# Listening to Young Europeans

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The JAvos – Empowering Youth Voices dialogue at the Pulse Z Festival in Brussels brought together young representatives and EU policymakers to examine how Europe can bridge its growing generational participation gap. While the programme appeared at first glance to be a youth-engagement initiative, the discussions revealed broader implications for democratic resilience, security governance, and Europe's strategic autonomy. The discussions revealed what is at stake when youth disengagement intersects with technological, societal, and geopolitical pressures.

## A participation gap with security implication

A recurring insight was how filtered Europe's youth participation has become. Those who typically enter EU policy spaces tend to be young people with the resources, language skills, and confidence to navigate Brussels-based institutions. Meanwhile, many others – such as apprentices, young carers and rural youth – remain underrepresented.

Speakers repeatedly stressed that getting young people involved is not merely a question of fairness but it's essential for keeping democracy safe. Studies show that low institutional trust increases young people's vulnerability to disinformation, making their inclusion in political processes a strategic challenge. Policymakers acknowledged that fragmented participation deepens political alienation, reinforcing vulnerabilities that foreign and domestic actors can exploit, for instance by manipulating public debate and consequently influencing voter attitudes. Participation, in other words, is not only a civic responsibility but it is essential for upholding democracy.

## Strategic dependencies in the AI era

One of the dialogue's most incisive exchanges centred on Europe's position in global AI governance. While the EU has become the regulatory frontrunner through the AI Act, it remains reliant on American and Chinese technological infrastructure. Youth representatives questioned policymakers on whether Europe can maintain high ethical and safety standards without compromising competitiveness, or whether lowering standards would erode core values.

This debate touched upon the surface of deeper strategic tensions. AI infrastructure, data governance, and digital sovereignty were framed as determinants of Europe's long-term autonomy, moving past the realm of abstract policy. The session underscored that Europe's challenge is not only about designing normative frameworks but about aligning its ambitions with its capabilities.

## Mental health as a political variable

Mental health, often discussed as a social or healthcare issue, emerged here as a political and security concern. Participants noted how precarity, unstable work conditions, and limited access to care undermine young people's sense of agency. Research linking poor mental health to political disengagement and polarization resonated strongly.

Youth representatives highlighted gaps between government emphasis on digital health innovation and the more basic needs of young Europeans: accessible appointments, non-stigmatising reproductive care, and reliable preventive services. The discussions showed that mental health policy, when detached from structural realities, risks weakening rather than strengthening democratic participation.

## Europe's informational first line of defense

Media literacy was treated not only as an educational imperative but also as a central pillar of resilience against manipulation, foreign influence, and hybrid threats. Existing disparities across EU regions create uneven vulnerabilities. While Europe has invested in curricula and awareness campaigns, participants argued that media literacy should be integrated more directly into security planning, not delegated solely to schools or NGOs.

## Moving from youth symbolism to strategic engagement

Taken together, the JAvos discussions made clear: youth participation is essential to Europe's long-term stability. Inclusive engagement strengthens democratic legitimacy, increases resistance to disinformation, and ensures long-term perspectives in fields ranging from AI governance to climate and information security.

Are European institutions able to move beyond symbolic consultation and embed youth perspectives systematically into policy processes? The ability to transform sporadic dialogue into durable structures will shape not only democratic trust but Europe's strategic trajectory in the decades ahead.

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