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CONTENT

Youth in Albania and the Online World
at the Crossroads of Freedom and Safety

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Following global trends, social media has become an instrumental part of daily life for most Albanians. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was a primary means for social communication and receiving information on current affairs. Moreover, since the outbreak of the pandemic, social media has cemented its position as an irreplaceable aspect of people's personal and professional lives. While it is wonderful that the internet allows education, business, and daily life to continue, there are some challenges to such dependency on social media. For example, disinformation spreads six times faster through social media channels than actual news, and social media platforms create opportunities for unsupervised communication, which can lead to harassment, abuse, and blackmail.

Particularly for children and youngsters, this can lead to problematic encounters. Although the younger generation (aged between 15 and 30) are the most media-savvy generation yet, they may still lack the critical skills to use the internet responsibly. Youth may find it difficult to assess whether the information comes from a trustworthy source or may be more vulnerable to blackmail – such as the 15-year old girl blackmailed by classmates and eventually raped by her school's security guard. Moreover, as online communication is usually unsupervised, social media creates space for an increase in bullying and harassment. According to a United Nations poll conducted in 2019, a third of the surveyed young people reported having been victim of online bullying.

Therefore, to better understand how social media is used to strengthen the freedom of each citizen while combating disinformation and hate speech on the internet, the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) organised youth consultations as a part of the "Making a Future Together: EU and the Western Balkans from the Youth Perspective." The discussion aimed to create a broader understanding of the role that social media plays in fostering greater youth political engagement by informing the future policy-making process. This report aims to provide an overview of the youth consultation's event held in Albania while shedding light on possible policy approaches towards a safer and more inclusive online space.

Methodology

Besides the consultations held in Albania, five partner organisations in the Western Balkan region held similar events with youth. To collect comparable results cross-nationally, a jointly developed methodology was followed for choosing the sample and conducting youth consultations, although the discussion topics were adjusted accordingly to fit the local context. The direct engagement with youth helped them gain a better understanding of the complexity of internet freedom while sharing their experiences regarding the regulation of the internet with peers and organisers. Moreover, this in-depth qualitative approach provided comprehensive and rich data that can be used to advocate for a more youth-informed policy-making process.

The consultations were organised as part of a two-day event. The first day enabled the project team in Albania to collect input from the youth through a participative discussion, while the second day was implemented in the form of a public debate with key stakeholders on internet freedom. The methodology of the consultations is outlined as follows:

• Introduction and first plenary session
• Separate group discussions
• Second plenary session
• Separate group discussions
• Third plenary session
• Conclusion

This structured discussion allowed for a logical progression of thoughts and ideas, where the participants could easily see the connection between the questions set out by the organisers and the overall goal of the consultations. After the first plenary session, participants were divided into three groups to participate in a guided discussion, each centred around one main question: (1) How often do youth use online platforms and which ones? (2) Do youth go online to engage with others for social or political causes? and (3) What are the pros and cons of the use of the internet?

The second plenary session grouped the main takeaways of the discussions and allowed participants of other small-group discussions to share their ideas on the question. Moreover, during the second plenary, youth were introduced to the topics of the upcoming round of group discussions. There they would brainstorm about ideas to fight the previously identified negative sides of the internet, without minimising the benefits, as well as who the participants would trust most to regulate the negative sides of the internet and the reasons for their choice. The last plenary enabled the youth participants and moderators to come to conclusions about the questions that were previously raised and discussed. Moreover, the third plenary session challenged the participants to share their stories about the use of the internet and to pay closer attention to their engagement on various social media platforms. The consultations held by IDM gathered a heterogeneous group of 19 young people across Albania. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 25 years old. The diversity of participants in the group enabled a more thorough discussion. Moreover, their inputs were complimentary to one another, contributing to the cohesion of the group and the fruitful discussion.

An Overview of the Current Trends

Internet access has increased rapidly during the last ten years in Albania. In 2020, 83.3% of Albanian households had access to the internet, compared to 45% in 2010. Additionally, 96% of Albanians under 35 years old say that they use the internet (almost) every day. Albanians commonly use the internet to engage with content on social networks such as Facebook or Instagram (59%), to make phone or video calls through Skype and WhatsApp (38%), or to download, watch or listen to music, films, video files, web, radio, and Web TV (24%).

For 2020, the 20-most searched words by Albanians on Google included COVID-19, online learning platforms, and e-Albania (public services platform through which curfew outings were registered). There was also an increased interest in social media, with YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram being among the most-visited sites in Albania during 2020.

Regarding the national response to internet safety, the National Security Strategy reflects the development of state security policies against internal or external virtual dangers and threats. Moreover, the main pillar of the National Strategy for Cyber Security 2020-2025 is to improve the capacities of responsible institutions to combat cybercrime and ensure citizens' safety. To achieve this goal, two initiatives were taken. First, the continuous identification of harmful elements circulating on the Internet that violate cybersecurity in the country. Second, the regulation of the internet service provided in public areas, through certification by the cybersecurity regulatory authority. Moreover, the provision of safe Internet was one of the objectives of the Digital Agenda 2015–2020 in Albania, and it remains a priority of the Digital Agenda 2015–2020.

In terms of the international conventions, the Government of Albania has harmonised its legislation with the Council of the Europe Convention on Cybercrime (ETS No.185). Additionally, the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime was adapted into national law in Albania in 2008, with the intention of using it as a global system of measures against information network crimes. Moreover, Albania has ratified in 2004 "The Council of Europe's convention on cyber-crime".

Based on international directives and conventions, several laws and regulations have been drafted and adapted for the implementation of these strategic approaches. For example, Law no. 9918 on electronic communications in Albania, enacted in 2008, sets obligations and criteria for telecommunication operators relating to the safeguarding of fundamental rights and freedoms. Additionally, Law no. 9887, enacted in 2010, on the protection of personal data, requires legal processing of personal data to respect and guarantee peoples' fundamental rights and freedoms, particularly their right to privacy.

Insights from the Youth Consultation

Youth consultation participants brought up various examples of the benefits of the internet. However, the majority of them were concerned about their privacy and safety. The majority of youth engage on social media daily and some participants even noted that they spend up to 85% of their spare time online. The actual hours spent online varies depending on their occupations, but it can be a large part of the day. Regardless of the considerable time youth spends online, they acknowledge the complexity of internet use. Despite the variety of opinions and perspectives on the use of social media, youth unanimously agreed that there is a harmful perspective hidden in their widespread use.

The following were regarded as the two most positive aspects of the internet by youth: the vast amount of information available, and the various marketing and e-commerce opportunities that arise for busi-

nesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). On the other hand, youth considered internet dependency, and the threat of cyberbullying or cyberattacks as the most negative aspects of the internet. Youth classified safety threats and serious health consequences among the most concerning aspects of the internet, by emphasising the high likelihood of internet or social media addiction.

The participants discussed in three different groups the measures and initiatives to strengthen the positive aspects of the internet and tackle its disadvantages. The first group proposed to increase the level of information provided on media literacy by directly training journalists in identifying fake news. Additionally, the group proposed to update the legislation, given that the internet is rapidly changing and poses new challenges in terms of privacy and user safety.

The second group noted the importance of actively engaging journalists to provide media literacy training to citizens for the identification of fake news. This can be achieved by providing ongoing training, especially to journalists and news editors, on how to prevent the spread of misleading information and train the online desk staff of portals and news websites to identify fake news more easily. Also, some of the participants emphasised the need for setting up independent agencies that will be involved in the licensing of online portals that communicate news.

Youth from the third group proposed raising parental awareness to support and keep their children safe while using social media platforms and engaging online. This was perceived as crucial by youth since children cannot distinguish what is an unsafe behaviour while engaging online.

An idea raised by all groups was countering fake news by strengthening multi-actor cooperation, as youth believed that each local actor has a crucial role to play in ensuring the safety of their citizens while being present in the online space. In regards to internet dependency, the participants added that the development of training modules and the provision of training to youth would enable internet users to become aware of the time they spend online and the negative sides of it, as well as the development of an online application to report cases of bullying.

Youth expected public institutions, especially the ones responsible for media and public safety, to take responsibility and regulate the use of the internet. In conclusion, youth believed that it is the responsibility of the state to ensure the safety of internet users. However, when it comes to young people's trust, international agencies and independent organisations are viewed as more capable of ensuring internet safety and a stronger data protection process for their privacy. Another point of view is that youth do not trust public institutions to protect citizens' data without abusing their power to benefit from it.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Social media and the internet have become one of the most-used forms of communication, business, and connection across the world. The Albanian youth that participated in the consultations recognised the many benefits of internet use, but also noted the drawbacks – particularly in terms of user safety and privacy. While youth emphasized a need for an independent, domestic institute to regulate the online sphere, ensure online safety, and curb the spread of misinformation, they did not seem to trust the government or public institutions with this task. Rather, they highlighted that they see NGOs and the European Union as actors who can provide solutions to many social problems, given that their work has proven to be closer to citizens' needs, and their expertise more diverse compared to public institutions. Nevertheless, the youth were aware that the European Union and other international agencies are present in Albania only to assist and not to implement regulations. Based on participant feedback, four recommendations made to create a safer internet for youth so that they can still enjoy the benefits of the internet while also being protected are set out:

• Set up a training scheme that provides ongoing training to journalists and news editors on how to identify and prevent the spread of misinformation and fake news;

• Strengthen the media literacy skills of vulnerable groups through awareness-raising sessions on fake news;

• Improve media literacy of parents, to better supervise the online activities of their teen and pre-teen children. The Ministry of Education should create a module in the school curriculum that involves students in class 3 (age 8/9) and their parents about the use of social media and the internet more broadly;

• Foster multi-actor cooperation by including the police, municipalities, and prosecutors in direct consultations with youth on how to create a safer online environment.

Digital content: Why regulate?
A view from Bosnia and Herzegovina's Youth

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Introducing regulations can form a perception that one's possibilities are limited. Placing this in the virtual context and drawing from the understanding that online platforms should allow for the free actions of various actors in the sphere who offer a diverse range of views and ideas, it is relatively simple to grasp the objection to regulations. So, why is the option still being discussed? The Internet is a global medium with no centralised control, leaving no room for states and nations to exercise oversight. Indeed, since a wide range of information is available online resulting in various types of feedback from Internet users, data credibility and validity are often questioned. Examining the content must not immediately implicate limitations per se but should instead introduce a system of checks that either approves or disapproves a specific user generated reaction that it may have caused. When discussing regulation in such circumstances, it is of utmost importance to determine whether the responsibility lies with the platform or the publisher.

Where effective regulation mechanisms are not employed, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the Internet sphere mostly relies on self-regulation of online media platforms. The lack of regulative laws combined with a high level of media illiteracy leads to a faster spread of fake news and disinformation, forming an environment suitable for malign influence. On the other hand, the European Union (EU) regulates the Internet through its law on data protection and privacy, with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) applying to the EU and the European Economic Area (EEA). Moreover, it encompasses

the transfer of personal data outside these areas for those who have previously complied with these regulations. As there is a notable difference between the Western Balkan region and the EU, it was relevant to explore perceptions and attitudes of young people in the region, primarily Bosnia and Herzegovina, and see how open they are to Internet regulation. This has been done through youth consultations and this paper presents some of the insights gathered, providing inputs for future policies in this area.

Methodology

To obtain comparable results, all partners had to employ the same methodology. The free exchange of thoughts, opinions and ideas were crucial for understanding the given matter from the perspective of young people. For this reason, youth consultations were selected as the most suitable option. They were organized as part of a two-day event in each Western Balkans country, with the first day consisting of discussions with youth, and the second of a public debate with experts in the field and relevant stakeholders. Young people aged between 18 and 25 were eligible to apply for participation in youth consultations, regardless of their personal background, city of origin or level of education. In this way, a heterogenous group of 14 young men and women was assembled, including students, young workers and activists from different parts of the country. Unlike other countries of the region, minors were not a part of the debate in Bosnia and Herzegovina due to specific legal regulations requiring approval from competent Ministries. Nevertheless, all registered participants managed to engage in an open discussion, providing diverse inputs.

The consultations were disseminated in the following way: introduction and first plenary session, separate group discussion, second plenary session, separate group discussion, third plenary session and conclusion. All group discussions were guided by the main set of questions which were followed by supporting questions to boost the discussions. Moreover, all participants were introduced to the goal of each session beforehand, thus acknowledging a transparent link between the questions and the overall intent of consultations. The key questions posed in all group sessions, enabled a discussion on the use of online platforms, the reasons behind one's online engagement (social or political), overall pros and cons of the internet and lastly, a selection of the top three pros and top three cons of using the internet. Qualitative research methods have been employed further, for the purpose of presenting, comparing and disseminating the inputs. Methodological limitations included sample errors and data validity, as more young individuals should have been included in the discussion for the derived findings to be applicable to the entire population. Nevertheless, the findings do represent a valuable contribution to future research and debate.

(Non-)Existing framework of regulation

The Internet is not a space that is beyond the reach of the rule of law, which is why the universal standard for regulating it is to prevent social conflicts and division, as well as counter the spread of extremist views. Many countries are facing the challenge of regulation and are discussing its effects on liberal democracies. Despite all its modern-day achievements and possibilities, the Internet can sometimes present a security risk. This is mostly the case when extremist and terrorist content in the online sphere remains unchallenged. Moreover, social attitudes, affected by advances in technology, make it more difficult than in other fields of law to implement a concrete solution. For that reason, countries often consider a system of self-regulation that relies on the voluntary participation of content creators, Internet providers and on hosting providers to create universal content standards and balance user activity.

The absence of a legal framework targeting Internet content regulation has left Bosnia and Herzegovina without a proper instrument to protect the rights of Internet users. Their online activities are not regulated, allowing for the dissemination of harmful content and various violations and crimes. There is a need for laws and institutional accountability to employ regulations and provide sanctions for breaches. Nevertheless, it is relevant to note that the digitalization process has made it difficult for governments to apply good practices and ensure data control. Due to the lack of a common understanding of rules, self-regulation has emerged as the best option for online responsibility but it also protects independent media. Furthermore, the protection of free speech, personal data, right to privacy, individual and minority rights and personal and national security is now a matter of international concern in order to respond within the bounds of democratic values.

The EU's approach is guided by its core values and many of the threats have been recognized by its officials for years. In fact, the EU has been actively working on preventing malign influence and hybrid threats, and it is worth noting that in 2015, the European Commission signed a Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Microsoft in 2015. The Commission has pursued several other steps to address the issue, including strengthening media literacy and organizing public consultations on shaping the EU's digital future. Moreover, in 2018, the Commission, in collaboration with the European Parliament, adopted the Action Plan against Disinformation. In the same year, the European Council addressed the responsibilities of social networks and digital platforms to guarantee transparency of actions and full protection of privacy and personal data. Overall, EU regulation of open Internet access is vested in the GDPR, adopted in 2016 and implemented in 2018, which unified the Union's regulatory approach. It not only regulates the transfer of personal data outside the EU and EEA areas, but it also gives individuals more data control. The regulation is directly binding and applicable, with individual Member States having the ability to make changes. It also serves as a model for a good state regulation mechanism, as the internet sphere mostly relies on limited social media self-regulation, which often overviews specific issues that may arise (e.g. hate speech vs freedom of speech).

Meanwhile, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the need for regulatory mechanisms is reflected in the fact that a large number of online media are anonymous and often contribute to the creation and spread of disinformation online. However, key stakeholders are unaware of such an impact, despite their general awareness of the problem of disinformation. Online media content does not require regulation under adequate jurisdiction, yet some of the responsibilities have been placed on the Communications Regulatory Agency, whose capacities do not encompass these issues. Existing laws and regulations on the matter are mostly outdated and inadequately specific. The Law on Communications mentions data protection and privacy, as well as the protection of freedom of speech and expression, but does not reflect the current situational circumstances and technological advancements.

Some effort has been detected regarding hate speech initiatives, with one of the recent campaigns being introduced in 2020 and implemented by the Press Council in BiH and OSCE. The Press Council is a self-regulatory body for print and online media that has been fighting against hate speech in the online sphere for 10 years, protecting free speech and monitoring its abuses. Moreover, the online newspaper magazine Buka has been very vocal about the issue, introducing its own campaign in 2021. Although such examples of good practices can be found, the EU still stands as a neutral and desirable actor in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to its value system and functioning democratic institutions.

The proliferation of digital technologies has impacted the quality of the content, public discourse and debate, as well as the overall level of trust in society, forcing online media to resort to sensationalism and a lack of investigative journalism for the sole purpose of increasing online clicks. The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the issues of hate speech, disinformation and discrimination, having a negative impact on youth. For this reason, the regulation of the Internet sphere is required to protect user data and fight against deviant routines while also protecting individual rights.

Youth perceptions

Government regulation of the online sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina is rarely discussed presumably due to a lack of public awareness. In addition, the country lacks adequate laws and regulations in all areas of technological advancements and in the online space. According to the findings of the youth consultations, citizens ought to rely on self-regulation mechanisms, operated by social media platforms and companies to effectively combat problems online, such as hate speech, fake news, disinformation, conspiracy theories, propaganda, radicalization, extremism, etc. The need for such mechanisms is evident considering that the internet usage rate in BiH was of 94,32% in 2019 and considering the generally high level of youth illiteracy.

Indeed, the participants have expressed concerns about the lack of evidence-based education reforms which could provide young people with more knowledge of online threats and hence make them less vulnerable to malicious influence. The internet's role in the spread of fake news and disinformation, as well as cyberbullying through discriminatory and hate speech highlighted in this context. As a result, participants have stated that they tend to avoid news portals and websites that allow public comments because the separatist narrative and strong language in these drives them away from viewing the site as a credible source. In their view, websites that allow for such comments fuel hate and conspiracy theories while ignoring their impact on society. Further impacts can be seen on social media platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat, where the false portrayal of life through the use of filters and photo editing softwares have been discussed. Distorted body images and a constant need to post online heighten unrealistic expectations, affecting mental health and self-perceptions among young people.

The consultations concluded that young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina support a self-regulation system for social media platforms and the use of fact-checking mechanisms, as well as educational reforms. It is hoped that these options will be based on EU standards, as the EU's Regulation on open Internet access grants users the right to access and distribute lawful content, as well as use and provide services of their choice via the internet. On the other hand, education reforms are perceived through the detection and reporting of harmful content, particularly hate speech and disinformation. Such content is perceived as a source of ethno-nationalism and other harmful ideologies, which continue to have an impact on everyday life.

Also, the need for state-level law regulations has been identified. However, young people have stated unequivocally that they do not trust the government, owing primarily to dominant nationalist party politics and harmful divisive rhetoric. As a result, most of them look to the EU to solve or assist them with their problems, often neglecting the fact that its actions must first address its Member States. Overall, Bosnia and Herzegovina are perceived as weak states that require an overarching instrument to set effective regulations and directives.

Rewriting the rules

Digitalisation has been a catalyst for the change in people's attitudes and worldviews, allowing for greater information exchange and the practice of free speech. Liberal democracies (including most of the EU states) have protected this right under their respective legal frameworks, by employing regulations on digital content. However, the relationship between online platforms and free speech allowed for differing perspectives on regulatory mechanisms, allowing for self-regulation to prevail. Taking into account the complexities of the matter and everything mentioned throughout the paper, the following recommendations are suggested:

1) Opening consultations for internet regulation on the institutional level, as well as advancing and adjusting the work of regulation and self-regulative institutions to new technological developments;

2) Enhancing institutional capacities and/or funding to support projects and initiatives targeting hate speech. These are mostly present among civil society organisations, international bodies and private individuals. Equal participation efforts and public campaigns by the state institutions are advocated;

3) Developing effective self-regulation mechanisms across social media platforms for flagging harmful content (i.e. fake news, disinformation, hate speech etc.), for actively reviewing reports and for preventing shares via unverified user accounts and internet bots. On that note, the alternative approach would include strengthening the capacities of watchdog and fact-checking online platforms that thoroughly investigate and point out irregularities and ethical misconduct;

4) Implementing universal education reforms at the state level to provide a unified approach to harvesting knowledge. This reform should incorporate all necessary elements to promote democratic values, critical thinking, analysis and media literacy as well as prevent hate speech by offering knowledge on how to recognize and report harmful content;

5) Fostering social cohesion and intercultural dialogue among different groups to boost discussions on common challenges and their respective solutions by putting effort into developing a unified approach to regulatory mechanisms;

6) Drafting new state laws and regulations in consultation with experts, academia, non-governmental actors and international institutions, but also ordinary citizens in order to address their needs and provide an adequate response. It is important to establish efficient state mechanisms, based on the EU example to protect user data and regulate its distribution online.

Between regulations and freedom of speech
Kosovo's youth acknowledge the importance of regulations and sanctions in digital space

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Each and every day internet usage is becoming more significant. Almost all aspects of social and cultural life are gradually transitioning into a cyber sphere. According to Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 93.2% of the households have internet access at home, and 82.5% use it on a daily basis. Considering that the Kosovar population is among the youngest in Europe - around 42% is under 25 years of age - the issue of internet usage is of high importance. In fact, it became even more relevant as the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the adolescents and the youth across many aspects of their lives in a meaningful way. Having less opportunity for socialization, including less time spent in school due to preventive measures, social media have, therefore, been seen as a tool to continue socialization in a different way.

With fewer possibilities for usual activities, online platforms have been used to spend time, attend classes and play games, therefore increasing screen time. This constellation raised some concerns more than before, such as mental health and bullying, shift from physical participation in schools to online learning, higher exposure to disinformation and privacy issues. Given that the impact of such a change is at an early stage, it is crucial to embark on a thorough conversation with a view at overcoming the existing obstacles, while simultaneously setting the basis for a proper paradigm's shift on the matter.

However, the issues abovementioned are not new. State institutions like the Ministry of Education, or organizations like UNDP in Kosovo have already tried to tackle those concerns with laws and regulations, strategies, and educational campaigns on how best to filter the information. Considering that youth is the most vulnerable category, major efforts have been focused on them. Being the most exposed to the internet usage, coupled with a lack of critical skills on how and to what extent make a balanced use of the net, such a dependency can obviously impact youngsters' well-being in a significant way.

Therefore, in order to have a better understanding of how youth feel about the usage of internet in these unusual times, Group for Legal and Political Studies (GLPS) organized consultations as a part of the "Making a Future Together: EU and the Western Balkans from the Youth Perspective." This report aims to provide a summary of the consultations held in Kosovo, with recommendations on how to set the basis for an open and free digital infrastructure.

Methodology

To obtain fully comparable results, GLPS had opted out for using the same methodology of conducting youth consultations as for every other partner from the Think for Europe Network (TEN), this project has been jointly carried out with. Youth consultations were chosen as an approach to gaining a deeper understanding on this topic, considering that quantitative and other qualitative methods would not have allowed for the freedom participants have been benefiting from via this format, while openly sharing their experiences regarding internet regulation. Moreover, this qualitative approach has provided a pool of comprehensive and rich data, which was simple to understand and use to boost future discussions.

The consultations were organised as a part of a two-day event in each country of the Western Balkans. The first day served for collecting input among the youngsters, and the second day enabled the space for an open public debate with relevant decision-makers and stakeholders reflecting on the conclusions reached the day before. The methodology of the consultations is outlined as follows:

• Introduction and first plenary session
• Separate group discussion
• Second plenary session
• Separate group discussion
• Third plenary session and conclusion

The participants easily following the connection between the raised questions and the consultations' overall goal. The first plenary session served as an introduction into the topic and to outline the expectations the moderators had from the participants themselves. Subsequently, the latter were divided into three groups and their discussion was guided by the four following questions – *How often do you use online platforms and which ones?; Do you go online to engage with others for social or political causes?; What are the pros and cons of the internet, in your view?*; and lastly, *what are the top three pros and cons of using the internet?* The second plenary session served to gather all answers and come up with a consensus as to what the three most beneficial aspects of freedom of the internet are, and to regroup their thoughts on the topic. This session was an introduction into the next round of group discussion, where

the participants were asked: *What should be done to fight the negative points detected in the plenary session without side-lining the positive ones?*; and *Who do you trust to regulate the negative sides of the internet? The government? The EU? Or, do you rather believe in self-regulation and why?*

The last plenary session assisted all participants and moderators to come up with to the conclusions to the previously mentioned questions. Moreover, the third plenary session ended the conversation, by prompting participants to share their own personal stories and to pay more attention to their usage of available online platforms and services.

The consultations held by GLPS gathered a heterogenous group of 11 young women and 1 man, in total 12 across the country. Their age ranged from 18 to 24, meaning that their education levels were also diversified – from attending high school up to the university. Such a diverse group successfully debated on the outlined questions in full cooperation. Moreover, all their inputs quite complemented each other, leading to a feeling of cohesiveness and fruitful discussion.

A Brief Overview

Since the scope for the usage of the internet is very wide some countries (i.e., Russia, Belarus, China, etc.), fearing their power's loss, imposed restrictions on the content available online. However, such a move runs the risk of turning into an authoritarian maneuver to be highly discouraged. The 2020 Freedom House report stated that internet freedoms have declined for the 10th consecutive year on a global level. The document highlighted key internet controls related to content restrictions based on political, social, or religious bases. This tendency has been detected in authoritarian regimes, as previously mentioned. However, a global concern requires a more comprehensive action for fighting political disinformation, dangerous misinformation, and propaganda.

And, whether the former aspect is circumscribed globally, cyber threats represent a concrete problem for the online community as a whole, and, thus, in need of being properly regulated and sanctioned. As far as Kosovo is concerned, lawmakers and other relevant institutions try to abide by the freedom of information and freedom from censorship as guaranteed by article 40 and 42 of the constitution. Parallel to this, the legal base and national strategies are being implemented with a view at tackling the concerns of cyber threats.

Whether cyber threats may take various forms (i.e., criminal activity related to fraud/money-laundering) cyberbullying and cyberviolence are obviously those of particular concern among the youth. As for the definitions for cyberbullying or cyberviolence is to mention: "The use of computer systems to cause, facilitate, or threaten violence against individuals that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering and may include the exploitation of the individual's circumstances, characteristics or vulnerabilities." Until now it has been recognised that forms of cyberviolence represent a kind of discrimination, violation of privacy and of human rights. On this matter the Council of Europe (CoE) approved in 2004, the Convention on Cybercrime making it the first international treaty on crimes committed via the internet and other computer networks tackling one aspect of the issue.

When it comes to Kosovo, however, there are not regulations dealing with the phenomenon tackling the problems that may affect the youth. And, whether there is a "National Strategyfor Cyber Security and Action Plan" with the former recognizing that the digital infrastructure needs to be open for everybody and provide aid so everyone can have access to internet, its action plan lacks the coverage regarding the misinformation and other related content, even though such phenomena have been referred to in several reports.

Main outcomes

Following GLPS's consultation the discussion was helpful for all the parties, and particularly have been very active and ambitious, while giving a sense of delivering honest answers. It was evident that internet is a very important aspect for their lives, therefore, the topic was of great interest for them.

During the discussions participants showed to be in favour of regulations that do not undermine the freedom of speech, but they were cautious over the importance of a secured space. They recognized the relevance of a better implementation of regulations. Enforcement of laws and sanctions, parallel to a continuous campaigning for the purpose of awareness raising, were looked at as means to protect the benefits of the internet usage, while counteracting the disadvantages.

As far as the positive sides of the internet are concerned, connectivity stands out among other reasons (i.e., gaining knowledge, doing business/entrepreneurship). For the participants the usage of internet goes hand in hand with their interaction in social media they make use of on a daily basis with a considerable amount of time (varying from 2 up to 5 hours). Participants in the group discussion acknowledged the internet as a platform for connecting them with the world in either joining common causes or by sharing statements.

Contrary to the positive aspects of the internet, participants also identified the negatives ones, such as online bullying, the harmful impact on self-esteem, the rise of hate speech and discrimination - fake news, polarization of society and addiction for the usage of the net. For overcoming these issues, awareness raising campaigning and regulations' implementation were mentioned. Finally, even though participants acknowledged the role of the government as the main actor, they preferred European Union regulations' standards, by thus targeting
the EU as a credible actor.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Following the discussions and the information outlined above, it is clear that internet usage is a necessity. It is important for the institutions to provide a secure space and to ensure that users are immune and aware of possible threats. Freedom House's latest report noted that during COVID-19 certain regimes extended the control and opened the possibility to breach the privacy of their citizens, by increasing the surveillance and gathering data as part of the response to the pandemic. Although Kosovo has not adopted such measures it is, nevertheless, important to be aware of the potential risks of such tools, while gradually undertaking a comprehensive dialogue with several actors and the interested parties for ensuring that the digital infrastructure regulations are fully implemented. Also, there is the need of investing on human resources and knowledge to guarantee a risk-free digital environment.

Youngsters are the most affected by an improper usage and/or overuse of the net with many of them connecting daily with the others through various social medias, considering that these online platforms are not solely a mean for a sound and informative communication and/or education, but also for the transmission of misinformation, breaching the privacy, and for bullying, the urgency of addressing the issue via ad hoc regulations, regulatory institutions and sanctions is required. Likewise, supporting campaigns and advocacy groups, making sure that information available online is accurate and reliable, while also providing the basis for critical thinking, is an additional valuable counter-measure.

Besides that, parental control can be also another tool Yet, its effective implementation might be difficult to achieve in the practice, considering that youngsters are part of a wider social environment they cannot be completely cut from. Nevertheless, parents and education institutions can provide the space and the necessary backup for a healthier usage of the internet among the youth. Following the consul-

tation process mentioned above and the research that followed, a list of recommendations, requiring intergovernmental action and a reformist approach on the matter, is here provided:

• Ensure that primary and secondary education pupils are properly informed that digital infrastructure can be used for education in the same manner as for communication.

• Promoting digitalisation in primary schools, by making use of online platforms and digital infrastructure for lessons and educative purposes.

• Education institutions ought to be present and visible on the main social platforms used by the youth, in order to reach them and spread information, providing relevant and educational content.

• The state institutions and specialized agencies should provide proper regulations and advocacy campaigns to the youngsters on the potential risks that could evolve from misuse of the internet especially in regard to: privacy issues, cyber security, bullying, and mental health. Up to date regulations and restrictions should be present in order to ensure a safe digital environment for the youth.

Freedom of Expression on Social Media
in Montenegro

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The Internet and online platforms have brought us good and useful things, primarily the opportunities to express ourselves, but also numerous problems that have arisen with their use. Along with this, arose the need to seek the same rights online as people seek in daily life. Freedom of speech online, although often taken for granted, can be a very controversial matter. The online social media system is typically used by the majority of people as the main tool for expressing their views, with minimal regulations on how to do so and minimal limitations on what to write and post. Yet, people's view of the internet is often so broad, that many tend to believe that they even have the right to use insulting and vulgar language and say whatever they want without any consequences. This is especially the case given that the area of internet freedoms is being actively adapted to new circumstances, while comprehensive legislation on digital policiies at national and supranational levels is still in development.

Younger people (between 15 and 30) account for the largest share of the world's social media users. Of the total population in Montenegro, 68.5% were active social media users in 2020. Over the past few years, Montenegro has been facing a visible trend of a growing presence of offensive speech in the public space, which frequently escalates into hate speech, as well as the spread of disinformation and propaganda. This is why freedom of expression should be at the top of the list of important topics for broad debate in Montenegrin society. Freedom of expression presents the vital ability to speak out without fear and without repercussions. As with other freedoms, freedom of expression is guaranteed by international legal acts and declarations (Universal Declaration of Human Rights; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Montenegro has yet to develop evidence-based policies which would better regulate the area of social media, since there is no law that specifically regulates the area of social media.

The aim of this report is to present the legal framework for freedom of expression online, both on a national and international level. This document will present the main insights and conclusions from the consultations that Institute Alternative held with the youth representatives, with the intention of understanding their attitudes related to social media.

Methodology

The project's methodology consists of two parts: desk research and field work. Prior to organising youth consultations with delegates from Montenegro and before writing the report, a thorough desk research was conducted. This led to the gathering of relevant information in terms of the existing international regulations and Montenegro's domestic legal framework in the area of freedom of expression. With such information, the researchers identified the key gaps in the existing framework of Montenegro, which also ushered the path towards better organising the youth consultation process.

The field work represented the key and essential component of this project. It consisted of the youth consultation process, with the goal of receiving feedback from the young people - the group of population that use social media the most. Institute Alternative conducted discussions with them in the form of consultations. Consultations were organised in a way that enabled all participants to explain and give opinion on how they perceive the online space, to share personal online experiences, and to provide suggestions for regulating the area of social media. The focus of the deliberation was on social media platforms where users were able to share posts, links, photos and other multimedia with other users, rather than on private messaging social media platforms, such as WhatsApp and Viber.

Consultations titled **"Young online"** gathered 15 young people, high school and university students aged from 18 – 24, from all three regions in Montenegro.[1] Firstly, all participants were divided into three working groups. Every group had a moderator who listed all the positive and negative aspects of social media mentioned by participants. Within the groups, the participants selected the three most important positive and negative sides from the list. In the "plenary room", after presenting the choices all of three groups, all participants voted for the two positive and negative aspects from the full list. In the working groups, participants also gave ideas on what should be done in order to regulate this area, and then those in the plenary chose the options that were acceptable to all of them. Finally, all of the participants voted by poll on which institution should be responsible for taking action in this field. With the aim of having concrete conclusions that are acceptable for all participants and reflecting their attitudes, conclusions were selected by voting. Conclusions from the consultations were presented on the forum **"Freedom of Expression on the Internet: A Common Challenge for Montenegro and the EU",** where experts discussed the current state of play in this area as well as the insights of the young people.

1. Central (Podgorica, Nikšić), Coastal (Budva ,Ulcinj, Bar) and Northern (Bijelo Polje, Plužine).

International and Legal Framework – What Has Been Done So Far?

The global nature of the Internet and social media, as well as the lack of centralised control, are just some of the reasons why it is difficult to regulate it. Numerous problems have arisen with the use of the Internet, such as the misuse of personal data, lack of privacy protection, hate speech, as well as disinformation, fake news, etc. With the rise of Internet use, opportunities to express oneself have grown exponentially, but so have the challenges to freedom of expression.

The right to freedom of expression is guaranteed by Article 19 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as well as by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). According to the ICCPR (article 12) and ECHR (article 10) restrictions on freedom of expression shall be only used when they are provided by law and are necessary: for respecting the rights or reputations of others and for the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals. The right to freedom of expression includes the expression of views and opinions that offend, shock or disturb (ECHR). Also, the UN Human Right Council has stated in its Resolution 12/16 that restrictions on freedom of expression should never be for discussion of Government policies and political debate, reporting on human rights, Government activities and corruption in Government, peaceful demonstrations or political activities, including for peace or democracy, and expression of opinion and dissent, religion or belief, including by people belonging to minorities or vulnerable groups *(page 4 ,(p) A/HRC/RES/12/16)*.

When it comes to the enjoyment of this right on social media, the European Commission (EC), has already started regulating this area. In 2018, EC published its "Code of Practice on Disinformation" which is the first set of worldwide standards to tackle international disinformation. It advocated greater collaboration between countries, companies, academic community and other stakeholders. This Code is also signed by Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and Twitter. Alongside the Code, the Commission established the European Digital Media Observatory, a hub that brings together academics, fact-checkers and other stakeholders to work with media outlets and media literacy experts to support policymakers in tackling disinformation.

Aside from the EC, EU member states have begun steps towards further regulation of content on social media platforms, particularly Germany and France whose focus was combatting hate speech. For example, in January 2018, the German Government passed the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) which stipulates that social media companies must remove "obviously illegal" hate speech and other posts within 24h of receiving a notification, or face a €50m fine. In France judges are able to order the removal of content deemed to be hate speech.

In Montenegro, there is no law that regulates social media or similar platforms, but there is an international legal framework that is binding. The Law on Media, whose implementation began in August 2020, is the only law that partially regulates freedom of expression on the Internet. This Law regulated Internet publications for the first time and required Montenegrin media portals to take action on comments with obviously illegal content. According to this Law, portals are obliged to remove comments below their posts on the portal, but not on their social media posts, even though portals mainly share their content through these platforms. Although the new Law has taken step forward in terms of filtering comments on online media portals, it is difficult to ignore the fact that posts published by online media on their social media channels are usually followed by offensive comments.

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Even though there is no law that regulates social media, several users of social media in Montenegro have already experienced sanctions by Montenegrin courts for publishing content on their personal social media profiles. For instance, in early 2020, there were several cases of journalists being arrested, as well as citizens creating and disseminating fake news, which, according to the Ombudsman, "was a misunderstood authorisation of the state in the control of the freedom of speech" and "disputable, to say the least, from the aspect of the application of convention standards". In these cases, citizens were prosecuted on the basis of the Criminal Code (criminal offence under Art. 398[2] criminalise the spread of "fake" news that has caused panic or violated public order or disturbed the operation of public bodies) or the Law on Public Order and Peace. This is a concerning trend as not only do these and other similar cases constitute violations of the right to freedom of expression, but also because the Art. 398 itself is fundamentally incompatible with international standards protecting the right to freedom of expression. Contrary to international standards and Montenegro's obligations to respect international law, this provision represents a repressive weapon in the hands of authorities to suppress freedom of expression.

The underlying issue remains that Montenegro lacks a strategic framework, institutional coordination and effective measures to combat disinformation. This is confirmed by the media literacy index that measures the potential for resilience to 'post-truth', 'fake-news' and their consequences. According to the latest report, Montenegro was ranked 32nd out of 35 European countries, next to all Western Balkan countries, which were at the bottom of the list. In order to improve its position on this list, competent Montenegrin institutions should broaden their scope and get involved in improving the strategic framework and stand in defence of facts, accurate information, and public interest journalism.

From the Young People's Perspective

During the consultations with young people, various perspectives and views on issues related to social media and rights on the Internet were highlighted. Young people have recognised both sides of this topic: the importance of freedom of speech and the breadth and pluralism that networks provide, on the one hand, but also the dangers of cyber violence, hate speech and the spread of misinformation, on the other hand, especially having in mind that Montenegro lacks systematic education in the digital sphere and on media literacy.

The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the increasing use of social networks. Young people usually use social media on a daily basis, for several hours on average, but they used social media more during the pandemic than in normal circumstances. As a result of social media, they are now informed about a wide range of humanitarian and civic activities. Some of them also use social media for political purposes, primarily to follow political parties and their activities.

The good side of social media platforms is that they enable the fast flow and availability of information and communication with people from all over the world. Social media is beneficial and useful because it provides entertainment, allowing people to create and post interesting and humorous content, as well as share and comment on it with others. Thanks to social media, small businesses, as well as humanitarian and similar actions, are more accessible to a larger number of people.

On the other hand, it is problematic that social media affects the human psyche. Social media creates unrealistic beauty standards mainly through the influence of famous people and the usage of filters. Social media is addictive both physically and psychologically. Additionally, social networks are places where untruths, fake news, disinformation etc. spread quickly and easily.

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2. In January 2020, Human Rights Action (HRA) submitted the Initiative for Constitutional Review of the criminal offence of "Causing Panic and Disorder".

When asked how the area of social media in institutional manner should be regulated, young people suggested the formation of an independent expert body at the EU level, arguing that self-regulation by social media is insufficient. Social media are run and maintained by private companies and their primary motive is to generate profit rather than to respect human rights. This body should be composed of lawyers and IT experts and should have its own bodies and agencies in each of the countries. There was a debate over whether this kind of regulation should be delegated to the states. However, in the end, the argument that state in that case could abuse these mechanisms prevailed.

Way forward

Developing and implementing appropriate policies to address the challenges posed by social networks has become a topic of transnational importance. Besides this, states should find a way for citizens to use social media platforms safely.

• Governments should open up a broad discussion on the topic of regulating social media platforms with the aim of ensuring freedom of public expression on the Internet, but also to ensure that this right does not violate the rights of others.

• Social media companies should reconsider how to regulate the content of their platforms through more stringent rules in order to stop the spread of fake news and disinformation.

• Online media must take concrete action to improve comment moderation systems not only on their websites but also on social networks, thus limiting the dissemination of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda in reader comments.

• Montenegro should create a strategy for dealing with the amount of misinformation that citizens are exposed to on social media, as well as better managing digital content.

• Montenegro should adjust its education system in order to include media and digital literacy so that young people can learn how to behave in the digital sphere.

Can You Hear Us from the Screen?

The Youth from North Macedonian for Safe Internet Space

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The internet sphere has become an increasingly regulated space. Research by the OECD reveals that regulators have applied different approaches: industry standards, co-regulatory agreements between industry and the government, and, mostly protecting personal data and consumers, and adopting state laws. Moreover, generally applicable laws that address privacy, security and consumer protection in the traditional economy apply to the digital economy as well. Yet, addressing the challenges that online platforms have brought to today's society has become a major concern for regulators.

Online platforms play a major role in facilitating internet interactions. These intermediaries host the majority of the communication and transactions between individuals, businesses, and government institutions. They became the gate keepers of the internet. These platforms have significant market power, take different forms, and serve different purposes, and could emerge promptly with the number of users and businesses engaged significantly increasing in a short period of time. Despite such power, determining the right regulatory approach to these platforms is difficult due to a lack of consensus on how to define an online platform, as well as the dilemma of whether these online platforms should self-regulate or be kept liableunder strict laws. The lack of consensus and lack of committed multilateral collaboration on creating new lews and enforcing existing ones adds to the overall difficulty of addressing the challenges that these global platforms create.

In the midst of global uncertainty regarding this issue, the European Union (EU) has been leading the way in providing solutions to the challenges these platforms bring. In 2015, the European Commission (EC) presented its position on how to regulate online platforms and support their development in the EU. This plan aims to create a level playing field, ensure responsible behaviour of online platforms to protect EU values, foster trust, transparency and ensure fairness on online platforms, while fostering a data-driven economy through open and non-discriminatory markets.

North Macedonia is expected to align its laws with the EU *acquis* and policies currently being developed. The policy development at the EU level will directly influence the citizens and businesses of the country. As a candidate country to the EU, neither the youth nor the Government have a direct say in the development of the regulatory framework in the EU. Even on the national level, the youth in North Macedonia have limited influence in the policy development process. A majority of the youth, 58%, believe they have no influence over the work of the government, while youth organisations are rarely consulted in the development of youth policies. Therefore, the youth from the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia, should be given space to share their views on how they see the internet fitting into their lives, and have their say on the way the online platforms' regulatory environment should develop in order to overcome the challenges and exploit the benefits that the online platforms bring to them and society. By presenting the main insights and conclusions from the youth consultations event organised in North Macedonia, we contribute to a better understanding of our country's views on our youth and to the design of future policies in this area.

Methodology

The youth consultation events are a form of citizen consultations designed to understand young citizens' perceptions of societal problems and their views on possible solutions to these problems. In this exercise, we aimed to understand the participants' personal experiences on the internet, both positive and negative, and their opinions on what policy actions should be taken and which stakeholders should be implementing these actions to improve the users' experience.[3]

The citizen consultation process had two main phases. In each phase, participants deliberated in four groups and then in a plenary session. In the first round, the groups discussed and agreed on what they considered to be the positive and negative aspects of the internet. Group rapporteurs reflected on the group positions and all participants voted at the plenary. Following the same process in the second phase, participants identified policy actions that would maximise the positive experience and tackled the negatives aspects.

In such a way, we allowed for more concentrated discussion between participants in the group sessions and later between the groups. The facilitator systematised the arguments and proposals from the groups and put them to vote. In the first plenary, participants voted on the positive and negative aspects, and in the second on policy priorities and responsible actors.

For this brief, it was estimated that it would be highly relevant to present the voting results from the plenaries, as well as the key arguments raised during the group discussions. In this way, we outline the key arguments and concerns which were not discussed at the plenary and try to capture the reasoning behind the voting.

3. Same events were held in all Western Balkan countries. The findings from the discussions will be published in a regional Discussion Paper that were presented to relevant stakeholders in Brussels on May the 5th.
https://epc.eu/en/Publications/Balkan-youth-speaks-up-about-digital-issues-Lessons-for-the-Conferenc~3ea328

The event was organised online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participation at this event was open to all citizens of North Macedonia aged between 16 and 24 years of age, subject to prior registration. The registration survey was advertised on Facebook and shared on youth NGOs' emailing lists and social media accounts.

In total, 25 young people participated in the event. The working languages at the event were Macedonian and Albanian.[2]

State-of-play in regulating online platforms in the EU and in North Macedonia

The consultation process on online platforms in the EU showed divergent concerns among different stakeholders. Businesses and business associations focused on competition issues, copyright protection, search rankings and liability for user generated content, while associations of consumers and individual citizens were concerned with data protection and enforcement of consumer rights, and CSOs were mostly concerned with issues related to privacy, anonymity, and censorship. All parties were concerned with criminal and fraudulent online activities and the difficulty of enforcing existing legislation. The platform's multisided nature and the blurry line between a user and a consumer, make platforms difficult to fit with existing EU regulations.

In its communication, the European Commission proposed a regulatory framework for four different approaches to online platforms:

• The first approach is harmonisation and applying the same rules throughout the EU. The flagship initiative with this approach is the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

• The second approach is based on applying existing rules in the EU to online platforms is specific areas such as competition, consumer protection, protection of personal data and single market freedoms.

• The third is a problem-driven approach, where the existing regulatory framework is examined in line with better regulation principles to address clearly identified problems that arise on online platforms. Under this approach, specific directives address IP and copyright infringement, terrorist content, market surveillance and compliance of products that are applicable to online platforms, video-sharing platforms. These specific directives are requested to restrict access to harmful content to minors and both actors take action to advance users' media literacy.

• Lastly, a self-regulatory or co-regulatory approach where industry players commit to taking action to ensure application of legal requirements and appropriate monitoring mechanisms are in place. The Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online, monitored annually by the Commission, The Code of Practice on Disinformation and the platforms' road maps, and the Recommendation on measures to effectively tackle illegal content online are notable examples in this regard. Yet, some member states consider that a co-regulating approach with enforcement mechanisms, sanctions and redress mechanisms should be put in place.

In North Macedonia, unlike the EU, there is a lack of a comprehensive approach to dealing with issues regarding online platforms. Some issues related to online platforms are regulated, but there is no sys-

2. The participants were split into two Macedonian speaking groups and two Albanian speaking groups. At the plenary, the working language was Macedonian with the Albanian-speaking facilitators translating into Macedonian.

temic connection and update of existing laws in compliance with the developments in the EU. Because the National Programme for Adoption of the EU Acquis of North Macedonia has not been made publicly available since 2017, there is no comprehensive evidence on where the country stands on transposing the EU acquis relevant for online platforms.

North Macedonia has not adopted a strategic document that addresses the problems that arise from the online platforms. The national short term Internet Communications Technologies (ICT) Strategy is outdated and did not plan for specific actions to address the issues that arise on online platforms. The Government's plan to fight against disinformation foresees active cooperation with social media platforms and the country's involvement in the platforms' programs fighting disinformation. The Agency for Audio and Audio-visual Media Services take actions only against traditional media. The online media is self-regulated by the Council of Media Ethics. The Council took action on several grounds, but it is insignificant in comparison to what it will take to address all the existing cases of code violation.

The regulatory environment for internet platforms is a complex one. While the EU sets itself as the global champion in regulating these platforms, North Macedonia has no comprehensive approach to address the challenges these platforms have brought to today's society. Yet, these challenges need to be considered and addressed by each government in order to provide safe online spaces for its citizens.

Main insights and conclusions from the discussions

Based on the substantial input gathered at the youth consultation event, the following section presents views on the positive and negative aspects of the internet. The main policy recommendations aimed at specific stakeholders are listed below.

Opportunities and challenges
The internet space allows citizens to benefit in several ways, in particular:

• Access to education, particularly during the pandemic. Formal and non-formal education through courses from renowned universities and professional courses for lifelong learning were other advantages discussed in the groups.

• The free and fast access to news and videos, and other information pieces helps young people to stay informed about current events and problems in the world.

• The easier communication with family and friends, as well as people from around the world, both in times of crisis (pandemics, pollution) and in times of peace, was mentioned in half of the groups.

• Business opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and eased job hunt for young people.

• Creating communities and interacting with peers and likeminded individuals in which they can be creative and practice free speech.

On the negative sides of the internet, the participants have identified:

• Internet addiction and mental health issues. In one group, participants said that it makes them estranged and antisocial, while another reported misleading perceptions and false opinions about young peoples' lives.

• Users' data safety on the platforms, possible predators and paedophiles' attacks. In the groups, the overall weak personal data protection on the internet, and the existing risks of misuse and violation of personal data and invasion of privacy, identity theft, and plagiarism of academic research were discussed.

• The spread of hate speech and cyber bullying. In two of the groups, this problem was illustrated with an example of backlash against online organized protests, which were met with hate speech towards the organisers.

• Through selection and restrictions over opinions and posts, as well as sharing fake news regarding world politics online, political propaganda is enabled, which could create double standards both in the West and East. A group noted the surge of political propaganda on social media targeting youth.

Solutions

Based on the discussions and voting at this event, the participants consider that the internet should be a regulated space in order to protect the users and society. The state should adopt legislation that will regulate the media space, including the profession of journalism, online news portals and social media, online hate speech and cyberbullying. One group suggested that the citizens' protection should be addressed with an International Convention on protecting citizens on social media. There is a need to better protect personal and institutional privacy.

While stricter rules were cited as the most relevant action, the participants consider that there is a need to take specific actions to combat the negative sides of the internet. The internet platforms should apply stricter rules and procedures to verify sources, block harmful posts and respect age limits. Moreover, they should better address the reports of users. In a group discussion, participants were sceptical about the self-regulation approach, as they believed the status quo benefits political elites.

Moreover, the Government and the Ministry of Internal Affairs should have more control and power, but also an efficient and quick reaction to find and sanction perpetrators and people that endanger the rights of others. In this regard, the participants have had concerns over government overstepping and lack of action. On the former, they fear censorship and a violation of free speech under the guise of combatting fake news are the main concerns. Regarding the latter, the insignificant number of cases in which the government took action to combat fake news, as well as the lack of political will to implement existing laws or even create and adopt new ones, raises concerns about trust in the institutions to undertake serious action to address the issues.

It was also discussed that online news portals should be verified and monitored to limit the spread of fake news. A group proposed an online news portal registry in order to have better monitoring.

Participants also discussed the users' own responsibility. The internet users should be more cautious when interacting with others and have a proactive role on social media. They should actively use the tools at disposal like reporting harmful posts and blocking content and respect the online platforms' terms. Moreover, users should be aware of the threats in the interaction with other people.

The role of the EU also emerged in the group discussions, but with a minor role in addressing the negative aspects of the internet. In the fight against fake news, cooperation with EU institutions and their representatives in North Macedonia would allow the Macedonian authorities to learn from the best practices in the EU. Moreover, more EU funds should be allocated for the media, to combat fake news and propaganda.

Mental health issues that arise from social media use should be addressed with appropriate policy actions. In a group, participants consider that adequate educational programs should be implemented, led by the Ministry of education. In another, events that would stimulate public discussion on this topic were suggested as a solution, as well as creative projects to engage young people offline.

Lastly, participants consider that educational policies should also be implemented. Educational programs should address the lack of understanding of the negative potential of social media. Such programs should target youngsters, parents as well as teachers. It was argued that the European Union, civil society organisations, the media and educational institutions should conduct more training to strengthen their capacities in digital and media literacy.

Conclusions

The increased use of online platforms has brought advantages as well as challenges for today's society. Drawing on the inputs from this event, the youth in North Macedonia understand the educational, communication and business benefits the internet platforms have brought to them and to society in general. On the other hand, they recognise the most pressing issues, like protection of personal data, plagiarism, hate speech and cyber bullying, and the spread of political propaganda online, need to be addressed through policy action.

Addressing these issues is a challenge in itself. While the EU has positioned itself as a global champion in this regard, North Macedonia lags behind in reviewing existing regulations to fit into the digital age and co-operating with online platforms to best address the challenges of the internet. Based on our discussions, the youth are not very aware of regulations already in place, nor of the need to align national laws with relevant EU legislation. This suggests that young people may not be aware of the policy developments at a national and EU level.

Nonetheless, the youth have propositions on how each stakeholder could contribute to making the internet a better space. They consider that a multi-layered approach and complementary policies are required to address the potential harm that widespread internet use has brought to society. The youth in North Macedonia favour strict laws and better regulations. To respond to online misconduct, Government oversight on the internet and prompt action are supported, but there should be checks and balances in place to limit the possibility of government abuse of power. Existing mechanisms like users reporting content and or platform content moderation are complementary actions that could make online platforms a more secure and welcoming place. Users and relevant stakeholders require supporting educational policies and training. Mental health issues that could arise from excessive use of the internet, need to be addressed with specific policy actions.

Regulating Interned in a Youth-friendly manner
a Standpoint from Serbia

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Throughout the past decade, the online sphere has turned into an essential part of people's daily lives. As a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic, much of our lives have been shifted online. From education, business, to social life and networking – people have become overly reliant on various social media platforms to socialise and normalise their day-to-day lives. With this increased reliance and screen time, many questions have arisen: How will this affect mental health? When will the disinformation stop? How will this transition impact the education process, social life, privacy and security? While there are no definite answers to these questions because we are still in the midst of these unprecedented times, it is highly important that conversations begin.

Many national and international stakeholders have tried to tackle these questions by implementing various strategies, laws and regulations, but also by working on building the media literacy of internet users, so that they can navigate the online world and filter information better. Moreover, most of their efforts have focused on the youth, as they are the vast majority of internet users and are considered more vulnerable than other groups. While being the most media literate generation yet, the youth (aged between 15 and 30), are confronted with several issues that have impacted their wellbeing and livelihood. Having so much of their lives dependent on the use of the internet, research has shown that the youth have swiftly adapted to the emergence of new sources and new media, but many still lack critical skills to assess the factors that make up internet freedom. Therefore, in order to understand how a heterogeneous group of young people feel about internet freedoms in present times, the European Policy Centre (CEP) organised youth consultations as a part of the "Making a Future Together: EU and the Western Balkans from the Youth Perspective."

This report aims to provide key insights from the consultations held in Serbia, while shedding light on possible policy approaches and recommendations on how to contribute to getting rid of the internet of its negatives so it becomes really free.

Methodology

In order to obtain fully comparable results, the Think for Europe Network (TEN) partners have jointly developed a unique methodology for conducting youth consultations, which they have applied in the same manner. Youth consultations were chosen as a method of gaining a deeper understanding of the key concerns of youth regarding the digital space, particularly as it was estimated that quantitative and other qualitative approaches would not have allowed participants the freedom to openly share their experiences with the regulation of the internet in the way that consultations did. Moreover, this qualitative approach provided a pool of comprehensive and rich data which was simple to understand and used to boost future discussions.

The consultations held by the European Policy Centre gathered a heterogeneous group of 29 young men and women from all around the country. Their age ranged from 16 to 25, meaning that their education levels were also diversified – from attending high school to being involved in a PhD programme. Such a diverse group successfully debated the outlined questions with ease and full cooperation. Moreover, all of their inputs were quite complementary to one another, providing a feeling of cohesiveness and fruitful discussion.

The consultations were organised as part of a two-day event in each country of the Western Balkans, where the first day served for collecting input from the youth, and the second for an open, public debate with decision-makers and relevant stakeholders regarding the conclusions drawn the day before. The methodology of the consultations is outlined as follows:

• Introduction and first plenary session
• Separate group discussion
• Second plenary session
• Separate group discussion
• Third plenary session and conclusion

This structured discussion allowed for logical progression of thoughts and ideas, where the participants could easily see the connection between the questions and the overall goal of the consultations. The first plenary session served as an introduction to the topic and to outline the expectations the moderators had of the participants. Subsequently, participants were separated into three groups where their discussion was guided by the four following questions: How often do you use online platforms and which ones? Do you go online to engage with others for social or political causes? What are the pros and cons of the internet, in the eyes of the participants? and lastly, what are the top three pros and cons of using the internet?

The second plenary session served to compile all of the answers and come to a consensus on the three most beneficial aspects of internet freedom, as well as to regroup their thoughts regarding the topic. This second plenary was an introduction to the next round of group discussion where the participants were asked: What should be done to fight the two negative aspects of internet use that were chosen in the plenary without throwing out the good points? and who do you trust to regulate the negative sides of the internet? the government? the EU? or do they instead believe in self-regulation, and if so, why?

The last plenary assisted all participants and moderators to come to conclusions on the previously mentioned questions. Moreover, the third plenary session concluded the conversation by prompting participants to share their own personal stories and to pay more attention to their use of available online platforms and services.

Diving into the concept of internet freedom

By definition, internet freedom is an umbrella term that encompasses digital rights, freedom of information, the right to internet access and freedom from censorship. Considering the essential value of freedom of expression on the internet, it was even declared a basic human right by the United Nations Human Rights Court in 2012. This court decision stated that everyone has a right to information and to freedom of opinion on any media they choose. However, when looking internationally, global internet freedom declined for the ninth consecutive year in 2019, according to Freedom House, meaning that this right is being violated internationally. The rise of misinformation, censorship, restrictions on content and privacy breaches have been seen as a hurdle towards a vibrant society with a strong rule of law. Therefore, this issue has become one of the key issues in global debates, and thus for the EU and the Western Balkans.

Other than the UN, the European Union has also begun to tackle this issue in its own manner. By producing several strategies and pulling competences from several institutions, they have become a guiding light for others in the fight for internet freedom. With a special focus on youth, the EU has, for example, created a Strategy for a Better Internet for Children in 2012. This initiative was signed by many international technology and civil society organisations with the aim of improving the online environment for children and youth, by undertaking user empowerment, enhanced collaboration and awareness-raising on all levels.

When analysing the Republic of Serbia, the regulatory framework has not been very extensive and all-encompassing. There are a few laws that regulate access to information and freedom of expression, but there are not any specific laws or clauses that regulate freedoms online. On the other hand, syndicates such as the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) have been pioneers in including regulations on expression online in their statutes and frameworks. Statistics show that the majority (76.5%) of Serbian youth uses the internet to get informed about ongoing political and social processes, more specifically through online portals and social media. Seeing that disinformation on Twitte spreads three times faster than fact-checked information, Serbian youth are more vulnerable to falling victim to fake news. Even though they have one of the highest rates of media literacy within the region, these numbers are still quite low when compared to their peers in Western Europe, making them a more vulnerable group.

Main outcomes

When looking at the outcomes and the consultations organised by CEP, it can be said that they went rather smoothly, with a heterogeneous group providing fairly homogenous answers. More specifically, participants agreed that the most beneficial aspects of internet use are the abundance of information present, the ability to connect with others and the possibility to support causes they are passionate about. On the other hand, the youth were unanimous in their voting for the three most negative aspects of the internet. Disinformation and fake news were the most prominent answers, while the severe lack of privacy and detrimental effects on mental health closely followed.

Participants in the three plenaries and two big group discussions concluded that the online space should be regulated on several levels. This means that, while the state should be in charge of regulations by, for example, enforcing stronger protections for freedom of speech online and creating an independent regulatory body to closely monitor the online sphere, individuals and supranational entities should be in charge as well. Individuals should educate themselves and be aware of the existence and vast prevalence of misinformation. Another key takeaway was that individuals bear responsibility as well for tackling this issue and for calling out disinformation when they see it. Moreover, individuals should be working towards achieving a greater level of media literacy through both formal and informal means, that is, both via formal education in school and personal development via informal education. Having in mind the importance of having a state that would regulate online space in a youth-friendly manner, while simultaneously prioritising encouraging individuals to better address the disinformation they spot, more needs to be done in order to ensure the youth better filter the information they come across in the online sphere.

Participants concluded that this is where state and non-state actors could also play a role by empowering people and increasing their human capital through an education reform and the creation of spaces where media literacy could be worked on. Moreover, it was concluded that having a proper regulatory framework, supplemented by strong efforts of civil society in educating the youth and the rest of the population, the youth would tend to fall less into traps with disinformation and dealing with other negative aspects would be a lot easier. Civil society organisations would play the role of "watch dogs" in ensuring that all stakeholders are working towards a safer, better informed and more comprehensive online space. Moreover, as civil society organisations are able to call for fair and equal treatment of everyone and good implementation of well thought out policies, this would ensure that the horizontal approach to the discussed problems would be properly implemented by every engaged stakeholder.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

In more ways than one, our lives have changed and have required some sort of adaptation. The vast expansion of the use of the internet has brought many positives, such as the ability to continue working during these extraordinary times, to connect with loved ones and to engage in various sorts of activism. However, there has been an extreme increase in disinformation, fake news, breaches of privacy and hate speech, alongside deteriorating mental health. The youth have been exposed to these problems and have developed an understanding of what is needed to resolve such issues.

As a result of held consultations, Serbian youth suggested a joint approach to tackling these negative aspects of the internet. This means that, through a horizontal approach, policymakers, civil society actors, and citizens themselves can come together and work on strengthening regulations and media literacy of not just the youth, but the whole population. The youth who participated in the consultations were eager and willing to continue discussing these issues with decision-makers, indicating that they should be given a platform to do so and advocate for changes they believe are critical to protecting youth online from disinformation and fake news. The fact that the EU is organising a Conference on the
Future of Europe is a good opportunity to explore how to effectively engage the youth on topics which are of utmost importance to them.

Internet, Freedom of Expression and Democracy in Europe
a Look from Italy

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It is well known that the internet has given people unprecedented access to information and simultaneously boosted individual freedom of expression. More recently, the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic have extended the power of the internet, making it a fundamental tool not only for people to access work and education but for the effective functioning of democracies. On the negative side, the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories is a clear example of the risks that the internet has exacerbated. Many social media companies are trying to cope with the issue by introducing more stringent rules. It is a moot point, however whether private companies operating on the internet should be able to make unilateral decisions that might have serious repercussions on freedom of speech and freedom of expression. On the other hand, in many countries, the internet is a viable alternative to the lack of a free media. According to the Reporters without Borders Index, if in Italy and in most EU countries the freedom of the press and media has reached an acceptable level, though with room for improvement, in the Western Balkans media independence must be strengthened.

As part of the "Making a Future Together: EU and the Western Balkans from a Youth Perspective" project, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) has organized two online events to openly discuss the role of governments and public institutions in regulating the internet. The aim of the exercise was to analyse the impact of the internet and of freedom of expression on the functioning of democracy in Italy, the European Union and the neighbouring Western Balkans. Specifically, the purpose of the two events was to allow youngsters

to express their views, while also engaging the experts' community and citizens at large in an open debate about the impact the internet is having on their lives. The first event, titled "Internet and Freedom of Expression", was a closed-door dialogue among 26 students between 16 and 24 years old to discuss the positive and negative impacts the internet is having on their lives and how it would be possible to regulate it and transform its negative externalities into positive ones. The second event was a webinar with three high-level experts providing food for thoughts on the internet and on the democratic trends in Italy, the EU and the Western Balkans. Five students who took part in the Youth Dialogue also participated in the webinar, acting as discussants and asking questions about the internet, its regulation and its impact on the future of democracy. The purpose of this report is to provide insights from the discussion in the form of policy recommendations for the design of future national and European agendas in this area.

Methodology

The regulation of the internet is one of today's most important challenges, particularly in terms of connecting the younger generation with professionals. The problem with such regulation is directly connected to freedom of speech and the free circulation of ideas and information, which are basic elements of any functioning democracy. Accordingly, the events organized by the project aimed to create a dialogue both among students and between them and the experts in order to allow a free exchange of ideas. To respect confidentiality, the first event was a closed-door dialogue facilitated by four moderators who, at selected times, convened with smaller groups of students. The structure of the event, which alternated plenary discussions with debates in smaller groups, allowed participants to listen, actively engage with others and remain open to different perspectives. In the plenary sessions but also in the working groups, students were invited to take the floor and explain their group's or their personal points of view and to vote, via chat or by raising their hands, about the most important issues and the solutions proposed. The main concerns expressed by participants were related to a lack of regulation, which is leading to big corporations exerting more control over the use of social media. This clearly raised a number of issues that were discussed during the second event, such as a lack of privacy and a limited access to information. The second event, titled "Internet and Freedom of Expression in Europe", was a webinar where three experts were invited to provide their insights on the regulation of the internet in Italy (Germana Barba, Women in Action), the EU (Jean Pierre Darnis, Istituto Affari Internazionali) and the Western Balkans (Giorgio Comai, Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa). Selected students were invited to act as discussants, asking questions and opening up a broader debate. The structure of the event enabled students who wanted to learn from experts first-hand to do so while also engaging the experts in an in-depth analysis of the issues discussed.

Diving into the Problematique

Since the beginning of 2021, various events, such as the Twitter ban and the indefinite Facebook suspension of Donald Trump, marked a significant shift in public awareness of the role of digital giants in people's lives. These events have forced the EU and individual European governments to question the ways digital platforms are controlled and whether the need to protect democracy should lead to more and better regulation of the internet. From being considered a positive tool to provide non-mediated information to the general public, benefiting democracy, and giving voice to underrepresented groups in the name of freedom of expression, the internet and social media have often been at the centre of controversies concerning the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories. Ultimately, the lack of government regulations has resulted in private companies acting to limit the diffusion of fake news, with the risk of undermining freedom of expression.

Interfering with democracy was probably not part of the Big Techs' initial business plans. On the contrary, it was hoped that the unprecedented freedom of information and expression promoted by social media and the internet would have re-launched democracy. Yet the diffusion of fake news on the one hand, and the role of private companies on the other is forcing the EU and the world to question how to control digital platforms to protect democracy. In December 2020, the European Commission presented its regulatory proposal through the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act. The drafts include measures to protect users from illegal content and target online advertising, notably stricter obligations for so-called platforms of large dimensions, such as disclosing the main parameters of the algorithms used to offer content and offering users an option not based on profiling. The EU digital package is ambitious and necessary considering that, according to the data collected during the IAI events, young people spend around six to eight hours per day on online platforms.

According to the students taking part in the closed-door dialogue (event 1), the internet has provided them with free and speedy access to information. It has boosted their freedom of expression but also improved their access to education, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the internet and online platforms have contributed to making politicians and institutions more accessible to the man on the street. This has been a benefit to democracy at large. Yet the lack of any form of mediation has also contributed to the rise of verbal violence and the diffusion of fake news. Similarly, profiling practices are reducing people's access to information. The internet has also boosted a crisis of competence, allowing everyone to express opinions even when they do not have relevant knowledge.

Participants in both events highlighted that there is a dilemma between the need to control information and the desire for the freedom to access information. They also confirmed their belief that it is not good for governments to control information and social media. At the same time, they asserted that there is a need for education and rules to punish inappropriate or criminal behavior on the internet. This, however, should not be done by private companies. For this reason, it was concluded that there is a need for national governments and the EU to regulate the internet, involving also private companies in the process.

According to experts contributing to the Webinar (Event 2), despite some of the risks, the benefits of a free internet remain nevertheless high. In many countries where the media are not free, the internet is of fundamental importance for providing information, increasing education and civic participation in political life. Asked by students how the positive aspects of the internet should be safeguarded, experts replied that the EU, through for instance the Digital Act, is attempting to create a safer and more open digital space, with European values at its centre. Yet the experts warn that even this Act has its limitations, as it is up to each member state and other European countries to sanction behaviours that infringe the law, even if they take place online. Sanctions are essential to discourage any unlawful behaviour. However, according to the experts, this should be the responsibility of governments and not private companies. Private companies operating in the digital markets, however, have an important role in signalling any issue to competent authorities.

Conclusion

The internet has provided an unprecedented volume of resources for information and knowledge that opens up new opportunities for expression and citizen participation in democracy at large. At the same time, however, the internet and the diffusion of fake news are challenging democracies and many social media companies are now trying to introduce more stringent rules. Legal and regulatory trends, especially if implemented by private companies and not by elected governments, might constrain online freedom of expression. In such a complex context, the IAI events proved to be stimulating, with students, experts and wider participants actively engaged in the discussions, providing different points of view and political recommendations. In particular, participants expressed the following recommendations:

beyond the European Digital Package, EU member states and European governments should foster their national regulations, in coordination with the EU, to punish unfair or unlawful behaviours on the internet. National governments and the EU should cooperate closely with global media companies to explore ways of avoiding the multiply of fake news and conspiracy theories while maintaining freedom of expression and free access to information. In this respect, digital education programs for students but also for older generations should be developed and promoted both at the national and EU levels.

Overall, the discussion was insightful, and we were asked to repeat the program, particularly by students. This suggests that dialogues and the open exchange of ideas is something particularly appreciated by young people. This is certainly a positive trend. Indeed, engaging the younger generation in open dialogues reflects the objectives of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which aims to consult people on the medium to long-term future of the EU and what reforms should be made to its policies and institutions.

Internet, Freedom of Expression and Democracy in Europe
the Polish Perspective

Bronislaw Geremek Foundation Centre, Warsaw
Maia Mazurkiewicz

We are living in unprecedented times. Technologies are developing faster than humans can adjust to them. During the pandemic, online communication became even more important than it was before. We all switched to the internet to stay in touch with each other. The average European today is exposed to more information every day than our ancestors were in their entire lifetime. All this information influences our subconscious, but at the same time, we are unable to fact-check each bit or even consciously think about what we overhear every day. That is how disinformation spreads so easily.

We can see that the disinformation spreading worldwide shifts the attitudes and behaviours of people. The same applies, in particular, to the EU and the Western Balkans. The explosion of disinformation during and about the COVID-19 pandemic is an alarming example. In March 2020, people were full of fear of what would happen to their lives and their health. The world seemingly stopped, but the spreading of disinformation had found its ground. Ever since, the number of people who do not recognise the danger of the virus or oppose vaccination has increased.

In Poland, the government is still using the same propaganda techniques – ad hominem and demonizing the enemy - used by the communists prior to 1989. In current Poland, we have seen Germans, Ukrainians, the LGBT+ community, women, pro-choice activists, liberals and leftists all being de facto labelled as enemies of the government. However, such a model of public labelling is not dissimilar to what we see in the communication of the AfD in Germany, the National Rally in France or some fringe parties in the Western Balkans. They simply use the old techniques to divide society and increase polarisation. Moreover, they are succeeding.

That is why we decided to take part in the project "Making a Future Together: EU and the Balkans from a Youth Perspective". The internet needs to change, and the Geremek Foundation strongly believes that changes must be made in cooperation with citizens. Therefore, the event we organised aimed to give a voice to the younger generation in order to analyse their views on possible internet regulations. The goal was also to strengthen ties between Poland and the Western Balkans to see how views on the subject differed among young people from different backgrounds. Therefore, the first event, "Poland, Balkans, and the European Union. How disinformation is influencing European Society," was a webinar with high-level experts from all over Europe to discuss the situation in Poland, the Western Balkans, and other European countries. We focused on changing the attitudes of people and looking at how disinformation developed during the pandemic. The second day of the project was a closed-door discussion that focused on the challenges and positive impacts of daily internet use and recommendations for what European institutions should do to make the internet a safer place.

This report aims to present the main insights and conclusions from the consultations we held with the youth representatives to better understand the position of the youth in Poland and how they can influence policy actions of the EU institutions.

Methodology

The future of the internet is one of the most important challenges. By meeting with youth and experts together, we wanted to make sure that the voice of youth on that matter is heard. One of the pinpoint discussions currently among the states and within the European Union institutions is the regulation of the internet. That is directly related to freedom of speech and expression, which are fundamental to democracy. It is essential to tackle this issue with concern and awareness, especially given that Poland's government has already introduced several regulations that violate the rule of law and democracy, and is currently working on implementing the aforementioned "law on freedom of speech," clearly exploiting the crucial value of freedom of speech to manipulate and control Polish society.

The first day of the event was an open webinar, "Poland, Balkans, and the European Union. How disinformation is influencing European Society", with high-level experts from all over Europe to discuss the situation in Poland, the Western Balkans, and other European countries. The following experts were in attendance: Jasna Jelisic, PhD, Head of Western Balkans Taskforce Strategic Communication and Information Analysis, East StratCom Task Force, Agnieszka Demczuk, PhD, Head of Team for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis INoPiA WPiD UMCS in Lublin, Anna Wójcik, a journalist at OKO.press, Co-founder of The Rule of Law in Poland and Nad'a Kovalcikova, PHD, program manager and fellow at the Alliance for Securing Democracy GMF that took place on Facebook. We had a meaningful discussion about the similarities and differences in the spread of disinformation in Poland, the Western Balkans and other European countries.

The discussions focused on external and internal disinformation as one of the most significant challenges to which we must find a solution. The whole event focused on female leaders on the issue, as we also wanted to empower young women and tackle the issue of unequal distribution of female leaders

on high-level panels. The discussion was vivid, and there was a direct connection with the young participants. The second-day event, "Making a future together – social consultations before the Conference on the Future of Europe," was organized in a merit partnership with the European Commission office in Poland. The event started with an introductory speech about the Conference on the Future of Europe by Bartłomiej Balcerzyk from the European Commission. After a short discussion where he gave participants advice on how to engage in the Conference on the Future of Europe, we moved to discussions in a plenary with participants from Poland.

We managed to have a very vivid discussion about the challenges and needs of the participants. All participants were actively engaged by delivering their concerns and ideas for the future of the internet. There was a possibility to engage both by discussion and writing in the chat function. One of the participants showcased the results of a self-made pool about the Internet. In this pool, we had over 30 responses to why young people are using the internet. The event's structure allowed participants to listen, actively engage with others, and remain open to different perspectives. The goal of the organizers was to have a diverse group of participants. Participants came from all over Poland, from big cities and rural areas, giving a diverse view of the issue. Participants were invited to put all their concerns and solutions. The vote via chat or raising their hands about the most critical issues and the solutions proposed was an essential step in the whole process. This exercise aimed to create a dialogue between experts and youth. Therefore, all the facilitators were also experts on disinformation. The main concern of the participants was who should be the one that is implementing regulations. They raised the issue of whether governments could use internet regulations to introduce censorship.

Content

At the beginning of the year, the Ministry of Justice in Poland introduced a law on freedom of speech on the internet. The recent explanation behind it is to "stop big platforms [from] censur[ing] freedom of speech after Twitter and Facebook blocked accounts of President Trump." One of the main ideas behind introducing the law was to make sure that online services would not block or delete posts or accounts that are not violating Polish law. The draft bill introduces the Council on Freedom of Speech, which should consist of five members. All of them would be appointed by a 2/3 majority in the Sejm, which will basically build a censor body for the government, as the decision would not go through the opposition-controlled Senate, which is usual practice in Poland. It also introduces courts for freedomof speech. The legally binding decision of the court needs to be immediately executed. Such a bill would censor social media platforms' freedom and hand them over to the government. This would mean that the Council on Freedom of Speech would have a say on what should be taken from the social media and what should stay. Another grain of salt in this topic is that in 2019, the same ministry used to have a troll farm working to discredit independent judges. That law hugely affected the group discussion, as they all said that regulations are necessary, but they strongly opposed national government regulations.

Another burning issue raised was hate speech. Participants brought an example of Paweł Adamowicz, the Mayor of Gdańsk, who in January 2019 was stabbed to death on the stage of a charity event. Before his murder, Adamowicz had been the subject of hate speech and was perceived as an enemy of the government. In 2018, a year before his murder, Polish National TV mentioned him about 1773 times, which is about five times per day. Most of this material was negative and built on hate speech. That is not the only instance of the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) using hate speech and disinformation. They have already used it in 2015 to win elections. They realised that portraying the unknown as the enemy is yet another way of spreading fear and disinformation. If people don't know about a certain issue, they are more afraid of it. Since 2015 marked the year of the refugee crisis in Europe, PiS used it in their com-

munication by spreading disinformation and fear about this topic. Those examples show how fearmongering and disinformation can affect the results of elections and change the attitudes of people.

Disinformation is not a new topic, and it was raised as one of the two main challenges of the internet. European institutions have been trying to deal with this issue since 2015. The Strategic Communications division and its Task Forces "contribute to effective and fact-based communication, countering disinformation, narrative-positioning and strengthening the overall media environment and civil society in their corresponding regions". The East StratCom Task Force that deals with ongoing Russian disinformation campaigns was set up in March 2015. These initiatives, however, came a little late when one considers that Russia started its disinformation campaigns in 2013, prior to the start of the Ukraine war.

A significant amount of time and effort was put into regulating digital platforms. This had begun in advance of the 2019 European Parliament elections. The Commission recently adopted a Digital Services Act (DSA) proposal that, when combined with the Digital Markets Act, should form a shield to protect democracy in Europe and prevent external influence during elections. In December 2020, the European Commission introduced the European Democracy Action Plan to empower citizens and build more resilient democracies across the EU. Currently, it is under consultation. As much as all these actions are a step in the right direction, they put insufficient focus on authentic communication with citizens. As we observed during our event, youth, but also other age groups, are afraid that regulating the internet will lead to censorship and restrictions on freedom of speech. The Polish government's introduction of a "law on freedom of speech" as a means of de facto trying to censor opposition is an alarming example.

With this unfavourable context in mind, participants at the second day of our event proposed launching a large debate on freedom of speech by linking it to the conference on the Future of Europe. This will allow citizens to have a greater say. Most of the regulations on that topic are very out of date and do not touch on new means of communication, such as social media. They also do not devote enough attention to new types of threats, such as online hate speech and disinformation. Youth claim that they are not being heard and that politicians use the definition of freedom of speech in a manipulative way.

All of the experts at the first day's event agreed that regulations of platforms are crucial. When it comes to these policies, it is necessary to consider not only the censorship but also the algorithms that platforms use. These algorithms trap people in echo chambers that lead to further polarisation of societies. Furthermore, young participants in the events were very much aware of this issue. The Polarisation of Society indicator, developed in cooperation with the Digital Society Project, shows that all European nations have become more polarised in the 21st century. Furthermore, one should bear in mind that polarisation will increase not only as a result of tactics used by various politicians, but also as a result of how online platforms use algorithms, bringing us more and more news that are similar to what people are already reading, which further leads to people being closed in their echo chambers. Globally, there is a big crisis of trust. Europeans have lost trust in authorities, despite the fact that trust is one of the main issues in building the future of Europe. Hence, the authorities and the media should try to regain it.

All of the participants agreed that the internet has a large number of benefits. They especially emphasised that it has various information sources and easy access to knowledge. It was obvious during the pandemic, when almost everyone's entire life was relocated to the internet. Participants use the internet for self-development, education, shopping, and staying in touch with friends. Specific regulations must be implemented if we are to ensure that the internet is a safe space. With that in mind, these cannot be implemented unless there is widespread agreement on these among European citizens. Therefore, citizen consultations should be introduced, albeit not in the same way that they are right now. They only refer to very active civil society organisations and citizens and many of the participants of the event had never heard of them or had never participated in them.

Conclusion

The internet is a space where humans can find enormous amounts of information and knowledge. The horizons of humans have broadened; information is spreading faster than ever before. At the same time, because users can be anonymous on the internet, it brings a lot of hate speech. People are treating the internet as a space to release their emotions. People are closing in on themselves in echo chambers as platforms introduce more and more algorithms, resulting in the polarisation of society. Those issues need to be tackled as soon as possible. However, this cannot be accomplished solely through the implementation of regulations. There is a need for more effective education of citizens. If Europe is to progress, Europeans must better understand one another. Civic education should provide knowledge of how to use the internet and how to listen to one another. The manner in which policies are being made in Europe should also change. Even though it is becoming more transparent, with citizen consultations and clear lobbying regulations, the entire process remains dehumanising. Legislators should not create policies and regulations without considering the human being, the person who will be affected by them. Also, as politicians focus more and more on target groups in their communication, they lose sight of who the policies should serve.

It was clear that youth did not want to be the final target of easy-measured political communication tools. Change will only be possible, and the European Union will be able to emerge from its current crisis, if institutions, nation states, CSOs and citizens work together more. The Conference on the Future of Europe is a positive step in the right direction. Nevertheless, in order to truly ensure that it will make a difference, all parties must commit to cooperation and listening to each other's arguments. Therefore, people's communication styles must evolve. Prioritise understanding other people in order to instil empathy, media literacy, and critical thinking. People's attitudes change as a result of disinformation, so combating it requires communication with citizens, and is also highly dependent on how positive communication is deployed.

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