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FACING THE CHALLENGES AHEAD :
UNICE PRESIDENT GEORGES JACOBS STRESSES NEED FOR STRUCTURAL REFORMS, INCREASED COMPETITIVENESS AND A SUCCESSFUL ENLARGEMENT

In a speech today to the Executive Board of the Federation of Austrian Industry (VÖI), President Jacobs outlined the major priorities for European business in the first Austrian Presidency. “The challenges of Economic and Monetary Union, enlargement and institutional reform are just some of the issues that will dramatically affect the way in which we do business. We must prepare ourselves for these and future challenges as we enter the next millennium”.

Referring to the recent UNICE report on “Benchmarking Europe’s Competitiveness”, President Jacobs stressed that Europe’s relative under-performance illustrates that it is **not possible to achieve and maintain a steady improvement in living standards, a high level of employment, and sustainable economic growth, unless overall competitiveness is strong.** “While UNICE targets public policy and its effect on the general business climate, *the primary responsibility of companies is to improve their own competitiveness* and exploit to the full all the advantages of their external environment”, he said.

On Europe’s employment and social policies, President Jacobs expressed UNICE’s commitment to the Social Dialogue and to playing an active role in the development of responsible social policies that take into account the concerns of business. Emphasising the importance of training to improve the employability of the young, the President welcomed the serious attention paid to this issue in the recently published national action plans for employment. “In a world characterised by rapid technological change, education and training policies aimed at updating a person’s skills are absolutely essential”, he said.

“The enlargement of the Union represents, for UNICE, a new opportunity to strengthen the competitiveness of European business in world markets and, in more general terms, to greatly benefit the European economy”, said President Jacobs. Trade volume with the central and eastern European countries already exceeds that of the EU with Japan and other regions of the world, and EU direct investment has also risen substantially. UNICE is committed to co-operation with the Community authorities throughout this process, and it will mobilise its network of federations in the applicant countries to ensure that the concerns of all business stakeholders in this process are taken into account.

President Jacobs finished by wishing the Austrian Government well for its first Presidency of the Union, and expressed his continued desire for close dialogue between business and the public authorities.

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