

Startup event in Finland puts spotlight on European tech

November 30 2017, by Jari Tanner



General view of Slush 2017 event in Helsinki, Finland, Thursday, Nov. 30, 2017. Al Gore has kicked off the two-day Slush conference, one of Europe's largest startup events in Finland, where 2,600 companies and some 1,500 investors are gathering to network and negotiate funding. (Vesa Moilanen/ Lehtikuva via AP)

One of Europe's largest startup events opened Thursday in Finland, with 2,600 companies and 1,500 investors networking and negotiating funding, as the region looks to ramp up an industry that has long

struggled to compete with the tech giants of the U.S.

The two-day Slush conference in Helsinki brought in star power to promote itself, including former U.S. Vice President Al Gore to kick off the event and Britain's Prince William.

The location of Finland is symbolic for a national and regional technology industry that has been trying to renew itself from older tech—the once-dominant handsets of Nokia—into newer ventures.

Finland has managed over the past five years to build a flourishing entrepreneurial scene, evident in the rise of gaming heavyweights Supercell—the maker of Clash of Titans among others—and the Angry Birds developer Rovio.

The home-grown startups in Finland are now expanding from conventional information technology to new lucrative fields like education, health, virtual reality and artificial intelligence.

Yet as successful as some of these companies can be, they more often than not get bought up by bigger U.S. or Asian companies, leaving Europe without a single software-based technology company to rival the likes of Google or Amazon. Supercell, for example, sold a majority of its shares to Japanese companies GungHo and Softbank in 2013 and then China's Tencent in 2016.



Former Vice President of the United States, Al Gore speaks during a Slush 2017 startup and technology event in Helsinki, Finland, Thursday, Nov. 30, 2017. (Vesa Moilanen/Lehtikuva via AP)

Venture capital firm Index Partners, one of Europe's largest technology investors based in London and San Francisco, is convinced Europe will get own star companies in the not-so-distant future.

"It's just a matter of time and people seeing the exhibit, seeing Supercell reach \$10 billion valuation. There will be more companies like that," said spokesman Vojtech Horna from Index's London office.

"The more people see examples like that, the more you see people taking it for the long-term and building these businesses in Europe."

He mentioned online fashion platform Farfetch, lending marketplace Funding Circle and music streaming service Spotify as examples of

European startups that have grown to become leaders in their respective fields.

From its beginning in 2008 as a student-driven event with 300 visitors, Slush has grown to become a major international showcase for startups, with about 20,000 visitors expected this year.



Former Vice President of the United States, Al Gore speaks during a Slush 2017 startup and technology event in Helsinki, Finland, Thursday, Nov. 30, 2017. (Vesa Moilanen/Lehtikuva via AP)

In addition, dozens of side events take place around Helsinki for investors, media and entrepreneurs, and organizers have expanded Slush to Asia with similar events staged in Shanghai, Singapore and Tokyo.

This year's overall theme is "how growth companies can solve the world's biggest problems" through technology.

"Slush has put Helsinki on the map," said director Reidar Wasenius of the Finnish Business Angels Network whose members invested some 53 million euros in over 300 startups in 2016. "It has brought not only visibility but also credibility with direct benefits to investors and Finnish startups."

Slush estimates total funds channeled to Finnish startups have more than tripled from 2011 to some 383 million euros last year.

Apart from Gore and Prince William, other European royalty—Prince Daniel of Sweden and Prince Constantijn of the Netherlands—are expected to visit.

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