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Visions of Tomorrow:

Teenagers' Essays on Their Dream Smart Cities

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"Why Young People Should Shape the Smart Cities We Hope to Live In"

Growing up in Türkiye, I've always felt that cities have personalities of their own. They can feel welcoming or exhausting, calm or overwhelming, depending on how they're built and how people move through them. Yet when decisions are made about the future of these places—where green areas will go, how transportation should work, what kind of technology the city will adopt—the voices of young people are often missing. And that absence is strange, because we are the ones who will live with these choices the longest.

Young people notice details that adults often overlook. We feel a city directly: the frustration of waiting for an unreliable bus, the relief of finding a quiet spot to sit, the fear of crossing a busy road without a proper pedestrian path, the joy of a shaded street on a hot day. These everyday experiences give us a deep sense of what works and what doesn't. You can't learn that from a report or a presentation. You learn it by living the city as a young person.

There's also something very simple: technology is part of our daily language. Smart cities rely on apps, digital platforms, online services, sensors, and interactive systems. We know instinctively when something is user-friendly and when it isn't. We don't need long explanations—we just try something and immediately understand how it could be improved. If a city wants to create digital tools that people actually use, young people should be part of the design process.

But maybe the most powerful contribution youth can make is imagination. Adults often think in terms of limitations: budgets, rules, risks, deadlines. Young people think in possibilities. Turning an abandoned lot into a community hub doesn't feel unrealistic to us. Creating a digital map that tracks safe walking routes feels achievable, even exciting. We naturally look for solutions rather than reasons something won't work.

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There's also a strong emotional aspect. Many young people in Türkiye feel a growing responsibility toward the environment. Clean air, green spaces, climate resilience—these aren't abstract issues for us. They're tied to our future. When young people participate in decision-making, sustainability becomes a genuine priority, not a checkbox in a bigger document.

Participation itself is meaningful. When young people are invited into real conversations—planning meetings, workshops, youth councils—their sense of belonging to the city grows. They move from being passive users of urban spaces to active co-creators. And that shift matters. A city becomes healthier when its residents feel responsible for it.

Smart cities are supposed to be innovative, adaptable, and forward-thinking. But no city can call itself "smart" if it excludes the generation that understands technology, embraces creativity, and will live with the consequences of today's decisions.

Giving young people a seat at the decision-making table isn't a symbolic gesture. It's practical, necessary, and simply wise. We understand the rhythm of the city. We see problems early. We think differently. And the future is being built around us—whether we are included or not.
If Türkiye truly wants smart cities, then it needs to listen to the voices that carry tomorrow within them.

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"My Dream Smart City—and the Steps We Can Take Today to Build It"

When I imagine the smart city of my dreams, I don't picture something out of a science-fiction movie. There are no flying cars or neon towers. Instead, I picture a place that feels comfortable, intuitive, and alive. A place where moving around isn't a daily struggle, where technology supports people quietly in the background, and where young people are not just residents but contributors.

But dreams don't build themselves. And the truth is, there are things we—young people in Türkiye—can start doing today to bring that future a little closer.

One of the simplest ways to influence the city is by paying attention and speaking up. Many of us walk the same routes every day: to school, to work, to meet friends. We know where the sidewalk suddenly narrows, where cars speed too fast, where a street desperately needs a bench or a tree. Instead of keeping these observations to ourselves, we can send them to local platforms, municipal apps, or even directly to community councils. A small note about a dangerous crossing can actually push a change faster than we expect.

Another step we can take is to gather information ourselves. It may sound complicated, but it isn't. With a cheap air-quality sensor or even just a smartphone, young people can map pollution, noise, or heat in their neighborhood. Imagine hundreds of students collecting data and sharing it online. Suddenly, decision-makers would have a clearer picture of what we experience daily. And picture this: a heat map created by youth could guide where to plant new trees. That kind of impact feels empowering.

We can also contribute by creating small community actions. A five-person clean-up group is still a clean-up group. A student-run recycling corner at school is still a step toward a circular economy. Small actions build momentum. They make others think, "Maybe I can do something too." Change rarely starts with a crowd; it starts with someone deciding not to wait for a crowd.

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Young people can also shape the future simply by showing up where decisions happen. Public consultations, youth councils, environmental workshops—these sound formal, maybe even boring, but they're open to us. When young people attend these discussions, the energy in the room shifts. We ask different questions. We imagine different possibilities. And adults, whether they admit it or not, pay attention.

And then there's the digital world. Many of us already produce content daily—videos, stories, posts. Using that creativity for our city is surprisingly effective. A short video showing how unsafe a bike route feels can spread faster than any official announcement. A well-made reel about why green spaces matter can inspire more people than a printed brochure. Online influence is a tool, and young people know how to use it better than anyone.

Of course, not everything has to be public or loud. Some of the most important steps are personal habits: choosing to walk or cycle, reducing waste, supporting local businesses, treating public spaces with care. A smart city isn't shaped only by technology—it's shaped by the culture of its residents.

My dream smart city is not perfect, but it's reachable. It's a city where small actions matter, where young people are taken seriously, and where technology and nature coexist instead of competing. And the best part is that building this future doesn't start "someday." It starts now. With us.

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"What Our Cities Are Struggling With—and How Those Struggles Shape the City I Dream Of"

When I look around the city I live in, I don't just see buildings, parks, traffic lights and buses. I see a place trying to grow faster than it can handle. I see problems that don't always make the news but show themselves in small, everyday moments. These moments stay with me, and they shape the smart city I dream of for Türkiye.

One issue that's impossible to ignore is air quality. You notice it the moment you step outside on a cold winter morning. The air feels heavier, almost tired. And you feel tired too. Young people walk, run, ride bikes, wait for buses—we are outside a lot. We feel the difference between clean air and polluted air in a very real way. It affects how much time we spend outdoors, how active we are, even our mood. A smart city, in my eyes, is one where the air doesn't make you think twice before taking a deep breath.

Another challenge is waste—not just the physical waste we see, but the habits behind it. Sometimes it feels like our cities don't know whether they want to be sustainable or convenient. Recycling bins exist, but people don't always use them properly. Parks are beautiful until you look closely and notice plastic wrappers caught in the grass. These small signs bother me, not because the city is dirty, but because it shows how disconnected we can be from the places we live in. My dream city is one where people notice the ground as much as the sky.

Heat is a growing problem too. Summers feel hotter each year, and some neighborhoods trap the heat like a blanket no one wants. You walk through certain streets and feel the temperature rise with every step. There aren't enough trees. There aren't enough shaded corners. You can feel the city asking for a little relief— just like the people walking under the sun. It makes me long for a city where green spaces aren't a luxury but a basic part of the landscape.

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And then there are the social challenges, the ones that you understand only after paying attention. Not every neighborhood offers the same opportunities. Some places feel inviting—clean, safe, connected. Others feel forgotten, like they're waiting for someone to remember them. Public spaces can either bring people together or silently separate them. Young people feel these differences deeply because we move across the city often—school, work, hobbies, friendships. We experience the contrast firsthand.

Another challenge is something less visible but just as important: the feeling of not being included. Many young people in Türkiye have ideas—good ones—but don't know where to take them. Decision-making often feels distant, as if it belongs to a different world with different rules. It shouldn't be like that. Cities become better when the people who actually live in them get to participate, especially the younger generation who will live with the results the longest.

Still, despite all these challenges—air, waste, heat, inequality, exclusion—I don't feel hopeless. If anything, these issues make my dream city even clearer in my mind. I imagine a place where shade is as common as sunlight, where recycling is second nature, where air feels light, where every neighborhood feels cared for, and where young people aren't just observers but contributors.

The challenges are real, but so is the possibility of change. And maybe the smart city we hope for isn't built all at once. Maybe it starts with noticing these problems, talking about them, and imagining something better. That's how my dream city begins—quietly, honestly, and with the belief that we can shape it together.

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🇮🇹 ITALY – ESSAY 1

"Why Young People Should Have a Say in the Smart Cities Italy Is Trying to Build"

Whenever I walk through my city—whether it's Rome, Milan, Naples, or a quieter place—I can't help noticing how differently young people experience urban life compared to adults. We move through the city in a constant mix of school, work, hobbies, friendships, late buses, packed metros, long walks and random shortcuts we discover by accident. We know which streets feel safe, which corners are neglected, which routes make sense and which ones absolutely don't. And because of that, it feels obvious to me that young people should have a say in how Italy builds its so-called "smart cities."

A smart city isn't just a place with apps, sensors or electric buses. It's a place that feels intuitive—where daily life flows smoothly instead of fighting against you. And young people are experts in noticing when that flow is broken. We feel when public transport doesn't match our schedules. We feel when the city gets too hot because there aren't enough trees. We feel when a public space seems designed for everyone except us. These aren't things you can fully understand from a policy report or a planning document. You understand them by living the city the way young people do.

There's also something about technology that makes youth involvement essential. Digital tools are not "innovations" to us; they're part of our everyday habits. We know instantly when an app is confusing, when a platform is outdated, or when a digital service actually works. If a smart city relies on digital participation—and it absolutely does—then the voices of the people who use technology the most should be at the center of its design.

But beyond technology, there is imagination. Young people imagine differently. When adults talk about the future, they often think about risks, costs and limitations. When young people talk about the future, we picture possibilities. We imagine abandoned spaces becoming gardens or community hubs. We imagine data being used to solve real problems, not just fill a report. We imagine cities that feel kinder, greener and more human. And this kind of imagination is not a luxury; it's a resource.

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Italy also has another layer to consider: tradition. Cities here carry history in their stones. This creates beautiful streets, but also complicated challenges—narrow roads, old infrastructure, crowded centers. Young people don't want to erase tradition; we want to help update it. We want cities that respect the past without sacrificing comfort, sustainability or innovation. Balancing these things requires fresh perspectives.

There is also the emotional side. Many young Italians care deeply about the environment. We worry about heatwaves, waste, pollution and energy use because we're the ones who will live through the long-term consequences. If smart-city strategies are made without considering this generation, they will miss the urgency we feel.

But maybe the strongest argument for including youth is simple: a city is healthier when its residents feel heard. When young people are invited into real decision-making spaces—urban labs, youth councils, public workshops—we don't just contribute ideas. We build a relationship with the city. We start to feel responsible for it. We treat it differently because we know our voice matters.

Italy is full of young people who are creative, informed and ready to contribute. They shouldn't be brought into smart-city conversations at the very end to "approve" what's already been decided. They should be there from the beginning, shaping the vision alongside everyone else.

A smart city is not just about technology. It's about people feeling connected to the place they live. And if Italy wants cities that truly work for the future, then the voices that carry the future—its youth—belong at the table now, not later.

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🇮🇹 ITALY – ESSAY 2

"Small Steps, Real Impact: How Italian Youth Can Shape Tomorrow Starting Today"

Whenever people talk about improving cities, it often sounds like something only mayors, architects or experts can do. But living in Italy has taught me something different: change usually begins with people who pay attention—especially young people. We're the ones who walk the most, who rely on public transport the most, who use digital tools the most. And because of that, the steps we take right now can genuinely influence the future of our cities.

One of the easiest things we can do is share what we see. Young people notice issues long before they become "official problems." A sidewalk that's too narrow, a bus stop without shade, a bike lane that suddenly disappears—these are things we experience daily. Many municipalities already have reporting platforms, and even when they don't, posting in community groups or contacting local councils works surprisingly well. A single message is small, but hundreds of messages tell a story that city leaders can't ignore.

Another powerful step is collecting our own data. It sounds technical, but it can be as simple as using your phone to track crowded metro stations or measuring air quality near schools with an inexpensive sensor. Imagine students across Milan, Florence or Bari sharing this data online. Suddenly, the city can "see" what we've been feeling for years. When young people present information instead of only opinions, their voices gain weight.

We can also form small groups—nothing official, nothing complicated. Just a few friends deciding to do something together. A weekend clean-up in a neglected park. A small survey about how safe people feel walking at night. A petition asking for better bike lanes. These actions don't need permission to start. And once they do, they often attract more people who were waiting for someone to lead the way.

Another step is to show up in places where decisions are discussed. Public consultations might sound boring, but they're open to everyone. When young people attend, the mood shifts. We ask different questions. We point out things adults don't experience. And honestly, seeing a young person speak confidently in a room full of older officials has an impact that no email could ever create.

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There's also the digital world—our world. Social media can highlight issues that would otherwise stay invisible. A quick video explaining why a bike route feels unsafe, or a photo comparing two different waste bins, can reach thousands of people in a day. And once a conversation starts growing online, local leaders notice. They may not "like" the posts, but they see them.

And finally, one of the most important steps: our habits. Walking instead of driving. Using reusable bottles. Supporting local shops. Spending time in parks. The behaviors we normalize as young people slowly shape the culture of a city. When enough of us choose sustainability—not because it's trendy, but because it feels right—cities adjust their priorities to match.

The idea of building a "better tomorrow" can feel overwhelming. But it becomes much simpler when you realize it doesn't start with big plans—it starts with us. With what we choose to notice, with the conversations we start, with the small actions we take without waiting for permission.

The cities we dream of won't appear all at once. They'll grow slowly through the choices we make today. And that's exactly why youth involvement matters—because tomorrow is already forming in the steps we take right now.

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"What Our Cities Are Struggling With—and How Those Challenges Shape the Future We Imagine"

When I think about Italian cities, I picture a mix of beauty and contradiction. You can walk past a centuries-old building in the morning and then spend the afternoon stuck in traffic that feels endless. You can admire a quiet piazza, and then turn a corner and find a street overwhelmed by noise or litter. These contrasts aren't random—they're clues about the environmental and social challenges shaping our everyday lives.

One issue I notice almost every day is air quality. Sometimes it's subtle, sometimes not. The air feels different on days when traffic builds up across the city. You sense it when you're waiting at a bus stop or walking to school. For young people who move constantly between classes, part-time jobs, and social life, air pollution isn't an abstract idea—it's something we breathe, quite literally. And it affects how free the city feels.

Another challenge that's becoming harder to ignore is heat. Summers feel heavier, more intense, especially in areas with too much concrete and too little shade. Even short walks can feel draining. The city seems to hold onto the heat long after sunset, making it difficult to enjoy outdoor spaces. It makes you realize how much difference a few trees, green roofs or shaded benches could make. These small elements can change not just temperature but the mood of a neighborhood.

Then there's waste. Not just the bins overflowing during tourist seasons, but the feeling that the city is struggling to keep up with modern habits. Takeaway culture, fast shopping, single-use packaging—they create a rhythm of waste that public services can't always handle. When young people hang out in parks or by the seaside, they often end up picking up trash they didn't create. It's tiring, but it also shows how much potential there is for cities to support better habits.

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Social challenges mix into this picture as well. One of the most noticeable is uneven access. Some neighborhoods feel alive, walkable, clean and connected, while others feel overlooked. Public transport may run smoothly in one district and rarely in another. The difference in how teenagers or students move through these spaces is striking—you immediately feel which areas were planned with people in mind and which were shaped by accident.

Another issue is housing pressure. Many young people dream of independence, but rent prices push that dream further away. When a city becomes too expensive for its own youth, something is off. It's hard to feel like the city belongs to you when you're not sure you can afford to stay in it.

And finally, there's the challenge of finding a voice. Young people have opinions—lots of them—but decision-making spaces often feel far removed from everyday life. You don't always know where to send ideas or who is listening. That disconnect weakens the bond between people and the city they live in.

Still, these challenges don't make me pessimistic. If anything, they make the vision of a "smart city" feel more meaningful. When you experience problems directly, you also start imagining solutions. Cleaner transport, greener corners, fairer access, better communication—these aren't distant dreams, they're improvements we can picture clearly because we've felt the absence of them.

The problems our cities face today don't just show us what's wrong—they show us what matters. And for those of us who dream about the future of Italian cities, those challenges become the starting point of a better design.

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🇷🇴 ROMANIA – ESSAY 1

"A Smart City Needs Smart Participation: Why Romanian Youth Must Be Included"

As Romania continues moving toward digitalisation and sustainable urban innovation, one question becomes increasingly important: Who is shaping the future of our cities? Smart mobility systems, green infrastructure, efficient public services and digital platforms are transforming urban life—but these systems will influence young people more than any other group. This is why involving youth in decision-making for smart-city development is not simply beneficial; it is essential.

Young people in Romania experience the strengths and weaknesses of our cities firsthand. Whether in Bucharest's busy streets, Cluj-Napoca's university districts or Râmnicu Sărat's emerging neighbourhoods, youth interact with urban spaces every day. We feel the impact of traffic, pollution, heat, digital gaps, lack of green spaces and limited public transport options. We also see opportunities—places where technology could improve safety, community engagement or environmental protection. Our daily experiences offer valuable insights that often go unnoticed by policymakers.

Another reason youth must be involved is their natural connection to technology. Today's young Romanians use digital tools instinctively: mapping apps, mobility platforms, open-data dashboards, online learning and social networks. These skills are central to smart-city development. When young people design or test digital services, the results become more intuitive and accessible. A mobility app created with youth input will better reflect real travel patterns; an environmental reporting platform built by students will be more engaging; and a digital participation tool shaped by young minds will feel more inclusive and user-friendly.

Youth participation also strengthens democracy. Many young Romanians feel their voices are not represented in traditional political structures. Yet when municipalities invite youth councils, student groups or NGOs to co-design smart-city strategies, they create a sense of belonging and empowerment. This transforms young people from passive observers into active contributors. A generation that participates in shaping its cities becomes a generation that believes in democracy, civic responsibility and community.

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Creativity is another powerful reason to include youth. Young people imagine possibilities beyond the limits of conventional planning. In Cluj, students have proposed micro green-spaces between buildings. In Bucharest, youth groups have developed digital air-quality maps. In smaller towns, young volunteers created clean-up networks and community gardens. These ideas may start as small initiatives, but collectively they help reshape urban life. Smart cities thrive on innovation, and young people are the engine of that creativity.

Environmental sustainability also depends on youth leadership. Romania faces significant challenges: pollution, heat islands, waste management issues and deforestation. Young people are often the first to recognise the urgency of these problems and the most motivated to find solutions. Whether through recycling campaigns, eco-education, tree planting or digital monitoring tools, youth consistently show a commitment to protecting the environment. A smart city that ignores the environmental concerns of its younger generation will struggle to achieve long-term sustainability.

Finally, including youth promotes social inclusion. Cities designed without the input of young people tend to overlook other vulnerable groups as well. When youth participate, they advocate for safe spaces, better lighting, accessible mobility, gender equality, digital inclusion and community-driven decision-making. These values help create cities that are truly built for everyone.

In conclusion, involving young people in smart-city decision making is not a symbolic gesture—it is a necessity. Romanian youth understand local problems, master digital tools, bring fresh ideas, care deeply about the environment and want to be part of solutions. My dream smart city is one where young voices guide innovation, not follow it. If Romania wants its cities to be smarter, greener and more inclusive, it must invite its youth to the decision-making table. The future belongs to us, and we are ready to shape it.

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🇷🇴 ROMANIA – ESSAY 2

"The Steps We Can Take Today—Even If They Feel Small"

Sometimes it feels like changing a city is something only politicians or experts can do. But growing up in Romania has shown me that real change often starts with the people who see the city up close—especially young people. We're the ones who walk the longest distances, wait for buses in the cold, notice which areas feel safe and which don't, and feel the effects of pollution or noise long before anyone writes a report about it. And surprisingly, there are steps we can take right now that actually matter.

One of the simplest things we can do is speak about what we see. It sounds basic, but it works. A cracked sidewalk, a poorly lit street, a dangerous intersection—these things often stay "invisible" because no one reports them. If we send a short message to the municipality, post in a local group or use a reporting app, suddenly the problem becomes real to the people who can fix it. And when more young people do this, patterns appear. It stops being a private complaint and becomes a public issue.

Another step is to collect information ourselves. It doesn't require fancy equipment. Even a phone can help track how crowded a bus route is or how long it takes to cross certain streets. Students have already shown how powerful this can be—mapping air quality near schools, noticing where heat builds up during summer, or documenting noise levels near busy roads. When young people show data, not just opinions, adults take it more seriously.

We can also create small groups that focus on specific issues. Nothing formal—just a few friends deciding to act. Maybe it's cleaning a neglected green area, maybe it's talking to local shop owners about recycling, maybe it's interviewing neighbors about mobility problems. These things sound small, but they change how people relate to their environment. They remind communities that someone cares.

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Another meaningful step is showing up where decisions are made. Most young people don't realize that public consultations are open to everyone. Walking into a room where older people are discussing planning documents may feel intimidating, but youth voices change the energy. And sometimes, one good comment from a teenager can redirect a whole conversation. You don't need experience to understand how your city feels—you just need honesty.

Social media also gives young people a powerful tool. A short video explaining why a playground feels unsafe, or why a certain bus line is crucial, can reach thousands of people quickly. Awareness grows, and pressure builds. Decision-makers notice when a topic gains momentum online, even if they never say it out loud.

Then there are personal habits—quiet but meaningful. Walking more. Using a reusable bottle. Choosing to plant something instead of ignoring an empty patch of soil. Spending time in public spaces so they feel alive. Treating the city as a shared home rather than a place we pass through. When enough young people adopt these habits, the city slowly shifts to match them.

But the most important step might be this: believing that our voice matters, even when it feels small. Many young people hold back because they assume no one will listen. Yet the moment you speak up—whether in a meeting, online, or among friends—you realize that influence doesn't come from being older or more powerful; it comes from caring enough to try.

The future of Romanian cities won't suddenly appear. It grows from the actions we take now, even the tiny ones. And if young people begin acting today, the smart, fair, sustainable cities we imagine won't feel like a dream—they'll feel like something we've already started building.

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🇷🇴 ROMANIA – ESSAY 3

"The Challenges We Must Face to Build the Smart Cities Romania Deserves"

When I imagine my dream smart city in Romania, I picture a place where technology supports people, green spaces are protected, and young voices shape decisions. But dreaming is not enough—we must also acknowledge the challenges that stand in the way. Romanian cities, whether large like Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca or smaller like Râmnicu Sărat, face environmental and social issues that deeply affect daily life. Understanding these problems is the first step toward solving them.

One of the biggest environmental challenges is air pollution, especially in Bucharest. Traffic congestion, old heating systems and industrial zones contribute to poor air quality. Many young people experience headaches, fatigue or difficulty breathing on high-pollution days. In my dream city, every school and neighbourhood would have air-quality sensors installed, and the collected data would guide urban mobility decisions. Cleaner public transport, safer bike lanes and low-emission zones would finally become priorities.

Another challenge is waste management. Although Romania is improving its recycling rates, many areas still struggle with illegal dumping, overflowing bins and limited public awareness. Some neighbourhoods lack proper infrastructure for separating waste, while others face high levels of littering. A smart city cannot function without responsible waste practices. My dream city would have digital waste-reporting apps, community recycling stations, and youth-led "reuse workshops" to promote circular thinking.

The urban heat island effect is also becoming more visible. Summers in Romania are hotter than before, and concrete-heavy districts trap heat, making daily life uncomfortable. Cities like Cluj and Timisoara experience rising temperatures that limit outdoor activities. The solution lies in micro-greening: trees along sidewalks, green roofs, shaded parks and community gardens. Youth can play a major role by mapping heat hotspots and proposing new green corridors.

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A significant social challenge facing Romanian cities is inequality in access to services. Some neighbourhoods enjoy modern public transport, safe pedestrian routes and digital tools, while others lack basic infrastructure. This gap affects young people's opportunities, mobility and sense of belonging. A smart city must be inclusive; technology and sustainability should serve all citizens, not just a privileged few.

Another major social issue is the digital participation gap. Romania is rapidly digitalising public services, but not everyone has equal access or digital skills. While many young people are highly tech-savvy, elderly citizens or residents of rural areas may struggle. In my dream smart city, youth would lead digital training sessions, helping others navigate online systems. A city is truly smart only if it leaves no one behind.

Finally, one of the most overlooked challenges is limited youth involvement. Although young Romanians are creative, informed and globally connected, they are not always included in decision-making. Many feel that their ideas go unheard. This discourages civic participation and weakens trust in institutions. In my dream city, youth councils would be part of every major planning process—from mobility strategies to environmental policies. Young people would help design public spaces, propose solutions and evaluate the impact of smart-city projects.

In conclusion, Romanian cities face complex environmental and social challenges: air pollution, waste problems, heat islands, inequality, digital gaps and limited youth participation. But these challenges also present opportunities for reform and innovation. With the creativity and energy of Romania's youth, smart cities can become a reality—cities that are greener, fairer and more responsive to the needs of their people. The smart city I dream of is one built with young citizens, not merely for them.

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"Why Young People Should Help Shape the Smart Cities We're Growing Into"

Whenever people talk about "smart cities," the conversation usually jumps straight to technology—apps, sensors, digital platforms, automated systems. But a city isn't defined by the devices it installs. It's defined by the people who move through it every day. And in Spain, a huge part of that population is young people. We walk, study, work, explore and socialize across the city in ways that are very different from older generations. That alone should be a good enough reason for us to be involved in shaping how cities evolve.

When I think about the places where I spend most of my time—on buses, metro lines, university corridors, plazas full of noise and sunshine—I realize how much these spaces affect our energy and our mood. Young people feel the city directly. We notice when a street feels unsafe late at night, or when a bus route doesn't match our schedules, or when a public space feels welcoming without trying too hard. These small details rarely appear in official documents, yet they shape the daily experience of thousands of students across Spain.

Another reason youth involvement matters is that technology is second nature to us. We instinctively know when an app is poorly designed or when a digital service actually helps people. Smart cities depend on digital participation, but digital participation only works if the people who use technology the most have a voice in how these tools are created. A platform meant to "engage citizens" won't succeed if young citizens find it confusing or irrelevant. We can help make these systems feel human, not just functional.

There's also something about the way young people imagine the future that is different from older generations. Adults sometimes approach change with caution—they think about budgets, procedures, regulations. Young people think in possibilities. We picture greener corners, safer bike routes, open spaces for creativity, cultural centers that feel alive, public areas where people from every background can mingle comfortably. We don't immediately ask, "Can this be done?" We ask, "Why not?"
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And honestly, we bring a kind of emotional honesty that planning committees sometimes lack. When something feels unfair or inefficient or simply outdated, we say it. We don't hide our frustrations behind formal language. We talk about them openly—with friends, online, in school. That honesty is valuable. It pushes conversations forward.

There's also the matter of belonging. When young people are included in the decisions shaping their community, they build a stronger relationship with their city. It stops feeling like a place they're temporarily passing through and starts feeling like a place they can influence and care about. That shift is powerful. A city becomes more vibrant when its youngest residents feel responsible for it.

Environmental concerns are another huge reason to bring youth to the table. Many of us worry about heat, pollution, water scarcity, and waste—not because they're political topics, but because they affect our future directly. We want solutions that don't just work today but still make sense twenty or thirty years from now. If smart cities aim to be sustainable, they need the voices of the generation that is actually going to live in that future.

For me, involving young people is not about symbolism. It's about practicality. If a city wants to be modern, intuitive, sustainable and human-centered, it needs the input of the people who understand modern life, digital culture and the urgency of environmental change from the inside.

Smart cities are supposed to grow with their people, not ahead of them. And if Spain truly wants its cities to evolve in a way that reflects the real rhythm of everyday life, then the ideas, frustrations, hopes and creativity of young people shouldn't be an afterthought—they should be part of the blueprint.

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🇪🇸 SPAIN – ESSAY 2

"Steps We Take Today: How Spanish Youth Can Build the Smart Cities We Dream Of"

When I imagine my dream smart city in Spain, I picture a place where digital tools make life easier, where green spaces are preserved, where clean mobility is a reality, and where young people feel that their ideas matter. But such a city cannot be built overnight. It requires action—especially from youth. The good news is that there are concrete steps we can take today to ensure our voices shape the future.

One of the most immediate steps is to use the digital participation platforms that many Spanish municipalities already provide. Cities like Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao have online portals where citizens can submit suggestions, vote on proposals or report issues related to mobility, lighting, waste or accessibility. Young people often ignore these tools, assuming they do not make a difference—but they do. When hundreds of young citizens highlight the same problem, decision-makers pay attention. Whether it's the lack of bike lanes, unsafe bus stops or insufficient green areas, youth opinions can influence municipal priorities.

Youth can also take action by collecting environmental data. Smart cities rely on accurate information, and young people can contribute by measuring air quality, temperature, noise levels or mobility flows in their neighbourhoods. In Barcelona, student groups have already mapped heat islands; in Valencia, youth volunteers monitored water usage during drought periods. These initiatives prove that data gathered by young people can guide real environmental policy.

Another key step is joining or forming youth-led sustainability groups. Whether it's organising beach clean-ups in Málaga, running recycling workshops in Granada or hosting climate-awareness events in Zaragoza, young people can create meaningful local change. These activities help build community spirit and demonstrate that environmental protection is not an abstract idea but a practical commitment.

YOUTH & THE CITY

Participation in co-design workshops is another powerful step. Many Spanish cities are experimenting with participatory urban planning, where residents help design public spaces, parks, mobility routes or cultural areas. When youth take part in these processes, they bring fresh ideas, digital knowledge and unique perspectives. A skate-friendly plaza, an accessible park, a shaded cycling route—these ideas often come from young people, and cities benefit tremendously from them.

Youth can also contribute by using their creativity on social media. Content created by young Spaniards—videos, infographics, challenges, storytelling—has the power to reach thousands of people. A single video about pollution in Madrid or waste in Ibi can inspire community action. Social media activism, when responsible and constructive, amplifies youth voices and puts pressure on institutions to act.

A crucial step is advocacy. Writing to local councillors, signing petitions, joining youth councils or attending neighbourhood meetings may seem small, but they are fundamental democratic tools. When young people express their concerns consistently and respectfully, they help shape policy agendas. A smart city is a shared project, and youth voices must be part of its foundation.

Finally, the most personal but powerful step is changing daily habits. Choosing to use public transport, cycling instead of driving, supporting recycling programmes, conserving water, reducing plastic waste—all these actions contribute to building a sustainable city. Smart cities are not just technological systems; they are reflections of the values of their citizens.

In conclusion, the steps young people can take today—digital participation, data collection, community action, co-design, social media advocacy and sustainable habits—are not small at all. They are the building blocks of the smart cities we dream of. Spain's youth have creativity, passion and digital competence. If we act together, we can transform our cities into greener, fairer and smarter places for everyone.

YOUTH & THE CITY

"Challenges We Must Overcome to Build the Smart Cities Spain Needs"

When I imagine my dream smart city in Spain, I picture a place where clean air, green mobility and digital equality are the foundations of daily life. But before we can create such a future, we must confront the environmental and social challenges that Spanish cities face today. These challenges are real, visible and deeply connected to the quality of life of young people. Understanding them is the first step toward building a better tomorrow.

One of the most urgent environmental challenges is air pollution, especially in large cities like Madrid and Barcelona. Traffic congestion, dense tourism, and certain industrial activities contribute to dangerous levels of NO_2 and particulate matter. On days when pollution peaks, young people feel the effects immediately—headaches, fatigue, difficulty breathing—and outdoor activities become restricted. A smart city cannot thrive if its citizens cannot breathe clean air. We need improved public transport, expanded cycling networks, more low-emission zones and youth-led air-quality monitoring programmes to guide better policy.

A second challenge is urban heat islands. Spain is one of the European countries most affected by climate-related heatwaves. Cities like Seville, Valencia and Zaragoza experience extreme temperatures in summer, especially in areas with little shade or vegetation. High heat affects not only comfort but also health and productivity. My dream smart city would prioritise micro-greening strategies: shaded walkways, rooftop gardens, cooling pavements, tree corridors and youth-designed "cool spots" in public spaces. Technology could help identify the hottest areas, while youth creativity could shape the solutions.

Another major environmental issue is waste management, particularly in tourist-heavy regions. Cities like Barcelona and islands like Mallorca struggle with seasonal increases in litter. Plastic waste in coastal areas threatens marine ecosystems and affects local communities. While Spain has strong recycling programmes, inconsistent participation and lack of awareness remain challenges. A smart city would integrate circular-economy principles into schools, neighbourhoods and businesses. Youth-led reuse labs, marine clean-up campaigns and digital tools for reporting waste issues could make a significant difference.

YOUTH & THE CITY

Social challenges are equally important. One of the most persistent issues is inequality in access to digital tools and services. While many young Spaniards are technologically skilled, vulnerable groups and rural communities may lack access to reliable internet or digital literacy. As more public services move online, this inequality creates barriers that a smart city must address. Youth can play an important role by supporting digital inclusion initiatives and advocating for accessible platforms.

Another key challenge is housing affordability, especially in cities like Madrid, Barcelona and Málaga. Many young people struggle to find safe, affordable housing close to education or employment opportunities. Overcrowded neighbourhoods, rising rent prices and limited social housing options contribute to social pressure. A smart city must prioritise inclusive housing policies and youth-friendly urban planning.

Lastly, Spanish cities face the challenge of limited youth participation. Many young people feel disconnected from decision-making processes, believing that urban planning is something only politicians and experts control. This distance weakens civic engagement and results in cities that do not fully reflect the needs of their younger residents. My dream smart city would have youth councils, participatory budgeting, co-creation workshops and digital platforms where young citizens can express ideas and influence real decisions.

In conclusion, Spain faces complex environmental and social challenges—air pollution, heat islands, waste, digital inequality, housing issues and limited youth involvement. Yet these challenges also present opportunities for collective action and innovation. With the creativity, energy and technological skill of Spanish youth, smart cities can emerge as spaces that are greener, fairer and more humane. The cities we dream of can become the cities we live in, if we begin addressing these challenges together.

YOUTH & THE CITY

🇵🇹 PORTUGAL – ESSAY 1

"Young Voices for Smarter Cities: Why Portugal Needs Youth in Urban Decision Making"

As Portugal works to modernise its cities and make them greener, smarter and more inclusive, one essential truth becomes clear: young people must be part of the decision-making process. Smart cities are not just about digital tools, sensors or infrastructure—they are about people, especially the younger generation who will inherit the long-term consequences of today's policies. That is why involving youth is not an optional gesture; it is a necessity.

Young Portuguese citizens experience cities in ways policymakers often do not. In Lisbon, students rely heavily on public transportation and feel firsthand the frustration of delays, crowded buses or unsafe walking routes. In Porto, young people witness the impacts of tourism-related waste and noise pollution. In smaller cities like Baguim do Monte and Gondomar, youth face challenges related to limited digital participation and fewer environmental resources. These daily experiences give young people a unique and valuable perspective on what a smart city should prioritise.

Another important reason to involve youth in decision making is their natural fluency in technology. Smart cities depend on digital platforms, open data, sensors and user-friendly communication tools. Young people already use these technologies every day—social media, mobility apps, collaborative platforms and digital navigation systems. When youth help design these tools, they become more accessible, interactive and meaningful for all citizens. A smart city will succeed only if the people who use its technology can shape it.

Youth also bring creativity and innovation to urban development. Traditional planning methods sometimes focus on efficiency and regulation, but young people imagine possibilities that older generations might dismiss. For example, Portuguese youth have proposed ideas such as micro-greening projects in dense neighbourhoods, community recycling points run by students, youth-led river-cleaning campaigns and digital platforms that allow citizens to report environmental issues in real time. These ideas demonstrate that youth do not just highlight problems—they design solutions.

YOUTH & THE CITY

Involving youth also strengthens democratic participation. Many young people in Portugal feel disconnected from traditional politics and doubt that their voices matter. But when municipalities create youth councils, workshops or participatory budgeting specifically for younger generations, it changes everything. Young people become more motivated to contribute, more confident in their role as citizens and more engaged in designing the future of their communities. A smart city is not only built with technology—it is built with trust and collaboration.

Another reason youth involvement is essential is environmental responsibility. Portugal faces environmental challenges such as droughts, heatwaves, coastal erosion and urban waste. Young people are often the first to speak up about climate change and the most committed to sustainable living. They cycle instead of drive, reduce waste, support renewable energy and promote eco-friendly habits. Involving youth in smart-city decisions ensures that climate concerns remain a priority and that future generations are protected.

Social inclusion is also shaped by youth perspectives. Young people care deeply about equal access—whether it is access to green spaces, transport, digital tools or safe public areas. When youth participate in planning, cities become more inclusive for all residents, including children, immigrants and vulnerable communities. In a country as diverse and vibrant as Portugal, this inclusive mindset is essential.

In conclusion, involving young people in smart-city decision making is vital for Portugal's future. Youth understand local challenges, master digital tools, bring creative ideas, and care deeply about sustainability and equality. My dream smart city is one where young voices guide development, not just respond to it. If Portugal wants cities that are truly smart—cities that reflect community needs and future aspirations—it must invite its youth to the decision-making table. The future belongs to young people, and we are ready to shape it.

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🇵🇹 PORTUGAL – ESSAY 2

"Steps We Can Take Today: How Portuguese Youth Can Shape the Smart Cities of Tomorrow"

When I imagine the smart city of my dreams in Portugal, I picture a place where green spaces are accessible to everyone, where technology helps communities connect, and where young voices genuinely influence decisions. Building such a city may seem like a long-term project, but in reality, young people can begin shaping this future today through simple, concrete steps.

One of the most effective actions young people can take is to use the digital participation platforms provided by municipalities. Cities like Lisbon, Porto and Braga offer online portals where citizens can vote on proposals, report problems and submit suggestions. Many young Portuguese residents are unaware of how powerful these tools can be. Whether it's highlighting unsafe cycling routes, requesting more green areas, or pointing out waste issues, youth submissions guide local priorities. When many young people raise the same concern, municipalities respond.

Another meaningful step is collecting and sharing environmental data. Smart cities rely heavily on information, and youth can help gather it. For example, simple air-quality sensors near schools or riverbanks can reveal pollution patterns. Groups of students in Porto could map noise levels around busy tourist areas, while youth in Baguim do Monte might track waste hotspots using a smartphone app. These types of data projects empower young people and offer valuable insights for urban planning.

Young people can also contribute by joining or forming sustainability clubs in schools, universities and community centres. These groups can organise tree planting, river clean-ups, recycling workshops or awareness campaigns. For instance, organizing a "Zero Waste Week" at school or leading a neighbourhood clean-up in Vila Nova de Gaia can create immediate visible impact. Community involvement strengthens local pride and inspires others to join.

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Participation in co-creation workshops is another important step. Many Portuguese cities now host public sessions where residents, including youth, can help design parks, mobility routes, cultural spaces or digital services. When young people take part, their ideas—such as shaded study areas, youth-friendly bike networks, or digital hubs in libraries—become part of the city's strategy. A smart city thrives when it reflects the creativity of its younger citizens.

Youth can also use their digital influence to create awareness through social media. Portuguese young people are skilled at storytelling, video creation and online advocacy. A creative Instagram reel showing pollution on a beach in Cascais or a TikTok highlighting the lack of cycling lanes in Lisbon can reach thousands of people. Responsible digital activism not only spreads awareness but also inspires collective action.

Another concrete step is advocacy through dialogue with local councils. Writing emails to councillors, attending public meetings or sharing youth policy proposals helps young people insert their concerns into official discussions. For example, a well-prepared youth mobility report based on student experiences in Porto can strongly influence transportation planning.

Finally, young people can make meaningful contributions through personal lifestyle choices. Choosing public transport instead of private cars, reducing water use during drought periods, supporting recycling, and practising mindful consumption all contribute to a more sustainable city. Smart cities are built not only by infrastructure but by the habits of their citizens.

In conclusion, Portuguese youth have powerful tools at their disposal to shape the future of their cities. Through digital participation, environmental data collection, community projects, co-creation workshops, online advocacy and sustainable lifestyles, young people can begin building tomorrow's smart city today. My dream smart city for Portugal is one where youth are not spectators but active co-creators—and these steps make that dream entirely achievable.

🇵🇹 PORTUGAL – ESSAY 3

"What Our Cities Are Struggling With—and What Those Struggles Tell Us About the Future"

When I look at the cities around me in Portugal, I see a mix of beauty, chaos, and quiet warnings. You can spend the morning walking through a sunny praça full of life, and then suddenly find yourself in a street where traffic, noise and heat make everything feel heavy. These contrasts are small reminders of the environmental and social challenges shaping our urban future.

One of the clearest problems we face is air pollution. It doesn't always appear dramatic, but you feel it on days when buses and cars fill the roads and the air seems slower. Young people notice this more than most because we're constantly moving—walking to class, running to catch public transport, spending time outdoors with friends. When the air feels thick, the city feels smaller, as if it's holding its breath. Clean air shouldn't be a luxury, yet sometimes it feels that way.

Another growing challenge is heat. Summers in Portugal have become noticeably more intense. Some neighborhoods trap heat for hours, especially where green spaces are missing. Standing in the sun waiting for a bus or walking home at midday can feel exhausting. It's a reminder that the design of a city—where shade is placed, how many trees exist, how buildings reflect warmth—directly affects daily life. Heat doesn't just make you uncomfortable; it changes how people use public spaces, or if they use them at all.

Waste is another issue that quietly builds up. Overflowing bins, plastic caught in the wind, abandoned items near recycling points—they are small signs of a bigger problem: a system struggling to keep up with changing habits. You notice it especially after weekends or tourist-heavy days, when the city feels like it's recovering from too much activity. It makes you think about how differently things could look if people had better habits or if cities supported smarter waste solutions.

YOUTH & THE CITY

Social challenges are woven into all of this. One major issue is unequal access. Some areas feel vibrant and well-organized, while others seem disconnected or forgotten. Public transport may work smoothly in one district and barely reach another. A young person trying to study at a library, find a safe place to walk, or reach an affordable sports center will immediately feel these differences. A city isn't truly smart if comfort depends on which neighborhood you happen to live in.

Housing pressure also shapes how young people experience the city. It's hard to feel grounded when rent rises faster than wages, or when entire neighborhoods become too expensive for the people who grew up in them. A city starts to lose part of its identity when its youth can't afford to stay.

And then there's a quieter challenge: participation. Many young people have ideas about how to improve things—how to redesign a square, how to make transport easier, how to create greener pockets in dense neighborhoods. But the path to sharing those ideas often feels unclear or distant. When decision-making seems far away, people stop believing they can influence change, even though their perspective is exactly what the city needs.

Despite all these challenges, I don't feel discouraged. If anything, they help me understand what kind of future I want to help build. Every issue points toward a solution: more shade, cleaner energy, smarter waste systems, fairer access, stronger youth involvement. These problems are not just obstacles—they are signposts showing us what matters most.

The cities we dream about aren't imaginary. They already exist in the distance, shaped by the lessons we're learning today. And if we pay attention to what our cities are struggling with, we can help guide them toward something brighter, greener and more humane.

YOUTH & THE CITY

"Why Young People Deserve a Seat at the Table When We Talk About Smart Cities"

When people in the Czech Republic talk about "smart cities," the conversation often turns into a list of technical upgrades—new systems, better transport, apps that solve everyday problems. But whenever I hear these discussions, I can't help thinking: How can a city be truly smart if it doesn't listen to the people who live most of their lives in its streets? And especially the young people who move through the city in ways older generations sometimes forget.

As a young person, I experience my city through small, everyday details. The crowded tram I take to school, the quiet shortcut I walk to avoid a busy road, the park bench where I study after classes, the poorly lit street that always makes me speed up my steps at night. These are the moments that shape my relationship with my city. And these are the kinds of details that rarely appear in planning meetings unless young people are invited to share them.

There's also something unique about how youth experience technology. We don't think of digital tools as "innovations"; we think of them as normal parts of our day. When a city launches a new app or an online platform, we instantly know whether it's something people will actually use. We can spot a confusing design or an outdated interface right away. If smart cities depend on digital participation—and they do—then involving young people isn't optional. Our feedback improves the tools everyone ends up using.

Another reason our involvement matters is the way we imagine change. Adults often think in terms of limitations: budgets, regulations, past failures. Young people imagine differently. We picture things as they could be, not just as they've always been. We aren't afraid to suggest turning an empty lot into a community space or using data to track local environmental issues. Our ideas lean toward creativity, not hesitation.

YOUTH & THE CITY

What people sometimes overlook is that young voices carry honesty. When something doesn't make sense, we say it. When a public space feels unsafe or neglected, we notice immediately. We don't hide our frustration behind polite phrases or bureaucracy. This honesty isn't a flaw—it's a tool. It pushes discussions forward instead of letting problems sit quietly in the background.

There's also the emotional part that's hard to measure but easy to feel. When young people are welcomed into decision-making—through youth councils, workshops, school projects or open consultations—they start to feel connected to their city in a new way. It stops being just a backdrop to their routines. It becomes a place they can shape. And when you feel connected, you care more. You treat the city differently because it feels partly yours.

Environmental issues strengthen this point even more. Many young people in the Czech Republic worry about heatwaves, pollution, and shrinking green spaces—not because these topics are trendy, but because they directly affect the future we're walking into. If decisions about sustainability are made without us, they risk missing the urgency we feel.

For me, involving young people in smart-city development isn't about giving us a symbolic role. It's about using the knowledge, creativity and perspective we already carry with us every day. No one understands what it feels like to be a young citizen in a modern city better than we do. And if the future of our cities is being planned today, then our voices should be part of that planning.

A city becomes smarter when it listens—not just to experts, but to the people who will live longest with the results. And that's why young people in the Czech Republic belong in every discussion about the future of our cities.

YOUTH & THE CITY

🇨🇿 CZECH REPUBLIC – ESSAY 2

"What We Can Do Right Now: Youth Actions That Shape the Future"

Most young people in the Czech Republic already care about the places they live in —they just don't always realize how much influence they actually have. Making a difference does not always start with a microphone, a protest, or a formal meeting. Sometimes it starts with noticing things that don't feel right and deciding not to stay quiet about them.

One of the simplest steps we can take is to document our reality. A broken bike path, a dangerous crossing, a polluted corner by the river—these things often stay invisible to decision-makers unless someone shows them. A photo shared in a local community group, a short message on a municipal app, or a map created by students can reveal patterns that spark change. Cities respond faster when information is clear, consistent and comes from many voices.

Another powerful step is forming small circles of action. Not everything requires a large organization. A few friends cleaning a neglected green patch, students creating a recycling corner at school, or a group of volunteers mapping night-time safety in their neighbourhood—the impact grows as others join in. These small initiatives make cities feel more cared for, and they often inspire adults who haven't yet dared to start something themselves.

Youth can also shape the future by stepping into conversations that are usually dominated by older generations. Public consultations, local councillor Q&A sessions, or even informal meetings at community centres may feel intimidating, but they're open to us. Showing up—physically or online—signals that young people are paying attention. And when we speak, decision-makers listen more than we expect, because a fresh perspective often challenges assumptions they didn't realize they had.

Digital creativity is another tool young people can use immediately. A simple infographic explaining a local problem, a short video showing how students move through the city, or a poll asking peers what improvements they want—all these things build awareness. When information spreads quickly among youth, it becomes harder for authorities to ignore.

YOUTH & THE CITY

Daily habits also contribute quietly but powerfully to shaping tomorrow. Choosing to walk or cycle, using reusable products, supporting local initiatives, spending time in green spaces and engaging in community events all help strengthen the culture of a smart, sustainable city. When many young people adopt these habits at once, cities adapt to match them—by adding more bike lanes, more green spaces, and more youth-friendly public areas.

Perhaps the most important step is believing that small actions matter. Young people often feel that their voices are too soft to change something big. Yet history repeatedly shows that cultural shifts begin with small, persistent efforts made by everyday people. If Czech youth decide that their ideas deserve space, those ideas will naturally find their way into the larger conversation.

The future won't suddenly appear one day—it slowly grows from the choices we make now. And every young person in the Czech Republic has something to offer that can help shape that tomorrow.

YOUTH & THE CITY

🇨🇿 CZECH REPUBLIC – ESSAY 3

"What Our Cities Are Struggling With — And What That Means for the Future We Imagine"

Growing up in the Czech Republic, you don't need a scientific report to notice that our cities are changing. You can feel it in the air after a long line of cars crawls past you on a narrow street. You sense it on hot summer days when the pavement seems to hold onto the heat long after the sun has gone down. And you hear it in conversations—people worrying about housing, public spaces, or how disconnected certain neighbourhoods feel.

One of the problems that stands out most is the slow, steady pressure of urban pollution. It isn't always dramatic. Sometimes it's a faint smell from traffic or a hazy view of the horizon. Yet these small signals add up. Young people walking to school or cycling to activities feel it directly. It affects how free or restricted a city feels, and whether outdoor spaces feel like places to enjoy or places to escape from.

Another challenge is waste and the culture around it. Recycling bins exist, awareness campaigns appear now and then, but the behaviour doesn't always follow. Overflowing containers, litter in parks, abandoned furniture behind apartment blocks—these are reminders that the system isn't functioning as smoothly as it looks on paper. Youth often notice these things first because public spaces are where we hang out, relax, study and socialise. When the environment feels neglected, the whole community feels a little more distant from its city.

There is also the growing issue of heat and disappearing shade. Summers are getting warmer, and many urban areas are dominated by concrete, glass and asphalt. Trees are fewer in some places, and older neighbourhoods sometimes lack green pockets where people can escape the heat. Young people sense this acutely because they move around the city a lot—walking to trams, sitting outside after school, meeting friends in open spaces. A city without shade feels less welcoming, less human.

YOUTH & THE CITY

Social challenges run parallel to environmental ones. One of the most noticeable is the feeling of disconnect between groups of people. Some neighbourhoods are thriving, full of culture, innovation and accessible services, while others feel forgotten or outdated. Public spaces can either bring people together or emphasise the gaps between them. When young people look for places to study, relax or meet friends, the difference becomes very real.

Another issue is youth participation—or the lack of it. Many young Czechs have ideas about improving their city, but the routes to sharing those ideas are unclear. Decision-making structures often feel far away, wrapped in bureaucracy. This creates the sense that cities evolve without asking the people who use them the most.

And then there's digital inequality, which becomes more visible every year. Technology is supposed to make life easier, but for people without reliable access or skills, it creates a wall rather than a bridge. Young people see this when helping parents or grandparents with online forms or public services. A smart city cannot truly be "smart" if it only works for some of its residents.

Despite these challenges, imagining a future city isn't difficult. Every problem quietly points to what a better city could look like: cleaner air, cooler streets, greener corners, fairer access, stronger community energy and a real place for youth voices. These obstacles don't weaken our vision; they shape it.

The struggles our cities face today sketch the outline of the cities we want tomorrow. And that outline becomes clearer every time a young person pays attention, asks a question or imagines something better.