Report on the Youth Policy Dialogue with European Commissioner Ekaterina Zaharieva Research and Innovation

Youth Policy Dialogue: How can young people help make Europe a start-up and scale-up powerhouse?

Date: 5.6.2026

Location: Sofia Event Centre, Sofia, Bulgaria

Introduction



The 2026 Youth Policy Dialogue, organised by the **Directorate-General for Research and Innovation**, brought together **21 young people from Bulgaria to discuss startups and scaleups with European Commissioner Ekaterina Zaharieva**. It took place on **5 June 2026 in** Sofia, Bulgaria and was held at the Sofia Event Centre alongside the **Green Transition Forum 6.0,** which brought together 600 young people. Participants of the Youth Policy Dialogue were also invited to join the forum.

The Dialogue was moderated in Bulgarian by Sophia Plamenova Nikolova, a secondary school student from Sofia and founder and CEO of a startup. The discussion focused on the question: **"How can young people help make Europe a startup and scale-up powerhouse?"** The theme "**startups and scaleups"** was selected in response to major technological and geopolitical changes, with the aim of ensuring that **young people are not only consulted about Europe's future but also empowered to help build it.** It created a direct opportunity for **young people aged from 17 to 32 — including school and university students as well as young entrepreneurs** — to contribute to shaping Europe's future economy, technologies and democracy.

The **event was organised within the framework of the EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy, which seeks to make Europe the best place in the world to create and grow global technology-driven companies.** The Strategy covers the full life cycle of innovative businesses, from launch to expansion, by promoting innovation-friendly regulation, better access to finance, quicker market uptake, support for talent, and access to infrastructure, networks and services. In this context, the **Youth Policy Dialogue helped place young people's views at the centre of the Strategy's future implementation**.

The European Commission selected participants to ensure broad diversity in terms of educational background, professional experience, gender and familiarity with the topics. In the online **preparatory meeting held on 1 June 2026**, participants received information about the **Startup and Scaleup Strategy** and about the objectives of the Youth Policy Dialogue. Participants later expressed their appreciation for both the preparatory meeting helping them to establish a positive group dynamic and the **follow-up meeting** after the Dialogue, held on **11 July 2026**. **Participants regarded the organisation of these meetings as a clear sign that the Commission values young people's opinions and ideas on this important EU policy area, which also offers educational and employment opportunities.**

The event opened with an interactive icebreaker, during which the moderator asked participants questions about the green transition, their personal and professional paths, involvement in youth networks and volunteering, and the importance of active participation in policymaking. Participants first discussed in four working groups, each supported by a facilitator. The four facilitators presented the groups' findings and recommendations to the Commissioner during the second part, the open Dialogue with all participants.

The Commissioner encouraged participants to be **honest, direct, imaginative, creative and bold in proposing concrete and practical ideas, suggestions and recommendations.** The exchange was highly engaging, and the Commissioner spent 1,5 hours in discussion with the participants. After the formal session, participants continued their conversations over lunch.

Topic of the Youth Policy Dialogue

Commissioner Zaharieva is the first ever EU Commissioner who was assigned the responsibility for **startups.** According to the 2023 Eurobarometer surveying social entrepreneurship and youth, almost one in two respondents (46%) would consider setting up their own business. Despite the enthusiasm for self-employment, only a small share of the young people responding to the survey are self-employed: only 9% have already started a business and an additional 14% are taking steps towards this objective. In an increasingly competitive world, Europe cannot afford to discourage young people who want to become innovators, entrepreneurs and researchers or lose them to ecosystems elsewhere. Europe must become a place where young people believe they can build ambitious projects, access opportunities and shape the technologies and solutions of the future while remaining anchored in European values of openness, fairness and democracy.

The Dialogue was structured along **four key themes**, each addressed by a working group:

1. **Startups and Scaleups in general**,
2. **Access to services technology infrastructure and experimentation spaces**,
3. **Universities and entrepreneurship**, and
4. **Young women as innovators and entrepreneurs**.

Summary of the Youth Policy Dialogue

1. **Positive outlook and global thinking:** The Commissioner expressed happiness about the solutions discussed, preferring to refer to problems as challenges. She valued the input of young people due to their positive attitude and global perspective. She highlighted that Bulgaria is provides many talent and economic opportunities considering country's size and has many talented individuals, noting that some of the most successful unicorns come from less populated countries.

2. **Focus on innovation and talent:** The Commissioner stressed the importance of developing innovation, investing in talent, and advancing technology to make a country rich. She noted that competitiveness is driven by technology, particularly AI, which clarifies many aspects of business and innovation.
3. **Support instruments and clarity:** There are numerous support instruments available supporting companies and the youth, but they are not clearly enough communicated, leading to a lack of awareness among the public. The Commissioner acknowledged that there are too many EU support programs and proposed simplifying them in the next program period. She mentioned the consolidation of 14 EU support programs into a more streamlined framework of programs. Therefore, the Commissioner call for more clear and accessible language in communicating about these support instruments and make these support opportunities easy to reach.
4. **We have tools to support companies and young people, but they often remain poorly understood.** to think regional, not local – and think European dimension from day one onwards.

Working Group 1: Startups and Scaleups

Key challenges identified

Early-stage and deep-tech startups face severe funding shortages. Private investors often avoid such ventures due to high risk and lack of revenue, while public funding remains difficult to access, for example with EIC success rates as low as 2–5%. Some national grant schemes in some Member States impose inappropriate eligibility criteria, such as mandatory registration before 2022 and minimum revenue thresholds (€32,000+), excluding innovative but pre-revenue startups. Additionally, prohibitive infrastructure costs (e.g., €10,000 for six months' lab access) and restricted university facilities hinder experimentation. Weak support and lower funding exacerbate the innovation gap which persists between front-runner and widening countries, Finally, limited entrepreneurship education leaves young innovators without guidance on business development.

Proposed solutions

To address funding gaps, participants advocated milestone-based eligibility criteria, replacing rigid revenue requirements with performance-linked tranches, as successfully implemented in Sweden. Decentralising grant distribution through trusted regional incubators would streamline approvals and improve accountability. The participants supported the European Commission's call to triple the EIC budget and asked for such an increase to be implemented as early as 2027, with mandatory quotas for widening countries to ensure equitable access. Infrastructure barriers could be overcome by introducing EU-funded lab vouchers and expanding Fraunhofer-style research networks in underserved regions. Cross-border regulatory sandboxes and mentorship programmes would further support validation and scaling. The participants also proposed embedding EIT-funded entrepreneurship hubs in schools and universities to bridge the skills gap, providing early-stage training and incubation links.

Working Group 2: Access to Services, Technology Infrastructure, and Experimentation Spaces

Key challenges identified

Startups and researchers alike face fragmented access to critical infrastructure, with poor connectivity between hubs, universities, and the private sector. Slow bureaucratic processes and information overload delay project execution, while opportunities remain poorly mapped, particularly at the national level. Many Member States still restrict national funding to domestic startups, limiting cross-border collaboration. Young innovators struggle to navigate disjointed resources, with experimentation spaces concentrated in capital cities. The lack of a unified digital platform to aggregate EU-wide opportunities further exacerbates inefficiencies, discouraging scalability and global competitiveness.

Proposed solutions

Participants called for a European Startup Acceleration Programme - a centralised digital platform linking schools, universities, incubators, and private-sector partners to streamline access to funding, mentorship, and infrastructure. A comprehensive EU-wide mapping inventory of all available resources could ensure transparency and reduce duplication. To foster collaboration, national funding programmes should open to startups from other Member States, with the European Commission acting as a facilitator. Decentralised but digitally linked innovation hubs beyond capital cities would improve regional access, while physical and digital sandboxes would enable cross-border testing and experimentation. Faster grant approvals and reduced bureaucracy were also highlighted as critical to maintaining momentum.

Working Group 3: Universities and Entrepreneurship

Key challenges identified

Europe's universities excel in research and talent development but consistently fail to translate academic innovation into market-ready startups. The core issue lies in the disconnect between higher education, research, and entrepreneurship, where students and researchers lack clear pathways to commercialise ideas. Entrepreneurship education remains marginalised, often theoretical, and confined to late-stage academic programmes, leaving graduates without practical business development skills. Universities prioritise publications over commercialisation, with researchers facing misaligned incentives - reward for academic output rather than societal or economic impact. Fragmented support ecosystems further hinder progress, as students struggle to navigate dispersed funding schemes, incubators, and mentorship opportunities.

Access to labs, makerspaces, and industry collaborations is currently restricted, and ambiguities with regard to intellectual property ownership discourage startup creation., Multidisciplinary collaboration—essential for modern innovation—is rarely fostered. Early-stage funding remains scarce, with complex application processes and limited micro-funding for student-led ventures, stifling the transition from prototype to market.

Proposed solutions

To bridge the university-startup divide, participants advocated for standardised "one-stop shop" startup offices in every European university, serving as a single entry point for entrepreneurship guidance, legal/IP support, funding access, and investor connections. Entrepreneurship should be embedded into curricula from secondary education, with practical, experimental learning replacing theoretical modules. Universities were urged to formally recognise entrepreneurship as an academic achievement, allowing students to earn credits for startup projects, submit business ventures as alternatives to thesis, or undertake innovation-focused internships.

The group proposed mandating industry collaboration in all higher education programmes, including joint research projects, corporate mentorships, and real-world innovation challenges. Stronger lab-to-market pathways would incentivise researchers to pursue commercialisation, with dedicated technology transfer offices, startup incubation programmes, and commercialisation grants. Expanding access to STEM hubs, makerspaces, and living labs—across all disciplines and regions—would ensure equitable opportunities for experimentation. A European Student Founder Pass was also suggested as a label connecting young entrepreneurs to EU-wide funding, mentors, and infrastructure.

Working Group 4: Young women entrepreneurs and innovators

Key challenges identified:

During the discussion, three key challenges were highlighted. First, **women remain underrepresented in STEM fields**, and this is even more visible in regions where there are few local role models. Without seeing women in

leadership, research, or technology-based entrepreneurship, many girls and young women may struggle to imagine themselves in these careers. This reinforces long-standing stereotypes about who belongs in innovation and tech.

A second major challenge is the **difficult transition from education to entrepreneurship**, particularly for young women. Even when they gain relevant qualifications, many face uncertainty about how to move from study into starting a business, accessing professional networks, or entering innovation ecosystems. These barriers are often compounded by limited mentorship and insufficient early-stage financing, which make it harder for promising ideas to develop into viable startups.

Lastly, **regional disparities** also continue to shape opportunities unevenly across Europe. In some areas, weaker connectivity, less developed tech ecosystems, and fewer support structures reduce access to training, investment, and professional communities. At the same time, **limited childcare support places an additional burden on women**, making it more difficult to balance family responsibilities with entrepreneurship, career progression, or participation in leadership and innovation.

The EU has recently adopted its EU Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030 and proposed key actions to act on this matter. In the field of research and innovation, this strategy has announced a dedicated Action Plan aimed at advancing gender equality in research and innovation, including stronger support for women's participation, leadership and entrepreneurship. The action plan is expected by the end of 2026.

Proposed solutions:

A key priority for the participants is to **build stronger networks for women entrepreneurs** and **aspiring leaders.** These networks should include mentoring, peer support, visibility events, and practical spaces for exchange, helping women gain contacts, confidence, and access to opportunities. **Mental health** support should also be part of this approach, as entrepreneurship and leadership often involve pressure, isolation, and high personal risk.

At the same time, **public investment in nurseries, kindergartens, and early childcare** is essential to support working mothers and women entrepreneurs. Better childcare provision would not only reduce practical barriers to participation in the labour market but also help create more equal conditions for balancing professional and family life. This would allow more women to pursue business creation, leadership roles, and long-term career development without being disproportionately constrained by care responsibilities.

Further action should focus **on fairness, skills, and access to information. Transparency in hiring processes** and funding criteria can help reduce bias and improve trust without relying solely on quotas. **Entrepreneurial education** should be strengthened so that young women are better equipped to move from learning into business creation, while communication about EU equality measures must become clearer and more accessible, especially in smaller towns and less connected regions.

Main takeaways / recommendations by participants

1. Create a single, milestone-based EU entry point for funding, infrastructure, and mentorship — replacing revenue thresholds and fragmented national schemes with a unified digital platform (a "European Startup Acceleration Programme") that maps and links labs, incubators, and funding across Member States with regional quotas and decentralised hubs to close the gap between front-runner and less supported regions.

2. Embed entrepreneurship as a core, practical track — not an afterthought — from secondary school through university, via standardised "one-stop shop" startup offices on every campus, academic credit for real ventures, and mandatory industry collaboration to end "science-washing" and give graduates genuine commercialisation pathways.

3. Back young women entrepreneurs with targeted investments: EU-funded childcare to ease the work-family balance, dedicated mentorship and pre-validation financing, and transparent (not quota-based) hiring and funding criteria, paired with better visibility of women role models and stronger communication of existing equality measures, especially in smaller towns.

Follow-up activities

The **outcomes of the Youth Policy Dialogue would be taken up under the following ongoing work streams**:

- **EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy:** The outcomes of the dialogue will be presented to the internal Taskforce in charge of the implementation of the Strategy, as they are relevant to the Lab to Unicorn Initiative, the Blue Carpet initiative, the Charter of Access to research infrastructures, and the design of the single digital entry point for innovators.
- **Horizon Europe Work Programme 2026–2027 and future research programmes:** The insights collected can feed into the development of calls for the next round of Horizon Europe and HE 2028-2035 and European Competitiveness Fund programming, in particular those addressing the startup ecosystem, youth engagement deep tech, and innovation education.
- **Upcoming Action Plan on women in research, innovation and startups:** The Youth Policy Dialogue, as well as the results reflecting young participants' perspectives, have been integrated into the consultation strategy for this upcoming initiative. Much of the feedback mirrors the responses to the public call for evidence launched earlier this year and will now be analysed to help shape concrete measures. As the Commission intends to address the gender gap at each career stage, the perspectives of young people are key to ensuring that every researcher and innovator can start and progress equally in research and innovation careers.

Communication activities

Links to press articles, social media, web publications:

- DG RTD News Alert: Shaping Europe's startup future: Commissioner Zaharieva meets young innovators in Sofia - Research and innovation
- European Commission's Spokesperson Service Daily News feature: Daily News 05 / 06 / 2026
- Press: Politico mentioned 'Startups Commissioner **Ekaterina Zaharieva** participates in the Green Transition Forum and a youth policy dialogue in Sofia.'

Commissioner Zaharieva's Social Media:

- LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/posts/ekaterina-zaharieva_i-left-todays-youth-policy-dialogue-in-sofia-ugcPost-7468698092989517825-T9DN/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAADA2rYwBFsxC53a9BTraaPpksIHlf5KyZYU
- X: https://x.com/EZaharievaEU/status/2062932638919282697?s=20

Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (RTD) Social Media:

- LinkedIn #youthpolicydialogue | EU Science, Research and Innovation
- X https://x.com/EUScienceInnov/status/2063984023093776702?s=20
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- Facebook EU Science & Innovation
- Web: Youth Policy Dialogue: Powering Europe's Startup and Scaleup Future | European Youth Portal