

Digital youth engagement in Slovakia and Poland: How is technology leveraging participatory democracy

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Abstract

In an ever-evolving technological landscape marked by increased digital connectivity, the engagement of young people online becomes of paramount importance for democratic governance. This policy paper centres on a comprehensive exploration of youth digital civic participation within the Visegrad countries, focused on Slovakia and Poland. The analysis reveals challenges in disseminating information, digital literacy, lack of institutional coordination and policy alignment, alongside opportunities for strengthening digital partnerships and networks. In evaluating the existing landscape of digital youth engagement in these countries, the paper not only provides recommendations for enhancing democratic processes through digital civic participation but also seeks to inform targeted interventions that promote an inclusive and vibrant digital civic culture among young people in Slovakia and Poland.

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Introduction

The involvement of young people in civic activities is increasingly acknowledged as a vital element in fostering vibrant communities and promoting democratic values.¹ Recent technological shifts from traditional democratic engagement such as voting in elections or participating in council meetings, to digital alternatives of online activism and participation have offered novel possibilities for the social and political organisation of individuals and communities.² In a digitally-driven era, understanding young people's online civic engagement is crucial for promoting democratic values and active citizenship.

The platforms that are offered online for young people's engagement empower them through the provision of information about certain issues, useful connections with like-minded peers, access to other relevant organisations or taking the lead for active action for healthier and more sustainable democratic communities.³ However, with this transition of public life into the digital realm, numerous challenges and opportunities arise when it comes to meaningfully empowering digitally-driven youth alongside protecting and strengthening democracy.

Insights gathered from young people in the Visegrad countries (V4) through public opinion surveys showed that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted young people's interest in politics and public affairs, particularly in the online realm.⁴ In Slovakia and Poland, digital engagement among youth, as in many other European countries, has been on rise due to the increased availability of digital technologies. However, the analysis in this paper shows that many challenges persist especially in relation to the political situation, lack of coordination with relevant stakeholders, proper financial funding or sustainability of initiatives. These factors impact young people's ability to navigate digital civic engagement in an effective and meaningful manner.

Guided by theoretical frameworks like digital engagement and participatory democracy, this paper draws from desk research, policy documents, and informal interviews with stakeholders from the governmental and non-governmental sector in Slovakia and Poland. Its findings and recommendations intend to inform interventions that foster an inclusive digital civic culture among young people in order to sustain and strengthen democratic processes in the Visegrad region.

¹ Bermudez A. (2012) "Youth civic engagement: decline or transformation?"

² Jordana J. George, Dorothy E. Leidner (2019). "From clicktivism to hacktivism: Understanding digital activism"

³ Walker R. and Goldie K. (2008) "Our Space: Online Civic Engagement Tools for Youth." Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth"

⁴ NDI 2020 Report Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy in Central Europe

Definition of digital civic engagement

The adoption of digital methods to encourage citizen involvement is becoming increasingly widespread on a global scale.⁵ Civic space can be referred to as a set of all-encompassing formal and informal channels that allow people and groups to participate meaningfully in the social, economic, and political life of a community. These channels facilitate effective access to information, discourse, and the expression of diverse viewpoints.⁶

For the purpose of this analysis, youth digital engagement in the civic space is understood as civic engagement carried out by young people through digital media and channels for political participation and action.⁷ In this regard, youth civic engagement is significant for early civic education and for the young people's wellbeing linked to a sense of socio-political empowerment.⁸ To ensure, however, that such an end goal is reached effectively, young people should be provided with equitable access to technology and digital literacy for meaningful and secure online engagement.

Many young individuals exposed to technology at a young age are often referred to as "digital natives" that communicate primarily via digital platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic has hastened this trend even more, urging governments and other actors to better understand the behaviour of young people, build communication channels to inform them and implement innovative mechanisms for youth participation in policy development and decision-making.⁹

At the same time, while the world moves towards greater connectivity and digitalisation, there is a persistent digital divide that separates the youth with access to information and technology from those without it. This only emphasises the need for stronger material equity among young people. Without appropriate conditions, empowering young people to become an active part of digital civic engagement for participatory democracy¹⁰ would become substantially more difficult.

⁵ Steinbach, M., Wilker, N., & Schöttle, S. (2020) E-participation on the local level—A census survey approach for researching its implementation

⁶ UN Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space (2020)

⁷ UNICEF: Digital civic engagement by young people, (2020)

⁸ Metzger et al., (2019) "Adolescents' Civic Engagement: Concordant and Longitudinal Associations among Civic Beliefs and Civic Involvement"

⁹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2016) World Youth Report: Youth Civic Engagement

¹⁰ Choi, E. Y., et al (2020) "Does perceived ageism widen the digital divide? And does it vary by gender?"

Visegrad countries' level perspectives: Slovakia and Poland

In the European Union, young people persist in experiencing a sense of disengagement from political procedures and believe that they are not involved enough to feel sufficiently represented.¹¹ Encouraging them to participate fully in social, economic, and political activities is the main goal of the EU Youth Strategy which through education and digital tools aims to strengthen citizenship competencies.¹² In order to improve access and assist young people in adjusting to digital means, the Member States are urged to modify digital opportunities and establish a framework for youth workers to facilitate the deployment of new technologies and novel pedagogical approaches.¹³

In the Visegrad countries (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary), about one-third of teenagers experienced some kind of youth participation in their communities either through public or non-governmental channels, usually as members of youth organisations. They also utilise a variety of social media sites to engage with content coming from governmental and civil society actors. According to them, engaging with political and social information is greatly facilitated by online spaces where they are able to actively share online links, articles, and other content relating to social and political subjects.¹⁴

Slovakia

While young people in Slovakia favour the democratic system of government,¹⁵ there is a relative lack of inclination to actively engage in political life, such as initiating or signing various forms of online petitions. Yet, around two-thirds of young Slovaks wish they had more opportunities to express their political ideas.¹⁶

NDI's public opinion report in 2018 revealed that young people in Central Europe are not politically engaged and are rather polarised. Their disinterest in long-term political engagement resulted from their perception that political institutions did not fairly represent their opinions and concerns.¹⁷ However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 had a significant impact on young people's priorities, viewpoints, and political satisfaction. NDI's public opinion in 2020 report indicated that 68% of Slovak

¹¹ GLOBSEC Report (2019) Young Minds on Democratic Horizons: Paving the Way for the EU's Promising Future Attitudes

¹² European Youth Portal. Engage! - EU Youth Strategy

¹³ Council of Europe (2023) Social Inclusion, Digitalisation and Young People

¹⁴ Council of Europe. (2017). Political Participation of Youth in V4 Countries

¹⁵ Political Capital Institute (2015) Youth, Politics, Democracy: Public Opinion Research in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia

¹⁶ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2015). Youth in Politics and Society: Between Participation and Exclusion

¹⁷ National Democratic Institute (2018). Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy in Slovakia

youth claimed to be interested in politics and public affairs during that time. When asked about key sources of information they used, the youth referred to Facebook, public governmental websites, and television channels.

To answer the Slovak youth's demand for more information, the Ministry of Interior of Slovakia has carried out the Initiative for Open Governance to digitalise public participation through various means. However, when it came to youth as a key target group, the initiative recorded only modest results.¹⁸

Furthermore, the public's awareness regarding the use of electronic methods for accessing information is still low with the main reasons attributed to limited internet access, low digital literacy, and concerns about security risks.¹⁹ The information flow between the government and public primarily occurs through official government accounts on Facebook and Instagram, where the government officials strive to interact with citizens and provide informative content.²⁰

The Slovak government has also attempted to implement projects and initiatives aimed at enhancing media literacy, drawing on the significant interest from the youth willing to engage in such activities.²¹ Young people have expressed satisfaction in such activities, with some of the key areas of interest for them including critical thinking, media literacy, geopolitical news, European affairs, and climate change, reflecting a global perspective for political engagement in their preferences.²²

However, despite the efforts made, In order to better support youth digital civic participation, the government and stakeholders should raise awareness, implement innovative education programmes, allocate funds for youth-led initiatives, ensure policy alignment, and maximise EU resources.²³ The importance of investing in financial and human resources, capacity building, and the development of clear policies for online youth engagement have been continuously identified as the main obstacles in achieving a more effective citizen engagement.²⁴

Other significant issues identified point to the disparity in the access to information, an insufficient degree of education and critical thinking skills as well as low digital literacy. An OECD study from 2020

¹⁸ European Commission, National Policies (2023). Young People's Participation in Policy Making in Slovakia

¹⁹ Institute for Public Affairs, E-Democracy in Slovakia

²⁰ Informal interview with a representative from the governmental sector in Slovakia

²¹ Informal interview with representative from the governmental sector in Slovakia

²² Informal interview with representative from the governmental sector in Slovakia

²³ Informal interview with representative from the governmental sector in Slovakia

²⁴ Informal interview with representative from the governmental sector in Slovakia

showed that in Slovakia youth digital skills are falling short of the OECD average, with significant disparities identified in the field of technology-related platforms and industries.²⁵

The need for systematic initiatives to educate and empower young individuals in digital literacy and skills remains a prerequisite for the country to strengthen the way how young individuals interact with participatory democratic processes. Dealing with issues such as polarisation, lack of coordination among relevant stakeholders, and financial constraints in engaging young people represent another set of issues which stakeholders in Slovakia need to address.²⁶

While young people seem to be substantially skilled in adapting to new technologies, teachers and public officials tend to struggle with current technological trends significantly. An increased investment in curricula and informal education, together with more sustainable funding mechanisms directed towards the areas of digitalisation and critical thinking could therefore considerably contribute to healthier democratic participation of youth in the community.²⁷

Poland

An overwhelming majority of young people in Poland favour the democratic political system, with voting considered the most apparent way for them to participate in politics. However, despite their continued strong support for democracy, young people's endorsement of democratic values in Poland has declined since 2008 as they are becoming more frustrated with their political system.²⁸

When compared to their peers in the Visegrad region, the Polish youth recorded the biggest decrease in satisfaction with the government as well as the interest in public affairs overall.²⁹

The Polish government has reaffirmed its commitment to advancing digital transformation in 2020, by joining the ranks of other EU members and signing the Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Value-Based Digital Government. A new strategy focusing on digital cross-sector cooperation, the adoption of user-friendly public eServices, and digital upskilling of officials in public institutions were identified as the main priorities in the coming years.³⁰

²⁵ OECD (2020), Skills Strategy Slovak Republic: Report Summary

²⁶ Informal interview with representative from civil society sector in Slovakia

²⁷ Informal interview with representative from civil society sector in Slovakia

²⁸ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2015) Youth in Poland: Caught between East and West

²⁹ NDI Report (2019) Frustrated, Resilient Polish Youth and Democratic Engagement

³⁰ European Commission (2022), Digital Public Administration Factsheet

The civil society in Poland actively involves youth through digital channels and dedicated online platforms. When it comes to key channels used for access to information regarding political and socio-economic subjects, youths in Poland frequently get information about politics and society from Facebook, media outlets, television channels, and radio.³¹

While traditional methods of participation in democratic processes are dwindling, recent developments show that young people in Poland are willing to organise and take action on issues that are important to them through signing petitions, joining political parties, or attending protests and being vocal online through digital media.³² Furthermore, they have expressed that they feel empowered through engaging in online initiatives and through digital participation in the online world, and capable of influencing political decisions or discussions.³³ They have been organising and participating in youth-led initiatives through a series of webinars and campaigns under the theme “talking about the internet” to reach more peers through digital means.³⁴

However, similar to the situation in Slovakia, there is a need to strengthen digital literacy and skills among youth in Poland. Studies on digital competences of Polish youth reveal significant disparities between rural and urban youth, with young people in rural areas generally self-assessing their own digital competency as lower than their urban counterparts, while also indicating they use online platforms, mass media and e-services less frequently.³⁵

In 2023, the city of Lublin in Poland, held the title of the European Youth Capital, which turned into a youth-led program having in its focus the provision of equal opportunities for youth and their inclusion in the social and political life of the city.³⁶ The European Youth Capital (EYC) program has improved outreach to young people in the city and raised awareness on issues of digitalisation and usage of technology to leverage democracy and the civic engagement of youth - serving as a good practice and example.³⁷ Raising awareness, filling digital literacy gaps among youth in rural and urban regions, battling misinformation, and addressing the impact of polarisation on skewed information and political viewpoints are some of the key challenges to be addressed by the relevant stakeholders for young people in Poland.

³¹ NDI Report (2020) Frustrated but Resilient: Polish Youth and Democratic Engagement

³² Institute for Structural Research (2020) Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy in Poland

³³ British Council (2017) Next Generation

³⁴ Croll J. & Krause T. (2023) “Digital Youth Participation in Digital Democracy”

³⁵ Tomczyk Ł. (2023). Digital Transformation and Digital Competences of Urban and Rural Polish Youths

³⁶ European Youth Capital is a title awarded by the European Youth Forum to empower local communities and youth-led action for boosting youth participation.

³⁷ City of Lublin, EYC 2023

Opportunities and recommendations

Digital transformation, democracy, and good governance share a fundamental characteristic: they are all dynamic processes that continually evolve. Their progression is influenced by a multitude of internal and external factors, and they are interconnected, particularly in what is commonly referred to as 'the digital age.' In this age, digital transformation has a profound impact on all facets of the public sphere, including individuals, communities, public institutions, and the overall state of democracy. Following the desk research and informal interviews which provide key insights into the current state of digital youth engagement in Slovakia and Poland, key recommendations for government and non-governmental stakeholders emerge:

Address the digital divide and invest in digital skills for youth

To ensure equitable access for youth, it is imperative to address the digital divide, primarily focusing on issues related to accessibility and affordability of the internet and digital devices. Governments should work to make digitalisation more accessible and implement policies that make digital tools more affordable. This can be achieved through educational programs, training initiatives, and skill development courses as well as through both formal and non-formal education mechanisms that support youth to enhance their critical thinking. Legislation and formal initiatives are already in place in both Slovakia and Poland - countries that have expressed their commitment to advancing technological empowerment and digitalisation in their societies. However, the legislation and initiatives need to be put in practice in a meaningful and sustainable way. Democratic governance would flourish, which, through digital access, would simultaneously strengthen efforts to empower well-informed individuals, and enrich their contributions to public decision-making.

Foster institutional coordination among stakeholders and ensure policy alignment

It is important to strengthen coordination and policy coherence among institutions and stakeholders engaged in youth digital engagement, through a multi-stakeholder approach. While youth issues and policies might not always be high on the political agenda, there needs to be a unified approach and focus on topics of youth empowerment and their digital skills as the world moves towards strengthened technological developments in the public and democratic realm. A more encouraging climate for young digital civic engagement would result from increased collaboration and policy alignment among key stakeholders in Slovakia. Lack of proper financial funding and sustainability of initiatives impact young people's ability to navigate digital civic engagement in an effective and meaningful manner.

Build digital partnerships and networks for more outreach and awareness raising

This should entail fostering collaboration between government agencies, civil society organisations, educational institutions, media, and the private sector to ensure a cohesive approach to youth participation in digital initiatives. Collaboration between these diversified groups of stakeholders is essential to develop and implement effective strategies for youth engagement in the digital age. These partnerships can leverage diverse resources and expertise to create impactful initiatives. Furthermore, there is more to be done in both countries for increasing outreach and awareness-raising on the importance of digital skills and literacy as well as the use of digital platforms for online participation in democratic systems. This will connect and empower youth and also give new pathways for digital networks and partnerships to flourish. While legislative documents and formal agreements and initiatives are already a good foundation in place in both countries of Slovakia and Poland, they need to be put into practice in a sustainable manner, as well as to be monitored and evaluated in order to fit the local and national contexts.

A holistic strategy that empowers youth in the digital age involves tackling the digital divide, boosting digital skills, ensuring policy coherence, and fostering institutional cooperation and digital partnerships. This approach helps to establish an inclusive and supportive environment, enabling young people to actively engage in the digital realm.

Through these pathways, digital engagement of youth would serve as a strong catalyst for enhancing democratic processes, promoting transparency, citizen participation, and responsiveness in governance, by helping sustain and strengthen democratic governance and its processes.

Conclusion

As 2030 draws nearer, a number of issues are pressing: deepening political rifts, a growing mistrust of institutions, and the fallout from a worldwide pandemic that disproportionately impacted youth and widened the gap between generations.³⁸ It is now more important than ever to figure out how to provide young people with access to participation in the democratic life of their countries, which includes the means and methods for online engagement in the digital world.

³⁸European Economic and Social Committee, the 2030 Agenda: The European Union committed to support the sustainable development goals globally.

Youth digital engagement is becoming hampered by a number of issues and barriers, such as insufficient knowledge about the channels and opportunities for participation as well as a lack of skills and information incentives, or trust in the government, to name a few. With active and meaningful youth engagement in society being a fundamental element of sustainable development, governments may find it difficult to effectively navigate and address complex issues on their own. For this reason, it is critical to work with a wide range of stakeholders, including the private sector, experts, academia, civil society organisations, and local communities.

This policy paper explored the current situation and trends in the Visegrad region, focused on Slovakia and Poland, showing a significant shift towards digital engagement among the youth after the pandemic, while emphasising the advantages and limitations of their civic engagement in online platforms. Key concerns included the digital literacy gap, the disparity in information access, lack of policy alignment, prioritisation in the political agenda and lack of funding allocation towards programs and initiatives that support the digital engagement of youth. The final recommendations of this policy paper underline key pathways for improvement such as: working towards enhancing digital literacy, strengthening communication channels, fostering trust, and building more cohesive collaborations among the stakeholders. These will serve as key components engaging and empowering youth in digital civic activities while strengthening their participation in safeguarding and sustaining democratic governance.

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