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Subject:	COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT The situation of young people in the European Union Accompanying the document Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2021)
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PART 5/10

COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

The situation of young people in the European Union

Accompanying the document

**Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European
Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions**

on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2021

{COM(2021) 636 final} - {SWD(2021) 286 final}

5. Youth and the digital world

The digital revolution has brought major changes to young people's lives. Advances in digital technologies are making new and innovative platforms, applications and networks available to large proportions of young Europeans and shaping their social and communication behaviours.

There are many advantages in a digital society. Connectedness and ease of interpersonal exchanges – particularly when face-to-face interactions are limited – transfer of knowledge and information, social engagement and political participation are all aspects that can be fostered by digital media. Several chapters in this report explore these topics, for example Chapter 2 'Youth engagement in society', Chapter 6 'Education and training' and Chapter 7 'Health and well-being'.

At the same time, digitalisation can expose young people at various risks ⁽¹⁾ and generate and aggravate inequalities between groups in the youth population, depending on their level of formal education and digital skills, the area where they live and their socioeconomic background, as will be illustrated in this chapter.

The chapter begins with an overview of the strategies established in European countries to reinforce media literacy and online safety among young people, which are essential conditions for the effective and responsible use of digital media. Information is sourced from the Youth Wiki, the platform providing information on national policies in the youth field ⁽²⁾.

Drawing from data collected by Eurostat, the second section explores some of the online activities conducted by young people, focusing on two sectors that have been growing rapidly: e-government, and e-commerce and the collaborative economy. It also discusses some of the divides provoked and reinforced by the spread of digital technologies.

The last section discusses young people's trust in digital information and applications during the COVID-19 pandemic and is based on data collected from a Eurobarometer survey conducted at the initiative of the European Parliament in 2020 ⁽³⁾.

5.1. Media literacy and online safety

In its conclusions on media literacy in an ever-changing world, the European Council defines media literacy as 'all the technical, cognitive, social, civic, ethical and creative capacities that allow an individual to access and use information and media effectively, and to safely and responsibly create and share media content through different platforms' ⁽⁴⁾.

Besides the positive transformations brought about by digitalisation, challenges have also emerged, such as exposure to unreliable information and to dangerous content and behaviours (e.g. fake news, cyberbullying

⁽¹⁾ Chaudron, 2018.

⁽²⁾ The Youth Wiki platform is regularly updated to include new policies and initiatives. To access the most recent developments, see the Youth Wiki website available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki>. [Accessed on 24.03.2021]

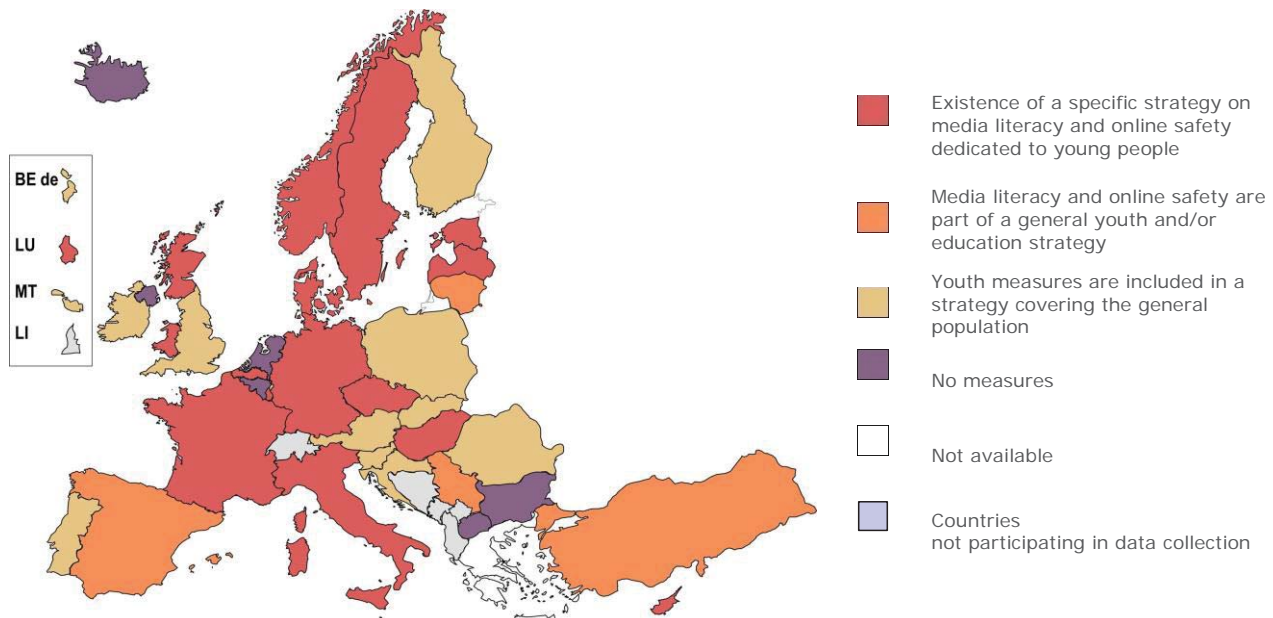
⁽³⁾ European Parliament, 2020a.

⁽⁴⁾ Council of the European Union, 2020a.

and appropriation of personal data). In this context, media literacy is indispensable to increase young people's resilience to online threats and to support their safety, security and privacy ⁽⁵⁾.

To this end, EU Member States have committed to developing systematic approaches to reinforce media literacy and the safe use of digital media among young people.

Figure 5.1: National strategies on media literacy and online safety, September 2020



Source: Youth Wiki, Section 6.8, 'Media literacy and safe use of new media'. Data collected in September 2020.

As Figure 5.1 shows, strategies specifically addressing the needs of young people in the media environment exist in one third of European countries. In these contexts, young people's use of media is identified as a specific priority in youth policy. In some of these countries, strategies focus on formal education.

For example, in **Italy**, the National Plan on Digital School was established by the Ministry of Education in 2015. It aims to strengthen students' media literacy and their ability to use media safely. To this end, the plan supports the upgrading of schools' digital equipment (e.g. fibre-optic networks) and the enhancement of teachers' digital competences. These objectives are upheld by 'digital animators', who promote digital education and innovation.

Some strategies extend media literacy and the safe use of media to non-formal learning.

The Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Minors in the Media of the **German federal states** represents the legal basis for youth protection concerning the risks posed by radio, television and the internet. Its aim is to protect children and adolescents from accessing inappropriate content online that may cause harm to their psychological and emotional well-being.

Other countries include media literacy and online safety in their general youth or education strategies.

For example, in **Spain**, the Organic Law on Education, adopted in 2006, forms the basis for developing media literacy. The law establishes media literacy as part of schools' curricula and defines the competences to be acquired. The subsequent Framework Law for the Improvement in Education of 2013 specifies media literacy and the safe use of media among the essential components of a high-quality education and includes them in teacher training. These measures have been reinforced by a revised education law, approved in November 2020, in light of the transition to e-learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁽⁵⁾ European Commission, 2020b.

A third approach to media literacy and safety consists of including youth-specific measures in general media strategies targeting the entire population.

This is the case in **Romania**, where the national strategy on the digital agenda was adopted in 2014. Its aim is to boost economic development by investing in ICT. The strategy includes a section on education and learning, with the objective of supporting students' learning through the use of digital tools. Media literacy and the safe use of media are part of the curricula, and teaching of these subjects includes the use of online instruments such as open educational resources and e-portfolios. The same section of the strategy also promotes the use of ICT in non-formal learning contexts, such as youth summer camps and international student exchanges.

5.2. Use of the Internet

Young people are often called 'digital natives' as they have grown up in a time when digital technologies are being used in all areas of life. While not a synonym for being adequately equipped with the skills needed to fully and safely use digital technologies, the term 'digital natives' points to young people's unprecedented exposure to and familiarity with digital media and applications ⁽⁶⁾. From education to employment, leisure activities, and civic and political participation, young Europeans are at the forefront of the use of online digital technologies ⁽⁷⁾.

The use of the internet is therefore an essential component of young people's everyday lives. Indeed, Figure 5.2 shows that in nearly all countries, more than 90 % of young people aged 16–29 used the internet daily in 2019; the exceptions are Italy (89 %), Bulgaria (87 %), Romania (86 %) and Turkey (85 %).

Moreover, Figure 5.2 indicates that the share of young people using the internet daily is bigger than the proportion of the total population using the internet daily. Unlike young people, individuals in older age groups have become accustomed to digital technologies at a later stage in life ⁽⁸⁾. On average, in 2019 in the EU-28, the difference between the proportion of young people aged 16–29 using the internet daily (95 %) and the proportion of the total population using the internet daily (79 %) was 16 percentage points (p.p.). The biggest differences were reported in Portugal (31 p.p.) and Romania (29 p.p.), where they are nearly double the EU-28 average, followed by Croatia, Greece and Bulgaria (all 27 p.p.). Conversely, the smallest differences were reported in the Nordic countries: Iceland (2 p.p.), Norway (3 p.p.) and Sweden (4 p.p.), followed by Denmark (6 p.p.) and Finland (8 p.p.). A similar situation was found in the Netherlands (6 p.p.) and the United Kingdom (8 p.p.).

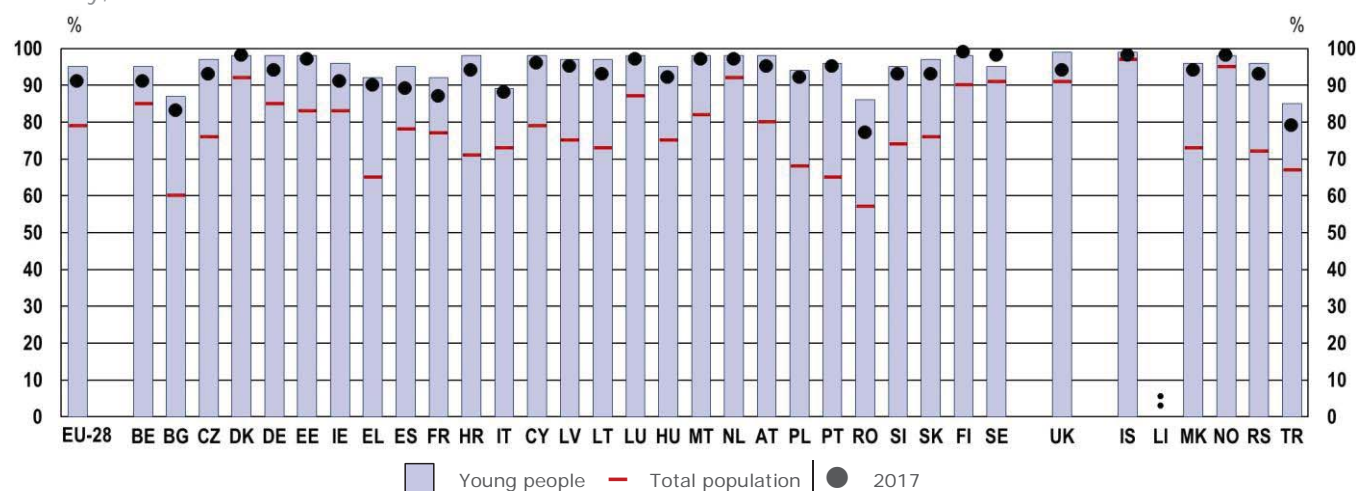
The proportions of young people who used the internet daily in each country did not change much between 2017 and 2019.

⁽⁶⁾ ECDL Foundation, 2014.

⁽⁷⁾ Ibid.

⁽⁸⁾ Prensky, 2001.

Figure 5.2: Shares of young people (16-29) and the total population who used the internet daily, by country, 2017 and 2019



Source: Eurostat [isoc_ci_ifp_fu]. Data extracted on 09.12.2020.

Notes: EU-27 2019: young people 94 %; total population 77 %. 2017: young people 91 %.

Luxembourg: break in time series.

Several factors play a role in the differences seen in the level of internet use. In addition to the availability of devices like personal computers and tablets (strongly associated with the level of households' wealth⁽⁹⁾), disparities in the level of formal education are key, both between generations and within the youth population. As illustrated in Figure 5.8 in Section 5.2.3, low levels of formal education are associated with less frequent use of digital technologies.

Another important factor giving rise to differences in internet use is the extent of broadband coverage, both between countries and within countries⁽¹⁰⁾. Internet activities are conducted less frequently in places where fixed and mobile coverage is comparatively limited than in places where coverage is widespread. This is often the case in remote and rural areas, where the necessary infrastructure tends to be less extensive than in urban areas⁽¹¹⁾.

Obstacles to accessing and using the internet prevent young people from taking advantage of the opportunities provided by digitalisation. The following sections explore two fields where the application of digital technologies has become increasingly diffuse: e-government and the online economy.

5.2.1. E-government: interacting with public authorities

The term 'e-government' describes the application of ICT to government services for citizens and businesses⁽¹²⁾. Many administrative procedures (e.g. obtaining information, filling in forms and submitting documents) can now be executed by means of online applications. To be effective, e-government must be supported by an efficient infrastructure framework, respond to the demands of citizens and function with transparency and accountability⁽¹³⁾.

⁽⁹⁾ UNICEF and International Telecommunication Union, 2020.

⁽¹⁰⁾ European Commission, 2020a.

⁽¹¹⁾ Ibid.

⁽¹²⁾ UN, 'E-government'. Available at: <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/about/unegovdd-framework>. [Accessed on 22.04.2021]

⁽¹³⁾ Vesnic-Alujevic et al., 2019.

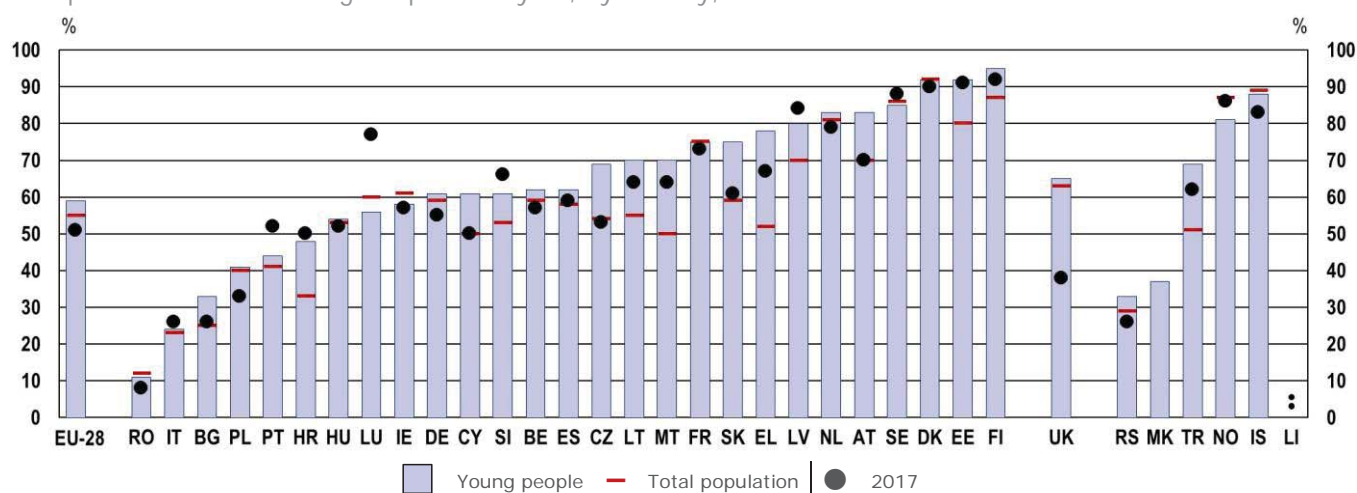
In general, the immediateness and ease of digital interactions is valued by young people⁽¹⁴⁾. In digital communication settings, senders and receivers of information are on the same level, the exchange of opinions and information happens quickly, and feedback is fast, as opposed to traditional means of communication⁽¹⁵⁾.

Online applications can therefore facilitate youth interactions with public authorities⁽¹⁶⁾ and in doing so have a ‘democratising’ effect on access to and communication with institutions⁽¹⁷⁾.

As shown in Figure 5.3, there are striking differences between countries in the share of young people using the internet to interact with public authorities. Among EU Member States, the highest proportions are reported in Finland (95 %), Denmark and Estonia (both 92 %), followed by Sweden (85 %), the Netherlands and Austria (both 83 %). Iceland (88 %) and Norway (81 %) also report high proportions. On the other hand, in Bulgaria (33 %), Italy (24 %) and especially Romania (11 %), the internet is used infrequently to interact with public authorities. A similar situation is found in Macedonia (37 %) and Serbia (33 %).

In general, the data show that young people in Nordic countries are more used to interacting online with public administrations than young people from other countries.

Figure 5.3: Shares of young people (16-29) and of the total population who used the internet to interact with public authorities during the previous year, by country, 2017 and 2019



Source: Eurostat [isoc_bde15ei]. Data extracted on 24.11.2020.

Notes: EU-27 averages – 2019: young people 57 %, total population 53 %; 2017: young people 53 %.

Czechia and Luxembourg: break in time series.

Countries are ordered by ascending proportion of young people who used the internet to contact public authorities.

In addition to the aspects mentioned earlier (level of formal education and geographical coverage of broadband access), differences in the level of engagement in e-government activities are related to the varying degrees of digitalisation of public administrations⁽¹⁸⁾. Although the modernisation of public services has

⁽¹⁴⁾ UN, ‘E-government’. Available at: <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/about/unegovdd-framework>. [Accessed on 22.04.2021]

⁽¹⁵⁾ Ibid.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Ibid.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Ibid.

⁽¹⁸⁾ European Commission, 2019.

become a priority and a trend across European countries, notable differences exist in the level of digitalisation of their administrations ⁽¹⁹⁾.

The absence of large differences between the share of young people and the share of the total population indicates that the use of the internet to interact with public authorities is equally widespread. At EU-28 level, the difference between the share of young people (59 %) and the share of the total population (55 %) using the internet to interact with public authorities is minimal, amounting to 4 p.p. Similarly, in some countries, such as Spain and Serbia, the difference between the two proportions is the same as the EU-28 difference.

Conversely, important disparities between the share of young people and the share of the total population using the internet to interact with public authorities exist in Greece (26 p.p.), Malta (20 p.p.), Turkey (18 p.p.) and Slovakia (16 p.p.). In these countries, there seems to be a considerable gap in the level of use of the internet between young people and the total population. It should also be noted that in some countries – Ireland, Luxembourg, Romania and some Nordic countries (Sweden, Iceland and Norway) – the proportion of young people using the internet to interact with public authorities is smaller than the proportion of the total population using the internet to interact with public authorities. In these countries, people above the age of 29 tend to use the internet to interact with public authorities more often than young people aged between 16 and 29.

The share of young people who used the internet to contact public authorities in each country did not change considerably between 2017 and 2019, except in the United Kingdom (27 p.p.).

5.2.2. E-commerce and collaborative economy

One application of digital technologies that has increasingly expanded over the last decade is the use of the internet for commercial transactions. Platforms for purchasing and selling goods and services have multiplied ⁽²⁰⁾, while opportunities in the collaborative economy – that is, sharing services between individuals, such as booking accommodation and purchasing transport services – have become widespread ⁽²¹⁾.

As the biggest users of digital media, young Europeans have taken huge advantage of these technologies ⁽²²⁾. Ease of access through smartphones and tablets and the affordability of such services are key factors in their success ⁽²³⁾.

Overall, the data in Figure 5.4 show that there are obvious differences between countries in the share of young people making online purchases. Specifically, the United Kingdom (89 %), Denmark, Germany (both 79 %), Estonia and the Netherlands (both 78 %) report the highest proportions for 2019, followed by Sweden (75 %), Ireland, Austria (both 74 %) and Norway (73 %). It is evident that the Nordic countries report some of the highest proportions of young people making online purchases. Conversely, the lowest proportions of young people making online purchases are registered in Bulgaria (27 %) and Romania (24 %).

⁽¹⁹⁾ Ibid.

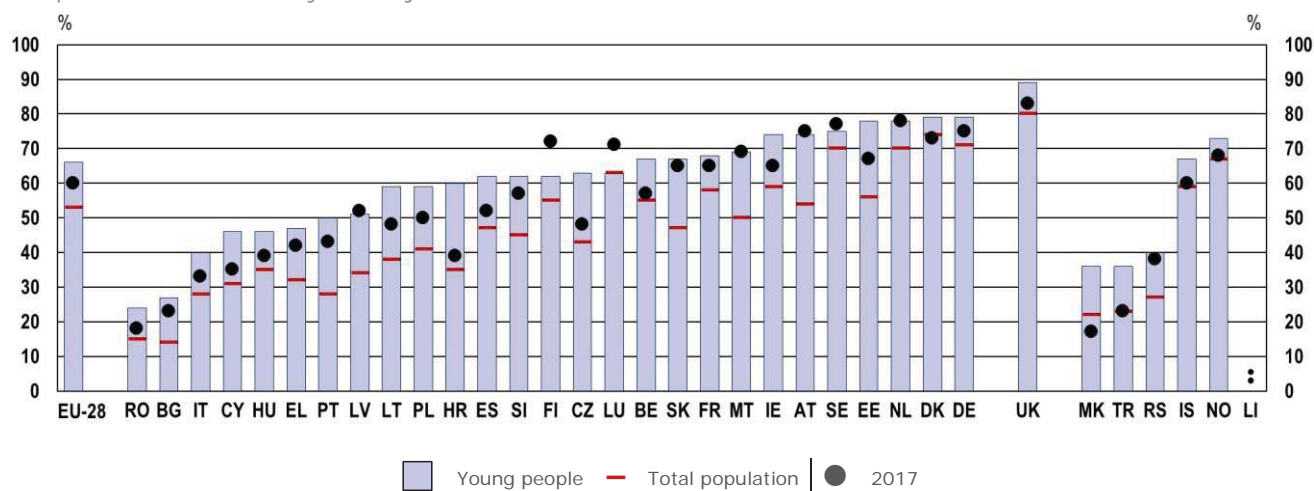
⁽²⁰⁾ Lee and Lee, 2020.

⁽²¹⁾ European Commission, 'Collaborative economy'. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/growth/single-market/services/collaborative-economy_en. [Accessed on 22.04.2021]

⁽²²⁾ Lian and Yen, 2014.

⁽²³⁾ Lee and Lee, 2020.

Figure 5.4: Shares of young people (16-29) and of the total population who made an online purchase during the previous 3 months, by country, 2017 and 2019



Source: Eurostat [isoc_ec_ibuy]. Data extracted on 10.12.2020.

Notes: EU-27 averages – 2019: young people 62 %, total population 49 %; 2017: young people 56 %.

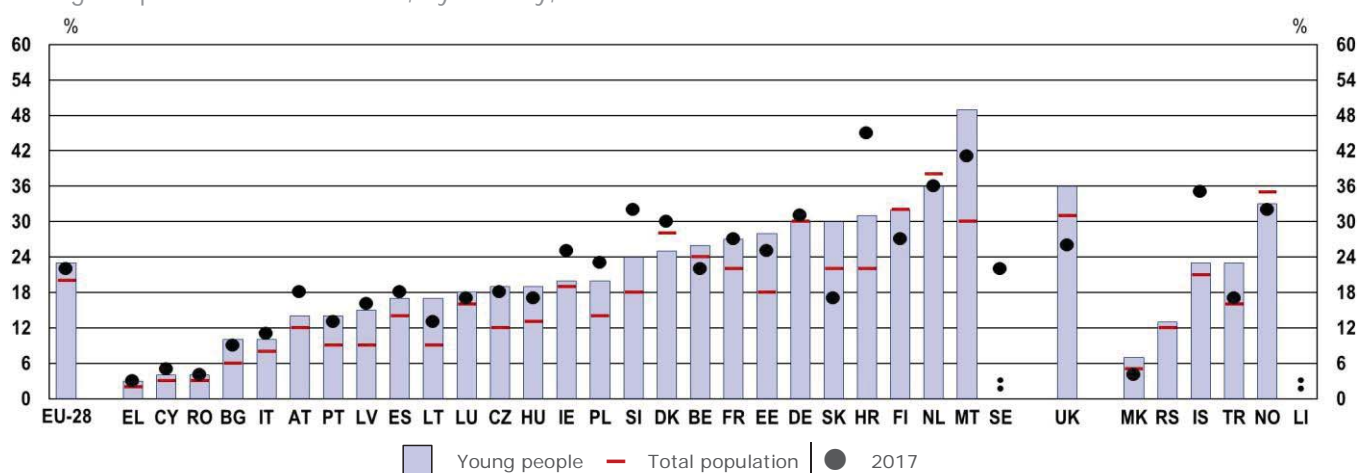
Luxembourg: break in time series.

Countries are ordered by ascending proportion of young people making an online purchase.

Figure 5.5 shows that young people make much less use of the internet to sell than to purchase goods and services. On average, in 2019, 23 % of young people in the EU-28 sold goods and services online. The shares are notably higher in Malta (49 %), the Netherlands (36 %), Finland (32 %), Croatia (31 %), Slovakia, Germany (both 30 %) and Estonia (28 %). The United Kingdom (36 %) and Norway (31 %) also report high proportions.

Countries where young people use the internet the least for selling goods and services are Greece (3 %), Cyprus, Romania (both 4 %), Bulgaria and Italy (both 10 %). North Macedonia, with a percentage of 7 %, is also among the countries where young people selling goods and services online are in a small minority.

Figure 5.5: Shares of young people (16-29) and of the total population who sold goods or services online during the previous three months, by country, 2017 and 2019



Source: Eurostat [isoc_ci_ac_i]. Data extracted on 3.05.2021.

Notes: EU-27 averages – 2019: young people 21 %, total population 18 %; 2017: young people 19 %.

Countries are ordered by ascending proportion of young people selling goods and services online.

Some countries show a pattern in the level of use of e-commerce: in general, in southern Europe, young people are less involved in the purchase and selling of goods and services online, while in some Nordic

countries the opposite is true. Moreover, there seems to be a correspondence between buying and selling goods – countries tend to report similar trends for both activities.

The biggest differences between young people and the total population are found in Malta (19 p.p.), Estonia (10 p.p.), Croatia (9 p.p.) and Slovakia (8 p.p.). In contrast, in Germany and Finland, young people sell goods and services online to the same extent as the total population. In the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway, the proportions of the total population selling goods and services online are slightly bigger than the proportions of young people.

Between 2017 and 2019, no change occurred in the proportion of young people selling goods and services online at EU-28 level. However, in Croatia and Slovenia, the share decreased by 14 p.p. and 8 p.p., respectively. Noticeable decreases also occurred in Serbia (–17 p.p.) and Iceland (–12 p.p.). On the other hand, increases in the proportions of young people selling goods and services online were reported in Slovakia (13 p.p.) and Malta (8 p.p.).

When observing the differences between countries and the variations over time, it is important to consider that online platforms for buying and selling goods and services are not equally present in all countries, and changes can occur over time. This also applies in the context of the collaborative economy, where countries have introduced different regulations ⁽²⁴⁾. Furthermore, the disparities in internet coverage have an impact on the ability to take advantage of these opportunities, as mentioned previously.

Participation in the collaborative economy sees young people as both providers and users of goods and services ⁽²⁵⁾. Renting accommodation – for example renting one's apartment for short periods – is a common form of the collaborative economy ⁽²⁶⁾.

Overall, as shown in Figure 5.6, there are remarkable differences between countries in the proportions of young people using digital technologies to arrange accommodation. On the one hand, high proportions are reported in Malta, Luxembourg (both 44 %) and Ireland (38 %), while far fewer young people make use of the internet to arrange accommodation in Czechia, Cyprus (both 7 %) and especially Turkey (4 %).

At EU-28 level, the difference between the share of young people aged 16–29 (26 %) and the share of the total population (21 %) that used a website or application to arrange accommodation is minimal, amounting to 5 p.p.

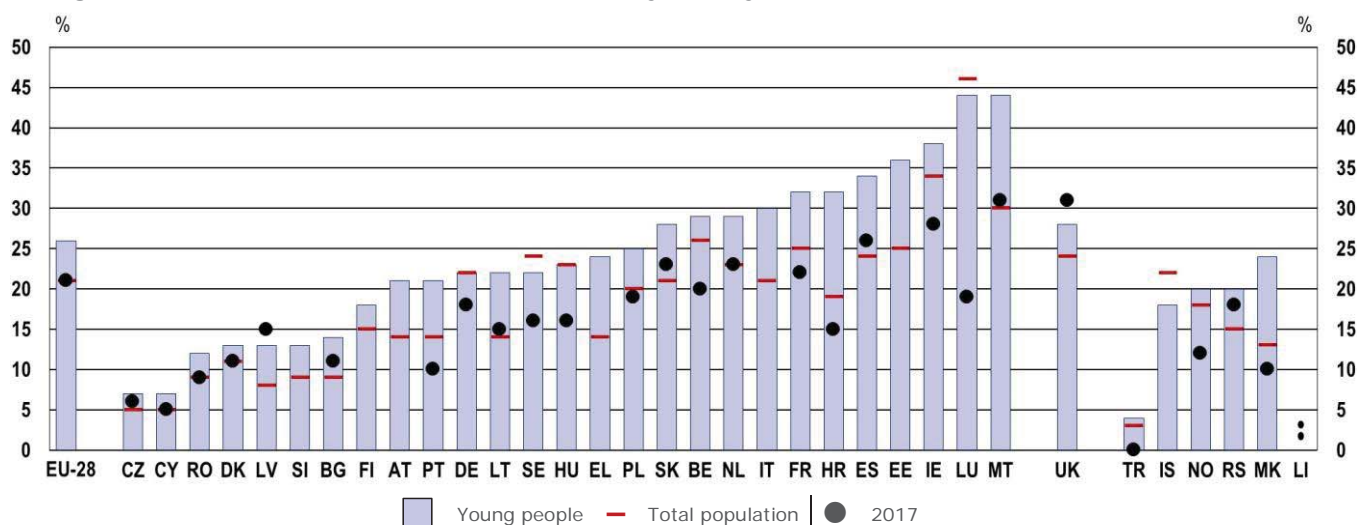
Conversely, Malta (14 p.p.) and Croatia (13 p.p.) report noticeable differences between the two shares. In these countries, there seems to be a considerable gap between young people and the total population in the level of use of the internet for arranging accommodation. It should be noted that the proportions of young people using the internet to arrange accommodation in Luxembourg (44 %), Sweden (22 %) and Iceland (18 %) are smaller than the proportions of the total population doing so (46 %, 24 % and 22 %, respectively). In these countries, people above the age of 29 tend to use the internet to arrange accommodation more often than young people aged between 16 and 29.

⁽²⁴⁾ Clarke et al., 2015.

⁽²⁵⁾ European Commission, 2016.

⁽²⁶⁾ Ibid.

Figure 5.6: Shares of young people (16-29) and of the total population who used any website or app to arrange an accommodation from another individual, by country, 2017 and 2019



Source: Eurostat [isoc_ci_ce_i]. Data extracted on 11.03.2021.

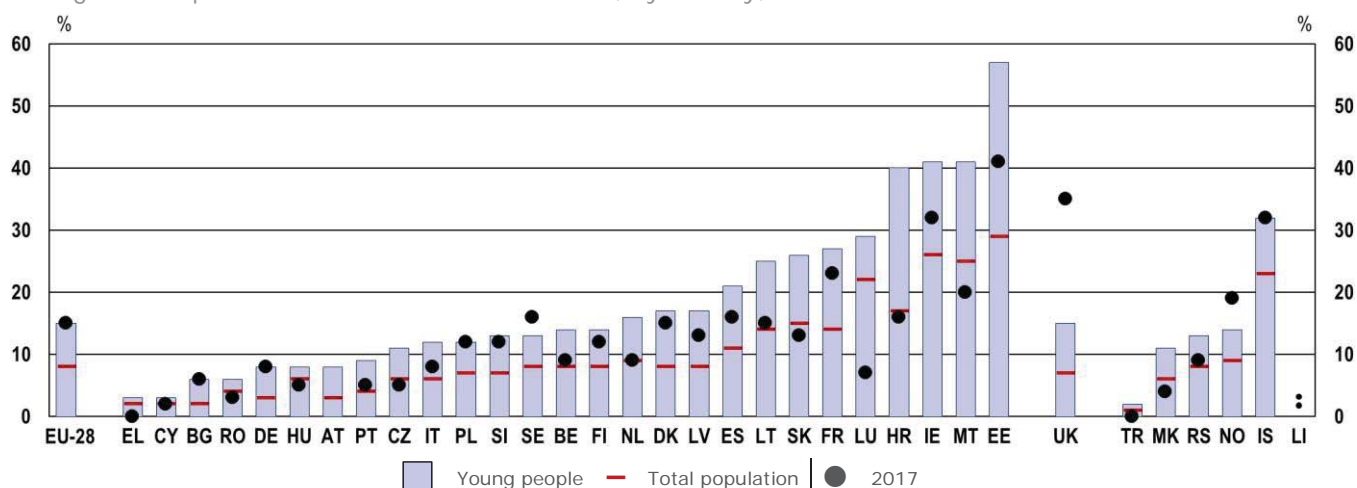
Notes: EU-27 averages – 2019: young people 26 %, total population 21 %; 2017: young people 11 %.

Countries are ordered by ascending proportion of young people who used any website or application to arrange accommodation.

The share of young people who used websites or applications to arrange accommodation did not change radically between 2017 and 2019.

Sharing transport (e.g. sharing a ride or a car with others) is another form of the collaborative economy ⁽²⁷⁾. Overall, data in Figure 5.7 reveal that the use of any website or application to arrange a transport service is particularly widespread among young people in Estonia (57 %), Ireland (41 %), Croatia (40 %), Malta (41 %) and Iceland (32 %). In contrast, Bulgaria, Romania (both 6 %) and especially Greece, Cyprus (both 3 %) and Turkey (2 %) report the lowest proportions of young people using the internet to arrange a transport service.

Figure 5.7: Shares of young people (16-29) and of the total population who used any website or app to arrange a transport service from another individual, by country, 2017 and 2019



Source: Eurostat [isoc_ci_ce_i]. Data extracted on 10.03.2021.

Notes: EU-27 averages – 2019: young people 15 %, total population 8 %; 2017: young people 22 %.

Luxembourg: break in time series.

Countries are ordered by ascending proportion of young people who used any website or application to arrange a transport service.

⁽²⁷⁾ European Commission, 2016.

The figure shows that, on average, the difference between the share of young people aged 16–29 (15 %) and the share of the total population (8 %) who used any website or application to arrange a transport service in 2019 was 7 p.p. Estonia (28 p.p.) and Croatia (23 p.p.) report the biggest differences, suggesting a considerable gap in the use of the internet between young people and the total population. Conversely, the differences between the two proportions in Greece, Cyprus, Turkey (all 1 p.p.), Hungary and Romania (both 2 p.p.) are considerably below the EU-28 average (7 p.p.). In general, the internet is used infrequently to arrange a transport service in these countries, even among young people.

Across countries, the share of young people who used any website or application to arrange a transport service did not change radically between 2017 and 2019 except in Croatia (increase of 24 p.p.), Malta (increase of 21 p.p.) and the United Kingdom (decrease of 20 p.p.).

As for e-commerce, some countries consistently report similar figures when considering participation in the collaborative economy. Bulgaria, Italy and Romania and, to a lesser extent, Greece and Cyprus are the countries where young people use the internet the least to participate in the forms of collaborative economy considered in this chapter. On the other hand, Nordic countries (in particular Iceland and Norway), Estonia and several western European countries report the highest shares of young people engaging in these activities.

5.2.3. Digital divides

Digital technologies and the online opportunities they provide support young people in many areas of their lives. In addition to the activities described in the previous section, they ease civic and political participation (as discussed in Chapter 2), support job searching (as indicated in Chapter 3) and allow students and learners to access education online (illustrated in Chapter 6).

However, digital technologies are also exposing young people to overlapping divides. As digital hardware (computers, tablets and smartphones) has become more widespread – though not ubiquitous –, new types of disparities in the use of digital media have emerged.

As Figure 5.8 indicates, education has an influence on young people's ability to take advantage of digital technologies and media.

While, in general, the level of internet use does not seem to be particularly impacted by young people's level of formal education, the specific activities described in the section are considerably influenced by their level of education.

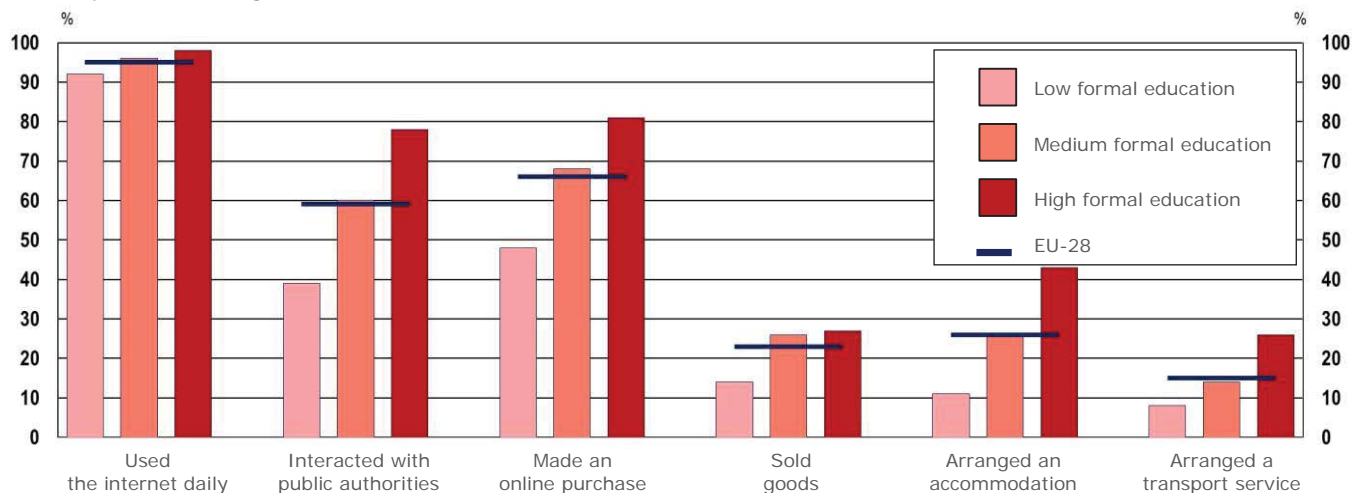
Young Europeans with lower levels of formal education consistently report more limited use of the internet to interact with public authorities, as well as to engage in e-commerce and the collaborative economy.

However, the data must be interpreted in consideration of the different characteristics of the age cohorts in the youth population. Individuals in the youngest cohort (aged 15–19) have lower levels of formal educational attainment and tend to be less active in the activities described.

With regard to the opportunities that young people have to engage in online activities, a second divide is seen between urban and rural regions, as mentioned earlier. Urban regions tend to have better internet access than rural ones. This goes hand in hand with the existence of online platforms and networks for e-commerce and the collaborative economy, which tend to occur less frequently in isolated areas ⁽²⁸⁾.

⁽²⁸⁾ Ibid.

Figure 5.8: Share of young people (16-29) who used the internet daily, used it to interact with public authorities, to make an online purchase, to sell goods or services, to arrange accommodation and to arrange a transport service by level of education, EU-28, 2019



Source: Eurostat [isoc_ci_ifp_fu], [isoc_bde15ei], [isoc_ec_ibuy], [isoc_ci_ac_i]. Data extracted on 10.03.2021.

Notes:

	EU-27 averages:			
	Total	Low level of education	Medium level of education	High level of education
Used the internet daily	94 %	96 %	97 %	98 %
Interacted with public authorities	57 %	39 %	60 %	79 %
Made an online purchase	62 %	48 %	63 %	78 %
Sold goods	21 %	14 %	23 %	26 %
Arranged an accommodation	26 %	11 %	27 %	44 %
Arranged a transport service	15 %	8 %	15 %	26 %

Furthermore, a more recent perspective on the digital divide has considered the purpose and content of digital applications ⁽²⁹⁾. Research has found that socioeconomic background affects the types of activities conducted online. Young people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to use the internet for self-enhancing activities, such as attending education, obtaining information about social and political issues, and engaging in politics. Conversely, young users from more disadvantaged backgrounds mainly use the internet for recreational activities, searching for entertainment and cultivating relational exchanges with their peers ⁽³⁰⁾.

Notably, a gap has been detected in the ability to critically assess information obtained online based on socioeconomic background ⁽³¹⁾. Compared with their peers from less privileged backgrounds, young people from higher income families tend to be more sceptical about information disseminated on social media, more skilled at detecting fake news and more protective of their online privacy.

This divide is particularly concerning at a time when a great deal of information is provided by a multitude of online media sites and the ability to identify reliable sources is of outmost importance ⁽³²⁾.

⁽²⁹⁾ European Commission, 2018d.

⁽³⁰⁾ Ibid.

⁽³¹⁾ Micheli, 2016.

⁽³²⁾ Ibid.

5.3. Online information and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic

Since the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has been at the centre of online and offline media coverage. Along with sources of factual information, a great deal of unreliable news is disseminated, particularly on social media ⁽³³⁾. As this represents one of the most common sources of information for young people ⁽³⁴⁾, they are particularly exposed to misleading information ⁽³⁵⁾.

Nonetheless, the level of awareness of news unreliability has been growing during the pandemic ⁽³⁶⁾. Children and young people report being able to detect fake news more often than before. This can partly be explained by them spending more time with family members during the lockdowns introduced in response to the pandemic, with family members having a mediating effect in relation to news content ⁽³⁷⁾.

In parallel, a survey conducted in 2020 indicates that young people's trust in national governments increased during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the survey, an important determinant of young people's trust in national governments is their assessment of how national institutions have managed the pandemic's outbreak, also in consideration of the reliability of the information communicated ⁽³⁸⁾.

Data collected by a Eurobarometer survey show the different levels of trust that young people have in various sources of information on the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 5.9 illustrates the results obtained for national authorities, scientific and medical professionals and the media ⁽³⁹⁾.

Of the different sources of information, young Europeans report trusting scientific sources (scientists, the World Health Organization and national health authorities) the most. Young people in Greece (60 %), Germany (49 %), Italy, Slovenia (both 47 %) and France (45 %) have the most trust in scientists. Governments are the next most trusted source of information on COVID-19, particularly in the Netherlands and Austria (both 40 %), Finland (38 %) and Ireland (34 %).

Traditional news outlets are trusted much less. On average, they are considered trustworthy by only 1 in 10 young Europeans. Exceptions are young people in Belgium, Italy, Portugal and Slovakia, who have higher levels of trust in news outlets than the EU-27 average. Citizens' opinions, such as those shared on social media, are deemed the least reliable when it comes to information on COVID-19: on average, only 6 % of the youth population report trusting them. An exception is Poland, where the proportion of young people trusting citizens' opinions is more than twice the EU-27 average.

⁽³³⁾ Strömbäck et al., 2020.

⁽³⁴⁾ Brennen et al., 2020.

⁽³⁵⁾ OECD, 2020b.

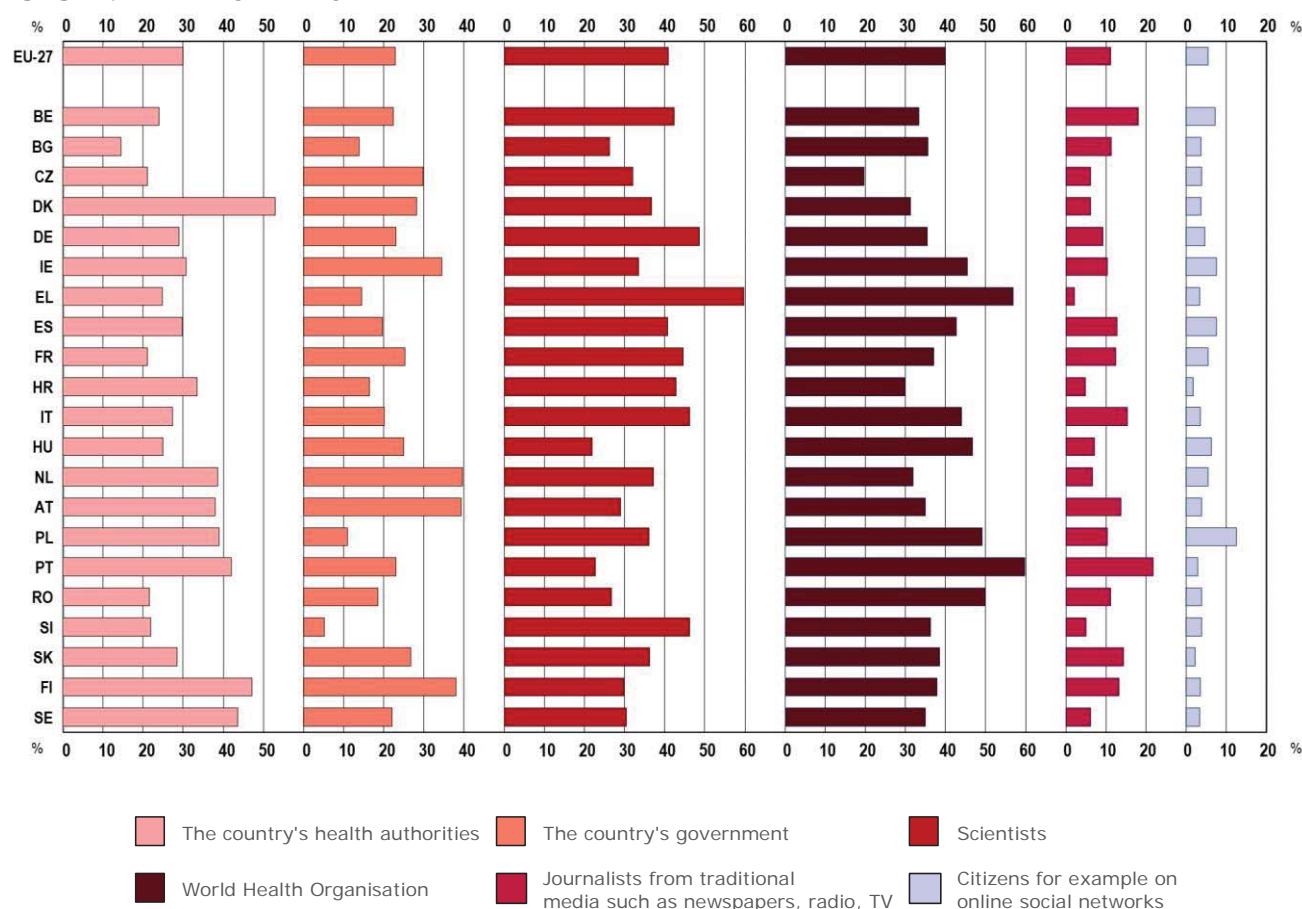
⁽³⁶⁾ Lobe et al., 2020.

⁽³⁷⁾ Brennen et al., 2020.

⁽³⁸⁾ OECD, 2020b.

⁽³⁹⁾ Other sources of information included in the survey were 'My doctor', 'My family members and friends', 'Local and regional authorities', 'Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on health and social issues', 'My pharmacist' and 'EU institutions such as the European Commission or the European Parliament'.

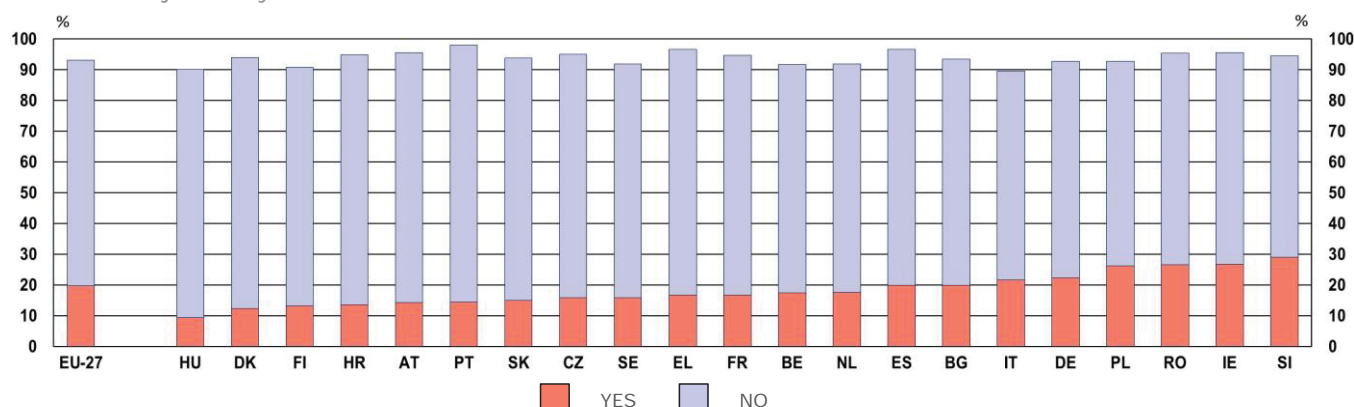
Figure 5.9: Level of young people's trust in various sources of information about the COVID-19 pandemic, age group 16-24, by country, 2020



Source: European Parliament Eurobarometer, 2020. Q16. 'From the following list, who do you trust the most to inform you about the coronavirus pandemic? (Max. 3 answers)'.

Scepticism about the reliability of citizens' opinions – such as those found on social media – may be one of the reasons why the majority of young Europeans do not engage in online debates about the measures implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10: Share of young people (16-24) who engage or not in online debates on the measures against COVID-19, by country, 2020



Source: European Parliament Eurobarometer, 2020. Q14. 'For each of the following situations that can occur since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, please tell me if it applies to you – I engage online in debates on the measures against the coronavirus pandemic'.

Notes: Figure 5.10 does not show the proportions of young people who responded 'do not know / not applicable'.

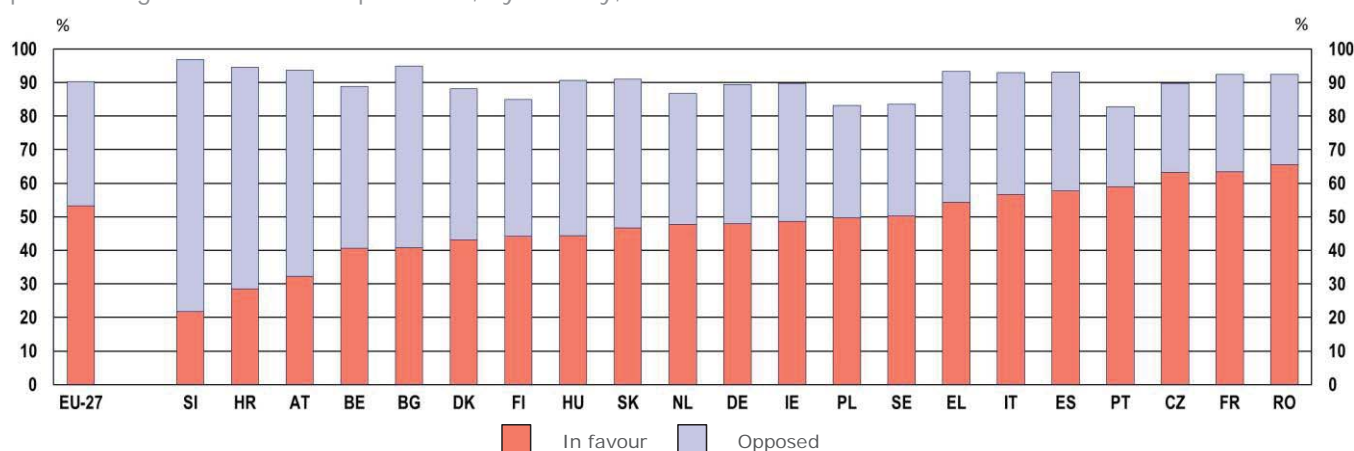
Countries are ordered by ascending level of the proportion of respondents reporting that they engage in online debates.

Overall, 20 % of young people report engaging in online debates, while 73 % report that they do not engage in debates.

Slovenia (29 %) reports the highest share of young people engaging in online debates, followed by Ireland, Romania and Poland, with percentages around 26 %. In contrast, in Hungary, only 1 in 10 young respondents reports engaging in online debates.

An aspect linked to the trust that young people put in national authorities and the reliability of information they disseminate is their willingness to accept public authorities' use of mobile phone applications to fight the pandemic (Figure 5.11). On average, 53 % of young people in the EU-27 are in favour, while 37 % of young people are opposed.

Figure 5.11: Share of young people (16-24) in favour of public authorities using applications on their mobile phone to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, by country, 2020



Source: European Parliament Eurobarometer, 2020. Q10. 'Would you be in favour or opposed to your country's public authorities using applications on your mobile phone to fight the virus' expansion?'

Notes: Figure 5.11 does not show the proportions of young people who responded 'do not know / not applicable'.

Countries are ordered by ascending proportion of respondents reporting that they are in favour of the use of mobile phone applications.

Romania (66 %), France (63 %) and Czechia (63 %) report the highest levels of support for this measure. In contrast, the proportions supporting this measure are 22 %, 29 % and 32 % in Slovenia, Croatia and Austria, respectively.

In line with the research findings that show that young people are becoming more prompt in detecting misleading information on the COVID-19 pandemic ⁽⁴⁰⁾, the data presented in this section show that they consider official sources of information (scientific and institutional sources, at both international and national levels) to be the most reliable. Conversely, news and opinions reported by traditional news outlets and social media are perceived as less trustworthy. These results are of particular relevance considering that – as mentioned at the beginning of this section – social media sites are generally one of the most common sources of information among young people.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Lobe et al., 2020.

Conclusions

Digital technologies provide young people with numerous opportunities. New and innovative platforms, applications and networks support them in many areas of their life. For example, the immediateness and ease of communication through digital means facilitate interactions with public authorities and so increase access to administrative and political processes (see also Chapter 2). Digitalization also fosters young people's inclusion in economic activities, such as e-commerce and collaborative economy.

At the same time, digital media can expose young people to risks such as unreliable information and dangerous content and behaviours. To tackle these risks, as the chapter shows, national governments in the vast majority of European countries have implemented measures to support digital literacy and safe use of new media.

Despite giving access to many opportunities, digital technologies can aggravate inequalities among groups in the youth population. Young people with low levels of formal education, living in rural areas and coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds risk staying at the margins of the digital society. Such challenges become ever more serious in present times as the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically increased the use of digital applications by young people (for example in the field of education, as discussed in Chapter 6).