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EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY

HOW MIGHT THE EU PROJECT BE REBUILT?

EUROPEAN YOUNG LEADERS AND ALUMNI MEETING, BRUSSELS

REPORT



The European Young Leaders (EYL40) programme is a unique, inventive and multi-stakeholder programme that aims to promote a European identity by engaging the continent's most promising talents in initiatives that will shape Europe's future.

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LEADERSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY – HOW MIGHT THE EU PROJECT BE REBUILT?

The European Union is under threat from populists riding a wave of public discontent over globalisation, immigration and mainstream politics. Britain's referendum vote to leave the EU is a manifestation of citizens' anger – the latest in a seemingly endless series of crises afflicting Europe's integration project.

The absence of clear leadership is both a symptom and cause of this malaise. To fill this leadership vacuum, Friends of Europe has developed its European Young Leaders (EYL40) programme. Since its creation five years ago, this programme has brought together established young talent from around the continent in a quest to find innovative solutions to Europe's problems.

A group of European Young Leaders gathered at the European Commission's Berlaymont headquarters on 14 October to exchange ideas with senior political figures working on issues ranging from climate change to research and innovation, and from accountability and transparency to the dynamics of EU regionalism.

Europe's influence in the world was a major theme of the discussions. The continent's standing is diminishing amid the rise of new economic and political heavyweights. Predictions suggest that in 20 years' time, no European nation will be qualified to sit among the G7 group of the world's biggest economic powers.

To respond to this challenge, Europeans should be working closer together in a spirit of openness, rather than reverting to old-style protectionism, extremism and populism. Innovation and technology can help pull Europe out of the doldrums by improving productivity, boosting growth and creating jobs – without the need to cut wages or increase work hours.

However, for that to be successful, the continent has to mobilise its openness and diversity – strengths that can give it an advantage over more inward-looking competitors. Gender diversity in the research sector was seen as a particularly important in this regard.

Openness is also vital to building a successful research sector. The impact of Brexit on Europe's research and innovation space risks making matters worse by throwing up new barriers, and participants discussed how to minimise the damage and ensure that the UK and the rest of the EU can continue scientific and technological cooperation and exchanges.

The necessity of strengthening Europe's single market was also highlighted, given that the current fragmentation of the digital market is holding back Europe's efforts to compete with global rivals.

Turning to the theme of regionalism within the EU, participants heard how geographic groupings have always worked together within the Union framework to resolve common issues. But discussion quickly turned to more fundamental and raw divisions over policy, such as perceived 'East-West' divisions over refugees.

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Participants debated the role of populist politics in acerbating such divisions. There was a particular focus on how the EU should react to threats to the rule of law in Poland and Hungary. Despite criticism of heavy-handed government policies in both countries, there was recognition that the scope of EU action is limited and a clear hope that the people of these countries will eventually show their disapproval through the ballot box.

Brexit loomed large throughout the debate. Participants warned of isolation ahead for the UK, while they perceived the impact on the rest of Europe to be painful, but not necessarily cataclysmic.

The rise in populist and anti-EU politics that has been seen in Hungary, Poland and – most starkly – in the UK led to a debate on how to restore citizens' trust in politics, particularly among young people. Accountability and transparency were words that featured throughout. The EU has played a crucial role underpinning peace, progress, democracy and women's rights, but it now needs to define new purposes and new ambitions that can again inspire voters.

The case of former European Commission President José Manuel Barroso was raised as an example of how things should not be handled. Participants expressed concern over the potential impact on public opinion of Barroso's acceptance of a senior post at the US financial group Goldman Sachs, less than two years after stepping down from the Commission's top job. The case could become a test for EU institutions' commitment to take steps that will regain voter trust.

Reform also needs to come in Europe's communications to counter the attacks of anti-EU forces, such as those that proved so successful during the UK referendum campaign. Participants noted that too often the European counter-narrative is boring, abstract and difficult to understand.

On a more positive note, there was a broad agreement that the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change had shown that collective leadership and international collaboration can still produce results. The fact that the EU played a vital role in securing the agreement runs counter to the widespread sentiment of doom and gloom over the Union's internal problems.

But Europe needs to build on that success to develop a new vision on environmental policy beyond Paris. It has to find other areas where it can take a lead, given that new players such as India and China are increasingly emerging as leaders in the fight to cut carbon emissions.

Continued European engagement is essential. Despite the progress made in Paris, huge efforts are still needed to counter the threat of global warming. As an example, Europe can build on its strengths in creating networks among state and non-state players to develop the innovative and technological solutions that will be needed in the next stage of the battle against climate change.



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