

Report on the Youth Policy Dialogue with Commissioner Marta Kos, European Commissioner for Enlargement, with the participation of Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, Glenn Micallef

Title of Youth Policy Dialogue: Youth Enlargement Dialogue 2025: Breaking
Barriers – Bridging Borders – Growing Together

Date: February 7-8, 2025

Location: Nova Gorica/Gorizia, Slovenia/Italy

Introduction

The Youth Enlargement Dialogue 2025 brought together 40 young people from all EU Member States as well as EU candidate countries and the Eastern EU Neighbourhood representing 37 different countries in total to discuss the EU enlargement process and the role of youth in shaping its future with European Commissioner Marta Kos. The Dialogue provided a platform for young voices to engage in meaningful discussions on the EU's policies, youth participation, and future opportunities. Hosted by Commissioner Kos, with participation from Commissioner Glenn Micallef, the event provided a direct dialogue between young leaders and top EU decision-makers.

The discussions aimed to explore the transformative power of young people as drivers of change in advancing the EU's enlargement agenda and to address complex challenges such as fostering integration, healing divisions and building bridges across borders. The discussions were structured to align with upcoming EU strategies on youth engagement, democratic participation, and mobility opportunities.

The event was held in Nova Gorica/Gorizia, a city that holds deep historical significance. Once divided, Nova Gorica and Gorizia symbolise European integration and cross-border cooperation. As the European Capital of Culture 2025, the city represents a tangible example of how EU values such as unity, diversity, and cooperation can thrive. The selection of this location highlighted the importance of overcoming historical divisions and fostering a shared European future, making it an ideal setting for discussions on enlargement and youth participation.

A diverse group of young participants was selected based on inclusivity, gender and geographical balance, educational background, and prior interest or experience in EU-related topics. This ensured a broad representation of perspectives.

Summary of the online preparatory meeting

The online preparatory meeting on **29 January 2025**, provided participants with key insights and expectations for the Youth Enlargement Dialogue.

- **Overview:** The Dialogue's objectives, discussion formats and themes—mobility, regional integration, and reconciliation—were introduced.
- **Breakout session preview:** Facilitators outlined core topics: mobility for work and study, economic cooperation, and youth-driven peacebuilding, and participants were encouraged to actively engage.

- **Social media strategy:** Emphasis was placed on using digital platforms to amplify key messages.

The meeting ensured participants were well-prepared for meaningful contributions during the Dialogue.

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

The event was designed to be fully interactive, with a combination of plenary sessions, breakout discussions, and networking opportunities. Participants arrived the day before the main event, with an introductory cultural visit and networking dinner to set the stage for engagement. A key highlight of the first day was the Walk of Peace, a cross-border cultural and historical trail promoting peace and remembrance by connecting sites from World War I in Slovenia and Italy. It aims to preserve shared heritage, encourage sustainable tourism, and foster dialogue on the importance of peace in Europe. Participants were taken through several locations of historical significance across Nova Gorica and Gorizia, including two museums showcasing the shared history of the region and the importance of reconciliation and cooperation. This historical tour helped frame the discussions on peace, integration, and the role of youth in shaping a united Europe.

The Dialogue began with an opening session featuring remarks from Commissioner Kos, who quoting Simone Weil, stated *“All the member states are confronted with three big challenges. The challenge of peace, the challenge of freedom, and the challenge of prosperity. And those challenges can only be met through the European dimension. That's why I really believe that Europe, the European Union, is the best that can happen to us. [...] The growing together of Europe we have seen over the past decades was the result of the work of millions of Europeans. And this is why I invited you here. I wanted you to know that what has happened at that time can happen again. And I wanted to encourage you to be part of that change, because the reunification of our continent is yet not complete, but it can be. As Commissioner for enlargement, it is my ambition to do my part in helping to complete it. It is my dream to have all the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe integrated in our European values...”*. She stressed that the European Union is a peace project—a foundational, unifying force that dissolves historical divisions and is essential for meeting the challenges of peace, freedom, and prosperity. She called on young people to join her as active co-workers in building a stronger, more integrated Europe.

It was followed by the opening remarks of Commissioner Micallef, who encouraged participants to speak freely, challenge officials and ask critical question, and a tour de table, where each participant introduced themselves and shared their perspectives, answering the question, “What does enlargement mean to you”.

Breakout sessions with the participation of the Commissioners were organised around three key thematic areas, fostering in-depth discussions in smaller groups.

1. Breaking Barriers: Empowering Mobility for Work and Study – Exploring how EU enlargement can enhance educational exchanges, labour market access, and the recognition of qualifications to support young people’s mobility across Europe.

EU enlargement policy plays a key role in breaking down barriers to mobility by promoting the recognition of qualifications, enhancing educational exchanges, and facilitating labour market integration. Through initiatives like Erasmus+ and the European Education Area, the EU supports young people in candidate countries and EU member states to access opportunities for study and work across Europe.

This session explored how to strengthen these frameworks, ensuring that mobility becomes a cornerstone of closer integration and mutual understanding between the EU and its future members.

Young people shared their assessment of the role in mobility in the context of enlargement policy. Mobility experiences play a crucial role in shaping a shared European identity. They reinforce common values, foster a sense of belonging to the European project, and enable participants to act as ambassadors of European ideals within their communities and governments. Exposure to diverse cultures helps dismantle stereotypes and build mutual understanding, while professional development and networking opportunities strengthen long-term regional cooperation.

Young people face several challenges in accessing mobility opportunities, including:

- Bureaucratic complexity and visa restrictions, particularly for third-country applicants.
- Financial constraints related to tuition, housing, and travel expenses.
- Mental health challenges such as homesickness and imposter syndrome.
- Limited access to information on financial planning and life abroad.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations:

Participants in the youth policy dialogue presented the following recommendations to Commissioner Kos and Commissioner Micallef:

- ✓ Strengthen European identity through cultural exchange and professional networking, learn from the historical experiences in candidate countries to address current issues, for example lessons from the war to build resilience.
- ✓ Simplify visa procedures and application processes, address language barriers and raise awareness about the programs.
- ✓ Promote inclusivity by tackling financial and bureaucratic obstacles with targeted support measures: increase funding for underrepresented groups and marginalised youth.
- ✓ Improve accessibility, including digital accessibility, and leverage social media influencers for outreach, debate and exchange, ensuring inclusivity and face-to-face interaction with people in remote places.

2. Building Bridges: Advancing Regional Integration – Discussing strategies for economic cooperation, connectivity, and stability between the EU and candidate countries, with a focus on initiatives like the Common Regional Market in the Western Balkans.

Regional integration is a fundamental pillar of the EU's enlargement policy, driving economic cooperation, enhancing connectivity, and fostering stability between the EU and candidate countries. A prime example of this approach is the Common Regional Market in the Western Balkans, an EU-supported initiative that mirrors the single market's principles by removing barriers to trade, investment, and mobility.

This session explored different approaches to fostering enhanced regional integration in partner countries and how this can bring candidate countries closer to the EU, while also laying the groundwork for a more integrated, prosperous, and cohesive Europe.

Key Takeaways & Recommendations:

Participants in the youth policy dialogue presented the following recommendations to Commissioner Kos and Commissioner Micallef:

- ✓ Youth initiatives and collaboration projects are vital in strengthening cross-border networks and fostering European unity.
- ✓ Successful regional integration and EU enlargement require a multi-stakeholder approach:
 - Citizens: Advocate for EU accession and hold leaders accountable.
 - EU Institutions: Implement reforms to support seamless integration of new member states.
 - Education systems: Incorporate citizenship education to highlight the benefits of EU membership.
- ✓ Expand funding for cross-EU and Western Balkans cooperation projects.
- ✓ Promote European collaboration through grassroots initiatives.
- ✓ Prioritise non-formal education, including cultural exchanges and youth mobility programs.
- ✓ Strengthen cross-border cooperation through structured initiatives.

3. Growing Together: Youth for Enlargement, Peace, and Reconciliation – Highlighting the role of young people in overcoming historical divisions, fostering dialogue, and contributing to peacebuilding efforts in the EU's neighbouring regions.

Reconciliation lies at the heart of the EU's enlargement policy, as it seeks to heal historical divisions and build trust among communities in candidate countries and beyond. Commissioner Kos's initiatives prioritise youth as key agents of change, empowering them through dialogue, cultural exchange, and collaborative projects that address the legacies of conflict and foster mutual understanding. Programs like the Western Balkans Youth Lab and the European Solidarity Corps provide platforms for young people to engage in

peacebuilding and bridge societal divides. By investing in youth-led reconciliation efforts, the EU ensures that enlargement is not only a process of political and economic integration but also a project of shared values, inter-generational fairness among them, and a transformative journey towards a more united, inclusive, and peaceful Europe.

In the eyes of young people, EU enlargement is perceived as a pathway to freedom, democracy, and shared values. However, concerns remain regarding political instability, regional disparities, and the potential consequences of expansion. There is a strong call for equity, accountability, and direct youth participation in policy discussions.

Key Takeaways & Recommendations:

Participants in the youth policy dialogue presented the following recommendations to Commissioner Kos and Commissioner Micallef:

- ✓ Prioritise European values over purely political or economic interests.
- ✓ Address internal EU challenges alongside external enlargement efforts.
- ✓ Foster unity despite cultural and democratic differences.
- ✓ Enhance civic engagement and mobilisation initiatives.
- ✓ Start at the local level, leveraging networks and engaging diasporas.
- ✓ Ensure safe and inclusive spaces for youth, promote open, respectful dialogue and protect freedom of speech.
- ✓ Utilise creative platforms such as music, sports, and the arts.
- ✓ Establish permanent youth representation in policy discussions.

A plenary session brought together these key takeaways and recommendations from the breakout discussions, allowing participants to present their insights to both commissioners. In her closing remarks, Commissioner Kos distilled the key lessons into four core principles — LEARN, ENGAGE, CONNECT, and CHANGE — while reaffirming the EU's commitment to support youth initiatives and integrate their perspectives into future enlargement policy discussions.

The event concluded with a cultural celebration highlighting Nova Gorica/Gorizia's role as the first borderless European Capital of Culture 2025, reinforcing the themes of cooperation and integration.

Follow-up Activities

- **Communication of Outcomes:** The following follow up actions have been launched and are in the process of being implemented:

- Continuing the conversation with the participants, soliciting **written inputs and recommendations**, thereby ensuring that all ideas that could not be shared during the limited time of the dialogue can still be fully appreciated and reflected in a dedicated **Follow-Up Action Plan**
- Building a lasting **community of youth participants**, regular social media engagement, including shared posts with the Commissioner, enhancing visibility and reach to youth across the participants networks
- Equipping participants with the necessary skills to drive change through dedicated **capacity-building trainings** with ENEST staff. These trainings could include workshops on project management, policy making, and leadership development, where participants learn to design and implement initiatives, navigate challenges, and lead teams effectively.

Media Outreach

The event's media strategy focused on social media coverage to amplify the voices of young participants. Juš Čop, a young influencer from Slovenia, was engaged to create and share content on Instagram and TikTok in Slovenian, significantly extending the event's reach—especially within Slovenia—in collaboration with DG ENEST and the EC REP Slovenia social media profiles.

Participants were also encouraged to share their experiences using provided visuals, Canva templates, and specific account tags. The event was also extensively covered in Slovenian media across national and local outlets. In addition, DG ENEST shared four separate wrap-up videos, highlighting key moments from the Dialogue, the Walk of Peace and the Capital of Culture festivities, as well as sharing key impressions and takeaways from the participants themselves. These videos were also shared with the participants with the request to share and amplify across their social media channels.

Across all platforms, YPD-related content received a total of 21,439 views and 345 interactions on X, 2,322,332 views and 150 interactions on Facebook, and 123,597 views with 1,852 interactions on Instagram.