



Report on the Youth Policy Dialogue with Maros Šefčovič, European Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security

Dialogue with young entrepreneurs on how EU trade and economic security policy can support small companies grow and export to third markets

Date: Thursday, 19 February 2026

Location: EU House, Nicosia, Cyprus



Introduction

This Youth Policy Dialogue brought together 12 entrepreneurs from Cyprus and 9 other Member States for a discussion with Commissioner Šefčovič on how EU trade and economic security policy can support small companies to access markets outside the EU and to further their business growth and scale internationally.

After an introductory statement by Commissioner Šefčovič, questions and comments covered a broad range of topics, including digital trade, transfer of personal data, certification and mutual recognition, standards applied by third countries, regulation in the EU, funding opportunities, issues related to the circular economy and possible support tools and networks available to small companies.

The event was live streamed on X and LinkedIn.

Summary of the Youth Policy Dialogue (In person-meeting)

In his opening remarks, Commissioner Šefčovič highlighted the current challenging geo-political environment while emphasising the importance that trade is playing to connect Europe to the world, by opening new markets and supporting European businesses to grow and compete globally. The EU has the world's largest network of free trade agreements – 44 deals with 76 countries, covering nearly half of global trade, helping over 700,000 EU businesses export and supporting 30 million jobs. Geopolitical tensions, war in Europe, and the risk of a fractured global economy, however, have created a lot of uncertainty. In a world where dependencies can be used as leverage and unfair competition is on the rise, the diversification of EU's trade is crucial. The EU is delivering - most recently concluding deals with Mexico, Mercosur, Indonesia and India, while negotiating with Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, the UAE and a group of 5 Eastern and Southern African countries. In addition, the EU is forming tailored partnerships, like the Clean Trade and Investment Partnership with South Africa, Sustainable Investment Facilitation Agreements with Angola and Ecuador, or initiatives like the EU-CPTPP Trade and Investment Dialogue. However, recognising that the digital dimension of trade today is crucial, the Commissioner also highlighted the digital trade agreements secured with Singapore and South Korea, and the prospect of finalising one with Canada. He concluded by encouraging young entrepreneurs to harness the opportunities offered by EU trade agreements and make the most of it.

Questions and comments clustered around the following themes

Digital trade, data protection/ the transfer of personal data and AI: several young entrepreneurs emphasised the importance of AI and the processing / transfer of personal data as part of their business model. They advocated simpler rules in the EU to reduce compliance time and costs compared to other countries.



Certification and mutual recognition: a reoccurring theme was also the regulatory environment around standards and certification requirements. Several entrepreneurs highlighted the costs and time it takes to get their products certified both in the EU and in third countries. Mutual recognition agreements are therefore highly desirable and can alleviate a big part of that burden. The U.S. and Canada were mentioned explicitly in this respect, in particular with respect to medical devices.

Circular economy: several young entrepreneurs are active in areas of circular economy (e.g. through the recycling and repurposing of textiles or coffee waste). They enquired about the extent to which the EU insisted on the same level of standards in third countries (like India) and highlighted the need to tailor certain rules and product categories better to the nature and purpose of the product.

Attractiveness of the EU to start and grow a business: more generally, several interventions emphasised the need to ensure that the EU remained attractive as a business location. One key issue in this respect was access to funding. Others referred to the need to receive fast and reliable information about the applicable rules when exporting to a specific third country (like Access2Markets), as well as support for trade promotion.

In their replies, the Commissioner, as well as Sabine Weyand, Director-General DG Trade, emphasised that indeed a successful and functioning Single Market was key to enable EU companies compete globally and link them to the growth centers outside the EU, like India – which is why the recently concluded trade agreement was so important. They explained various initiatives taken by the EU to improve the regulatory environment for companies in the EU (referring to the Draghi report, the Savings and Investment Union, the 2025 Omnibus package, the AI Act as well as the “28th regime”), explained the EU’s approach to mutual recognition agreements (mutual recognition of testing, not standards), commented on the potential use of AI in tools like Access2Markets, and encouraged entrepreneurs to explore the support offered by the Enterprise Europe Network. As regards standards, EU health and safety standards are not changed by EU trade agreements, such as the one with Mercosur or India. While non-EU countries have the right to define their own standards applicable on their territory, products can only be placed on the EU market for consumers if and when they comply with our standards and rules.

In his concluding remarks the Commissioner emphasised again his hope and expectation that the EU would remain an attractive location for young entrepreneurs to launch and grow their business while then making use of trade to scale up and grow internationally.

Annex

Promotional video:

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7426949780213256193>

Recording available on X: https://x.com/Trade_EU/status/2024400951143018496