

ESDN Youth Network Policy Note

September 2026

Resilience 2.0: Strengthening democracy as a common good: countering polarization, supporting community building and safeguarding democratic standards

Introduction

In 2020 the [European Sustainable Development Network](#) established the ESDN [Youth](#) Network, which is funded by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety.

Its yearly on-site event, the **ESDN Youth Workshop 2026**, took place on **12–15 August 2026** in Vienna at the Austrian Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management, brought together more than 42 UN Youth Delegates and National Representatives on Sustainable Development (SD) from 31 European countries to discuss issues most relevant to them.

The overarching theme of the Workshop was “**Resilience 2.0**” as described in the [2025 Strategic Foresight Report - European Commission](#). Four of the eight areas of action mentioned in the report were dealt with in more detail according to a ranking carried out by the ESDN Youth Network:

- Supporting sustainable and inclusive well-being
- Strengthening democracy as a common good
- Developing a coherent global vision for the EU
- Strengthen long-term economic resilience

Over the four days of the Workshop, Youth Members heard input from experts on all of

these topics and were given ample opportunity to discuss these topics and issues with one another.

The main goal of the Workshop, apart from providing a space for Youth Members to exchange ideas with one another, was to produce a policy document with recommendations on the topics covered throughout the Workshop. This was done by the Youth Members working in smaller groups on five different issues. This Policy Note focuses on Core Issue 2. The other Policy Notes are available separately, as well as in one complete document.

- **Core Issue 1: Reimagining education - coupling education reform with future-oriented labor market and social policies**
- **Core Issue 2: Strengthening democracy as a common good: countering polarization, supporting community building and safeguarding democratic standards**
- **Core Issue 3: Strengthening long-term economic resilience -increasing the ability to deliver sustainable and inclusive growth (circular economy and a resilient labor market)**
- **Core Issue 4: Developing a coherent global vision for Europe - asserting Europe’s position as a strong, stable, and trusted worldwide partner, based on a clear strategic concept**
- **Core Issue 5: Sustainable and inclusive well-being**

Strengthening democracy as a common good: countering polarization, supporting community building and safeguarding democratic standards

Democracy is not a permanent or self-sustaining condition. Democratic institutions, public trust, and meaningful civic participation require continuous protection and renewal, particularly at a time when the digital transformation of public life has changed both how democracy is practiced and how it is contested. Across Europe, political debate has shifted decisively into digital spaces, creating new opportunities for participation and access to information, but also new vulnerabilities to manipulation, polarization, and disinformation. These pressures do not originate from a single source: they combine external interference, domestic political dynamics, and structural features of the digital environment itself.

This note argues that a resilient European democracy rests on three interdependent pillars: defending democratic institutions and public trust against threats from every direction, adapting the digital information environment so that it serves rather than undermines informed citizenship, and renewing democratic legitimacy by making young people genuine actors in political life rather than its passive subjects.

Democratic resilience, for the purposes of this document, can be understood as the capacity of a democratic system to absorb pressure, correct itself, and retain public legitimacy, without suspending the rights and freedoms it exists to protect. This capacity is now tested under conditions unlike those democracies faced a generation ago: algorithmic curation mediates much of what citizens see and believe; generative AI has sharply lowered the cost of producing convincing false content at scale; and foreign and domestic actors alike exploit the same digital mechanisms to deepen existing social divisions. Threats that were once treated separately (i.a. cyberattacks,

disinformation, political extremism, institutional erosion) increasingly interact through a shared digital public sphere, making them harder to address in isolation. Responding to this requires a comprehensive approach that treats external interference and internal vulnerability as two facets of the same challenge, rather than as separate policy domains.

Policy Recommendations: Protecting Democracy from Every Threat

External and internal threats are two faces of the same vulnerability. Foreign actors seeking to weaken European democracies typically do not invent new divisions; they exploit existing ones. Coordinated disinformation campaigns, political microtargeting, attacks on electoral infrastructure, and covert financial support for divisive political movements (increasingly grouped under the EU's own terminology of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)) and situated within the broader category of hybrid threats – aiming to deepen tensions that already exist within societies. Migration is sometimes instrumentalized within this landscape, with narratives around it amplified specifically to polarize rather than to inform. The underlying vulnerability, however, is domestic: rising populism, extremism, and declining institutional trust, which make societies more susceptible to these external efforts in the first place. A resilient democracy must therefore treat external attacks and internal vulnerabilities as a single problem, not two.

Digital discourse is the connective mechanism. The shift of political debate online accelerates both dynamics at once. Algorithmically amplified content turns disagreement into identity-based hostility rather than policy debate, echo chambers reduce exposure to opposing views, and online anonymity lowers the threshold for harassment. The consequence is a decline in the willingness to compromise, deepening distrust of institutions, and growing vulnerability to extremist narratives – the same conditions that make foreign interference more effective.

Institutional resilience and the limits of governance reform also have an impact. Beyond information-space measures, some proposals are put forward as possible safeguards against institutional capture and as tools for democratic renewal. One such measure could be a term limit for senior political office. Such proposals carry a genuine tension: they can support turnover and reduce entrenchment, but they also constrain the democratic mandate voters give to leaders they choose to re-elect. This note treats such governance measures as a legitimate subject for national debate *rather than* a recommendation to be applied uniformly, and any move in this direction should be weighed against its effect on voter choice as carefully as its effect on resilience.

Therefore, we recommend to:

- **Strengthen coordinated European responses to hybrid threats and FIMI**, including information-sharing between national authorities, the EU, the Council of Europe, and international partners, rather than relying on isolated national responses.
- **Support democratic institutions in other countries** – within and beyond the EU, including the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership states, and non-EU European countries – on the basis of partnership and technical cooperation, not political conditionality.
- **Agree on election-period rapid-response protocols between electoral authorities, platforms, and civil society** before campaigns begin, not during them.
- **Address the domestic drivers of vulnerability**, including declining institutional trust, political disengagement, and inadequate protections for journalists and civil society, with the same urgency as external threats.
- **Encourage open, evidence-based national debate on governance safeguards**, such as necessary prior training or education before assuming

office or term limits for elected officials across the spectrum of local, regional, national and supranational levels, acknowledging the trade-offs between institutional renewal and a democratic mandate.

Policy Recommendations: Democracies Need to Adapt to the Digital Age

Algorithms and the integrity of the information environment are important issues that also need to be addressed. Social media algorithms are generally optimized to maximize engagement, which means they tend to prioritize emotionally charged content and repeatedly expose users to material that reinforces their existing views. This does not merely reflect public opinion; it actively shapes it by determining what is amplified, repeated, and made visible. Generative AI compounds this problem: convincing false images, audio, and video can now be produced cheaply and at scale, used to misrepresent candidates, fabricate events, or cast doubt on facts and genuine evidence altogether. Treating algorithmic curation and AI-generated content as a single, connected challenge, rather than as separate "platform" and "AI" issues, better reflects how they positively reinforce each other in practice.

Factchecking, media literacy, and reliable media, therefore, need to act as complementary defenses. Factchecking establishes whether a specific claim is accurate, but it cannot keep pace with how quickly false narratives spread, nor can it substitute for citizens' own capacity to question sources and recognize manipulation. Media literacy is therefore a necessity. This extends to the health of the media environment itself: independent, adequately funded public media, transparent ownership structures, and clear information about the funding sources behind political content all shape whether citizens have reliable alternatives to algorithmically curated feeds in the first place. Weak public media and opaque content funding leave a vacuum that manipulation fills more easily.

Data, political advertising, and transparency also need to be considered. Detailed personal data allows political actors to target individuals with personalized messages invisible to the wider public, undermining the transparency that allows journalists, electoral authorities, and citizens to scrutinize campaigns. Clearer rules on political advertising, data use, and campaign funding are a necessary condition for meaningful public debate, not a peripheral technical concern.

Therefore, we recommend to:

- **Require meaningful transparency on recommender systems** with a readily accessible non-profiling feed option set as the default for minors.
- **Ensure clear labelling of AI-generated political content**, paired with platform-side provenance signals and rapid-response mechanisms during elections.
- **Fund and evaluate digital and media literacy programs** on the basis of evidence while prioritizing approaches shown to build resilience to manipulation, not only "spotting fake news."
- **Safeguard the independence and funding of public and local media** and require effective transparency on the financing of political content and advertising.
- **Establish clearer, enforceable rules on political micro-targeting and campaign data use** that is applicable across the European media and advertising space, and not only within EU borders.

Policy Recommendations: Youth as the Guiding Force for Democracy

Youth should be seen as both targets and agents. Young people are not only affected by today's political, social, and digital decisions – they will live with their consequences the longest. Heavy exposure to online information makes them particular targets of manipulation and algorithmic influence, yet the same digital

fluency also positions them as some of the most effective agents of democratic resilience, through digital literacy, factchecking, and youth-led civic initiatives. Treating young people only as a vulnerable group, without recognizing their agency, misses half the picture.

Participation of youth in democratic processes remains fragmented and symbolic. Despite this potential, youth involvement in democratic institutions is too often dependent on individual goodwill rather than embedded formal structures: consultations without binding follow-up, youth-led projects without a seat in actual decision-making, and participation mechanisms that are under-resourced compared to those available to experts and policymakers. Symbolic participation does not build trust but rather risks deepening disengagement.

Electoral and institutional access are also challenges facing youth participation in democracy. Several concrete measures could reduce these barriers: youth quotas or quorums in local and regional councils, with an obligation on political parties to include younger candidates; giving municipal youth councils a formal right to place proposals on the agenda of local councils; aligning the minimum age for candidacy with the minimum voting age, so that young people are not permitted to vote before they are permitted to stand; and simplifying voter registration to reduce the mis-registration that disproportionately affects first-time voters. Lowering the voting age to 16 is one option worth considering within this package; not primarily as a numerical expansion of the electorate, but as a way of forcing political debate to engage more directly with issues that matter to younger generations. Any such step, however, must be accompanied by a robust system of civic and democratic education from an early age; extending the franchise without preparing young people to meaningfully exercise it would risk symbolic inclusion rather than genuine participation.

Civic and digital-democratic education for youth is a must. Education for democratic resilience should go beyond identifying

misinformation to include an understanding of how algorithms shape political perception, how polarization develops, and how manipulation tactics operate – building directly on the literacy measures set out under the recommendations made above in democracies needing to adapt to the digital age, but oriented toward forming active democratic participants rather than solely defending against manipulation.

Therefore, we recommend to:

- **Establish binding, resourced consultation mechanisms for youth in democratic-resilience governance,** replacing advisory-only or project-based formats with structural, funded participation.
- **Introduce youth quotas in local and regional councils** and give municipal youth councils formal agenda-setting rights.
- **Align minimum candidacy age with minimum voting age** and simplify voter registration to reduce structural barriers facing first-time voters.
- **Explore lowering the voting age** as one option for engaging youth in political debate, conditional on parallel investment in civic education and not as a standalone measure.
- **Integrate civic and digital-democratic education across all levels of schooling,** evaluated on its measurable effect on civic engagement rather than left unevaluated indefinitely.

Conclusion

Democracy in Europe faces no single threat that can be addressed in isolation. External interference and internal polarization reinforce one another through a shared digital public sphere; algorithmic curation and AI-generated content determine much of what citizens come to believe as true; and young people stand at the center of this environment, as both its most exposed targets and its most underused source of renewal. Treating these as three separate aspects – security, technology, and youth

policy – has produced responses that are reactive, fragmented, and too often too narrow to match the scale of the challenge.

A more resilient European democracy requires the three pillars set out in this note to move together. Defending institutions against external and internal threats will not hold if the information environment continues to reward manipulation over accuracy. Adapting the digital environment will not restore public trust if young people remain locked out of genuine participation. Youth participation will also not be meaningful if it is not backed by both a trustworthy information space and institutions resilient enough to sustain it. Strengthening democracy in the digital era is not a matter of choosing which of these to prioritize, but of recognizing that none of them can succeed without the others.