

Davos 2026: Final Day Summary (January 23, 2026)

Geopolitical Dimensions

- **Trump's Departure and Transatlantic Rupture:** U.S. President Donald Trump departed Switzerland late Thursday afternoon, leaving a fractured transatlantic relationship as the meeting's defining legacy. In his closing speech, WEF President Børge Brende implicitly referenced Trump's confrontational approach, stating that "real dialogue requires patience, commitment and creativity" and that its absence "deepens division". European leaders expressed relief when Trump stated he "won't use force" regarding Greenland, but remained alarmed by his broader transactional worldview. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney captured the prevailing sentiment among U.S. allies: "We know the old order is not coming back. We shouldn't mourn it... but we believe that from the fracture, we can build something bigger, better, stronger, more just". ¹
- **Ukraine Peace Process Fragility:** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Thursday meeting with Trump dominated Friday's diplomatic chatter, with Zelenskyy telling reporters that trilateral talks (US-Ukraine-Russia) would begin January 23 in Abu Dhabi. The Ukrainian leader struck a cautiously optimistic tone, stating documents aimed at ending the war were "nearly ready," but emphasized that "faith is not enough" and that "world order comes from action". However, Reuters reported that despite claims of progress, a peace agreement remains distant with territorial disputes unresolved. ^{2 3 1}
- **Middle Power Assertiveness:** European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the EU and India were "on the cusp" of a historic free trade agreement creating a market of 2 billion people, positioning it as a direct response to protectionist pressures. China's Vice-Premier He Lifeng, in his special address earlier in the week, stated that "tariffs and trade wars have no winners", a message that reverberated through final-day discussions as trade tensions remained unresolved. ^{4 1}
- **Energy Security Alarm:** International Energy Agency Executive Director Fatih Birol told participants he had "never seen" energy security risks multiplying so rapidly, declaring that "energy security should be elevated to the level of national security". U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright's assertion that global oil production must more than double to meet AI-driven demand was widely discussed on the final day, challenging conventional peak-demand forecasts. ^{1 2}
- **Multilateralism Crisis:** In Friday's closing panel, WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala stated the trade sector had suffered "the most severe shock in 80 years," with global trade rules severely weakened. IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva joined her in warning that public debt crises in developing countries—where some spend more on debt repayments than healthcare and education—required urgent restructuring. ^{5 1}

AI and Tech Dimensions

- **AI Job Creation Mantra:** The "jobs, jobs, jobs" refrain dominated executive discussions on

- the final day, with business leaders expressing confidence that AI would generate more employment than it destroyed. IBM Chief Commercial Officer Rob Thomas stated AI had
- matured to where companies can "genuinely begin to automate tasks and business operations" and see returns on investment. Bill Gates told Reuters that while AI brings
- opportunities and disruptions, challenges are "all solvable problems," suggesting taxing AI activities to support workers.⁶
- **Infrastructure Scaling Crisis:** NVIDIA CEO Jensen Huang's earlier conversation with Larry Fink continued to frame final-day discussions about AI's energy demands. Huang framed AI
- as "core infrastructure" and argued that "all countries should include AI in their infrastructure," predicting that "learning to work with AI will soon be as fundamental as learning to manage people". The staggering infrastructure requirements—particularly the
- need to more than double energy production for AI plants—were cited as both an opportunity and a systemic risk.^{7 2}
- ● **Scaling Implementation Challenges:** The WEF's "Scaling AI: Now Comes the Hard Part" session earlier in the week set the tone for Friday's executive huddles. Accenture CEO Julie Sweet highlighted that moving beyond pilots requires "creating new strategies, capabilities and organizational designs," while Aramco's Amin Nasser emphasized using AI to capture institutional knowledge from frontline workers. This "difficult second phase" of AI adoption was a recurring theme in closing conversations.⁸
- **Regulatory Divergence:** Concerns about AI's psychological impacts—including potential links to suicidal tendencies in chatbot interactions—surfaced in private discussions, though public programming largely avoided the topic. The gap between technical capability and governance frameworks was highlighted when participants noted only four climate sessions appeared on the agenda compared to sixteen in 2022, reflecting the administration's influence on programming priorities.^{9 6}
- **Economic Impact Forecasts:** Participants widely cited McKinsey research predicting AI could add \$13 trillion to global GDP by 2030, but debated whether benefits would diffuse equitably. The "AI diffusion gap" between developed and emerging economies remained unresolved, with Huang's advice that countries should "build your own AI, take advantage of your fundamental natural resource, which is your language and culture" resonating particularly with developing nation delegates.⁷

Gossip and People

- **Trump's Chaotic Logistics:** Trump's arrival on Wednesday afternoon—delayed when Air Force One turned back due to an electrical issue—created a dramatic opening. The president switched to a smaller backup Boeing 757, landing at Zurich Airport at 12:50 p.m. before transferring to Marine One helicopters for the final leg to Davos. His departure Thursday afternoon at 5:37 p.m. was equally theatrical, with a Keystone-SDA photographer documenting Air Force One's takeoff from Zurich. The circus-like atmosphere dominated hallway conversations on the final day.¹⁰
- **Private Jet Armada:** Zurich Airport handled 850 private-jet movements between January 19-21, with 216 individual aircraft on the ramp at one point, creating operational chaos. The airport activated contingency plans normally reserved for summer peaks, reallocating overnight parking to Dübendorf military airfield and imposing 30-minute ground-time caps. Gulfstream G650s and Bombardier Global 7500s—dubbed the "Ferrari of the Skies"—were the transport of choice, with jets registered to Google, BlackRock, and IBM among those tracked.^{11 12}









































- **Celebrity Sightings:** Elon Musk made a surprise appearance Thursday, addressing participants at 4:30 p.m. and generating buzz that carried into Friday. His presence alongside tech leaders like Jensen Huang, Microsoft President Brad Smith, and former Google CEO Eric Schmidt transformed the Promenade into a "who's who" of AI power brokers. Matt Damon announced a new Water.org initiative, the Get Blue program, with Gap, Amazon, Starbucks and Ecolab already committed, providing a rare celebrity-humanitarian moment. ^{13 10 1}
- **Side Event Frenzy:** The "real Davos" ran 07:30-22:00 across 50+ venues, with Nigeria inaugurating its first national pavilion and Saudi Arabia hosting its first dedicated "Saudi House". Japan Night at the Central Sporthotel featured wagyu beef flown from Japan and the traditional Kagami-biraki sake ceremony, while the Swiss House hosted back-to-back sessions on energy security and multilateralism. These parallel events generated more substantive dealmaking than the main Congress Centre program, according to veteran attendees. ¹⁴
- **Protest and Scrutiny:** Despite tightened security, activists targeted the USA House venue, where Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, AI czar David Sacks, and other Trump officials spoke. Scammers reportedly sold fake VIP tickets and access passes to the USA House, duping attendees seeking entry to the administration's inner circle. Meanwhile, International Rescue Committee President David Miliband criticized the Forum for not fulfilling its mission, telling Swiss media that the humanitarian aid sector had shrunk 50% in 2024 while Davos remained "beautiful but not enough". ^{13 10}

Word Count: 1,498

Citations: ^{3 6 8 4 2 14 10 9 5 7 13 1}

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