



Can you hear us from the screen? The youth for safe internet space

Report from the youth consultations event in North Macedonia



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Introduction

The internet sphere has become an increasingly regulated space. [Research](#) by the OECD reveals that regulators have applied different approaches: industry standards, co-regulatory agreements between industry and the government, and, mostly protecting personal data and consumers, and adopting state laws. Moreover, generally applicable laws that address privacy, security and consumer protection in traditional economy apply to the digital economy as well. Yet, addressing the challenges the online platforms have brought to today's society has become a major concern of regulators.

The online platforms play a major role in facilitating internet interactions. These intermediaries host majority of the communication and transactions between the individuals, businesses, and government institutions. They became the gate keepers of the internet. These platforms have significant market power, take different forms and serve different purposes, and could emerge promptly with the number of users and businesses engaged significantly increasing in a short period of time. Despite such power, what makes it difficult to determine the right regulatory approach vis-à-vis these [platforms](#) is the fact there is the lack of consensus on what is the definition of an online platform, as well as the dilemma if the online platforms should [self-regulate](#) or be kept liable under [strict laws](#). The lack of consensus and lack of committed multilateral collaboration on creating new and enforcement of existing laws adds up to the overall difficulty to address the challenges these global platforms create.

In the midst of a global uncertainty regarding this issue, the European Union (EU) has been leading the way on providing solutions to the challenges these platforms bring. In 2015, the European Commission (EC) presented its [position](#) on how to regulate online platforms and support their development in the EU. This plan [aims](#) to create a level playing field, ensure responsible behaviour of online platforms to protect EU values, foster trust, transparency and ensure fairness on online platforms while fostering a data-driven economy by with open and non-discriminatory markets.

North Macedonia is expected to align its laws with the EU *acquis* and policies currently being developed. The policy development at the EU level will directly influence the citizens and businesses from the country. As a candidate country to the EU, neither the youth nor the Government have a direct say in the development of the regulatory framework in the EU. Even on national level, the [youth in North Macedonia](#) has limited influence in the policy development process. Majority, 58% of the youth, believe they cannot influence the work of the government, while the youth organisations are rarely consulted in the development of youth policies. Therefore, the youth from the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia, should be given space to share their use on how they see the internet fit in their lives, and have their say on the way the online platforms' regulatory environment develops in order to overcome the challenges and exploit the benefits that the online platforms brought to them and the society.

Presenting the main insights and conclusions from the youth consultations event organised in North Macedonia, we contribute to the understanding of the views on the youth in our country and give contribution to the design of the future policies in this area.

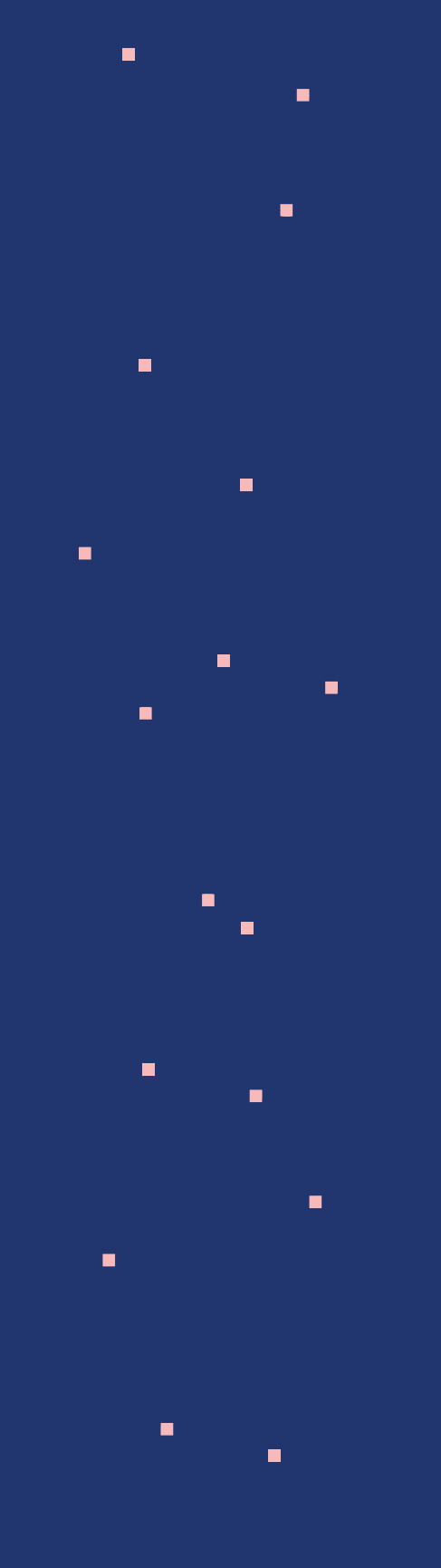
Methodology



The youth consultation events are a form of citizen consultations designed to understand the young citizens' perceptions of societal problems and their views on possible solutions for these problems. In this exercise, we aimed to understand the participants' personal experiences on the internet, both positive or negative, and their opinions on what policy actions and which stakeholders should be implementing these actions to improve the users experience.¹

The citizen consultation process had two main phases. In each phase, participants deliberated in four groups and then at a plenary session. In the first round, the groups discussed and agreed on what, in their opinion, are the positive sides and negatives sides of the internet. Group rapporteurs reflected on the group positions and all participants voted at the plenary. Following the same process in the second phase, participants identified policy actions that would maximise the positive experience and tackle the negatives sides of the Internet.

1 Same events were held in all Western Balkan countries. The findings from the discussions were published in a regional Discussion Paper, available at: <https://epc.eu/en/Publications/Balkan-youth-speaks-up-about-digital-issues-Lessons-for-the-Conferenc-3ea328>



In such a way we allowed for more concentrated discussion between participants in the group sessions and later between the groups. The facilitator systematised the arguments and proposals from the groups and put them to vote. Participants voted on the positive and negative sides in the first plenary, and in the second one on the policy priorities and the responsible actors.

For this brief, it was estimated that it would be highly relevant to present the voting results from the plenaries, as well as the key arguments raised during the group discussions. In this way we outline the key arguments and concerns which were not discussed at the plenary and try to capture the reasoning behind the voting.

The event was organised online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participation at this event was opened to all citizens in North Macedonia aged between 16 and 24 years of age, subject to prior registration. The registration survey was advertised on Facebook and shared on youth NGOs emailing lists and social media accounts.

In total, 25 young people participated in the event. Working languages at the event were Macedonian and Albanian language.²

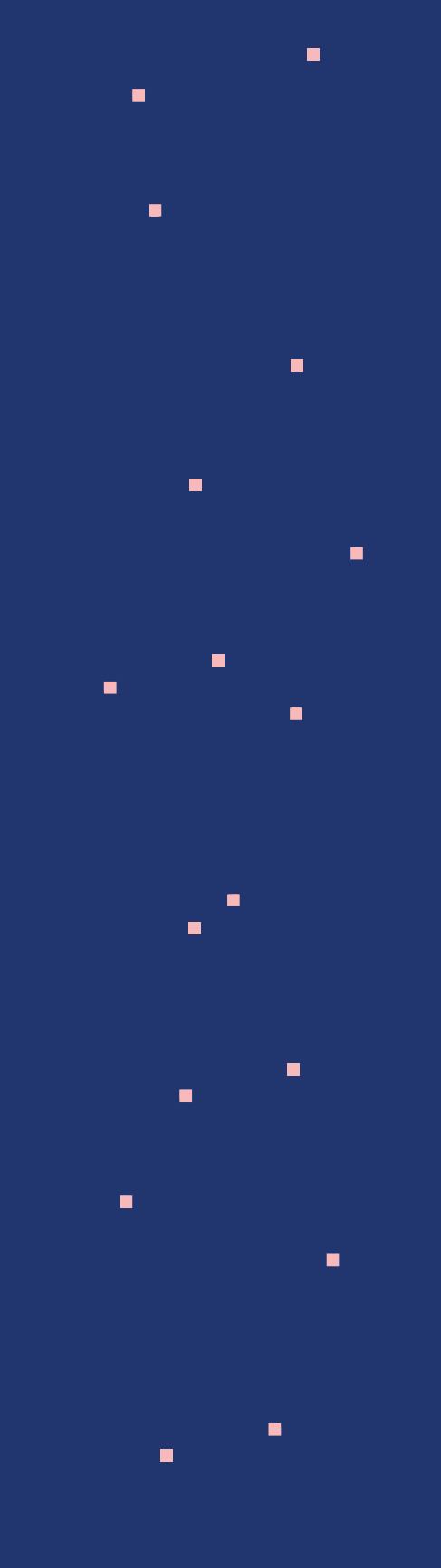
2 The participants were split in two Macedonian speaking groups and two Albanian speaking groups. At the plenary, the working language was Macedonian with the Albanian speaking facilitators translating in Macedonian.

State-of-play in regulating online platforms in the EU and in North Macedonia

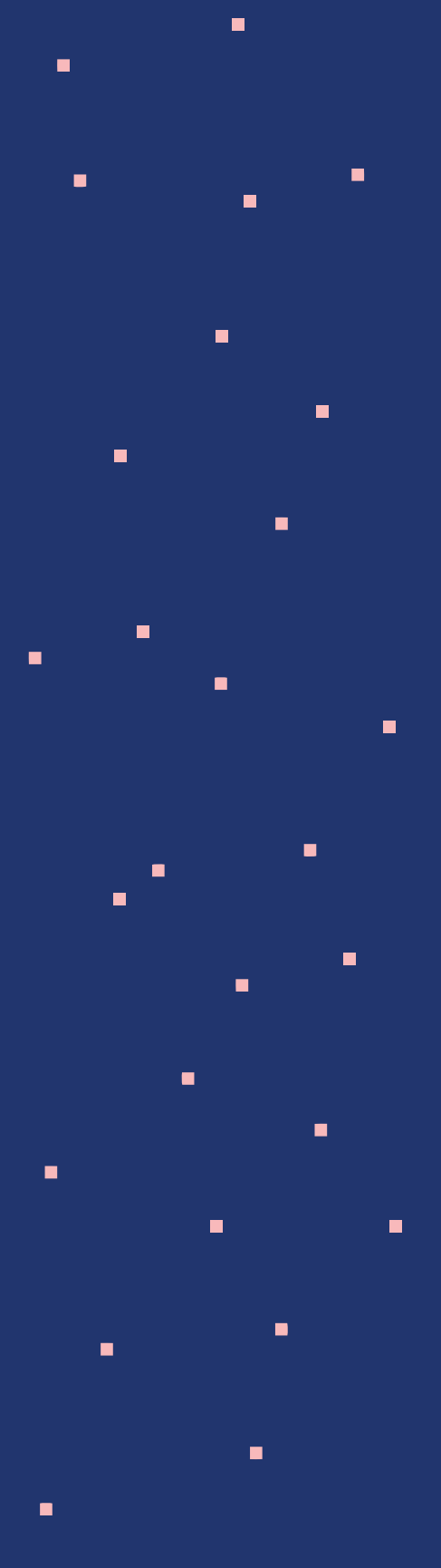
The consultation process on online platforms in the EU showed [divergent concerns](#) among different stakeholders. Businesses and the business associations focused on competition issues, copyright protection, search rankings and liability for user generated content, while associations of consumers and individual citizens were concerned with data protection and enforcement of consumer rights, and CSOs were mostly concerned with issues related to privacy, anonymity, and censorship. All parties were [concerned](#) with criminal and fraudulent online activities and the difficulty of enforcing existing legislation. The platforms' multi-sided nature and the blurry line between a user and consumer make [platforms](#) difficult to fit with existing EU regulations.

In its communication, the EC proposed a [regulatory framework](#) of four different approaches to online platforms:

- The first approach is harmonisation and applying same rules throughout the EU. The flagship initiative with this approach is the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- The second approach is based on applying existing rules in the EU to online platforms in specific areas such as competition, consumer protection, protection of personal data and single market freedoms.

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- The third is a problem-driven approach, where existing regulatory framework is examined in line with better regulation principles to address clearly identified problems that arise on online platforms. Under [this approach](#), specific directives address IP and copyrights infringement, terrorist content, market surveillance and compliance of products that are applicable to online platforms are being reviewed, and video-sharing platforms are [requested](#) to restrict access to harmful content to minors and both actors take action to advance users' media literacy.
 - Lastly, a self-regulatory or co-regulatory approach where industry players commit to take action to ensure application of legal requirements and appropriate monitoring mechanisms are in place. The [Code of Conduct](#) on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online, [monitored](#) annually by the Commission, The [Code of Practice](#) on Disinformation and the platforms' [road maps](#), and the [Recommendation](#) on measures to effectively tackle illegal content online are notable examples in this regard. Yet, some members state [consider](#) that co-regulating approach with enforcement mechanisms, sanctions and redress mechanisms should be put in place.

In North Macedonia, unlike the EU, there is [lack of comprehensive approach](#) on dealing with the issues in respect to online platforms. Some issues related to online platforms are regulated, but there is no systemic connection and update of existing laws in compliance with the developments in the EU. As the National Programme for Adoption of the EU Acquis of North Macedonia is not publicly available since 2017 and there is no comprehensive evidence on where the country stands on transposing the EU acquis relevant for online platforms.



North Macedonia has not adopted a strategic document that addresses the problems that arise from the online platforms. The national short term Internet Communications Technologies (ICT) Strategy is outdated and did not plan for specific actions to address the issues that arise on online platforms. The [Government's plan](#) for fight against disinformation foresees active cooperation with social media platforms and the country's involvement in the platforms programs fighting disinformation. The [Agency](#) for Audio and Audio-visual Media Services takes actions only against traditional media. The online media is self-regulated through the Council of Media Ethics. The [Council](#) took action on the several grounds, but it remains insignificant to what it takes to address all the cases of the code violation in place.

The regulatory environment on internet platforms is a complex one. While the EU set itself as the global champion in regulating these platforms, North Macedonia has no comprehensive approach to address the challenges these platforms have brought to today's society. Yet, these challenges need to be considered and address by each government in order to provide safe online space for its citizens.





Main insights and conclusions from the discussions

Based on the substantial input gathered at the youth consultation event, the following section presents views on the positive and negative sides of the internet. The main policy recommendations addressed to specific stakeholders follow.

Opportunities and challenges

The internet space allows citizens to benefit in several ways, in particular:

- Access to education, particularly during the pandemic. Both formal and non-formal education through courses from renowned universities and professional courses both for lifelong learning was another advantage discussed in the groups.
- The free and fast access to news and videos, and other information pieces help young people to stay informed on current events and problems in the world.
- The easier communication with family and friends, as well as people from around the world, both in times of crisis (pandemics, pollution) and in times of peace was mentioned in half of the groups.
- Business opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and eased job hunt for young people.
- Creating communities and interacting with peers and likeminded individuals where they can be creative and practice free speech.

On the negative sides on the internet the participants have identified:

- Internet addiction and mental health issues. In one group, participants said that it makes them estranged and antisocial, while in other misleading perceptions and false opinions about young people's lives.
- User's data safety on the platforms, possible predators and paedophiles' attacks. In the groups, the overall weak personal data protection on the internet, and existing risk of misuse and violation of personal data and invasion of privacy, identity theft, and plagiarism of academic research were discussed.
- The spread of hate speech and cyber bullying. In two of the groups this problem was illustrated with an example of backlash on online organized protests which were met with backlash and hate speech towards the organisers.
- Through selection and restrictions over opinions and posts as well as sharing fake news regarding world politics of content online political propaganda is enabled, which could create double standards both in the West and East. A group noted the surge of political propaganda on social media targeting youth.

Solutions

Based on the discussions and voting at this event, the participants consider that the internet should be a regulated space in order to protect the users and society. The state should adopt legislation that will regulate the media space, including the profession of journalism, online news portals and social media, online hate speech and cyberbullying. One group suggested the citizens' protection should be addressed with an International Convention on protecting citizens on social media. There is a need to better protect personal and institutional privacy.

While stricter rules were cited as the most relevant action, the participants consider that there is a need to take specific actions to combat the negative sides of the internet. The internet platforms should apply stricter rules and procedures to verify sources, block harmful posts and respect age limits. Moreover, they should better address the reports of the users. In a group discussion, participants were sceptical for the self-regulation approach, as they believed the status quo benefits political elites.

Moreover, the Government and the Ministry of Internal Affairs should have more control and power, but also efficient and quick reaction to find and sanction perpetrators and people that endanger the rights of others. In this regard, the participants have had concerns over government overstepping, and lack of action from the relevant institutions. On the former, they fear censorship and breach on the freedom of speech under the excuse of fighting fake news are the main concerns. On the latter, insignificant number of cases where the government took action to combat fake news as well as lack of political will to implement existing laws or even creating and adopting new ones raises concerns towards the trust in the institutions to undertake serious action to address the issues.

In it was also discussed that online news portals should be verified and monitored to limit the spread of fake news. A group proposed an online news portals registry in order to have better monitoring.

Participants also discussed the users' own responsibility. The internet users should be more cautious when interacting with others, and have a proactive role on social media. They should actively use the tools at disposal like reporting harmful posts and blocking content, and respect the online platforms' terms. Moreover, users should be aware of the threats in the interaction with other people.

The role of the EU also emerged in the group discussions, but with a minor role in addressing the negative aspects of the internet. In the fight against fake news, cooperation with EU institutions and its representatives in North Macedonia would allow the Macedonian authorities to learn from the best practices in the EU. Moreover, more EU funds should be allocated for media, combating fake news and propaganda.

Mental health issues that arise from the social media use should be addressed with appropriate policy actions. In a group, participants consider that adequate educational programs should be implemented, led by the Ministry of education. In other, events that would stimulate public discussion on this topic was suggested as a solution as well as creative projects to engage young people offline.

Lastly, participants consider that educational policy should also be implemented. Educational programs should address lack of understanding of the negative potential of social media. Such program should target youngsters, parents as well as teachers. It was argued that the European Union, the civil society organisations, the media and the educational institutions should conduct more trainings to strengthen their capacities on digital and media literacy.

Conclusions

The increased use of the online platforms has brought advantages as well as challenges for today's society. Drawing on the inputs from this event, the youth in North Macedonia understand the educational, communication and business benefits the internet platforms has brought to them and the society in general. On the other hand, they recognise the most pressing issues like protection of personal data, plagiarism, hate speech and cyber bullying, spread of political propaganda online need to be addressed through policy action.

Addressing these issues is a challenge in itself. While the EU has positioned itself as global champion in this regard, reviewing existing regulations to fit in digital age and co-operating with online platforms to best address the challenges of the internet, North Macedonia lags behind. Based on our discussions, the youth is not much aware on regulations already in place, nor of the need to align national laws with relevant EU legislation. This suggests that youth may not be aware on the policy development on national and EU level.

Nonetheless, the youth have propositions on how each stakeholder could contribute in making the internet a better space. They consider a multi-layered approach and complementary policies are needed to address the potential harms the widespread use of the internet has brought to the society. The youth in North Macedonia favour strict laws and better regulations. Government oversight on the internet and prompt action is supported to respond to online misconduct, but there should be checks and balances in order to limit the possibility of government abuse of power. Existing mechanisms like users reporting content and or platforms content moderation are complementary actions that could make the online platforms more secure and welcoming place. Supporting educational policy and trainings, in particular, are needed for users and relevant stakeholders. Mental health issues that could arise of excessive use of internet needs to be address with specific policy actions.

This report was prepared based on the conclusions from the youth consultation event organised within the Make Future Together: EU and the Western Balkans from the Youth Perspective project, implemented by a group of think tanks under the HYPERLINK "<https://www.thinkforeurope.org/>" Think for Europe Network, the European Policy Centre – EPC Brussels, Institute for International Affairs – Rome and The Bronislaw Geremek Foundation – Warsaw. The project is financed within the Europe for Citizen programme.

