

Motion

Strengthening European Train Travel to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Increase Young People's Mobility

signed by: Forum des Jeunes (FJ)

co-signed by: Council of the German-speaking Youth of Belgium (RDJ), Croatian Youth Network (MMH), Erasmus Student Network (ESN), Flemish Youth Council (VJR), Youth and Environment Europe (YEE), Portuguese National Youth Council (CNJ), Romanian National Youth Council (CTR), Young Democrats for Europe (YDE)

1. Background and Context

Transport currently accounts for roughly one quarter (EEA, 2025) of the EU's total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and contributes to air pollution, noise pollution, and habitat fragmentation. Mobility is key to the development, engagement and empowerment of young people, while climate action remains one of their highest concerns.

In 2025, young Europeans see the freedom of movement across the EU as its greatest benefit and the feature they most closely associate with the Union (European Union, 2025). The Eurodesk Youth Info Survey 2025 (Eurodesk, 2025) further explored young people's views on mobility, revealing that 98% would be open to going abroad for a mobility experience, with 69% saying they are very open to the idea. At the same time, they also believe the EU should tackle environmental issues and climate change as the second most important priority, just behind security and defence.

Greenpeace (2023) reports that, across Europe, train tickets cost on average twice as much as flights and can be up to 30 times more expensive for same-day travel. Yet, according to data from the UK Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (2022), domestic flights produce around seven times¹ more emissions than national rail over the same distance (Ritchie, 2023). On the other hand, car-based commuting continues to rise, contributing to heavier congestion and longer travel times. In major European cities, drivers lose an average of 40 to 100 hours annually in traffic (INRIX, 2024). Moreover, travelling alone by car is far more polluting than using public transport: a solo car journey emits roughly five times² more CO₂ per kilometre than a national rail trip (Ritchie, 2023). Ultimately, the continued growth in private car use not only exacerbates urban congestion but also deepens the environmental impact of daily mobility.

As the EU strives for climate neutrality by 2050, enabling young people to adopt more sustainable travel habits is urgent. Expanding and improving the rail system, including night trains and cross-border services, is essential to make national and international mobility both environmentally friendly and accessible to all.

However, from an international perspective, budgetary constraints and institutional policies often mean that youth organisations are forced to opt for air travel over rail. Support for train journeys is limited, and reimbursement for rail travel is either unavailable or difficult to obtain. Despite the European Commission stating that “the use of rail travel should be promoted as an alternative to flying for distances of more than 400km” (European Commission, 2024b), it fails to address the higher consumer price for train travel compared to air travel. The unit costs calculator applies the same thresholds for air and rail travel (European Commission, 2024), even though cross-border flights in Europe are cheaper than equivalent train journeys in 56% of cases (Greenpeace, 2025). This makes train travel financially unattractive in EU-funded programmes (including for the European Youth Forum and its Member Organisations). From a national perspective, however, the rail connections are either poorly designed or unreliable, which discourages people from adopting sustainable ways of travelling around the country.

Besides **housing challenges, limited job opportunities, the high cost of living**, young people's precarious situations are further aggravated by the **poor accessibility of public transport**. Combined with the stronger marketing influence of airlines and car manufacturers, these factors discourage many young climate activists from choosing rail travel. Therefore, it is unsurprising that less than 6% of all cross-border trips made by EU residents in 2023 were made by train (European Commission, 2025).

Addressing these structural, financial, and cultural barriers is key to creating a **more sustainable, inclusive, and equitable system of youth mobility in Europe and beyond**. Reducing the price of train journeys is, thus, a crucial step to make European sustainable mobility a reality for every young person.

1 National rail emits around 35 grams per kilometer. A domestic flight emits 246 grams.

2 National rail emits around 35 grams per kilometer. The average petrol car emits 170 grams.

2. Policy and Political Context

The issue of sustainable youth mobility is already reflected in international commitments. At UN level, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 11 and SDG 13) call for inclusive and low-carbon transport (SDG action, 2021). At EU level, the European Green Deal and the *Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy* (EEA, 2020) aim to cut transport emissions by 90% by 2050 (European Commission, 2021), while the European Year of Rail and recent pilot projects support cross-border trains and night services (European Commission, 2021).

However, at the **national level**, subsidies for aviation and company cars, alongside limited youth rail discounts, undermine these ambitions. Indeed, the European Federation for Transport and Environment (2024) estimated that fossil fuel subsidies for company cars cost EU taxpayers €42 billion every year. At the **local and organisational level**, youth programmes with limited financial capacity are able to cover flights more easily than trains, reinforcing unsustainable habits. Action is needed from the **EU, national governments, youth organisations, and global actors** to ensure fair pricing and better infrastructure for a sustainable mobility.

3. Strategic Alignment

This motion directly supports the European Youth Forum's Strategic Plan by advancing several of its core priorities. It strengthens the pillar on sustainability, by calling for systemic changes in transport policy that reduce emissions and make greener travel more attractive. It also contributes to the pillar on youth rights and inclusion, ensuring that mobility opportunities are accessible to all young people regardless of financial means. Finally, it reinforces the pillar on participation, as it echoes the demands voiced by young people in the EU's Flash Eurobarometer 545 on Youth and Democracy (2024), where youth most actively engaged in promoting **human rights, climate and environmental protection, health and well-being, and equal rights** regardless of gender, race, or sexuality.

By addressing environmental, social, and economic barriers to sustainable travel, this motion is not an isolated demand but a strategic addition to the Youth Forum's agenda, amplifying youth voices and pushing forward collective commitments to a fair, green, and inclusive Europe.

4. Recommendations

The European Youth Forum calls on:

1. EU institutions to:

- End aviation tax exemptions, including kerosene subsidies, and redirect the resulting revenues toward investments in sustainable rail infrastructure and cross-border services, while exempting countries without viable land-based travel alternatives (e.g. islands).
- Support the creation of a single European-wide ticketing and payment system to make it easier for passengers to book train journeys with different rail companies. Rail operators should also be required to offer through tickets for the entire journey to ensure that passengers' rights are protected.
- Increase funding for night trains and cross-border rail projects, and halt the cancellation of existing operational services.
- Adapt cost reimbursement calculators to avoid favouring more polluting modes of transport over cleaner alternatives.
- In general, support sustainable means of travel (bus, train, carpooling, etc.) for long distance trips as an alternative to air travel.
- The EU should make its climate, youth, education, and transport policies work better together, ensuring that decisions in one area (for example, sustainable transport) support and reinforce the others (like climate goals and youth mobility opportunities), rather than working in isolation or even in contradiction.
- Develop and implement sustainable travel education policies.
- Explore and enable innovative ways to travel sustainably when passengers must carry a lot of material with them (e.g. motorail).

2. National governments to:

- Rethink their transport subsidies, stop funding polluting transport means and start

supporting sustainable mobility and officially include these changes in their climate commitments under the Paris Agreement (i.e. Nationally Determined Contributions).

- Extend youth fare reductions to cover each country's legal definition of "youth" with special provisions to ensure students, low-income workers and apprentices can access these discounts. Introduce a voluntary European Youth Travel Recognition to simplify cross-border use.
- Reform transport subsidies by phasing out benefits that favour aviation and company cars, while increasing investment in national and regional rail connections.
- Exempt or at least reduce VAT on international train tickets and introduce fair pricing mechanisms to make rail travel competitive with aviation.
- Ensure train travel is accessible to all people, with particular consideration for all types of disabilities.

3. Youth organisations and mobility programmes to:

- Actively promote sustainable travel choices among their members, including awareness campaigns on the environmental impact of different means of transport.
- Prioritise the reimbursement of train tickets in their mobility policies, while allowing flexibility where direct connections are lacking or journeys are unreasonably long.

4. The Council of Europe and the United Nations to:

- Recognise sustainable and affordable youth mobility as a right linked to participation, inclusion, and climate justice.

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