

Why Europe matters: Talking about my generation

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Event Coverage

While Europe's young people are keen to develop modern soft skills and entrepreneurial know-how, they also want policymakers and business leaders to listen to them on why Europe matters.



This was the key message emerging from a recent event seeking to engage young people with political and business decision makers. The conference - Why Europe Matters - Youth Speak Up - was jointly organised by the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT) and entrepreneurship and work readiness NGO JA Europe and hosted in the European Committee of the Regions on 21 March.

Policymakers from across the EU institutions, CEOs and senior business executives, education experts, entrepreneurs and a 35-strong group of young people from nine member states were briefed on the findings of an EU-wide survey of 15 to 25-year-olds. The survey, by Eastern Norway Research Institute, explored young Europeans' attitudes to Europe and the EU and their future hopes and expectations.

Caroline Jenner, CEO of JA Europe, said this showed that young people want to know more about the EU. "At the same time, they feel their voice is not being heard. Mobility, and the opportunity to study

abroad, are of paramount importance. The majority of respondents favoured the common currency, the internal market and freedom to travel.”

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Brian Ager, secretary general of ERT, agreed. He said, “It is important to remember that the benefits of the EU, many of which were acknowledged in the survey, must not be taken for granted. We can see that there are some championing a return to nationalistic approaches, with all the dangers that involves.”

Everyone needs to make the case for Why Europe Matters. “Young people need to be engaged in that process, improving what we have, making it even better both for your future and those that come after you.”

He added, “It’s great that your voices are now being heard, and not just in Brussels. This should be part of a sustained process of young people speaking up. Let’s make this the start of a better understanding of Europe and what it can do for us all.”

Karl-Heinz Lambertz, the President of the European Committee of the Regions, (CoR) believed that the new JA Europe/ERT report, the CoR’s own initiatives and studies “all illustrated that young people expect more from the EU, particularly in providing good quality education and cutting youth unemployment.”

He added, “It also tells us that they want policymakers to develop a sound youth policy.” If EU policymakers are to restore trust, they must listen to the expectations of its people.

“Mobility, and the opportunity to study abroad, are of paramount importance. The majority of respondents favoured the common currency, the internal market and freedom to travel” **Caroline Jenner, CEO of JA Europe**

“Europe needs to be better equipped to help them achieve their ambitions.” Lilyana Pavlova, minister for Bulgaria’s EU Council presidency, said 2018 was a “key year” and “window of opportunity” for selling the merits of the EU to a sometimes sceptical public.

Young people will be central to this process. Pavlova also praised the CEOs and business leaders for

their personal involvement, “without your support here today, we can’t promote and inspire these young people to deliver and give them a chance to present and share their ideas.”

The event heard from numerous top business executives. Christian Klein, Chief Operating Officer and Member of the Executive Board of SAP SE, raised some concerns on the skills shortage in the IT sector arguing that, “Youth unemployment is one of the biggest issues we are facing within the European Union. Currently we are not getting the skills we need to master the digital era.”

He added, “For me, it’s not acceptable that more than four million young people are looking for a job while we are facing such a huge capacity shortage in some sectors. Clearly, we need to do more in education to close those skills gaps. This is why we as SAP are involved in initiatives such as this one”.

Looking to the future, Klein said, “Europe can truly overcome borders - we’ve seen that in the past and I trust we will see that in the future. With all its united efforts I am confident that Europe will manage the digital transformation and make the best out of it - for its institutions, for its companies and most important for its people. We as SAP are committed to contributing to that goal to ensure Europe can reach the full potential of digital transformation.”

“It is we, the young people, who will be responsible for Europe in the future” **Lotte van Rijen, a student from Utrecht in the Netherlands**

Lotte van Rijen, a student from Utrecht in the Netherlands, appealed to EU policymakers to “focus more” on the “concerns and expectations” shared by millions of other young people in Europe. She said, “It is we, the young people, who will be responsible for Europe in the future.”

The young participants also got the chance to pitch their own ideas and suggestions on three key themes: education, youth unemployment and safer Europe.

Responding to one of the pitches on education, Nestlé Chair Paul Bulcke championed the benefits of business mentoring, saying, “It is a great thing. I do believe that in an increasingly complex world, mentoring can really help, so companies going into schools earlier is definitely a good idea. Youth matters. You cannot have a healthy society if its youth is not well. With Europe’s ever-ageing population, youth matters even more than ever.”

Bulcke said Nestlé began an initiative - Nestlé Needs YOUth - in 2013 aimed at hiring, training and preparing young people for work.

“We extended the initiative to amplify its impact and created an Alliance for YOUth to engage like-minded companies here in Europe. More than 200 companies have joined and the initiative has now created more than 200,000 jobs and training opportunities.”

“Youth matters. You cannot have a healthy society if its youth is not well. With Europe’s ever-ageing population, youth matters even more than ever” **Nestlé Chair Paul Bulcke**

Echoing Bulcke’s comments, Hans de Jong, the President of Philips Nederland told the young participants that there are always people willing to help, but not to expect the world to come to them.

“So my advice is: don’t just sit there, inspire each other to go out and speak to companies; I think you

will be received with open arms.”

He made the team an offer of help; “There’s greater willingness and awareness that we have a role to play, either as companies or individuals. So I’d like to invite this team to come to Eindhoven to see how these things work; maybe it will inspire you to take back ideas and spread the word in your own countries.”

Responding to a proposal that each university degree student undertakes a final entrepreneurial project, Jean-Pierre Clamadieu, CEO of Belgian chemical group Solvay, who said, “ the EU’s single market has delivered much alignment and simplification, but it’s not yet where we’d like to be. So on this we are really with you young people. Simple rules applying for all of Europe is certainly something we are ready to fight for, with your support.”

Clamadieu was impressed with the ideas in the pitches. “I like the interest in entrepreneurship. This is exactly what we need, people willing to create value. If a large number of students have the willingness to complete their studies with an entrepreneurial project it would help us make this much more common throughout Europe, so well done.”

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He told the students, “We need you; we need young talent to join our organisations.”

Czech MEP Martina Dlabajová said that when she asked during her very first speech as a politician, what businesses would like to hear from her, one businessman answered: “Nothing. Just listen.”

Dlabajová added, “And he was completely right. This is not only the case for business but also for young people, the ones we are supposedly creating the future for. In a rapidly-changing world, there is little that can still seize our attention and inspire us. In my view, one of the few exceptions is an engaging human story of young talents.

“This is why I set up my own project of motivational traineeships called WhyNot? We give them the opportunity to look past school stereotypes, look at the outside world and learn from professionals.”

Tanya Hristova, head of the Bulgarian delegation in the CoR, outlined some of the youth-focused initiatives she had recently been involved with.

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Martina Dlabajová MEP

She called on the young people present to remain engaged and entrepreneurial and to keep working on solutions for Europe’s societal challenges.

“I would like to join other speakers in saying that we need young people like you; motivated and insisting that people listen. If you ask me why Europe matters it is because of you young people.”

In the closing speech, European education, culture, youth and sport Commissioner Tibor Navracsics

highlighted that the survey had “confirmed that investing in education is an important way to improve youth participation. Your survey, and our latest Eurobarometer survey on youth earlier this year, shows how eager young people are to learn more about opportunities available to them and how eager they are to benefit from them.

He added, “An entrepreneurial mind-set enables young people to be actors in the labour market and in society as a whole; architects of their own lives and helping build the resilient, cohesive communities we need to tackle our major challenges.”

Navracsics urged the young people present to vote in next year’s European elections, saying, “This is an opportunity to make your voice heard. Every vote counts, including - yours. Vote, be vocal, participate. And, finally, take the results of the Why Europe Matters project further, for a better and stronger Europe.”

Download the JA Europe/European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT) [\[7\]](#) [Why Europe Matters - Youth Speak Up](#) [\[7\]](#) event brochure.

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