

Report on the Youth Policy Dialogue with Henna Virkkunen, Executive Vice-president of the European Commission for Technological Sovereignty, Security and Democracy

Title of Youth Policy Dialogue: The Role of social media in Sharing Democracy
and its Impact on Young People

Date: 10 March 2025

Location: Aalto University, Espoo, Finland

Introduction

The Youth Policy Dialogue brought together 9 social media influencers and 11 students from different countries in Europe. They discussed the role of social media in shaping democracy and its impact on young people with Henna Virkkunen, Executive Vice-president of the European Commission for Technological Sovereignty, Security and Democracy. The Dialogue took place on 10 March 2025 at Aalto University and was moderated by an Italian YouTuber and influencer, Lorenzo Luporini. Executive Vice-president Virkkunen recommended using Aalto as the venue due to its strong reputation in technology and innovation. Aalto University and the European Commission selected the participants based on their fluency in English and diverse backgrounds.

Summary of the online preparatory meeting

DG CNECT held a one-hour online meeting with the influencers and students on 4 March 2025. They introduced the concept of the EU Commission's Youth Dialogues and reviewed how EU and Member State digital regulations work. DG CNECT fielded participants' thoughts on the topic of the Dialogue through word clouds where participants could provide one-word responses to DG CNECT questions.

Summary of the Youth Policy Dialogue (hybrid event)

The Youth Policy Dialogue started at 11.00 am on 10 March 2025 at Aalto University and was live-streamed via the DigitalEU YouTube and Instagram channels. Screens displayed the results of the word clouds the participants had helped create at the online preparatory meeting.

Before the start of the conversation, Executive Vice-president Virkkunen presented her role in the EU and the challenges of her portfolio.

Once the floor opened to the participants, the conversation could be divided into roughly four different categories:

- 1) how the EU would deal with social media giants
- 2) how it would protect democratic discourse
- 3) how it would handle the rise of AI, and
- 4) how it would protect mental health online.

The next section will present the details of these discussions.

Executive Vice-president Virkkunen closed the Dialogue encouraged by the fact that participants expected a fair, safe, and democratic environment in the EU. She felt the participants were aligned with her fight against disinformation and felt more supported against criticism that the EU is anti-free speech. She also felt she had received good ideas from the participants and particularly noted their emphasis on education and digital skills as solutions.

Attendees continued the discussion over lunch, delving further into the key topics. They were also invited to tours of both Aalto University campus and the LUMI supercomputer centre.

Topic(s) of discussion

1. How the EU planned to deal with American and Chinese social media giants

Participants wanted social media platforms to be held accountable. Foremost on their minds were the opacity of their moderation practices, business models, and algorithms.

Proposed solutions: Many asked for EU action to make social media companies transparent. One asked about creating EU competitors to the American and Chinese platforms.

Response: Executive Vice-president Virkkunen emphasised that the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) already forces companies to be transparent on why certain content gets shown to users. The DSA now needed to be given time to be put to the test. The Executive Vice-president also emphasised the codes of conduct most online platforms had signed on disinformation and hate speech. And investigations were underway against some platforms.

Nevertheless, she warned the EU was already criticised for over-regulating and that it could not protect people 'from everything'. Citizens needed their own digital skills to 'set their own limits.' A distinction was made for minors, where the Commission was working with platforms on cyber-bullying, age verification, and guidelines on the reach of age-inappropriate content.

The Executive Vice-President acknowledged that European companies have room to grow in comparison to their global competitors and expressed confidence in their future progress.

2. How the EU planned to protect democratic and electoral discourse

Participants were rattled by the prominence of disinformation and inflammatory political content on social media. Some wanted largescale reform of campaign finance and influence online. Others raised the promotion of education and digital skills. Two participants raised the positive potential of social media in politics.

Proposed solutions: One participant proposed making social media platforms interoperable and decentralised, making them harder to manipulate. Another proposed reducing the visibility of bots to reduce discourse distortion.

Response: Executive Vice-president Virkkunen repeatedly championed a ‘balanced approach’ that enables the EU to protect freedom of speech while also limiting the spread of disinformation. She emphasised the work the EU does with Member States to safeguard elections, which she views as successful. Education, however, is a Member State competence and the EU can therefore only be involved in best practices dissemination and awareness raising. Similarly, bot regulation is the responsibility of the social media companies.

The Executive Vice-president maintained that social media could be beneficial for politics as long as they operated and innovated in a ‘human-centric’ way. She expressed some interest in decentralisation as a solution.

3. How the EU would handle the rise of AI

Participants wanted protections against AI content like bot-generated comments, fake creators, and deepfake content that could be used for revenge porn or political strife. One asked if the EU was promoting positive uses for AI and AI literacy.

Proposed solutions: Participants proposed watermarks on AI-generated content and ‘proof of humanity’ cryptographic tools for social media activity.

Response: Executive Vice-President Virkkunen noted that, given the fast-evolving nature of AI, a period of adaptation would be necessary to understand how EU rules would apply in practice. It was important to encourage innovation but that humans were in the ‘driver’s seat’ with AI development. She noted the EU already had rules for deepfakes, but no direct rules on how algorithms disseminate malicious content. The EU works with social media companies to deal with this issue. It was also up to the Member States to enforce existing rules on violence against women when it came to revenge porn.

4. How the EU will protect mental health online

Participants pointed to influencers and algorithms promoting demoralisation and radicalisation.

Proposed solutions: Participants proposed either the creation of new rights and freedoms for mental health and online activity, or large awareness campaigns that mirrored past campaigns against tobacco and junk food industries.

Response: Executive Vice-president Virkkunen put it on the platforms to mitigate risks against mental wellbeing. An inquiry was underway on the risks to minors, but adults had to regulate their own consumption.

Follow-up Activities

The Youth Policy Dialogue was a success in both in-person and online engagement and communication. While the live stream did not attract a large audience, the level of interest was very high. The participants in the room were very active. Questions submitted on social media and Sli.do provoked engaging discussions. The students and content creators in the room had many questions that were answered during the session. Although few concrete proposals were made during the conversation, Executive Vice President Virkkunen said that she would consider the various discussion points raised by the attendees for future European Commission initiatives.