

04/06

Good afternoon, everyone. (*Introduce yourself, include CCJ and CI!*)

Anchoring it in the NDP framework

I'd like to begin my speech by anchoring it to the **New Democratic Pact's** pillar "Learning and Practising Democracy", emphasising the need to equip young people with the skills and attitudes necessary to foster **active citizenship**, both in online and offline spaces.

Key point in AI and Digital Governance – Youth participation

But as the Reference Framework on the integration of the youth perspective adopted in Malta last year emphasises, young people shouldn't just be empowered; they should meaningfully participate in AI and digital governance, wherein they should be recognised as **equal stakeholders** alongside member states, experts and private-sector actors.

This translates into:

- guaranteeing their **involvement** in decision-making,
 - Where the underlying idea is that a moral digital space cannot be deemed moral if morality is only determined by a few.
- while also **supporting and fostering new participatory initiatives**.

How do we foster active digital citizenship at the structural level?

....and the CoE youth department strives to achieve so through **non-formal education** programs (such as study sessions, workshops, trainings) taking place at the youth centres of Budapest and Strasbourg, the latter found on the other side of the Ill river, that gather around **15k** young people every year who, after a general understanding of the concepts through a multistakeholder dialogue, actively provide educated input in what they would like the digital environment to look like.

Then, because the youth department is **co-managed**, these inputs are used as the basis for our policy recommendations in plenary sessions of the Joint Council on Youth, where present at the table there is the **CCJ**, made up of 30 representatives under 35 from NYCs and INGYOs and the **CDEJ**, which includes representatives from the 46 member states.

Specifically related to the topic of **digitalisation**, our **mission** is to

- empower young people in safely navigating digital spaces through digital, media, and AI literacy programs (*mention AI literacy tool*);
- while advocating for these technologies and platforms to be not only human-friendly, but also **youth-friendly** through safeguards.

Distinction within the youth label and children

In the context of today's thematic conference, it is important to recognise that young people and children are **not a monolith**, as in too many discussions, they are put in the same category. Therefore **what we need is** a nuanced policy approach based on the **age gaps** and subsequent needs and interests is pivotal to assess in the stakeholder engagement phase.

- YP and children: For children under a certain age, for example, as critical thinking skills are not developed/taught yet, **access to social media should be restricted**; as they grow up, regulations and recommendations should change **gradually**. Their online activities should also be mediated by parental control, and in-platform mechanisms that I will mention in a second.
- Within the young people label: At the same time, the youth department mainly focuses on young people **15+**, which in turn is a **diverse group**, based on age (as the needs and interests of 15-year-olds are different from those of 24-year-olds), geographical contexts (as underlined in the difference between living in urban and rural areas), local legislative categories, and other degrees of vulnerabilities and marginalisation.

Specifically related to the ongoing discussions related to the social media ban...

Shift from binary to layered logic

The debate should move beyond the **binary** and **oversimplified** choice between “ban” and “do nothing,” toward a comprehensive response that combines—as the title of this session hints at—“education, empowerment, and proportionate and progressive regulation”

Problem statement

In this context, we ought to consider that **social media platforms** are now part of how young people:

- build their identity and relationships.
- gather information and therefore mould their democratic participatory experience.
- access to educational and working opportunities.

and young people and children are particularly sensitive because during these years, we go through:

- a period of identity formation and peer validation.

And currently, the **algorithmic features** of SM are not youth-friendly but rather **profit-oriented**, aiming at:

- “doom” scrolling and engagement optimisation → through algorithmic amplification

This ultimately can lead, among others, to cases of:

- harassment or loneliness, or isolation
- as well as of radicalisation and polarisation.

SM ban in terms of policy development, agency and responsibility

Here, however, not only would a **social media ban** be an oversimplification, but it would also be detrimental to young people’s digital engagement and democratic participation.

The *underlying rationale* here is that, as **physical civic and participatory spaces are shrinking** → modes of engagement are moving online, young people – especially those who do not have access to youth organisations, as is too often the case in rural contexts, LGBTQI+, and marginalised groups in general – cannot be shut out from them, as it would be going against existing rights frameworks. Then we can analyse the ban from different layers:

- 1st: In terms of policy development, studies have demonstrated that a blanket ban like the Australian example stagnates digital and media literacy when young people don’t engage online.
- 2nd: In terms of agency, preventing young people from accessing social media platforms would lead **governments** to be the only actors retaining agency over regulatory practices (indeed, the ban). While, young people within this framing are treated as **objects of care rather than right-holders**, as they are deemed incapable of safely navigating digital and online spaces. Ultimately, as I already said, shutting them out of democratic participation.
- 3rd: In terms of responsibility, at the EuroDIG, we discussed how $\frac{2}{3}$ of minors are still on social media in Australia. As bans are easy to circumvent, this would place the entire burden of responsibility on young people rather than on platforms, which would not have to implement youth-friendly features if the digital landscape is not supposed to accommodate them in the first place.

Therefore...

Yes, children and young people must be **protected**, but they are also **right-holders** whose **participation**, lived experiences, and evolving capacities matter.

→ Therefore, their **inclusion** not only in the design of policies, but also in their (*regulated!*) access to platforms, should not be an option but a **moral imperative**. And here, social media platforms should be tailored to the evolving capacities of children and young people.

Final points to develop

→ So, for example, **age restrictions**, not the whole social media platform access, could selectively apply to specific features that are particularly harmful to minors

- like push notification,
- public metrics,
- algorithmic content recommendation,
- as well as advertisements. *This reflects the rationale of the CDBIO strategic plan 2026-30, objective 6.2 and General Comment 25 of UNCRC.*

Here, the question is *how to design with **privacy** in mind while striving for **accuracy**.*

- There is no need to reinvent the wheel; we ought to look at existing good practices, like the **Digital Service Act**, which talks about third-party verification and moderation (from independent bodies).
- In terms of algorithm safety-by-design, prioritising:
 - less engagement-driven design choices and;
 - making sure that datasets are audible and reflect the diversity within the “youth” label.
- Data protection:
 - Then, especially related to CSAM, policies should prioritise **data protection** and should keep **privacy** (in end-to-end encrypted chats) as a central pillar.
- When it comes to assessment, policy responses should be evidence- and risk-based, *where it is important NOT to let platforms do their own risk assessment.*
- And finally, in terms of the broader ecosystem, we should cooperate with VPNs to prevent them from letting children access restricted dangerous digital spaces/features.

Closing

In conclusion, as social media isn't and shouldn't be going away anytime soon, the real question is: *do we want young people and children to show up there without the skills or support to take **part safely and meaningfully**?*

If we shut them out now, we inevitably leave them behind in a civic life that increasingly takes place online. That's **why they ultimately need spaces** where they can build and practice those skills.