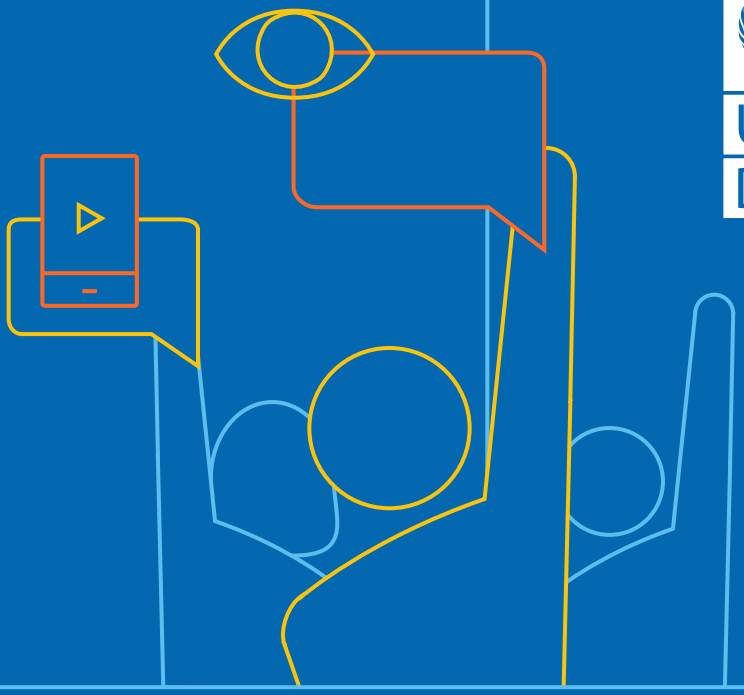
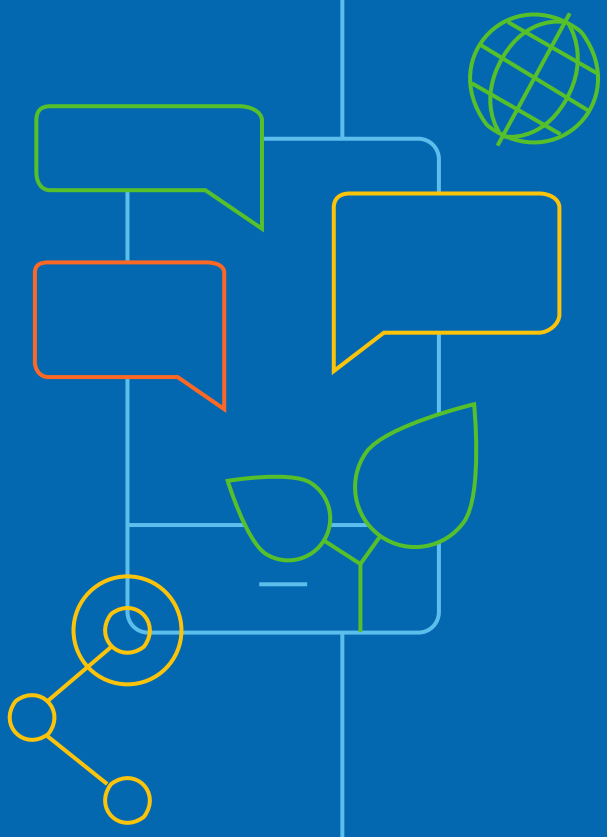


CIVIC PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH IN A DIGITAL WORLD

RAPID ANALYSIS

EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA



This rapid analysis was prepared by UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub for Europe and Central Asia, with data gathered through the involvement of a number of young activists, youth organisations, experts and UNDP representatives, including participants to the online survey, online interviews and online consultation. We would like to thank all those without whose contribution this analysis would not have been possible.

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY 4

1. Introduction and purpose 6
   Methodology 7

2. Civic engagement redefined 9
   Youth-led civic participation: from the sidelines to digital activism 10
   Civic space in Europe and Central Asia 12
   Digital activism in a region of digital divide 13

3. Youth digital activism in Europe and Central Asia 16
   How do young people use digital platforms? 16
   Digital activism: increased opportunities for youth 17
   Barriers to equal and effective participation 20
   Threats to young activists in the digital realm 23
   The intersection of online and offline activism 24
   COVID-19 and its impact on young civic actors 25
   Use of e-government solutions 26

4. Key takeaways 27
   Strengthening youth civic participation online 27
   Protecting and promoting the rights of young digital activists 28
   Promoting a youth-inclusive and youth-led civic space 29

ANNEXES 30
ANNEX 1: Methodology 30
ANNEX 2: Survey questions 31
ANNEX 3: Interview guidelines 35
ANNEX 4: Examples of youth civic movements in the ECA 36

SUMMARY

This rapid analysis aims at understanding how young civic actors in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA)[1] region use digital tools for political and social participation, the topics that they are motivated about and the opportunities and obstacles they encounter in their digital activism. The goal of the analysis is to serve as a conversation opener and to lead to more in-depth research and dialogue between stakeholders interested in advancing digital youth activism and civic engagement.

WE LEARNED THAT:

1.

Young civic actors in the ECA see the digital realm as positively enabling their direct engagement, improving their outreach, helping gain public support for their causes and making cross-border connectivity easier. Up to 70% of survey respondents agreed that online activism gave higher visibility to important issues.

2.

At the same time, young activists saw digital activism as possible for only a minority of youth: lack of digital skills or internet access, internet restrictions and a lack of funding to support digital activism were cited as obstacles for the larger cohorts of youth to engage civically online.

3.

An intergenerational gap in the use of the digital sphere means that young civic actors are not able to fully interact with decision and policymakers or public institutions via online platforms. This was seen as a major barrier for effective and impactful digital activism.

4.

Online and offline activism were seen by the young activists as strongly complementing each other. Up to 82% of survey respondents stated that online activity needs to be paired up with face-to-face work, while 46% stated that digital civic engagement alone is not efficient enough to produce results.

5.

Digital activists feel particularly exposed to harassment, bullying and hate speech. Up to 46% of survey respondents identified online harassment of civic actors as an important obstacle for online youth participation, with 60% of women viewing that their gender impacted how others reacted to their civic views, compared to 31% of men respondents.

6.

Privacy and cybersecurity are of concern to young activists: while 60% of survey respondents felt confident using their real name or identity online, up to 57% felt their data was not protected online and that the views they shared could be used against them, while 48% were concerned about data surveillance.

7.

When it comes to information pollution, 85% of respondents viewed that they encountered a lot of disinformation and fake news on social media, with 69% seeing the internet as an important source of polarisation – information pollution and polarisation were also reported as being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, up to 58% of survey respondents reported trusting online sources more than traditional media such as television or newspapers.

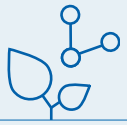
8.

COVID-19 has had a strong impact on civic activism, especially offline. Young civic actors saw the pandemic and its restrictions as having a positive impact on digital activism, increasing the importance of online efforts (84% of survey respondents), while the majority also felt that the pandemic had aggravated the digital divide and exclusion of some groups of youth (65% of survey respondents).

1 The rapid analysis consisted of surveying, interviewing and consulting 130 young civic actors, experts and practitioners in the region between August 2020 and January 2021, covering respondents and interviewees from Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo,* Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. * References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Based on this, we find that young people's civic engagement in the ECA can be better harnessed and supported by:



Strengthening youth civic participation online

- Addressing the digital divide and young people's digital skills gaps
- Supporting the sustainability of youth movements
- Expanding the use of open data and tech tools for digital civic engagement
- Reaching marginalised and hard-to-reach youth
- Developing youth-inclusive e-government tools

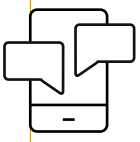
Protecting and promoting the rights of young digital activists

- Safeguarding the civic space against anti-democratic tendencies
- Ensuring better protection for youth activists against harassment
- Increasing youth capacities to recognise and combat information pollution online
- Raising young civic actors' awareness of ethical and legal frameworks online

Promoting a youth-inclusive and youth-led civic space

- Supporting intergenerational dialogue on offline and online platforms, mitigating the separation between traditional and digital civic engagement
- Ensuring that young people's online and offline civic engagement better support each other
- Supporting the participation of young people in decision-making at all levels
- Increasing access to funding for youth actors including for digital activism
- Strengthening regional and cross-border cooperation of online youth actors for peer-learning and wider visibility and recognition

1. Introduction and purpose



Young people across the world are increasingly connected, using the internet and digital tools to build their communities, interact with other similar-minded people as well as advocate, express resistance, organise events and raise funds for causes they care about, claiming space and agency in their societies and adopting new forms of participation. At the same time, young women and young men find themselves inadequately represented within formal political structures, and demonstrate low rates of parliamentary involvement, political party participation, electoral activity or engagement in traditional civil society organisations. Across the globe, younger generations often feel disenfranchised and disillusioned with governing structures incapable of providing them with the opportunities and support they need.

For many youth-led social movements, one of the most important shifts of the 21st century has been moving from what used to be predominantly in-person activism to increasing action online and different forms of digital activism. From the Arab Spring and the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity to hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo, the online sphere has been used by activists of all ages to organise, mobilise and promote their causes.

This trend has been even more pronounced with the onset of COVID-19, as curfews and enforced physical distancing have made people more dependent on digital tools to connect and communicate, on both personal and societal levels. While COVID-19 has restricted young women and young men from taking to the streets to voice their concerns, staying at home has not meant staying silent. Global movements have seen exponential growth in online environments

with young people rallying against racial injustice, surfacing inequalities, and climate change, showing that social causes go beyond any physical restriction.[2] Similarly, online communities have stepped up to support the most vulnerable groups, often complementing governmental processes which have been at times overwhelmed.[3]

While online activism has proved to be a powerful means of grassroots political mobilisation for development and peace, it can also disadvantage young civic actors in a few important ways. Government control over internet service, censoring of information flow, surveillance, spread of false information or disinformation can all complicate civic activities and undermine trust and coordination within activist networks. Moreover, civic space online may lack the back up of strong organisational infrastructures and be less accessible due to digital divides and thus lack sustainability and long-term impact.

While online activism has proved to be a powerful means of grassroots political mobilisation for development and peace, it can also disadvantage young civic actors in a few important ways.

What is clear, however, is that key emerging negative trends in the state of democracy and civic space, as well as the changing social and political contexts worldwide are calling for a greater emphasis on young people's civic engagement into shaping peaceful, just and inclusive societies. Public participation and civic space are at the heart of the work and of the United Nations, making it a priority area to not only partner and engage with youth-led civil society, but to also ensure the protection of young civil society actors and overall promotion of civic space for youth.[4]

For this to happen, we should better comprehend what platforms and causes young people veer towards, how their digital activism intersects with traditional civic engagement and what opportunities and obstacles actors encounter in the digital sphere. This paper offers perspectives from the region of Europe and Central Asia (ECA),[5] as a starting point to gain a preliminary understanding how young civic actors use digital tools for political and social participation, and for a discussion on ways to support youth activism and broader civic and political participation.

METHODOLOGY

The data collection for this rapid analysis was undertaken by UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub between September 2020 and January 2021 with the goal of probing into the nature and dimensions of digital civic engagement in the ECA, identifying emerging trends and challenges in the digital civic space but also opportunities for supporting youth-led digital activism. Complementing a desk research, data was collected

2 World Economic Forum: 3 ways COVID-19 has changed youth activism, 2020.

3 We are Social: How Armchair Activism Became a Force for Change During COVID-19, 2020.

4 UN Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, 2020.

5 In the context of this analysis, data collected included Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

through an online survey, interviews with key informants in the region and an online consultation organised with young civic actors.[6]

The data collection and analysis focused on young civic actors who demonstrated engagement in activities in the digital sphere, specifically those outside of UNDP youth civic engagement programmes and projects. The intention was therefore to understand the experiences of independent young actors who organise themselves upon their own initiative.

The online survey was distributed in English and Russian on social media and using a snowballing methodology. The survey data, which captures a relative balance of women and men respondents, outlines a profile of a young civic actor living in an urban area, studying or working, with a higher educational background. Most respondents reported being engaged in non-governmental organisations, and just over half also voted regularly at elections. Whether this bias is due to the nature of digital activism or a bias in selection and outreach of respondents is hard to deduce. In any case, the findings presented in this analysis should be understood against this background.

The online survey was complemented with interviews held online with young civic actors as well as experts in the field of youth civic activism and digital activism. The findings of the survey and interviews were combined into key findings, enabling them to be cross-referenced and weighted. Due to the lack of representation of this sample, these findings were further consulted with a group of youth, experts and UNDP specialists allowing a first collective analysis.

The findings of this analysis have to be considered in the light of some limitations. Considering the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, all research activities took place online without in-person outreach opportunities, thus favouring those youth actors who were proactive in responding and with good internet access and skills. This may have also contributed to the unequal distribution of respondents between the sub-regions in the ECA, with connectivity and internet usage higher in some sub-regions than in others. The languages used also limited participation to those comfortable using English or Russian.

While the data collected cannot claim to represent the entirety and diversity of young activists operating in the ECA region, the views of altogether 120 young actors, experts and practitioners (69 women, 50 men and 1 preferred not to say) illustrate some interesting initial notions. Rather than becoming a reference for the quantitative and qualitative monitoring on the topic, the main goal of this rapid analysis is to shed light on a topic and context less explored. Reflected in the key takeaways of the analysis, it aims to be used as a conversation opener, establishing directions for more in-depth research and dialogue between stakeholders interested in advancing digital youth activism and civic engagement.

6 For more details, please see Annexes 1-3.

2. Civic engagement redefined

Youth digital civic engagement or youth digital activism are defined as civic engagement specifically carried out by young people through the internet and digital media as key platforms for mass mobilisation and social and political action.

Civic space is the foundation of any open and democratic society. What is meant by civic space is the environment that enables people and groups, different civic actors including youth, to freely and meaningfully participate in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies.[7] A vibrant, youth-inclusive civic space is an environment that fosters youth participation in civic actions, including the formal and informal spaces where young people can develop as civic actors, as well as the entire ecosystem of opportunities and means through which they can engage critically in dialogue and action.[8] When civic space is open for young people, they are able to claim their rights, influence the political and social structures around them and shape public policies to address their specific concerns. Importantly, in an open civic space, young individuals and groups are able to interact free from acts of intimidation, harassment and reprisals, both online and offline.

UNDP defines civic engagement as the broad range of actions undertaken by individual and collective actors operating in the civil society arena, taking a multiplicity of forms, including: actions aimed at influencing policy-making processes, actions aimed at holding state institutions accountable for the fulfilment of their responsibilities, actions aimed at shaping cultural norms and practices and actions aimed at complementing the state's delivery of goods and services.[9]

7 UN Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, 2020.

8 Richards-Schuster, Katie and Dobbie, David: Tagging Walls and Planting Seeds: Creating Spaces for Youth Civic Action. Journal of Community Practice, 2011.

9 UNDP Civil Society Advisory Committee Operating Framework, 2016.

For the purposes of this analysis, youth digital civic engagement or youth digital activism are defined as civic engagement specifically carried out by young people through the internet and digital media as key platforms for mass mobilisation and social and political action. It is worth noting that while definitions of youth vary from one context to another, this analysis and the data collected comprises young people between the ages of 15 and 29.[10]

As the digital sphere is everchanging, there are relatively few studies quantifying and categorising young people's digital activism in Europe and Central Asia in a comprehensive manner. What can be said however, is that youth digital civic engagement can take multiple forms: from using the internet to find news and discuss important societal and political issues online, to circulating written or visual material among networks and creating original content.[11] Through growing access to information and different worldviews, young women and men are expanding their horizons, and increasingly aware of their rights, opportunities elsewhere and their disadvantages relative to other youth in the world.[12] The online realm can facilitate youth activism in four key ways: first, by allowing young people to express experiences and opinions, relating them to collective causes; second, by providing an online community who can support, collectively solve problems and organise activities; third, by enhancing young people's access to information, ideas and resources on issues that matter to them; and finally, by allowing youth to involve others outside their community to collectively negotiate new shared realities and spread these.[13][14]

This analysis focuses on a specific set of the young respondents' online (and offline) activities: sharing or promoting views, organising events, volunteering, campaigning and petitioning, fundraising and donating, and interacting with elected officials or participating in consultations.

YOUTH-LED CIVIC PARTICIPATION: FROM THE SIDELINES TO DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Civic engagement and participation forms a core priority for UNDP work on youth empowerment, along with peacebuilding, economic empowerment and partnering with youth for the 2030 Agenda.[15] Young people face a serious array of development challenges, and their needs and priorities do not get the attention they deserve. Young women and young men often face multiple and interlocked forms of discrimination and significant barriers to full participation in public life – having adverse impacts on the economy, politics, peace and development at large.

10 The UN, however, for statistical purposes, defines youth as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States.

11 UNICEF: Digital civic engagement by young people, 2020.

12 UNFPA and PBSO: The Missing Peace. Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, 2018.

13 Greijdanus, H. et al: The psychology of online activism and social movements. Relations between online and offline collective action. Current Opinion in Psychology, 2020.

14 Jenkins H.: Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century, 2006.

15 UNDP Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace 2016-2020.

How the current cohorts of young people are supported and engaged in the ECA region, where outward migration of youth is a widespread phenomenon, will therefore significantly determine the prospects of sustainable development and peace in the coming years.

While there is an acknowledgement that young people are a driving force in shaping societies, research has proposed a variety of reasons for which they do not feel fully incentivised to engage in formal or traditional forms of participation. In several contexts, elections systems are perceived by youth actors as dysfunctional, corrupt and undemocratic.[16] Traditional political parties fail to represent young people, and those youth who do join find it challenging to effectuate change within parties.[17] In the ECA region, people's trust in institutions operating without sufficient checks and balances has suffered and undemocratic practices persist – the region is the second-lowest performing on corruption globally.[18] Young people's trust in public institutions and in their ability to get their message through and have political influence and representation in decision-making have equally faltered.[19]

Yet the image of the disengaged youth does not fully represent the truth. In response to their exclusion, young people have been able to transcend their local boundaries and access more diverse influences and networks in the digital realm, by claiming innovative spaces for less hierarchical dialogue and participation.[20] The digital space provided opportunities for youth to engage in social and political issues in forms that were not previously available. In the past decade, young people's involvement in protests and alternative forms of participation has increased globally, as youth protests have filled the political landscape and young people have engaged with one another through hybrid media systems and across hybrid public spaces.[21] Young people are using digital and online tools to democratise and facilitate their direct participation, voice, agency and leadership, and to monitor, document and report governance failures and human rights breeches. Equally, youth in the ECA region have exhibited a strong motivation for coming together to address global challenges such as climate change, rising inequality, shrinking space for civil society and threats to democratic institutions. In this context, new types of youth engagement have emerged, creating online spaces where young people gather around concrete topics, sharing common goals and identities, allowing for a larger, bottom-up and youth-driven self-organisation, and making the online space an important priority for any strategy aimed at youth participation and inclusion.[22][23]

Young people have been able to transcend their local boundaries and access more diverse influences and networks in the digital realm, by claiming innovative spaces for less hierarchical dialogue and participation.

People's online and offline behaviours are intertwined, and one person's online activism can mobilise others for offline civic action.

16 UNDP and EC: Youth Participation in Electoral Processes, 2017.

17 ACE Electoral Knowledge Network: Youth and elections, 2018.

18 Transparency International: CPI 2020. Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

19 OECD: Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice, 2020.

20 UNFPA and PBSO: The Missing Peace. Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, 2018.

21 UNDESA: World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement, 2016.

22 NonProfit Quarterly: Young Leaders as a Self-Organizing Vanguard, 2019.

23 EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership: Youth and social movements.

At the same time, the trend of digital civic activism has generated a debate around its effectivity and impact. Actions such as posting or sharing photos, videos and memes are difficult to measure and evaluate and are by nature spontaneous, momentary and elusive. Digital activism has been dismissed as 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism' that gives people a false sense of making a difference and inhibiting more effortful, effective offline civic engagement. However, this view is simplistic: while there is mixed evidence that engaging in online activism may subdue offline engagement, other evidence suggests that in some cases, online and offline actions are relatively unrelated – either people act differently online versus offline or it is different people engaging in online versus offline actions. The two can also be seen as correlating phenomena: people's online and offline behaviours are intertwined, and one person's online activism can mobilise others for offline civic action.[24][25] This has happened, for example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where young environmental activists mobilised their peers online to take part in peaceful rallies and signing petitions for the conservation of rivers in the country.[26] In another example from Kazakhstan, an activist who spoke up about sexual harassment was able to start a social movement that led to organising public awareness events and more women reporting abuse and finding justice.[27] Indeed, numerous other examples but also research show that digital activism can create a domino effect among young people who engage in collective actions, and can even lead to global movements such as those related to climate change and gender equality.[28][29]

While the internet has been an enabler for civic actors to interact beyond physical limitations, digital tools have also been used for monitoring and surveillance of online movements and for disseminating propaganda and disinformation.

CIVIC SPACE IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

The civic space in the ECA has seen various changes in the past decades, ranging from restrictions imposed on civil society organisations to growing youth movements engaging in actions for the rights to free expression and peaceful assembly. [30][31] Across the region, civic space has in the past years been narrowed, obstructed or repressed. The most common violations on the freedoms of people to organise, participate and influence political and social structures include detention, censorship, intimidation, attacks on journalists and harassment. Threats to the freedom of expression and the targeting of women and LGBTQI+ groups are some of the key trends documented in the region.[32]

24 Greijdanus, H. et al: The psychology of online activism and social movements. Relations between online and offline collective action. Current Opinion in Psychology, 2020.

25 Milosevic-Dordevic J. S, Zezelj, I. L.: Civic activism online: Making young people dormant or more active in real life? Computers in Human Behaviour, 2016.

26 World Wild Life Fund: As Investors Look to Dam the Pliva River, Citizens Rally Against them, 2020.

27 UN Women: Six activists who are using social media for change offline, 2018.

28 Toor S.: Open global rights. Digital activism: empowering women, creating change and demanding human rights, 2020.

29 Mavrodieva V. et al: Role of Social Media as a Soft Power Tool in Raising Public Awareness and Engagement in Addressing Climate Change, 2019.

30 CoE: The Shrinking Space for Human Rights Organisations, 2017.

31 Amnesty International: Annual report 2019 Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 2019.

32 Civicus: Monitor Tracking Civic Spaces 2020.

On the level of democratic governance (national and local governance, electoral processes, independent media, civil society, judicial frameworks and corruption) the ECA region represents a variety of governments from consolidated authoritarian regimes to transitional and hybrid regimes. Looking at people's access to political rights and civil liberties, the countries and territories of the region emerge as only partly free or not free.[33]

Globally speaking, internet freedom has been on the decline for the tenth consecutive year – 2020 was particularly challenging as the pandemic was used as an excuse to impose tighter restrictions and rolling out new surveillance methods.[34] In the ECA, the pandemic has underlined the need for more effective digital governance across the region, particularly to bridge digital divide, enhance literacy and ensure the continuity and delivery of core government functions. In a region with a legacy of conflict, COVID-19 has also threatened social cohesion, with increased polarisation, hate speech, and incidents of violence observed within communities.[35]

For civic actors, the pandemic has implied restrictions on freedom of movement and public assembly, while various governments have adopted measures that granted them powers to oversee and censor online content.[36] While the internet has been an enabler for civic actors to interact beyond physical limitations, digital tools have also been used for monitoring and surveillance of online movements and for disseminating propaganda and disinformation. These global trends are reflective of many contexts in the ECA region. In these times of crisis, strengthening civic space, transparency and the free flow of information are more critical than ever for building and maintaining the trust needed for effective responses.

DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN A REGION OF DIGITAL DIVIDE

Digital activism has the potential of broadening participation of youth and challenging conventional modes of collective action, but given the digital divide – reflecting the variety in people's access to technology, infrastructure and possession of necessary skills – those that do not have access to computers, smartphones, internet connection or know how to operate these skilfully fall behind in terms of civic engagement.[37]

Europe and CIS regions rank among the top regions with the highest percentages of basic digital skills.

33 Freedom House: Democracy scores.

34 Freedom House: Freedom of the Net 2020 report.

35 UNDP Europe and Central Asia: Covid response: Governance.

36 The Balkan Civil Society Development Network: COVID-19. The Effects to and the Impact of Civil Society in the Balkan Region, 2020.

37 Schradie, Jen: The Digital Activism Gap: How Class and Costs Shape Online Collective Action. Social Problems, 2018.

In ECA, internet connectivity is relatively high with internet users ranging from 70-90% of the population in the Western Balkans, Turkey, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, while notably fewer in Central Asia. At least half of the internet and social media users connect via mobile phones. When it comes to active social media usage, there is a great variety within the region, ranging from around 40-70% to as low as around 5% in some Central Asian countries.[38]

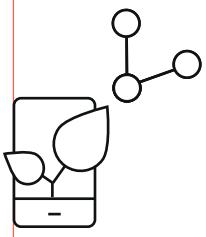
Examining more specifically how young people in the region are engaging with the internet and technology, it is clear that they represent the highest percentages of users, following the global trend. Europe is the leading region globally with 96% of young people using the internet, while the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is ranked third (84% of young people), both of them being considerably above the global average.[39]

When looking at the gender gap related to the use of internet, it is also remarkably noticeable that both Europe and the CIS are among the most equal regions, with a gender parity score (proportion of women who use the internet divided by the proportion of men) of 0.94 in the former and up to 0.97, 1 being considered as absolute parity in women and men as internet users. Considered against the global average of 0.87, the gender gap in the region is therefore relatively low.[40]

In terms of differences between access to internet and technology in rural and urban areas, there are still significant differences, with youth living in urban areas having more access. The Europe and CIS regions perform better than the global average, but also better than all other regions.[41] Despite this, differences between rural and urban areas would indicate a discrepancy in means, opportunities and skills for all young people to participate, risking to leave behind those who are already at a disadvantage. With regard to digital skills, the Europe and CIS regions rank among the top regions with the highest percentages of basic digital skills – Europe over 60%, CIS at 50%, although differences appear when looking at standard and advanced skills, where the CIS region indicates lower levels.[42]

It is therefore important to keep in mind that while digital technology may indeed improve democratic participation, it does not do so equally across youth groups. Possibilities for digital engagement vary across the region and within specific localities and groups, and as such cannot in its current setup fulfil its promise of democratic pluralism.

While digital technology may indeed improve democratic participation, it does not do so equally across youth groups.



38 Hootsuite: Digital 2021.

39 ITU: Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2020.

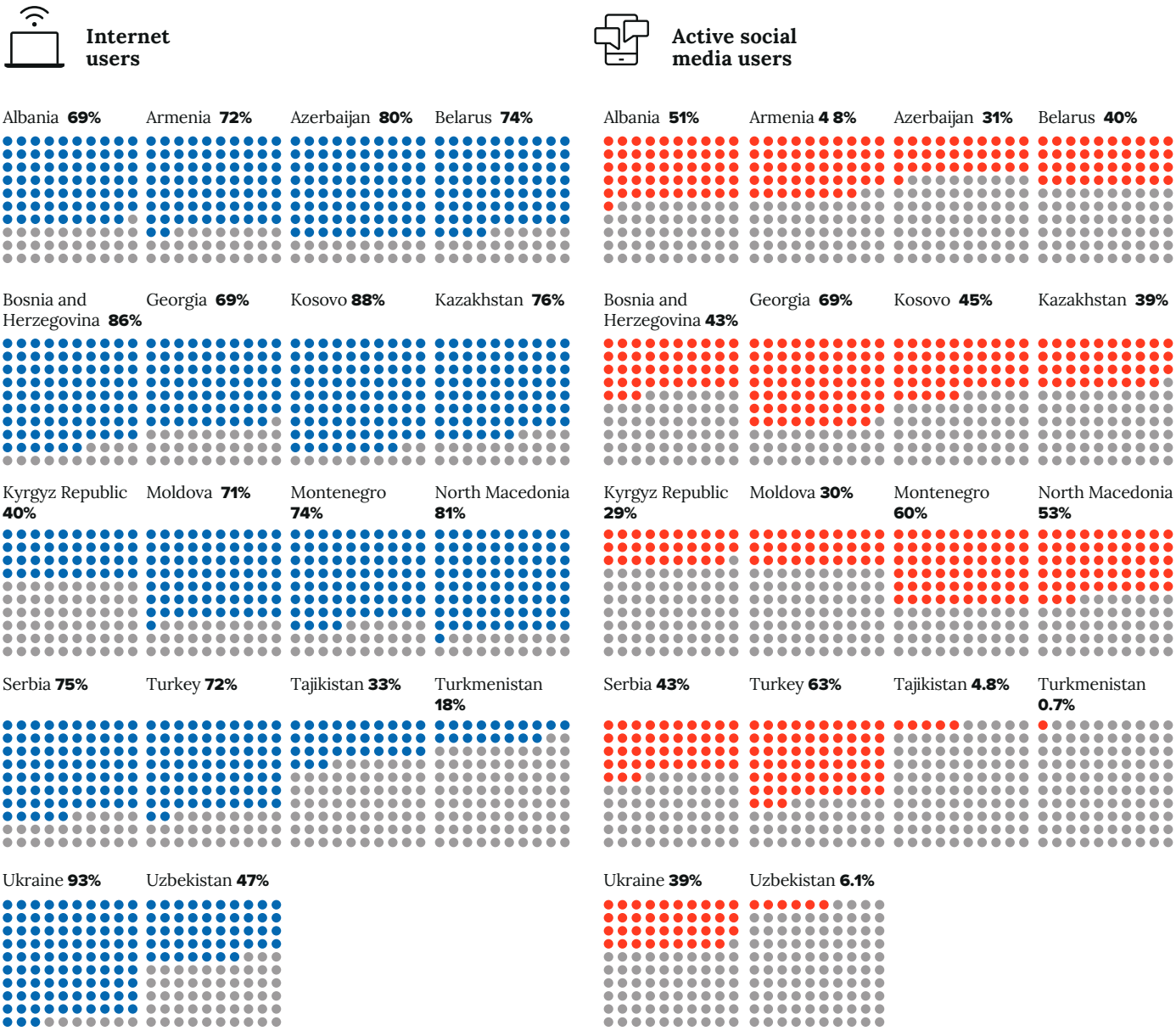
40 ITU: Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2020

41 ITU: Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2020.

42 ITU: Measuring the Information Society Report Volume, 2018. Basic digital skills refer to computer-based activities such as copying or moving a file or folder, using copy and paste tools to duplicate or move information within a document, sending emails with attached files, and transferring files between a computer and other devices. Standard digital skills refer to computer-based activities such as using basic arithmetic formula in a spreadsheet; connecting and installing new devices; creating electronic presentations with presentation software; and finding, downloading, installing and configuring software. Advanced digital skills refer to computer-based activities such as writing a computer program using a specialized programming language.

Figure 1. Internet and social media users in Europe and Central Asia

Percentages of users from the total population



Source: Digital 2019 reports.

Figure 2. Percentage of young people (15-24 years) and overall population using the internet

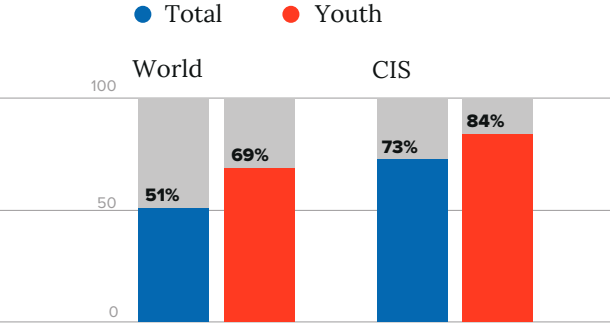


Figure 3. Percentage of individuals who have access to internet and computers, by urban and rural criteria

Source: ITU. Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2020.

3. Youth digital activism in Europe and Central Asia

The following sections summarise the data collected via online survey, interviews and consultation, reflecting the perceptions and responses of young civic actors in the ECA region.

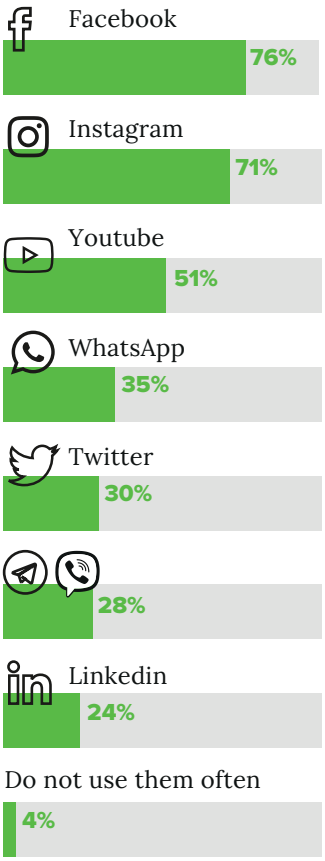
HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE DIGITAL PLATFORMS?

Based on the analysis, the most frequently used social media platforms to follow developments in social and political issues are Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, with some regional variation (Telegram, Viber and Twitter were also highly featured). Facebook was seen as the platform mostly used by the older age cohort, while the use of Youtube and Instagram is dominant for the younger cohort of youth. Facebook and Instagram live sessions were also identified by key informants as powerful communication and advocacy tools, especially during protests and street movements, but also for debates on strategic issues. Platforms such as LinkedIn, on the other hand, were less used for activism and more for professional activities.

When looking at how social media are used, written posts or images and memes are the main types of content created or shared, while it is obvious that many also prefer to use social media in a more passive, receptive way, without creating or sharing content. Men respondents tended to be more active in creating content on social and political issues on social media, notably videos and images, memes and humorous content, while also being more present on YouTube than women.

Figure 4. Most frequently used social media platforms by young activists to follow social and political issues

Percentages of survey respondents



When it comes to the causes that mobilise young actors in the ECA to engage in the digital realm, the most commonly reported topics were education, human rights and social justice, and activities for youth, with democracy, politics following suit, and gender equality, peacebuilding and environmental issues engaging more than a third of respondents. Women respondents appeared to be more mobilised when it came to topics linked to peacebuilding, human rights and social justice, and were almost exclusively sharing or creating content on issues related to minorities and gender.

Survey respondents reported that the most common civic activities they had taken part in during the past year were expressing views and opinions online, volunteering, signing petitions, campaigning and organising events for their cause. Respondents reported to a much lesser extent activities related to political campaigning, interacting with officials or participating in public consultations which would indicate a lack of formal mechanisms for intergenerational dialogue around the issues important for youth.

Overall, what emerged is that young people preferred visual content over long texts in either consuming or creating content. In response, for better outreach to their peers, young civic actors use visual materials, generating discussions and communicating via Instagram stories, infographics or data storytelling. However, not all civic actors felt they had the skills and capacity to produce these types of visuals, while some more organised youth actors had started partnerships with video content creators such as YouTubers and vloggers or established media organisations in order to fill that capacity gap and increase their outreach.

DIGITAL ACTIVISM: INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH

With regard to the main opportunities and benefits that digital and online platforms offer youth actors, several emerged, in line with literature on the matter. When asked about the importance of digital activism, youth activists and interviewed experts saw it as a means for young people to be free and break from traditional views and to express themselves creatively, while at the same time sharing and receiving useful information and connecting with the global society.

Digital tools were seen as **supporting young people's empowerment**, even those who are not traditionally active, allowing them to act from the comfort of their homes and use tools that they can control. It enables young people to express experiences and opinions, relating them to collective causes. Young people who otherwise would not join a protest, for example, could still get engaged on their phone or computer and support the cause without the fear of physical exposure. The majority of survey respondents

Figure 5. Types of content created and shared on social or political issues by young activists online

Percentages of survey respondents

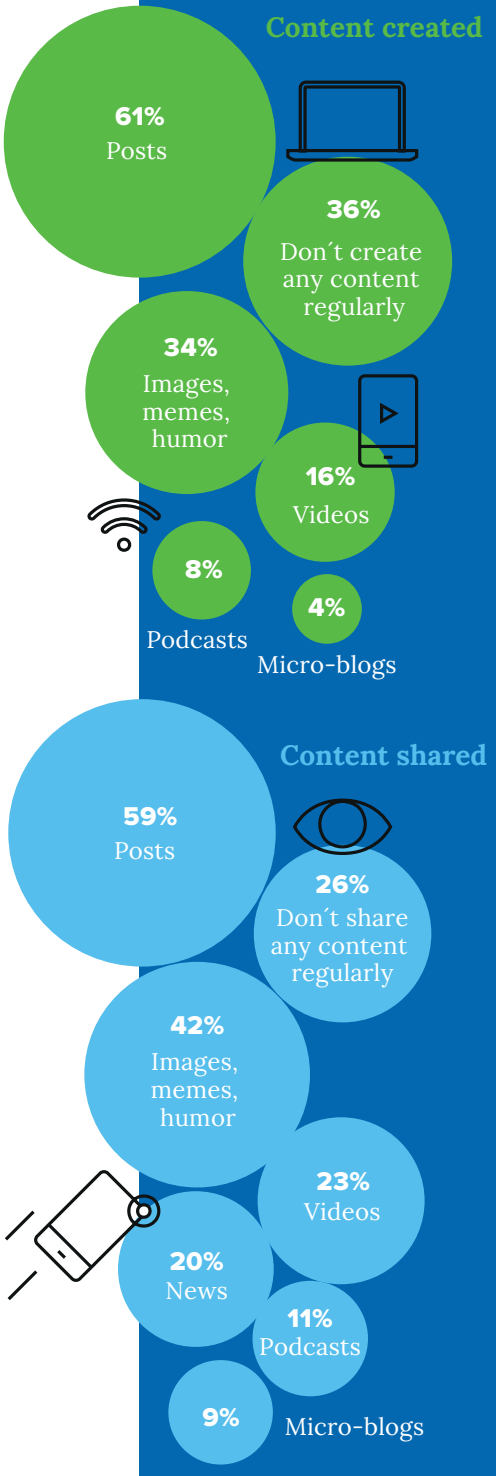


Figure 6. Causes that young activists engage in promoting online

Percentages of survey respondents

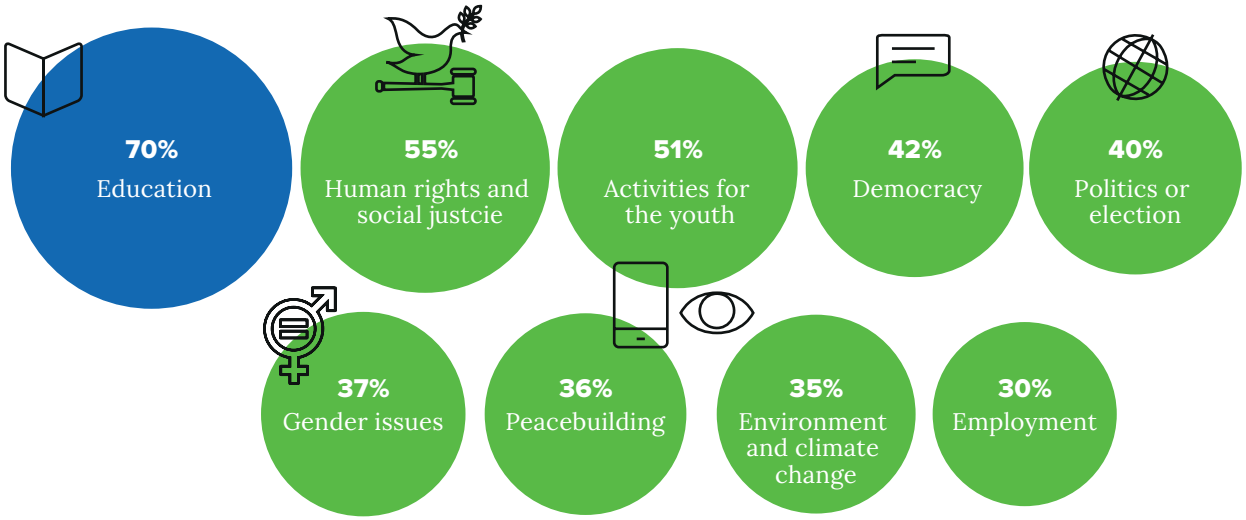


Figure 7. Most common civic activities young people had participated in during the past 12 months, online and offline

Percentages of survey respondents

	Both online and offline	Online	Offline	Neither
Expressed my opinion on a political/ social issue important to me	56%	21,3%	20%	2,7%
Volunteered for a social or political cause important to me	45,3%	28%	12%	14,7%
Taken part in campaign related to a social or political cause	37,3%	36%	8%	18,7%
Organised meetings/events related to social or political issues	36%	20%	9,3%	34,7%
Tried to persuade others to agree with my opinion on a social or political issue	32%	18,7%	21,3%	28%
Started a campaign related to a social or political cause	18,7%	14,7%	6,7%	60%
Signed or initiated a petition on a social or political issue	17,3%	49,3%	10,7%	22,7%
Donated money for a social/ political cause	17,3%	29,3%	5,3%	48%
Organised or attended a protest/ demonstration	16%	6,7%	17,3%	60%
Interacted with elected officials	14,7%	12%	10,7%	62,7%
Raised/collected money for a social/ political cause	13,3%	12%	8%	66,7%
Participated in a public consultation/political process organised by public authorities	13,3%	17,3%	12%	57,3%
Organised or participated in a political campaign	5,3%	8%	6,7%	80%

indicated feeling free to access and use the internet as they wished, and that it gave them a strong sense of empowerment or belonging, while 27% still declared that they did not feel free expressing themselves online. Another point worth noting is that just over half of the respondents felt that their gender impacted how others reacted to their civic views online - women respondents felt this more strongly, with 60% of women agreeing with this statement.

Digital tools and online channels were also seen as useful for **improved outreach**, raising awareness and mobilising campaigns. The digital realm helped youth actors reach out to new target groups and beneficiaries, but also to financial donors and other supporters, particularly by allowing a spill-over into mainstream media. It provides young people an online community who can support, collectively discuss and solve problems and organise activities. A vast majority of survey respondents (70%) agreed that online participation gave higher visibility to important issues.

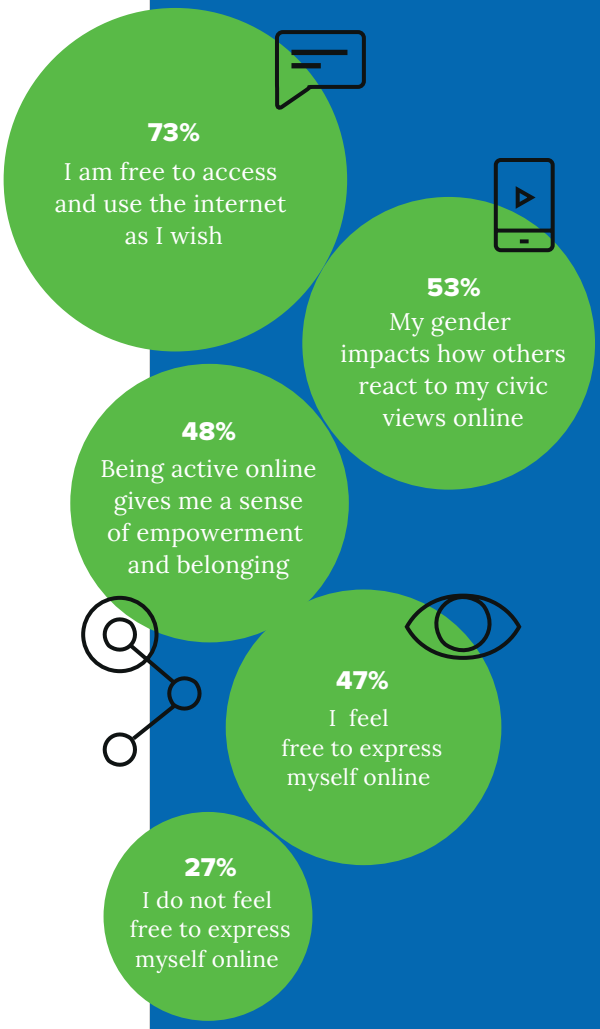
Young activists and youth-led NGOs felt that their successful online advocacy for important causes and mobilisation of peers and others to join in online campaigns gave their work **public recognition** they might have not otherwise gained. Civic engagement online also gave them an opportunity to reach beyond their own geographical locations, allowing for **cross-border connectivity** and learning and new partnerships to take place. Being able to involve other youth outside their community also help them to collectively negotiate new shared realities and spread these.

Young civic actors in the region also felt that online platforms facilitate their **direct participation** in various decision-making processes, with less practical restrictions related to time, travel and access to locations. They enhance young people's access to information, ideas and resources on issues that matter to them. Out of the survey respondents, 67% said online participation gave them more freedom to respond to issues that affect them and their peers. Still, participatory budgeting, as a mechanism for direct participation in decision-making through the use of public resources, was one of the least used governmental mechanisms according to survey respondents.

Overall, there was a strong agreement among interviewed youth activists and experts that social media is an effective tool for community building and mobilising communities. However, they also pointed out that young civic actors need better access to open data and skills to use advanced civic tech tools to better take part in monitoring elections, reporting problems in their communities and finding effective solutions to societal problems.

Figure 8. Young activists' perceptions about online civic activism

Percentages of survey respondents



Kloop (Kyrgyzstan) is a news portal and media school that provides training to young students on reporting controversial topics such as corruption, elections and human rights, and offers budding journalists a platform to publish their work.

Kloop's digital platform also provides space for youth activists to engage with governments and participate in public debates, most recently around monitoring of COVID-19 cases or following elections. Kloop also uses digital and media tools to spread public awareness such as through data visualisation of election processes and turnout: In January 2021, Kloop media covered the presidential elections and the referendum vote in Kyrgyzstan and used technology to make the election process more transparent and easier to understand for the public.

BARRIERS TO EQUAL AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION

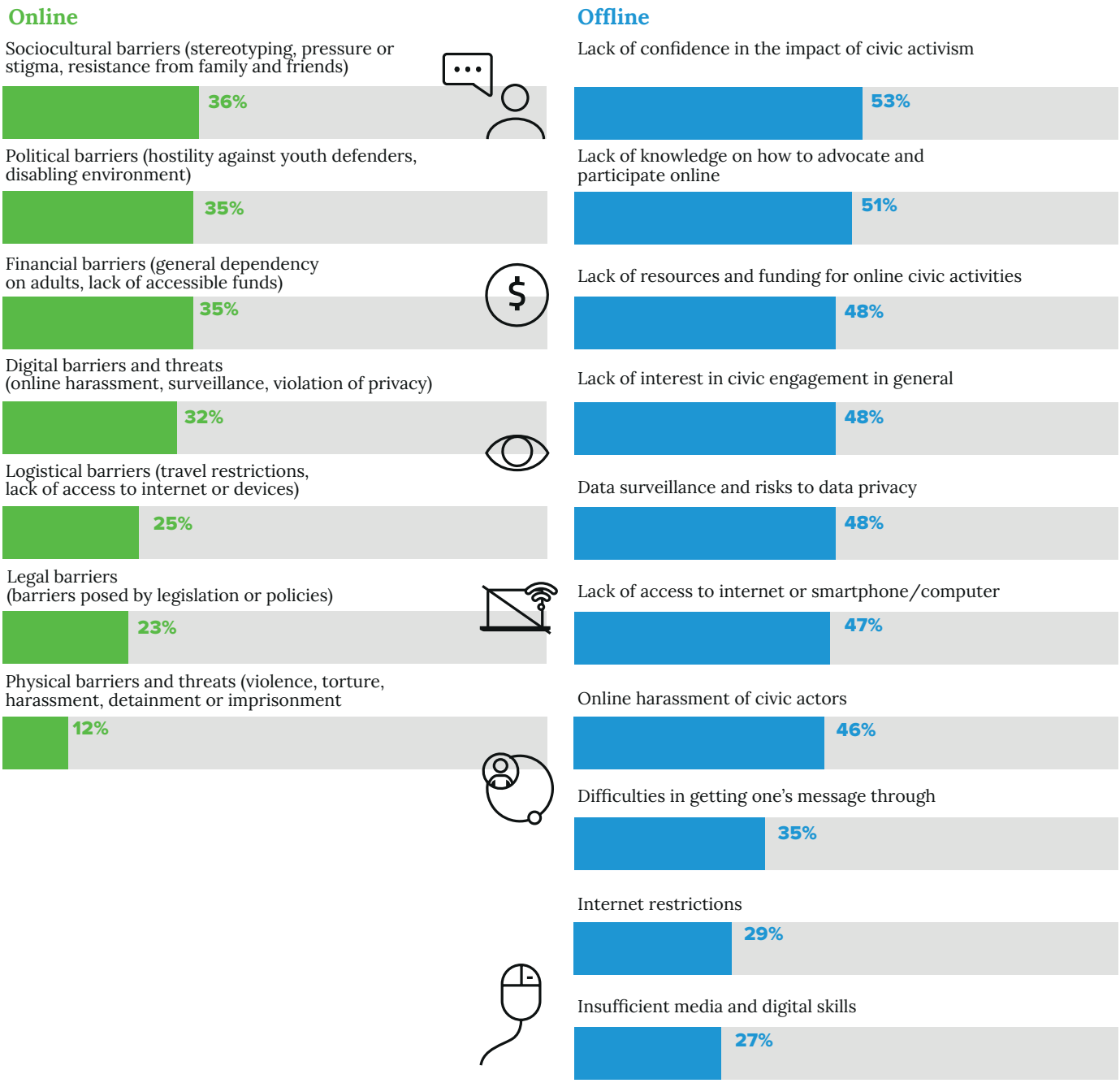
At the same time, the analysis revealed some important challenges which have the potential to constrain the scale and impact of young people's digital civic engagement. When asked about experiences of different types of barriers to civic engagement, the most significant obstacles young actors themselves had experienced were sociocultural (stigma or resistance from family or friends), political (hostility against youth activists, disabling environment), financial (general dependence on adults, lack of access to funding) and digital threats (online harassment, surveillance, violation of privacy). Direct physical barriers such as violence or detainment were much less reported, although still by around 12% of respondents. On the other hand, when enquiring about obstacles to online activism specifically, respondents pointed out a low confidence in the impact of civic activism, a lack of awareness of digital avenues for participation and an overall low interest in civic engagement.

Further to digital civic engagement, while the internet seems to have eased access for more direct participation, young people in the region have **unequal access to internet and technology**. Some 63% of the respondents felt that taking part in digital activism was not at the reach of all young people, and 47% mentioned lack of access to the internet as an important obstacle to youth online participation. Young people in rural areas or those from marginalised communities (such as low-income families, religious or ethnic minorities or migrants and refugees) were pointed out as lacking access to internet and technologies or to educational opportunities that would enable them to engage in activism online. Moreover, while the ECA region benefits from relatively good and affordable internet infrastructure, shutdowns by the government have become a reality in some contexts: 29% of survey respondents saw **internet restrictions** as one of the barriers for youth online participation.

When enquiring about obstacles to online activism specifically, respondents pointed out a low confidence in the impact of civic activism, a lack of awareness of digital avenues for participation and an overall low interest in civic engagement.

Figure 9. Most common barriers to civic engagement, experienced often or constantly by young activists

Percentages of survey respondents



Youth activists and youth NGOs face significant challenges in terms of access to financial and human resources to support online activism: 48% of the survey respondents identified the **lack of resources or funding** for online activities as an important challenge for digital activism. Furthermore, young activists reported a lack of skills needed in order to navigate in the digital world successfully and create meaningful impact, and a **lack of opportunities to develop digital skills** – such as effective communication skills, digital media literacy, digital safety and technical expertise. Youth-led NGOs viewed they often lacked the technical expertise that could help them engage digitally. Of the survey respondents, 27% identified insufficient media and digital skills as an important obstacle to youth online participation.

When it comes to advocacy and outreach, even if many young people and civic actors are active online, interaction with public institutions or decision makers via these platforms did not emerge as a widespread practice. An **intergenerational gap** in the use of the digital sphere proves a challenge in view of generating meaningful debates between young people and their representatives, in the spaces where young people are present. A third of survey respondents felt that difficulties young people have in getting their message through to the wider audience was an important barrier for youth civic engagement online.

Interviewed activists also saw the **lack of access to governmental and other open data** as a limitation for data-based advocacy and independent efforts for accountability. They saw access to data to young activists as enabling them to monitor the transparency of public decisions, by creating tools to, for example, raise awareness on spending of public funds and turnout during elections and monitor COVID-19 cases.

When it comes to using data for advocacy and accountability, **ForSet** (Georgia) has been pioneering efforts in South Caucasus and beyond. ForSet is a Tbilisi-based creative enterprise that uses design and technology to communicate data. Driven by its young founders, ForSet is known for its civic-tech activities, creating user-friendly data portals, civic tools, educational games and compelling storytelling. The organisation uses combined approaches in supporting their communities and developing civic tech solutions.

ForSet uses online means to get organised, identify community problems, reach out to stakeholders or create new ideas, but they also operate offline such as trough hackathons that bring together young people from different backgrounds (activists, experts, and programmers) to develop technological and social solutions. Their biggest community-building event, DataFest Tbilisi, brings together hundreds of data professionals, human rights defenders, reporters, and activists to explore data and exchange practices on how to apply data for social good. DataFest Tbilisi covers a diverse range of topics such as using open data for human rights and democracy, data journalism and activism, datasets for effective fact-checking and developing IT and civic-tech solutions based on open-data. In 2020 and for the first time, the event took place entirely online due to Covid-19.

THREATS TO YOUNG ACTIVISTS IN THE DIGITAL REALM

Young digital activists reported a variety of challenges when they participated and engaged in the social and political discourse online.

Online activists, especially women and members of LGBTQI+ who advocate for gender equality and the rights of gender and sexual minorities feel particularly exposed to **harassment, bullying and hate speech**. Up to 73% of survey respondents were worried about hate speech and bullying while 46% identified online harassment of civic actors as an important obstacle for online youth participation, with 60% of women viewing that their gender impacted how others reacted to their civic views, compared to 31% of men respondents. NGOs and movements promoting the rights of specific communities or minorities, such as the LGBTQI+ or refugees, face serious backlash and are exposed to hate speech, bullying or trolling through fake profiles. In the opinion of several regional experts interviewed, authorities are not responding to online harassment effectively, possibly because they do not have enough resources or proper skills to do so. Some interviewed activists also viewed that existing legislative or judicial frameworks did not protect digital freedoms and rights.

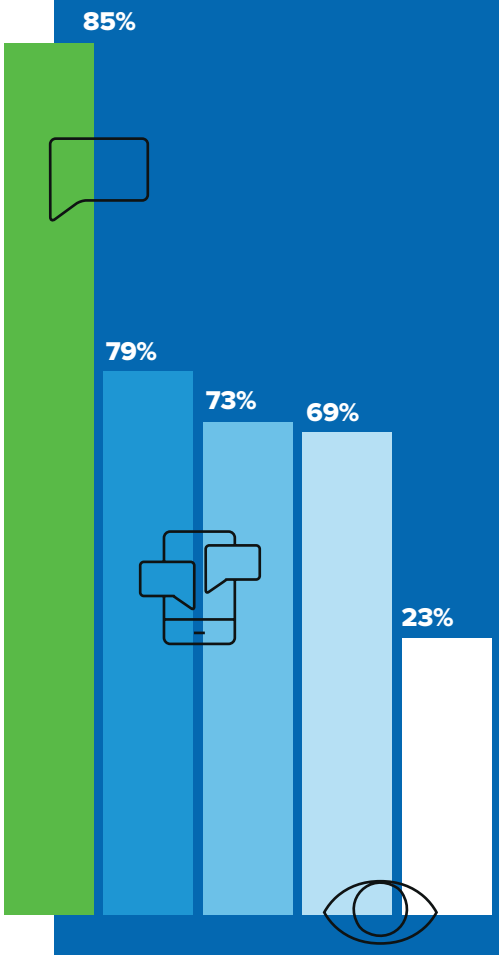
Privacy and cybersecurity were also of concern to young activists. While 60% of survey respondents felt confident using their real name or identity online, up to 57% felt their data was not protected online and that the views they shared could be used against them. When asked about obstacles young people face when participating online, 48% identify data surveillance and risks to data privacy as a challenge.

As observed globally, young civic actors in the ECA are also concerned by instances of **information pollution** - misinformation (false information is shared, but no harm is meant), disinformation (false information is knowingly shared to cause harm) and malinformation (genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere).[43] Of the survey respondents, up to 85% felt that there was a lot of disinformation and fake news on social media – still, 58% declared they trust online sources more than traditional media such as newspapers or television. **Polarisation** and extremist content were also expressed as concerns for young activists, with 69% of survey respondents believing that the internet creates polarisation of public discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic was seen as amplifying information pollution, especially in relation to the nature of the virus, quarantine restrictions and the need for protection or the effectiveness of the vaccine. Survey respondents agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic had exposed the public to more disinformation online (78%) and created more extreme and divisive views in society (64%).

43 CoE: Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making, 2017.

Figure 11. Young activists' perceptions about information pollution, polarisation and bullying online

Percentages of survey respondents



Wikimedians of Albanian Language User Group (Albania) was created by the Albanian community of Wikimedia projects to increase the quality and quantity of articles and multimedia material in the Albanian Wikipedia, and to advocate for free knowledge on Wikipedia.

Working both online and offline, the community brings together young online citizens and content creators and trains them to write high-quality articles and source photos about Albania in categories such as culture, heritage, social issues, geography, institutions, economy, and tourism.

The group promotes its content through online platforms, gets organised on social media groups, mailing lists and newsletters while also uses offline approaches when organising trainings on editing and writing, and for identifying new members interested in their community.

For example, the community organises 'editathons' on topics such as national cultural monuments or addressing the gap in representation of women in Wikipedia. Participants meet in person to learn editing skills and create content online. The group also provides fully online training through illustrated videos related to editing in Wikipedia.

THE INTERSECTION OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE ACTIVISM

Online and offline activism complement and reinforce each other.

Based on data obtained from the survey, interviews, consultation, there was a wide consensus that online and offline activism complement and reinforce each other. Of the young survey respondents, 82% viewed that digital activism needs to be complemented with face-to-face work, while 46% stated that digital civic engagement alone is not efficient enough to produce results.

When looking at how young actors move from online to offline civic participation, it emerged that young civic actors participate in both spheres across a range of activities, from volunteering and taking part in campaigns to sharing opinions and organising events. Signing or initiating petitions and fundraising seems to happen more online, while physical activities such as organising protests or demonstrations would take place in person.

Digital and traditional civic engagement and activism were seen as similar in goals and objectives of advancing social or political causes.

Digital and traditional civic engagement and activism were seen as similar in goals and objectives of advancing social or political causes. Digital activism was viewed as an enhancer but not a substitute for offline activism - advocacy, resource mobilisation, networking and coalition building in both contexts were seen as complementing one another.

On the one hand, digital activism was considered more fluid and having the potential to create impact at a larger scale. From a practical perspective, digital tools can offer better insights into the impact of civic actions, due to the power of data and analytics. On the other hand, digital civic engagement was described as limited in scope, and lacking the practical and legal power more traditional civic engagement has when operating in spaces where decision making takes place.

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUNG CIVIC ACTORS

As the data collection was conducted amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, participants of the survey, interviews and consultation reflected on the impact of this period on their civic activities, including on the opportunities and challenges that forced digitalisation and remote working brought about.

According to the views of the young survey respondents, COVID-19 had a strong impact on their civic activism, with just 22% saying it changed nothing. Notably, up to 69% said it had created barriers for traditional civic activities, while only 11% saw it negatively impacting digital activism.

Respondents identified some positive outcomes for civic engagement deriving from the crisis, such as: increased importance of activism online (84%), networking with new like-minded groups (67%) and governments employing more digital tools (61%). On the other hand, the crisis was seen as widening the digital gap, including for participation (65%).

There seemed to be a general consensus that the pandemic created a significant challenge in switching to digital work. Many representatives of the youth-led organisations interviewed recognised that their work largely depended on face-to-face approaches when it came to outreach to peers and other stakeholders and getting organised, even if creating online content formed their core form of activism. In this context, the pandemic has pressured even those that had less online experience to embrace the use of digital tools across the board. These challenges resonate with recent findings, for example on the virtualisation of peace work, whereby transition to online mode is seen as broadening access and equalising interaction, while at the same time losing or hampering elementary aspects of physical meetings: the sense of trust, understanding and togetherness so important in civic activities.[44]

What was worrying for many civic actors was how the pandemic has isolated younger generations, especially those who could not attend school or have access to the digital tools and skills to attend online, further exacerbating vulnerabilities and decreasing their engagement in social and civic life.

On the more positive side, interviewees acknowledged that the pandemic had also boosted creativity and readiness to use digital tools. Several of them expected that in the future more initiatives will continue to be organised online, as they offer additional advantages by granting access to new beneficiaries or fostering cooperation across border without the usual expenses.

The pandemic has isolated younger generations, especially those who could not attend school or have access to the digital tools and skills to attend online.

44 Isabel Bramsen, I. and Hagemann A.: The missing sense of peace: diplomatic approachment and virtualization during the COVID-19 lockdown, 2021.

USE OF E-GOVERNMENT SOLUTIONS

E-government can be defined as the use of information technology to more effectively and efficiently deliver government services to communities and businesses.[45] The interest of the public and young people in particular in digital platforms has incentivised innovation in the public sector, leading to the development of different e-government solutions to facilitate the interaction between the people and institutions.

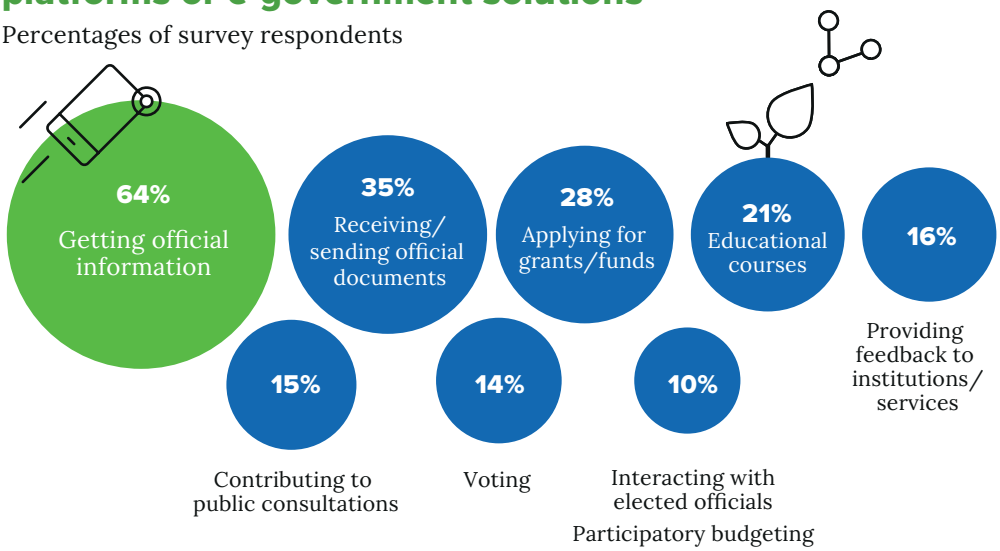
Based on the online survey, young civic actors made use of e-government platforms mostly for finding official information (64%) and to a much lesser extent to file documents (35%) or apply for funding and grants (25%). Only about 20% of respondents or less used e-government platforms for education, providing feedback, participating in public consultations or interacting with officials.

At the same time, 17% of the young survey respondents said they did not use any e-government platform. Among the reasons for which they had not done so, not knowing about them or not having these available were the most common. Up to 25% also stated they did not trust online tools for political processes such as deliberation.

These figures can be interpreted against existing data on e-government development, e-participation (online access to information, consultation and decision-making) and local online services.[46] While the development of e-government systems and digital public services is advancing in the ECA region, with most of the region ranking above global average, there are important differences within the region, with Turkey and Kazakhstan performing better than others across all indicators. In the same vein, young people's access to these types of solutions is differently impacted.

Figure 12. Young activists' use of government digital platforms or e-government solutions

Percentages of survey respondents



45 UN E-Government Knowledgebase.

46 UN E-Government Knowledgebase.

4.
Key takeaways

This rapid analysis set out to explore the nature and dimensions of digital civic engagement in the ECA and identify emerging trends and challenges in the digital civic space and to understand the opportunities and obstacles digital activism poses to young actors. A number of key takeaways can be proposed, based on the survey findings and a series of discussions with youth actors and key experts. These reflections are here organised based on the central principles that the UN has identified for civic engagement, namely increasing **participation**, ensuring the **protection** of civic actors and the **promotion** of a healthy civic space, both online and offline.[47]

STRENGTHENING YOUTH CIVIC PARTICIPATION ONLINE

- **Addressing the digital divide** and gaps between and within youth communities is key to the overall strengthening of youth civic participation. Limits to young actors' ability to engage in and create online communities and benefit from online tools are foremost linked to lack of digital skills and access to the internet and technology as well as the financial means that are implied.

- To support the **sustainability of online youth movements** and increase their outreach, beyond tokenism and without doing harm, youth actors require support in planning and implementing

47 UN Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, 2020.

strategies for online fundraising, organising, advocacy and promotion, including elements of digital marketing.

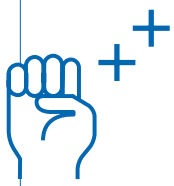
- As the current analysis reflects the views of cohorts of youth that are mostly urban, well-educated and employed, more is needed to understand how **marginalised and hard-to-reach youth communities** view the digital sphere, how they interact with others through digital tools, and how all groups of young women and young men could better benefit from the opportunities digital platforms present for civic participation.

- Beyond online platforms and social media, the **nexus of tech and digital** could open avenues for more advanced youth participation: for example through access to open data and use of data visualisation and monitoring tools, both for accountability purposes and for discovering and finding solutions to challenges young people face. There are successful examples in the region of hackathons that bring together civic activists, tech communities, business sector and government representatives to resolve social problems.

- Capacity-building and training youth actors on the use of digital and tech tools has the potential of moving their activism from more improvised and ad hoc modes to **systematic and strategic**.

- There is room for development of better **e-government tools** to open avenues for young people to become more aware and informed about government functioning, access government information and easily interact and participate in the processes of governance. Enhanced interaction among young people and their government as well as their increased participation in government functioning, decision-making and policymaking promotes civic engagement and strengthen democracy.

PROTECTING AND PROMOTING THE RIGHTS OF YOUNG DIGITAL ACTIVISTS



- **Safeguarding the civic space** against barriers to freedom of expression or other anti-democratic tendencies is needed for young people to participate in civic life safely, both online and offline. A better understanding of the types of threats young civic actors face, across identities, cultures, and communities, is the first step in ensuring better protection and redressal mechanisms in the face of harassment and intimidation.

- Developing the capacities of youth activists and youth-led NGOs to recognise and deal with challenges related to **information pollution or safety online** emerges strongly, especially for smaller activist communities with limited opportunities.

- Raising young people's awareness on the **ethics and legal frameworks** of operating in the digital sphere as well as tools to support them in pursuing their activism online while protecting themselves.

PROMOTING A YOUTH-INCLUSIVE AND YOUTH-LED CIVIC SPACE

- It is important to address the lack of **intergenerational dialogue**, mitigate the separation between traditional and formal civic participation and young people's online activism, and facilitate young civic actors' dialogue and cooperation with decision makers – for example, by creating new spaces for interaction between organised and unorganised civil society and government representatives. This includes trusting youth-led organisations and giving them appropriate credit for giving a voice to young people and addressing their issues.

- Supporting participation of **young people in decision making** at all levels can be done by utilising youth-friendly language and exploring online formats andeliminating all age restrictions to participate in processes of public consultation and deliberation. Ensuring young people's participation can also be done through supporting the establishment of youth councils on national or subnational levels that would have presence online and offline.

- While young people have demonstrated eagerness to civically engage online, digital action alone is unlikely to foster the strong networks, outreach and impact that sustains digital movements over the long-term – exploring how **online and offline engagement** support each other is needed.

- **Public-private partnerships** and increasing **access to funding** for youth emerge as an interesting avenue for increasing youth-led digital activism. The know-how of the tech sector and cooperation with private companies are particularly useful to tackle challenges related to security online or combating the spread of disinformation and fake news. Particularly, it is important to provide sustainable resources for the basic functioning of online youth organisations (e.g. equipment, human resources and skills) instead of activity-based funding.

- **Strengthening regional cooperation** can support existing youth digital activist networks and promote peer-learning and give them wider visibility and recognition in the region. This can be done together with existing regional youth institutions and organisations.

ANNEXES

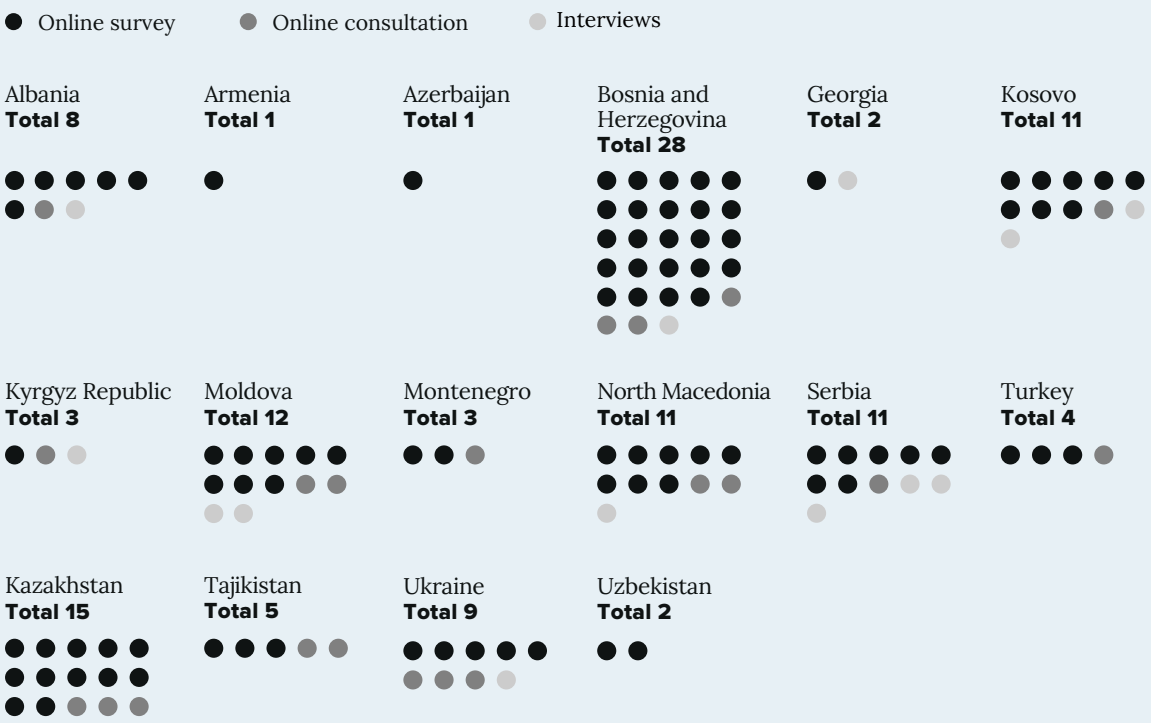
ANNEX 1:
METHODOLOGY

An online survey was administered through social media and snowballing method to young civic actors aged 15-29 years and living in the ECA region, between September 2020 and January 2021. It was composed of 20 questions, including demographic details, and made available in two languages, English and Russian (see Annex 2 for the full questionnaire). At the end of the roll-out phase 92 responses were recorded, representing respondents who completed at least 75% of the survey (52 identified as women, 39 as men, 1 respondent preferred not to say).

A series of 13 in-depth interviews (6 women, 7 men) were conducted between October and November 2020, each one the length of one hour, with key experts in the field, researchers, leaders of youth-led organisations and youth activists (see Annex 3 for the interview guideline).

As a final step, an online consultation engaging 15 experts and youth actors in the region was held (11 women, 4 men) to validate and complement the findings and recommendations extracted from the preliminary analysis.

Figure 13. Research participants: distribution per place of residence



ANNEX 2:
SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. **Age**
2. **Gender**
3. **I live in**
4. **Place of residence (Urban or Rural area)**
5. **Main occupation** (I currently:)
    a. Study
    b. Have a fulltime job
    c. Have a part-time job
    d. Am self-employed
    e. Am unemployed
    f. Am a homemaker
    g. Am unable to work
    h. Other (please mention)

6. **Highest level of education**

7. **The following describes me: (to choose)**
    a. I am a member of or volunteer for an NGO or social movement
    b. I am a leader or founding member of an NGO or social movement
    c. I am an individual civic activist/ active on social/political issues (not part of an NGO or organised movement)
    d. I am a member of a political party
    e. I am a member of a youth council, youth parliament or youth advisory board
    f. I regularly vote in elections
    g. I am active in an online community dealing with social or political issues
    h. I coordinate an online community dealing with social or political issues
    i. I have created or manage a social media platform/webpage/online forum or blog related to social or political issues
    j. Other, please elaborate

8. **In the past 12 months, I have…. (Answers = Online; Offline; Both; Neither)**
    a. Expressed my opinion on a political/social issue important to me
    b. Tried to persuade others to agree with my opinion on a social or political issue
    c. Volunteered for a social or political cause important to me
    d. Started a campaign related to a social or political cause
    e. Taken part in campaign related to a social or political cause
    f. Organised meetings/events related to social or political issues
    g. Signed or initiated a petition on a social or political issue
    h. Raised/collected money for a social/political cause
    i. Donated money for a social/political cause
    j. Organised or attended a protest/demonstration
    k. Interacted with elected officials
    l. Participated in a public consultation/political process organised by public authorities
    m. Organised or participated in a political campaign

9. **While carrying out these activities, please indicate if you have experienced the following barriers and threats and how often (Answers = Not at all/Never; Occasionally; Often; Constantly)**
    a. Sociocultural barriers (stereotyping, pressure or stigma, resistance from family and friends)
    b. Legal barriers (barriers posed by legislation or policies)
    c. Political barriers (hostility against youth defenders, disabling environment)
    d. Physical barriers and threats (violence, torture, harassment, detainment or imprisonment)
    e. Financial barriers (general dependence on adults, lack of accessible funds, lack of resources for bail-outs etc.)
    f. Digital barriers and threats (online harassment, surveillance, violation of privacy)
    g. Logistical barriers (travel restrictions, lack of access to internet or devices)

10. **To follow developments in social and political issues, the social media platforms I use frequently (several times a week) are… (to choose)**
    a. Facebook
    b. Twitter
    c. Instagram
    d. Youtube
    e. Tik Tok
    f. Snapchat
    g. WhatsApp
    h. Discord
    i. Linkedin
    j. Triller
    k. Telegram
    l. Viber
    m. Reddit
    n. I don't often use social media platforms to follow developments in social or political issues
    o. Other social media platforms

11. **I regularly (at least once a week) create the following content on social or political issues on social media… (to choose)**
    a. Posts (such as tweets, stories or status updates)
    b. Micro-blogs
    c. Videos
    d. Podcasts
    e. Images, memes or other humorous/ironic content
    f. I don't regularly create content on social or political issues for my social media channel
    g. Other content:

12. **I regularly (at least once a week) share the following content on social or political issues on social media… (to choose)**
    a. Posts (such as tweets, stories or status updates)
    b. Micro-blogs
    c. Videos
    d. Podcasts
    e. Images, memes or other humorous/ironic content
    f. I don't regularly create content on social or political issues for my social media channel
    g. Other content:

13. **The social/political topics that I usually share/create content online are about (to choose)**
    a. Education
    b. Employment
    c. Environment and climate change
    d. Democracy
    e. Politics or elections
    f. Peacebuilding
    g. Human Rights and social justice
    h. Activities for youth
    i. Health
    j. Poverty
    k. Minority groups
    l. Gender issues
    m. LGBTQI
    n. Global or local news
    o. Other, please elaborate.

14. **Thinking about your behaviour and civic activities online, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: (Answers = Strongly Agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree)**
    a. I feel confident using my real name/identity on social media
    b. I feel my data/privacy is protected online
    c. I feel free in expressing myself online
    d. Being active online gives me a sense of empowerment and belonging to the society
    e. If I express my views on social or political issues online, they could be used against me
    f. I am free to access and use the Internet as I wish
    g. The Internet creates polarisation of public discourse and opinions
    h. I trust traditional media sources (TV, newspapers) more than online/social media
    i. There is a lot of disinformation and fake news on social media
    j. I am worried about hate speech or bullying online
    k. I am worried about extremist content online
    l. I feel my gender impacts how others react to my civic views online

15. **I have used government digital platforms or e-government solutions (official platforms created by government institutions) for.... (to choose)**
    a. Getting official information
    b. Receiving/sending official documents
    c. Contributing to public consultations
    d. Interacting with elected officials
    e. Voting
    f. Applying for grants/funding
    g. Participatory budgeting
    h. Providing feedback to the services of institutions
    i. Educational courses offered by a public school/university
    j. I have never used any official digital platforms
    k. Other, please elaborate:

16. **If "I have never used any official digital platforms", "Why haven't you used any official digital platform? Please choose all that apply.**
    a. I haven't heard about them
    b. I don't think our public institutions have any
    c. I have never needed them
    d. I don't trust online political processes
    e. I prefer interacting with institutions face-to-face
    f. I don't use them because they don't offer updated information
    g. Other, please elaborate

17. **Thinking of possible obstacles young people face in participating online, please choose up to 5 obstacles that you think are relevant in your context:**
    a. Lack of access to internet (coverage, quality, cost) or smartphone/computer
    b. Internet restrictions (some platforms/websites are not available)
    c. Lack of resources and funding for online civic activities
    d. Data surveillance and risks to data privacy
    e. Online harassment of civic actors
    f. Difficulties in getting one's message through to the wider audience
    g. Lack of confidence in the impact of civic activism
    h. Lack of interest in civic engagement in general
    i. Lack of knowledge on how to advocate and participate online
    j. Insufficient media and digital skills
    k. Please indicate any other obstacles not mentioned:

18. **Thinking about civic participation in your society today, to what extent would you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Answers = Strongly Agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree)**
    a. Online participation helps create well-networked, cohesive groups
    b. Online civic activity gives more freedom and autonomy to young people to respond to issues which affect them
    c. Online participation strengthens engagement within local communities
    d. Online participation strengthens engagement among different communities across borders
    e. Online civic activity gives higher visibility to important issues that should be addressed by the society
    f. Online participation alone is efficient for achieving desired change in society
    g. Official decisions cannot be taken online
    h. Online communities are more efficient than traditional NGOs
    i. Online civic activity needs to be complemented with face-to-face work too
    j. Online participation is not inclusive of all young people

19. **We would like to map out the important civic movements in the region. Please mention any local civic movement(s) that are important to you and include their name and a link to their media platform - social media channel and/or official website**.

20. **The global COVID-19 pandemic has... (Answers = Strongly Agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree)**
    a. Increased the importance of activism online
    b. Inspired me to network with new likeminded groups and communities
    c. Created barriers for traditional civic activities offline
    d. Created barriers for civic activities online
    e. Exposed citizens to more mis/disinformation online
    f. Widened digital inequality and the digital participation gap
    g. Created more extreme views and divisive opinions online
    h. Resulted in governments using more digital tools for interacting with citizens
    i. Emphasised the role of digital tools as essential for civic participation
    j. Enabled me to discover new resources for mobilizing/promoting my cause
    k. Changed nothing when it comes to civic activism in my society
    l. Please give us some details on the opportunities or obstacles that you have identified during the global pandemic, in your civic activities.

ANNEX 3:
INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

Survey Prompt:

Who is the survey designed for? Young people engaged in civic actions, aged 15-34 years old, living in Europe and Central Asia

What is the purpose of the survey? We aim to understand how young civic actors use digital tools for political and social participation, what are the opportunities and obstacles they face. By civic actors we understand any young person active in a traditional NGO, an online community or any other form of social movement - traditional or loosely organised.

Who is the initiator? The survey takes place under the coordination of the UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub (IRH).

What does it imply? The survey takes approximately 10 minutes to complete. The participation is voluntary, and in order to safeguard your rights, the minimum personally-identifiable information is requested. At the end of the survey, you have the possibility to provide your personal details, only if you choose so.

Questions for youth civic actors:

1. How did you get into what you are doing and what drives you/motivates you?
2. What is the change that you would like to see happen in your society?
3. Who are the main targets of your activities (other youth, decision-makers, general public, other?)
4. To what extent are digital platforms (social media etc.) important in your work?
5. What are your thoughts about engaging other young people in your activities - do you actively do that, are there any specific obstacles that are important for your cause?

Questions for experts:

1. How do you work on the topic of youth activism/digital activism?
2. What are the recent trends in youth activism and engagement in the society/region that you are familiar with?
3. What is the general level of access for young people to decision-making, to voicing their opinions, to express their views?

Questions for both:

1. What do you see as the main frustrations of today's youth generation? What are their main aspirations?
2. What is your personal experience with digital activism?
3. While engaging in civic activism what do you think are the main barriers and threats young people are exposed to; the main opportunities and benefits the digital tools offer them?
4. What are the main digital/social media platforms young people mostly engage with to follow social and political developments, in your country?
5. Talking about "fake news", dis/misinformation or propaganda, how much is your work connected to them?
6. Thinking of the impact the global COVID-19 pandemic on youth civic activism, do you think civic activists faced more opportunities or challenges?

ANNEX 4:

EXAMPLES OF YOUTH CIVIC MOVEMENTS IN THE ECA

We asked survey respondents and key informants to let us know about key youth-led or youth-focused civic movements in their societies, working online or in the nexus of online and offline that were important to them. The following list, though not exhaustive of youth-led engagement in the region, summarises these responses.

Albania	**Qendresa Qytetare/Civic Resistance** – founded in 2016, the organisation consists of a group of young professionals who believe in the power of the people and who are determined to do the best for the public and their country. They work together to increase transparency, monitor electoral and democratic processes in universities, increase citizen participation in local decision-making, empower students through education and legal assistance for administrative and judicial appeals, and monitor the work of the government related to the youth and education sectors.
	Wikimedians of Albanian Language User Group – a user group created by the Albanian community of Wikimedia projects, interested in increasing the quality and quantity of articles and multimedia material in Albanian Wikipedia. This is done through trainings, workshops and edit-a-thons, running competitions online and offline, and cultural institution partnerships across the Western Balkans where Albanian is spoken.
	Albanian National Youth Network (ANYN) – a youth network composed of representatives of political youth forums, youth groups and civil society organisation at the local and national level, established in 2015. Their objectives include the promotion of youth rights and youth issues at local and national levels, increasing the engagement and representation of young people in all stages of decision-making and policy-making, as well as promoting the creation of policies, laws and programs to support young people in Albania.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	**ZastoNe/Why Not** – established as a youth peace organisation, Zasto Ne has expanded to work on the creation of a safe, secure, healthy, active, efficient and accountable Bosnia and Herzegovina through increasing civic participation, influencing government accountability, use of new technology tools and promotion of socially engaged culture. Active since 2000, their activity covers: fact-checking and promotion of accountability, monitoring of the government and political processes, research and advocacy, promoting the use of technology and civic education for elections.
Georgia	**ForSet** – a Tbilisi-based, youth-led creative enterprise that uses design and technology to communicate data. ForSet runs educational programmes on data collection, data cleaning and analysis and data communication, and work with journalists and CSO activists, researchers, government representatives, students both from Georgia and the region. They also organise various community building events (meetups, hackathons, festivals) for people from different professional backgrounds to network, share their knowledge and start collaborations around data use.
	Shame movement – emerged during the summer of 2019 with the lead of young activists and active in protest movements and mobilising the public through social media for larger participation in political and civic life. The Shame movement has consolidated itself as a group that unites representatives of liberal civil society determined to bring positive change in Georgia.
Kosovo	**Free Libre Open Source Software Kosova (FLOSSK)** – a non-governmental organisation of students and young professionals based in Prishtina established in 2009 in order to support, promote and develop free and open source software. They contribute to open and participatory knowledge, education in information technologies through open courseware, and open standards, culture and open society using free communication.
	Peer Educators Network (PEN) – a youth organisation that aims to create a community where young men and women are empowered to act as agents of social change. PEN works all over Kosovo by being active in 36 municipalities and has over 4000 volunteers/peer educators. Their mission is to empower youth towards active participation and promotion of human rights, and they tackle issue such as employment, volunteerism, gender equality, social innovation and entrepreneurship, environmental protection, anti-violence and healthy lifestyle.

Kyrgyz Republic	**Kloop** – a news website with most of its authors students and young alumni of the Kloop Media School of Journalism. Through the investigative journalism of its members, Kloop tackles a range of topics not raised in mainstream media, such as a range of political, societal, human rights and corruption stories.
	The Association of Legal Clinics of Kyrgyzstan – unites and coordinates the activities of legal clinics of universities and non-profit organisations that implement educational programmes in the field of jurisprudence. Its aim is to improve the quality of legal education in the Kyrgyz Republic.
Moldova	**Code4Moldova** – a community of young professionals and enthusiasts who develop pro-bono IT solutions in order to solve societal challenges while supporting the digital transformation in Moldova. Their activities include civic labs and programmes on tech for social good.
	OccupyGuguța – a youth-led online protest movement, an apolitical group that makes use of creative ways to protest and to encourage Moldovan youth to get more involved into the political and social life of the country.
	Association for Student and Youth Initiatives' Support (ASIST) – a non-governmental youth organisation active since 2006, their goals include assisting young people in developing projects, enhancing critical thinking, encouraging student participation, providing consultancy to youth and student organisations, linking students with NGOs, and creating networks and constructive dialogue platforms.
	Tinerii pentru ECO Plastic (TEP)/Young people for ECO Plastic – an online community created by young people and students in different fields, active since 2017 with a mission to promote recycling and climate education.
Serbia	**Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK)** – a non-profit organisation established to improve investigative journalism in Serbia. The organisation was founded by a team of young journalists engaged in exposing crime and corruption, to help readers better understand how crime and corruption affect their lives.
Ukraine	**Media Reforms Center (MRC)** – a non-governmental organisation and an educational platform, founded by Mohyla School of Journalism and aiming to bring high standards of journalism education to Ukraine, raise the level of media literacy, inform about the danger of propaganda and dissemination of fake information. Their The fact-checking site Stopfake.org was launched as a collaboration of students and graduates of the school with teachers and journalists.
Uzbekistan	**Nemolchi.uz** – an online community organised around an independent information project against violence in Uzbekistan. The online platform contributes to the debate about cases of violence, news, statistics, including advice from psychologists interested to share knowledge in this area.
Regional organisations and initiatives	**mampassi** – a self-organised professional collective and network of students, young professionals, and mentors from Central Asia seeking to impact views on social and environmental change collaborating with businesses, tech communities, education sector, arts scene and intellectuals. The collective aims to integrate Central Asian countries by facilitating projects that stimulate public dialogue in five thematic areas: education, climate change, healthcare, good governance, business and technology.
	Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) – a regional network of non-governmental organisations with programs in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Since their foundation in 2003, YIHR has been fighting for values such as truth, justice, accountability, equality, freedom, democracy and peace. The organisation is fighting for peace as a lasting process, including dealing with the past and developing continuous co-operation between the governments and people in the region.
	South Eastern European Dialogue on Internet Governance (SEEDIG) – an open, inclusive and informal space for dialogue and cooperation on internet and digital policy issues between stakeholders from South Eastern Europe and the neighbouring area. SEEDIG was launched in a bottom-up manner in 2014, as a platform to facilitate discussions and collaboration on internet-related issues in the region.