The European Democracy Action Plan:
Protecting your most fundamental rights

Table of Contents

What is the European Democracy Action Plan?

The European Democracy Action Plan is a set of goals and strategies aimed at enforcing democratic ideals, strengthening democratic systems and, ultimately protecting fundamental rights throughout the European Union.

It was announced in December 2020, as part of the political priorities of the European Commission for the legislative term of 2019-2024. It details the policies and objectives that will be adopted within the European Union to protect citizens and freedoms, established as the first priority of the EU's Strategic Agenda for the same period.

The European Democracy Action Plan was designed and released after an ample process of public consultation. The result reflected different inputs from citizens, organized civil society and other stakeholders.

The Action Plan is based on three connected pillars:

- promoting fair elections,
- strengthening media freedom and
- countering disinformation.

Together, these pillars work to empower each and every citizen, while making the democracies in the continent more resilient.

The Action Plan itself is the result of European Democracy, and reflects a process of dialogue, assembly and voting that embody the democratic principles at its core.

Before detailing each pillar of the European Democracy Action Plan, this report will provide a brief explanation of the democratic process that led to the Action Plan, as an example of how Democracy works at the level of the European Union.
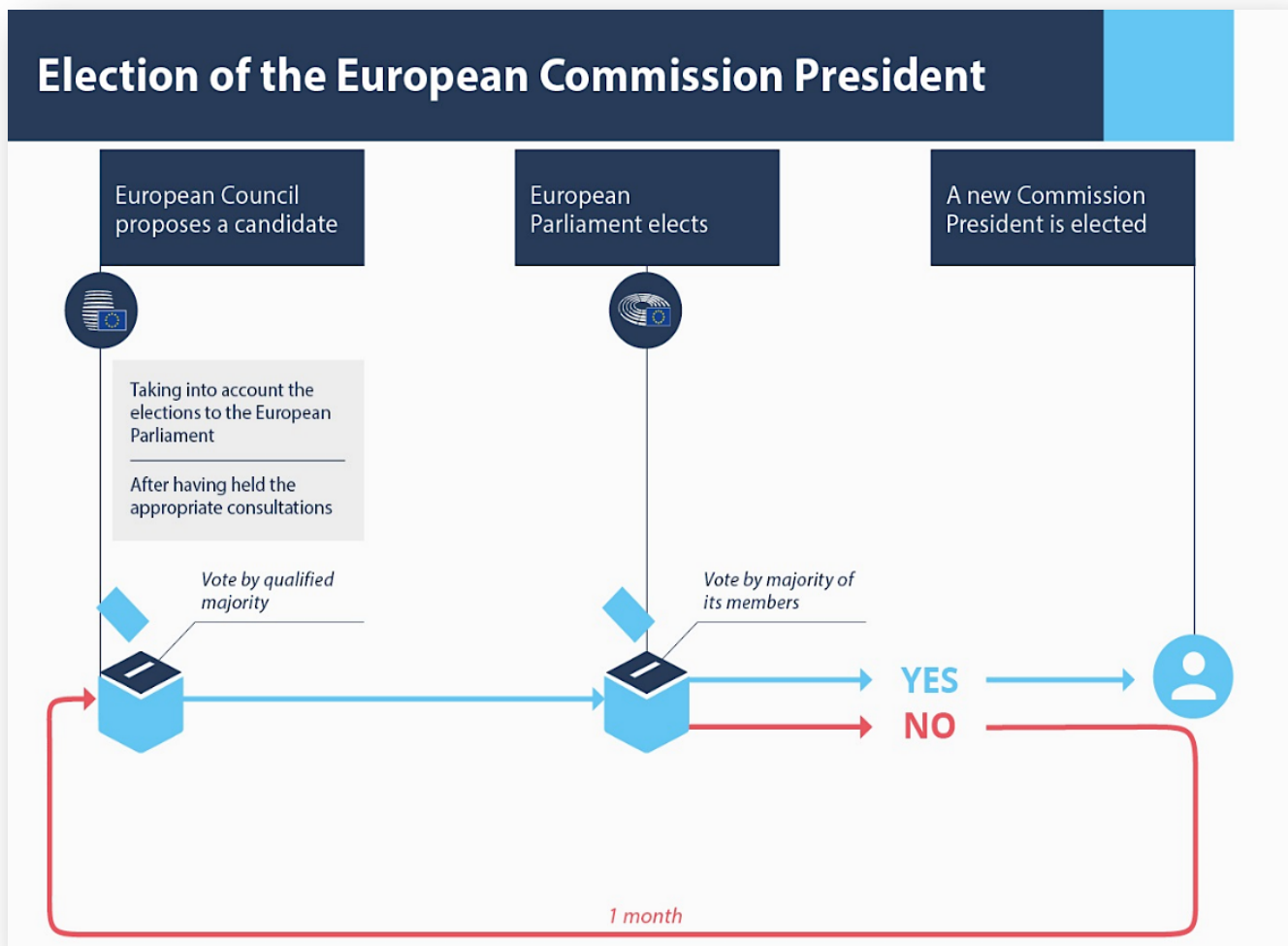
How does Democracy work at the European Union?

Every five years, citizens across the European Union vote for the European Parliament. This assures their voices will be heard at the European Union, directly influencing policy even if their party stays in political opposition to the sitting government at the national level. This is designed to allow for more voices to be heard at the EU.

After the Parliamentary Election, there is a process to choose who will form the new Executive Power of the European Union. This process reflects the parliamentary system adopted by many Member States. It has, however, a new balance of power.

In most parliamentary systems, the acting head of government with executive power – usually the prime-minister – is directly chosen by the parliament. At the EU, however, this person – the president of the European Commission –, is chosen in a slightly different process.

To guarantee the voice of each member-state political majority, the European Council leads the negotiations and suggests a President for the European Commission, the EU`s executive body. The President then has to be elected by the European Parliament.

Election of the European Commission President

European Council proposes a candidate

European Parliament elects

A new Commission President is elected

Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament

After having held the appropriate consultations

Vote by qualified majority

Vote by majority of its members

YES

NO

1 month

During this process, the heads of state or government of each member-state, who get together as the European Council, have to engage in dialogue with the new Parliament to make space for different voices and find a consensual name to lead the European Commission during the legislature.

This process allows for ample discussion of European matters, and how they affect the European Union, different member-states and different grouping within and across national borders. While it takes place, the European Council listens to elected members and negotiates to establish a Strategic Agenda for the legislature.

The Strategic Agenda comprises broad objectives that guide the European Union until the next Parliamentary Elections, when new voices will engage in another dialogue, within the same framework.

After the process, dialogue continues as the elected President of the European Commission forms the Commission itself for the legislature.

In this phase, a list of commissioners is presented to the Parliament. This list usually has one commissioner of each of the member-states of the European Union, to ensure the balance of influence at the Commission. The Commissioners also need to be elected by Parliament, which involves another round of negotiations and understandings.

Once established, the European Commission details the Strategic Agenda proposed by the European Counsel. These are the Priorities of the European Union for the next five years, which also is shaped by the voices in European Parliament, voted all across Europe every five years.

In 2019, the European Counsel established the following objectives as the Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024:
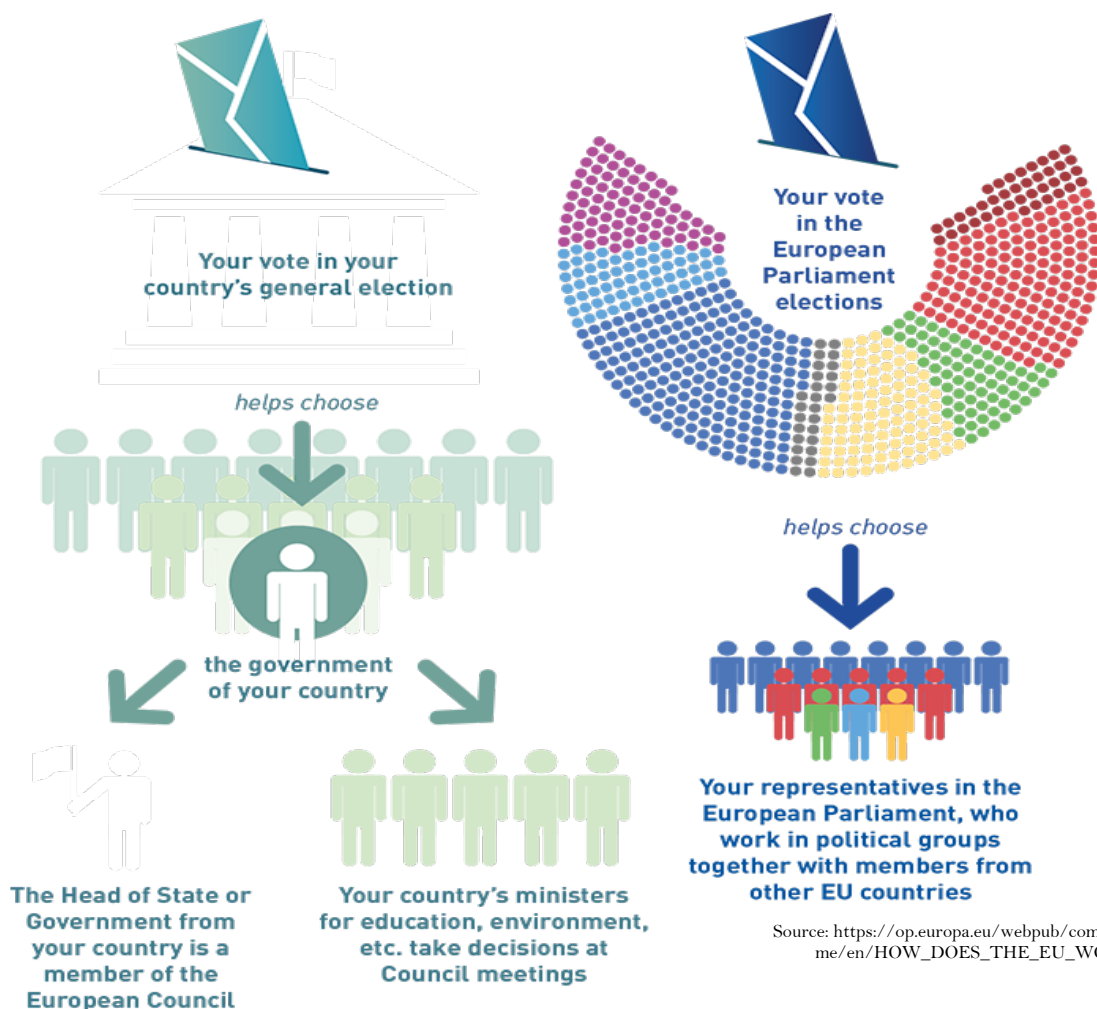
- Protect citizens and freedoms
- Develop a strong and vibrant economic base
- Build a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe
- Promote European interest and values on the global stage

For this Legislature, the European Commission has established the following objectives as the **Priorities of 2019-2024**:

- A **European Green Deal**
- A Europe fit for the **digital age**
- An economy that **works for people**
- A stronger Europe in the world
- Promoting our **European way of life**
- A new push for European **Democracy**

These Priorities are further detailed in specific **plans**, such as the European Democracy Action Plan. This step demands further negotiations with Parliament and the member-states. In this case, member-states are usually represented by the Council of the European Union, constituted of the ministerial bodies of each sitting government.

It is your voice!

Your vote in your country's general election

helps choose

the government of your country

The Head of State or Government from your country is a member of the European Council

Your country's ministers for education, environment, etc. take decisions at Council meetings

Your vote in the European Parliament elections

helps choose

Your representatives in the European Parliament, who work in political groups together with members from other EU countries

Source: https://op.europa.eu/webpub/com/eu-and-me/en/HOW_DOES_THE_EU_WORK.htm
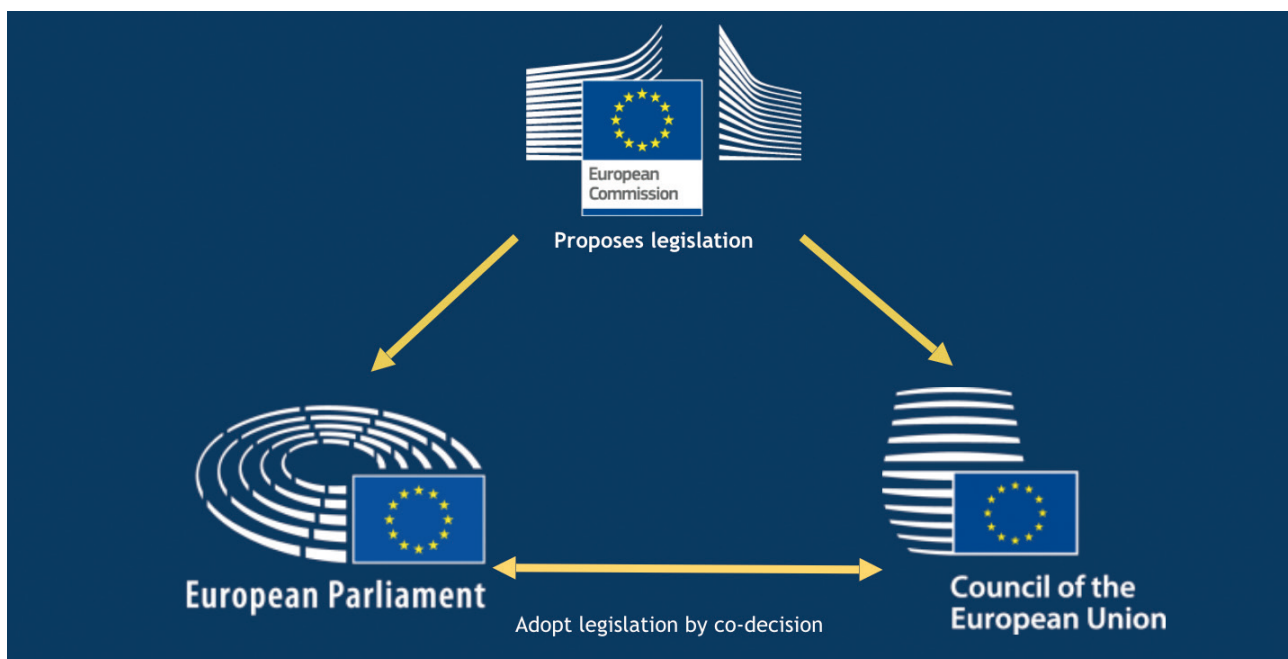
These negotiations lead to the propositions of new European Laws by the European Commission. These are then voted by the Parliament and by the Council of the European Union, ensuring that many voices are heard.

The plans and negotiations also reflect indirectly on to inter-state cooperation and discussion and adoption of internal policies within each member of the European Union. This is provided by the contact between different governments and European parties, who represent your voice at different and interconnected levels of European Democracy.

Your voice is also heard directly by the policy makers at the European Union, in public consultations. These are open researches that allows for citizens to influence policy without the intermediation of parties and national governments.

The European Democracy Action Plan is a fruit of a public consultation. Between 15 July and 18 September, 2020, the European Commission was open to citizens' direct input. The voices heard at this moment direct shaped the policy proposed by the plan.

You can find the past, **present and future public consultations at the European Commission's website**, at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/consultations_en.

The European Democracy Action Plan

In the last decades, the advancement of digital forms of communication and interaction have impacted political action. Alongside the enduring social and economic impacts of the 2008 financial crisis, new tools have reshaped how we make political claims, form active groups and voice social concerns.

These changes have the potential to expand democratic ideals and processes, broadening social dialogue while upholding democratic ideals and processes.

However, there are also new risks to democracy that arise from how digital platforms are used by and around citizens. Partly as a result of that, harms and feelings of frustration around social and economic realities can also motivate anti-democratic messages.

This is not a completely new phenomenon. Roughly a century ago, changes in communication technology, like the widespread use of radio transmissions and development of film, took place around a deep economic crisis. Then, anti-democratic movements also appeared and developed in Europe and elsewhere.

The historical context today is very different than the 1930s in many ways. However, there are similarities and it is no coincidence that new and neo anti-democratic movements appear to grow and come closer to political institutions.

Cartoon by Mahmoud Abbas.
Source: https://cartoonmovement.com/cartoon/hate-speech-4

"Our ideal, our principles, in the European Union, are our values: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

Sadly, today none can be taken for granted."

Vera Jourová

Vice-President of the European Commission

© picture-alliance/W. Dabkowski

Beyond the rise of different discourses that attack democratic ideals, another way we can observe this threat relates to how people judge their democracy. This is usually measured as how much people are happy with their democratic system.

Recently, many people are voicing dissatisfaction: in France, for example, 58% were unhappy with their democratic system in 2019. For comparison, 56% of people voiced a similar concern in Brazil and 59% in the United States.

But keep in mind that **showing dissatisfaction with a democratic system is not the same as being against democracy**.

Systems are designed to promote and uphold them. If they are not working, or have problems, they can be enhanced to guarantee them.
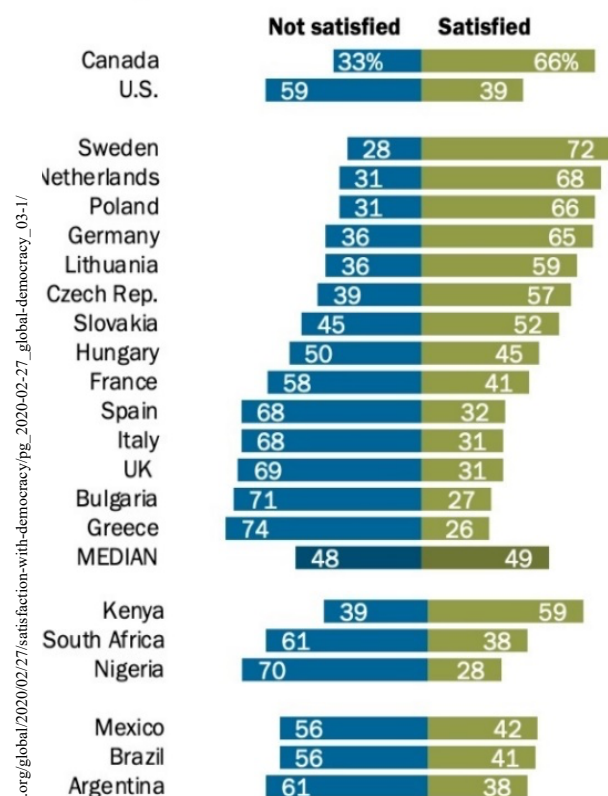
Remember: it is **only in democracy that you can voice your concern and ideas** to enhance the system. To give away democracy is to lose the right to change what is not right.

A vote against democracy can be your last.

The European Democracy Action plan comes exactly to preserve and promote these ideals and your rights to speak and participate in politics within the European Union. It is part of an ample effort to maintain and expand fundamental rights – a priority for the EU.

**Speak.
Listen.
Vote.
Participate.**

Many dissatisfied with democracy

% who are ___ with the way democracy is working in their country

	Not satisfied	Satisfied
Canada	33%	66%
U.S.	59	39
Sweden	28	72
Netherlands	31	68
Poland	31	66
Germany	36	65
Lithuania	36	59
Czech Rep.	39	57
Slovakia	45	52
Hungary	50	45
France	58	41
Spain	68	32
Italy	68	31
UK	69	31
Bulgaria	71	27
Greece	74	26
MEDIAN	48	49
Kenya	39	59
South Africa	61	38
Nigeria	70	28
Mexico	56	42
Brazil	56	41
Argentina	61	38

te: Don't know responses not shown.
urce: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q5.
emocratic Rights Popular Globally but Commitment to Them Not
vays Strong"

W RESEARCH CENTER

Free and fair elections

The Commission is strongly committed to support that all European electoral processes follow democratic standards of **freedom**, **transparency** and **citizen engagement**. Free and fair elections require a political commitment to democratic values during the whole process of election, not only when it is time of voting. Thus, the Commission aims to address mechanisms that improve the **transparency** and **integrity** of electoral processes, while empowering citizens to **participate** as voters and candidates in the political debate. The European Action Plan aims to purpose

- A **legislation** to assure greater **transparency** of sponsored content in political advertising.
- A revision of the **rules of financing political parties**
- Join operational mechanism to **protect elections and electoral infrastructures** against threats, such as cyber-attacks.

'I want Europeans to be able to make their political choices next May in fair, secure and transparent European elections. In our online world, the risk of interference and manipulation has never been so high. It is time to bring our election rules up to speed with the digital age to protect European democracy.'

12 September 2018

Jean-Claude Juncker, 12 September 2018

The Action Plan aims to protect elections by applying the following detailed measures:
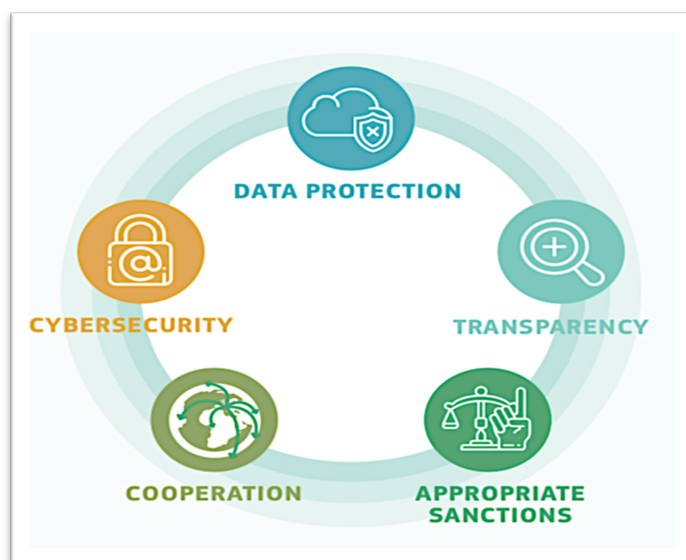
Data protection: The Action Plan is concerned with the protection of our personal data in electoral contexts.

Recently, we had important revelations of circumstances in which our personal data is believed to have been misused during electoral processes, for instance the case including Facebook and Cambridge Analytica.

The Commission developed a General Data Protection Regulation, which is applied since May 2018, and aims to give guidance not only to European political parties, national authorities, but also, to social media platforms on how to apply data protection regulations.

Transparency: it is crucial to guarantee transparency of political advertising. In democracies, it is important to safeguard equal treatment of candidates, by setting, for instance, limits of electoral spending.

The Commission is especially concerned with *online* environments, in which transparency rules are vulnerable of being bypassed. Because of that, the Commission launched a Code of Practice, involving political parties, Member States and social media platforms, to assure transparency in digital environments and attack online disinformation.

Elections and the COVID-19

Due to the pandemic, the Commission acknowledges that new digital realities may challenges the integrity of democratic elections. Therefore, the Commission is working with Member States to promote good practices and adaptations that ensure free and fair elections

The Commission gives recommendations to the authorities and political parties and foundations in EU countries on how **to ensure transparency of political advertising**:

- political parties, foundations and campaign organisations should make information available for citizens on how much money they spend on online advertising in a campaign;

- they should clearly indicate which party or political support group is behind paid online political advertisements;

- they should share with European citizens information on how they are targeted in the dissemination of such advertisements;

- where these principles are not followed, Member States should apply relevant electoral sanctions.

Cooperation: The Commission aims to improve national and European cooperation of different actors involved in the electoral process. The main goal is to detect risks of threats to elections and solve these issues quickly. Therefore, the Commission has organized meetings with Member States to exchange and discuss electoral best practices.

Cybersecurity: The Action Plan proposes mechanisms to protect elections from cyberattacks. The Commission and the EU Cybersecurity Agency have developed a Recommendation which provides guidance on cybersecurity threats. Additionally, it has been proposed the creation of a Network of Cybersecurity Competence Centers together with a new European Competence Center. The goal is to coordinate and target available funding for research, innovation and cybersecurity cooperation.

Appropriate sanctions: The Commission aims to assure that electoral rules are followed by all. Member States should introduce financial penalties and relevant electoral sanctions if political parties infringe the data protection and political advertising rules.

Furthermore, the Commission aims to encourage the use of EU funds to fund civil society and build administrative or institutional infrastructure for deliberative civic **engagement** and **political participation**.

The EU funds should be used under programs that promote **citizenship education, democratic participation, equality** and **trust in democracy.**
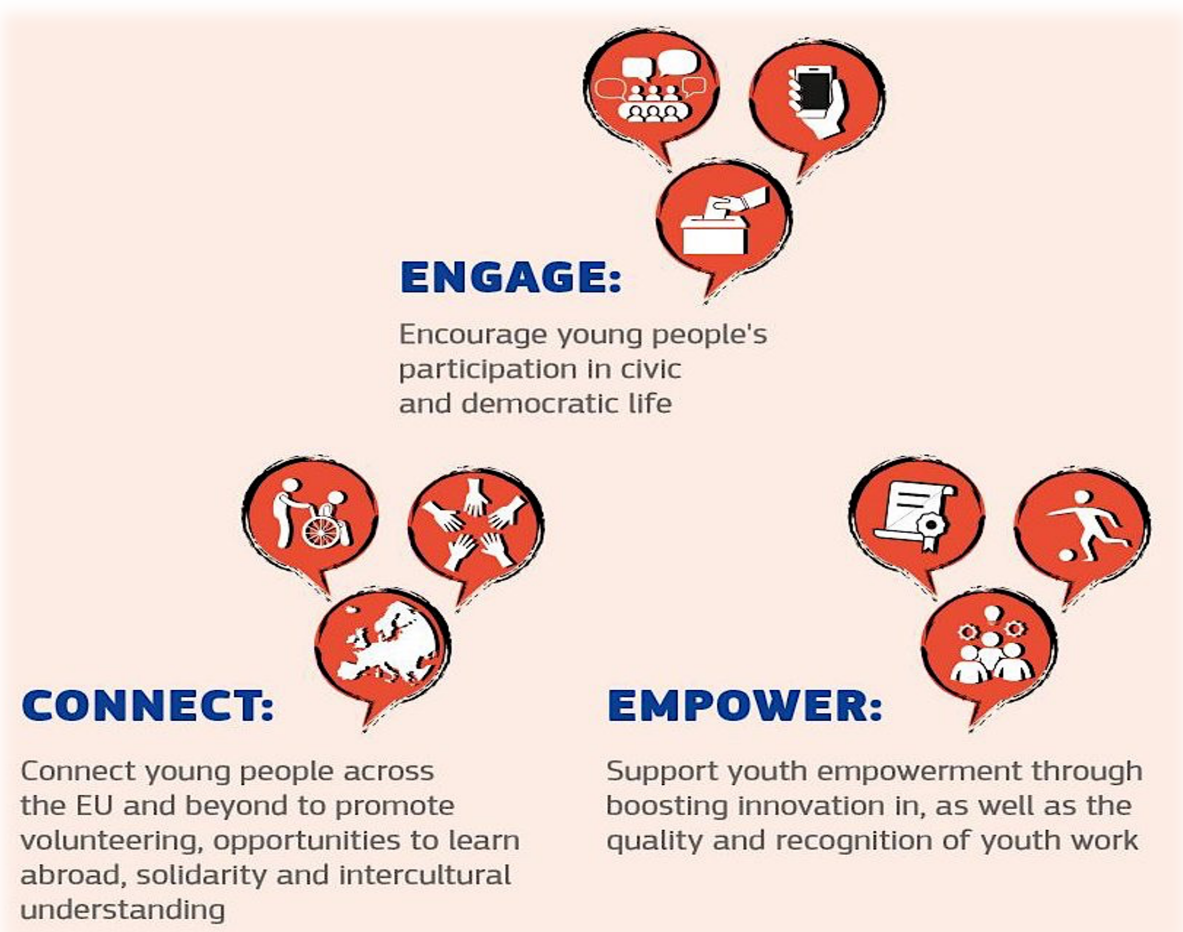
As I young student you should know that the Commission has a special program to support young people and encourage them to **take part in politics**.

The EU Youth Strategy is a framework for EU policy cooperation for 2019-2027. It is focused on three words: **engage, connect, empower.**

The Commission hopes to **listen** to you, as a young citizen, and know what you think it is important!

Currently, the Commission has identified the following goals discussing with young Europeans:

- o Connecting EU with Youth
- o Equality of All Genders
- o Inclusive Societies
- o Information & Constructive Dialogue
- o Mental Health & Wellbeing
- o Moving Rural Youth Forward
- o Quality Employment for All
- o Quality Learning
- o Space and Participation for All
- o Sustainable Green Europe
- o Youth Organisations & European Programmes

ENGAGE:

Encourage young people's participation in civic and democratic life

CONNECT:

Connect young people across the EU and beyond to promote volunteering, opportunities to learn abroad, solidarity and intercultural understanding

EMPOWER:

Support youth empowerment through boosting innovation in, as well as the quality and recognition of youth work
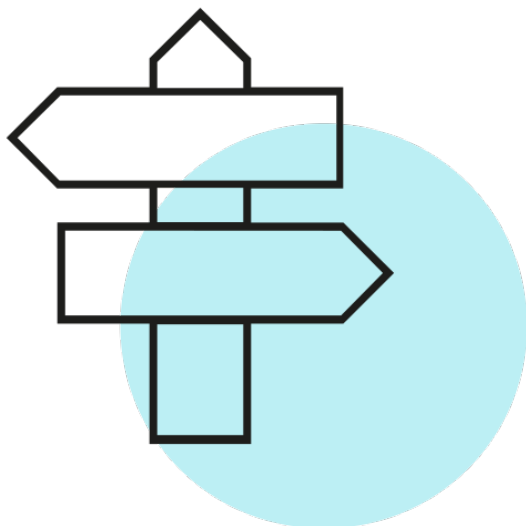
Media freedom and pluralism

The Commission is strongly concerned with the safety of journalists, who have been recently threatened by physical and online attacks. Since 2020, at least 140 journalists and media workers from different Member States reported to suffer attacks.

Women journalists are a target group in cases of online harassment. Globally, 73% of women journalists have experienced online violence during their work.

Media freedom and pluralism are essential components of open and democratic debates.

The European Democracy Action Plan addresses this issue and aims to propose actions to **protect journalists** and improve **freedom** and **pluralism** of **media**.

The Commission aims to dialogue with Member States and propose:

o   a **Recommendation** on the **safety of journalists**, giving special attention to **women** journalists. The Recommendation takes into account the digital transformation of the media and audiovisual sectors, giving special attention to cases of online threats.

o   measures to protect journalists and civil society against **abusive litigation,** which are specific lawsuits against public participation.

o   **funding** for projects focused on practical and legal assistance to journalists in the EU and elsewhere, including safety and cybersecurity training for journalists and diplomatic support.

o   measures to **support media pluralism** and to strengthen **transparency** of media ownership and state advertising.

o   Initiatives to support and promote journalistic partnerships and standards, as well as cooperation between national media councils, other media self-regulatory bodies, independent media regulators and networks of journalists.

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FUNDING & SUPPORT FOR **MEDIA** & **AUDIOVISUAL** SECTOR

Support to the Audiovisual Industry
-
Support to news media

Creative Europe
Strengthening the Culture and Creative Sectors

Cultural and Creative Sectors Guarantee Facility
-
MEDIA invest
-
Equity-based pilot for news media

Support to short-time work schemes

REACT-EU 2020
Additional Cohesion Funding

Invest EU
Access to Finance

MEDIA & AUDIOVISUAL

Investment in SMEs

Corona Response Investment Initiative
Redirection of European Structural and Investment Funds

Horizon Europe
Research & Innovation

VR MediaLab
-
Media data space

Digital Europe
Deployment of Digital Infrastructure

Media data space

Recovery & Resilience Facility
At least 20% of expenditure for digital

N A T I O N A L   L E V E L

SURE
Protect against risk of unemployment and income loss

Media pluralism in the digital era

The EU developed a scientific tool that measures media pluralism in the digital environment: The Media Pluralism Monitor. The Monitor assesses the **risks** faced by media pluralism based on a set of indicators under four different areas: Basic Protection, Market Plurality, Political Independence and Social Inclusiveness. The indicators address legal, economic and socio-political questions.

Countering Disinformation

One of the biggest threats for democracy today is the spread of disinformation. There are different ways in which this may happen, from decontextualized information to open, plain lies. It is important to address disinformation because it has been used as political weapons within and between sovereign territories.

Disinformation is hard to fight back because it usually relies on points of contact with reality, such as real pictures or words that really were said, but fills gaps or creates contexts with wrong or false information. One common use during the pandemic, for example, has been the usage of old pictures to claim certain people disrespected lockdown rules.

Apart from localized disinformation, we also face the rise of conspiracy theories. These are broad narratives, usually overly simplistic, that rely on factual gaps to claim the existence and power of certain groups and alliances.

They are difficult to fight back because they are usually self-confirming. The absence of proof of the conspiracy is said to prove its existence, as these powerful groups would be withholding information from you in order to establish certain dominance.

"Fake News"

Associated with misinformation from different sources, including journalists. Seen as distinguished from news primarily by degree. Also recognized as weaponized by critics of news media and platform companies.

Satire	**Poor journalism**	**Propaganda**	**Some advertising**	**False news**
Not seen as news Parody Funny Amusing	Superficial Inaccurate Sensationalist	Hyperpartisan content Politicians lying Extreme spin/PR	Ads and pop-ups "Around the web" links Sponsored content	**Not seen as news** For-profit fabrication Politically motivated fabrication Malicious hoaxes

News

Associated with professionally produced information that is accurate, timely, relevant, clearly communicated, and fair. There is often no clear agreement on where to draw the line between fake news and news.

Source: https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/publications/2017/news-dont-believe-audience-perspectives-fake-news/

In all its different variants, disinformation is dangerous to democracy and to social life because it aims to direct opinions with false information, affecting and complicating the critical formation of opinion. They also create divisions and truly parallel worlds, with different systems of factual understandings.

Together, these effects stand in the way of democracy. They distance fellow citizens and directly hamper democratic dialogue, influencing opinions away from reality.

This is a planned strategy. A report from 2016 analyzed how the bombardment of information by different channels, without commitment to reality or even to consistency is part of a strategy used for political gain.

This strategy relies on people's impulses and automatic reactions, and its final goal is to build the image of certain people as the sources of truth. This relates and leads to authoritarian and personalized forms of organizations that are not in line with democracy or with democratic dialogue

DISINFORMATION AND COVID-19

"Disinformation in times of the coronavirus can kill. We have a duty to protect our citizens by making them aware of false information, and expose the actors responsible for engaging in such practices. In today's technology-driven world, where warriors wield keyboards rather than swords and targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns are a recognized weapon of state and non-state actors, the European Union is increasing its activities and capacities in this fight."

Vice-President Josep Borrell, 2020

The European Democracy Action Plan aims to protect the freedom of expression and people's right to access legal content.
The Commission is taking the following measures:

- o **Improving the EU's existing toolbox for countering foreign interference**
- o Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation
- o Setting up **a more robust framework for monitoring** the Code of Practice implementation
- o **Funding** new innovative projects to fight disinformation and promote media literacy under various EU progammes, in particular by civil society organisations and higher education institutions, within and outside the EU.

The Code of Practice on Disinformation was agreed on a voluntary basis by online platforms, leading social networks, advertisers and advertising industry to address the spread of disinformation.

It sets a wide range of commitments, from transparency in political advertising to the closure of fake accounts and demonetization of who perpetrates disinformation.

What can I do as a young student?

There are different actions you can take to protect and improve our democracies.

Our future society depends on our daily actions, and together we can make a difference. As a young student, you can engage and take several actions every day that have an effective impact on the European democratic systems.

Take action and vote!

Greenhouse emissions are produced when we use electricity and gas.

- Switch off lights when not in use.
- Have shorter showers, or shower before going to bed (there is less fossil fuelled electricity generation after 9 pm).
- Unplug electronics from the wall socket when they are not in use.

Talk to your family, friends and colleagues!

Red meat production produces significantly more greenhouse emissions and requires more water than the production of chicken meat, fruit, vegetable and cereals. Additionally, 30% of the world's land area is used for livestock production, and it is one of the key reasons to cut down forests.

- Cut down on meat or try having a meat less day each week!

Stop fake news on social media!

You can help to reduce greenhouse emissions from transport by consuming local food. You can also:

- Plant your own vegetables
- By local and in-season foods

Know your area and your Government politics

How is democracy in your region?

Be informed about what is happening in your region now and what could happen in the future. If you live, for example, in a coastal area, it is important to know about the impacts of the sea level rise on coastal hazards such as erosions and flooding.

You play a leading role in taking actions to pressure your local government to support climate and environmental sustainability. As a young student, you should claim sustainable and responsible actions from your government and local institution.

Responsible actions are crucial to face climate and environmental issues that are shaping the world in which ours and future generations will live.

Share these actions with your friends and community!

The publication of this information booklet was realized by the information center **Europe Direct Trapani** in collaboration with the European Commission and the Consorzio Universitario della Provincia di Trapani.

Europe Direct Trapani is one of the information centers of the Europe Direct network in Italy, selected and co-financed by the European Commission. The center offers consultancy, assistance, orientation and answers for citizens regarding politics, programs and finance of **the European Union**.

In the center **Europe Direct Trapani**, it is possible to:

✓ Receive information of the community policies as well as rights and duties of citizens; ✓ Inform about European finance methods;

✓ Consult the European Union official publications;

✓ Participate in events and initiatives related to the European Union;

To be constantly informed about initiatives promoted by the Information Center Europe Direct Trapani visit our web page and sign to our newsletter.

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