

WHAT THE NEXT GENERATION HEARD – EUROPE AS A TASK

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A STRATEGIC SYNTHESIS OF THE TRANSITION TO EUROPEAN ADULTHOOD

Dear readers,

I am proud to present *What the Next Generation Heard*, a report born from the partnership between the Europe as a Task conference and the Young Public Affairs Leaders Academy (YPALA).

The narrative of Europe stepping into its strategic adulthood is currently shaping the highest levels of policy debate. We are witnessing a critical shift moving away from an era of strategic dependency and idealism, toward a future defined by resilience, self-reliance, and value-based realism. These concepts are not merely abstract geopolitical theories. They are the direct blueprints for how Europe will navigate its economy, security, and global standing in the decades to come.

While the need for a mature Europe is widely discussed by today's leaders, the perspective of those who will actually live and manage this new reality is too often missing from the room. The insights captured in this report carry profound meaning. They represent the voices of the very generation that will inherit these consequences and bear the weight of their implementation. What the next generation takes from these strategic shifts and how they interpret them fundamentally matters.

We created this synthesis to bridge that gap. Our goal was not only to document the policies being proposed, but to evaluate how credible, accessible, and urgent they feel to young professionals. The ability of our youth rapporteurs to interpret this transition and separate the rhetoric from the actionable steps is what makes this contribution distinct.

I invite you to explore this narrative and engage with the vision of those who will shape the future of European public affairs.

Tobiáš Bruno Galia
European Affairs Manager & Co-founder YPALA

METHODOLOGICAL AND PROCESS FRAMEWORK

METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS: HOW THE SYNTHESIS WAS CREATED

The insights and recommendations presented in this report are the result of a structured, collaborative analytical process. To ensure the highest level of accuracy and depth, each session was covered by a dedicated team of three rapporteurs, operating within a system of rotating responsibilities that combined strategic leadership with detailed evidence gathering.

THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The synthesis was built on a dual-layer approach. For each thematic block, a Lead Rapporteur was responsible for structuring the flow of information in real-time and transforming live discussions into a coherent analytical framework. Their role was to identify overarching strategic arguments, connect ideas across different speakers, and define the session's core message.

CAPTURING NUANCE AND DEPTH

The Lead Rapporteur was supported by two Associate Rapporteurs, whose focus was on high-fidelity documentation. Their task was to capture the fine nuances of the debate. Specific examples, underlying tensions, and the subtle "reading between the lines" that often disappears in standard reporting. This ensured that no significant argument or critical counterpoint was lost.

SYNTHESIS AND ALIGNMENT

Following each session, the team engaged in a rigorous alignment process. The Associate Rapporteurs provided the detailed data needed to fill analytical gaps and clarify complex points, while the Lead Rapporteur synthesized these inputs into the final conclusions. This collaborative rotation ensured that every section of this report benefited from both a broad strategic overview and a meticulous attention to detail, reflecting a truly collective generational perspective.

YOUTH RAPPORTEURS PROFILES

The following rapporteurs formed the core of YPALA's reflection team at the conference. Selected based on their academic, professional, and communication experience, they represented a balanced combination of policy expertise, legal background, and media practice.



TEREZA NEKVASILOVÁ

The key to tomorrow's solutions lies in the education of today's youth!" Tereza Nekvasilová is an advocate for educational innovation and youth empowerment, currently finishing her degree in Education studies at the University of Cambridge. Driven by a long-term vision to modernise educational systems to better meet 21st-century challenges, she actively bridges academic research with actionable policy, most recently through her experience as Head of Outreach at The Wilberforce Society, Cambridge's student-led think tank. Her work as a Liaison Officer during the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU and her participation in the Young Public Affairs Leaders Academy in Brussels, as well as engagement with Models of the European Parliament and Council have given her firsthand insight into high-level diplomacy and the EU's approach to today's most pressing issues.

In supporting her peers, she co-founded the "Oxbridge Stipendium" initiative to support students aiming to study at the world's top universities, has tutored marginalised youth through People in Need, and is now mentoring younger peers through the Yoda Mentorship Programme. Having studied and volunteered across diverse global environments - from European schools to community research projects in Nepal and Bolivia - she brings an open-minded, cross-cultural perspective to her role as a Youth Correspondent at the Europe as a Task 2026 conference. Tereza looks forward to engaging thoughtfully with expert dialogues on Europe's strategic and geopolitical future, focusing on translating these complex discussions into accessible, meaningful insights that empower and inform the next generation



KLÁRA MALINOVSKÁ

Klára Malinovská is a graduate student in the Erasmus Mundus programme in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, with a focus on state capture and institutional resilience in Central and Eastern Europe. In her MA thesis, she examines media capture as a key mechanism through which elites influence democratic participation.

Alongside her studies, she works as a journalist at the Czech public radio's iROZHLAS.cz, where she covers developments across Eastern Europe. Her previous experience includes internships with Transparency International Czech Republic and the Office of the Government during the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU, as well as participation in youth-focused EU policy initiatives, including the Prague European Summit youth track.

At the “Europe as a Task” conference, she brings a perspective focused on the relationship between strong institutions, good governance, and informed citizens, particularly in the context of Europe’s competitiveness and strategic resilience.



JAN BARVA

Jan Barva is a law student at Masaryk University's Faculty of Law, with interests spanning law, international relations, and youth empowerment. He is active in several youth initiatives, including the U.S. Ambassador's Youth Council, and is an alumnus of the Díky, že můžem Academy and the Young Public Affairs Leaders Academy (YPALA).

Alongside his studies, Jan works as a scientific assistant at the Department of Constitutional Law and Political Science, focusing on human rights development within the Czech constitutional framework. On the youth empowerment front, Jan is a member of the Participation Group under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, where he works to bring the youth perspective into policymaking. He also developed VOICES for RIGHTS - an extracurricular human rights syllabus for high school students, and serves as a mentor in the AMIGO program run by Středoškolák roku. In 2024, Jan represented Czechia at the U.S. Department of State's program, Benjamin Franklin Transatlantic Fellowship, where he engaged with young leaders from both sides of the Atlantic and built a firsthand transatlantic perspective. This experience expanded his understanding of how multicultural dialogue can tackle the shared challenges of the contemporary world.

At the conference, Jan hopes to bring a youth voice to the discussions, drawing on his cross-cultural background to explore how young people can actively shape Europe's future.

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: THE DAWN OF STRATEGIC REALISM

This Executive Summary synthesizes the core outcomes of the Europe as a Task conference, interpreted through the unique lens of the next generation of leaders. The report serves as a strategic bridge between high-level policy discourse and generational expectations, providing a distinct perspective on the Union's transition from strategic dependency toward a state of adulthood. This transition is characterized by a shift toward comprehensive resilience, economic self-reliance, and value-based realism.

The analysis identifies critical structural challenges discussed during the sessions, particularly the staggering 800 billion EUR annual loss resulting from Single Market fragmentation. From the perspective of emerging professionals, the proposed 28th regime and the unification of capital markets are essential tools to stop the brain drain and ensure that European innovation remains under European ownership. The report also highlights a key geopolitical paradox noted in the debates: the quest for green sustainability must not lead to increased strategic dependencies on authoritarian regimes.

In the fields of technology and security, the synthesis captures a call for deep-tech sovereignty and a fundamental shift in the European culture of risk. It emphasizes that democratic resilience - built on critical thinking and civic preparedness - is as vital as hard military capabilities. Furthermore, the analysis covers the rising importance of polar power politics and the necessity of a cohesive defense industrial base to protect the eastern flank, framing these as immediate challenges for those who will lead in the coming decades.

These findings underscore a narrow five-year window of opportunity to transform diagnostic clarity into legislative action. For the next generation, these conclusions are not abstract concepts but a survival roadmap for a future they will be responsible for sustaining. This report ultimately presents the conference findings as a mandate for a bold, unified, and strategically independent Europe.

II. GEOPOLITICAL VISION: RESILIENCE AND VALUE-BASED REALISM

The strategic foundation of the conference was established during the opening dialogue between President Petr Pavel and President Alexander Stubb, framed through the lens of a "Europe of Resilience." The core ambition presented is the transformation of European society into a structure capable of defending itself from external threats. As captured by the reflection team, this defense must be fundamentally two-way. While NATO remains the undeniable guarantor of hard military capabilities, the European Union must urgently step up as the provider of non-military security, specifically through targeted investments and the rapid scaling of its industrial base. Furthermore, resilience extends far beyond kinetic warfare. It demands what the rapporteurs identified as "democratic resilience," which includes the fortification of critical thinking, civic awareness, and institutional preparedness against hybrid threats.

A pivotal conceptual shift observed during these discussions is the definitive move toward "Value-Based Realism." For the next generation of leaders, this framework resolves a long-standing European dilemma. It posits that (European values, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law) are not in opposition to pragmatic geopolitical interests. Instead, they are the very interests that must be defended with assertive power. As noted in the analytical inputs, the strategic formula is no longer a choice between values or realism, but rather a firm commitment to "Value AND Realism." Europe can no longer afford to be just a moral superpower; it must become a geopolitical one.

This pragmatic awakening directly influences the institutional future of the Union. The dialogue emphasized that Europe will only be as strong as its member states are willing to make it, leading to the necessary emergence of a "Europe of the Willing." This suggests that future integration will likely be driven by a core group of member states ready to deepen cooperation, rather than being continuously stalled by a perpetual search for absolute consensus.

Consequently, the concept of a "Multispeed Europe" was reframed from a political taboo to an absolute geopolitical necessity. Reforming internal frameworks, including potential changes to the EU acquis, is now viewed as a practical step forward. Enlargement and the deepening of the Union are no longer viewed as competing goals but as twin strategic pillars necessary for securing the continent. However, the rapporteurs highlighted a profound sense of urgency attached to this vision. The leaders indicated a strictly limited window of opportunity, estimated at merely five years, to enact these institutional changes before the global order solidifies without European influence.

Moreover, this ambitious vision is heavily shadowed by the reality of current strategic dependencies. As the Union ambitiously pursues its climate goals, it risks trading one critical external dependency for another.

“The more we try to go green, the reddish China becomes.”

Youth rapporteur Jan Barva

This stark observation captures the sobering reality that Europe's green transition is currently inextricably linked to Chinese supply chains for critical raw materials and clean technologies. The rapporteurs noted that this paradox demands a rapid and sophisticated "de-risking" strategy. As discussed in the geoeconomic panels, the goal is not an impossible total decoupling, but a strategic recalibration to ensure that environmental progress does not come at the fatal cost of strategic autonomy. For the emerging generation, solving this equation is not merely an economic challenge, but the ultimate geopolitical test of European adulthood.

III. ECONOMIC SECURITY: DISMANTLING THE BARRIERS OF FRAGMENTATION

The economic deliberations of the conference provided a stark and uncompromising diagnosis of the Union's internal structural weaknesses. Central to this discussion was the Cost of Non-Europe, a concept that highlights the staggering financial and strategic price of a fragmented Single Market. As noted by the rapporteur team, this fragmentation currently costs the Union approximately 800 billion EUR annually in lost potential. This economic hemorrhaging is not a result of a lack of talent or resources, but rather the persistence of non-tariff barriers that remain shockingly high. In practical terms, these barriers are estimated at 44% for goods and a prohibitive 110% for services, effectively stifling the very sector that should be the engine of modern European growth.

For the next generation of professionals, these numbers represent more than just statistics; they describe a market that is often easier to exit than to scale within. The debates underscored that for Europe to remain a global competitor against the agility of the United States and the state-driven scale of China, it must transition toward a Savings and Investment Union. The current reality is a paradox where European households hold massive savings in low-yield bank accounts while European startups are forced to seek venture capital from non-European sources. This creates a cycle where the continent essentially invents the future but sells the ownership, exporting its most promising intellectual property and eventual tax revenues to foreign ecosystems.

To dismantle these barriers, the synthesis points toward the implementation of the 28th Regime. This proposed unified legal framework would allow companies to incorporate and scale across all 27 member states under a single set of rules. For a young entrepreneur, the ability to bypass the administrative nightmare of 27 different labor, tax, and insolvency laws is seen as a vital prerequisite for survival. As the rapporteurs observed, the current complexity acts as a "proximity tax" that disproportionately affects small and medium-sized enterprises and innovative startups, which lack the legal departments necessary to navigate the continental labyrinth.

However, the analysis suggests that legislative hurdles are only half the battle. A significant cultural barrier was identified as the systemic aversion to risk that permeates both European regulation and social fabric. The European environment tends to penalize failure, viewing a collapsed business as a permanent stigma rather than a necessary, iterative step in the innovation cycle. This mindset fosters a "brain drain" where the most ambitious talents do not just leave for higher salaries, but for ecosystems that reward boldness and tolerate the risks inherent in high-growth industries.

“Europe is like a person who thinks too much. It knows exactly what it needs to do to improve its life, but it keeps hesitating, not because it lacks intelligence or resources, but because the overall mindset rewards caution instead of boldness.”

Youth rapporteur Jan Barva

This analogy captures the essence of the generational frustration voiced throughout the conference. The rapporteurs highlighted that while Europe excels at regulation and often sets the global standard, it frequently regulates what it has not yet built. The synthesis calls for a recalibration of the European project to prioritize economic oxygen for new industries. Without a unified capital market and a cultural shift toward embracing risk, the Union risks becoming a museum of past industrial success rather than a laboratory for future breakthroughs. For the emerging generation, the task is clear. Europe must stop over-analyzing its potential and start facilitating its execution.

IV. TECHNOLOGICAL FRONTIERS: FROM REGULATION TO AMBITION

The technological discourse at the conference signaled a definitive end to the era where software alone could provide a sustainable competitive advantage. In a global landscape where AI models and basic software applications have become commodities, the synthesis of the debates points toward a future rooted in Deep Tech. This sector, which combines high-level scientific discovery with physical engineering, represents Europe's primary path to leadership. The transition requires moving beyond theoretical excellence into the aggressive commercialization of world-class academic research.

The rapporteurs observed that the role of universities must undergo a fundamental evolution to support this shift. These institutions can no longer function merely as educational centers or isolated ivory towers of research. Instead, they must become innovation giants and safe spaces for intellectual friction that fosters true economic independence. For the next generation, the university is the primary site where intellectual property must be protected and scaled. By transforming academic breakthroughs into market-ready technologies, Europe can ensure that the value generated by its research remains within the Union rather than being exported to foreign ecosystems for final development.

A central theme of the discussion was the persistent and often paralyzing tension between regulation and ambition. While the European Union leads the world in creating sophisticated regulatory frameworks such as the AI Act, there remains a critical risk that Europe becomes a global referee for technologies it does not actually produce. For emerging leaders, the challenge is to transform these legal structures into a foundation for trust-based innovation. The goal is to ensure that European standards act as a competitive advantage and a mark of quality rather than a bureaucratic ceiling that prevents companies from reaching global scale.

The reflection team captured a growing concern among young professionals regarding this regulatory imbalance. There is a strong consensus that the next five years must be dedicated to building industrial capacity that matches our legislative output.

“It is not enough to be the most ethical player in the room if you are also the least relevant. We need to pair our regulatory leadership with industrial audacity, ensuring that the rules we write are meant to empower our own innovators rather than just managing the products of our competitors.”

Youth rapporteur Klára Malinovská

Strategic autonomy in the digital sphere also demands a radical shift in how advanced technologies are utilized across the continent. Large Language Models and Artificial Intelligence should not be viewed merely as productivity tools for simple tasks or communication. They must be recognized as fundamental engines for scientific discovery, materials science, and industrial optimization. This transition is essential for securing Europe’s position in the global value chain.

By focusing on the intersection of hard science and digital tools, the Union can move from being a consumer of foreign digital products to being a primary architect of the technological future. The synthesis concludes that this technological frontier is where the transition to strategic adulthood will be most visible. Success requires a culture that views regulation not as the end goal but as the framework within which bold industrial ambitions are realized. For the emerging generation, the task is to bridge the gap between complex research and global markets, turning European ingenuity into European sovereignty.

V. SECURITY REALITIES: POLAR POLITICS AND THE EASTERN FLANK

The security deliberations at the conference introduced a new level of urgency regarding the emergence of Polar Power Politics. Historically viewed as an environmental sanctuary, the Arctic is rapidly shifting into a geopolitical battlefield where the interests of major powers collide. With Russia controlling over 50% of the Arctic coastline and China aggressively positioning itself as a near-Arctic state, the rapporteurs noted that the thin ice of the region is leading to thick tensions. This northern theater is no longer a peripheral concern but a central component of European territorial integrity and resource security.

This geopolitical pressure extends directly to the structural integrity of the European defense industrial base. The current state of European defense is hindered by a lack of collective demand and deeply fragmented procurement processes. While tools like the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) are recognized as essential, the synthesis of the debates reveals that they currently suffer from high complexity and slow implementation. The reflection team observed that the primary obstacle is not a lack of technological capability but a lack of political synchronization. Europe continues to purchase a vast array of incompatible systems, which undermines the interoperability required for a credible deterrent on the Eastern Flank.

The security outlook for the coming years is defined by a window of opportunity that is rapidly closing. The rapporteurs highlighted that the next five years will determine whether European defense cooperation can move beyond rhetoric toward actual capability delivery and civil preparedness. This is not merely a matter of industrial policy. It is a fundamental requirement for social stability. The concept of resilience must therefore transition from a buzzword to a practical reality, involving the hardening of critical infrastructure and the preparation of the civilian population for long-term systemic threats.

For the younger demographic, these strategic failures carry a personal and existential weight that was palpable throughout the conference discussions. The next generation views the lack of a cohesive defense strategy as a direct threat to their future safety.

“There is a sobering and direct reality that the youth generation will be the ones physically standing in the Eastern trenches if European defense cooperation fails.”

Youth rapporteur Tereza Nekvasilová

The synthesis concludes that the era of relying on external security guarantees without internal contribution is over. To protect its democratic way of life, Europe must harmonize its defense industry and establish a credible, unified presence from the High North to the Eastern borders. For the emerging generation of professionals, the success of this military and industrial integration is the only safeguard against being the first to face the consequences of a fragmented continent.

VI. GENERATIONAL REFLECTION: THE BURDEN OF IMPLEMENTATION

This final analytical pillar addresses a critical observation made by the reflection team throughout the conference: the persistent paradox of youth representation. While many speakers frequently highlighted the natural boldness and technological savvy of the next generation as the primary solution to European stagnation, the discussions were largely conducted about them rather than with them. For the young professionals present, the issues of brain drain, a punitive culture of failure, and the economic fragmentation of the Single Market are not abstract policy points. They are lived realities that dictate where they choose to build their careers and how they perceive their future within the Union.

The rapporteurs noted that this gap between rhetoric and inclusion creates a sense of generational urgency. When leaders speak of the necessity of a 28th regime or the unification of capital markets, they are describing the infrastructure that the next generation will be required to manage and sustain. The synthesis of the debates suggests that while the current leadership is effective at identifying the symptoms of Europe's strategic adolescence, there is a lack of focus on the practical transition of power. True strategic adulthood requires more than just a change in policy; it requires a change in the seats at the table.

The conference successfully provided a comprehensive diagnosis of the illnesses currently affecting the European project, specifically its market fragmentation, systemic risk-aversion, and slow reactivity to global shifts. However, the reflection team observed that the solutions proposed often rely on a long-term implementation phase that will be entirely the responsibility of the emerging generation. For these young leaders, the five-year window of opportunity identified by experts is not a theoretical timeframe but the start of their own professional peak.

The weight of this responsibility was most clearly articulated in the team's analysis of the transition to a more assertive and resilient Europe.

“The conference brilliantly diagnosed Europe’s illnesses—fragmentation, risk-aversion, and slow reactivity—and while it offered concrete solutions like the 28th regime, it left the heavy lifting of actualizing this transition to adulthood squarely on the shoulders of the next generation.”

Youth rapporteur Tereza Nekvasilová

This reflection captures the overarching sentiment of the YPALA synthesis. For the next generation, the transition to strategic adulthood is a mandate for action rather than a subject for further debate. The findings of this report serve as a reminder that the credibility of European policy is measured by its accessibility and urgency to those who will inherit its consequences. The heavy lifting of building a self-reliant, resilient, and competitive Union has begun, and the success of this transition will depend on the ability of the current leadership to empower the very generation they so often describe as the future. The synthesis concludes that Europe’s coming of age will only be complete when the generational perspective is integrated as a permanent feature of its strategic architecture.

VII. CONCLUSION: THE FIVE-YEAR WINDOW

The final synthesis of the Europe as a Task conference serves as more than a summary of debates. It is a call for immediate and decisive action. Throughout the sessions, a remarkable consensus emerged regarding the necessary tools for European survival. The blueprints for the 28th regime, the defense industrial union, and the savings and investment union are no longer theoretical. The intellectual groundwork has been laid, and the "what" of the European project is now clearly defined. The remaining and most critical challenge is the "how" and the "when."

The experts and leaders gathered in Prague shared a sobering assessment of the timeline. Europe is operating within a narrow five-year window to secure its position in a rapidly hardening global order. This period is not merely a political cycle but a decisive timeframe for transforming diagnostic clarity into industrial and legislative reality. If the Union fails to integrate its markets and defense capabilities within this window, it risks being relegated to a secondary role in a world shaped by more agile and assertive powers.

The reflection team captured the essence of this urgency, noting that the value of the conference lay in its refusal to hide behind diplomatic ambiguity.

“This conference mattered not because it resolved Europe’s challenges, but because it named them honestly. Europe knows what it needs to do, the tools are being built, and the window is closing.”

Youth rapporteur Jan Barva

The transition to strategic adulthood is ultimately a test of political will and generational continuity. The task of Europe is no longer simply to survive or to manage crises as they arise, but to mature into a power that can actively shape the global future according to its own values and interests. This report demonstrates that the next generation is not only ready to inherit this responsibility but is already providing the analytical framework necessary to navigate it.

Success in this mission will depend on whether the current leadership can move beyond rhetoric and truly empower the next generation to take the reins of a unified, resilient, and bold Union. The coming five years will determine if Europe steps into its adulthood as a sovereign leader or remains in a state of perpetual dependency. For those who will live the consequences of these decisions, the choice is clear. The time for diagnosis has passed, and the era of implementation must begin.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would like to thank all the speakers and participants who engaged with critical questions and shared their visions for the future of the Union. Our greatest appreciation goes to our team of rapporteurs - Tereza Nekvasilová, Klára Malinovská, and Jan Barva. Their analytical dedication, ability to synthesize complex ideas, and courage to formulate a distinct youth perspective serve as tangible proof that the next generation is ready to take responsibility for the European project.

ABOUT YPALA

The Young Public Affairs Leaders Academy (YPALA) is a platform dedicated to bridging the gap between current decision-makers and the next generation of public affairs and European policy professionals. Our mission is to overcome generational divides and integrate the perspective of young talent directly into the spaces where the future is shaped.

Leveraging a network of young professionals active in European institutions, academia, and the media, we provide structured reflection and new impulses for strategic debates. We believe that true European strategic adulthood requires leadership that is analytically rigorous, ethically grounded, and capable of acting decisively in a complex multipolar world.



SHAPING THE FUTURE TOGETHER

The findings of this report are an invitation to dialogue. We invite partners, stakeholders, and fellow professionals to engage with these insights and seek ways to transform these visions into concrete actions. We are ready to contribute to building a unified, resilient, and bold Europe—not just as observers, but as active architects.

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We believe in
young people
and their power
to **change the**
world.

