Report on the Youth Policy Dialogue with Commissioner Ekaterina Zaharieva, European Commissioner for Start-Ups, Research, and Innovation

Title of Youth Policy Dialogue: Youth Policy Dialogue with Commissioner Ekaterina Zaharieva: "How do young people envision the cities of the future?"

Date: 10 March 2025

Location: Representative Office of the European Commission in Warsaw, Poland

Introduction

The Youth Policy Dialogue, organized by Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD) brought together 30 young people coming from Poland to discuss the Future of Cities with European Commissioner Ekaterina Zaharieva. Prior to the physical meeting on 10 March 2025 at the Representative Office of the European Commission in Warsaw, online preparation meetings were hold on 4 and 5 March 2025. The meeting was moderated by Julia Kelsz, co-founder and Vice-President of the think-do-tank, Important Matters Foundation.

The topic was chosen because young people often experience policy decisions affecting them for the first time at local level, for example as regards public transport, housing and green spaces. Framing the discussion around the cities of the future allowed the young participants to approach this topic in a creative mindset focused on innovation. The EU Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities and the New European Bauhaus are two major EU initiatives that allow taking up the participants' contributions and ideas in EU policy development.

To ensure the maximum diversity in terms of gender, geographical balance, educational background, prior experience and knowledge of the topic, candidates were recruited with the help of several stakeholders of the European Commission Representation in Poland (NGOs, youth organizations, local government bodies, and universities).

Summary of the online preparatory meetings

The online preparatory meeting lasted approximately one hour, providing an opportunity for young participants to familiarize themselves with the structure and objectives of the upcoming in-person Youth Policy Dialogue. The meeting began with a tour de table, allowing participants to introduce themselves and establish a relaxed and open atmosphere. This was followed by a brief overview of the agenda, setting expectations for the session. One of the key discussions focused on the importance of the Youth Policy Dialogue. A presentation on the Cities Mission, the New European Bauhaus and urban policy provided essential context for the dialogue, helping participants understand how their contributions fit into broader policy initiatives. The meeting also addressed communication, including social media engagement. Additionally, logistical and practical aspects were covered to ensure participants were well-prepared for the in-person discussions.

Summary of the Youth Policy Dialogue

The first activity of the day was an icebreaker session at 9:00, where young participants gathered at the Europa experience, located at the ground floor of the European Commission Representation in Warsaw, to get to know each other and create a relaxed atmosphere. The session then officially began with an opening speech by Commissioner Zaharieva, who welcomed the attendees and emphasized the EU's dedication to including young people in developing policies to help shape the cities of the future. She highlighted key EU initiatives such as the Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission and the New European Bauhaus,

underlining their role in making European cities greener, more innovative, and more inclusive. The Commissioner encouraged participants to share their perspectives and contribute actively to the dialogue.

Following the introductory remarks, a moderated Q&A session took place. The Commissioner addressed questions about her priorities for the next five years, the significance of youth involvement in policymaking, and her vision for future cities.

The core of the event was the group discussions, where participants were divided into three thematic groups:

- **Environment and Sustainability** – exploring ways to make cities greener and more resilient.
- **Technology and Innovation** – examining the role of digital tools and AI in urban development.
- **Inclusion and Accessibility** – discussing strategies to ensure equitable access and participation for all citizens.

Each group engaged in in-depth conversations, guided by sub-moderators who ensured that all voices were heard. The Commissioner moved between groups, listening to insights, engaging with participants, and taking part in informal discussions. This format encouraged active involvement and collaboration among attendees. After the group discussions, representatives from each team presented their key takeaways and recommendations in a plenary session. These presentations provided valuable insights into the participants' views and innovative ideas on urban transformation.

After the presentations, participants had 30 minutes to ask questions to the Commissioner. The questions addressed topics such as the challenges posed by EU crypto legislation for young start-ups, the development of electric vehicle infrastructure in cities, long-term plans for car battery utilization, the rollout of the EU disability card, the impact of technology on social life, and the EU's dependence on US operating systems and social media.

The dialogue concluded with closing remarks from Commissioner Zaharieva, who expressed gratitude for the participants' energy and creativity. She acknowledged the significance of the ideas shared and reassured the attendees that their input would be taken into account in EU policymaking. The Commissioner highlighted concrete follow-up actions, such as inclusion of some of the ideas presented in research and innovation calls. The Commissioner also highlighted that the ideas would be shared with the Cities Mission Platform, NetZeroCities. She also encouraged young people to remain engaged at the local level and contribute to their communities' sustainability efforts.

Beyond the discussion, the event featured additional program elements aimed at enriching the participants' experience. A lunch break at 12:00 provided a chance for informal networking. At 13:30, attendees participated in a study visit hosted by the city of Warsaw, exploring the New Centre of Warsaw project—an ambitious urban transformation that focuses on sustainability, culture, and improving urban life. The visit showcased EU policies in action, while additional networking opportunities facilitated knowledge exchange and engagement with EU representatives.

Topic(s) of discussion

The event covered three main topics: environmental sustainability and urban transformation, technology and digitalization, and inclusion and accessibility in cities. Each topic explored challenges and proposed solutions for improving urban living.

1. Environment and sustainability

This group focused on key environmental and sustainability challenges faced by cities, addressing transport, energy poverty, energy efficiency, safety, air pollution, and green spaces.

Regarding transport, participants highlighted urban sprawl as a significant issue that results in poor connectivity outside city centres. The discussion also emphasized high transport prices and a shortage of bus drivers, a profession not perceived as attractive. In terms of low-emission zones, there was a consensus that incentives should be introduced before vehicles are banned from city centres, with the idea of a "carrot before the stick."

Ideas emerged around making public transport tickets more affordable, improving the design of bus stops to provide better shelter in winter and protection from heat in summer, as well as integrating solar energy. Additionally, making cities more bike-friendly was identified as a key solution.

On the topic of energy poverty, participants suggested partnerships between the public and private sectors to retrofit historic buildings, with a particular focus on energy efficiency. Solutions like photovoltaic window blinds were discussed to improve energy performance.

Heat waves were identified as a major safety concern, particularly for vulnerable groups such as the elderly. Ideas to address this included biomimetic facades, non-invasive insulation paint, and shutters for better thermal regulation. Air pollution was also flagged as a significant problem, with suggestions to improve urban planning, optimize bus routes, and work towards the "15-minute city" concept.

For safeguarding biodiversity around cities, participants called for green corridors for animals to be established, ensuring certain design requirements for safety.

In conclusion, there was a strong emphasis on ensuring that sustainable solutions are not only effective but also affordable.

2. Technology, Digitalization, and Innovation

This group addressed the role of technology and digital solutions in urban environments, touching on issues such as employment, housing, culture, public services, energy, green spaces, safety, and transportation.

The group discussed several pressing issues, starting with the lack of infrastructure for electric vehicles, particularly the absence of charging stations. Another concern was the overuse of concrete in cities, which exacerbates heat, limits shade and causes water management problems like flooding. Participants also pointed out that European cities are not yet prepared for the development of advanced public transportation systems, such as metro networks.

The digitalization of cities was another key topic, with participants noting the fragmented nature of current digital services. The idea of consolidating multiple applications into a single platform was suggested to simplify the user experience.

Discussions also focused on the need for long-term vision and planning. While the solutions proposed were often general in nature due to the complexity of technology, the group highlighted the importance of

investing in research, innovation, and start-ups to address the challenges facing cities. Young people's creative ideas, such as those generated through hackathons, were seen as a key resource that often lacks the necessary funding or support for implementation.

Additionally, participants discussed the idea of making cities more open to innovation by encouraging large companies to invest in smaller cities, helping them grow and develop further.

3. Inclusion and Accessibility

The third group focused on issues of inclusion and accessibility for people with special needs in urban settings. Housing, employment, culture, public services, energy, green spaces, and transportation were all discussed in relation to this topic.

Participants identified three main areas of concern: the price of goods and services, the availability of these services, and the inclusivity of people with disabilities. Regarding the price of services like housing and transportation, participants stressed the need for affordable options for those with special needs. Additionally, the group noted that disabled individuals are still often treated as a "special category," which hampers their full integration into society.

In the context of employment, the group discussed the challenges faced by young people entering the job market without experience, while also emphasizing the importance of accessible public transport for people with disabilities, as they often cannot drive themselves. The need for public spaces to be more inclusive and easily accessible was also highlighted, as it is vital for people with disabilities to feel that they belong and are not treated as "different."

The proposed solutions focused on making public transport systems more accessible, improving biking routes, and making small-scale improvements that can have a big impact, such as simplifying ticketing systems and improving access to bus stops. There was also a call to provide advantages for people with long-term tickets, making transportation more accessible and inclusive. Ultimately, the goal was to create an environment where people with disabilities can lead normal lives, feeling integrated and included in society.

Follow-up debate on the Citizens' Engagement Platform

Idea 1 – Establishing green corridors for biodiversity around cities

To safeguard biodiversity and support wildlife populations, participants propose the creation of green corridors around urban areas. These corridors would serve as safe, natural pathways for animals to move between fragmented habitats, preventing isolation and promoting genetic diversity. The design of these corridors would need to follow specific guidelines to ensure safety and accessibility for wildlife, such as the inclusion of wildlife bridges, tunnels, and protected green spaces.

Idea 2 – Digitalization of city services in one platform

Young people highlighted the fragmentation of digital services in cities as a major issue. A concrete solution proposed was to create a single, unified digital platform that consolidates services such as public transport, housing, energy, and public services. This platform would simplify user experience and improve accessibility. Additionally, there was a call for increased investment in research and innovation, particularly

in start-ups and young entrepreneurs who often lack funding for their ideas. A more open approach to innovation, such as encouraging large companies to invest in smaller cities, would help create a more connected and digitally inclusive urban environment.

Idea 3 – Inclusive urban design for people with disabilities

A concrete solution for improving inclusion in cities is to make urban infrastructure more accessible for people with disabilities. This includes enhancing public transportation by ensuring buses, trains, and bike routes are accessible, and simplifying ticketing systems for ease of use. Improvements to public spaces—such as accessible housing, ramps, and better signage—were also suggested. Additionally, providing long-term transport ticket advantages for people with disabilities and offering more inclusive job opportunities in the urban environment could help improve integration and quality of life for people with special needs. This idea ensures that cities cater to everyone, regardless of their physical abilities.

Follow-up Activities

Many of the issues that participants referred to as priorities for the cities of the future, notably public transport, housing and accessibility, are also priorities of the Cities Mission and the New European Bauhaus and will be considered when developing future activities in Horizon Europe.

Additionally, participants' ideas for action at local level are also shared with the Mission Board, the Mission Owners Group, the Cities Mission Platform (NetZeroCities project) to inform their day-to-day work with cities and to feed into their Community of Practice, and the Working Group of the Strategic Programming Committee.

The Youth Dialogue is communicated prominently in the Cities Mission community, i.e. with the cities participating in the Mission, city networks and stakeholders involved in the development of the Mission.

Cross-service collaborations were essential for reaching the diverse audience for which the Youth Policy Dialogue is of interest. DG Research and Innovation worked closely with the European Commission Representation in Warsaw as well as with the Joint Research Centre, the European Research Executive Agency and the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency. The cooperation entailed, among others, social media and press work. In addition, the message could be spread through diverse channels, reaching as many interested youth, other citizens and stakeholders.

Communication activities began already in the lead-up to the event, primarily on social media. On the day of the event itself, two news articles were published to announce the Youth Policy Dialogue. Social media activities reached their peak during the day of the event, with Commissioner Zaharieva promoting the dialogue from her accounts on X and LinkedIn and sharing photos taken during the event with her audience. In addition, the Youth Policy Dialogue was featured strongly on corporate accounts across platforms. Many of these posts made by the corporate accounts were among the most successful posts since 01 March (data as of 17 March), when communication activities began.

On corporate accounts, collaborations helped reach new audiences and inform them about the Youth Policy Dialogue. The accounts of the European Commission Representation in Warsaw and the Polish youth

organisation which moderated the event posted together with the corporate Research and Innovation account on several platforms.

Instagram Stories were the main way for engaging on social media with the young participants of the Youth Policy Dialogue. Many of the youth attending shared stories on Instagram, which were re-shared from the corporate account. Live coverage of the event, also through Instagram stories, complimented the youth's content.

Annex

In this section you may include links to web streams, videoclips and news articles (if any related to the coverage of the event), etc.

[Young voices, bright future: Commissioner Zaharieva's first youth dialogue - European Commission](#)

[Young Europeans engage with Executive Vice-President Virkkunen and Commissioner Zaharieva on democracy and future of our cities | Shaping Europe's digital future](#)

[Youth Policy Dialogue with Commissioner Ekaterina Zaharieva | European Youth Portal](#)

[Youth Policy Dialogue with Commissioner Zaharieva on the Future of Cities - European Commission](#)

Media coverage:

[Young Europeans engage with Executive Vice President Virkkunen and Commissioner Zaharieva on democracy and future of our cities - EU Reporter](#)

[Democrazia e futuro. I giovani europei dialogano con la Commissione Ue. - Sardegnagol](#)

[Commissione Ue: oggi due dialoghi sulle politiche giovanili ad Aalto (Finlandia) e Varsavia. Focus su social media e città sostenibili - AgenSIR](#)