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Workshop report: The OSCE and its role in strengthening European security architecture

Maria Branea

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About the author

Maria Branea joined the European Leadership Network in April 2024 as a Research and Administrative Assistant on the Eurasia Futures project. Prior to joining the ELN, Maria worked as a Program Associate at LSE IDEAS, the London School of Economics' foreign policy think tank, and the Romanian-based Ratiu Forum. While there, she assisted with the Russia-Ukraine Dialogues and the Central and South-East Europe Program, as part of which she coordinated the Journalism Program aimed at bolstering independent media in the region. She holds a Master's degree in Russian and East European Studies from the University of Oxford, where she previously studied for a Bachelor's in History.

Executive summary

This report, based on the findings of a discussion between multinational experts convened by the ELN, explores the historic, current, and future role of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and its toolbox in maintaining and strengthening European security architecture.

Over its 50-year history, the OSCE has evolved through various phases, from its early days during the Cold War to its post-Cold War "Golden Age" and now to its current challenges amid rising geopolitical tensions. Over the past ten years, this consensus-based organisation has been weakened significantly by the growing political divergences among its membership and, above all, by the deep breach in trust between Russia and the rest of Europe, precipitated by Russia's 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine.

Nevertheless, key OSCE processes and field programmes such as electoral monitoring, crisis management on the ground, human rights advocacy, and post-conflict normalisation remain important tools in shoring up European security. The continued existence of a forum for dialogue between Russia and the rest of Europe may also prove valuable in the future, even if its current functioning is limited.

Finland's upcoming Chairpersonship in 2025 marks the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, a reminder that cooperation and dialogue were possible even amid the ideological divergences of the Cold War. The chairpersonship will aim to reinforce the common values captured by Helsinki – to the extent possible, given today's ideological divergences.

Looking to the future, the discussion found that the OSCE's role will continue to be profoundly affected by the future trajectory of Russia's invasion and occupation of Ukraine. Drawing on [previous ELN work](#) on scenarios for the future of European security under different war outcomes, the participants found that:

- In a scenario where the war precipitated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine remains prolonged, but the wider Russia-NATO conflict is contained, the OSCE could play a significant role in addressing the human dimension of the conflict, particularly through humanitarian efforts, including assistance for those living in occupied territories.
- In a scenario involving creeping escalation between Russia and Western countries, the OSCE's primary focus would be on reducing risks and managing tensions between Russia, Ukraine, and their respective allies. By utilising processes like the Moscow Mechanism, the OSCE could ensure transparency in prisoner-of-war treatment and collect data on war crimes.
- In a scenario of massive escalation, where there could be direct conflict between Russia and NATO countries, the OSCE's influence would become

extremely limited. Despite potential declines in funding and relevance, the OSCE's diverse membership would keep the organisation on life-support as a crucial communication channel during and potentially after the conflict.

- In scenarios where Russia and Ukraine enter negotiations, the OSCE could potentially play an important role. The organisation's capabilities and limitations need to be well understood: as an organisation of member states, including Russia and Ukraine, it would not realistically be able to kickstart or mediate in ceasefire or peace negotiations. However, if Ukraine, Russia, and other supporting states did embark on talks at some point in the future, the OSCE could provide technical advice and capacity to implement a future agreement, for instance, in monitoring any ceasefire. Participants noted that there is a perception, especially in Ukraine, that the OSCE failed because it did not prevent the 2022 invasion; the OSCE can mitigate this characterisation and improve its chances of being an effective partner in the implementation of a negotiated settlement by engaging in better public diplomacy, and reminding onlookers that the OSCE's conflict prevention toolkit can only operate if there is political will to back it.

Looking ahead, the OSCE's extensive experience in post-conflict aid and its focus on human security dimensions, like arms control, gender issues, and human rights, positions it well for a significant role in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and rebuilding of human security, including in disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation, and tackling the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

The OSCE's future relevance may lie in its ability to act as a bridge between NATO's hard security guarantees and its own soft security measures. Additionally, the OSCE's diverse membership could make it a unique platform for dialogue between the West and Russia.

Given the anticipated insecurities and instabilities of the next 10-15 years, including the modernisation of nuclear arsenals and the impact of emerging technologies, the OSCE's most impactful period may still lie ahead. Its varied toolbox of mechanisms and processes, combined with its unique membership dynamics, could position the OSCE as a crucial player in the future of European and global security architecture.

Introduction

In July 2024, the European Leadership Network (ELN) convened a multinational group of experts from multiple countries across Europe to analyse the OSCE's toolkit and what it can achieve under different possible futures for European security. This report brings together the findings of this discussion. It provides the groundwork for further research that the ELN will be carrying out in 2024-25.

The OSCE from a historic perspective

The OSCE has undergone significant transformations over the past 50 years, evolving through various phases to address the shifting dynamics of international security and cooperation.

The pioneering phase (1973-1990)

The OSCE was initially established as a dialogue platform between the Western and Eastern blocs during the Cold War, also featuring Non-Aligned states between the two camps. This period was characterised by extensive diplomatic engagements, particularly through the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). Significantly, the Soviet Union found itself having to address head-on questions beyond just hard security, grappling with the human dimensions of conflict, in particular human rights, marking a significant shift in diplomatic discourse.

The golden age (1990-2010)

The post-Cold War era saw a flourishing of initiatives and processes within the OSCE. The 1991 Moscow meeting allowed newly independent former Soviet states to scrutinise human rights implementations, reflecting a broader commitment to human security. New issues such as peacekeeping and energy security were incorporated into the OSCE's agenda, and the organisation set up its first field offices.

Despite these achievements, the OSCE faced challenges due to the growing influence of major powers and the resulting discrepancies within the system. The practical powers of the OSCE were tested following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the resulting regional conflicts, for example, in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The period following the 1994 Budapest summit saw a 'revenge of the nomenklatura'¹, with the newly formed Russian state pressing for increased centralisation of the OSCE structure, modelled on its own bureaucracy, with an emphasis on a strong central Chairman with substantial authority over field missions and organisational processes.

This period also saw the growth of NATO as an alternative international security framework, particularly as the United States warmed to the idea of NATO enlargement. As more and more post-communist countries joined NATO and the EU, Russia increasingly felt the need to revitalise the OSCE as a balancing counterpoint to the other international organisations from which it was excluded.

Significantly, former Soviet states, particularly in Central Asia, used the OSCE to enhance their legitimacy. This set the scene for the OSCE as a platform through

¹"Nomenklatura" refers to the members of the communist party who constituted the bureaucracy of the Soviet Union.

which smaller states could pursue their interests beyond their role in global crisis management and sit at the same table as the great powers.

Recent developments (2010-present)

In recent years, the OSCE has encountered several challenges that have impacted its effectiveness. Growing tensions between Russia and the United States largely centred on the enlargement of NATO, led to a weakening of the OSCE's role. Key agreements, like the Open Skies Treaty, saw withdrawals by both Russia and the U.S., impacting the OSCE's operations.

Nevertheless, the OSCE continued to play a role in crises such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict over Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine and occupation of Crimea in 2014. These demonstrated its continued capacity for intervention and conflict management, although political obstacles often complicated its efforts.

Key events and milestones

- Soviet Diplomacy (1950s/60s): The OSCE emerged from Finnish initiatives aimed at facilitating dialogue between North America and the Soviet Union – an example of the significant impact that small states can have in international politics. The initial hard security focus was expanded in the Helsinki Final Act to include human dimensions, despite initial reticence from senior Soviet diplomats. This marked a revolutionary shift in international diplomacy, giving the Soviet and Eastern bloc states a framework in which to combat human rights abuses.
- Post-Cold War Transition: After the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO member states and former Warsaw Pact members came together to sign the legally binding Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty). The treaty was negotiated over five years during the end of the Cold War and aimed to establish a military balance between the two alliances at a lower level of armaments. This was followed by the Paris Summit and the drafting of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, which formed the basis of the OSCE. Arms control and hard security agreements thus developed in parallel to OSCE processes following the end of the Cold War. The OSCE also played a critical role in various regions, including the Balkans, Caucasus, and Central Asia, highlighting its importance beyond just European security.
- The 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict: The OSCE deployed a mission on the ground within two weeks of the conflict's start. The OSCE's experience in Georgia is cited as having primed the organisation for its response to Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014.
- Kazakhstan's Presidency (2007-2010): Kazakhstan's leadership of the OSCE brought a temporary reprieve between Russia and the West and allowed for significant discussions at the 2010 Astana summit, reinforcing the

organisation's commitment to upholding human rights and international security.

Tools and functions

Discussing the overview of the OSCE and its toolkit, a few key themes stood out:

- Electoral Monitoring: The OSCE's electoral monitoring is one well-regarded area where the toolkit is complete, with established processes and institutions. Despite some member states' frustrations, this function remains a strong aspect of the OSCE's capabilities.
- Human Dimension: The OSCE's focus on human rights and local humanitarian issues is crucial. However, there is often a gap between political expectations and the organisation's practical capabilities.
- Crisis Management: The OSCE's involvement in direct interventions and conflict resolution, such as in Kosovo and during the Dayton Agreement, reflects its practical role in addressing crises.

Future risks

Participants highlighted multiple significant risks facing the organisation:

- Russia's continued aggression in Ukraine and beyond;
- Authoritarian regimes having different notions of international security and cooperation;
- A lack of collective responsibility and political will among OSCE members;
- The EU and NATO potentially eclipsing the OSCE's role and responsibilities;
- The global rise of populism and nationalism, increasing sensitivities around the role of multilateral organisations, especially when it comes to preserving rights and democracy;
- The paralysis of the organisation's decision-making due to friction within the OSCE membership.

Future directions

- Maintaining multilateralism: The OSCE should preserve its multilateral approach rather than reverting to a strictly inter-military framework. Strengthening its role in electoral monitoring and human dimension issues is essential.

- Adapting to multipolarity: As the global landscape shifts, the OSCE must adapt its strategies to effectively manage regional and international security challenges.
- Enhanced collaboration: Effective communication and collaboration between international organisations are vital for maximising the OSCE's impact and ensuring complementarity rather than competition.

The OSCE's history underscores its adaptability and durability in the face of changing geopolitical dynamics. This flexibility needs to be reaffirmed to avoid the risk of processes and institutions becoming hostages of the past. To best safeguard the OSCE's future effectiveness and improve global perceptions of its relevance, a special emphasis should be placed on utilising the unique processes in its toolbox which have not yet been used. For instance, the Moscow Mechanism has only been used about ten times, and much of the economic toolkit has hardly been used.

The OSCE in the current geopolitical climate

Finland's chairpersonship

In preparation for its OSCE Chairpersonship in 2025, Finland faces a challenging and volatile situation, primarily due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. In light of this context, Finland has underscored its commitment to maintaining the European security order as a top priority during its chairmanship. Finland recognises the enduring importance of the OSCE and its tools, despite the disruptions caused by Russia and by some other member states. Addressing Russia's actions in Ukraine and their impact on OSCE operations is a critical focus for Finland, as is further emphasising the need to shore up regional democratic frameworks and cooperation between member states.

Finland is also advocating for increased voluntary contributions to the OSCE from its members. The Finnish Foreign Minister is set to present the country's plans for the OSCE after the summer break. Despite celebrating the anniversary of the Helsinki Summit next year, holding a new summit is deemed unfeasible due to current geopolitical tensions.

One of Finland's key agendas is to unblock the organisation's decision-making, seeking to reinvigorate the political will and collective responsibility necessary for effective security cooperation. Structural path dependencies and a general decline in commitments to global governance, exacerbated by the rise of populism and nationalism, add to these challenges.

The consensus rule

Some OSCE tools are seen as outdated and counterproductive. The consensus rule within the OSCE, while intended to foster agreement, often paralyses the organisation. However, it also empowers any member state to significantly influence decisions, which can be both a strength and a weakness. Interestingly, the consensus rule, while often weaponised by Russia for its own strategic aims, can likewise be used to isolate dissenting voices like Russia's, potentially reducing their disruptive impact over time. It is important to note, for instance, that multiple members have used the OSCE as a platform to chastise Russia for its actions in Ukraine since February 2022. Despite difficulties posed by the consensus rule, key players will continue to pursue their interests within multilateral organisations like the OSCE.

The current climate

The OSCE's important work in the human dimension – upholding human rights and holding transgressions accountable – is, to a certain extent, hindered by the fact that participating states are increasingly moving away from a shared understanding of values. Little progress is being made, for example, on gender issues or on media freedom.

The current geopolitical climate also seems to be tilting in favour of bilateral and 'minilateral' accords, as opposed to multilateral interactions, on account of the reconfiguration of great power dynamics.

Diplomats increasingly spend more time defending, rather than using, organisations such as the OSCE. This has led to a chicken-and-egg effect, whereby more work is done on bilateral accords as institutions weaken, further weakening those same institutions.

Nevertheless, this context can provide multilateral organisations like the OSCE with opportunities to act as platforms for middle and non-aligned powers and for discussions between parties that would otherwise not interact directly - for example, Russia and the United Kingdom, particularly considering the latter's "no business as usual" approach. However, "no business as usual" means that while diplomacy continues at a formal level within the OSCE, diplomats are not engaging in informal discussions or 'corridor diplomacy' such as off-record conversations over coffee – which usually form the lifeblood of multilateral organisations, allowing diplomats to explore possibilities beyond their pre-planned talking points.

The toolbox

The OSCE provides a crucial platform for civil society, especially in increasingly authoritarian contexts. However, its effectiveness is predominantly in conflict prevention and post-conflict scenarios, with a notable gap in conflict resolution. This is largely due to the OSCE being able to monitor and advise in tense situations but lacking the power to negotiate or enforce. The OSCE and its tools remain particularly relevant in the domain of humanitarian efforts, as demonstrated by its activities in Afghanistan. Crucially, political will and specialised knowledge are necessary for the successful use of OSCE tools. Defining the OSCE's role and establishing clear success criteria are essential to proving its value.

Perceptions of the OSCE

The OSCE has become largely invisible in the media; its failure to define itself and to determine and publicise its success has undermined its reputation and credibility. Increasing its visibility is imperative for revitalising perceptions of its importance on the international stage. An increasingly public emphasis on the human security dimension, which is of particular interest in light of the current conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, could be a means of increasing the organisation's visibility. Moreover, it is important to reform the prevailing view of the OSCE as a relic, in the eyes of many, rather than a living organisation with particular uses in the areas of human security and post-conflict normalisation.

In addition to working on popular perceptions of the OSCE, it is also necessary to improve the understanding of member-state politicians of the OSCE, its tools, processes, and their uses. It is counterproductive to assume pre-existing knowledge

and understanding in member-state capitals, particularly from a political generation with less direct knowledge of the Cold War and no military background.

Scenarios – The OSCE and the War in Ukraine

Participants discussed how the OSCE would evolve under different possible scenarios for European security. These scenarios were differentiated primarily by different possible trajectories for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the war it has triggered, and the related wider confrontation between Russia and Western countries. Critical uncertainties identified by participants included the outcome of the 2024 US election, the future of "Orban-like" parties in Europe, the solidity of the Russian political system, and internal political dynamics in Ukraine, along with wild cards from outside the Euro-Atlantic area such as a US-China confrontation in the Asia-Pacific.

Prolonged war

This scenario envisages the war precipitated by Russia's invasion continuing for the foreseeable future without escalating to a broader Russia-NATO conflict. Some participants felt this was the most likely scenario. Moreover, some felt that if the war is perceived as a stalemate, there could be a gradual ebbing of violence, albeit with ongoing skirmishes and the absence of a political resolution.

In this scenario, the OSCE's political decision-making would continue to be hampered by the deep divide between Russia and the rest of the member states. Participants also discussed the likelihood of increased calls for a ceasefire or peace negotiations in the face of continued fighting and without the expectation of a decisive military victory for either side. The OSCE would be unlikely to kickstart such a process but could prove useful in implementation (see below).

On the ground, the OSCE can play a significant role in addressing the human dimension of conflict, particularly for people living under occupation. By aiding in localised humanitarian crises, the OSCE can impact lives in meaningful ways, as it does, for example, in Transnistria. One suggestion was whether the OSCE could deploy a mission to support the human dimension in Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia (for instance, in disaster relief) while the EU and NATO focus on free Ukraine.

Creeping escalation

In this scenario, sporadic escalatory events would be taking place between Russia and its neighbours, and hazardous military incidents would be commonplace. Any de facto lines that emerged on the ground in Ukraine would be unstable and unpredictable. The OSCE's primary role would be to reduce risks between Russia and Ukraine and their allies in the ongoing conflict.

The OSCE could use the Moscow Mechanism to investigate key human-dimension issues, such as the treatment of prisoners of war. It could develop direct channels, like the 'red telephone', for crisis communications. Its fact-finding missions could

help counter disinformation and misinformation by collating and disseminating accurate information on war crimes and human rights violations.

Clarifying the OSCE's level of ambition would be vital. Would its role be to manage the conflict between Russia and the rest of the OSCE countries, or could it be a forum to move Europe forward out of conflict? As noted by a participant, this will probably depend primarily on Russia.

Massive escalation

In a scenario of massive escalation involving direct conflict between Russia and NATO countries, the OSCE and other international organisations would have an extremely limited role, largely confined to making statements with little impact.

Despite this, the OSCE could maintain relevance as a platform for dialogue on account of its diverse membership, including Russia, EU countries, and the United States. The OSCE could serve as a crucial communication channel during escalations and provide a platform for dialogue when/if parties seek to negotiate peace. As such, participants suggested that the OSCE is likely to be preserved in a reduced capacity over the course of a larger conflict, albeit primarily due to the difficulty of formally dismantling existing institutions.

Russia itself would benefit from maintaining a presence in international organisations like the OSCE, using these platforms to counterbalance China's growing influence in bodies like the UN. Russia's involvement arguably aligns with its preference for a great power system, where it can assert its interests more effectively.

Preparing for possibilities of future negotiations

Participants noted that at some eventual stage in the future, there are likely to be negotiations between Russia and Ukraine over how to reach a ceasefire, end the occupation or end the war – even if the feasibility of such negotiations is currently highly uncertain. The OSCE might not be the venue for negotiations, but it can offer vital technical expertise in how any ceasefire agreement could be monitored and implemented in different phases. Thus, its role and relevance in European security would be likely to increase in a post-conflict setting.

It was noted that OSCE aerial monitoring, as used in the Kosovo Verification Mechanism, in conjunction with human intelligence collected through on-the-ground missions, might be able to help monitor and verify a future ceasefire, and gradually build confidence through transparent information sharing. This could potentially lead to confidence-building among other OSCE member states that lack the capacity to pay for satellites and organise their own reconnaissance, encouraging long-term regional de-escalation.

Preventing unintended escalation is also a critical aim of the OSCE, with officers on the ground needed to observe any early warning signs of renewed aggression and to counter disinformation and misinformation.

Participants noted that whilst it is unlikely that hostilities between Russia and Ukraine will subside in the immediate future, the OSCE can still begin planning vital post-conflict programmes in areas where it has expertise: gender issues, missing persons, war crimes, human trafficking, human rights monitoring, small arms and light weapons control, and developing democratic norms.

The role of the OSCE after the collapse of Yugoslavia as a platform for discussions on issues like energy offers an interesting example to review.

In terms of the human dimension, it was also noted that the High Commissioner for National Minorities could play a useful role in convening and facilitating exchanges on Ukrainian history and identity among scholars from OSCE countries to improve understanding of Ukrainian history and identity.

However, the organisation's credibility is currently questioned in Ukraine, where it is seen as having been ineffectual since the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea. To build trust with Ukrainian civil society, public diplomacy is necessary – this must include expectation management on the OSCE's capabilities, and it must reaffirm that it is an organisation dependent on political support from member states in order to function properly. Participants also noted that amid the current war, the Moscow mechanism remains unused; there have been no interventions on prisoner exchanges via the OSCE.

Leadership and personnel selection will be critical for any future mission; the OSCE's Albania mission clearly showcased that the success and image of missions heavily depend on their leaders.

The future of the OSCE: Comparison and complementarity

Participants also flagged a number of issues that will be critical to determining the future of the OSCE.

Future US-China conflict

The most likely scenario identified as having the potential to lead to a global conflict would be a clash between the US and China, potentially over Taiwan. Such a conflict would have significant consequences for European security. It could lead to a large-scale retreat of US military presence and focus from Europe, as the US prioritises the Pacific and China over European conflicts. There would be more pressure on Europe to “backfill” militarily and to take more of a lead in resolving security crises in Europe.

The OSCE and new technologies

The exponential growth of AI will heavily influence international relations and warfare, further complicating the geopolitical landscape. The future of arms control will be shaped in part by new technologies which will continue to evolve rapidly, and which traditional arms control approaches may not be suited to. The current arms control architecture is built on counting tanks, an approach which is inherently unsuitable for establishing limits and regulation on weaponised AI or quantum technologies.

It is widely expected that soft norms, best practices, and codes of conduct may have more of a role than treaties when it comes to governing emerging and disruptive technologies in the defence and security space. Organisations like the OSCE, which work on arms control, may also increasingly need to find ways to engage with the private sector.

Collaboration and coordination

Defining the OSCE’s future role requires inter-organisational discussions with other multilateral entities like the EU, NATO, and the UN. Effective coordination will be necessary to share responsibilities and avoid overlap. Participants felt NATO and the OSCE should complement each other, with NATO primarily focusing on hard security and the OSCE on soft security.

There may be other less obvious options for collaboration. For instance, it could explore whether it could draw on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organisation’s (CTBTO) formidable data monitoring capabilities to monitor data relevant to security and arms control. It was also suggested that under its economic and environmental dimension, the OSCE might be able to help support efforts to protect the security of nuclear power plants in conflict zones, an issue where the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) takes the lead.

Post-war planning often goes wrong when politicians are at odds with military leaders on the ground. The OSCE might be able to help facilitate civil-military dialogue in post-conflict situations. It was suggested that the OSCE should establish a dialogue with both the Russian and Ukrainian militaries to understand how each sees the post-war situation and act as an intermediary between military and government officials.

The OSCE's strategic position

Originally set up for a bipolar world, participants noted that the OSCE must now adapt to a multipolar context. It serves as a beneficial platform for third parties, such as Turkey and Central Asian states, who suffer a variety of negative economic consequences from the Ukraine war but want to maintain dialogue and relations with Russia as well as Western countries. In a global context in which governments often talk in silos and fail to liaise sufficiently either internally or externally, the OSCE can help bridge the gap and avoid contradictory directions and misunderstandings.

Participants noted that one of the reasons the CSCE had been successful was that the USSR really wanted it to be successful. Today, Russia's views of the OSCE are less clear despite its continued membership. It may also have value to Russia as a place where it can engage directly with Europe and North America without a wider set of rising powers being present.

A number of Global South nations perceive that unwavering Western and NATO support for Ukraine is solely about military support rather than efforts to negotiate peace. (For their part, Western governments tend to say that they have no faith that Russia is currently interested in a negotiated settlement other than negotiating Ukraine's surrender, but this point is often 'lost in translation'). The OSCE offers an alternative model where dialogue with Russia can endure, although it is often stilted and unproductive.

Given the modernisation and multiplicity of nuclear arsenals and the impact of emerging and disruptive technologies, a variety of insecurities and instabilities are expected in the next 10-15 years. The impact of a potential Trump presidency and ongoing US-China tensions likewise further complicate the security landscape. Consequently, despite – or on account of – current challenges, the OSCE's most impactful period may still lie ahead.

This report was written by Maria Branea with inputs from Katia Glod, Edan Simpson, and Jane Kinninmont. The ELN team would like to thank all who participated in and supported the workshop for sharing their insights and ideas.



**EUROPEAN
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NETWORK**

European Leadership Network
8 St James's Square
London, UK, SE1Y 4JU

secretariat@europeanleadershipnetwork.org
[@theELN](https://www.theELN.org)
europeanleadershipnetwork.org