

The Honourable President of the Council of the
European Union
Mr Pedro Sánchez

The Honourable Executive Vice-President of the
European Commission
Mr Frans Timmermans

The Honourable European Commissioner for Mobility
and Transport
Ms Adina Vălean

The Honourable Chair of the European Parliament's
Committee on Transport and Tourism
Ms Karima Delli

The Honourable President of the European
Committee of the Regions
Mr. Vasco Alves Cordeiro

The Honourable Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of
Mobility of the Kingdom of Belgium
Mr. Georges Gilkinet

The Honourable Director-General for Mobility and
Transport, European Commission
Ms. Magda Kopczynska

Contribution to a European Cycling Declaration

POLIS is the leading network of European cities and regions advancing transport innovation and sustainable mobility. Our members, local and regional governments from across Europe, are working hard to make their mobility systems more sustainable, safe, and equitable – and many of them are deploying and upscaling Cycling.

Their work is accelerating the shift to sustainable mobility, which is indispensable to deliver on (at least) two crucial commitments made by the European Union: to halve road fatalities and serious injuries between 2020 and 2030 and get close to zero road deaths by 2050, and to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

Local and regional governments hold the keys for many of the most important measures, and they must be actively involved and supported in the design and implementation of policies and instruments to meet those EU commitments. We stand ready to actively support all relevant efforts made in this direction by the governing bodies of the EU, as with the announced European Cycling Declaration.

We salute the steps already taken, namely by the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, and 14 Member States, who have called on the European Commission to develop an EU-level Cycling Strategy. We note the explicit commitment of the European Commission, eloquently expressed by Vice-President Timmermans.

We appreciate, in particular, (1) your commitment to supporting the substantive growth of this transport mode, of enormous importance for sustainable urban mobility, transport justice, and a just transition; (2) your acknowledgement of the critical role that cities have to play; and (3) your call for combining a bottom-up approach with the encouragement, assistance and support from the European level.

This inter-institutional consensus holds great potential and promise, and must be matched by a bold and effective European Cycling Declaration.

Learning from the successes and challenges our members face when advancing policies in favour of Cycling, we would like to point out the following elements as essential ingredients to be considered in the European Cycling Declaration:

1) Active mobility is a fundamental Human Right, and must be treated as such.

Walking and Cycling are the most basic, universal, resilient and affordable transport modes. We must ensure all EU citizens can use Active Mobility in a safe, convenient

and comfortable way. Across all scales of EU governance, this must be acknowledged as a fundamental duty of public officials and a cornerstone of mobility policies.

The Declaration should highlight the fundamental role of infrastructure in the realisation of this Human Right. Roads and streets that lack safety, space, and convenience for walking and cycling pose a major impediment to the free movement of people and to their freedom of choice regarding transport modes.

The Declaration should also explicitly recommend growing the proportion of space allocated to Active Mobility in EU road and street networks, clarifying that this reallocation should never benefit one of these modes at the cost of the other.

2) Mobility must be safe, or it won't become sustainable.

Safety fears are often cited as the most important impediment to taking up cycling, including by parents who feel they must drive their children to school. Roads and streets must be made structurally safe for people to embrace sustainable modes, and for cities to mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis.

Experience also shows that structural factors making roads and streets unsafe for cycling also discourage or delay the deployment and upscaling of several innovative mobility services, blocking the positive push that new business and technologies could provide to sustainable mobility.

The Declaration should clearly advocate for the alignment of Cycling and Road Safety policies and measures. Making roads and streets safer will unlock the potential for walking, cycling, public transport, and a growing number of shared mobility options.

In European cities, segregated bike lanes are a correct and indispensable measure, but for a limited part of the street network. In many streets, the most efficient and fastest way to improve cycling conditions is to reduce the speed of motorised vehicles, through a combination of reduced speed limits, network management (e.g., super blocks), and physical traffic calming measures.

The Declaration should clearly advocate for reducing the speed of motorised vehicles on all roads and streets where the law allows for cycling (which creates the duty for public authorities to ensure the safety of that mode).

The Declaration should remind that sound safety strategies require, first of all, addressing the main source of danger, which in this case clearly is the speed, mass and shape of motorised vehicles. Coherently, the Declaration should, also, explicitly call on the automotive industry to stop the proliferation of SUV (or J-segment) vehicles, and set out exploratory steps to establish safe maximum weight and size limits for type approval of passenger cars and light-duty vehicles.

3) The EU must treat Cycling as a core mode of transport.

Cycling is a fully-fledged mode of transport and has a key role to play in the shift to sustainable mobility. Millions of EU citizens use it every day, and we are all aware of how important it is to keep that number growing, and to grow it faster.

And yet, Cycling is still recurrently downplayed at the EU level, often treated marginally or even absent from mobility statistics, impact assessments, policies, plans and projects, funding instruments and EU-funded research streams.

This lack of coherence with reality is a major strategic and technical shortcoming, which reinforces the status quo, and impedes a comprehensive understanding of key trends and opportunities in urban mobility.

This applies to the movement of passengers but also to the movement of goods: with the growth of e-commerce and last-mile deliveries, and in line with the expected rules of the TEN-T network, supporting Cycling Logistics will become vital for decarbonising transport and to prevent massive congestion in urban streets.

The Declaration must address and seek to correct this shortcoming: the European Commission must collect statistics about transport in the EU in a truly multi-modal way, taking into account Cycling as a fully-fledged transport mode, and the Cycling Industry as a fully-fledged (and fast-growing) economic sector.

The Declaration could consider the current revision of the TEN-T guidelines as a unique opportunity to address Cycling as an integral part of the mobility system at the level of the Functional Urban Area, including the intermodal, active-travel aspects of inter-city and peri-urban travel.

The Declaration should emphasize a multi-modal vision, where the gains are to be made not by a one-for-one substitution of cars by a one-mode-fits-all, but rather by the provision of a diverse menu of transport modes, which, taken as a whole, will offer more freedom of choice and, with it, a versatile, reliable, appealing and much more affordable alternative to individual car ownership. Walking, Cycling, and Public Transport are a core, unifying, element of this whole, and must be fully understood, supported, prioritised – and combined.

4) A strategic vision going beyond bikes and bike lanes.

The potential benefits of an effective EU-level Cycling Strategy can (and should) extend beyond bicycles. Compared to internal combustion engines, electric engines are smaller, lighter, cheaper, and easier to manufacture and install. They've been driving the rapid expansion of Light Electric Vehicles (LEV), from bicycles and cargo bikes to e-scooters, skates, mono-wheels and whatever will come next.

The Declaration should mention the fast growth and diversification of LEVs, acknowledging that, while they may not be exactly active mobility, they do pose many similar challenges to safety and have many similar functional needs. As such, LEVs must be fully considered in the design of policies, plans and measures to make streets and roads safer and more convenient for Cycling.

When it comes to Cycling Infrastructure, an effective EU-level Cycling Strategy must also be based on the understanding that, in terms of individual legal rights and public obligations, a comprehensive “cycling network” already exists, being composed of all roads and streets where cycling is not forbidden – and, thus, citizens have the right to cycle, and public authorities at all scales of governance have the duty to ensure the infrastructure offers proper conditions.

As discussed above, segregated bike lanes are an indispensable measure for part of the network but not for its majority. The Declaration must highlight the importance of reducing speeds, namely through reducing speed limits and implementing physical traffic calming measures, as a way to exponentially grow a network safe for Cycling. The Statistics to measure the delivery and progress of pro-cycling policies should measure not only the total length of bike lanes but also the total length (or percentage) of the street network made safer for cycling through speed reduction.

The Declaration should also highlight bike parking as a critical ingredient for the fast and sustained growth of Cycling. Investment in safe space for circulation must be matched by investment in designated space for parking bikes, e-scooters and other compatible vehicles. This must include both open and locked parking (e.g., bike hangars), both open to the public and reserved for individuals in residential areas, well distributed across the street network and aggregated in mobility hubs directly connected with public transport and other shared mobility modes.

The Declaration should emphasise that parking spaces and structures for bicycles and light electric vehicles must not result in further degradation of the pedestrian network and should, as much as possible, be installed through the conversion of on-street car-parking spaces into bike-parking spaces.

Many citizens most in need of cycling (or LEVs) as an affordable transport mode live in buildings without proper space to keep bicycles inside. Furthermore, with the rapid growth in the electrification of bicycles and the purchase of other LEVs by individuals, the fire risk of charging and keeping their respective batteries indoors must not be downplayed. Practical solutions for this concern are already available in the EU market, incorporating EU technology and EU manufacturing.

The Declaration should emphasise the importance of this issue and consider it in the framework of EU-level regulations for charging infrastructure in public and residential buildings.

5) Cycling as a tool for Economic Opportunity and Transport Justice.

Gender is frequently noted as a significant factor shaping willingness and ability to cycle. In many European cities and regions, it is undoubtedly the case that women account for a far lower percentage of cyclists than men. Safety, security and accessibility have been frequently shown to shape these ratios.

The fact that women often assume an outsized responsibility for unpaid care work, which determines more complex mobility patterns, further compounds the challenge, and the importance of addressing this imbalance.

The Declaration should (1) clearly address this difference as a key challenge to overcome, (2) call for an equitable expansion of Cycling, with an attention to factors that can help overcome this difference, (3) recommend the integration of a gender perspective throughout the whole sustainable mobility action process, from the assessment of needs to the planning, design, delivery, and evaluation of measures (including capital investments), (4) advocate for the empowerment of women's freedom of movement through Cycling, namely through community-based training and encouragement of women and girls, (5) commit to implementing processes that will lead to the systematic disaggregation by gender of statistical mobility data, including data on Cycling, and (6) stress that innovative and inclusive transport services cannot be delivered without a more diverse workforce, that the gender imbalance in the transport workforce also affects cycling, and that recruiting and retaining women is essential to foster diversity of thought, creativity and effective responses to real needs.

Gendered cycling experiences are intersectional, and the Declaration must also account for how age, disability, ethnicity and socioeconomic status are central to Cycling uptake.

The Declaration should underline the potential of Cycling as a key tool to drive economic opportunity and access to jobs, transport justice and social inclusion. Particularly for the millions of EU citizens who live away from city centres in suburban,

periurban and rural areas, and who are pushed by the context to become car-dependent or captive users of an inevitably limited Public Transport offer.

The Declaration should express support for measures which can facilitate access to affordable cycling by helping those most affected by transport poverty through financial support for (1) the purchase of bicycles (including cargo bikes and electric bikes) and relevant accessories, (2) the provision of well-distributed, safe, and convenient bicycle and e-scooter parking facilities, and (3) the deployment and upscaling of affordable bike sharing systems.

Finally, we must strive to include People with Disabilities in a European-level Cycling Strategy. The Declaration should (1) advocate for the access of people with conditioned mobility to Cycling, namely through already available solutions suited to their needs (e.g., recumbent bikes, human-assisted bikes, wheelchair hand cycle attachments), (2) highlight the importance of making all mobility hub infrastructure accessible, and (3) underline, as a key principle, that public investment in the improvement of cycling infrastructure, namely through segregated bike lanes, on-street parking, and traffic calming, should always seek to improve, or at least safeguard, the pedestrian network's accessibility conditions.

6) Capacity building is critical.

Political commitment is indispensable, but not enough – we must ensure there is organisational capacity to deliver on that commitment. The changes we must advance require innovation of a particular kind, i.e., in principles, methods, priorities and tools. Capacity building is therefore indispensable, both at the political and technical levels.

Political leaders advancing pro-cycling policies at the local and regional level often have to overcome prejudice, ignorance about the proven benefits of Cycling, and fears about its negative impacts on traffic and local shops. Sometimes, these fears are stoked by populist appeals seeking electoral gains.

While political courage is a desirable and commendable quality, and many officials have been brave enough to step forward, if we want a substantive growth of Cycling

(and we do need it), we must work to make pro-cycling policies politically safer – and for that, a clear position on the part of the European Union regarding what is “the way to go” will be very helpful. The Declaration should state clearly to political leaders advancing pro-cycling policies that “you’ll never pedal alone”.

On the technical level, we must understand that the foundations of sustainable, safe and equitable mobility are fundamentally different from the basic principles that have guided urban traffic planning and management for decades, along with the training of its professionals.

The Declaration should encourage Member States to ramp-up their investment in training and technical support to professionals.

The European Commission should also take this Declaration to set the example and launch a flagship capacity-building programme, which could be developed in partnership with networks of EU cities and regions.

Not all cities are at the same stage of active travel planning and implementation. Some have developed entire networks of bike lanes and bike share systems, with efficient integration with public transport services, while others are just in the process of commencing these actions. This is not to say the latter are not prioritising Cycling or are unambitious. In fact, by learning from others who have already undertaken many of these actions, they can avoid many mistakes or missteps. The Declaration should encourage, and commit to actively supporting such knowledge sharing if it is to accelerate action on the ground.

At the same time, we must recognise that not all cities and regions have the same needs and demands. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Cycling infrastructures and services are influenced by size, geography, and socio-cultural factors. What works for some territories may not work for others. An EU capacity-building strategy must be able to accommodate these differences, in order to ensure all national, local and regional governments will pull in the right direction.

7) Clear funding commitment by the EU and the Member States.

Almost all cycling infrastructure improvements have to be done in road and street networks under the jurisdiction of local and regional governments. Maintenance of existing roads and streets often consumes almost all the budget available for road infrastructure, leaving little budget available for improvements, namely for traffic calming and bike lanes.

To advance road safety and cycling with the scale and speed required by EU commitments, local and regional governments must receive dedicated financial support from the EU level, but also from their respective Member States.

While European funding has an important role to play, more must be done, by the European Parliament and the European Council, to ensure that Member States dedicate a percentage of their transport budgets to sustainable and safe mobility, and specifically to (1) improve the road and street networks to make them safe and convenient for active mobility, (2) expand the offer of adequate bike parking solutions, namely including on-street bike hangars and mobility hubs, (3) support the deployment and upscaling of bike sharing services, and its physical and digital integration with the public transport network, (4) support the purchase of bicycles and relevant accessories, (5) foster bottom-up community efforts to accelerate and advocate for the uptake of cycling.

For this effect, the Declaration should propose a minimum level of investment from the Member States, preferably expressed as a percentage of their national budget for Transportation.

This would specifically follow up on the findings of the European Court of Auditors in their Special Report 6/2020, which concluded that “no substantial improvement is possible without Member States’ commitment.”

8) Measurable objectives, and effective performance indicators.

The Declaration must be clear in its commitments and goals. When defining key performance indicators, it must be careful to (1) combine lagging and leading indicators and (2) avoid the perverse effect that a narrow set of indicators can have.

Lagging and Leading indicators measure different things, so one type cannot substitute for the other, and instead of choosing one or the other, the question is how to combine them while bearing in mind respective roles and limitations.

Lagging indicators measure the overall impact of a policy or set of measures, i.e., the evolution of a situation we want to change, and leading indicators measure the execution or output of the measures themselves. While the former may measure, e.g., the number of people cycling, the latter may measure, e.g., the total number of bike lane kilometers installed.

Lagging indicators show the later-stage results of an effort, and may take a long time to change. They are usually influenced by several variables, many of which are not directly controlled by those implementing the policy. Experience shows that slow change and indirect effects breed frustration, scepticism and low accountability.

Leading indicators, on the other hand, measure the execution of measures that will (hopefully) help reach the overall goals. Their evolution depends on a much smaller set of variables and is directly linked to the work of those implementing the policy, thus responding more directly to activities and establishing clear accountability links. However, experience indicates that if adopted in isolation, this type of indicator can bias action towards the execution of actions that deliver “the numbers” but can be of low strategic value or even misplaced.

Growing the modal share for Cycling is an important goal, but as a lagging indicator mustn't be considered alone and should, in any case, be accompanied by other important dimensions, e.g., the percentage of women cycling.

The same applies to setting targets for the total km of bike lanes built, which is a leading indicator, and should also be accompanied by other important outputs, e.g., the percentage of street networks with reduced speeds, and the offer of dedicated bike parking.

To conclude:

The knowledge that POLIS and its members have built up on the above-mentioned issues through EU-funded projects can be capitalised over the next few years, by the integration of these issues in the 430 Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP) set to be developed by the 430 urban nodes that are part of the TEN-T Network.

Transferring knowledge, and translating it into a local action and investment agenda for Cycling should be a priority – to make mobility more sustainable, safe, and equitable, but also to open new pathways for a just transition in many EU regions, with new economic opportunities driven by an EU-based, labour-intensive, blooming industry.

Promoting sustainable urban mobility is a core mission of POLIS, and many of our members are stepping forward and ‘pedalling’ hard to advance and accelerate much-needed changes. POLIS is available and committed to actively participate in the development of this European Cycling Declaration and in its subsequent implementation.

Brussels, 11th July 2023

Respectfully yours,



Karen Vancluysen
Secretary General, POLIS