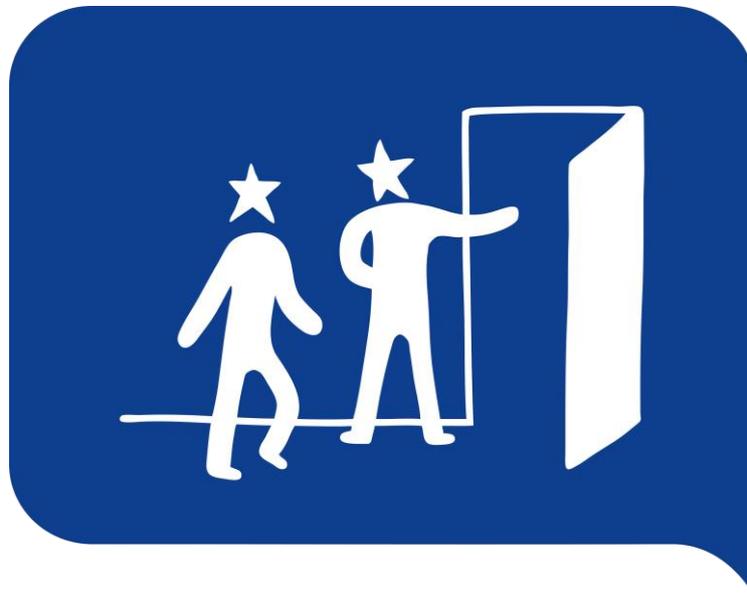


# Achieving Youth Goal #9 Target 5

*Findings from the 8th Cycle of EU Youth Dialogue Qualitative Consultation*



**Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for all:** Strengthen young people's democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society.

*Young people are underrepresented in decision-making processes which affect them although their engagement is crucial to democracy. They need access to physical spaces in their communities to support their personal, cultural and political development*

**YG#9 Target 5:** Ensure safe virtual youth spaces are accessible to every young person which provide access to information and services as well as ensure opportunities for youth participation.

**Guiding question used in the EUYD8 consultation:** How can virtual spaces and tools be used to increase young people's participation?

**Key topics in this report:** digital gap, digitalisation of public services, digital competences, hate speech, fake news, help-seeking platforms, hybrid spaces.

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# Target 5: Ensuring Digitalised Youth Spaces

The Youth Dialogue activities asked participants how can digitalised spaces and tools be used to increase young people's participation in democratic processes. EUYD7<sup>1</sup> already featured extensive dialogue about digitalised youth spaces, especially in relation to youth work and rural areas. The National Working Groups tried not to duplicate these discussions. This section presents some of the main findings of the current cycle. As *the online* is not a parallel, autonomous and self-contained 'world' or 'space', but a loose reflection and continuation of the physical spaces, the report will use the term 'digitalised space/s'.

## Wider context: why digitalised youth spaces matter?

Digital **technologies**, including the **digitalisation of public services** enable citizens' participation in decision-making processes in more direct and collaborative ways. Based on online tools, young people can demand more democratic dynamics in the public space, removal of barriers and fast decisions. They are able to catalyse civic engagement through digital petitions, participatory budgeting, activist YouTube channels etc.

In order to participate and benefit from digitalised spaces, and to manage the risks, young people need **digital competences**, especially given the younger age of those entering the Internet. Since 2013, the European Commission identified and updated the key components of digital competence in the areas of digital literacy, communication, creation of content, safety and problem-solving. The young people taking part in Youth Dialogue are part of the generation that benefited from **DigComp 2.0**, a tool that influenced the digital experiences in education and training, employment and lifelong learning

The **Covid-19 crisis** brought to the fore some of the unsolved tensions in young people's relationship with the digitalised world, its possibilities and limitations for participation. By analysing young people's experiences *online* during the Covid-19 crisis, decision makers can better support their participation. As the activities within the Youth Dialogue indicate, there is a lot to learn about how young people use the Internet, about the value, the limitations and the paradoxes of using digitalised spaces for youth participation.

## What issues matter most to young people within this topic?

To the young participants, political participation is embedded in their use of social media. They like *the online*, but they do not idealize it. They know it has limitations. Discussions on the digitalised space were, invariably, shaped by the experiences during the Covid-19 crisis. There was **no consensus** on the effectiveness of the digitalised space for participation during the pandemic. Opinions ranged from acknowledging the obvious advantages of the online options, to complaints on the difficulty of reaching the most vulnerable young people.

On the positive side, participants suggested the abrupt reliance on the *online* during Covid-

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<sup>1</sup> The report of the EUYD7 is accessible [here](#).

19, **raised the level of possibility** among some young people who would not have participated, otherwise. For instance, *the online* allowed engagement with topics some young people found too 'sensitive' for *offline* activities. The loose structure of digitalised spaces seemed appealing to many participants. For others, in order to discuss personal concerns, *the offline* remains paramount. On the negative side, *the online* allows **easier disengagement** and can easily lead to **oversaturation**. Digital divides, socio-economic barriers, competing priorities, the need to cope with emotional exhaustion, hindered the participation of '**hard to reach**' young people. As argued in the Slovakian National Working Group Report, young people's overall assessment was that 'virtual spaces are not very inclusive but also not very participatory'.

*While in the previous consultation the insufficient transport infrastructure was mentioned as an obstacle to rural young people's participation, nowadays the lack of internet access is significantly impeding young people's involvement in formal and non-formal education as well as limiting their further participation in decision-making.*

Portuguese National Working Group Report

To many participants, the need for **safe, inclusive and accessible** digitalised spaces will remain post-pandemic. This may happen because of choice, because of time needed to adjust to *the offline*, because of topics, the outreach or because of various barriers in accessing physical spaces. Yet, participants were aware of the structural constraints of the digitalised spaces. As argued in the Estonian Working Group Report, the Covid-19 crisis demonstrated that one can, at best, 'prevent the decline' of youth participation, yet, not to achieve growth through online means alone. Thus, a consensus was built on the idea that **the future will be hybrid** with *the online* and *the offline* being used, for meeting, ideally, different functions. To them, *the online* works well for introducing major issues, opening debate and for awareness rising. Yet, for trust building, large-scale community development and meaningful conversations, physical spaces were considered ideal. A common message from young people was that the value of digitalised spaces should be **not to replace, but to enhance** the offline participation:

*the community that you are also interested in, it also dies when you only meet people online. Because when you meet people for online meetings, everything is over as soon as the meeting is over, because you leave it there. But if you met physically somewhere, you would sit for five minutes before and half an hour after the event and talk. It changes the whole community.*

Danish National Working Group Report.

Participants expressed their distress when **insufficiently participatory consultations** are miss-used for validating **pre-designed policy solutions**. They were in favour of having consultation processes that are genuinely participatory and followed by concrete structural changes. To them, social media is a tool for authentic participation (*via* stories, polls, news, questions etc.), not merely a communication tool ('talking-shop', as expressed during an activity). To many young people, the 'business-like' format of the tools used during the Covid-19 crisis (Zoom, online conferences etc) call for a makeover in order to stimulate participation. Participants expressed their need for digitalised spaces that are more **creative** in format, accessible, engaging and able to **go beyond mere discussions/ consultations**.

The negative psychological implications of digitalised spaces were extensively discussed. Many participants spoke at length about the harmful effects of **cyberbullying, virtual peer pressure or hate speech**. The excessive screen time was linked with social isolation and anxiety for some young people. The Covid-19 crisis put youth workers in the situation of **responding to young people's emotional and psychological** needs online, without always being guided on the ways to proceed and how to protect themselves from burnout:

*Youth workers' flexibility enabled young people to keep on expressing their concerns throughout the crisis. They have somehow become the "receptacle" for young people's malaise. It is important to recognise the role of the Youth Sector during this crisis but also outside it, to build the post-Covid society.*

French National Working Group Report.

Although participants were aware of the manipulative potential of the digitalised spaces, they were concerned there are insufficient opportunities for the majority of young people to acquire **digital competences**. As argued in several reports, although young people are increasingly digital, they are more likely to interact as 'consumers of media', than as autonomous producers of content. Speaking more generally about their peers, participants argued that many are insufficiently aware of underlying mechanisms that may be manipulative (e.g. algorithms, censorship, commercial interests, biases of representation etc), or, on the contrary, are untrusting to online content and unwilling to commit.

## **Possible actions and measures**

Covid-19 crisis generated **high expectations** related to digitalised participation. According to the reports from National Working Groups, it is very likely for young people to remain tuned to *the online* and to demand more of their needs to be met there. In addition, they expect more **help-seeking platforms** to be made available in order to address mental health concerns: either by providing information on the services available, either by directly supporting young people. The need for **more specialised professionals** offering help through the digitalised spaces (notably, social workers and psychologists), was a frequent proposal.

Overcoming the digital gap by **public investments in infrastructure** ranked high in participants' accounts. However, discussions suggested that in order to reach the most disadvantaged young people, the online tools need to be accompanied by personal and tailored, **offline strategies**. As European countries are more diverse, **accessibility** of websites and platforms in different languages and for people with visual impairments became important for participants. A demand for more conferences and training courses to be free of charge, was also voiced.

All reports demonstrated that young people have **very high expectations** from the digitalised spaces: in terms of content provision and possibilities to (re)act. They want digitalised spaces for participation to be engaging, easy to use and fun; to provide immediate clarification, fast feedback, quick fixes, to be concise and clear. If possible, to incorporate gamification tools. Participants cherish the possibilities to **follow and contact decision makers** via social media and would welcome politicians addressing the young people in simple language *through* the social media tools young people are using.

*...young people think that politics should be present where youngsters are, i.e. social networks like YouTube or Instagram. In this way, they do not have to take another step to another platform.*

Belgium, German speaking community, Working Group Report.

*The advantage of online participation is the anonymity, the availability of an online environment for young people, but also the speed of making the decision ("It takes me only a few minutes to check it and if the content is interesting, I'll click on it and join").*

Slovakian Working Group Report.

Social media, apps and online gaming can be used to engage young people in virtual spaces for youth participation.

Irish Working Group Report.

Participants' high expectations can be linked to the other online media young people are generally exposed to (e.g., entertainment, social media, consumption etc). These spaces are shaped by new business models that prioritize **concision, simplicity, instant gratification**. Young people may extend the expectations shaped in these online spaces to their approach to civic and political participation (*online* and *offline*). But policy processes require time and depth; they take place in more hectic environments, and are based on complex processes of analysis. Occasionally, young people remarked the difficulty of meeting their demands.

A common message from participants referred to the need for authorities (all levels) to ease the **access to public information and decision-making processes**. They proposed authorities to co-produce (together with young people) **dedicated, youth-friendly platforms/channels** where input on issues on the public agenda can be provided in real-time from young people themselves. These spaces should be continuously updated and engaging<sup>2</sup>. Genuine access to consultations on **climate-related measures** and **urban planning** ranked high in participants' accounts. They demanded more information about the EU and more transparency about political decision-making processes at the EU level, as well. A suggestion from the German participants was to extend an online tool used in Germany to assess the impact of legislation on young people (Youth Check).

Although digitalised spaces bring to the fore intergenerational divides, participants argued that **adult mentorship** is important for supporting young people in using and contributing online to public decision making. Several participants argued that young people need to be educated/supported about how to discuss controversial topics. The International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYO) roundtable also came to the conclusion that Europe needs more intergenerational dialogue and cooperation, which is important for all. Whilst some participants related to participation as a right independent of civic competence, for many others, the need for preparedness emerged as a concern. They would like to engage in an informed, competent way in decision making processes *via* online tools.

***Whose reasonability is preparing young people for taking part in such processes?***

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the co-management of a single-entry-point to access information, see the report on *Information*.

Opinions ranged from the moral reasonability of the authorities/ political leadership organising the consultations, to youth work and youth organisational structures that are experienced in peer mentorship and civic participation. As suggested in the activities, the challenge is to enable young people to acquire the knowledge on citizenship, the skills and the democratic culture of decision making, yet in ways that are embedded in digitalised spaces shaped by gamification, instant gratification, fast feedback, excitement, concision and fun. Moving from gaming to learning, or incorporating the two in ways that do not compromise depth and complexity of participation, is a task that requires increasingly creative solutions.

**Online hate speech, cyber-bullying** and the **protection of personal data** online were frequent concerns. Young participants called for stronger privacy laws and policies addressing cyber-bullying: easier reporting systems available locally and also specialised social interventions addressing the rehabilitation of bullies. Calls for media education of quality were repeatedly made in order to address also the **fake news** phenomenon<sup>3</sup>. A cross-cutting theme was that any digitalised space aiming to foster youth participation needs strategies to prevent **hate speech** and **cyberbullying** and to be proactive in reaching diverse young people.

There was a strong consensus that those interested to reach and engage young people online (politicians, youth workers etc), need **culturally competent strategies**. Young people move quickly from a platform to another. Each has its own tacit communication codes which are not replicable on another platform/ channel etc. What works for a particular age group, is disconcerting or perceived as inauthentic to another. Online platforms emerge and fall out of fashion very fast. As one participant from Luxemburg stated, now, 'very few young people use Facebook', despite many activities being promoted there. Keeping up with the dynamic online environment is not an easy task and many participants signalled the risk for youth workers and decision-makers to lag behind, whilst young people 'move to the next platform' (Irish participant).

Several participants argued that youth work and decision makers need to rely on **systematic research** and overcome established assumptions about what, when, how and why young people use the Internet. They called for young people's participatory practices online to benefit from robust research, in the same way as young people's consumption behaviours are being researched by market-driven companies, yet, for different purposes.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on media literacy, see the Report on *Information*.