraud detection, and search engines daily, but this happens under the hood. Similarly, most people rarely interact directly with EU institutions.

They benefit from EU standards, consumer protections, and research funding, but the benefits are often invisible. In many occasions, both systems work in the background of our lives without making their presence obvious.

Finally, both AI and the EU become **vulnerable to manipulation** when people lack direct experience. AI gets blamed for problems it didn't cause, like job losses from automation when it's actually companies choosing to fire workers, or for misinformation when it's actually a human orchestrating it.

The EU faces similar distortions: it gets blamed for policies it didn't make, like austerity measures that were national decisions, or attacked for powers it doesn't have, like controlling national immigration quotas.

Generally speaking, these parallels suggest that both AI and the EU face fundamentally similar communication challenges. The question is: can solutions from one field help the other?

### Two fields, one solution?

The answer, I believe, is yes. While both fields face similar challenges, AI research has made significant progress developing solutions that the EU hasn't fully explored yet.

Over the past decade, AI researchers have worked on "explainable AI". The core idea is simple: when you make AI decisions more transparent and understandable, people trust the systems more and use them more effectively.

Instead of just showing an output, AI systems can provide context: "I recommended this movie because you liked similar comedies" or "I flagged this transaction as potentially fraudulent because it happened in an unusual location at an unusual time."

This doesn't mean dumbing down the technology; it's simply about translating complex processes into terms that we can understand.

And the research findings are promising. Studies consistently show that people who receive explanations for AI decisions develop more realistic attitudes toward these systems (Rong et al., 2022). They stop imagining AI as all-powerful or even malicious and start seeing it as a useful tool with specific capabilities and limitations.

Explanations help users develop better "mental models" of how AI systems operate; this understanding grows both from using the system and from clear explanations about how it works. Moreover, when people understand how AI reaches its conclusions, they're more likely to accept and act on AI recommendations (Panigutti et al., 2022). Even simple explanations can dramatically shift perceptions from fear to acceptance.

AI researchers have also studied the power of direct interaction. When people actually use AI systems and see immediate, tangible benefits, their attitudes change. Recent research on ChatGPT usage shows that frequent use increases trust in the system, while direct experience is more effective than theoretical knowledge to build understanding (Bouyzourn & Birch, 2025).

A study of college students using ChatGPT for programming found that their perceptions toward the system significantly changed after hands-on practice, they perceived it as more useful and were more inclined to use it (Sun et al., 2024).

And perhaps most importantly, these studies also show that direct interaction helps users develop better critical thinking; they become more capable of evaluating strengths and weaknesses, and are more likely to advocate for improvements and necessary changes.

Meanwhile, governance research has started to confirm similar patterns, though it hasn't developed solutions as systematically. Citizens who directly interact with government services report higher satisfaction and trust in institutions.

When people can see tangible benefits from government action, support increases rather than decreases (Lanin & Hermanto, 2019; Kumagai & Iorio, 2020). The limited research we have suggests the same principle can apply to EU institutions: familiarity breeds support.

This is a clear opportunity: AI research has developed methods for building trust in complex systems. Now, the question is how to adapt them to help the EU build stronger connections with its citizens.

### Lessons from AI: a plan for a stronger Europe

Let me be direct about what I think has gone wrong and how we can fix it.

The EU's current approach was a strategic choice that made sense in its time. In the postwar period, European integration was a radical idea that needed careful, cautious implementation. Federalists built institutions that were deliberately distant from the people to protect the project from potential rejection (such as what happened with the Constitutional Treaty).

But now we're stuck: we've created a union that promises much but struggles to deliver because it was never truly empowered by its citizens. People see "funded by the EU" signs on bridges and new railways, but that's not enough. We need citizens to directly experience the EU, not just see distant effects.

Of course, I'm not the first (or last) one to criticize this situation. For instance, Yanis Varoufakis rightly points out how "there is no polity that can pass judgment on the Council itself, hold it accountable and, ultimately, dismiss it" (Varoufakis, 2025).

Even former Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica acknowledged that "citizens should be at the heart of EU policymaking" and that "it is important that citizens can be engaged in their democracy throughout their lives" (JRC Press Office, 2022).

But participation is not all we need. Take ReArm Europe: some say that it was developed with insufficient consultation, but I don't think that's the issue (we needed to act fast).

The problem is that after the EU developed it, they should have explained it better. For example, the UK government runs targeted advertising to communicate directly to citizens: when they want people to understand new tax rules, they don't just publish complex documents; they run ads saying "Here's what's changing and why it matters to you." This is direct-to-citizen communication that works.

So we have widespread recognition of the problem, but action remains limited. Here's where AI research may offer another way forward:

**First, we need an "explainable EU."** Just like AI systems may provide context for their decisions, EU institutions should explain their reasoning in human-understandable terms. When the Commission proposes new data protection rules, don't just publish long regulations. Explain it like this: "We're requiring companies to ask permission before using your personal data because we found that 67% of Europeans want more control over their digital footprint, and this rule gives you the right to say no."

**Second, we need direct interaction opportunities.** The research shows that people who actually use AI systems develop more realistic and positive attitudes. Similarly, we need ways for citizens to directly engage with EU institutions and see immediate, tangible benefits.

This means creating EU services that people actually use in their daily lives, not just policies that affect them indirectly. If the EU has competence over consumer protection, why do I still need to complain to my national government when I'm scammed?

**Third, we need to help citizens develop better "mental models" of how the EU works.** Right now, most people have no clear understanding of what the European Commission does versus the European Parliament versus the Council, how laws are made,

and so on, and this ignorance is fertile ground for manipulation and misinformation. We need to make EU processes visible and understandable through direct-to-citizen communication (and while the EU has tried it, we need to double down).

The goal isn't to make everyone love the EU unconditionally. In fact, AI research suggests something better: direct interaction creates more informed, critical citizens who can evaluate strengths and weaknesses and advocate for improvements. We want Europeans who understand the EU well enough to push for the changes it needs.

### **Directly engaging with citizens: a roadmap**

Let's now get practical. What are some concrete steps we could take to implement these ideas?

#### **Short-term implementations**

**Create EU Direct Services as primary contact points.** We need EU services that citizens can access directly when they have problems, not as a backup option. The European Consumer Centres Network is a brilliant idea, but it only works for cross-border complaints, so it's buried behind national consumer agencies and most people don't know it exists.

We need to make EU services like this the primary contact point, heavily advertised, and expanded to cover employment rights, healthcare disputes, and social security issues. Let's scale this up so citizens think "EU help desk" first, not last.

**Launch systematic "EU Explains" campaigns.** Deploy targeted advertising campaigns that explain major EU decisions in plain language as we mentioned before. When the European Central Bank

changes interest rates, run ads that say: "We're raising interest rates by 0.25% to slow inflation, which means your mortgage payments may increase by about €50 per month, but your savings will earn more."

The EU has tried some communication campaigns, but they're sporadic and weak. We need massive, consistent, direct-to-citizen communication that reaches everyone, not just those who already follow EU politics.

**Build comprehensive EU feedback loops.** Create digital platforms where citizens can directly respond to proposed EU legislation. The EU already has formal consultation and participation processes, but they're bureaucratic and invisible. We need simple interfaces: "This new law would require companies to reduce packaging waste by 30%.

Do you support this? Why or why not?" Make it as easy as rating a product online, heavily promote it, and publish aggregated responses where everyone can see them, make them go viral. Citizens' assemblies could be another interesting idea to expand on.

#### **Medium-term structural changes**

**Transform Europe Direct into powerful service centers.** Europe Direct centers exist in around 400 locations, but most people have never heard of them, and they are primarily information centers. That was a nice idea before the digital age, but people can get information online now.

Within 3-5 years, we should transform these into "Apple Stores for the EU". Citizens should be able to get help with EU-related problems, access services, file complaints, and get immediate assistance. Give staff authority to solve problems on the spot.

**Make the EU Digital Identity Wallet work.** This is an app in which I see a lot of promise. It should launch by 2026 and could become the comprehensive platform that shows citizens how the EU helps their daily lives in real time.

So it's crucial to make it easy to use and not repeat the mistakes of the past. For instance, I'm a computer scientist, and I've never managed to authenticate with eIDAS cross-border services using my Spanish digital ID. These problems are widespread, eIDAS was a great idea but very poorly implemented. This Digital Identity Wallet is the EU's chance to get it right, so let's make it a priority.

**Create participatory budget mechanisms.** Allow citizens to directly vote on how to spend portions of EU funds. Start with smaller programs like Erasmus+ or cultural initiatives. Citizens propose projects, debate them online, and vote.

This gives people direct control over EU spending and makes abstract budgets tangible. Some member states do participatory budgeting locally, but there's nothing at EU level where people can directly decide how their European taxes are spent.

#### Long-term vision

**Seize the moment for treaty reform.** We're living through a unique historical moment: global turmoil from wars, climate change, and economic uncertainty has pushed EU approval ratings to record highs. People increasingly see the EU as necessary for tackling challenges too big for any single country. But this creates both an opportunity and a danger.

We are looking toward the EU to help us, and it's too easy to let us down. We need treaty reform that strengthens EU democratic legitimacy and capabilities before the current wave of support turns into disappointment. We should use this window to formalize the

direct citizen engagement mechanisms outlined above, giving the EU both the democratic mandate and institutional capacity it needs to really deliver.

**Build the "European Public Square".** This one may be a bit ambitious, but I'd envision a digital platform where all EU policy debates happen in public, with real-time translation and AI-powered summaries. Citizens can follow specific issues, ask questions to policymakers, and see how their representatives vote. Make EU politics as transparent and accessible as following a sports team. The EU already streams meetings and publishes votes, but once again, it's buried in institutional websites that are impossible to navigate. Let's change that.

**Institutionalize direct democracy elements.** Integrate citizen feedback directly into EU decision-making. I think major policies should include mandatory citizen consultation periods with guaranteed response mechanisms.

If 60% of citizens oppose a proposed directive in initial consultation, the Commission must either revise it substantially or provide detailed justification for proceeding. Yes, the European Citizens' Initiative exists, but it's weak and rarely leads to real change. We need mechanisms with actual teeth.

#### What can we expect?

If we implement this roadmap, AI research gives us insights about what should happen. Of course, the EU and AI are different systems, and we can't predict the future. But I think we can be reasonably confident about achieving:

**More realistic expectations about EU capabilities.** We saw earlier how AI users stop imagining systems as all-powerful once they interact with them directly. The same should happen with the

EU: citizens who actually use European services will understand what the Union can and cannot realistically accomplish. This means fewer people blaming Brussels for problems that are national competencies, but also fewer people expecting miracles from institutions with limited powers.

**Increased trust through experience, not rhetoric.** Research showed that hands-on experience builds deeper trust than any amount of explanation. For the EU, this suggests that someone who successfully resolves a consumer dispute through EU Direct Services will trust European institutions far more than someone who just reads about EU achievements on X. Acts speak louder than words.

**Better informed, more critical citizens.** I think the most encouraging finding from AI research was that direct interaction creates more sophisticated users who can evaluate both strengths and weaknesses. Applied to European politics, this could empower citizens to better understand the EU and demand specific improvements. We could see more nuanced and grounded public debates about European integration.

**Higher compliance with EU policies.** When people understand the reasoning behind AI recommendations, they follow them more often. The same logic applies to European legislation: citizens who grasp why the Commission proposes certain rules should be more willing to support and follow them. This creates a virtuous cycle where better communication leads to better implementation, which leads to more effective policies.

**Reduced vulnerability to misinformation.** Perhaps most crucially, people with firsthand experience of complex systems become much harder targets for manipulation. Citizens who have actually navigated EU institutions and understand how European decision making works should be harder to mislead with

misinformation, a long-term benefit for democratic resilience in times of crisis.

Again, these are just predictions, not certainties. But to be fair, I'd argue that the challenge doesn't lie in predicting what will happen. It lies in building the political will to implement these changes before the current window of EU support closes.

## Conclusion

The European Union and artificial intelligence face remarkably similar challenges: both are complex systems that most people don't directly experience, so both suffer from fear, misunderstanding, and manipulation. But AI research has developed practical solutions that the EU could learn from.

The core idea: direct interaction changes everything. When people actually use AI systems, they develop realistic expectations, build trust, and become better critical thinkers. The same principle should work for European institutions and is what we need to focus on.

But timing is key here. We're living through a unique moment when global challenges have pushed EU approval to record highs. People are looking to the EU for help, and it's easy to disappoint them. We need to act before this window closes.

So what do we want? Continue with the current approach and watch European integration stagnate? Or can we build a union that citizens actually experience and understand? The lessons from AI research show us the way forward; now we need to take it.

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**AI Statement:** I wrote this text with assistance from AI for editing, research, and formatting. All ideas, arguments, and conclusions remain my own.

## POETRY & PROSE

'Awaken, Europa' by Alexander Visser

You see,  
some believe they were born too late,  
the great decisions have been made,  
and that what's left is sit and wait  
for the unfolding of our fate,  
a reckoning for the deeds of our fathers.

Do not follow them;  
those who are heading nowhere  
will arrive nowhere.

will destroy everything.

Others believe

that peace and prosperity are the status quo,  
that the likes of our society will always grow,  
when that which we would reap we also sow,  
turn the cheek for another blow,  
forgetting the toils of our fathers.

Do not follow them;

these who appreciate nought  
will restart at nought.

Others again believe

the heritage of this old world is all they need,  
their descent and pedigree their greatest deed,  
they were born to lead,  
but are not much more than the weeds,  
growing on the graves of our fathers.

Do not follow them;

these who believe they are everything

And yet others believe  
that the greatest sin is pride,  
our continent's legacy is something we should hide,  
our vast inheritance is there to deride,  
and they plot and scheme and bide  
the time to topple the statues of our fathers.

Do not follow them;

those who wish to preserve nothing  
will have nothing.

They ride as the Four Horsemen of our time:  
Self Loathing—he corrodes us from within.  
Sham Superiority—he would sunder us from kin.  
Aimless Apathy—he cares not if we lose or win.  
and Blind Naivety—who would, smiling, let our downfall in.  
This is not the struggle of our fathers.

This is our battle,

for we were born exactly right  
to join the fight.

But! you say...  
our institutions crumble from the weight of the extremes.  
Peace trembles under the mad men's schemes.  
Nature herself is tearing at the seams;  
our economies bending in the beams.  
What is to be done?

Only a blind man  
could deny the truth of what you have said.  
It is all coming to a head.

“Quod inscitia potest, ne culpes malitia”;<sup>1</sup>  
the more extreme the conviction, the closer it is to fiction.  
But they march on as if to their own crucifixion.  
Not malice, but a courageous, ignorant obsession.  
Not inferior people, just brothers heading the wrong direction,  
seeking simple answers to a complex question.

But still they carry pitchforks  
and the torches light the sky.

It will go awry...

And yet “In ficto semper aliquid veri”;<sup>2</sup>  
beware democracy when to the voters you shift the shame.  
In a state full of extremists, it is the state to blame,  
for it then no longer rules in the people's name.  
If you recognise these truths, you too should join the game,  
or else you leave the field to the problem and the cause.

You see, democracy  
is not just the right to cast a vote,  
but also the duty to be the vote.

“Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori”;<sup>3</sup>  
a mirage, but nonetheless, to arms! Not seeking wars,  
but because defenceless values are just words,  
the pen is only mightier than their swords  
if it is there to be read by enemy hordes,  
written defiantly on our shields.

Lead them,

and preach to wish no war at all,  
but don't deny it all.

“Natura non nisi parendo vincitur”;<sup>4</sup>

and obey we do, exploiting her transcendental laws  
to bend her primeval powers to our cause,  
in us godly might combined with human flaws.  
We have the hand that feeds us in our jaws,  
but beware: one day we must again obey.

Lead them,  
and preach to treat nature with respect,  
for she will demand respect.

“Ducendum exemplo, non temere se ipsum perdendo”;<sup>5</sup>  
our continent's influence lies in our industrial wealth,  
and should we lead with reckless abandon to ourselves,  
strangling our economy to save this world's health,  
we'll lose all power to sway the billions to follow in our path,  
and it will have been for nothing.

Lead them,  
and preach that there must be change,  
but others too must change.

Europa, motherland,  
a herculean task indeed, should you choose to lead,  
but you were born just right for the heroic deed,  
to unite this continent, rebirth! But heed  
the four horsemen approach with speed,  
should you, wise youth, succeed,  
our motherland need not bleed,  
you being last of our seed,  
so this I plead:  
LEAD!

<sup>1</sup>“What can be [blamed on] ignorance, do not fault to malice.”

<sup>2</sup>“In fiction, there is always something true.”

<sup>3</sup>“It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country.”

<sup>4</sup>“Nature is not conquered except by obeying.”

<sup>5</sup>“One should lead by example, not recklessly destroying oneself”.

### 'Building a world with words' by Angelina Widmann

German is a language where every state of being has its very own word.  
Word-by-word translations are virtually impossible.  
For example, the English word *confidence* carries a powerful weight, yet still feels balanced, like a scent you can't quite place but which carries you to a memory.

Google Translator will offer, in German, *Selbstvertrauen* or maybe *Zuversicht*.

But here, that sounds like something from the self-help shelf at the bookshop.  
Printed on the kind of pastel background I never see in real life,

except maybe in the waiting room of my therapist.

Being part of a generation where young people can step on needles with every action, *confidence* is not a glossy word.

It's earned. It's shared. I believe that every single person is fighting for the right to consider themselves confident towards life.  
I have often imagined worlds where I am 100% confident, where we as humans are 100% confident with our relationship to the world we live in.

There's a theory that with every decision we make, or don't make, a new parallel world is born.

I have often asked myself, how could this idea be used collectively to imagine visions for a better world?  
If every yes, every no, is a door to a different reality, then where are the doors to the world where we stop waging war upon the ground which we walk?

There is such a world.

It's the one where *confidence* doesn't mean dominating Mother Earth until she sits still like an AI-generated image, orchestrated and lifeless. There is a word for this: *nature morte*—dead nature.  
Digital Art as a symbol for force placed on a colonialized nature.

But *confidence* in our parallel world means *knowing*, deeply *knowing* that we don't have to fight nature to live well.  
That our dignity as human beings is not measured by our victory over rivers, forests, or the last patch of fertile soil,

Rather by our ability to live alongside them  
without needing to turn them into trophies.

Austrians generally consider themselves to be connected to nature.  
Climbing mountains becomes a metaphor for the way of life.  
Breathing in the fresh air, taking photos at the summit cross,  
posting them online as proof of our *Heimatliebe*,  
our love for the place we call home.  
Then use *Heimatliebe* as a justification  
for walls, for exclusion,  
for drawing lines  
where bridges should be.

*Heimatliebe* is not a weapon. It's a responsibility.  
If it gives us sanctuaries like Alpbach,  
then it can give us places where humanity and nature  
stand on the same side of history.

If every choice we make really does open a door to a new parallel  
world, then how about we stop opening the ones where glaciers die  
in our lifetime?  
where seas rise faster than our empathy.  
where technology is just a new weapon  
in a war ongoing since the beginning of consciousness.

I envision a reality where *confidence* is not  
an individual performance, rather a collective state of being.  
Where we wake up not asking "How can I win?" but  
"How can we all live?" and truly feel release  
from the pressure placed on our generation...  
It is no longer there.

Maybe the only fight worth fighting for  
is the fight for the right  
to lay our weapons down.

What a sweet rabbit it would have been,  
Had I made it through the day.

"The Fox" by Jasper Hack, Enje J.V. and Mathias Enderle

Hunting and being hunted  
Dwelling in opposing worlds  
Neither a wolf nor a sheep,  
Sometimes strong, sometimes weak.

Sensing my prey in the woods  
An ecstatic hunt for food  
Small pups back at the den,  
Guided by the spark in their eyes.

A shot in the dark!  
The trees, the wet moss, fading away...

'Fragmented Reflections on the Forum Alpbach' by  
Julian Seidenbusch

I heard a story here about a woman who made a politician cry.

Sat at Jakober.

The woman had attended a panel discussion where the politician passionately made a point of the inclusivity of his political project. Raising her voice, she put forth a challenge, presented a simple task to her fellow crowd members.

Raise your left if you have studied. Your right if your parents have.

A room full of raised hands, she told of her upbringing, of a farm, of goats and sheep, of cows and chicken. Of relatives who find it hard to conceptualise - what European unity could do for them.

A voice full of emotion, the politician broke out in denial, insisting on how hard he had been trying.

Preaching to the choir.

Making arthouse films about working-class struggles for an audience of the intellectual elite.

An unlikely connection.

Barbie?

Did it really take until two years ago for there to screen a mass-appeal piece of feminist cinema? Often criticised for its lack of depth, is Barbie's superficial, entry-level feminism what is needed? Barbie as an easily digestible film that is light enough for a family viewing yet able to stir the odd important notion in the nine-year-old daughter?

Prescription. We need to stop preaching to the choir.

Prescription. We need to stop patronising.

Reflection. Am I being hypocritical?

Reflection. Am I in a position to speak up?

Poetry.

Caricaturing the European social scene of the 1930s, Polish poet Julian Tuwim wrote a "poem in which the author politely but firmly implores the vast hosts of his brethren to kiss his arse". After a systematic enumeration of the various personalities to be experienced around him - "perfumed café intellectuals", "drab socialists", "fascist jocks", "Zionist doctors", "repressed Catholics" et cetera - he ended verse by verse by requesting from each the performance of the action indicated in the poem's title.

People.

Impressions.

Jakober.

Connections.

Monkeys in clothes.

Existential hiccup...

Prescription. We need to stop being cynical.

Prescription. We need to stop the rising wealth inequality that is threatening our democracies via an erosion of social cohesion.

Rising wealth inequality leads to higher asset prices and lower interest rates, making it harder for non-asset holders, such as the working class, to accumulate wealth.

Still at Jakober...

Go to morning seminar.

Discuss relationship between income and wealth inequality.

Chug coffee.

Chug coffee.

Chug coffee.

No use crying over spilt milk.

Concentration.

A few very rich individuals will consume less than a lot of poor people would in their stead with the same amount of money. The rich tend to invest and save a bigger share of their earnings, thus creating a savings glut which pushes down demand for loans and consequently interest rates. Low interest rates then drive up the prices of assets like stocks and real estate even more, further benefiting wealthier individuals who already hold these assets.

Concentration.

Concentration of wealth among the few perpetuates rising asset prices and limited opportunities for class mobility. This fuels social frustration.

Frustration.

Frustration.

Concentration.

The far-right's favourite trick: blaming social frustration and crisis of meaning - derived from lack of meaningful social mobility - not onto the concentration of assets with the increasingly absurdly uber-wealthy but onto immigrants coming in search of better opportunities themselves.

Prescription. We need to stand fast in our fight against fascism.

Ideologies are not theories and not sets of propositions. Ideologies are collections of beliefs and images that sit in us and facilitate our navigation of the political landscape. The borders of ideology are muddy, what is inside is sometimes closely, sometimes distantly related.

A contradicting collage of ideas, fascism is a far-right, authoritarian, ultranationalist ideology characterised by a dictatorial leader,

centralisation, autocracy, militarism, forceful suppression of opposition, belief in natural hierarchical structures, subordination of the individual for the perceived good of the nation and wide-ranging regimentation of society and economy. A distinct feature of fascism is the idea of a radical historical return, a revolutionary transformation of society to a past that never was. Guided by the equivalence between the will of a leader and the collective self-realisation of the citizenry. Through this, fascism develops destructive motivation towards democratic institutions, checks and balances.

Fascism has a fascinating relationship to modernity, simultaneously rejecting and worshipping it. Pridful of technological advancement, fearful of intellectual scrutiny. Fascism comes with a built-in promise of order that speaks to a people's retrospective bias. The past that never was. Ungrounded and lacking sense of purpose, our ears are open to radical ideas. Dynamics of inequality, deteriorating social mobility, societal polarisation, omnipresence of money, demands of industrialisation and urbanisation lead to existential and political drift, and, eventually, to radicalisation.

Project 2025.

Donald Trump openly endorsed an anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian agenda resonating especially with a cohort of young male voters who ultimately helped tip the scale and bring him back to power.

Donald Trump and his key allies are some of the richest men in the world. Yet, they have managed to disguise their will as the one of

the people asserting equivalence between it and the collective self-realisation of the US-American citizenry.

Reflections.

A «now» of recognisability. A window, a point in time where the past, through a dialectical image, becomes recognisable and relevant to the present, allowing for a critical understanding of history. The past may flash into the present, not as a continuous, linear progression, but as a sudden, recognisable moment of truth. We must recognise this «now» to improve our position in the fight against fascism.

Tasks.

Freedom is an unending task.

'Wer putzt das Forum Alpbach?' by Julian Seidenbusch

Wer fährt deinen Bus?

Wer kocht deine Spätzle?

Wer serviert deinen Kaffee?

Wer putzt das Forum Alpbach?

Who drives the EFA shuttle bus?

Who prepares your spaetzle?

Who serves your coffee?

Who cleans the forum?

## 'Entropisch Chaotisch' by Vinzenz Herkner

//Deutsch//

Ein mittelgroßer Seminarraum, Sessel kreisrund aufgestellt, intellektuelle junge Menschen, in der Mitte eine Mindmap, bunt und auf den ersten Blick chaotisch, fast wie ein Biotop. Das Licht hell aufgedreht, die Sonne strahlt durch die großen Fensterfronten durch die Eingangshalle direkt in den Seminarraum.

Ein Zettel wird vorgelesen, die Hände schnellen in die Luft. Geordnet und diszipliniert werden die einzelnen Punkte vorgetragen, und die unterschiedlichen Meinungen der Teilnehmenden werden von der Runde mit interessierten Augen angehört. Die Stimmung ist anregend, es werden vielseitige Ideen geäußert, die nicht unbedingt zusammenhängen, aber auf eine Art stimulierend wirken.

Betrachtet man die Gedanken aus der Ferne, sind sie wie Sprechblasen: Teilweise finden sie schnell zusammen, teilweise

tänzeln sie umeinander herum und finden nie eine Schnittfläche. Die Blasen werden teilweise diffus, die Linien oft nicht sehr klar. Mit jeder Erklärung werden die Linien genauer und schärfer, um dann wieder etwas zu verwischen. In den unklaren Zonen ist Raum, um Gemeinsamkeiten zu finden. Am Ende solcher Diskurse ähnelt der Gedankenraum einem Biotop: ein chaotischer, bunter Raum.

//English//

A medium-sized seminar room, armchairs arranged in a circle, intellectual young people, a mind map in the middle, colorful and chaotic at first glance, almost like a biotope. The lights are turned up bright, and the sun shines through the large windows at the front of the building, directly into the seminar room via the entrance hall.

A piece of paper is read aloud, hands shoot up in the air. The individual points are presented in an orderly and disciplined manner, and the different opinions of the participants are listened to with interest by the group. The atmosphere is stimulating, with a wide range of ideas being expressed that are not necessarily related, but which have a stimulating effect in their own way.

Looking at the thoughts from a distance, they are like speech bubbles: some come together quickly, while others dance around each other and never find a point of intersection. The bubbles become diffuse in places, the lines not very clear. With each explanation, the lines become more precise and sharper, only to blur again. In the unclear areas, there is room to find common ground. At the end of such discourses, the space of thought resembles a biotope: a chaotic, colorful space.

'When Is Summer Over?' by Lucy English

When is summer over?

When the dahlias bloom?

When the swallow leave?

When mornings have the smell of mist?

Conkers are ripe on the chestnut tree

and blackberries are purple plump.

I'm longing to wear new boots and a jumper.

My favourite soft jumper, apple pink.

And there's so many apples now

on the yellow grass.

'Butterfly Dreams' by Lucy English

Squeeze out of the dark husk into light.

Crumpled, fragile. You need the sun to give you strength.

Stretch yourself to your glory mode

of fourteen days to suck the flowers.

Fourteen days to flit, mate, flit.

Make enough eggs to coat under leaves

so life goes on. Life goes on.

I was dreaming I touched my brown speckled wings

on the red geraniums. Resting for not long enough.

But now I don't think I'm a lumpy human anymore  
but just dreaming I am one.

What does it feel like to live for more than fourteen days?

Wake up every day for ninety years?

Plod and sigh and sulk and cry,

Not, streak and flash and whoosh and ahh.

'The Wild Ride (inspired by a Tyrol folk tale)' by Lucy  
English

When the air is thick  
and the wind rises, not with a gust,  
but a storm of hooves and shrieks.  
Hide, oh hide, lie low.

Here comes the wild ride.  
Here it comes. The ghosts galloping  
over rooftops and fields.  
Let the dark wind go.

Once, a Lechen boy too far from home  
was seized by the darkest ones,  
hauled into the air.

Hide, oh hide, lie low.

'Dear Jesus. Dear Mary,' his mother prayed.  
Made a sign of the cross which trembled in the air.  
The boy fell back, but, thank God, alive.  
Let the dark wind go.

But others did not return.

Those who stood defiant tall, too arrogant proud,  
were snatched by the vengeful ghosts.  
Hide, oh hide, lie low.

Only those who pressed their bodies  
close to the earth survived.  
Went home thankful to their husbands and wives.  
Let the dark wind go.

And now, when the wind roars up the valley  
the old ones murmur, 'Here it comes.  
Shut the door. Keep still. Keep low.'  
Hide, oh hide, lie low.

Let the wild wind ride. Let the ghosts go by.  
Let the thunder roar. Protect my soul.  
Bolt the door. Shut the slats. Stay by the fire.  
Let the dark ones go.

Who lives in those wooden houses?

The conifer trees are so, so dark.

I'm not cold yet, but the breeze is cool.

I want to fly away now and find the sun.

Sycamore leaves are never still

but concrete is so ugly and barren.

It's not thunder but an aeroplanes high up rumble.

A child looks up. Orange hair, blue umbrella.

Her mother hurries her along.

### 'Outside Mittleschule' by Lucy English

I can almost imagine what cold  
must feel like on my face.

Two swallows fly over the roof.

The school roof is grass. A mini wheat field.

Leaves are just turning pink at the tips.

As pink as bindweed in the hedge.

There's four sycamore trees.

Here come the swallows again.

The clouds fall on the high peaks and hide them.

## AUTHOR Biographies

**Lucy English** is a spoken word poet and novelist. She has two collections published by Burning Eye Books. The most recent, *The Book of Hours*, is the poetry from her online project of the same name which features 48 poetry films made in collaboration with 27 filmmakers. Lucy is Professor of Creative Enterprise at Bath Spa University and editor/contributor of *Spoken Word in the UK* published by Routledge in 2021. She is currently working on an immersive hologram poetry film installation *Cancer Alley* highlighting extreme pollution in Louisiana.

**Dr Howard Williamson** is Emeritus Professor of European Youth Policy at the University of South Wales in the United Kingdom. Previously he worked at the Universities of Oxford, Cardiff and Copenhagen and has held visiting positions at universities and research institutes in Hong Kong, Malta, Croatia, China, France, Iran, Australia, and Slovenia. He has lectured and published widely on young people, youth policy and youth work. His latest books are *The Milltown Boys at Sixty* (Routledge 2021), *About Time!* (Council of Europe 2021), *Advanced Introduction to Youth Studies* (Edward Elgar 2022), *Transitions on Hold* (Council of Europe 2023), *Taking Stock – Where are we now: Youth work in contemporary Europe* (Flemish Government 2024) and *Youth Work Strategies Manual* (Council of Europe 2025).

He is a JNC qualified youth worker and ran an open youth centre for 25 years in parallel with his academic research. He has advised many levels of governance on youth policy issues, from the Welsh and UK governments, the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the United Nations. He co-ordinated the Council of Europe's international reviews of national youth policy. He is a Vice-

President of the Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services, and the Restorative Justice for All International Institute. He is a board member of Grassroots – the Cardiff City Centre Youth Project, the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award for Young People, and Learn About Britain. He is also co-chair of the advisory group to the Africa Network of Youth Policy Experts and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board of European Forum Alpbach. From 2002-2023, he was Organisational Secretary of the International Sociological Association Research Committee 34 (youth research). He now sits on its Executive Board as Senior Scholars Liaison. In 2002, he was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) and, in 2016, a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order (CVO). In 2019, he received an Outstanding Contribution to Youth Work award from the First Minister of Wales.

**Naajia Amanulla** is an undergraduate at Bath Spa University, taking a bachelor's in Creative Writing and Publishing. She loves travelling to various countries and trying their local cuisine. With her life constantly on the move, Naajia's wanderlust keeps her hopping from one adventure to the next, but she still enjoys the feeling of crashing on her own bed once she's back home. In her free time, she likes to read fantasy books, watch K-dramas, listen to Japanese rock, and cook Indian-Muslim recipes passed down from her grandmother. Her creative writing focuses on mental health and religion with broader themes of familial bonds.

**Stanislav Taran** is an expert in international cooperation and municipal partnerships, advancing projects for a more sustainable and cohesive Europe. At the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, he implements a flagship initiative and the development of a digital matchmaking platform. He is also currently completing a Sustainable Development course at Harvard University.

**Antonio-Mihai Ciobanu** is a strategic disruptor and audit trailblazer, riding the waves of change at the Romanian Court of Auditors. As Disruptive Strategy Team Leader, he steers ethical leadership through the turbulence of digital transformation, mastering EU fund oversight with finesse. From Tax Revenue Officer to Audit Director, his career has carved paths through Romania's Ministry of Finance, auditing cross-border programs across Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and beyond. Currently, Antonio-Mihai is surfing the future, building skills for emerging roles in an AI-powered, blockchain-secured arena.

**Oleksandra Kobernik** is a policy advisor specialising in international affairs and economic strategy. She translates in-depth analysis into actionable recommendations strengthening EU policymaking. Oleksandra holds degrees in International Economics, EU Law, and Strategic Communications.

**Edlirë Maloku** is a dedicated medical student, researcher, and peer educator working at the intersection of science, education, and creativity. With a strong commitment to advancing medical knowledge and sharing it widely, she has authored both a children's book and a kids' television show, translating complex ideas into accessible stories that spark curiosity in young minds. Her work reflects a belief that learning extends beyond the classroom and the clinic, and that creativity is essential to building bridges between disciplines and generations. Passionate about the transformative role of education, she continues to explore how medicine, storytelling, and public engagement can come together to inspire and empower communities.

**Hayk Smbatyan** is a sociologist and peace & conflict scholar with over twelve years of experience in research design and

implementation across the post-Soviet region. He currently heads the research department of a leading Armenian think tank, lectures on research methods at the university level, and writes extensively in both academic and public-facing formats. His work bridges international knowledge with local know-how, and marries theory with practice. Having advocated for inclusion and equality, Hayk is drawn to philosophy, landscape & urban photography, and narrative storytelling. He deeply believes in the transformative power of narratives to illuminate, translate, and humanize the complexities of modern social life, and is convinced that the quintessence of a storyteller is to 'let people down' in the most beautiful ways possible.

**Andreea-Maria Ianoșiu** is a policy researcher and civic educator working at the crossroads of democracy, innovation, and digital transformation. She has a background in political science and international public affairs, and worked on research projects on energy, governance, and emerging technologies, while also creating educational and communication initiatives that bring complex policies closer to citizens. Passionate about the role of human-centered technology in shaping society, she is particularly drawn to questions of AI governance, energy justice, and citizen participation, areas where she believes interdisciplinary dialogue is most urgently needed. She values empathy, creativity, and curiosity as key drivers of meaningful impact, and sees dialogue as the most powerful tool to connect people and generate change.

**Enje J.V.** is a multidisciplinary architect and intersectional environmentalist. She specialises in sustainable architecture, cinematic architecture, and the conservation and restoration of heritage sites. Active in public diplomacy, she engages with diverse communities and promote cultural exchange through projects that bridge arts, heritage, and social mobility. As the founder of the Earthlings Coexistence Foundation, she brings together cultural

heritage, climate advocacy, and creative expression. Fluent in five languages and experienced across diverse international settings in Europe and Kurdistan, she utilizes her linguistic and intercultural skills to lead policy campaigns and promote youth engagement.

**Dennis Kamau Muniu** is a Kenyan graduate from FH Salzburg, where he attained his Master's in Innovation and Management with Distinction. He is a Rotarian, a member of the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), and a former One World Scholar and student representative for the Global South, representing students from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. He also served as a board member at the Afro-Asian Institute (AAI), an NGO dedicated to promoting social justice and intercultural dialogue, embodying the spirit of ubuntu. His work focuses on global issues, including climate change, gender equity, democracy, and sustainable development. Dennis is committed to bridging the gap between the Global North and the Global South through innovative and inclusive solutions. His latest peer-reviewed academic publication is *'The Role of Innovation Policy in Shaping the Future of Sustainable Development.'*

**Eleanor Dayan** is a doctoral candidate & direct-track presidential scholarship holder for Political Science at the Division of Government & Political Theory, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Haifa, The State of Israel. She holds M.A. and B.A. degrees in Political Science including a specialization certificate in International Relations from University of Haifa. Graduate of the National Security and Maritime Strategy track and internship supervisor at the Institute for Maritime Policy & Strategy (MPS). Her research fields are; political theory and post-structuralism, governance, security studies, and maritime policy.

**Mina Medjedović** is a political scientist engaged in democratization projects in Montenegro. She holds a Master's degree in International

Relations from Corvinus University of Budapest. Her work focuses on strengthening democratic institutions and processes, with particular emphasis on supporting political parties in becoming more transparent, accountable, and better equipped to advance their democratic capacity. As part of these efforts, she has also worked on programs promoting women's political participation and addressing violence against women in politics, ensuring that inclusivity remains central to democratization. These experiences have shaped her interest in the relationship between technology and democratic systems, particularly in how innovation can be integrated into governance practices to enhance citizen participation, reinforce institutions, and support more resilient democratic processes.

**Julian Seidenbusch** is a philosopher with a background in the British analytic tradition. His research interests range from logic and epistemology to ethics and politics. Having spent several years abroad in Portugal, Brazil and Scotland, he has discovered purpose in being an active global citizen volunteering for various NGOs such as AFS, the Austrian Service Abroad, Otra Cosa Network and Shelter Scotland. Over the years, he has held varying positions in these organisations. Currently, he serves on the board of AFS Austria and Club Alpbach Salzburg and is a member of the MUSMIG art collective.

**Zinab Abdelfatah** is a UN and diplomatic linguist (migration and refugee expert) at UNHCR and the Embassy of Canada in Egypt and part-time academic of English literature and cultural studies at October 6 University. She is a poet, storyteller, translator & interpreter, and researcher. Her academic research focuses on the representation and documentation of the Palestinian Nakba in contemporary literature from both Western and Arab perspectives. Zinab is also a founder of "Literature Overseas" project, a literature club providing spaces for featuring social issues while highlighting literary texts beyond the national boundaries in translation.

She is also an intercultural Euro-Med citizenship educational consultant and intercultural dialogue and policy debate expert with a focus on issues related to global challenges, Euro-African and Euro-Med regions like climate change, hate speech and leadership for gender equality, with many NGOs and cultural institutions including Anna Lindh Foundation, British Council and Goethe Institute in Cairo. Zinab uses arts and culture as indispensable means of raising awareness and influencing policies regarding refugees as well as human rights and international protection laws. She is currently a contributor to The Austrian Cultural Forum in Cairo's *Women Creative Writing Circles*. The main aim of her pursuit is to encourage more dialogue between members of the cultural sectors and representatives of other sectors working in the areas of peace-building, to foster a massive understanding of the unique and often underestimated role that arts can play in peace-building strategies.

**Tina Wong** is a security engineer from New York. She graduated from Stony Brook University, where she studied computer science and history. Passionate about exploring both the magic and moral questions that arise from technology's impact on society, she has volunteered at non-profits on digital transformation and data analysis projects, and has been involved in efforts to close the gender gap in technology through Girls Who Code. In her free time, she enjoys wandering through museum exhibits and learning new languages.

**Joseph Felix Krautgasser** studies law and history with a focus on political science at the University of Graz in Styria, Austria. In addition to his studies, he works as a project assistant at the University of Graz. His research focuses on the intersections of law and politics, particularly examining political systems and their evolution. With a strong interest in Austrian and European politics

and history within a global context, he actively explores questions surrounding politics and society.

**Bakhtiyor Salmanov** is a public policy specialist with a background in international relations. He holds MPA from LSE as Azerbaijan State Scholar, where his work focused on economic policy, digital governance, and the impact of artificial intelligence on the future of employment. He was an Islamic Development Bank International Scholarship Holder during his BA in International Relations at ADA University, and also participated in the Erasmus+ mobility programme at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

He is the co-founder and editor of *"Shining Pearl of Azerbaijan"*, a journal introducing Azerbaijani culture to the international community. His research has been published in several peer-reviewed journals, and he has spoken on education and youth development in Azerbaijan, where he also initiated social responsibility projects for school students. Bakhtiyor has professional experience across embassies, think tanks, and international institutions in the UK, Germany, and Azerbaijan. A devoted fan of The Lord of the Rings trilogy, he enjoys weaving stories and conversations around its themes of resilience and fellowship.

**Alexander Visser** is a master's student at the Leopold Franzens University of Innsbruck, exploring the intersection of high-performance computing and quantum computing. His interests extend beyond science to questions of agency and responsibility in the context of determinism and chaos—often reflected upon during long walks in the Alps. He regards European collaboration as vital for safeguarding and carrying forward our way of life to future generations and enjoys engaging in lively discussions on politics.

**Sunčica Rosić** is an MA student in Economics, Data, and Policy at Central European University (CEU) in Vienna, working at the crossroads of data-driven healthcare, public finance and social entrepreneurship. With a completed Bachelor of Science in Data Science and Society from CEU, she possesses extensive knowledge in computational social science and data for social good. Sunčica has worked on several research projects: on machine learning detection of youth depression and Parkinson's Disease and co-authored a publication in the journal Applied Sciences titled *Detection of Psychomotor Retardation in Youth Depression: A Machine Learning Approach to Kinematic Analysis of Handwriting*. Passionate about human technology interaction, Internet Governance and peace-building in the Balkans, she believes in the importance of building cross-disciplinary scholarly communities in social, scientific and policy landscapes. She values integrity, intellectual curiosity and pluralist perspectives as pivotal ingredients for social change.

**Angelina Widmann** recently graduated high school and now studies law and biology while working as a constitutional history project assistant at the university of Salzburg. She describes herself as a professional sidequester, as she played sports for 2 Austrian nationalteams and won several of the world's biggest nature photography competitions. Being around very opposite fields, she weaves these experiences into a web from which she crafts texts that she enjoys performing at poetry slams. Her thematic focus is on queer topics, as well as peace and the environment.

**Tiago Azzi** is a MSc student in Neuroscience in the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree program. He currently works with dementia, aging, and depression across the globe. His main goal is to contribute to the advancement of brain and mental health from the cell to the healthcare levels, using computational tools and adopting an interdisciplinary approach.

**Daniel Nenning** calls himself a “Haflinger clearing the snow” — grounded, persistent, and always moving forward. In his 20s, ideology was his fuel. Strong beliefs, debates, and visions shaped his early path. But through trial, error, and countless conversations, he realized that conviction alone rarely changes the world. In his 30s, he shifted course: from ideology to impact. This pivot opened doors into sustainability, systems change, and cultural transformation. He learned that impact grows where people connect resources, skills, and culture and where action follows belief.

Today, Daniel is an entrepreneur, connector, and changemaker. His strength lies in starting fires that keep burning — inspiring others to sell the future, bridge divides, and co-create solutions that matter. His journey shows that everyone has the capacity to achieve something beautiful — not by waiting for the perfect moment, but by having the courage to adjust, to act, and to keep moving forward.

**Mike** is an officer within the Austrian Armed Forces and a European citizen.

**Abdallah Essam Elbassiouny** is a petroleum engineer from Egypt with over three years of professional experience in crude oil refining, where he found his passion for sustainability through his work in process engineering and plant operations. He is currently an Erasmus Mundus master’s student in Chemical Innovation and Regulation (ChIR), offered by the Universities of Bologna, Barcelona, and Algarve.

During his experience in the oil and gas industry, monitoring and dealing with its negative environmental impact motivated him to seek out innovative and sustainable opportunities in the energy field. As an advocate for sustainability, Abdallah is devoted to helping to bridge the gap from industrial practice to environmental responsibilities. Abdallah’s research interests involve the areas of improving process optimization, green chemistry, and chemical

regulation in an attempt to design cleaner, safer, and more efficient applications for the energy industry. Together with his strong commitment to climate change and energy transition toward sustainability and through his current studies, Abdallah continues to explore how innovative technology and regulatory approaches can be further applied to the world’s work toward affordable and clean energy (SDG 7) and climate action (SDG 13). Outside of his professional life, Abdallah is a traveller, nature lover, and history buff who loves to visit and learn about new places and the stories they tell.

**Alexandra Egger** is an aspiring physicist, language enthusiast, and philosopher, exploring the intersections of science, languages, and critical thinking. Born in the Tyrolean Alps, she is currently pursuing a BSc in Physics at the University of Innsbruck. Alexandra’s curiosity has taken her from philosophy competitions and economics awards to research in clinical epidemiology, quantum circuits, and environmental mechanics. Fluent in German and English, with knowledge of Latin and Spanish, she brings analytical rigor, creativity, and a commitment to public engagement into every project she undertakes. For Alexandra, curiosity and interdisciplinary thinking are not just tools. They are a way to add color and perspective to science, learning, and life itself.

**Patryk Litwiński** is a young professional in international security and diplomacy, currently responsible for business partnerships at the Warsaw Security Forum - one of Europe’s leading platforms on transatlantic relations and strategic affairs. In the past, he served within the Chancellery of the Prime Minister during the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, where he coordinated high-level delegations attending summits in Poland. His professional background also includes experience at the European Academy of Diplomacy and the Embassy of Poland in Paris. A graduate of the University of Warsaw, he completed academic

exchange programmes at Sciences Po Paris and Sichuan University. His work focuses on European foreign and security affairs, NATO, and the evolving dynamics of transatlantic cooperation.

**Alexander Rauscher** ist Mitgründer und Managing Partner der accilium Gruppe und verfügt über mehr als 20 Jahre internationale Erfahrung als Mobilitätsexperte in der Fahrzeug-, Schienen- und Flugzeugindustrie. Als Unternehmer und Berater treibt er für seine Kunden:Innen die digitale Transformation und den kulturellen Wandel stetig voran. Darüber hinaus ist Alexander als Investor und Beirat aktiv.

**Kerem Ergün** is a high school student studying at the technical institute *Technologisches Gewerbemuseum TGM* in Vienna, Austria. His program combines secondary education with university-level studies in industrial and mechanical engineering, for which he will receive a technical diploma upon graduation. He is currently working on his diploma thesis in collaboration with the Swedish manufacturer *SKF*, where he is analyzing a new market innovation. Outside his academic pursuits, Kerem has a keen interest in economic, political, and scientific affairs and enjoys engaging in discussions with others. In his free time, he can be found designing solutions to everyday challenges or having profound conversations with his pet Lagotto Romagnolo about his next big idea.

**Hoomeshree Neha Rawah** is a vibrant painter, visual arts teacher, and dedicated researcher hailing from Mauritius. She is currently pursuing doctoral research in artistic education at the University of Porto, bringing a wealth of experience from her time as an educator across elementary, secondary, and preschool classrooms in both the USA and Mauritius. Her research bridges theory and practice, focusing on decolonising art education, fostering experiential learning, and reinforcing cultural identity through art-based pedagogy. She aims to redesign the educational curriculums to

directly address contemporary world issues and resonate with the young generation. Beyond the classroom, Hoomeshree is an active leader and community engager, with experience coordinating large-scale cultural events, mentoring international students, including YALI fellows, and championing intercultural competence. Her journey across continents infuses her teaching and research with a dynamic, culturally sensitive, and research-driven approach, positioning her as a unique talent in the field of art and education.

**Vinzenz Herkner** studies Drug Discovery Sciences in Amsterdam and is driven by his fascination with underlying mechanisms at the molecular level that have noticeable effects in the visible world. In addition to his deep fascination with science, he is an artist and works at UAEM (Universities Allied for Essential Medicines) to promote equitable access to medicines. In his artistic work, he primarily addresses current issues and discusses them in images and writing in abstract works using intuitive (visual) language.

**Peter Mumford** works in public policy in London. He has two degrees in Classics from the University of Cambridge. His research focused on the role of ancient history in the construction of cultural identity, and ancient Greek perspectives on non-Greek cultures in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. He also has previous experience in strategic advisory and open-source investigations, and has worked in both the private and non-profit sectors on issues relating to Ukraine and Russia. He is interested in international security, geopolitics and anything related to the ancient world!

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