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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Young activists' communicative practices of resilience. The challenge of disinformation towards 2024 European Elections

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**ABSTRACT:** This article presents findings from a qualitative study on the communicative practices of young Italian activists during the lead-up to the 2024 European elections. Specifically, the study examines the phenomenon of disinformation and its potential to disrupt the electoral campaign, highlighting the active participation of civil society in the political process and their ability to navigate disinformation can significantly influence the strength and resilience of Europe. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of youth organizations, both informal and institutionalized. The results show that highly educated and civically engaged young people use digital tools and hybrid media ecosystems to promote critical, transnational debates. Resilience emerges as a relational capacity rooted in the socio-political context, where youth activism develops alternative discursive spaces to counter democratic erosion. A key insight is the educational role assumed by these activists: in response to perceived institutional shortcomings, they act as informal educators, informing and mobilizing peers. This role contributes to reinforcing democratic values and fostering a more resilient European public sphere.

**KEYWORDS:** European public sphere, resilience, social media, disinformation, youth

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## 1. Introduction

The 2024 European elections represent a particularly important phase for examining citizens' resilience in the wake of critical events - Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine - that have been characterised by various forms of information disorder and have undermined the sense of belonging to the European Union. The integrity of the electoral process and citizens' trust in institutions were threatened by several factors (Sampugnaro and Trenz 2024), among which the propagandistic use of disinformation and misinformation, which fostered the spread of unreliable content. Moreover, in the post-election Eurobarometer survey (2024), a significant majority of young people (76%) reported having been exposed to disinformation and fake news, expressing concerns about Europe's resilience to face these challenges. Many young respondents declared that they had not voted in the June 2024 European elections, citing a lack of sufficient information to make an informed choice (16%), the absence of candidates or parties representing their views (15%), and a general distrust or dissatisfaction with politicians and politics (15%).

The paper argues that the communicative practices of young activists within both formal and informal organisations of civic participation play a crucial role in addressing information disorder in the mediated public sphere. Although some young people experience isolation and disengagement, others are at the forefront of developing innovative forms of participation that bridge personal experiences with cosmopolitan significant issues (Pitti, Mengilli and Walther 2023; Raffini, 2024). Mainly the most educated young citizens engage in public debate through a variety of symbolic flows facilitated by digital media, discussing values, rights, and social issues from an evidence-based and reasoned European perspective (D'Ambrosi and Parito 2022; Parito, Pérez-Calle and D'Ambrosi 2022). These young European natives, who were indeed born and socialised in a Europeanised society, play a pivotal role, at the same time, in counteracting the information disorder and shaping the European public sphere. Youth participation experiences develop within a hybrid media ecosystem (Chadwick 2013), where practices of content production and distribution, as well as audience habits, evolve through the integration of experiences across different tools. When assessing the role of the media in shaping a European public sphere, it is therefore necessary to consider the various trends that intertwine the logics of legacy media with those of digital platforms (Iranzo-Cabrera and Casero-Ripollés 2023; Bruns 2023; Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2020; Van Dijck, Poell, de Waal 2018).

In this context, the paper presents the results of a study aimed at exploring the communicative practices of young activists involved in different kinds of organizations, either spontaneous or with varying levels of institutionalization, examining the activities promoted in the period leading up to the 2024 European elections which suggest their ability to understand and dealing with threats affecting the European public debate. Specifically, the present study examines the active participation of a segment of civil society in the political process and investigates its ability to navigate various forms of information disorder. It is posited that this ability can significantly influence the strength and resilience of European society (Eurobarometer 2024).

The paper is structured as follows. Sections 2 and 3 provide the theoretical framework on disinformation and, in particular, illustrate how youth are innovating strategies of communicative resilience in the European scenario. Section 4 outlines goals, research questions and methodology. Section 5 presents the results and discussion: (5.1) young people's perceptions of the main threats to an informed public debate; (5.2) how young activists define resilience and their efforts to create alternative spaces for civic participation in the 2024 European elections. Finally, in Section 6, concludes the paper with a critical reflection on the dynamic relational capacity of young people to actively practice resilience against disinformation in which activism takes place.

## 2. Young Citizens' strategies of communicative resilience in the European scenario

The 2024 European elections have underscored the increasing importance of engaging young people in the democratic process and fostering a high level of resilience (European Commission 2025). In the scientific literature, resilience is typically conceptualized as the social capacity of a group to maintain and enhance their well-being in order to overcome challenges (Hall, Lamont 2013), a bouncing back of individuals or collectives in a situation of emergency or political upheavals (Aguirre 2006). Particularly, in terms of civil society, "civic resilience" refers to a wide range of social practices for coping with crises, mainly developed through private initiatives in conjunction with state or local government (Trenz *et al.* 2021).

Within the European communication environment, raising public awareness is critical for strengthening societal resilience, particularly in countering the threats posed by disinformation (European Commission 2018; Rodríguez-Pérez, Canel 2023). Some scholars define resilience as an intangible resource, described as "the capacity of citizens to deploy discerning and cognitive skills regarding the veracity and falsehood of information, as well as to comprehend the scope of the issue" (Rodríguez-Pérez, Canel 2022, p. 862). More specifically, in the hybrid media communication ecosystem resilience is operationalized as the reluctance to share, like, or comment on disinformation. From this point of view the greater a society's reliance on social media, the lower its capacity for resilience becomes (Humprecht *et al.* 2021).

The level of resilience is shaped by structural factors, which are closely linked to varying political and informational environments. Thus, it is essential to examine the factors that contribute to societal resilience, particularly considering technological transformations and the evolving information dynamics of social media platforms. Based on the report Eurobarometer 2024, more than three-quarters of young people are aware of their exposure to disinformation. Furthermore, online communication and artificial intelligence have also enabled the proliferation of misleading and harmful content at an unprecedented scale and speed (OECD 2021). Both false and misleading content, whether intentionally spread to deceive or unknowingly shared, can have toxic consequences for trust in institutions. Specifically, beyond the framework of disinformation, its impact on the integration process should be considered alongside other concerns such as social media dynamics, echo chambers, and political partisanship (Bennett and Livingston 2019; Wardle 2019; Conrad *et al.* 2023).

In response to these challenges, youth participation experiences and initiatives that support European public debate contribute to societal resilience to the risks posed by harmful and misleading content. Their active participation, reconfigured through horizontal communication processes encouraged by digital media, supports greater visibility, public representation, and practices that construct meaning around the EU as a space of social relations (D'Ambrosi and Parito 2022).

Although these activities are increasingly moving away from traditional forms of participation, such as supporting political parties (Norris 2002) and instead embracing unconventional forms of participation in areas such as volunteering, social movements, cultural citizenship and everyday participation (Ekman, Amnå 2012; Pitti 2022), they continue to demonstrate a deeply solidaristic approach to civic engagement (Della Porta and Portos 2020).

As recent scholarships have highlighted (Fox, Pearce 2017; D'Ambrosi, Parito, 2022; Deželan, Moxon, 2021; Della Porta, Portos 2023), highly educated young people tend to engage positively with EU-related issues such as climate change, immigration, health, and human rights. This transformation is particularly evident among younger generations, because they are the first to have been fully socialised in a context where European institutions and their representatives are more visible and more frequently discussed within national public spheres. There is a second, and arguably even a third, "Erasmus generation", a small but significant segment of European citizens who are deeply integrated into transnational ways of life and who cultivate forms

of identification that extend well beyond national borders. In addition, certain concerns and values seem to stand out among the younger generations, particularly those that affect their future, such as climate change, sustainable development or inclusiveness.

Expressions of “self-actualizing citizenship” (Bennett 2008) and innovative forms of resilience emerge among young generations, enabling them to support others and influence political outcomes (Kousis 2017). Rather than merely “bouncing back” to a prior state, these new forms of resilience allow young people to “bounce forward”, acquiring new skills and adaptive capacities through digital and civic engagement (Trenz *et al.* 2021). Digital media facilitates “connective action” (Bennett, Segerberg 2018), allowing young people to participate in transnational networks and engage in “lifestyle politics” that naturally merge individual needs with universal concerns (Raffini 2024). Young people increasingly see European institutions as influential in their time and view Europe as the natural framework of their everyday lives and civic participation (Parito *et al.* 2022). Their approach as “self-actualizing Europeans” (Raffini 2024) is the fundamental premise for activating innovative forms of resilience and combating disinformation, where young people's capacities are expressed and strengthened through transnational and horizontal flows of debate, especially in times of political upheaval.

### 3. Information disorder and public debate

The transformation of the media environment with the establishing of a hybrid media ecosystem have reshaped how political and institutional actors communicate and how young citizens access information. The impact of social media and the parallel weakening of traditional quality journalism have fostered conditions for information disorder and post-truth politics (Waisbord 2018; Michailidou, Trenz 2021; Conrad *et al.* 2023). The dissemination of false information and misleading narratives, including for propaganda purposes, is obviously not a new phenomenon (Kapantai *et al.* 2021). However, fake news, disinformation, misinformation and, more generally, the various manifestations of information disorder (Wardle 2019) take on particular significance in relation to the emergence of post-democratic political communication, the erosion of conventional journalism, and the algorithmic logic of digital platforms (Crouch 2016, 2019; O'Connor, Weatherall 2019).

The use of digital platforms by certain political actors who resort to populist consensus-seeking strategies by fostering disinformation and misinformation into the public sphere, has been clear since 2016. The scandals related to Cambridge Analytica's use of Facebook data affecting the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump is emblematic, suggesting the necessity to deal with the danger of election interference (Marshall, Drieschova 2018; Rose 2017). At the European level, disinformation<sup>1</sup> has been progressively recognised not only as a foreign hybrid threat but also as a domestic challenge undermining citizens' trust and participation. Since 2015 EU institutions have treated disinformation as a key issue for ensuring democratic participation in the digital environment, particularly in response to the risk of foreign-origin hybrid threats promoted by Russia and China. These threats have been explicitly defined as “massive disinformation campaigns, using social media to control the political narrative or to radicalize, recruit, and direct proxy actors” (European commission, 2018, p. 2). However, the UK's referendum to leave the EU has been an important change of perspective, as disinformation also came to be recognized as an internal threat to democracy,

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<sup>1</sup> The term disinformation is often used to denote a broad range of content with different characteristics. For the purposes of this article, we will also use the term broadly, referring to the extensive literature for a precise definition (Broda & Strömbäck 2024; Wardle 2018).

particularly exploited by Eurosceptic and populist parties. The integrity and fairness of public debate in the run-up to 2019 elections was therefore a priority objective that justifies strategies and activities to counter threats and regulate digital environments. Among the various measures — ranging from enhancing the capacity of EU institutions to detect disinformation to mobilising the private sector in combating it — a noteworthy aspect of the Commission's position concerned the reinforcement of democratic resilience, where citizen engagement and an active civil society were identified as the most effective safeguards for the protection of European democracies.

In this policy framework, the emphasis on democratic resilience inevitably brings attention back to the quality of information and participation as the relationship between democracy and well-informed citizenship becomes particularly salient in today's hybrid media environment. There is a broad consensus among scholars that democratic efficiency and representation are significantly enhanced when citizens, and particularly young people, possess a greater degree of political and social awareness (Bennett, Livingston 2018; D'Ambrosi, Parito 2022). Citizens who are well-informed tend to exhibit a greater degree of acceptance of democratic norms, such as tolerance, and demonstrate higher levels of political participation (Broda, Strömbäck 2024). However, the structural transformation of the public sphere, influenced by the characteristics of digital platforms together with the decline of trust in traditional quality journalism, limits opportunities for informed participation and contributes to what has been called an “epistemic crisis of democracy” (Dahlgren 2018).

This crisis, in turn, highlights the importance of institutional and civic responses aimed at safeguarding the conditions of informed debate. In the lead-up to the 2024 elections, the necessity to guarantee the fairness of public debate has once again become a matter of concern. On the one hand, political upheavals in the post-pandemic context, including the war in Ukraine and the resurgence of nationalism, have heightened worries; on the other hand, the framework of European disinformation policies appears increasingly consolidated. Electoral integrity is addressed through a comprehensive approach that considers the interplay between safeguarding democratic processes, responding to the challenges of the digital environment, and combating disinformation. Indeed, electoral integrity is no longer merely a matter of administrative procedures and regulatory frameworks for voting; rather, it has become a broader objective, closely linked to the exercise of civil rights such as freedom of expression, access to reliable and unmanipulated information that supports informed decision-making, and meaningful participation in political life well beyond election day (Sampugnaro, Trenz 2024).

In the most recent European policies, the issues of safeguarding democratic processes, citizen participation and combating disinformation are closely interrelated. Explicitly, the objective of safeguarding democratic processes in the face of geopolitical upheaval and the risks of manipulative use of social media is pursued through a set of policies and strategies against disinformation. The European Democracy Action Plan (EU COMM/2020/790) identified three areas for strengthening democratic resilience: the protection of the integrity of elections and the promotion of participation; the support of media freedom and pluralism; and the countering of disinformation. A further package of coordinated initiatives (12 December 2023), spearheaded by the Commission Communication on Defending Democracy (EU COMM/2023/630 final), focused on two key areas. Firstly, the aim was to safeguard the forthcoming elections. Secondly, the objective was to strengthen transparency with the goal of promoting trust in the institutions and safeguarding open public debate from covert interference. From this perspective, the initiative *together.eu* promoted by the European Parliament in the run-up to the 2019 European elections to encourage voter participation can be framed. What makes this project distinctive is that it is not a traditional campaign; rather, it aims to foster a pan-European non-partisan community structured as a collaborative online space, which encourages citizens, particularly the younger, to share their own ideas and actively promote the engagement of others. Although not explicitly designed to counter disinformation, by supporting the participation of citizens, both individuals and civil society

organisations, *Together.eu* contributes, also in the run up to the 2024 elections, to fostering informed debate and engaging as many people as possible in Europe's democratic life.

#### 4. Aims and Methodology

In a context where public debate is increasingly threatened by information disorder, concerns about the integrity of electoral processes and trust in institutions, this article explores the resilience practices of young people involved in civil society organizations in the run up of the European election 2024. The study considers young activists involved in formal or informal organisations with varying degrees of institutionalisation that uphold communication flows of debate and participatory practices. For the aim of the analysis, we define “resilience” as the ability of these young activists to understand the threats affecting the public debate and activate initiatives to try to respond to them. By examining how these young citizens engage in political communication and collective action, we shed light on the strategies they employ to counteract disinformation, sustain democratic participation, and reinforce a credible and informed public sphere. Specifically, the research explores the communicative practices and participatory initiatives of the young activists and examines the events and activities promoted, either spontaneously or in various ways stimulated by the European Institutions.

This exploration was guided by four core research questions that reflect the aim of the study to analyze both the opportunities and constraints encountered by young people as they navigate and influence transnational democratic spaces: RQ1 What do young activists identify as the key threats to a well-informed public debate on European issues? RQ2 How do they evaluate the role of European institutions in addressing the challenges to safeguard its integrity? RQ3 How do young activists respond to the institutional shortcomings they perceive? RQ4 What alternative initiatives and communicative practices have they adopted to combat disinformation in the 2024 European elections?

Our hypothesis is based on previous studies (D’Ambrosi *et al.* 2021; Parito *et al.* 2022, Parito *et al.* 2025), which suggest that young citizens, particularly those with higher levels of education, are significant actors in promoting innovative practices of communication and participation in dealing with a complex and unexpected situation such as the Covid-19 pandemic. In that new and unprecedented situation, they were able to respond quickly, leveraging their digital skills and networks of personal and formal relationships to programmatically activate debates and participatory practices on issues and questions that they considered relevant but not addressed in an effective manner by institutions, political actors, and media. During the Covid-19 upheavals, the ability of some young people to merge diverse initiatives was observed, including those promoted by European institutions and formal organizations, as well as independently interpreted or activated through distinctive autonomous plans. This capacity allowed these young activists to demonstrate resilience in countering disinformation and promoting public debate on EU-related issues. The present research aims to analyse whether, in the run-up to the 2024 European elections, young activists once again acted as well-informed and engaged citizens, and as agents of a resilient democracy.

The investigation was conducted as an exploratory and descriptive qualitative study, employing qualitative methods to delve deeply into events and activities promoted by activists involved in different kinds of youth organizations. The analysis included 18 in-depth interviews with Italian individuals aged 18 to 35. This age range was chosen because it encompasses a crucial life stage in which individuals transition from adolescence to full civic and political engagement, emphasizing their role as active contributors to civic and public

discourse. The interviewees held a variety of roles within their organizations, including leadership positions (e.g., presidents, founders, and co-founders), communication managers, and general active members. In terms of educational background, the majority of interviewees were either university graduates or nearing the completion of their studies, with academic specialisations concentrated in fields such as law, political science, communication, and business management (see Table 1). This educational profile is consistent with those typically found among young people involved in youth organisations, as these fields of study often provide the knowledge and skills required for participation in public debate, policy advocacy, and organisational leadership (Parito et al. 2022). In addition, their political orientations spanned a broad spectrum, ranging from the ideological left to the centre-left and extending to the right. However, the clear majority located themselves between the centre and the centre-left, with only two respondents placing themselves on the right. These two also noted a general lack of interest among right-leaning youth in participating in transnational debate or engaging with European issues more broadly.

**Table 1. Profile of study participants (n = 18)<sup>2</sup>.**

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Role/Profession
P001	30	M	Family business employee
P002	28	M	Parliamentary Assistant
P003	35	F	Communication Manager
P004	21	M	Law graduate
P005	28	F	Student of Public and Cultural Diplomacy
P006	23	F	Master's student in European Studies
P007	29	F	Regional government employee
P008	27	M	Project Manager
P009	30	F	Journalist and Content Creator
P010	35	M	SME Consultant
P011	29	F	Lawyer
P012	24	M	Public Policy Analysis graduate
P013	25	M	PhD candidate in Economics
P014	27	M	Law graduate
P015	23	F	Journalist
P016	21	M	Student in Economics
P017	22	M	Student in Engineering
P018	23	M	Economics graduate

*Source: Authors' own elaboration*

To identify young people to be interviewed, a snowball sampling method was employed. The research began by selecting the Italian partner organizations of the *Together.eu* community as the initial point of contact. It is an initiative, run by the European Parliament, that aims to foster citizens' engagement, in particular youth, in European democratic processes, and it was actively involved in the campaign to support voting in the European

<sup>2</sup> Participant names have been anonymized; demographic and professional details are reported as age range, gender, role/profession, and ideological positioning.

elections. After reaching out to the youth associations, we expanded our sample by inviting the activists to identify other youth associations with which they collaborated in their activities. This approach allowed us to map a broader network of interconnected associations in Italy, ensuring a multifaceted representation of civic initiatives and communicative practices (Pitti *et al.* 2023). A purposeful sampling strategy ensured diversity among participants, aiming for a balanced representation in terms of gender, age, political ideology, and organizational roles. The interviews focused on two key macro areas: 1) young people's perceptions of the threats to an informed public debate and the role of European institutions in fostering resilience to protect its integrity; and 2) how young activists make sense of resilience and enact it through alternative spaces for civic participation in the 2024 European elections.

The interviews were conducted and recorded over a three-month period prior to the 2024 European elections, from March to May, through a combination of face-to-face meetings and virtual sessions on video-conferencing platforms. All audio material was transcribed verbatim and analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2023) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. The process began with a phase of familiarization, during which each transcript was read multiple times by each of the three researchers and annotated with preliminary notes on emerging ideas around resilience, hybrid media usage, and counter-narratives. From these readings, the team moved on to the generation of initial codes, working collaboratively in workshops to highlight passages of interest line by line and assign descriptive labels such as "institutional distrust," "digital mobilization tactics," or "counter-narrative framing." The coding process then gave way to the identification of broader themes, with related codes clustered into provisional categories like "adaptive grassroots mobilization," "narrative reframing in hybrid media," and "scepticism toward institutional messages." These themes were continuously reviewed against the dataset as a whole to ensure internal coherence and distinction from one another, leading in some cases to refinements or mergers. Once stabilized, themes were carefully defined and named, with precise labels and, where relevant, the articulation of sub-themes such as "formal vs. informal resilience tactics." To illustrate their scope, representative quotations were selected from the transcripts. The final step consisted in integrating these defined themes into the overall analysis, mapping them back onto the four research questions and presenting them in the Results and Discussion section. Throughout the entire process, the team maintained a detailed audit trail of coding decisions and engaged in regular peer-debriefing sessions, thereby safeguarding both dependability and reflexivity.

Following this procedure, researchers established a clear and transparent analytic pathway that links every interpretive judgment back to the raw interview data. In the next section, we unfold four interrelated themes that answer our research questions: first, *Threats of disinformation to democratic dialogue*, which examines how young activists identify and articulate the risks posed by rapidly spreading of false or misleading contents; second, *Institutional trust and accountability*, exploring their assessments of European institutions' capacity and shortcomings; third, *Non-formal education for civic engagement*, detailing the hands-on, workshop-based methods they employ to build critical skills and fill gaps in formal civic learning; and finally, *Network building and digital mobilization*, describing how they forge cross-scale partnerships and leverage online platforms to create resilient spaces for collective action and dialogue. These themes will guide our presentation of the specific strategies and experiences that emerged from the interviews.

## 5. Results and discussions

### 5.1 Threats of disinformation to democratic dialogue and institutional trust and accountability

The discussion of the findings focuses on RQ1 and RQ2, examining how young activists perceive the main threats to informed public debate in Europe and evaluate the responses of European institutions to these challenges.

In response to RQ1 and RQ2, two interrelated thematic clusters emerged. Under *Threats of disinformation to democratic dialogue*, young activists consistently warned that propaganda and sensational headlines go beyond fact-checks, cultivating echo chambers where low media literacy deepens the problem and many of their peers lack even the basic tools to locate reliable information on European issues. Simultaneously, the theme *Institutional trust and accountability* captures activists' frustration with slow, opaque European communication: delayed fact-checks and heavy reports erode credibility and leave young audiences disengaged. As a remedy, participants advocated for youth-driven advisory bodies within the European Parliament to co-design more timely, accessible counter-narrative initiatives that can keep pace with the rapid spread of disinformation.

Specifically, the interviews reveal a clear picture of the main issues young people face in the current political and media context. First, disinformation is perceived as a concrete threat in the process of shaping public opinion, furthermore interviewees show awareness of the role played by traditional journalism in supporting correct information and of the importance of evidence-based news. The diagnosis of the problem they perceive, the risk of interpretations not supported by the facts, leads to a precise choice on how to act, which means publishing content always supported by reliable and verified sources. Summarising in the words of one interviewee:

Disinformation is also prevalent at the national level and has a strong impact on public opinion. In journalism, in particular, the way a news story is framed can significantly influence the electorate — especially young people. For this reason, every time we publish content, we always cite the original sources, whether they are articles, scientific studies, or official data such as those from ISTAT. This ensures that the information is verifiable and not merely the result of personal interpretations (P015).

Another point many interviewees emphasise is the twofold problem of the lack of skills, especially among the youngest, in researching, selecting and interpreting media content and the lack of adequate civic education to support the acquisition of these abilities. They believe that institutions are not doing enough to provide students with the necessary tools to participate consciously in political life and critically analyse the information they encounter daily. This educational gap becomes even more problematic in the hybrid media ecosystem, where false or misleading contents can spread quickly without proper intervention from authorities. According to the interviewees, the formation of a public that can distinguish between opinions and facts is crucial and represents one of the main threats to democratic dialogue. Indeed, the interviewees perceive the spread of false or misleading information as being interrelated with polarization and the manipulation of public discourse. Growing concern about this issue was shared by several respondents. It is interesting to note that, when faced with the perception of this problem, young activists respond with the concrete initiative of engaging in schools to compensate for institutional shortcomings:

In my opinion, disinformation is largely due to the fact that young people no longer know where to find reliable information. When we go into schools, it's always up to us to explain that there are official sources they can trust

— like the social media accounts of the European Parliament and the Commission, as well as dedicated websites. Most of them simply aren't aware these even exist (P014).

The young activists involved in our research do not merely highlight these challenges; they actively propose strategies that national and European institutions should adopt to enhance democratic resilience. They demonstrate awareness of the role of European institutions in supporting active citizenship initiatives but at the same time they identify several areas of weakness or shortcomings.

An important issue pertains to the communication of the European Union, which should be clearer and accessible to all citizens, especially among younger generations. It is significant that in the face of a perceived weakness of European institutions to communicate effectively, the activists interviewed react by proposing autonomous initiatives but supported by European funding whose relevance they recognise. As one interviewee says:

Unfortunately, the communication of the European Union is often complex, and what we try to do is simplify it; telling the story of the EU in a way that young people can easily understand. We also promote youth participation in social life by providing them with tools to engage actively, often through the use of European funds, which are a real game changer for many issues. These tools are essential for empowering young people, enabling them to take action in their communities, have a positive impact, and build a solid future for themselves (P010).

This highlights how youth-led initiatives do not merely interpret or disseminate institutional messages; they reframe them in ways that are more inclusive, accessible, and meaningful to their peers. By doing so, they fill crucial gaps left by institutional communication and become key agents in fostering democratic resilience at the grassroots level.

In the view of young people, institutions need to move beyond reactive measures and adopt proactive strategies that strengthen the epistemic integrity of the public debate, based on reliable knowledge, critical reasoning and transparency. However, while they call for stronger institutional action to address these issues, many express dissatisfaction with the responses they receive. Faced with what they see as inadequate institutional engagement; these young people are not merely passive observers of democratic shortcomings. Instead, they develop and implement their own resilience strategies, actively shaping alternative spaces for informed discussion and civic participation.

Another concern raised by young people is the rise of populism and Eurosceptic views, which threaten to deepen divisions in society and alienate younger generations from the idea of a shared European project. Many respondents argue that these trends are often exacerbated by a political class that is not only disconnected from the needs and concerns of young people but also appears to neglect the creation of policies that are responsive to this demographic group, thus overlooking their concerns for active participation and representation. As one interviewee outlined:

Today's political landscape under-represents young people, in part because most office-holders are much older and disconnected from current youth experiences. This generation gap is evident even in my own family; my father calls it a "youthful battle", but older politicians who have held power for decades have made little real change (P005).

## 5.2 Non-formal education for civic engagement, network building and digital mobilisation

The other thematic area of the findings relates RQ3 and RQ4, which explores the strategies proposed by young activists to respond to the institutional shortcomings and the alternative communicative practices they adopt to counter disinformation ahead of the 2024 European elections.

In response to these question research, two overarching thematic areas frame our findings. The third frame that emerged from the thematic categorization, *Non-formal education for civic engagement*, captures how young activists proactively equip themselves with hands-on methods to analyse information, develop critical skills, and fill gaps left by formal civic education. The fourth theme, *Network building and digital mobilization*, reflects their efforts to forge cross-scale coalitions and leverage online platforms, creating interconnected spaces for collective advocacy and resilient public debate. These two themes provide the structural lens through which we will explore the specific strategies and initiatives that emerged from our interview data.

A central aspect underlying the various initiatives is the conviction held by the young people interviewed of the significance of direct personal involvement. Many activists subscribe to the belief that the promotion of democratic resilience is initiated by the decision to engage and act, thereby experiencing concrete action. For instance, the promotion of fact-checking and countering disinformation within personal relationships, as well as in the social networks, could be effective strategies. Furthermore, participating in public discussions and mobilising peers to engage in political life could also contribute to informed public debate.

However, individual action alone is not sufficient to generate lasting change. For this reason, young activists prioritize the creation of networks that connect different youth organizations, facilitating cooperation across local, national, and European levels. These networks enable young people to share resources, coordinate advocacy efforts, and collectively amplify their voices in public discourse. Through digital platforms and grassroots organizing, they establish independent spaces for debate, challenging narratives that they feel are neglected or misrepresented in mainstream media and institutional discussions. An example of network creation is the *Europa porta Europa* project, mentioned by some of the interviewees:

We established a platform of 16 non-partisan associations, each bringing diverse perspectives and strong third-sector involvement and launched our campaign in Lampedusa on the tenth anniversary of the 2013 migrant tragedy to define what the EU is and should be. Our ambition is to move from a centralized, national network to territorially rooted local communities, closing the gap that hinders citizen engagement and sustained interest in European issues, especially during elections (P007).

This dynamic becomes particularly evident during moments of political upheaval, such as the European elections, which represent a crucial arena for public debate and the circulation of political information. Within this context, youth engagement unfolds primarily within a digitally networked and supranational space, where social media can operate as strategic tools to connect people and promote concrete action at the local level. These actions often involve grassroots mobilizations, advocacy initiatives, and continuous dialogue with a variety of stakeholders—including institutions, civil society, and social organizations—around emerging issues of collective relevance.

However, the effectiveness of such engagement is closely tied to the foundational knowledge that young people acquire through formal education. Once again, civic education in schools is crucial for young people, as it provides the knowledge and skills that will enable them to become active and engaged European citizens. The problem of inadequate education during school years emerges, leaving many young people uninformed about what the European Union is, how it is structured, and how its institutions function. This gap becomes particularly concerning when they are called to vote for the first time without having the necessary knowledge

to make informed decisions, further complicating their ability to engage meaningfully in the European public debate. As one young person states:

I was surprised to learn basic facts about Europe and the European elections at 35. Before debating policies, we need to teach what Europe is. Civics education in schools should cover why we vote, the role and decisions of the European Parliament, its members, and staff. It's not young people's fault; they simply haven't been taught this (P006).

Drawing from their own experiences, these young people actively promoted initiatives during the European elections, which served as training grounds for developing critical thinking skills. By analyzing sources and data, they aim to foster a form of participation that is conscious and not driven by emotional impulses. They advocate for an approach that not only encourages the consumption of high-quality informational content but also inspires young people to become agents of change, capable of positively influencing the political and social landscape while navigating the challenges posed by the growing pervasiveness of digital technologies.

Many interviewees emphasize the importance of fostering engagement through accessible and transparent communication channels, as well as the need to strengthen dialogue between institutions and civil society. In this regard, different approaches emerge in the way young people and organizations attempt to shape the public sphere, balancing advocacy efforts, collaborative initiatives, and educational strategies. As one interviewee outlined:

We have three areas of work. The first is advocacy, which consists of promoting change towards institutions, both at a political level and in representing the interests of our sector. [...]. The second area concerns best practices, where the aim is to promote horizontal cooperation between all realities, with the intention of generating cultural change. [...]. The third area is European citizenship. In this area we focus on issues related to the promotion of European opportunities, using non-formal methods such as direct testimonies from young people who have participated in these experiences (P010).

A central aspect of their communicative practices is the use of non-formal education as a tool for empowerment. Distinguished by its flexibility and focus on active participation, non-formal education equips young people with the skills necessary to critically engage with political discourse. Unlike traditional educational systems, which often rely on formal settings, non-formal education emphasizes experiential, interactive, and peer-driven learning. For young activists, it serves as both a response to the limitations of formal civic education and a proactive approach to cultivating informed and engaged citizens. The experience of young people who approached her organization was shared by one interviewee:

We spent the week running workshops on how elections work and the European political system, then used a non-formal education approach: participants chose topics they cared about, shared their priorities, and noted their preferred information platforms. We stressed to politicians the importance of engaging on these channels because 18-year-olds aren't tuning in to late-night TV debates. Finally, we drafted a manifesto and, after the national mobility event, brought all 44 participants to Strasbourg (P009).

As formal education struggles to keep pace, non-formal education can quickly address emerging challenges, creating learning environments that are directly connected to real-world experiences. This approach not only makes learning more relevant but also amplifies its impact by fostering an environment where young people are empowered to apply what they learn in their daily lives. These same principles of non-formal education

are at the core of the practical strategies young activists have developed to counter disinformation. By leveraging hands-on, real-world methods, they move beyond simply identifying false information and focus on creating proactive frameworks that help their peers engage more critically with media content. These efforts not only address the immediate need for verification but also encourage long-term practices that cultivate a more discerning approach to information consumption. Central to these strategies is the ability to deconstruct media messages, understand their context, and explore alternative narratives. In this context, the following quote outlines some of the practical methods being implemented to equip youth with the necessary tools for tackling disinformation and fostering a more informed public debate:

One of the work sessions we conducted focused on three main topics: the SMART method, the SHIFT method, and content facilitation. With the SHIFT method, participants learned to stop, investigate, seek alternative sources, and trace claims. Another tool used was the SMART method, which analyzes points of the electoral campaign according to the criteria: Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound. [...] We aimed to understand how artificial intelligence can be useful for today's youth. While artificial intelligence represents a risk, it is essential to engage in mediation work to manage incoming information. We should not fear it but rather see it as an opportunity. Our goal is to adapt the language of our association to young people (P003).

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide a deeper insight into how young people practice resilience in the European public sphere, particularly in response to disinformation. While resilience is defined by scholars and policymakers as an individual cognitive skill, our results highlight that, for young activists, it is fundamentally a collective and communicative endeavour. Rather than a fixed attribute, resilience emerges as a dynamic, relational capacity shaped by the socio-political context of youth activism, especially in political upheavals such as European elections 2024.

## 6. Conclusion

The study highlights how young activists emphasize their commitment to countering disinformation, promoting resilience practices, and upholding democratic values. Drawing on the narratives derived from the interviews, an interesting result emerges: resilience is not a static individual trait but a dynamic, relational capacity enacted through communicative practices. This is not just an expression of networked individualism (Rainie, Wellman 2012), on the contrary the perception of the young people interviewed reveals an awareness of collective action that seems to overcome the individualistic withdrawal that characterises young people and adults in contemporary society.

Four analytical themes were identified. The first theme, threats of disinformation to democratic dialogue, reveals how young activists identify and articulate the risks posed by rapidly spreading of false and misleading contents. Encouraging informed and critical public debate is a key focus for the interviewees. The interviewees perceive threats to civic dialogue and underline the importance of fostering discussions that are reasoned, evidence-based, and free from populist oversimplifications, stereotypes, and emotional manipulation. A major concern is the growing impact of disinformation during political upheavals, especially its amplification by artificial intelligence, which is seen as a significant threat to democratic dialogue. The 2024 European Parliament elections were a critical moment for the future of European democracy, especially in the context of growing concerns about the spread of disinformation and misinformation with the intention of manipulating public opinion.

Such dynamics inevitably raised questions about institutional trust and accountability, the second theme explored in this study. While young people acknowledge the growing attention paid to disinformation by EU institutions, they also question the adequacy, transparency, and timeliness of institutional responses. As active participants in civic and political life, the interviewees expressed considerable concern regarding the potential impact of information disorder on the fairness and credibility of the electoral campaign, in the context of what they perceive as a weak and ineffective response from EU institutions. In general, the interviewees recognise a gap in all the institutional responses to the societal challenges they are concerned about. This awareness prompts them to actively assume the role of educators and informers, disseminating knowledge and information to their peers. Many interviewees integrate educational activities into their activism, designing workshops, campaigns, and peer-learning initiatives that strengthen both their own and others' media literacy and critical awareness. So, non-formal education for civic engagement emerges in the interviews as a central theme and strategy of resilience.

Building upon these educational efforts, the fourth theme, network building and digital mobilisation show how these young actors expand their engagement from local initiatives to broader transnational spaces. By creating and supporting alternative networks for public discourse, they transform educational practices into collective infrastructures for democratic participation. In such a scenario, their resilience to counter disinformation emerges as a dynamic process and relational capacity shaped by the socio-political context in which youth activism takes place.

These findings suggest a multidimensional understanding of resilience that goes beyond simply withstanding external challenges, it involves the capacity to innovate and reshape the public sphere in ways that promote inclusivity and foster informed dialogue. Indeed resilience, for young activists, is deeply intertwined with empowerment: it is about equipping themselves and their peers with the tools, networks, and knowledge necessary to actively shape their social and political environments. Taken together, these elements indicate that resilience, in this context, is not just about resistance to external threats like disinformation but about building the foundations for long-term engagement, promoting organizational dynamics of networked and fostering inclusive communities, and ensuring that young people have the means to drive meaningful change in the European public sphere.

This study has some limitations. It focuses on the perceptions of young activists, most of whom have a higher level of education. As a result, the findings may not capture the full diversity of youth experiences across different educational or socio-economic backgrounds. Future research could expand on these insights by conducting comparative analyses of young citizens' communicative practices in promoting resilience and countering disinformation, particularly within the broader context of the European Union.

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