
YOUTH MANIFESTO

FOR
DIGITAL
SPACE

VISION

The Youth Manifesto is a source of ideas and inspiration for European decision-makers to ensure empowerment of young people online and to protect their rights and well-being.

WHY MANIFESTO?

Throughout the past decade, the online sphere has been turning into an essential part of people's daily lives. Having been strongly affected by the current COVID-19 pandemic, much of our lives have transitioned into the online sphere. 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.

The overreliance on the Internet has become particularly the case among the youth. In that regard, the pandemic has only exacerbated the previously existing challenges, while opening the door to the new ones whose consequences are yet to materialise. While being the most media literate generation yet, the youth (aged between 15 and 30), is confronted with several issues that have impacted their wellbeing and livelihood. With screen time increasing, many questions have opened – how will this affect mental health of youth, to what extent will the increasing amount of dis- and misinformation on the Internet affect ways of thinking and decision-making, how will this transition impact the education process, social life, privacy, and security? As we are still found amid unprecedented times, these questions have no definite answer. Yet, it is highly important that conversations commence.

Behind extensive consultations in all capitals of the region, the joint conclusion of the Western Balkan youth, together with their counterparts across Europe, is that there is a dire need for the adoption of regulation to better protect their right to free and safe digital space. Hence the Manifesto, whose intention is to stand as a call for action for European opinion- and decision-makers at the supranational, national, regional, and local level in the areas related to digital freedoms and Internet use. Moreover, they call for:

- **consequential fight against the spread of disinformation and the rise in hate speech;**
- **addressing the detrimental impact of the internet on mental health;**
- **ensuring accountability of the social media platforms.**

The Manifesto development was also supported by an online petition, signed by over 400 signatories in just two weeks. Considering the backing of the region's youth and strong demand for action, this Manifesto lays out key demands that ought to be addressed. As the countries of the region have been excluded from directly partaking in the Conference on the Future of Europe, the voice of the Western Balkan youth becomes all the more important. "Shaping Europe's digital future" is one of the thematic areas of the Conference, thus the Manifesto aspires to usher the path for further discussions in this area.

The call for a Manifesto was first publicly announced on 5 May 2021, just four days before the monumental day for all Europeans – the Europe day that celebrates unity in diversity. More so, this day marked the start of the long-awaited Conference on the Future of Europe, hoping to create a prospective future for all Europeans. In such a context, the aim of the Manifesto is to generate debate and policy-action from relevant stakeholders in Europe.

DEMANDS



FREE, UNRESTRICTED ACCESS

We want free, unrestricted access to the Internet so that we can learn and share.



EDUCATION AND SUPPORT

We want support and education about the internet to become accessible to everyone.



PRIVACY AND DATA PROTECTION

We want to be able to protect our data and privacy online.



RESPECT ONLINE

We want an online world free from bullying, racism, and intolerance.



TERMS AND CONDITIONS

We want terms and conditions that are simple to understand.



GOOD QUALITY AND RELIABLE CONTENT

We want access to high-quality and reliable content online, free of disinformation and fake news.



FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

We want to be able to express ourselves freely online.



REGULATION

We want our local governments and the EU to propose and adopt regulations that will protect us and will serve to better our societies.

ROADMAP FOR ACTION

Having in mind the national policy briefs - which present the existing challenges in each Western Balkan country and provide and elaborate the input of the local youth - and the call for action presented in the Manifesto, the following represents a roadmap for action. For seven listed demands in the Manifesto, the Roadmap breaks each down, by answering the following three questions: how do the young people see the issue in question? what can be done? and who is responsible and who should act? By providing brief but concrete answers to these questions, the aim of this Roadmap set the stage for addressing the listed demands, and thus to make sure the youth can indeed interact on the Internet in a free, safe, and effective manner.



FREE, UNRESTRICTED ACCESS

How do the young people see the issue?

To create a perspective future for ourselves, we, the youth, believe that the Internet should be accessible to everyone for free or for a fair and affordable price. Recognising that a large part of the Western Balkans is still quite rural, making the idea of a fast, 5G internet connection is still unrealistic for the time being. Despite one's geographical location, we believe that everyone, not only the youth should be provided with a stable, unrestricted, and accessible internet connection. Moreover, as the standard of living in the Western Balkans is substantially lower than in the rest of Europe, it leaves people unable to obtain quality, unrestricted and reliable internet due to their inability to pay. This means that a significant portion of the population is left disconnected from education, employment and other benefits internet brings, putting them at a greater disadvantage than they were in prior.

What can be done?

To improve the accessibility of internet, many different, horizontal approaches can be taken. Firstly, the availability of solid mobile coverage can be substantially increased by investing into infrastructure. Secondly, solutions could include providing free Wi-Fi access in public areas which would make diffusion of information, education, and employment attainable to the majority. We are aware of the considerable costs which are associated with such developments, however we believe that if many stakeholders come together and cover these costs, they will be investing into a more productive society which will bring back much more than what was initially invested.

Who is responsible and who should act?

For such actions, a wide spectrum of actors should join forces to tackle these issues and bring positive change to our society. From policymakers, government officials, technology experts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to mobile companies, everyone has their fair share of work to do. Youth of the Western Balkan countries are also open to take part in implementing these changes, as we believe that we are the most technologically and media literate generation so far. To provide free and unrestricted access to the Internet to everyone, to diminish existing inequalities and to provide marginalized groups with the same opportunities, an over encompassing partnership should be created between all these actors.



EDUCATION AND SUPPORT

How do the young people see the issue?

While we believe that access to technology is crucial, education on how to use this technology responsibly to extract its maximum potential is fundamental. Obtaining support from qualified personnel, educators, parents, and peers will substantially increase the quality of one's user experience, their security online and their ability not to be deceived by the overwhelming presence of false news. Additionally, we have recognized the necessity for the establishment of centres to which we can turn to when we need help and answers to the opportunities and risks encountered every day. Through such education and assistance, literacy levels will significantly increase while bringing along an empowered generation who will be the ones helping and educating others in this field.

What can be done?

As it is with all other educational processes in life, family plays a crucial role in the beginning of education. We are aware that parental control of our online behaviours is not ideal, we want to ensure that parents understand the necessity for both generations to be educated in the new and emerging technologies. Not only will this allow for closing a generational gap, but it will allow for a two-way conversation about responsibilities, dangers, and opportunities. Open discussions in schools, tailored classes towards increasing media and technological literacy will lead to a more aware and educated society, free of susceptibility to possible dangers.

Who is responsible and who should act?

We see education as an absolute cornerstone to any successful change in society. Therefore, education about positive and appropriate use of the Internet is everyone's responsibility. Parents and teachers should be at the frontline at this change by being up to date with the novel technological developments and trends to oversee and help the youth and support them in any possible manner. Secondly, schools and NGOs should work on developing programs which will propagate safe and responsible use of the internet, while teaching both the parents and the youth about safety and security online. Thirdly, technology companies should ensure safe spaces online where the youth can come and obtain crucial information, while educating themselves on various technology-related topics. Lastly, governments should become more engaged in these processes by ensuring that appropriate funding, policies, and oversight are placed.



PRIVACY AND DATA PROTECTION

How do the young people see the issue?

Even though we believe that we know how to protect our privacy and control the data we share with numerous websites, most of the time we do not. Moreover, even if we are aware of the possible dangers, we usually prefer to use websites that use, and often misuse, our data, rather than to pay for those who do not use our data. We need to better educate how to protect our privacy and the devastating consequences of not doing so. The youth should pay more attention to the fact that nothing can be completely deleted and removed from the internet, but also that there is nothing free on the Internet.

What can be done?

In addition to obtaining more education, privacy settings on all websites should be, by default, more reliable and stronger. This is because it is much easier to allow access to personal data than to find a way to turn access to personal data off. To allow for the choice regarding the amount of data and information we exchange for free, we believe that large social media monopolies could be divided and broken up. By doing so, it would make it more difficult for them to transfer data from one site to another, for free, without the user being notified and aware of such transition. As the definition of privacy differs for many, we need to be able to make smarter and informed decisions on what we are sharing and what are we keeping to ourselves. Companies should be more transparent about what data they collect and how this information is used. Developing new technologies and new monitoring strategies could also be seen as beneficial. For example, developing an application that shows you what data a particular online service collects and how it is being used.

Who is responsible and who should act?

Even though technology companies and social media websites hold most of the responsibility for the misuse of personal data and lack of protection online, we are the ones who are primarily responsible. To balance data protection and privacy against companies and business who are operating in the online sphere is a great challenge. Governments could impose a set of minimum standards of operation for each company operating within their countries, however without individual engagement by every user, companies will continue operating without respect for privacy and protection of personal data.



RESPECT ONLINE

How do the young people see the issue?

As the representatives of the Western Balkan youth, we believe that a safe online environment to express our thoughts, beliefs, and ideas is more than needed. This means that such environment will not tolerate harassment, racism, or any other forms of discrimination. Respect online means accepting and respecting others and for who they are and receiving the same level of respect for who we are. Achieving a greater balance, while not endangering freedom of expression, is needed. We believe that mediators should be allowed to react in cases of disrespect, while being considerate about not inflicting the universal right of freedom of expression. Online relationships, based on respect, should not only be between the people who communicate, but also between the people and the providers of the services they use.

What can be done?

Primarily, we believe that there should be a greater understanding that every online interaction has real, offline consequences. Therefore, it is of great importance that everyone thinks about their words and actions prior to posting. To guarantee respect online, it is also necessary to establish a relationship of trust between users, technology companies, online platforms, and service providers. This means that the basic rules and guidelines that everyone must follow in their online interactions should be highlighted and prominently propagated. If harassment, racial profiling, or other discrimination occurs, service providers and web platforms must provide user-friendly methods to report problems and to ensure a quick and adequate response. Internet platforms and companies should also improve the visibility and adherence to values of online respect and provide information on their websites regarding these issues.

Who is responsible and who should act?

Just like all the other discussed issues, respect online is the responsibility of all. Parents, teachers and NGOs can take several steps to encourage children and youth to respect and treat others online just as they wish to be treated. Therefore, we are in strong support of the apparent rise in the recognition of this problem and the increase presence of campaigns that deal with cyberbullying. This is a much-needed development which will only improve the online user experience but will not hinder freedom of speech. Nevertheless, technology companies and social media platforms play an important role in this process of ensuring that their services are not used for harassment, racism or discrimination against minorities and other marginalized groups.



TERMS AND CONDITIONS

How do the young people see the issue?

When we sign up on any social networking platform, we are faced by pages and pages of Terms and conditions which guide us through serious topics of data usage, privacy, and other crucial topics in a legal manner. These Terms and conditions are often extensive and challenging to understand, leading many of us to click the “Accept” button rather than read and understand them. However, this can cause serious complications in the future, as these are legal documents in which we may sign our rights away without knowing we are doing so. Moreover, despite being extensive and written in lengthy sentences, they contain highly technical and legal language which a regular young person does not understand. As a matter of fact, sometimes there may be situations where the company deliberately makes them difficult to understand to get away with suspicious usage of personal data without the knowledge of their users.

What can be done?

To remove the concerns and problems we identified regarding Terms and conditions, we believe that there are many approaches and things which can be done to improve the overall user-friendliness. For example, platforms and companies could limit their Terms and conditions to one or two pages. If not, they could create a summary of the main points in a numbered paragraph at the beginning of the document. By doing so they could hyperlink these main points to the actual clauses in the legal document if the user wants to become more familiar with the issue. Additionally, they could also create Terms and conditions containing shorter sentences constructed with plain language instead of obscure legal jargon, endless clauses, and technicalities.

Who is responsible and who should act?

We believe that the first step in simplifying Terms and conditions, making them user-friendly should come from the highest level – the government. Governments have the ability and the power to ensure that Internet platforms operating within their border are providing users with simplified and more understandable Terms and conditions documents. Secondly, NGOs could play a crucial role in these processes. With their legal expertise and up-to-date knowledge on all current legal implications of Terms and conditions, they could provide users with infographics or workshops that will teach them to discern these lengthy documents.



GOOD QUALITY AND RELIABLE CONTENT

How do the young people see the issue?

Nowadays, the Internet can be seen as the largest knowledge and information resource available to people. Unfortunately, as youth, we often encounter huge difficulties in finding high-quality and reliable content. This is especially applicable and valid for the youngest among us, as they are not able to access appropriate and suitable educational materials, videos, and games. The older ones among us also find it difficult to identify reliable sources of information for our homework, school projects and work. This is especially true if the differences between online advertising, false news and independent, checked content are not evidently noted.

What can be done?

Greater efforts must be made to provide valuable, useful, suitable, and appropriate online content, especially for the youngest users. Regarding the issue of reliability and trustworthiness of sources, we hope to see clearer signals from information sources on the Internet. What this means is that we would like to be able to see whether the source we are reading is academic and based on serious research or if it is pop-culture, written without respect for basic journalistic principles. Ideas for improving the validity and reliability of online content could also encompass creation of some type of verification label or logo which would serve to ensure that the information on a particular website is trustworthy. However, we have recognized that it is difficult to agree on the criteria for awarding such a logo. Another option is to create a search engine specifically designed for children that will quickly display suitable and high-quality Internet content. We are aware that this issue also requires significant training which will improve media literacy among the youth where they will be able to independently judge the sources they are reading and consider their credibility.

Who is responsible and who should act?

In order to ensure that higher-quality content is created, schools, businesses, and online platforms must jointly provide educational and technologically engaging online materials; when necessary, supported by government funds. In addition to working hard to ensure that the online information source is more clearly marked, teachers can do more to train us on how to verify the reliability of the information. Lastly, government oversight and regulation could be found as beneficial in extreme cases, such as websites promoting violence or even eating disorders.



FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

How do the young people see the issue?

A space which allows us to express and share our views freely is of great importance to us, the youth. Such space includes the freedom to research and obtain all sorts of information and ideas freely, wherever we are located. Just as in offline life, whenever hate speech or calls to violence occur, people will call for restrictions on freedom of speech on the Internet. However, such restrictions and penalties should be maintained at a minimum, as usually the answer to such questions is more discussion and polarization, not a strong consensus and overall improvement of online practices. When restricting someone's ability to express themselves, it is important to recognize that such action can cause long-term harm to them and not to those who have found themselves as offended by the written words. We stand behind the idea that the Internet has great potential and the ability to knock cultural barriers down which will only be possible if all people living around the world have the right to speak freely.

What can be done?

In addition to ensuring that national governments do not restrict freedom of expression on the Internet or restrict the free flow of information, there need to be several measures that need to be taken forward to ensure that marginalized groups have their voices heard. Social media platforms and online service providers should only agree to delete information or opinions on the Internet in the most extreme cases. They should use search bars to remind people of the extensive amounts of positive online content, by, in turn continuously promoting freedom of expression. Finally, Internet users themselves, including young people, should actively urge others to express their opinions and create a safe and acceptable environment for every user.

Who is responsible and who should act?

Just like all the other discussed issues, freedom of expression is a question which should be dealt by several stakeholders. We believe that it is everyone's responsibility to protect and promote online freedom of speech, while governments, companies, platforms, as well as parents, schools, and even all Internet users also play a significant role. Through education and comprehensive policies, the Internet can be made into a safe space, where everyone can freely express themselves without retributions from others.



REGULATION

How do the young people see the issue?

To ensure that all internet users feel safe, we believe that it is of crucial importance to pay more attention to the regulation of the Internet space and the content which is being published on these platforms. If the online sphere remains unregulated, we recognize the tendency of it becoming completely unhinged and unbalanced. Even though freedom of expression should not be hindered, and privacy of users should be respected, we urge that regulation becomes more extensive due to a significant increase of false information, hate speech, and rise in detrimental, undemocratic behaviours. Therefore, now is the right time to act and impose regulations which will increase accountability of online platforms and technology companies and propagate responsible online behaviour.

What can be done?

While there are many approaches which can be taken to horizontally impact the regulation of the online sphere, it can be started with the online platforms themselves. Fact-checking, filter-labelling on social media, creating a register of media which distribute false information and sanctioning them, creating a sense of urgency and accountability for the platforms, etc. We strongly believe that everything begins with education and that all the regulation and so on will fall into place afterwards. Moreover, campaigns can be created which will teach and call Internet users to self-regulate. Such campaigns can raise awareness of the importance of responsible online behaviour and its possible negative outcomes.

Who is responsible and who should act?

Just like in many other areas in which we see space for improvement, we believe that regulation of internet space is a responsibility of everyone – the individual, the state, online platforms, technology companies, NGOs. Starting with the individual, we deem it necessary to focus on self-regulation and education about the possible dangers of not protecting own's data and privacy. Education comes as a cornerstone and premise for responsible online behaviour and regulating own's online experience. Secondly, the government has great potential of influencing the state of regulation while not diminishing the importance and prevalence of freedom of speech. As the Western Balkan countries are aiming to become members of the European Union, vast possibilities can be explored with such connection. The EU can play a crucial role in defining standards and rules which online platforms must abide by. Lastly, NGOs have the necessary expertise and knowledge to supplement this process and to safeguard the wellbeing of every internet user.



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