

BUCERIUS SUMMER SCHOOL



Revisiting Global Governance — Adapting to a Growing Global Disorder 21–31 August 2025

Conference Report

ON
GLOBAL
GOVERNANCE

Revisiting Global Governance – Adapting to a Growing Global Disorder

From 21 to 31 August 2025, the **ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius**, in cooperation with the **Karl Schlecht Foundation**, held its twenty-fourth annual Bucerius Summer School on Global Governance (BSS). The overall aim of the Bucerius Summer School is to foster leadership qualities in young professionals by involving them in an international dialogue on current political, economic, social, and juridical questions. Georg Mascolo, Journalist, and Eberhard Sandschneider, Partner, Berlin Global Advisors are the deans of the Bucerius Summer School. The Bucerius Summer School has always been more than just a high-profile conference. It is about building networks and enhancing cross-cultural cooperation of representatives from all walks of public life. To follow up on the annual meetings, we run an active alumni network.



An initiative of the **ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius**, Hamburg, in cooperation with the **Karl Schlecht Stiftung**, Aichtal

Moderators: **Georg Mascolo**, Journalist, Berlin
Eberhard Sandschneider, Berlin Global Advisors, Berlin

Director: **Sascha Suhrke**, ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius, Hamburg



Revisiting Global Governance – and How the Next Generation of Leaders Plans to Adapt to a Growing Global Disorder

In August 2025, eighty years after the end of World War II, 46 young leaders hailing from all corners of the globe gathered in Hamburg, Berlin, and Lübeck, for this year's Bucerius Summer School. They faced one central question, which they pondered and debated in roundtable discussions, workshops, simulations, and site visits: How can we rethink and adapt global governance in an era of growing global disorder? In that sense, they stayed true to the issue at the heart of this annual gathering since its first edition in 2001, albeit under vastly changed circumstances.

The timing was symbolic. The war's anniversary served as a reminder that the multilateral postwar order—with the United Nations, international law, and regional alliances at its center—

was born from the ruins of global catastrophe. Today, eight decades later, this order faces immense pressure. Geopolitical rivalries among great powers, authoritarian tendencies in established democracies, economic fragmentation, climate change, and digital transformation pose questions to which the existing system no longer seems to offer convincing answers.



With their extensive experience in politics, business, civil society, academia, and the military, these young professionals, together with the distinguished speakers, contributed to painting a multi-layered picture of contemporary challenges. The discussions revolved not around abstract theories but concrete dilemmas: How can Europe achieve strategic sovereignty without jeopardizing the transatlantic partnership? How can democracy be defended when populist movements tap into real frustrations? How can we create a more just international order that includes the voices of the Global South? Participants challenged each other as much as their own views, explored new ideas and developed novel solutions through an informed dialogue on current political, economic, and social questions.

This report collates the participants' very individual views of the systemic changes underway, the crises and trends that they discussed, and the questions around agency and

leadership that inspired them¹. It offers → an assessment of the state of global governance, then analyzes → specific challenges ranging from geopolitical conflicts to democratic backsliding to climate change, and concludes with → concrete recommendations for action. The report follows an approach that heeds the admonition offered during the conference: diplomacy requires optimism, but this must not slip into naivety.

1 The author wishes to warmly thank Juan, Michal, Chitranshi, Wouter, Agathe, Deema, Alexandre, Ivana, Daniel, Beatrice, Louise, Lennart, Sebastian, Justus, Felix, Elizabeth, Martin, Nupur, and Maike for their respective reports on one individual session, which together formed the basis for this overall report.



1. The State of Global Governance: An Assessment

1.1 The End of Naivety in Europe

One of the opening sessions brought the current situation into sharp focus: the post-Cold War era was, for many in the West, a time of misplaced confidence. The “Zeitenwende” (turning point) so often discussed today marks the end of this naivety. Germany, which once pledged never to export weapons to conflict zones, today supplies arms to Ukraine defending itself against Russia’s aggression. This represents less a betrayal of principles than proof that Europe underestimated the persistence of military confrontation and became complacent. At the same time, one speaker deplored that this focus on defense came at a price, i.e. the erosion of a long-standing political consensus that international cooperation and development assistance should be complementary to and balanced with defense spending.



Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 changed everything. What initially appeared as an act of charity—supporting an attacked country—is now widely recognized as being in Europe’s own security interest. Geography makes this war immediate, not distant. For Europe, supporting Ukraine constitutes a form of collective self-defense.

Yet the “Zeitenwende” is not limited to Europe. It expresses a deeper, global transformation. The question is no longer whether the rules-based order is under pressure, but whether it remains functional in its current form at all.

1.2 Fragmentation and Power Shifts

The discussion on great and small powers revealed a central tension: statistics can measure the weight of different countries, but the crucial question is what states do with their power. Does the international system still operate according to clear rules, or is it undergoing a profound transformation?

A triangular relationship among the United States, China, and Russia is reshaping global politics. The old system appears increasingly unsustainable. Future priorities will be set by regional issues: U.S. domestic politics, Europe’s security, the energy struggle between Washington and Moscow, and China’s technological ambitions. India is rising as a significant power, while technology offers smaller countries new opportunities.



At the same time, countries operate at different speeds. Some move forward quickly, others more slowly. This variation—both domestically and internationally—will shape how the world adapts to fragmentation and change. The anniversary of the

Second World War's end reminds us that the global order is not functioning properly, and this mismatch of speed and capacity complicates collective responses.



1.3 The Crisis of International Law

Despite countless conventions protecting human rights and the creation of regional and global courts, international law finds itself in crisis. The more powerful a state, the less weight it gives to legal norms. Court judgments depend on states' willingness to enforce them. Great powers lean toward realism, while others neglect their duty to uphold fundamental rights. This erodes respect for legal principles, affects how conflicts are fought, and makes it more difficult to achieve sustainable peace.

Nevertheless, international law is not dead. Leaders have been tried, states held accountable. The rules exist and are clear. What is lacking are courageous leaders willing to enforce them and place humanity and human rights at the center of international order.

1.4 America's Unpredictable Course

Donald Trump's return to the White House has further heightened uncertainty. While many describe Trump as

unpredictable, the discussions showed this to be a dangerous miscalculation. Trump has maintained a consistent worldview since the 1980s: the nation above all else, disregard for alliances, personal enrichment, propagation of certain ideas even when counter to facts, and an affinity for authoritarian tactics.

Trump's approach to foreign policy—transactional in relations with other governments, skeptical of international institutions, dismissive of treaties—matters because it reflects not only his worldview but also the domestic pressures that made his rise possible. Growing inequality in the United States has created space for a leader with authoritarian tendencies who questions established norms. Regardless of the threat he poses to democratic values, Trump tapped into something real: the existing world order has not delivered for those at the bottom.

The real unpredictability lies not in Trump's actions but in developments within the United States itself—the future of the two major parties, the consistency of U.S. foreign policy beyond even one presidential term, and the willingness to uphold the foundations of the UN Charter. This unpredictability has thrown the world into increasing disorder. For Europe and the world, this means balancing between the predictability of Trump's worldview and the long-term unpredictability of U.S. foreign policy.



2. Central Challenges: Conflict, Order, Democracy, and Climate

Among the different crises dominating the news, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza stood out in the group's discussions. Beyond these, participants addressed some of the underlying global trends, among them climate change and urbanization.

2.1 Geopolitical Conflicts: Ukraine and the Middle East

Ukraine faces the difficult task of balancing resilience, justice, and strategic realities amid war. Three critical dilemmas emerged during the Summer School discussions.

→ *First*, Ukraine remains firm that peace cannot come at the cost of territorial concessions or justice not being delivered. Trust in Russia's willingness to negotiate in good faith has eroded, as repeated talks have mainly bought Moscow time to strengthen military and economic alliances, notably with China, North Korea, India, and Iran. Without meaningful consequences—including reparations for war damages—Russia faces no deterrent to future aggression. At the same time, Ukraine understands that NATO membership represents a red line for Russia and possibly the United States, yet the country is already deeply integrated into the alliance. Keeping NATO membership on the table is viewed not as provocation but as a necessary signal that aggression will not be rewarded.

→ *Second*, despite remarkable national unity under martial law, civil society risks becoming marginalized. The psychological toll is severe: 70 percent of the population is affected by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the strained health system struggles to cope with the war's effects. As donor attention shifts elsewhere, there is a need to shift the mentality "from charity to investment." Civil society remains a vital force in development assistance, humanitarian aid, social cohesion, and democratic resilience. The perspectives and expertise of civil society actors need to be systematically integrated into local, national, and international processes alike, as they

can enhance both the legitimacy and effectiveness of policy outcomes.

→ *Third*, while Ukraine's strategic communications have been effective in countering Russian narratives, information manipulation thrives, boosted by algorithm-driven amplification. The Russian diaspora abroad is deeply divided, with significant pro-Kremlin factions—especially in Germany—complicating efforts to foster internal opposition.



As emphasized during one of the discussions: “Ukraine is a laboratory for Europe and the world”—for the strength of its civil society, for its fight for justice and accountability setting important precedents for international law, and for its sustained response to information manipulation campaigns and hybrid threats.

The discussion on the **Middle East** quickly focused on the intergenerational trauma of those involved. Speakers reminded the group that active rather than passive language can help better analyze these different traumas, whether relating to the Hamas terrorist attacks of October 7, the occupation that preceded them, or the immeasurable human suffering in Gaza that Israeli military operations have since caused.

Exploring these issues in depth nevertheless prevented the group from fully discussing what a “New Middle East” could look like. The region confronts several structural challenges that global governance could help address: from climate change and its impact on livelihoods to socioeconomic transformations and political realignments beyond daily headlines. The question of how geopolitics might better serve the societies concerned, or how international cooperation could help empower local drivers of positive change, remains key.

From a German perspective, the special responsibility toward Israel—rooted in the Holocaust—remains a central compass of foreign policy. The balancing act—support for Israel, humanitarian concern for Gaza, skepticism toward certain Israeli strategies—echoes broader global struggles: reconciling moral commitments with geopolitical pragmatism. Therefore, one of the valuable conclusions of the discussions was that without addressing the traumas of the past and present, it will be very hard to shape a better future.



2.2 World Re|Order: Economic Disruption, Great Powers and the Global South

The global reordering also has **profound economic consequences** and is likely to produce social disruption down the line, if unchecked. The new U.S. administration tariff hikes and trade realignments are already straining global supply chains. For decision-makers, the dilemma is not only how to absorb the immediate financial costs but also how to redesign supply networks for the long term. The challenge is to strike a balance between reducing exposure to political risk in concentrated markets while retaining the efficiency gains of globalization. This tension raises a deeper question: will current disruptions eventually push governments and businesses toward building a new framework of international economic cooperation less dependent on single regions?

The International Monetary Fund's forecast of three percent global growth in 2025 provides cautious optimism but conceals serious vulnerabilities. Public sector deficits in many advanced economies continue to rise, and such fiscal imbalances are unsustainable over the longer horizon. The broader dilemma is whether global growth can remain robust without addressing underlying imbalances: growing current account divergences, heightened trade distortions, structural asymmetries, and fragilities in financial markets.

Sustainable growth requires more than macroeconomic stability; it demands renewed attention to equity and resilience. Group discussions emphasized establishing social protection floors to guarantee minimum security during times of disruption. Yet financing such protections poses a dilemma: how to expand social safety nets without undermining competitiveness, especially as higher taxation becomes more politically salient.

Already, the erosion of the social promise that “the next generation will do better” is visible across many democracies. When economic frustration meets the disruptive power of social media, support for the political center is quickly



threatened. In Germany, a growing crisis of trust in the state's ability to act feeds on perceptions of uncontrolled migration, economic stagnation, and stalled digitalization. This revealed a paradox familiar in many democracies: governments are expected to act decisively, but any attempt to centralize power risks undermining their legitimacy. For global governance, if democracies cannot maintain stability at home, their ability to act confidently abroad diminishes.

The **Global South** is not a geographical, but a geopolitical category rooted in shared experiences of exclusion. The concept resonates with many countries that feel angry and disillusioned—whether by the framing of wars as “you are either with us or against us,” or by pandemic inequalities, climate financing, or debt burdens. This fuels a perception of hypocrisy and injustice, for example when crises are considered “global” when they affect the West but “regional” when they strike elsewhere.



The Global South's central demand is fairness and agency, in the form of financing, framing, and a seat at the table. Key players include China and India, each deploying different strategies to assert themselves as leaders of this agenda. These strategies are primarily pragmatic and transactional, aimed at reshaping—not overthrowing—the order.

The rise of the Global South represents yet another a rebalancing act, not a zero-sum game, which can unlock untapped human potential and resources. Yet challenges remain: internal diversity, governance questions, and competition over who will “speak for the Global South.” Still, one thing is clear: Global issues require inclusive solutions, and ignoring half the world risks wasted potential.

2.3 Democracy Under Pressure and Strategies for their Defense

Democracy confronts profound megatrends: digitalization and AI, urbanization, demographic change, climate change, and the challenge for nation-states to regulate an increasingly untethered global economy. Together, they raise a single overarching question: how can democratic systems adapt to structural forces that move faster than their institutions can respond?



Three dilemmas mark the core of the **democratic crisis**:

→ The *first dilemma* lies in technology and truth. Digitalization and AI create immense opportunities for governance and innovation, yet they also erode trust through disinformation and misinformation. If citizens no longer agree on what constitutes

a fact, how can democracy sustain meaningful debate or legitimate decision-making?

→ A *second dilemma* comes from demographic and spatial shifts. Urbanization and aging societies transform the social contract. Housing emerges as a new social frontier, while intergenerational politics raise uncomfortable questions: should the old decide policies that the young will live with for decades?

→ The *third dilemma* is global interdependence. No nation-state alone can tackle the challenges from climate change and rapid economic transformation, yet democratic politics remain largely national. This gap between global challenges and national politics creates frustration, and populism thrives in that space.

Ultimately, rethinking democracy means acknowledging these dilemmas openly and equipping institutions with the power to decide rather than staying stuck in crisis management. Most of all, it needs leaders with the courage to chart a way forward: Democracy needs a “software update”—a new narrative that is positive, future-oriented, and capable of inspiring trust.

When it comes to **strategies for defending democracy**, two dimensions are central: developing a sober analysis of the situation democracies face and discussing potential



approaches to strengthening them. This requires setting aside notions of “exceptionalism” in supposedly stable Western societies and acknowledging the vulnerability even of their democratic systems. Depending on the assessment—whether current disruptions are temporary turbulence or systematic attacks—responses vary from defense to proactive offense.



One perspective emphasized that in the short term, populism itself could be a remedy, as anti-establishment figures speaking in accessible language manage to reconnect with disillusioned voters. Yet this approach revealed dilemmas: the need for heavy mobilization by state institutions to contain more destabilizing candidates. Another contested approach was education, seen as vital for renewing democracy across generations, though skepticism was raised about assuming a straightforward link between education and democratic resilience.

The role of the international community also provoked debate. While robust international engagement helped safeguard democratic transitions in contexts like Guatemala, caution and inconsistency—as seen in Venezuela—highlighted the limits of external support. The debate underscored that defending democracy requires moving beyond reaction toward proactive strategies that resonate with citizens and address their needs. As one participant argued, “pessimism is

irresponsible”—a reminder that sustaining freedom demands both urgency and hope.



Taking the discussion from the abstract to the concrete, participants explored two different **spaces for democracy** at the intersection of politics and everyday life: architecture and museums. Architecture and physical space play key roles in democratic life. There are deep interconnections between the architectural design of cities and the politics they reflect. When many people believe democracies cannot deliver positive results anymore, one way to fight this sentiment is to create citizens' assemblies—innovative forums bringing together citizens to deliberate on issues of common concern. Successfully conducted assemblies in Paris, Brussels, Copenhagen, and Berlin show that citizens can feel more in control of necessary decisions. For that, physical space is still very much needed, as digital space often leads to people seeing each other as opponents. This gives people a sense of being heard by showing that their voices actually matter.

Museums enjoy exceptionally high public trust—second only to family and friends. This trust is anchored in the institutions' enduring integrity, but it brings profound responsibility: museums must consistently uphold high standards, and that depends entirely on their freedom from external interference.

Museums preserve history, challenge narratives, and spark debate, as “any curatorial act is at the same time a political act.” This makes them targets for authoritarian forces: whoever controls a museum can manipulate collective memory. Ethical and constitutional tensions arise when politics decides which art should be displayed, as suggested by the seductive narrative of “neutrality for publicly funded institutions.” Such gatekeeping narrows discourse and compromises pluralism.

Such threats are not hypothetical. In Slovakia, there are reports of politically motivated staffing changes, budget pressure, and censorship. In Italy, the government has attempted to exercise greater control over cultural institutions. Examples can also be found in Germany, where cultural institutions are being discredited. Museums must remain autonomous—guardians not only of collections but of democratic discourse itself.

2.4 Climate Change and Ocean Governance

For decades, humankind largely overlooked the question of **how to govern the oceans**, clearly underestimating the scale of human impact on marine ecosystems. Only recently has that perception shifted. Today, the oceans face intense and multiple human-made pressures: warming waters and rising sea levels, plastic pollution, overfishing, coral bleaching, and eutrophication. Still, short-term profit-seeking too often sets the agenda. Meanwhile, new challenges are emerging, such as carbon capture and storage and the regulation of deep-sea mining.

This outlook underscores a massive need for better ocean governance and leadership that prioritizes the long term over the short term. How do we ensure that all countries benefit from the oceans sustainably? How do we define common values: is a healthy ocean ecosystem a value in itself for all of humanity, or is its exploitation by a few the only value that counts?

In weighing these questions, it is important to remember the deep interdependence between humankind and the oceans.

Humans rely on functioning seas for climate regulation, food security, and livelihoods. Do we truly govern the oceans—or do the oceans, through their condition, govern us? The challenges are stark: coordination among diverse coastal and global actors is complex, and enforcement remains weak.

Yet there is hope: the UN's recent agreement on high-seas protection (which entered into force after the end of the Summer School) will create vast marine protected areas around the world. Moreover, the oceans' capacity for regeneration still offers a window for action. It is not too late to protect this vital ecosystem—and to govern it in ways that benefit the oceans themselves, and therefore humankind.

Finally, an endurance swimmer's work on global responsibility for the oceans holds valuable **lessons for changemakers worldwide**. In one attempt to cross a major strait from shore to shore, a strong counter-current meant that for more than five hours, he was basically swimming in the same spot. Progress, sometimes, can simply mean not going backward.



Thus, building on his work for a cleaner and healthier ocean, the speaker highlighted several recommendations directed at his audience: Family and a wider support network are a source of strength and perseverance, especially when challenges

look insurmountable. A clear narrative is essential to reaching audiences and capturing their attention. Breaking tasks down into manageable steps rather than always focusing on the end goal is key. In a time of international uncertainty and challenges for global governance, these points provide a template for changemakers who seek to engage audiences on pressing international issues.



3. Recommendations for Action

The Summer School discussions also yielded concrete recommendations spanning global cooperation, institutional reform, democratic resilience, and specific policy areas as well as a number of cross-cutting principles. These emerge from the recognition that global governance requires simultaneous action at multiple levels.

3.1 New Forms of International Cooperation

→ **Rebalance Global Governance Structures:** The rise of the Global South represents an opportunity. Global issues require inclusive solutions. This means providing meaningful seats at the table in international institutions, reforming financing mechanisms to address debt burdens and enable climate adaptation, avoiding double standards where crises affecting the West are treated as “global” while others are dismissed as “regional,” and supporting diversity within the Global South.

→ **Build Resilient Supply Chains:** Rather than retreating into fragmented blocs, countries should use current trade disruptions as an opportunity to build more resilient systems. This includes diversifying supply chains, reducing vulnerabilities in energy and trade, and creating frameworks for international economic cooperation less dependent on single regions—while retaining efficiency gains of globalization where possible.

→ **Maintain Transatlantic Ties While Building Autonomy:** All countries must adapt to U.S. unpredictability without alienating Washington. This requires being realistic about what the U.S. can offer, building European capabilities that reduce dependence while maintaining alliance commitments, strengthening cooperation among like-minded democracies beyond the transatlantic relationship, and developing strategies that can withstand shifts in U.S. policy across electoral cycles.

3.2 Institutional Reform and Strategic Sovereignty

→ **Reform European and International Institutions:** The unanimity rule within the EU hampers decisive action in times of crisis. If consensus proves impossible, coalitions of the willing must lead. Without reform, Europe risks irrelevance. This principle applies more broadly: international institutions must adapt their decision-making processes to reflect contemporary realities or risk becoming obsolete.

→ **Strengthen European Strategic Sovereignty:** Europe cannot remain dependent on the United States for its security. American defense spending vastly exceeds that of Europe, and the latter's fragmented procurement systems weaken its credibility. Consolidating the defense sector and strengthening industrial policy are essential steps toward strategic sovereignty, including technological independence in digital infrastructure and artificial intelligence.

→ **Diversify Diplomatic Engagement:** Countries must actively utilize their embassies and establish new diplomatic missions in regions where their perspectives remain less understood. Despite budget constraints, the strategic allocation of resources aimed at preserving vital international exchanges remains crucial.



3.3 Strengthening Democratic Resilience

→ **Develop Proactive Democratic Strategies:** Defending democracy requires moving beyond reaction toward proactive strategies that resonate with citizens and address their needs. This includes acknowledging legitimate grievances that fuel populism while rejecting authoritarian solutions, building positive narratives capable of inspiring trust, ensuring state institutions can deliver on basic functions, and addressing economic inequalities to restore the promise that also future generations will prosper.

→ **Invest in Civic Spaces and Citizen Participation:**

Democracies must create innovative forums that give citizens a sense of agency. Citizens' assemblies have shown promise and should be supported with adequate resources. Physical spaces for democratic engagement remain essential, as digital spaces often lead to polarization.



→ **Counter Disinformation Systematically:** Platforms must be held accountable for amplifying manipulation. Algorithm-driven amplification of disinformation must be countered through regulatory frameworks that balance free expression with protection against systematic manipulation. Strategic communications capabilities must be strengthened, particularly in contexts facing hybrid threats.



→ **Protect Cultural and Educational Autonomy:** Museums and cultural institutions must remain autonomous, and free from political interference. Their role as guardians of democratic discourse and pluralism needs to be defended. Civic education programs, particularly for youth, should be strengthened—while recognizing that education alone cannot counter systemic information distortion without addressing structural drivers of polarization.

3.4 Specific Policy Areas

→ **Ukraine:** From Defense to Future Investment: International support for Ukraine must shift from short-term military and humanitarian assistance to long-term investment. This includes sustained support for civil society, ensuring civic actors have a say at the table, addressing the mental health crisis through community-based initiatives, continuing anti-corruption reforms, and maintaining pressure for accountability and justice, including reparations, to deter future aggression.

→ **Middle East:** Address Trauma and Structural Challenges: Without addressing the traumas of the past and present, it will be difficult to shape a better future. Beyond immediate conflicts, the region confronts structural challenges that global governance could help address: climate change adaptation, socioeconomic transformations, political realignments

that could empower local drivers of positive change, water security and resource management, and regional cooperation frameworks.

→ **Ocean Governance:** Prioritize Long-Term Sustainability: Better ocean governance requires leadership that prioritizes the long term: enforce and expand marine protected areas, regulate emerging challenges such as carbon capture and storage and deep-sea mining with precautionary principles, ensure all countries benefit from ocean resources sustainably, strengthen coordination among coastal and global actors with robust enforcement mechanisms, and defend the principle that healthy ocean ecosystems are a value for all humanity.

→ **Climate Finance and Social Protection:** Establish social protection floors to guarantee minimum security during times of disruption, particularly those caused by climate impacts and economic transitions. This requires innovative financing mechanisms that expand safety nets, recognition that social protections are foundations for stable growth, climate finance that flows to vulnerable countries as investment in shared resilience, and integration of climate adaptation into all development planning.



→ **Enforce International Law:** The rules of international law exist and are clear. What is needed are courageous leaders willing to enforce them: hold states accountable for violations regardless of their power, strengthen mechanisms for reparations and accountability, support international courts and tribunals with resources and political backing, place humanity and human rights at the center of international order, and continue demanding justice in the face of the most horrendous crimes.

3.5 Cross-Cutting Principles for Changemakers

Several principles emerged across all discussions that can, in particular, help the capable and motivated leaders of tomorrow to better grow into their roles:

→ **Break Down Tasks into Manageable Steps:** Rather than being paralyzed by the enormity of global challenges, focus on concrete, achievable actions. Progress sometimes simply means not going backward.

→ **Build Support Networks:** No country, institution, or individual can address these challenges alone. Allies, partnerships, and coalitions are sources of strength, especially when challenges seem insurmountable.

→ **Develop Clear Narratives:** To engage diverse audiences, issues must be brought to life through compelling stories and powerful images. Abstract policy discussions must be connected to human experiences.

→ **Maintain Both Realism and Hope:** Changemaking requires balancing clear-eyed assessment of threats with the optimism necessary for action. As one participant noted, “pessimism is irresponsible” in the face of challenges that demand urgent response.

Eighty years after the end of World War II, the multilateral order born from that catastrophe faces its most serious test. Discussions at the Bucerius Summer School made clear that the world stands at an inflection point: the old system is visibly strained, yet no new order has emerged to replace it. As the Italian author, politician, and philosopher Antonio Gramsci said of the interwar period in Europe, “The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters.” This critical moment in world history is characterized by growing disorder, but it also presents opportunities for creative adaptation.



The challenges are daunting. Geopolitical rivalries intensify as great powers pursue divergent visions. Democracies face internal pressures from inequality, disinformation, and citizens' loss of faith that the system can deliver. The Global South demands a fairer share of power and resources. Climate change and technological transformation move faster than institutions can adapt. And the unpredictability of major powers injects volatility into every calculation.

Yet the Summer School's deliberations also revealed sources of resilience and pathways forward. Ukraine demonstrates how civil society can sustain a nation through existential

crisis. Citizens' assemblies show that deliberative democracy can rebuild trust. The UN agreement on high-seas protection proves that ambitious multilateral cooperation remains possible even in fragmented times. Cultural institutions preserve spaces for pluralism and dissent. And individuals—from endurance swimmers to museum directors to diplomats—model the perseverance needed to address challenges that seem insurmountable.

The recommendations outlined above share common themes: institutions must reform or risk irrelevance; democracies must



proactively address citizens' needs rather than merely reacting to populist challenges; international cooperation must become more inclusive, bringing the Global South fully into governance structures; and specific crises require sustained attention and resources, not just crisis management.

Perhaps most importantly, the debates among participants emphasized that progress in global governance will not come from a single breakthrough but from sustained effort across multiple fronts. Every small step—whether reforming a decision-making process, supporting a civil society initiative, enforcing an international norm, or protecting a marine

ecosystem—contributes to a larger transformation. And given that this year’s participants are now part of a tightly knit worldwide network of alumni, as they learned when they joined more than 200 of the latter gathered for a reunion on the heels of the Summer School, they already know who they can work with to create strong partnerships for a better future.

The Summer School’s title captured both the challenge and the imperative: Simply restoring the order of the past does not suffice; it no longer fits the world we inhabit. We must instead build something new, drawing on the principles that made the postwar settlement successful—commitment to peace, respect for human rights, multilateral cooperation, and

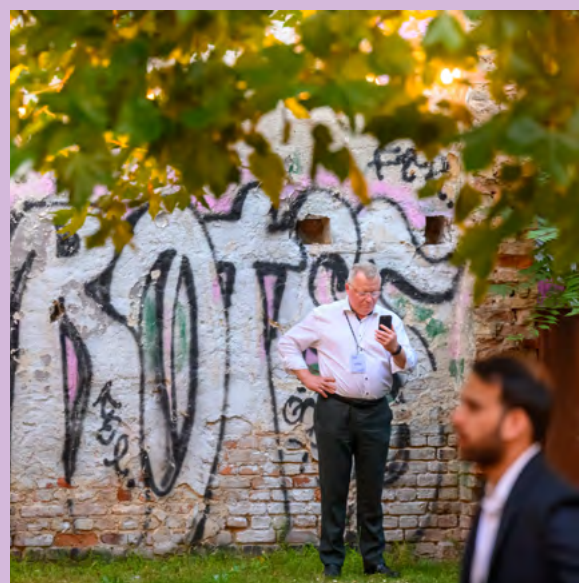


the rule of law—while adapting them to contemporary realities. This requires what was called “the end of naivety” without descending into cynicism. It demands strategic sovereignty without abandoning alliances. It needs inclusive cooperation without sacrificing core values. And it calls for urgent action without losing sight of long-term goals.

The 2025 Bucerius Summer School brought together diverse voices from different regions, disciplines, and positions. This diversity itself models what effective global governance requires: the willingness to listen to uncomfortable truths, to question assumptions, to learn from others' experiences, and to build coalitions across differences. As participants departed, they carried both sobering assessments and reasons for hope—and the shared conviction that the work of adapting global governance to our disordered world has only just begun.

By Dr Cornelius Adebahr, Political Analyst and Consultant, Berlin / Rome
cornelius@adebahr.eu





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For further information please contact:

Sascha Suhrke

Phone: +49 40 41336717

Email: suhrke@zeit-stiftung.de

ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius

Feldbrunnenstrasse 56

20148 Hamburg/Germany

www.bucerius-summer-school.de

Team

ZEIT STIFTUNG BUCERIUS

Sascha Suhrke

Director/Head of Politics and Society

Phone: +49 40 41336717

suhrke@zeit-stiftung.de

Tim Sievert

Project Manager

Phone: +49 40 41336916

sievert@zeit-stiftung.de

Dörthe Boose

Project Manager

Phone: +49 40 41336780

boose@zeit-stiftung.de

Helen Oqueka

Assistant

Phone: +49 40 41336750

oqueka@zeit-stiftung.de

Klara Lübker

Trainee

Phone: +49 40 41336751

luebker@zeit-stiftung.de

Karl Schlecht Stiftung

Jonathan Keir

Project Coordinator

Phone: +49 162 7742253

keirj@ksfn.de