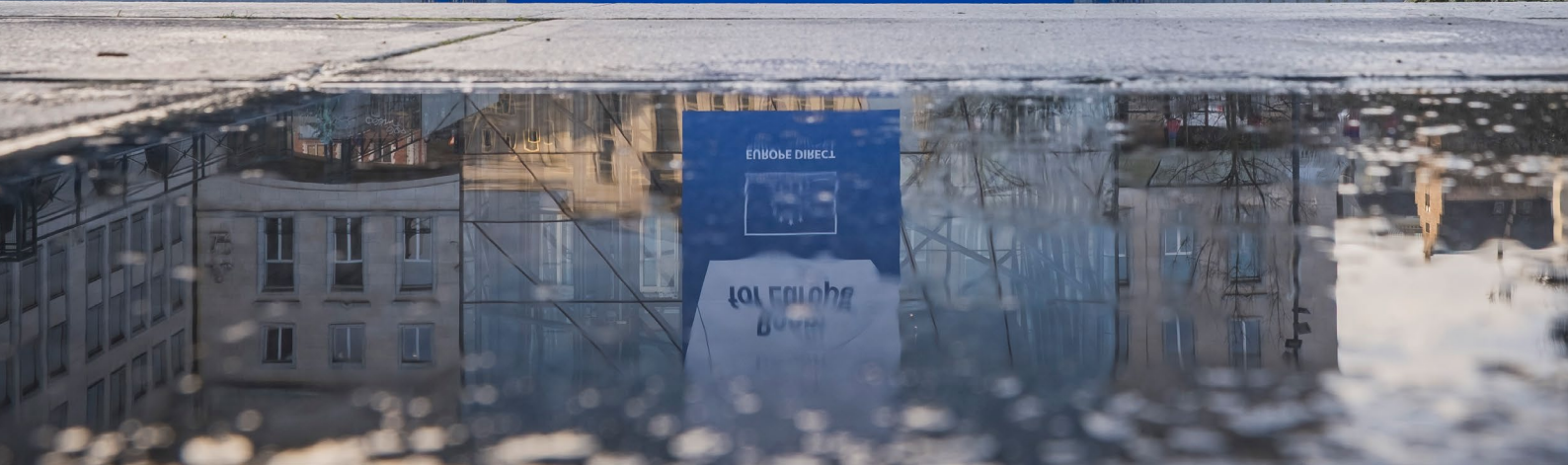




European
Commission



EUROPE DIRECT GENERAL MEETING THE NEW GENERATION

12–13 MARCH 2026
BRUSSELS, BELGIUM





**EUROPE
DIRECT**

**GENERAL
MEETING**

12-13 March 2026



A network built for a changing Europe

“Today we open a new chapter for EUROPE DIRECT,” Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission said in the introductory video message setting both the tone and the direction of the two-day gathering. “The next generation of centres begins its work with a clear responsibility to bring Europe closer to its citizens.”

Europe, she said, was living through “a period of profound change,” one in which disinformation was being “ruthlessly pushed by those who want to divide our societies.” The damage, she warned, was not limited to public confusion. It was more corrosive than that. “This erodes trust not only in facts, but in democracy itself.”

That was why, she continued, the European Commission had proposed a European Democracy Shield: to counter foreign information manipulation, strengthen democratic resilience and help citizens “engage fully in their democracies and civil societies.” EUROPE DIRECT centres, she said, are at the heart of that effort, engaging communities and creating spaces for respectful debate, especially for younger generations.

Then came the sentence that stayed with the room throughout the conference: “Trust cannot be taken for granted. It must be earned and renewed every single day.”

That, in essence, was the job description for the new generation of EUROPE DIRECT centres.

The General Meeting in Brussels officially launched a new five-year cycle for the network. After a call for proposals opened in May 2025 across all Member States, 400 partners had been selected, with eight more to follow. Of the 400 selected, 85 were newcomers, roughly a fifth of the network. The renewal rate was substantial, but so too was the continuity.

The new generation is also meant to function differently. The centres will have more room to adapt to local context, propose activities that make sense in their region and shape communication around real public concerns rather than institutional templates.

If that sounds like a technical change, it is really something broader: a recognition that Europe's communication challenges have become deeper, more local and more political. It is no longer simply visibility. It is credibility, trust, and the ability to keep democratic conversation alive in a harsher environment.

Dana Spinant, Director-General for Communication at the European Commission, captured that shift in her opening remarks. "This is for me a memorable moment, a moment I will cherish," she said, looking out over a room that, as she described it, brought together "unique experience, knowledge and understanding of the hopes, concerns and aspirations of 450 million Europeans."

Some participants had travelled a very long way: teams from Lapland to Europe's most distant territories in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean had gathered in Brussels. Europe, she reminded the audience, does not exist only in large cities or conference rooms. "It happens on the streets of small islands and villages," she said. "Europe is everywhere."

Her speech moved between tribute and challenge. She singled out Silvia Nobre, manager of EUROPE DIRECT Trás-os-Montes, and Alfredo Borba, manager of EUROPE DIRECT Açores, both of whom have led their centres continuously since the old Carrefour network in 1995. "That is three decades of commitment to bringing Europe closer to citizens," Dana Spinant said. And then, with a line that perfectly summed up the room's generational mix, she added: "Some colleagues here today were not even born in 1995."

The network, she suggested, draws strength from that combination of memory and renewal. "EUROPE DIRECT is not a marketing trick," she said. "For many Europeans it is the first direct contact with the EU, and perhaps the only." That gives the centres a "very noble mission": to give Europe a face, to make people feel part of a community, and to create places where people are not afraid to ask difficult questions.



Security, affordability and the politics of daily life

If there was a strategic core running through both days of the conference, it was the insistence that European communication must begin not with Brussels announcements, but with what people actually worry about in their daily lives.

Dana Spinant laid out the European Commission's main communication priorities in stark terms. Europeans, she said, are concerned above all with two broad areas. The first is quality and affordability of life, whether they can pay bills, afford housing, access healthcare, transport and energy, or feel that their work skills still matter in a changing economy. The second is security and protection: from external threats, with Russia explicitly named as a major one, but also from safer streets, cyberbullying, online scams and the broader instability in the world.

This is why, she explained, the European Commission's communication is increasingly organised around two "meta-narratives": protecting what matters and making life more affordable. Those are broad enough to travel across borders, but close enough to daily life.

"Our aim is to show that Europe is close to people and can offer practical and solid solutions to the issues that shape their daily lives," she said. "Together, these narratives help connect the EU's policies to what matters most to citizens."

The centres' own feedback confirmed that these themes were not imposed from above.

Asked what issues citizens raise most often locally, EUROPE DIRECT centres gave answers that read almost like a rough map of the current European mood: cost of living (56%), security (14%), jobs (14%), defence (8%) and quality of life (8%).

For Anguel Beremliysky, Head of Unit, Strategy, Coordination & Governance at the European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, who provided the strategic overview behind the European Commission's broader communication efforts, this reflects a Europe living through overlapping crises. "Multiple crises are ongoing," he said, "and that creates a sense of insecurity and uncertainty for EU citizens that needs to be tackled."

The answer, he argued, cannot be technocratic. These are emotional issues, and communication must acknowledge that. To earn trust, he said, the EU has to combine "an emotional message with something concrete," showing not only that Europe understands people's anxieties, but that it can offer "tangible, workable solutions." Coherence is crucial: security and defence, protection of democracy, safety for children and families, protection of purchasing power and energy affordability, all need to fit within one recognisable message.

And the message must be reinforced. "We need to repeat consistently what the EU is doing," he said, because repetition builds familiarity, and familiarity can begin to rebuild trust. At that point, the role of EUROPE DIRECT becomes indispensable: local stories, local examples, local multiplication.



That same logic ran through a series of campaign presentations during the meeting. Julien Turpin, Deputy Head of Unit, Communication, Human Resources and Planning at the European Commission, Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space, spoke about the Protect What Matters campaign on European defence. Citizens, he said, are increasingly asking a blunt question: “Are we safe? Can Europe protect what matters to me?” Surveys show growing demand for a stronger Europe because the world looks more dangerous than it did only a few years ago. He described 2025 and 2026 as a period of major EU defence investment, with new financial instruments and deeper industrial cooperation. But he was careful with the framing. “This is not about militarization,” he said. It is about peace, stability, economic prosperity and jobs.

What is still missing, in his view, is the local layer. A defence narrative built in Brussels cannot simply be broadcast unchanged into every region. “EUROPE DIRECT proximity matters,” he said. In one place, the story may be about closeness to a conflict zone; in another, about industrial or economic benefit. Citizens need to see not only that Europe is investing in defence, but why that matters where they live.

Jakob Martinsson-Lenouvel, Deputy Head of Unit, Campaigns at the European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, approached the same theme from the democratic angle. In a world that feels uncertain, he said, what people need is “reassurance and stability.” Yet democracy often feels abstract, and policy distant. So, communication should start not with institutions, but with the “invisible pillars” of democratic life that citizens already care about: films and cinema, journalists and media, researchers, the freedom to speak, create and question. “The message is simple,” he said: “Protect what matters.” Make democracy visible not as a concept, but as something already living in daily life.

A similar attempt to link macro strategy with lived experience was visible in the sessions on energy and food. As Katarzyna Wolos, Team Leader, Communication Plan and Outreach at the European Commission, Directorate-General for Energy outlined the EU’s energy transition, EUROPE DIRECT centres shared the concerns they most often hear from citizens. Energy prices and affordability dominated the list (69%), followed by questions about reducing bills, improving energy efficiency, renovating homes, using renewable energy and joining collective energy projects.



Almost 10% of EU citizens still cannot afford to adequately heat their homes in winter. Thirty million people struggle to pay their bills. Lowering bills is challenging due to numerous factors, including the fact that every energy bill contains components falling under responsibilities of various actors – but it remains politically and socially essential. The European Commission’s response includes the Affordable Energy Action Plan, with a series of concrete initiatives, including the recent Citizens Energy Package, which aims at empowering citizens in the energy market through promotion of consumer rights, greater price transparency, and stronger protection against unfair practices. It will help Member States implement measures aiming at protecting vulnerable consumers from being disconnected; and will further empower citizens to produce and share their own clean energy. The Package will be supported by the upcoming citizen-centred awareness-raising campaign on energy consumer rights granted by the EU legislation, under the slogan: “Unlock your power: Your energy. Your rights. Your choice.”



Francesco Laera, Deputy Head of Unit, External Communication and Promotion Policy at the European Commission, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development made a similar argument for food. The upcoming campaign in this area, planned for October, has three goals: to make citizens more aware of and proud of the richness and standards of European food, to encourage them to choose European products, and to reconnect them with the farmers who produce food. The target audience is carefully chosen: young urban people seeking diversity, but also families looking for quality at an affordable price. “The campaign will be successful if there is cooperation on the ground,” he said. “Please reach out.”



Leaving the comfort zone

This strategic turn toward daily life, however, comes with a hard truth: EU communication has often been too institutional, too top-down and too self-contained.

Christian Mangold, Director-General for Communication at the European Parliament, broadened that argument further by placing it in the context of Europe's changed geopolitical reality. It would be a mistake, he suggested, to understate how serious the situation has become. Europe lives in "a more unpredictable and dangerous world," and has to see reality "as it is, rather than how we wish to see it." Institutions and campaigns alone, he argued, cannot build trust and mobilise citizens. The democratic bond has to be renewed through

face-to-face contact, because "there is no real dialogue in the digital world, and we cannot distinguish what is real and what is not." Democracy, in this view, is built in daily local life: in schools, libraries, debates and community spaces.

That is why the Parliament sees EUROPE DIRECT as such a crucial partner. Christian Mangold pointed back to the Parliament's 2024 campaign, which through 550 joint actions reached more than 400 million people and helped produce a politically striking result: more people wanted to vote than stayed home. The campaign's core message was intentionally blunt: use your vote or others will decide for you. It was, he said, "a question of democratic ownership."

The same logic now extends into the future. The 2025 call for EUROPE DIRECT centres explicitly asked them to establish privileged partnerships with the Parliament's Liaison Offices. Christian Mangold urged them to start structured cooperation early, because it brings scale, visibility and trust. He also spoke with an eye on the next electoral cycle. The coming years, he said, would be decisive, and by 2029 that partnership would be tested again. Two challenges loom large: preventing parties hostile or deeply critical to the EU project from growing stronger and increasing participation. On both counts, the Parliament sees EUROPE DIRECT as a reliable local ally.



Stephen Clark, Director responsible for the European Parliament's Liaison Offices, gave that problem a memorable name: the "original sin" of EU communication. It tends, he said, to operate from within its comfort zones; in Brussels or Member State capitals, in metropolitan centres, in English slogans, among audiences already broadly sympathetic to the European project.

"The current problem of communication is that it is institutional by default," he said. "We tend to work in comfort zones."

Those comfort zones are not only geographic, but social and psychological. EU communication often ends up "preaching to the converted" and the way out, Stephen Clark argued, lies in multipliers and partnerships. That cooperation, he stressed, needs to begin early rather than being left to the last minute, with EUROPE DIRECT centres acting as local hosts and conveners. He also cautioned against duplication, particularly of communication materials, noting that fragmentation can weaken trust. The aim, he said, is to take Europe "into places where we are not so good at getting the message across."

The networks, the neighbourhoods and the people in between

If there was one practical answer repeatedly offered to the scale of the challenge, it was cooperation. Richard Kühnel, Director for Representations and Communication in Member States within the European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, put it most plainly: "Teamwork is crucial."

With EUROPE DIRECT centres, European Commission Representations, communication teams and numerous parallel EU networks, the system already exists. The real question is whether it can be used more intelligently. "We have to look at synergy and potential for cooperation among different networks," he said.



When we speak about “EU space,” he said, we do not mean a room with walls. We mean “a space where you can meet, discuss, seek, facilitate and animate debate.” Nobody has all the answers. The point is to create the conditions in which people feel empowered to speak their mind. That requires two things above all: treating “local” as central, and raising awareness of the many networks already available. There are more than 20 EU-level networks with topic oriented communication and outreach functions, including Eurodesk, EURES, Euroguidance, Europass, InformEU, Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values, SOLVIT, the European Documentation Centres, Climate Pact Ambassadors, the European Consumer Centres. Some help citizens develop skills or understand diploma recognition; others help them navigate the Single Market or consumer rights. Some cooperation with EUROPE DIRECT centres already works well but much more remains possible.

The interactive map presented to participants illustrated just how extensive this ecosystem of networks already is, while also highlighting opportunities to connect them more closely.



Two examples discussed during the conference helped bring that potential cooperation into focus. One was the EU Local Councillors’ network, with around 3,200 local councillors. Mojca Erjavec, a municipal councillor from Ravne na Koroškem in Slovenia, described them as “basically ambassadors of the European Union at their local politics level.” Because they operate at the level closest to people, she argued, they need to speak in language people genuinely understand, “not only the language, but maybe the dialect, and preferably not EU terminology.” “Their role is to appear at local initiatives, be active in social media groups, and “sometimes speak for Europe when it has nobody to speak for it.”



Her comments were notable because they mixed conviction with realism. Cooperation with EUROPE DIRECT centres, she said, is extremely valuable - for events, invitations, initiatives and information sharing - but resources are scarce on all sides. That means cooperation must also be creative. Her conclusion returned to a phrase that surfaced more than once during the meeting: citizens do not want only tangible benefits like bridges. "They want to feel, and then remember and advocate."

The other example was the newer Trade Champions network, around 120 experts across the EU, many with business backgrounds, which became especially valuable during the controversy over EU-Mercosur agreement. Ewa Synowiec, a Trade Champion and Team EUROPE DIRECT member, described it as a network of people who understand how trade policy is made, how agreements are negotiated, and what they mean in practical terms for businesses and citizens. Yet because the network is still relatively new, many local centres do not know it exists.

"That's the potential of EUROPE DIRECT local centres," she said. In regions where trade agreements trigger demonstrations or anxiety, they could call on such expertise. The problem is that trade language is dense and legalistic. "It's not easy to explain," she admitted. "But if you reflect a bit, you can translate these commitments in the agreement into real opportunities or even challenges."

Her tools are very practical: WhatsApp groups, real-time explanations, guidance to the Commission's Access2Markets database, and quick clarifications of terms like "provisional application" of trade agreements. There was something instructive in that. European communication often imagines itself through campaigns; Ewa Synowiec described it as an expert answering questions fast enough to be useful.



Sometimes Europe has to come in through the back door

Sharpest insights came from EUROPE DIRECT centres themselves.

Representatives from Greece, working daily in an environment marked by euroscepticism, stressed the importance of keeping small opportunity-based programmes alive: Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, small grants. These matter not only for their material effect, but for the message they send: that even people in small, poorer or peripheral regions have a chance to change something in their own lives. They also offered one very practical lesson: bring EU officials physically into local communities whenever possible, and ideally those who can speak the local language.

From Italy came a plea for less procedural communication and more human texture. There is a need, one representative argued, for “more daily life elements, like music, poetry and arts.” The formulation that followed was as simple as it was accurate: “We need emotions.”

From Germany came perhaps the strongest of field realism. In some places, local press had warned organisers not to put “Europe” in the title of events at all. Europe, then, may sometimes need to enter the room from the side, or even from the back door, through topics people already care about, rather than through overt institutional branding.



Anna Gasquet, manager of EUROPE DIRECT Drôme Ardèche, came a line that could be framed on the walls of many offices: never spend time in your office if you want to reach people. Go to schools. Go to fairs. Go to forums and training events. Go to youth football clubs and take 15 minutes before training to talk about solidarity, values, mobility and opportunity. Europe, in this view, has to appear where life is already happening.

Taken together, these interventions described something far more complicated than a simple communication problem. Across Europe, the challenge is not just to explain better. It is to find the social routes through which Europe can still be heard.



Keeping the conversation open



How do we talk about the EU when conversations quickly become tense, polarised or confrontational? In many settings, people encounter deeply solid views on difficult topics, potentially influenced by disinformation and foreign information manipulation, from migration and climate change to support for Ukraine or trust in institutions. These exchanges can easily escalate or shut down.

In the workshop *Local conversations, European questions* the premise was simple: the task is not to “win” every argument, but to keep the conversation open. Participants experienced a hands-on approach, working with real situations to explore how to navigate challenging interactions constructively. The focus was on facilitating exchange, not convincing or correcting. It’s about staying in conversation, even when perspectives differ.

The issue was framed not as one of persuasion, but of endurance. In an era marked by geopolitical confrontations and conflicts, and rapid technological changes, democracies are facing significant internal and external pressure. It is during these times that constructive

dialogue becomes crucial in ensuring our democracies remain robust, capable of thriving amidst adversity and resilient to disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference.

The workshop gave the opportunity to discuss about the importance of empathetic conversation to build trust and tackle difficult topics. Participants practiced on how to pause and structure responses to challenging claims, starting by acknowledging the concern and then clarifying the information. By focusing on a key message or shared concern and reframing issues, discussions remain constructive.

In synthesis: listen with empathy, bring your own perspective with authenticity and trust, do not patronise and do not try to convince by force. The underlying insight was that democratic trust is rarely rebuilt by lecturing.

Inga Höglund, Deputy Head of the Task Force for Strategic Communication and Countering Information Manipulation at the European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, reinforced that point. The EU has tools, she said: media literacy, support for independent media and fact-checking, whole-of-society approaches. But the key remains local action. “Disinformation spreads globally,



but it has to be countered locally," she pointed out. Debates, visits to farms and schools, creative small community initiatives - these are just a few some examples that allow people to feel heard. That in turn reduces perceived polarisation, rebuilds local bonds and creates spaces where people feel safe to speak. One telling initiative she cited was the Commission's grants for intergenerational media literacy and community-building in rural areas and small towns in Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Cyprus: €50,000 per project, aimed not just at media skills, but at building intergenerational trust.

Her takeaway to the network was clear: "You are local micro-hubs of democracy."

Democracy between elections



That phrase connected naturally to another major theme: democracy cannot be limited to election day. Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul, Head of Unit, Public Opinion and Citizens' Engagement at the European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication said that one of the most important lessons in recent years has been precisely that. "Democracy cannot be only elections," she argued. "We have to nurture space in between elections."

The context for that claim is the legacy of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which concluded in May 2022 with 49 proposals to the institutions and helped normalise new forms of citizen participation. Since then, Citizens' Panels have become a regular feature of EU democratic life. For Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul, they matter because they bring into politics three things today's democracies often lack: diversity, deliberation and duration. Diversity comes through random selection; deliberation through giving people time to hear experts, arguments and counterarguments; duration through processes that unfold over weeks rather than moments.



From the perspective of EUROPE DIRECT centres, democracy today was rated only around 6 or 7 out of 10 in strength - not collapsed, but clearly fragile. That makes citizen engagement all the more important.

The Citizens' Panels themselves are carefully designed. They gather 150 randomly selected citizens from all 27 Member States, representing gender, age, socioeconomic background, urban-rural geography, education and attitudes toward the EU. One in three participants must be aged 16 to 29. Between 2023 and 2025, panels dealt with food waste, learning mobility, virtual worlds, energy efficiency, tackling hatred in society, the EU long-term budget and intergenerational fairness. In 2026, the next panel will focus on preparedness, running from March to May, and later in the year a new panel on democratic resilience will follow as part of the Democracy Shield agenda.

Panels meet over three weekends - two in person in Brussels and one online - and move through plenary sessions, sub-plenary discussions and working groups supported by facilitators and experts. Their recommendations are then voted on and fed into policy initiatives. Accompanying them is the Citizens' Engagement Platform, a multilingual digital space intended to widen access beyond the 150 selected participants and allow broader public contributions.

The system is more developed than many citizens realise, which also explains one of its key challenges. Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul noted that 75% of people are not aware of what is already available in terms of participation: panels, platforms, local dialogue and other ways to shape policy.



Here again, EUROPE DIRECT centres are expected to act as translators between European processes and local life: sharing the names of panel participants from their region, helping turn them into storytellers in local media, organising decentralised events that feed into the platform, and drawing on an alumni network of around 2,000 former panel participants, a quarter of whom have agreed to act as citizen ambassadors.

One of the strongest dimensions of the panels, Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul added, is intergenerational dialogue, especially important at a time when issues such as climate change increasingly create resentment between age groups.



Young people, public space and the art of hosting

The conference's thinking on democratic renewal was not limited to formal participation tools. It also spilled into more practical questions: how do you actually get people to stop, listen and talk?

The discussions on young audiences, public hosting and community practice all pointed in the same direction. Reaching people means meeting them where they already are: physically, socially and emotionally.

Among Europeans aged 15 to 24, information on social and current affairs comes primarily through Instagram (64%), TikTok (54%), YouTube (52%), and only then Facebook (31%). That means communicators need to know where their audience is before they can even begin to shape a message.

But platform choice is only the shallow end of the problem. Sophie Lutz and Sofia Afanesjeva from the European Parliament's Youth Outreach Unit stressed that the first principle is accessibility, including language without acronyms. The second is co-create and co-design: young people are far more likely to engage if they feel they are in charge, or at least genuinely involved.

Alvara Carstens and Bevin Anandarajah of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication pushed that further. Young people, they said, are online-first, but not gullible. They are "platform omnivores," content-savvy and discerning. They expect communication that is clear, respectful and honest; they respond to emotional storytelling and authenticity; and they quickly reject anything that feels forced. "Don't try too hard" and "don't be overly formal" might sound like casual advice, but in institutional communication they are almost revolutionary.

Equally important, they insisted, is to stop treating "young people" as one homogeneous audience. Segmentation matters, by values, attitudes, interests, gender, geography, education, status, media habits and lifestyle. EUROPE DIRECT centres themselves proposed to use young voices, peer-to-peer formats, positive stories, partnerships with schools and youth centres, and to appear both online and offline. New initiatives like the Europe Direct Community of Practice on Youth Outreach are meant to support that shift.

The discussion on how to be a good host, led by Stephan Naumann and Simon Raiser moderators from Planpolitik, a Berlin based agency specialising in the conception and delivery of interactive educational formats on political, social and economic issues, widened the lens beyond youth. Its core lesson was both obvious and radical: instead of telling people why Europe is great, listen first. Listening, the facilitators said, must become the strategy.



Their “dialogue starter” approach broke conversation into phases: reaching out, starting, engaging and wrapping up. The aim was not to win arguments, but to create conditions where genuine exchange becomes possible: in public spaces, festivals, fairs,

together.” It is “a group of people who regularly encounter one another in a shared space and through repetition begin to create meaning, trust and responsibility together.”

That emphasis on repetition matters. One-off events are not enough. Trust grows when people come back. Dennis Schmees spoke of the disappearance of “third places”, those spaces that are neither home nor work, where people gather without needing to buy anything or achieve anything. In their absence, social fragmentation grows. The response, he suggested, is not for institutions to dominate such spaces, but to offer them humbly. “The EU builds community by making room, not by taking centre stage,” he said.

That means lowering the threshold, not over-branding, inviting people to use a space as they wish, and allowing relationships to self-organise. It may begin with dancing, gaming communities, or any other shared interest. The EU does not need to force people to “download Europe” into every interaction. It only needs to be visible as the actor that made common life a little easier.

The message was echoed by Dana Manescu, Head of Unit, Local Engagement, EUROPE DIRECT and Networks at the European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, “You, EUROPE DIRECT managers, are not there to communicate Europe; you are there to talk about local issues and bring Europe in when relevant - and we all know how relevant Europe is in many local places”. EUROPE DIRECT’s role is to act as ‘community builders, conversation hosts’, to keep using innovative formats and connecting with other networks.

informal gatherings, with or without experts. Centres shared examples of what works: everyday topics, relaxed atmospheres, good facilitators, familiar settings. Food events help. Role-play and simulations work particularly well with younger audiences. The good example is Europe Café in Salzburg, where people came because the best barista in town served the best free coffee - and EUROPE DIRECT listened while they talked.

Dennis Schmees, a strategist whose work centres on communities of practice, added a deeper layer to that. Community, he argued, is not something produced by a programme and then neatly packaged. It emerges “when people claim and shape space



AI as assistant, not author

Even the discussion on artificial intelligence slotted neatly into that broader concern with authenticity. The workshop led by Glen Campbell, Publication Office of the EU, and Paulina Zakovska, EUROPE DIRECT Strasbourg, tried to move beyond hype and focus on practical uses. AI is already part of everyday communication work: drafting emails, structuring social media posts, generating visuals, summarising documents.

The speakers' central warning, however, was crisp: AI should remain a tool, not the voice of the organisation. Tools such as ChatGPT, Perplexity AI, Microsoft Copilot, Canva and Emplifi can all support communication work. But there is a trap. If communicators rely on AI blindly, they risk producing the same polished, empty prose as everyone else. The presenters used the memorable phrase "AI slop" for that flood of generic, low-quality content. The solution is a human-first workflow: begin with ideas, emotional insights, original perspective, even messy notes, and only then use AI to refine, shorten, structure or adapt.

The practical "do's" ranged from caption shortening and translation refinement to simplifying policy texts, brainstorming hooks, correcting grammar, adjusting tone, cross-posting, extracting data and creating recap tables. The "don'ts" were equally important: do not generate images with people, do not let the tone become robotic, do not copy-paste without source verification, do not use ChatGPT as a source engine, and do not write vague prompts stripped of context.



That distinction mattered because it echoed the wider mood of the conference: Europe is not short of tools. It is short of trust. And trust does not survive automation if authenticity disappears with it.



GRAPHIC RECORDING BY @BLANCHE ILLUSTRATES

The newcomers and the mood in the room



By the end of the two days, the formal programme had produced a surprisingly coherent political message. Europe's communication problem is not merely about making institutions more visible. It is about rebuilding trust locally, creating real spaces for debate, resisting polarisation, translating complex policy into everyday life and connecting democratic participation with lived experience.

For newcomers to the network, the scale of the challenge was clear, but so was the sense of opportunity.

Klaus Klipp from EUROPE DIRECT Frankfurt am Main said he hopes to begin connecting socially active young Europeans aged 16 to 24 across borders in order to build an "EU bubble" on social media, not a bubble of isolation, but of constructive transnational exchange.

Marko Zmirak from EUROPE DIRECT Dubrovačko-neretvanska županija came with a flagship project already in mind: Dubrovnik EXPO, a growing regional event that connects schools, universities, the business sector, European institutions and young people. Its fifth edition in March 2026 is expected to gather more than 4,000 participants from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. It offers educational, European and professional opportunities and connects stakeholders from mobility, labour and youth development. Marko's ambition is to bring more EUROPE DIRECT centres into that orbit.

Ralitsa Popova from EUROPE DIRECT Lovech in Bulgaria highlighted the atmosphere of the conference - the value of networking, shared enthusiasm and the sense of community, expressing the hope that this spirit of cooperation will continue beyond the two days in Brussels.

That may sound intangible, but it is not. In a network built on local initiative, enthusiasm is operational fuel.



And perhaps that was the most revealing thing about the meeting. For all the talk of security, affordability, defence, energy, youth, food, democracy and AI, the conference kept coming back to a strangely simple proposition: Europe will only remain meaningful if it can still be encountered locally: in a room, in a library, in a school, in a coffee line, in a football club, at a fair, through a local official, a random citizen, a patient explainer, a trusted conversation.

Ursula Von der Leyen had opened the meeting by calling EUROPE DIRECT centres “the bridge between European policies and local realities.”

Bridges are useful things. In today’s Europe - anxious, fractured, overloaded with information yet hungry for meaning - they do not hold themselves up.

They have to be built, maintained and crossed, again and again.

Author: ŽELJKA LEKIĆ-SUBAŠIĆ

