



Report on the Youth Policy Dialogue with Apostolos Tzitzikostas, European Commissioner for Sustainable Transport and Tourism

The future of European tourism

15 May 2026

Athens, Greece

Introduction

This [Youth Policy Dialogue](#) brought together 20 young people from 15 European countries to discuss the future of tourism with Commissioner Apostolos Tzitzikostas. Following an online preparation meeting on 4 May 2026, the in-person event took place on 15 May at the Athens Conservatoire in Greece, moderated by Greek TV presenter Sakis Tanimanidis and featuring travel filmmaker Eftyhis Bletsas.



The discussion focused on the future **EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism**, with participants sharing ideas, concerns, and recommendations based on their diverse backgrounds in tourism, transport, hospitality, accessibility, rural tourism, entrepreneurship, and sustainability. Participants included students, workers, entrepreneurs, a Paralympic champion, and residents from Tampere and Dubrovnik, winners of the 2026 [European tourism awards](#).

The event was livestreamed and attended by more than 100 people from universities, educational institutions, tourism stakeholders, and the Hellenic National Youth Council. The audience was invited to participate through an online engagement platform (see results in the Annex).

Summary of the Youth Policy Dialogue

Commissioner Apostolos Tzitzikostas opened the Youth Policy Dialogue by emphasising the importance of involving young people in shaping the **EU's first comprehensive tourism strategy**. He highlighted tourism's major contribution to the EU economy and identified key challenges including sustainability, unbalanced tourism, connectivity, protection of cultural heritage, and ensuring benefits for local communities. He also referred to the recently presented [EU Passenger Package](#) designed to simplify cross-border rail travel by enabling passengers to book multi-operator rail journeys through a single platform with stronger rail passenger rights – one journey, one ticket, full rights.

Following introductions, travel filmmaker Eftyhis Bletsas reflected on his experiences visiting 120 countries and stressed the need for responsible tourism that protects local communities and destinations. Eftyhis shared an example of a secluded Greek beach where residents asked him not to publicise it, fearing that social media exposure would permanently alter the location. He concluded by stressing that tourism should continue to inspire people while being managed in ways that also protect destinations and local populations.

The Youth Dialogue then began with Sharon, representing a Dutch [national park](#) (through [EUROPARC](#) and the [European Charter for Sustainable Tourism](#)), asking how the EU could **balance tourism growth with environmental and social limits**. Commissioner Tzitzikostas replied that the future strategy aims to balance tourism development with residents' quality of life and that Europe must better distribute tourism

flows by promoting lesser-known destinations and improving access, in particular through rail and other sustainable transport options.

Building on this, Paulina from the [TUI Care Foundation](#) stressed that tourism should directly **benefit local communities**, highlighting a Croatian project supporting women artisans producing traditional handicrafts, where tourism helped increase participation in local cultural events. She called for EU funding to better support local businesses and communities, a point the Commissioner acknowledged, noting that EU cohesion funds already support similar initiatives.

The issue of unbalanced tourism was discussed through the example of [Dubrovnik](#), where Giuliano, a resident of the city, described measures such as limiting cruise ships, controlling visitor numbers, and restricting traffic in the historic centre to reduce pressure on residents. Commissioner Tzitzikostas praised the initiative and linked it to EU plans for stronger destination management, including a **European tourism data space** to better monitor tourism flows and infrastructure pressures.

Hospitality student Dilyan from Bulgaria raised **concerns about mass tourism** in major Bulgarian summer resorts and shared his thoughts on how converting mass tourism destinations into quality tourism could bring businesses the same profit – but they would need to be willing to invest into their destinations.

The Commissioner stressed that tourism policy must focus not only on promoting destinations but also on **managing them effectively**. He noted that many destinations invest heavily in promotion while neglecting visitor management and infrastructure planning. To address this, the Commission plans to strengthen Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) and improve management of visitor flows, infrastructure, and sustainability. He also proposed systems similar to airport slot management for cruise ships in destinations such as Venice and Santorini to reduce congestion. Sharon added that overtourism is not only about visitor numbers, but also about **visitor behaviour** and **awareness**, stressing the need for respectful tourism practices.

Participants stressed that many travellers increasingly seek **authentic experiences** over overcrowded tourist hotspots. Julia from Barcelona ([European Network of Outdoor Sports](#)) highlighted how lesser-known destinations allow deeper connections with local life, while Liisa from Estonia, working for a [rural tourism](#)



[NGO](#), called for greater support for **rural tourism** businesses, as rural areas often struggle to attract visitors despite offering unique experiences, strong local identities, and the time to provide visitors with a more personal experience of local life. The Commissioner confirmed that rural tourism would be fully integrated into the future strategy.

Sector-specific perspectives were also discussed. Ana from Croatia, representing the [European Boating Industry](#), called for a more harmonised European approach to **boating tourism**. She

highlighted the need for mutual recognition of boating licences, easier mobility for skippers, and improved marina infrastructure for alternative fuel and electric vessels. The Commissioner acknowledged the sector's



importance and the need for European solutions in this area, which will be reflected in the EU's upcoming strategy.

Julia and Joaquín, both active in the [European Greenways Association](#) focused on **cycling tourism** and **sustainable mobility** routes. Commissioner Tzitzikostas confirmed that cycling would have a dedicated chapter in the future tourism strategy and announced plans to better map and connect cycling routes across Europe. Paul, a German train attendant, also highlighted the importance of **improving cross-border European rail connections**, particularly towards the southwest, to make it possible to reach every European capital within an attractive travel time.

The role of **digital platforms in tourism** was raised by Mathis from Luxembourg, who explained that his family's tourism business [LetzRent](#) struggles to compete with dominant online booking platforms. The Commissioner replied that while competition rules must be respected, the Commission supports by setting fair and transparent platform rules. For example, he has recently worked with major accommodation booking platforms, hotel operators and consumer organisations on a [Code of Conduct](#) to improve **transparency and the reliability of online reviews**.

Employment and labour conditions also featured prominently. Jennyfer, a [young hotelier from Italy](#), raised concerns about tourism being viewed as **seasonal** work rather than a long-term career. Commissioner Tzitzikostas stressed the need for year-round tourism activity and announced plans for a **European Tourism Academy** focused on training and upskilling workers. Paul from the Swedish Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union highlighted the importance of **decent wages and working conditions**, while Julia from Poland reported from her experience as a tour guide and described difficult conditions for tourism workers behind the scenes. Suggestions were also made to promote year-round tourism models, including wellness tourism and conference tourism, to reduce dependence on seasonal employment.

In this context, Apolline ([Thales Group](#)) reflected, from a travel management perspective, how **business travel** and tourism are becoming increasingly interconnected, as both sectors face many of the same challenges. She also emphasised the growing importance of 'bleisure' - the combination of business travel and leisure - a trend that reflects a broader shift in how business travel is perceived: no longer merely as a functional necessity, but as a bridge to leisure travel, creating new opportunities for destinations and tourism providers.

The discussion also focused on **accessibility**, with Commissioner Tzitzikostas stressing that tourism must be **accessible to everyone**. Paralympic champion Dimitra described the difficulties disabled travellers face, explaining that accessibility challenges begin already during the planning stage, as disabled travellers often spend hours searching for information about assistance policies, contacting transport operators, and arranging support for mobility aids. She also described frequent problems such as damage to wheelchairs and the requirement to notify operators up to 48 hours in advance to receive assistance, calling for more user-friendly systems. Lydia from the [European Disability Forum](#) highlighted also the additional costs disabled travellers often face for adapted transport and accommodation. The Commissioner acknowledged accessibility as a major issue that would receive stronger attention in the future strategy.

Several participants stressed the importance of **supporting small family-run businesses**, and **local entrepreneurs**. Sarah from Austria, reporting from her family's experience of running a [holiday farm](#),



explained the relevance of rural tourism businesses in preserving landscapes and traditions, while also giving visitors insight into local ways of life. She warned that administrative burdens often create challenges for small operators. Others added that excessive regulation and complex short-term rental rules can discourage rural hosts, reducing authentic tourism opportunities.

Youth participation, training, and skills development also emerged as important themes. Niki, founder of [Book My Culture](#) in Cyprus, highlighted programmes such as [Erasmus+](#) as valuable opportunities for young people, that can even inspire entrepreneurial projects such as her own start-up. Participants also called for stronger mentoring and training networks for young tourism entrepreneurs. In response to a question from Elvira of the [Hellenic National Youth Council](#), Commissioner Tzitzikostas confirmed that feedback from the dialogue would be incorporated into the future strategy.

Closing the discussion, Georgios from [Tampere](#) in Finland – another winning city of the 2026 Capitals of Tourism – stressed that many of the challenges discussed during the dialogue ultimately depend on **action at local and regional level**. While EU policy can provide direction and support, it is often cities and regions who have the possibility to implement practical solutions and improve infrastructure and working conditions on the ground.

Main takeaways

Sustainable and balanced tourism

This was the central theme of the dialogue, reflecting concerns about overtourism, environmental pressures, and protecting local communities while maintaining Europe's competitiveness. Particular attention was given to destination management, dispersing tourism flows to lesser-known and rural areas, sustainable mobility, and promoting authentic tourism experiences over mass tourism. Commissioner Tzitzikostas acknowledged that tourism policy must focus more on managing destinations, not only promoting them, and committed to strengthening Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), developing a European tourism data space, supporting rural tourism, and integrating cycling and sustainable transport into the future EU tourism strategy.

Accessibility and inclusion

Participants emphasised that tourism should be accessible, inclusive, and beneficial for residents as well as visitors. Accessibility for persons with disabilities received particularly strong attention, with discussions focusing on inadequate assistance systems, lack of transparent information, affordability barriers, and difficulties faced by travellers with reduced mobility. Broader concerns also included affordability of travel for young people and ensuring tourism improves local quality of life. Commissioner Tzitzikostas recognised accessibility as a major issue that would receive stronger attention in the strategy and acknowledged the need for clearer, more transparent assistance systems from transport operators.

Skills, jobs, and local businesses

A third major takeaway was the need to ensure tourism creates sustainable economic opportunities for workers, local businesses, and young entrepreneurs. Discussions focused on seasonal employment, working conditions, digitalisation challenges for small businesses, and the importance of training and upskilling. Commissioner Tzitzikostas announced plans for a European Tourism Academy and committed to supporting fairer digital platform rules and integrating youth feedback into the strategy.

Follow-up

The outcomes of this Youth Policy Dialogue will contribute directly to the upcoming **EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism**. The ideas raised will also feed into the Commission's ongoing discussions with tourism stakeholders, including public authorities, tourism businesses, and transport operators. The dialogue aimed to bring together young people from different backgrounds and sectors to exchange experiences, connecting them with other young tourism specialists from across the EU, while bringing them closer to EU policy making. Participants are encouraged to continue sharing their views and experiences in the future to help ensure that EU policies are better tailored to the needs and realities of young people.

The event livestream and recording were widely promoted by the Commission, ensuring close to 500 views. On social media, the event was covered by the [EU Transport LinkedIn account](#), as well as Commissioner Tzitzikostas' social media presence, with the best performing post generating more than 80,000 impressions to date. Content posted by [Sakis Tanimanidis](#) and [Eftyhis Bletsas](#) generated a combined reach of over 370,000 impressions so far.

The event was also attended by local media, including Greek public TV, newspaper Ta NEA, news agency [AMNA](#), news portal in.gr and Greek weekly city guide [LiFO \(4,597 unique page views and 293,461 total impressions\)](#), and covered by other local and international media, such as the [Brussels Times](#), and Greek news website [lefimerida](#), as well as tourism specific media, such as [tourism today](#).

Photos are available [online](#).

More information

Want to watch the Youth Dialogue in full length? Find the [recording here!](#)

Want to get involved with EU policymaking? Have a look at the [Citizens' Engagement Platform](#), your space to participate in EU policymaking.

Want to find out more about EU tourism policy? Find an overview [here](#) and follow [EU Transport](#) on social media.

Annex

Results of the audience polls:

