

Report on the Youth Policy Dialogue with Commissioner Maros Šefčovič

‘EU trade and economic security – what is at stake for young Europeans?’

Monday 3 February 2025

College of Europe, Natolin Campus, Warsaw, Poland

Introduction

The Youth Dialogue on EU trade policy and economic security with Commissioner Maros Šefčovič took place on 3 February 2025, bringing together 12 young students from 9 different countries in Europe and its neighbourhood. Prior to the physical meeting, an online preparation meeting took place on 28 January. The Youth Dialogue was moderated by two students. The event was live streamed.

Summary of the Youth Policy Dialogue (In-Person Meeting)

The Youth Policy Dialogue discussed the EU trade policy and economic security in today's challenging geopolitical context with Commissioner Šefčovič highlighting how maintaining and expanding trade and investment relationships from across the globe is more important than ever. The subsequent discussion then focused on many different aspects of EU trade policy, including – amongst others – the triangle of competitiveness-sustainability-security, trade relations with big economic partners and other neighbouring countries, the role of the World Trade Organisation, the importance of sustainability and the fight against climate change.

→ A more detailed report on the Youth Dialogue and the discussion prepared by the students can be found in the Annex.

Topic of Discussion

The discussion was structured in five clusters:

- Economic Security and Trade Policy in a Fragmented World
- Competitiveness, Sustainability, and Strategic Autonomy
- Inclusivity in Plurilateral Agreements
- Reconciling Trade Policy with Sustainability Goals
- The EU as a Trusted Trade Partner

Two themes emerged as the most important:

- 1) **The need to ensure competitiveness and sustainability goals go hand in hand:** Students emphasised strongly the need to reconcile the EU's ambitious sustainability goals with the need for economic competitiveness. They also showed considerable interest as to how the EU can act as both a trade power and a normative actor in global governance to protect the EU's values while at the same time being able to pragmatically influence global trade policy.

- 2) **The EU as a global partner:** The discussion also highlighted the role of the EU as a global trade partner, both bilaterally, plurilaterally and multilaterally. Students recognised that the challenging global environment requires a careful calibration of bilateral trade relations with big economic powers like China and the US, neighbouring countries, like Ukraine and Türkiye, and others while also maintaining a rules based global order through multilateral and plurilateral agreements.

→ The recording of the Youth Dialogue can be found here: [LinkedIn](#)

Right after the YPD, a workshop was organised on data-story telling with colleagues from the European Publication Office. The workshop was open to all Natolin students.

Follow-up Activities

A follow up meeting with students (online) took place on Friday 14 February chaired by Director Sofia Munoz Albarran and in presence of policy experts from DG Trade. Students had the opportunity to discuss remaining open questions and additional aspects including on EU-US trade relations, digital trade, the EU's trade strategy for the indo-pacific, the modernization of the EU-Türkiye customs union, the EU's approach to a African Continental Free Trade agreement, the use of qualified majority voting, the Anti Coercion Instrument and many more.

Annex

- Report by Students of the College of Europe, Natolin



College of Europe
Collège d'Europe



Natolin

REPORT

the Youth Dialogue with
Commissioner for Trade and
Economic Security Maroš Šefčovič
at the College of Europe in Natolin

Warsaw, 3rd of February 2025



The College of Europe was founded in 1949, first in Bruges, Belgium, whilst the College of Europe in Natolin was established in 1992 in Warsaw, Poland in the wake of historical changes in Central and Eastern Europe, the fall of communism and the reintegration of the European continent. By anchoring its educational activity in the Eastern 'lung' of Europe, the College was prepared for the anticipated enlargement of the then European Communities, as the College of Europe in Natolin contributed to educating future Central and Eastern European policymakers, leaders and administrators on all aspects related to the European integration process. At the same time and to bridge the East-West divide, equally crucial was educating their partners from the original EU-15 Member states on the history, political systems, economies and concerns specific to Central and Eastern Europe.

In 2024/2025, the College of Europe in Natolin with 124 students representing 35 nationalities stands as a well-established and renowned centre of academic excellence on EU, EU Enlargement, and the European Neighbourhood (EN) related affairs.

Specifically, by witnessing the legal and political developments vis-à-vis the EU's neighbouring countries and within these states themselves, the College of Europe in Natolin has been developing and fostering an EU enlargement and neighbourhood-oriented teaching, research and educational programme which was established in 2008 thanks to a European Commission pilot project. The main aim of such activities remains to advance the knowledge and understanding of the ENP and neighbourhood-related matters by students, researchers, and public-opinion makers, but also to act as bridge-builders between the EU, and the countries from EU's neighbourhood.

Today, the College of Europe in Natolin continues to operate through innovative approaches, exploring diverse areas of interest such as security challenges in the EU's neighbourhood, energy and the climate transition, migration, digital media and knowledge-based journalism, how politics and technology interact, religion and politics.

The College of Europe in Natolin pursues these goals through its Advanced Master's degree in European Interdisciplinary Studies, supported by two flagship academic Chairs – the European Neighbourhood Chair, and the European Civilization Chair – founded by the European Parliament and financed by the European Commission.

On Monday the 3rd of February, students of the College of Europe in Natolin participated in an EU Youth Dialogue with Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič to discuss some of the EU's most pressing challenges, notably trade policy, economic security, sustainability, and the EU's role in an evolving global order. Throughout the discussion, the students and the Commissioner agreed that a coherent EU strategy is necessary.

ECONOMIC SECURITY AND TRADE POLICY IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD

One of the messages from Commissioner Šefčovič was the necessity of adapting EU trade policy to a rapidly shifting global economy. The world is experiencing a fragmentation of the open, rules based system that Europe has traditionally championed. The Commissioner echoed President von der Leyen's strategy that the EU has three overarching priorities, namely Competitiveness, Sustainability and Security. He also mentioned the importance of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) as a key element of the EU's success. However, the evolving geopolitical landscape requires Europe to rethink its approach. FTAs should be mutually beneficial, particularly in relation to safeguarding European industries from unfair trade practices and maintaining a level playing field.

Students also showed considerable interest as to how the EU can act as both a trade power and a normative actor in global governance to protect the EU's values while at the same time being able to pragmatically influence global trade policy. In this regard, the Commissioner reaffirmed the EU's commitment to promoting human rights, labour standards, and climate objectives through trade agreements. He showcased recent successes, such as integrating the Paris Agreement into trade deals and enforcing labour rights through International Labour Organisation (ILO) standards. At the same time, he recognised that trade policy alone cannot address all geopolitical concerns. The EU must also ensure its economic security in an era of heightened geopolitical tensions, particularly in relations with China and the United States. Commissioner Šefčovič emphasised that Europe must act with unity, as this remains the EU's strongest asset. He also highlighted ongoing efforts to reform the WTO, particularly in relation to dispute settlement mechanisms, to ensure that global trade remains fair and rule-based.

COMPETITIVENESS, SUSTAINABILITY, AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

The question of how to reconcile the EU's ambitious sustainability goals with the need for economic competitiveness was one of the main points of contention during the debate. Students raised several concerns about the alignment between trade agreements and environmental objectives, particularly regarding the MERCOSUR agreement. Commissioner Šefčovič acknowledged the sensitivity of this issue but argued that the agreement includes the most comprehensive sustainability chapter ever negotiated by the EU. Additionally, students were interested in Europe's strategy to reduce its dependence on external suppliers, especially in key industries such as clean tech and critical raw materials. In this regard, the Commissioner mentioned the Net-Zero Industry Act and argued that more efforts are necessary to enhance the EU's manufacturing base to reduce the risks of foreign dominance in key sectors.

In light of the students' interest in industrial strategy and trade relationships with third countries, Commissioner Šefčovič argued that permitting processes and funding mechanisms must be accelerated to enable European businesses to compete effectively. He also highlighted the need for regulatory streamlining. The Commissioner argued that the EU should not hesitate to impose duties where necessary to protect against unfair competition, such as the recent measures against subsidised Chinese battery electric vehicles for instance.

INCLUSIVITY IN PLURILATERAL AGREEMENTS

A significant portion of the discussion focused on the EU's role in fostering inclusivity in international trade, particularly within plurilateral agreements. Students expressed concerns about the potential exclusion of smaller WTO members and the risk of creating a fragmented trading system. Commissioner Šefčovič responded by affirming the EU's commitment to inclusivity, emphasising the need to support smaller and less-developed nations through capacity-building initiatives. This, he explained, ensures that all parties can participate meaningfully in trade negotiations. The Commissioner also outlined plans for a more structured approach to plurilateral negotiations to reduce the risk of duplication or conflicting commitments. He reassured students that the EU would prioritise coherence and coordination to ensure that plurilateral agreements strengthen, rather than weaken, the multilateral system.

RECONCILING TRADE POLICY WITH SUSTAINABILITY GOALS

Another key topic was how the EU balances its ambitious sustainability objectives with its trade policies. Students questioned how the EU incorporates circular economy principles into trade agreements while ensuring environmental priorities are not overshadowed by economic benefits. Commissioner Šefčovič acknowledged the importance of aligning trade with sustainability objectives, particularly in agreements like MERCOSUR. He pointed out that such agreements now include robust sustainability chapters to promote environmentally responsible trade practices. He also addressed the EU's need for critical raw materials (CRMs) from non-EU countries to support the green transition, while noting the importance of ensuring trade policies are in line with the EU's circular economy ambitions. Students underlined the idea of a "Circular (Made in) Europe" model, which emphasises shorter supply chains and localised production. While ambitious, this vision aligns with the EU's broader strategy of combining economic growth with environmental sustainability.

THE EU AS A TRUSTED TRADE PARTNER

In response to questions about the EU's global partnerships, Commissioner Šefčovič emphasised the EU's reputation as a reliable and predictable trade partner. He noted that the EU is the largest investor in the United States, with mutual investments totalling €5 trillion. The EU's trade relationship with the U.S., he explained, is characterised by its scale and depth, making the two economies interdependent. Looking ahead, the Commissioner discussed ongoing negotiations with MERCOSUR, Mexico, and India, among others. He highlighted that the EU's appeal as a trade partner lies in its commitment to fairness, predictability, and adherence to the rule of law, which makes it an attractive ally in an increasingly uncertain world.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Youth Dialogue with Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič provided a good platform for students to share their perspectives and gain deeper insights into the EU's strategies for tackling critical global challenges, although it was noted by students in the wrap-up session that deepening rather than widening the debate might be an option for future debates. The Commissioner's responses showed that the Commission actively seeks to balance economic, environmental, and social priorities while maintaining the EU's competitiveness in a fragmented world. Students left the discussion eager to contribute to the development of a resilient and sustainable Europe.

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