



Empowering  
young people



# European Social Cohesion in the Digital Era – Youth and Social Work Perspectives

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## **About the YES Forum**

Founded in 2002, YES Forum is a European network of organisations working with and for young people facing challenging situations. By promoting their social inclusion and developing their professional skills, we act to improve the life chances of vulnerable young people. YES Forum aims to create an environment where young people and youth professionals have equally accessible learning and work-related opportunities in Europe and beyond.

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## Introduction

The guiding question of the YES Forum's work is not 'what can we do for young people?', but 'what can we do with them?'. This is especially important during our events, including this year's policy event– 'Social Cohesion in the Digital Era: Trends, Challenges and Mutual Learning in the aftermath of European elections'. The two day-event took place on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of November 2024 in Brussels. The event focused on the opportunities and challenges that the digital transition brings for social cohesion, as well as the pivotal role of young people in shaping this digital transition.

*A cohesive society is one "that works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility."*

- OECD, 2011

As we argue in our recent policy paper – [Navigating the digital transition: New Technologies in Youth and Social Work](#) - digitalisation is both vital and inevitable to young people's future. All young people today will need technological skills and an agile mindset towards technology in their future work and everyday life. For these reasons, digital youth work should not be seen as separate from youth work, but as an essential element of it. In this spirit, we found it extremely important to have young people join us at our policy event.

One of the central aims was for young people themselves to participate in civil dialogue at the EU level, and through the sharing of their perspectives, to grow in confidence and build skills. Alongside youth participants, we had representatives of 14 youth and social work organisations across Europe in attendance. Professionals and young people alike benefited from the opportunity to share their experience and meet and network with key EU stakeholders.

Over the course of the event, participants heard from a brilliant line-up of speakers on a range of relevant topics. They grappled with how youth and social workers can contribute to ensuring social cohesion in the digital age, and discussed the risks and opportunities posed by digitalisation in relation to youth and social work. Consequently, the event [encouraged young people to be equal stakeholders in the dialogue on digitalisation and AI](#), with the recognition that they, as well as youth and social workers, bring valuable lived experience to the discussion which must be heard by institutional actors.

This report seeks to highlight the perspectives of young participants, professionals and speakers on the topic of digitalisation and AI. With particular attention given to how we can [ensure that digitalisation benefits everybody in our society equitably](#), and why it is so important that policymakers listen and involve young people and professionals in decision-making processes.

## Principles of youth and social work in the digital era

Throughout the policy event, professionals and youth participants found many points that they either agreed upon, or continuously returned to, because they acted as a starting point for discussing the topic of digitalisation and AI at a greater depth.

These points, which we have called [our key principles](#), sit alongside recommendations published as part of our [policy paper](#). They should be considered in the development of new services and projects. They are:

1. Civil dialogue is invaluable for sharing expertise and advocating for the experience of young people and professionals at the EU level.
2. In the digital era, the 'human touch' will always be needed in youth and social work, including in the development of digital services.
3. The digital agenda must benefit everybody in our society equitably, not deepen the inequality gap.
4. There is a need for a digital literacy offer for young people as well as a digital skills offer; this would improve their access to the labour market and protect democratic values.
5. Not every young person is a digital native, not all older people struggle with digital technologies; the digitalisation agenda is relevant for everybody.
6. Digitalisation and AI can be a force for good and potentially improve the accessibility and inclusivity of services and support, but the risks must be managed.
7. Post COVID-19, there is a need for us all to work and think in a digitally agile way, especially as people and services move away from physical spaces.
8. All relevant organisations, including EU institutions, have a part to play in "giving young people wings" so that they can have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

## The event

### Preparing for inclusive youth participation

There is a difference between including and *including* young people in an event. As Neža Repanšek, one of our speakers mentioned as part of a panel discussion, it is important to have meaningful youth participation and to not use young people merely as decoration.

To make sure we took a participatory approach to our event, we had [an online preparatory meeting with young participants](#) two weeks before the event. The aim of this meeting was to familiarise them with the topics being discussed, the English language, with us, and with each other. A week before the preparatory meeting we provided the young participants with a one-page accessible information sheet introducing ourselves, the event and the topic.

During the online preparatory meeting, we started by creating an online word storm together with the young participants. We asked them to share whatever popped into their minds when they saw the words

'digitalisation' and 'artificial intelligence'. It was particularly interesting to see that the first associations that were written down were mainly positive (e.g., *"it's useful for my studies"*, *"to stay in touch with people"*, *"to reduce language problems"*)<sup>1</sup>.

After shortly discussing the word storm, we used the digital tool Mentimeter for a 'take a stand' activity. We used questions and statements related to the topic of digitalisation and AI to stimulate discussion. This worked well, and it was interesting to see how our initial thoughts about the outcomes of some questions and statements differed from the actual answers of the young participants. One example of this was that we had estimated that young participants would not be comfortable with the time they spend on screens. However, it seemed that they were mostly comfortable with this and had also taken measures to decrease their screen time if necessary.

Another example was that, when the young participants were asked on a scale of 1-5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) whether they agree with the statement that they "always check their sources when reading news on social media", young people on average scored 3.6. This leads us to believe that the often-used cliché that young people believe everything they see online is not necessarily true.

The last interesting observation we made during this preparatory meeting is that none of the young participants had learned anything about spotting AI-generated content in school. However, all of them have used AI tools to help them with school assignments or work, and most of them believe that they would not always be able to spot AI-generated content online.

Overall, the preparatory meeting made sure that the participants felt prepared for the policy event, as they had already discussed the relevant topics and familiarised themselves with staff and other participants who would be attending. The preparation sessions **emphasised the importance of including young people in dialogue instead of making assumptions about them.**

When asked in the evaluation form whether they deemed the online preparatory meeting to be useful, respondents answered positively. One answer read: *"I liked the online meeting, because then you had an idea of the subject, and you could give your opinion in advance"*. Another answer read: *"Yes because we got prepared for the event..."*.

### **Inclusive tools for youth participation**

From our experience in organising events with disadvantaged young participants, we have observed that it is often quite difficult for young participants to voice their opinions aloud in a group of people. This is especially true when the language being spoken is not their first language.

To counter this, we have developed several tools that could be used to ensure that the voice of the young participants is heard. Firstly, young participants had the opportunity to send us questions and

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<sup>1</sup> Where necessary, we translated the original quotes from our young participants to English, as we encouraged them to write in their own language to make it more accessible.

statements before the event, so that we could share these statements for them during the first day. During the first session, three of the questions that we asked to the speakers came directly from our young participants.

Throughout the event we also gave young participants the opportunity to write down their thoughts, statements and questions on paper, and we collected these to raise during the sessions. Another important tool was the use of a WhatsApp group to communicate with the young participants during the event. In this group we spoke with the young participants, provided them with extra explanations when speakers were talking, and gave them the opportunity to pose their questions directly. An example of this occurred during session one, when we used this WhatsApp group to explain quickly what one of the speakers meant when talking about 'platform workers'.

However, the tool that proved the most useful was the data we extracted from the preparatory meeting. For example, several of the statements used in the take a stand activity of the preparatory meeting was also used in the second and third session of the event. As a result, it was easy for us to compare the discussion of all participants during the event with the thoughts of the disadvantaged young people during the preparatory meeting.

Finally, after the joint dinner on the first day we gave everyone, including young participants, the chance to write a wish, fear or statement to a Member of the European Parliament as an interactive activity. All young participants wrote at least one, or multiple, of these messages to MEPs.

### **Day 1 – European Economic and Social Committee**

Tuesday 19th November was the first day that 45 youth and professional participants from 8 different countries met, reconnected over an icebreaker task, and took their seats for the first day of the Policy Event. Hosted by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the day began with an introduction to the topic by YES Forum and its founding member BAG EJSA, sharing key messages and observations with the group.



One central theme was the need to engage critically with the issue of digitalisation and its interplay with young people's lives. This is especially true in light of recent European election results, and trends across Europe, that highlight that young people are increasingly turning towards far-right parties for answers to complex questions. After the introduction, it was time to dive into the main sessions.

### **Session 1 – Social Cohesion in a Digital Era**

**Topic:** This session focused on the impact of digitalisation and the rise of Artificial Intelligence on social inclusion and social cohesion in the European Union, focusing specifically on young people.

### Panellists:

- [Neža Repanšek](#), *Member*, European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)
- [Guillaume Hemmert](#), *Policy Officer at Fair Green and Digital Transitions Research Unit*, DG EMPL, European Commission
- [Cornelia Kramsall](#), *Responsible for International Education Projects*, ipcenter

In her keynote speech, Repanšek shared a personal story about how she had observed different generations of her family interacting with digital technology. She further stated that technology, skills and services must result in *“digital equality between generations”*, but warned that the *“human touch”* will always be essential in providing services or support for people, whether young or old. Additionally, Repanšek shared her belief that *“you can’t be smart alone”*, a sentiment which we at YES Forum strongly resonate with, given our focus on sharing expertise and best practice between practitioners in different Member States.

Hemmert built on this discussion and stressed that not all young people currently have the digital skills which are needed to equip them for the future of work, with [3 in 10 young people in the EU currently lacking essential digital skills](#). He also brought in the risks posed by disinformation and fake news, an underlying theme of the conference.



Kramsall added that while access to AI resulted in many benefits, for example, in assisting people in overcoming language barriers, there was a risk that it could widen the digital skills gap for young people, result in copyright issues and the spread of fake news. All three speakers expressed [cautious optimism about the growing role of AI and digitalisation](#) which was expanded upon throughout the rest of the event.

As mentioned in the previous section about tools for youth participation, during this session three questions were asked that came directly from our youth participants. Starting generally, the first question asked was: *“I would like to know how people in the EU parliament view the developments in the field of technology, whether they think it is good or bad influence on youth”*.



The following questions were both related to digitalisation and work – “To what extent will digitisation take over the work? What are you as the EU going to do to ensure that the work is not taken over too much?” and “When these technologies will improve in the future, how much work will remain for graphic designers?”. One of the speakers, Hemmert, explained that at the DG EMPL they believe that the digital transition also offers many employment opportunities; that employment can be tailored more easily to a person’s needs when there are opportunities for digital working, and it might be easier to find employment using digital tools.

*“Youth work is about young people – and so, young people had the opportunity to raise their issues, ask their questions and explain their points of view on the Brussels stage.”*

- *Social Youth Worker, Policy Event 2024*

### Session 2 – Mutual Learning on Digital Social Work

**Topic:** The next interactive session was led by representatives of two YES Forum members, and showcased innovative ways that they have applied digital tools to a youth and social work context. They further shared their thoughts on what skills were needed for the future, and provided some practical tips for engaging with AI.

#### Panellists:

- **Mirco Trielli**, *President, Zefiro*
- **Felix Neumann**, *JMD Programme Officer, Diakonie Offenburg (BAG EJSa)*



Opening the discussion, Trielli started with the point that *“digitalisation is not revolutionary, but an evolution of past innovations”*. He also answered questions about digitalisation and work posed by young participants in the first session. He shared his philosophy that ever since digitalisation started and the internet was created certain jobs

have become obsolete, and new jobs have emerged. Taking the example of ChatGPT, Trielli outlined the cyclical relationship users have with AI technology – from training the algorithm, which they then use to write content, which is then utilised by another user (for example, to summarise, break the content down, make a presentation that suits their needs). From that perspective, users have the opportunity to input into the development of AI and are not merely bystanders. Lastly, Trielli provided some practical tips for practitioners on how to get the best out of AI tools.



Neumann then went on to give us an overview of the digital tools he uses in his work with young migrants in Germany, sharing how Jugendmigrationsdienste has utilised tools like digital scavenger hunts to help young people orientate themselves in their community, and podcasts to provide a platform for them to share their thoughts. He reflected on some of the potential benefits, and cons, of digitalised youth work – including [expanding the reach of services and improving content accessibility](#), but also on the possibility for the ‘human touch’ in youth and social work to be lost.

#### Take a stand – interactive activity



Following the end of the settings on Day 1, Elie Demerseman - an expert on youth participation - led an activity designed to get participants thinking about the implications of digitalisation on young people. He read some statements that had been discussed with young people in the preparatory meeting, and then asked participants to *stand* if they agree, and *sit* if they don't.

Panellists and participants then had the opportunity to expand upon their views and challenge their own perspectives. Throughout, Demerseman provided input and thoughts from the young participants that were collected in advance. Examples of these statements were:

*"I would never fall for a scam online."*

*"My daily screen time is more than three hours a day."*

*"I am comfortable with how much time you spend on screens daily."*

The activity revealed some [interesting differences in perspectives among participants](#). For example, despite young people spending more time on their devices on average, they were more comfortable with their daily usage than professionals were.

#### Joint, interactive dinner

Finally, the Day 1 of our policy event concluded with a short-guided tour of the EU Quartier. This was followed by an ‘interactive dinner’, where participants experimented with making origami envelopes. Each envelop contained a message from young participants or professionals, about their wishes, fears, or thoughts they wanted to share with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). The envelopes were sent directly to decision-makers to set the scene for continued engagement in 2025. The activity especially aimed to [give wings to young people](#); encouraging young participants to have a voice and to show that they can be involved in the decisions that impact their lives.

## Day 2 – European Parliament and civil society organisations

### Session 3 – Democracy in Action and Empowerment of Citizens

Once all participants had gone through security, it was time to commence our sessions in the European Parliament. Firstly, we were given a walk-through of the EU institutions, how the legislative process works, and the history of the European Union by a member of the Visitors Centre. It was an important reminder for everybody of the [EU's relevance to our everyday lives](#). Afterwards, the third session officially started.



**Topic:** This session focused on advancing social Europe and social cohesion in the years ahead, especially in the light of the recent European elections. It also focused on the role of the European Union, and the European parliament in particular, in ensuring a fair and inclusive digital transition that leaves no one behind.

**Panellists:** Unfortunately, a last-minute schedule change was required, as MEP Katarina Barley was unable to meet us. However, we were fortunate to be joined by her Policy Advisor, Hannah Gohlke, and her Spokesperson, Johann Vohn, who answered our questions enthusiastically and with expertise.



Participants questions covered a range of important topics related to AI and digitalisation, and built upon the recommendations made in YES Forum's ['Navigating the digital transition: New Technologies in Youth and Social Work' policy paper](#).

In addition, Demerseman brought youth perspectives into the mix once again by utilising the 'Take a stand exercise'. Through the exercise, Gohlke and Vohn elaborated on their positions further, and young people received answers to the questions that interested them the most. Both Gohlke and Vohn

stressed the importance of digital literacy (as well as digital skills), keeping people safe, and minimising the extent to which people can be tracked online.

When talking about disinformation and deepfakes, Gohlke and Vohn shared their feelings that disinformation is currently the biggest threat to democracy. In response, one of the young participants vocalised his hope that the level of disinformation online will eventually lead people to become more critical about what they see online. This demonstrates that [participants of the event had a range of different perspectives themselves](#). It might also suggest that younger generations are potentially less worried about the negative impact of digitalisation and AI and are able to identify silver linings.



With time running out, and an agreement from Barley's office to answer further questions from our members virtually, participants headed out to the Plenary Gallery to observe the place where EU democracy plays out every day. This activity put the pre-event preparation and knowledge on the internal workings of the EU into action for all participants and consolidated the importance of civil dialogue on youth and social work.

*"It's possible for them [young people] to get access to another world, and also to get motivated to form a view and opinion. They can get an idea of speaking and discussing upcoming topics."*

- *Social Youth Worker, Policy Event 2024*

#### **Session 4 – Conversations with European Stakeholders**

Finally, participants split up for the final agenda item of the day: a smaller, more intimate group meeting with three respective European stakeholder organisations.

**Topic:** Depending on the specific session, these meetings served as a platform for exchange of experiences and insights. Discussing the implications of the recent European election on social and youth policy, youth active citizenship, and social cohesion. It was also a platform for the exchange of best practices of activating and empowering young people to become more engaged in social and community work.

### Stakeholder groups:

- [Social Platform](#) – Robert Ranson, Katja Reuter
- [Young European Socialists](#) – Sofie Amalie Stage
- [Caritas Europa](#) – Agnieszka Zarzyńska

During our meeting with Social Platform, we discussed engagement strategies and how our respective organisations are working with stakeholders, such as MEPs, to promote our member's work. A key message we took away was that [post-COVID 19 there is a need to work, and think, in a more digitally agile manner](#). Social Platform shared their experience that many MEPs now prefer digital engagement over in person events and meetings, a point which YES Forum will continue to reflect upon with their members going forward.

As part of the session with the Young European Socialists, participants were given an overview of their work and how the organisation is focusing on critical issues such as digitalisation and combating fake news. In response to participants questions, Stage highlighted how young people use social media to express their concerns on housing costs, inflation and economic challenges, and stressed that [despite global crises and other geopolitical tensions, it is important to continue to fight for a united and resilient Europe](#). We wholeheartedly agree.

Our main takeaway from our meeting with Caritas Europe was that they were [committed to the inclusion of young people at the highest level](#), including within their executive board. Participants also heard how Caritas had creatively leveraged digital tools through one of their projects to bridge the gap between younger and older generations, fostering connection and combating loneliness among the elderly. We are pleased that the decision to appoint an EU Commissioner with responsibility for intergenerational fairness will keep this important topic high on the agenda.

The final sessions were designed to be more intimate to provide participants with an opportunity for smaller group discussion. The effect was that some professional and youth participants who had not previously contributed within the larger settings felt compelled to share their perspectives. One young participant told us it was easier to voice their opinion within the smaller group.

All three stakeholder meetings resulted in a rich discussion among participants and stakeholders, and provided sources of inspiration for us at the YES Forum Secretariat, as well as our members, to consider as we go into the new year.



## Evaluation and takeaways

Youth participants were given multiple, special ways to share their opinions and views with the YES Forum. The first option was for the young participants to respond to a physical evaluation form on both days. These forms focused especially on [their feelings, impressions and expressions](#). The second option was an online evaluation form – specifically designed for the young participants - that was sent to them after the event was finished. This form focused more on the [evaluation of the whole event](#); including what they thought of it, whether they had tips to improve the event, and anything else they would like to tell us. The professional participants also received an online evaluation form after the event, in which they also had the opportunity to share their reflections and main takeaways.



Looking at the feedback we received, several learnings can be taken into consideration. For example, one piece of feedback given to us by a young participant was that they felt the first day was very long and busy. They shared that they had felt tired, and as one young participant said: *"It was sometimes exhausting to sit for so long, but it was very interesting"*. In addition, one respondent, when asked for specific tips to improve the event, mentioned the following: *"perhaps slightly longer breaks or [the event should be] spread over several days"*. Professionals seemed to agree with this, mentioning that they would have liked more time for informal discussion, for example about new project ideas. They also mentioned that some discussion could have been longer, as they still had a lot they wanted to discuss with the speakers.

The YES Forum will take this feedback into consideration, as fatigue among participants leads to less concentration and difficulty following the dialogue. It is important to keep in mind that for many of the young participants it was their first time in Brussels, first time at a YES Forum event, and for all of them it was an event which was not conducted in their mother tongue. We will also keep in mind the request from participants for more time to exchange ideas and reflections. We consider it a good sign that participants were so invested in the topic and missed more time to go deeper into discussions. However, combining the need for more space for discussion with the desire not to overload the programme with too much content is still a challenge.

Another observation that we made from the evaluation forms is that the more [interactive parts](#) of the dialogue were valued by the youth participants. When asked what made the biggest impression on them, one young participant stated: *"The involvement with the chairs, when we voted and listened to the questions"*

*asked by us kids.*" The young participant refers to the take a stand activity that was done during the second session of the first day. It is important to incorporate these types of activities during events that require everyone to participate. This not only contributes to participants feeling included but also raises energy levels that might have lowered after sitting and listening for a while. The professionals were mostly impressed by the mix of different people that came together at the policy event. One professional said, when asked what they considered the most successful or most valuable part of the policy event, *"the voices and input from the different people who joined the event"*.

The last important feedback we received was that **language still posed a problem** for some of the young participants. This is a challenge that every organisation working in the field of international social or youth work faces. Although we have provided multiple tools to decrease this problem (e.g., WhatsApp group, encouraging participants to write in their own languages, asking speakers to repeat themselves or talk more slowly), the language barrier remains a difficulty. One young participant highlighted that the use of technical language and long sentences by speakers were especially difficult to understand. While the WhatsApp group proved useful to reduce the language barrier, perhaps pressing speakers to answer in a more accessible language and the use of visual aids can reduce the barrier further in the future. Professionals also flagged this problem, mentioning that the language was sometimes too difficult or too 'dry' for young participants. Several solutions mentioned by professionals were to include translators for the young people, to make more use of visual aid, or have more discussions in smaller groups. The YES Forum and its members will keep developing new methods and continue to share this knowledge.

As the YES Forum we were really interested to learn what our young participants had to say about the tools they were given to voice their opinions during the Policy Event 2024. We were very happy to learn that on both days, the **young participants felt that they had had the chance to express themselves**. However, one participant pointed out that he would have had the chance, but he was too busy listening and forming his own opinion about the topic. The participants liked the tools they were given and one participant described them as *"very nice, [as] you don't have to speak yourself"*. Another participant mentioned that the WhatsApp group in particular proved to be very helpful.



We also asked the participants **what they learnt** during the event. After the first day, two young participants said that they had especially learnt a lot during the session about digital tools, as digital

tools were particularly of interest to them. Another answer given by a young person was that they felt they had learnt [to listen to different opinions](#), and as a result had changed their perspective on things, improving their way of thinking about technology overall. After the second day, which took place primarily in European Parliament, many young participants said that [they learnt a lot about the European Union and its mechanisms](#). We were also very pleased to read that in all responses to the evaluation forms, the young participants stated they would definitely join again if they have the chance! Professionals shared the opinion of the young participants, with a majority also reflecting on the new knowledge about the European Union. Professionals also gained valuable insights about different perspectives on digitalisation – including the youth perspective – and how to keep up with and keep everybody on board during the digital transition.

Lastly, we asked all participants whether it was important that there were disadvantaged young participants present at the policy event. [All participants unanimously agree that it is essential that young people are included in the dialogue](#) and that they get the chance to share their opinion with European policymakers and stakeholders. In addition, it was also argued that the experience of the policy event is important to show young participants what participation can look like. When asked why it was important for them to be present at the Policy Event, our young participants answered especially firmly. They stated that [it was important for them to be present to show that they do have an opinion](#) and want to participate in the discussion. As one young participant declared – and we could not have said it better ourselves –:

*[“Listen to the opinion of young people, not just the opinion that you put in their mouths or that you want to hear, because it is also the young people's future.”](#)*

- *[Young Participant, Policy Event 2024](#)*