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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Communicative Resilience in Post-truth and 'Post-Digital' European Union: Youth-led Civil Society Organisations in the 2024 European Elections

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ABSTRACT: In an era marked by epistemic instability, algorithmic disruption and institutional disaffection, the European Union faces a deepening crisis of communicative legitimacy. This article investigates the role of youth-led civil society organizations (CSOs) as agents of communicative resilience within the evolving landscape of European public institutional communication, focusing on the 2024 European Parliament elections. Drawing on 35 qualitative interviews with CSO representatives involved in the *Use Your Vote* institutional communication campaign, the study examines how these actors operate simultaneously as actors of disintermediation and multipliers of EU messaging. Through localized, participatory and pedagogical practices, youth-led CSOs rearticulate abstract institutional narratives into context-sensitive forms of civic engagement, countering information disorder and reconnecting citizens—especially in peripheral territories—with the European project. The research highlights how these organizations combine digital tools with offline presence and non-formal education to foster trust, critical awareness and democratic participation. It further explores emerging tensions surrounding the use of generative AI in civic communication, calling for a reflexive and situated approach to digital innovation. Ultimately, the article contends that strengthening communicative resilience in the post-truth and post-digital public sphere requires institutional recognition of civil society's constitutive role in shaping democratic discourse.

KEYWORDS: Civil society organisations, communicative resilience, European public institutional communication, European public sphere, post-digital, post-truth.

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1. Introduction

Since the sovereign debt crisis, the European Union (EU) has operated in a sustained ‘permacrisis’ or ‘polycrisis’. This condition is driven by the recurring interplay between internal tensions and external disruptions, which has progressively accelerated fragmentation, polarisation and the erosion of public trust (Hoeffler *et al.* 2024; Lausberg *et al.* 2024). Such prolonged instability has disrupted the Union’s political and communicative equilibrium, accelerating fragmentation, polarisation and a broader erosion of public trust. Within this context, the EU’s public institutional communication—designed to inform, engage and legitimise collective decision-making—has become increasingly fragile. This fragility intensifies doubts about democratic legitimacy and exposes tensions in the Union’s capacity to sustain a European public sphere (EPS), understood by Trenz (2002:20) as “an intersubjectively shared, communicatively constructed system of mutual observance” and by Pasquino (2002) as a communicative arena for democratic discussion and citizen engagement.

Reinforced by the broader post-truth environment that took shape in the mid-2010s, the current communicative landscape is defined by the erosion of factual authority and the rise of emotion-driven narratives, further distancing institutions from citizens (Conrad *et al.* 2023). These dynamics expose structural weaknesses in the Union’s communicative architecture and contribute to a deepening legitimacy deficit (Smillie & Scharfbillig 2024). At the same time, rapid transformations in the communication environment—driven by digitalisation and, more recently, by the diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly in its generative form—introduce additional vulnerabilities, risking disruption rather than cohesion within the public sphere (Jaidka *et al.* 2025).

In this context, the notion of communicative resilience acquires renewed relevance. Resilience refers to a system’s ability to absorb shocks, adapt to change and reorganise without losing its core identity. Whether applied to institutions, social actors or communication environments, it highlights how systems respond to disruption while maintaining essential functions (Olsson *et al.* 2015; Sefer 2024; Walker & Salt 2012). In this perspective, resilience is not a fixed attribute possessed by institutions or individuals. It materialises through communicative and symbolic practices among social actors. Buzzanell’s (2010) contribution is particularly relevant in this regard, as she conceptualises resilience as constituted communicatively—through the narratives, discursive framings and meaning-making processes by which communities interpret disruptions, negotiate identities and mobilise collective responses.

Within the European public institutional communication ecosystem, communicative resilience denotes the capacity to sustain inclusive, informative and legitimacy-enhancing communication. Crucially, it must do so even under conditions of epistemic contestation and political uncertainty. Rather than a stable property, it constitutes an ongoing and contested process shaped by the interactions that unfold within the European public sphere (Friedland & Kunelius 2023; McSwiney *et al.* 2025). Because communicative resilience depends on relational and trust-based forms of communication that institutions cannot generate alone, civil society organisations (CSOs)—and youth-led organisations in particular—have acquired increasing significance. Positioned at the intersection of local realities and supranational governance, they mobilise trust, foster citizen engagement and embody democratic values of participation, transparency and deliberative inclusion (Carbone 2008; Kröger 2018; Liebert & Trenz 2008).

Unlike individual forms of civic engagement or informal, contentious social movements (Della Porta & Diani 2015; Edwards 2013), CSOs provide structured channels for participation and can act as “sites of

counter-narratives” that challenge dominant frames and catalyse sociopolitical change (Diani 2015). Their proximity to citizens enables them to address disengagement and build interpersonal trust, making them central actors in efforts to strengthen the EU’s communicative resilience (Kohler-Koch 2008). Yet despite these normative expectations, the mechanisms through which youth-led CSOs may strengthen communicative resilience within the EU remain theoretically underexplored and empirically underinvestigated.

Building on this framework, the article examines how youth-led CSOs enhance the communicative resilience of the European public institutional communication ecosystem by analysing the practices and tools through which they engage citizens and contribute to the development of a more interconnected and participatory transnational public sphere. Drawing on a qualitative study based on 35 in-depth interviews with youth-led organisations involved in the *Use Your Vote* campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections—coordinated by the Parliament’s Directorate-General for Communication—the analysis offers new insights into the evolving role of these actors within contemporary European communication dynamics.

2. Background

2.1 From informational deficits to participation fragilities: the structural limits of European public institutional communication

European public institutional communication should be understood as a key driver in the EU’s longstanding ambition to nurture a truthful EPS, which has long functioned as a flagship objective of its communication efforts (D’Ambrosi 2019; Parito 2012). The very existence of an EPS remains the object of an open scholarly debate: while some maintain that such a sphere does not exist and cannot emerge in the absence of unified media systems, linguistic homogeneity or shared political identities, others argue that it does exist—albeit in an embryonic, fragmented and structurally distinct form compared to national public spheres (Habermas 1992; Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo 2022). In this perspective, it becomes particularly visible at ‘critical junctures’, such as European elections and periods of crisis, which function as key drivers of its emergence (Auel & Tiemann 2020; Bondebjerg & Golding 2004; Risse 2010). It is this latter perspective that informs the present analysis, which conceives the EPS as a developing and qualitatively different configuration of transnational communication, shaped by the interplay between institutional practices and deeper structural constraints (Pane 2025).

This conceptualisation aligns with Habermas’s (2016) account of the post-national constellation, in which democratic legitimacy beyond the nation-state depends on the emergence of communicative spaces capable of transcending nationally bounded publics. From this standpoint, the EU’s challenge lies not simply in disseminating information across member states, but in cultivating the preconditions for such transnational communicative spaces to take root—a task made more complex by the absence of a fully integrated *demos* capable of sustaining shared processes of opinion- and will-formation. This requirement has thus far been only partially fulfilled (Habermas 2001).

The evolution of European public institutional communication must be interpreted against this structural backdrop. From the 1950s onwards, supranational communication was conceived mainly as an informative and technocratic function. Its purpose was to disseminate policy outputs, enhance institutional visibility and

offer authoritative explanations of Community action. In practice, this approach treated the public sphere less as a democratic arena and more as an extension of policymaking. This model—consistent with the ‘permissive consensus’ described by Lindberg and Scheingold (1970)—targeted experts, organised stakeholders and specialised media rather than the broader citizenry. Communication thus operated within and ultimately reinforced, the fragmented EPS, treating the public sphere not as a democratic arena but as an extension of policymaking, where dissemination rather than deliberation served as the principal rationale (Belluati & Marini 2019; Radaelli 1999, 2017). As the permissive consensus eroded from the 1970s onwards—particularly after the Maastricht Treaty made the distributive and constitutional implications of integration more visible—the communicative *equilibrium* underpinning early integration shifted profoundly.

The rise of a ‘constraining dissensus’ rendered European integration politically salient, contested and subject to continuous public scrutiny (Hooghe & Marks 2009). In response, EU institutions began to act upon the public sphere in its normative sense. Initiatives such as *Plan D—Dialogue, Democracy and Debate* (2005), the *White Paper on a European Communication Policy* (2006) and the structured dialogues introduced under the first Barroso Commission (2004–2010) sought to *reshape* European public communication into a means for realising a truthful space of civic deliberation and open participation (Michailidou 2008). Through these efforts, institutions attempted to widen public engagement and legitimate integration by fostering communicative interaction rather than merely providing information.

Yet European public institutional communication continues to display significant structural fragilities. These include linguistic and infrastructural barriers as well as the promotional tone that often characterises institutional communication. Together, these factors have limited the transformative ambitions of recent reforms. Consequently, the longstanding communication *deficit*—understood not simply as a shortage of information but as a profound misalignment between institutional messaging, media logics and citizens’ interpretive resources—has become increasingly entangled with broader questions of legitimacy and trust (Belluati 2020). This deficit is both informational and participatory, revealing deep weaknesses in the Union’s communicative architecture.

More recent initiatives have newly attempted to counteract these shortcomings, including the *European Democracy Action Plan* (2020), the *Media and Audiovisual Action Plan* (2020), the *Conference on the Future of Europe* (2021–2022) and, more recently, the *European Media Freedom Act* (2024). While each represents an effort to strengthen deliberative practices and communicative transparency, their overall impact has remained limited (Abels 2023). These unresolved deficits—combined with the limited effectiveness of recent institutional reforms—create fertile ground for a broader process of citizen withdrawal from EU politics. It is within this communicative context that this research conceptualises cognitive demobilization: a condition characterised by information overload, emotional disengagement and a progressive detachment from the institutional processes of contemporary Europe. This trend contrasts sharply with Inglehart’s (1977, 1990) notion of cognitive mobilization, which presupposes increasing political competence, heightened involvement and more active engagement among well-informed publics. Cognitive demobilization unfolds within and is intensified by, the broader epistemic distortions associated with post-truth dynamics. This is dealt in greater detail in the following section.

2.2 Information disorder and the epistemic quest in the European 'post-digital' public sphere

The structural fragmentation of the European communication ecosystem and thus of the communicative

infrastructure on which the EPS depends, increasingly intersects with a broader epistemic crisis intensified by post-truth dynamics. Harsin (2018) conceptualises post-truth not as a condition “beyond” truth but as a historically specific configuration of public discourse marked by pervasive scepticism toward truth claims and the delegitimisation of traditional epistemic authorities. Rather than signalling a rupture, post-truth denotes an environment in which honesty and factual accuracy—understood as justified belief—are refracted through ideological and affective lenses. The term gained global prominence in 2016, following the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump in the United States—events that exemplified the weaponisation of disinformation in digitally saturated media ecosystems.

These developments have intensified the epistemic destabilisation of liberal democracies, including within the EU. They undermine shared standards of truth, evidence and rational deliberation. As a result, the boundary between fact and fiction becomes increasingly porous. Public messages are judged less by their epistemic validity and more by their emotional resonance and identity alignment. As Newman (2023) argues, post-truth politics is not reducible to falsehood; it reflects a deeper transformation in which truth loses its function as the normative anchor of democratic discourse. The resulting “information disorder”—encompassing misinformation, disinformation and malinformation—further erodes the epistemic foundations on which democratic legitimacy depends (Santos-D’Amorim & de Oliveira Miranda 2021). Information disorder destabilises shared epistemic frameworks, fostering audience fragmentation and weakening the collective sense-making processes on which democratic deliberation depends.

These dynamics are compounded by advanced digitalisation, which makes such narratives easier to generate, circulate and amplify. Digital infrastructures and platform logics do not merely add a new communicative layer; they constitute the channels through which disinformation is algorithmically amplified. Disinformation—understood as the deliberate creation and dissemination of false or misleading content with the intent to deceive or manipulate public opinion—is not new, but digital platforms have endowed it with an exceptionally efficient amplification system, intensifying both its velocity of dissemination and the breadth of its persuasive impact (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017). Digital technologies have introduced an additional layer to the public sphere, subtly modifying how information is created, distributed and received (Hennen 2020; Seeliger & Seignani 2022). Yet the opacity of algorithmic infrastructures—together with the monetisation and inferential logics that govern them—pollutes the quality of public debate, thereby harming the public sphere itself, as Habermas (2023) has recently noted in his reflections on the structural transformations generated by digital media.

At the same time, recent technological developments reveal a significant research gap. AI-mediated communication environments—particularly chatbots and generative agents that increasingly disintermediate interactions between citizens and institutions—are transforming public communication in ways existing theories only partially capture, further complicating the epistemic conditions under which citizens form judgements. Whereas post-truth designates an epistemic condition centred on the erosion of truth and the affective filtering of information, ‘post-digitality’ captures a structural condition in which digital and AI infrastructures become deeply embedded in everyday communicative practices. Post-digitality does not indicate a stage beyond digital technologies. Instead, it describes a condition in which digital and AI infrastructures are fully embedded in everyday interactions. In this context, the boundary between online and offline life loses much of its analytical relevance. Applied to the EU context, post-digitality reshapes the communicative architecture of the European public sphere itself, embedding algorithmic mediation into its core functioning.

Within this post-digital scenario, the boundary between human and algorithmic authorship becomes increasingly porous (Pane 2025). Public discourse is shaped not solely through human agency but through computational logics that curate, personalise and prioritise content to maximise engagement (Stark *et al.* 2020; Zuboff 2019). As a result, the discursive contours of the EPS risk being shaped more by platform dynamics than by democratic will-formation.

Safeguarding the EU's communicative resilience therefore requires more than reactive regulation; it demands strategies capable of balancing technological innovation with locally rooted, participatory and trust-based forms of communication that mitigate the epistemic vulnerabilities of the post-truth era. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in sustaining a pluralistic communicative environment that is more resistant to algorithmic manipulation and aligned with democratic deliberation. This, in turn, requires communicative intermediaries capable of reactivating citizens' interpretive agency through outreach, translation and participatory engagement—a reminder that, despite advanced digitalisation, communicative resilience still emerges from human, community-rooted intermediaries.

2.3 Youth-led civil society organisations as agents of communicative resilience in the 'post-digital' European Union

In parallel with the transformations discussed above, patterns of public participation in the EPS have changed significantly. Traditional, institutionally mediated forms of engagement are increasingly supplemented—and at times displaced—by informal, digitally mediated practices structured by platform logics shaping visibility, attention and connection. These developments have altered not only how political voice is expressed but also where participation occurs. As institutional arenas lose centrality, citizens articulate concerns in decentralised and digitally networked environments. This shift foregrounds civil society as the sphere capable of collecting, interpreting and giving coherence to dispersed acts of participation, transforming fragmented expressions of engagement into more durable public reasoning. In this respect, Liebert and Trenz's (2008) argument that EU legitimacy cannot rest solely on institutional design acquires renewed relevance: legitimacy now depends on civil society's capacity to sustain the communicative infrastructure through which political claims are articulated, contested and rendered meaningful.

Within this context, CSOs assume a pivotal role. As non-state and non-market actors—from youth-led initiatives to advocacy NGOs—they translate institutional discourses into locally meaningful narratives and channel societal concerns toward supranational arenas (Buntinx & Colli 2022; Crepaz 2024; Parito *et al.* 2025). Their intermediary function becomes especially salient in the post-truth and post-digital environment, where disinformation, algorithmic curation and audience fragmentation weaken shared interpretive frameworks. Public Institutional communication alone cannot account for citizens' diverse contexts. CSOs bridge this gap by cultivating trust, embedding messages within culturally grounded perspectives and enabling participation to take shape within lived experiences. Through these practices, they sustain the meaning-making processes on which the EPS depends and reinforce the Union's communicative resilience.

Their relevance is amplified within the EU's multilevel governance system, where communication circulates across supranational, national and local arenas (Horga & Florian 2011). Subsidiarity encourages such bottom-up flows and aligns with Schmidt's (2006) view of legitimacy as emerging from continuous interaction between institutions and society. Locally embedded organisations are particularly effective: their proximity to communities allows them to position European issues within familiar cultural and linguistic

horizons, ensuring that supranational debates resonate within everyday lifeworlds and anchoring resilience in situated understanding.

Youth-led CSOs are especially well positioned to perform this mediating role. Embedded in peer communities and fluent in the digital repertoires shaping contemporary interaction, they combine online activism with grounded and often experimental forms of engagement (Bárta *et al.* 2021; García Luengo 2006). Their practices blend expressive, creative and deliberative elements, enabling them to mobilise younger publics in ways that institutional communication—often perceived as distant or promotional—struggles to achieve. Yet these organisations operate within constrained environments. Platform dynamics often privilege identity performance over deliberation, while persistent digital inequalities—understood as disparities in skills and critical competencies rather than access alone—shape who can participate meaningfully in digitally mediated public spheres (Pilkington *et al.* 2018; van Dijk 2005, 2020).

Even within these constraints, youth-led CSOs enhance the mediating capacity of civil society. Their proximity to peer networks allows them to translate European issues into forms aligned with young people's cultural repertoires and interpretive frames. This mediation contrasts with the one-size-fits-all logic of EU-level messaging and narrows the distance between supranational narratives and younger citizens' lived experiences (Smillie & Scharfbillig 2024).

These functions acquire particular significance in an environment marked by algorithmic fragmentation and heightened epistemic uncertainty. Under such conditions, youth-led CSOs provide interpretive anchors that stabilise young people's encounters with European issues, mitigating participation and legitimacy deficits characteristic of the post-truth and post-digital landscape. In doing so, they offer a communicative linkage that institutional communication alone struggles to secure.

Although frameworks such as the 2001 *White Paper on European Governance* and the *Better Regulation Agenda* increasingly acknowledge the importance of civil society, the operational logic of EU participation still favours professionalised, Brussels-based umbrella organisations. This creates a paradox: the CSOs most embedded in local realities—and often the most effective in fostering communicative proximity—remain least integrated into formal participatory mechanisms.

Against this background, the European Parliament has sought to involve young people more directly in its communication efforts, particularly in response to declining turnout and the persistence of European elections as 'second-order' or even 'third-rate' contests (D'Ambrosi & Parito 2022; Irwin 1995, Reif *et al.*, 1997). A central initiative is the European Youth Event (EYE), a biennial event designed to foster political awareness and democratic participation among 16- to 30-year-olds. In 2024, the Parliament decentralised the EYE, organising four local editions in Italy, Germany, Lithuania and Slovenia. This localisation aligned with the broader 'Europe going local' strategy, aiming to reduce territorial and generational disparities in civic engagement and to root public institutional communication more firmly in local contexts. It also created an unprecedented opportunity to observe how youth-led CSOs operate within these decentralised settings, navigating a delicate balance between grassroots creativity and the risk of institutional co-optation.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design anchored to semi-structured interviews (Hays & McKibben 2021; Herzog & Ali 2015). It is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology to examine how youth-led civil society organisations across Europe contribute to the communicative resilience of the European Union within an increasingly post-truth and post-digital communication landscape. The analysis is situated in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections—the first to be held under these conditions—which constitute a critical moment in which the agendas of member states converge around shared political and communicative challenges (Pane *et al.* 2025).

RQ1: *How do youth-led civil society organisations strengthen the communicative resilience of the European Union's public institutional communication ecosystem in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections, understood against the broader meta-frame of post-digital fragmentation, declining trust and heightened contestation of institutional authority?*

RQ2: *What practices, instruments and communicative strategies do civil society organisations mobilise during the 2024 European Parliament elections to enhance the communicative resilience of the European Union's public institutional communication ecosystem? How do these actions increase its capacity to inform, involve and sustain engagement across fragmented, hybrid and post-digital publics?*

Although qualitative interviews do not permit statistical generalisation, they are particularly well suited to capturing the situated meaning-making processes that shape interactions between citizens, civil society actors and EU institutions (Corbetta 2003). This method aligns closely with the aims of the study, as it allows participants to articulate in their own terms how they contributed to the *Use Your Vote* 2024 campaign and how they perceive their communicative role within the broader EU context. A purposive maximum-variation sampling strategy was adopted to reflect diversity in organisational size, scope and degree of institutional embeddedness (Creswell 2013; Patton 2002). Eligible CSOs were youth-led or explicitly youth-oriented and involved in activities supporting the *Use Your Vote* 2024 institutional campaign coordinated by the European Parliament's Directorate-General for Communication for the 2024 European elections¹.

The CSOs involved were active across multiple layers of EU multilevel governance—European, national, regional and local. In-depth interviews were conducted between May and June 2024, coinciding with the campaign's peak. Participants signed informed consent forms in their preferred language and could withdraw at any time. Anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation and non-maleficence were ensured throughout the research process (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe 2023; Polisen & Jayaraman 2020). The interview process was guided by an interview guide informed by the literature and structured around three thematic pillars—information, communication and participation—each explored in terms of opportunities and challenges, as these are understood in this study to represent key dimensions of the EPS. Digital dynamics were treated as a transversal element across all three pillars and a targeted focus on the 2024 European elections was incorporated (see annex). One pilot interview was retained in the final dataset, as it confirmed the coherence

¹ Given demographic evidence that transitions to adulthood in Europe now extend well into the early thirties, the conventional EU definition of 'youth' (15–29) was expanded to include organisations targeting individuals up to the age of 35. See Ferraretto and Vitali (2024).

and validity of the guide. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in English, Italian or French according to participant preference. In this context, multilingual interviewing was treated as intrinsic to the European communicative landscape, recognising that language shapes accessibility, legitimacy and identity (Gazzola 2016; Rolland *et al.* 2023).

To mitigate reflexivity, a research journal was kept to record relevant observations and to monitor the progress of data collection, which continued until saturation was reached. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated with close attention to semantic fidelity. Data analysis followed a qualitative content analysis approach that combined deductive and inductive strategies. This dual strategy aligns with Glaser and Strauss's (1967) emphasis on balancing theoretical grounding with openness to emergent insights, ensuring an analysis that is both conceptually robust and empirically responsive to the aims of the study. Deductive codes were developed from the literature review and included labels such as 'CSOs as multipliers', 'multi-level EU communication' and 'digital communication'. These were complemented by inductive codes derived directly from the interview material, such as 'difficulty breaking the pro-EU micro-bubble', 'proximity-building', 'territorial embeddedness', 'pedagogical functions' and 'human resistance to AI'. The following sections elaborate on these codes and illustrate them with relevant interview excerpts.

4. Findings and discussion

Given the epistemological and methodological orientation of this study, findings and discussion are integrated within a single section. This choice reflects the study's interpretivist stance, which understands meaning-making as inseparable from interpretation (Corbetta 2003). A total of 35 organisations participated in the research, of which a subset ($n=21$) took part in the Italian edition of the 2024 EYE, held from 17 to 19 May 2024. These CSOs operated across multiple levels of EU multilevel governance—European, national and regional/local—where the latter two were considered jointly, as they consistently appeared as a single category in the data. Geographically, most organisations were based in Italy ($n=28$), while the remainder ($n=7$) were either headquartered in or active across other European countries. In terms of institutional positioning, the sample included organisations working primarily at the European level ($n=7$), the national level ($n=14$) and the regional/local level ($n=14$), reflecting the multilevel character of youth civic engagement within the European public sphere².

In response to RQ1, the analysis identifies three interrelated ways in which youth-led CSOs enhanced the EU's communicative resilience during the 2024 elections. First, they performed a dual role as agents of disintermediation and as multipliers of institutional communication. Second, they translated and localised EU messages, countering both structural and linguistic constraints. Third, they contributed to mitigating information disorder within a fragmented and post-digital communicative environment. Each of these contributions is examined in turn.

² The predominance of Italian CSOs in the sample reflects the location of the 2024 EYE Local, hosted in Italy, which generated a higher concentration of feasible field access opportunities compared to other EU countries. This composition does, however, constrain the representativeness of the sample *vis-à-vis* the broader diversity of youth civil society across the Union. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as analytically transferable within similar contexts rather than statistically generalisable to the EU level.

Table 1 - Overview of the participants

Participant	Level of EU governance	EYE 2024 attendance
P01	Regional/Local	X
P02	European	-
P03	European	X
P04	National	-
P05	Regional/Local	-
P06	Regional/Local	X
P07	Regional/Local	-
P08	National	X
P09	National	-
P10	Regional/Local	-
P11	Regional/Local	-
P12	Regional/Local	-
P13	National	X
P14	National	X
P15	Regional/Local	X
P16	Regional/Local	X
P17	'National	X
P18	Regional/Local	X
P19	National	X
P20	European	X
P21	European	X
P22	European	X
P23	National	X

P24	National	X
P25	National	X
P26	Regional/Local	X
P27	National	X
P28	European	-
P29	National	-
P30	Regional/Local	X
P31	European	-
P32	Regional/Local	-
P33	National	-
P34	Regional/Local	-
P35	National	X

Source: Own elaboration.

4.1 Youth-led CSOs: agents of disintermediation and multipliers of European public institutional communication

CSOs strengthen the EU’s communicative resilience by acting both as agents of disintermediation and as multipliers of public institutional messages. By disintermediation, it is referred to here as the process through which CSOs bypass traditional institutional channels to directly engage and inform citizens. Their engagement stems from a shared recognition of a persistent challenge: the EU’s struggle to effectively reach citizens and fulfil its dual role of informing and engaging them. CSOs involved in the study widely acknowledged the EU’s legitimacy *deficit*. From this perspective, one interviewee emphasized that: ‘It is evident that a disconnect currently exists between European citizens and EU institutions’ (P09). While not the main focus, the 2024 European elections offered a critical lens for observing these dynamics. The findings suggest that, although critical perspectives persist and challenges remain, participants also recognised progress in the EU’s public institutional communication. In this regard, one participant, referring to the EU’s communication campaign for the European elections, remarked that: ‘(...) it’s much more effective than in 2019, but there’s still room for improvement. In my view, it still feels somewhat... suspended, so to speak. (...) If you don’t go local—if you don’t make the campaign truly widespread and rooted—it’s pointless to put up billboards in Brussels’ (P22). Still, another participant noted: ‘I really appreciated the fact that there was a focus on young people, for example and an effort to use digital platforms to reach them’ (P15).

4.2 Youth-led CSOs: locally embedding European public institutional communication

However, participants also articulated several critical concerns about European public institutional communication efforts, particularly during the 2024 campaign. First, multilingualism, which more broadly reflects one of the enduring structural challenges of effective communitarian communication, was identified as a limiting factor. As one participant noted: “The *Use your vote* campaign is a bit simplistic, perhaps, but it’s also definitely hard to adapt it across all countries and all languages. It certainly sounds better in English” (P03).

On the content level, however, further concerns were raised. One participant argued that: “It’s somewhat superficial. I believe that, at the European level, there is currently a great deal of chaos and also a lot of fear. It is evident that we are at risk of a drift that goes against all the values promoted over the past seventy years. I believe the EU bears enormous responsibility in this” (P09). In a more critical tone, another participant stated: “I am already in a pro-European micro-bubble and even within this bubble, I saw very little—so, very poorly done, much worse than in 2019” (P07). This reflects a key challenge in EU communication: the persistence of a ‘Euro-bubble’, intended here as a sub-communicative environment where the salience of the EU is widely acknowledged and shared among its members. However, there is also a shared recognition that for European communication to be truly effective, it needs to extend beyond these limited and self-referential spaces. In this context, a CSO representative remarked: “In my view, a great deal has been done; however, breaking out of the bubble remains difficult. That is probably our role—as multipliers and as local associations” (P30). In this context, CSOs emerged not only as critics but also as enablers of more grounded, locally sensitive engagement strategies. Such a perspective highlights the crucial role of CSOs in supporting and complementing the European Union’s public institutional communication efforts, particularly by acting as intermediaries between top-down messaging and local publics. One participant emphasized this point by stating: “In my view, the alliance between associations and institutions is crucial. Instead of organizing events inside government buildings in city centers attended by a hundred people, we should go to a square in the middle of the periphery” (P17).

This observation highlights an additional dimension of how CSOs contribute to the communicative resilience of the EU. By reinforcing the multilevel logic of European public institutional communication and operationalizing the principle of subsidiarity, CSOs engage with citizens in ways that are both context-sensitive and geographically proximate. In doing so, they help move beyond the ‘one size fits all’ approach to public communication previously mentioned (Smillie & Scharfbillig 2024). Moreover, by working directly within communities, CSOs also help mitigate the challenges of multilingualism previously discussed, thereby strengthening the adaptability and inclusiveness of European public institutional communication. From this perspective, a participant argued: “I believe that to truly foster civic sense and a sense of belonging to the EU, rather than starting from macro themes, we could begin with micro themes—starting from territorial examples linked to the problems of a specific community and finding in Europe the answer to those problems and thus the strategy” (P01). This critique underscores the perceived disconnect between abstract, top-down EU narratives and the lived experiences of citizens in local contexts. In contrast, the communicative potential of civil society organisations lies precisely in their capacity to bridge this gap. In other terms, CSOs enable the “aggregation of communities” (P24), fostering a sense of belonging and shared participation around European issues. This function enhances communicative proximity whilst contributing to building socially rooted and context-sensitive forms of engagement, which are essential to strengthening the EU’s communicative resilience.

4.3 Youth-led CSOs and information disorder

Finally, a recurring theme in the interviews was the issue of information disorder in the contemporary EU. In contributing to the improvement of the quality of public debate about the Union, CSOs play a key role in enhancing communicative resilience by addressing one of its most pressing contemporary challenges in the post-truth context: disinformation. As several participants noted, disinformation remains a pervasive concern in the European information environment. One interviewee stated explicitly: “I think we have a lot of disinformation in Europe” (P27).

Referring specifically to the 2024 European Parliament elections, the same participant highlighted the disruptive potential of emerging technologies, arguing that: “It’s a rather special campaign now that we have artificial intelligence, which is very powerful. It means we can manipulate many things and then it becomes difficult to refute something or to understand what is fake news and what is not” (P27). However, based on participants’ reflections related to the 2024 elections, the findings raise a critical question: is the core issue truly disinformation, or rather a lack of information? As one participant observed: “The real issue isn’t disinformation, it’s that there’s barely any information at all” (P33), pointing to a broader concern about the general scarcity of reliable and accessible information on EU affairs.

This perspective was echoed and expanded upon by another participant, who argued: “Since social media and the internet are often blamed for disinformation, we should also question what so-called official information is doing. Because, except in rare cases—very rare cases—the information that comes from the European Union is either deliberately distorted by certain official newspapers with a political orientation, or it is presented in a fragmented and incomplete way by other newspapers that may consider themselves more serious. Sometimes it is even presented incorrectly” (P31).

Taken conjointly, these insights show that the core challenge extends far beyond the spread of false or misleading content. It is rooted instead in the structural fragility of the EU information ecosystem, within which disinformation, misinformation and informational neglect operate simultaneously and mutually reinforce one another. AI-driven content generation adds a further layer of complexity: it accelerates the production and circulation of synthetic or misleading material, but it also exacerbates pre-existing information gaps by amplifying what is most engaging rather than what is most accurate. Within this context, youth-led CSOs emerge as essential mediators. Their work helps citizens navigate an environment where trustworthy information is often scarce, fragmented or overshadowed by AI-enhanced noise. By providing contextualised, reliable and transparent explanations, CSOs act as stabilising intermediaries capable of countering both informational scarcity and algorithmically amplified distortions.

For what concerns the analysis of RQ 2, finding a set of grassroots strategies that combine digital and physical engagement and embed civic learning into everyday democratic practices starting from educational settings (schools and universities). These two dimensions are interwoven and recur across the empirical material.

4.4 Youth-led CSOs: toward a pedagogic function for European public institutional communication

Regarding the practices implemented to strengthen the resilience of European public institutional communication and make it more effective in reaching citizens, the findings indicate that participants in the

study played an active role in the 2024 European Parliament elections campaign. Every CSO involved in the study was active on social media (*Facebook, Geneva, Instagram, LinkedIn, Threads, TikTok, YouTube* and *X*) and podcasting services (*Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts* and *Spotify*) valuing the digital ecosystem as a strategic infrastructure for communicating Europe and reaching citizens. However, their contribution went well beyond the surface. They engaged in a wide range of offline initiatives—including roundtables, webinars, local outreach efforts, participatory research activities and workshops focused on European project design. These initiatives were highly localized and specifically adapted to target audiences, with strong emphasis on educational contexts.

However, the aim of these initiatives extends well beyond the mere transmission of information about the EU. Through non-formal education practices, as “(...) a participatory workshop dedicated to the design of a communication campaign for the elections” (P23) leveraging on “creativity and grassroots initiative” (P23), they embody the core purpose of the pedagogical function here discussed: raising awareness and fostering critical reflection among youth. The objective was to cultivate a civic consciousness and sense of belonging to the Union as a shared political project, rather than to simply communicate institutional facts. In this context, educational engagement was designed to nurture a spirit of critical citizenship and to anchor European identity within lived, participatory experiences. CSOs, in this light, did not act merely as communicators but as civic co-educators—facilitators of deliberation, reflection and collective meaning-making.

Through these practices, communication became performative: not simply a means of engagement, but a constitutive act through which young people enact citizenship and develop political agency. This was particularly evident in concerns expressed by participants regarding youth political disorientation. In this regard, a participant observed that: “(...) to reach that generation which, unfortunately, feels disoriented because it lacks a concrete point of reference. So, when they leave school and are faced with voting, very few truly have firm ideas or feel a strong attachment to any specific ideal. As a result, they do not vote based on conviction. What we would like is, in some way, to return to the idea of active citizenship and youth political participation” (P33). In response, CSOs create informal but lasting spaces for civic learning and engagement.

Their role is both educational and focused on rebuilding democratic values, particularly in communities where the EU is often perceived as distant or untrustworthy, such as rural and peripheral areas. Particularly within these settings, “(...) the mistrust toward the EU raises -or at least should- true concerns (...); people feel as being left apart and not having a voice in the arena where the decisions are taken” (P12). Building on this need to reconnect marginalized communities to democratic processes, participants stressed that outreach within formal educational settings is a crucial complement to the non-formal spaces created by youth-led CSOs. As one participant highlighted, “(..) to reach the greatest number of people and have a greater impact, universities and schools are key” (P10). As a consequence, educational institutions emerge as essential arenas for promoting active civic engagement and for sustaining the pedagogical function of communication, understood as a process of civic learning rather than simple information delivery. This embodies a significant finding that warrants systematic monitoring and broader contextualisation beyond the immediate focus on the elections.

4.5 Hybrid online and offline tools: prospects for AI integration by youth-led CSOs

A consistent pattern across interviews highlights how youth-led CSOs enhance the resilience of European public institutional communication by combining non-formal education with hybrid engagement strategies.

While active in formal educational settings, their distinctive contribution lies in informal, community-centered approaches. As one participant explained: “For onsite activities we engage in community building and training, following the non-formal education methodology” (P01). Offline activities are considered indispensable—not as a substitute, but as the foundation for effective public engagement. All interviewees emphasized that offline formats are essential for trust-building and civic reflection, while digital tools serve to amplify outreach. As one interviewee stressed: “I believe that offline participation is necessary, especially on issues related to Europe and especially with very young people. Going into schools is incredibly powerful. (...) Because young people have very limited attention on social media—these platforms are constantly lowering the bar in terms of attention span” (P17). This points to a key limitation of platform-based communication: its incompatibility with the deliberative depth and reciprocity required for sustained democratic discourse. Importantly, digital and offline modes are not viewed in isolation but as complementary. Digital platforms expand visibility and reach, but their effectiveness depends on anchoring them in face-to-face, context-sensitive interaction. “In my view, they can be complementary—but never substitutive” (P01). This captures a shared understanding that the meaningfulness of public institutional communication hinges on the interplay between digital scalability and embodied presence.

An emerging insight concerns the experimental use of generative AI by youth-led CSOs. Several participants reported employing tools such as *ChatGPT* for content creation. These practices are primarily driven by the need for operational efficiency. Generative AI is viewed as a tool that can potentially accelerate tasks without compromising—sometimes even improving—content quality. “Tools such as ChatGPT can be valuable in specific contexts, particularly for tasks like brainstorming. When provided with an appropriate prompt, they can function as effective instruments for improving efficiency and saving time” (P19), one respondent noted. At the same time, interviewees expressed critical ambivalence. While recognizing AI’s potential to scale communication and enhance responsiveness, concerns emerged about creativity, authorship and civic voice. “It could even end up limiting people’s creativity” (P26), warned one participant. This finding is particularly relevant as it highlights a tension between past and present approaches to digital engagement (Pane, 2025). It shows that citizens now use digital tools in more conscious and reflective ways, moving beyond earlier techno-enthusiastic perspectives that framed social media primarily as vehicles of innovation. Rather than assuming technology-driven progress, this view situates digital transformation within human-centred practices, even as questions about human–machine interaction and the appropriate scope of human oversight remain open and subject to ongoing debate.

Taken together, these practices illustrate that youth-led CSOs enhance the EU’s communicative resilience not through a single intervention but through an integrated repertoire that combines civic education, hybrid engagement and selective, reflective use of digital tools—including emerging forms of generative AI. Their non-formal educational initiatives cultivate critical citizenship and help compensate for structural information gaps; their context-sensitive offline activities anchor EU communication in lived social realities; and their judicious use of digital platforms extends reach while maintaining proximity and trust. Through this interplay of pedagogical, relational and technological strategies, youth-led CSOs strengthen the EU’s capacity to inform, involve and sustain engagement across fragmented, hybrid and post-digital publics, reinforcing the communicative infrastructure on which democratic legitimacy depends.

5. Conclusions

This article has examined how youth-led civil society organizations across Europe strengthen the communicative resilience of the European Union within a public sphere increasingly marked by epistemic fragmentation, technological disruption and declining institutional trust. Focusing on the 2024 European Parliament elections—an electoral cycle conducted under unprecedented communicative and technological conditions—the analysis shows that these actors function both as agents of disintermediation and as multipliers of meaning. They reach constituencies often untouched or underserved by institutional communication, particularly in peripheral or marginalized areas, while translating EU-related narratives into situated forms of civic meaning that resonate with local identities and everyday concerns. Through proximity-based practices and non-formal educational approaches, youth-led CSOs foster dialogic, contextualized and participatory forms of engagement that re-embed EU communication within citizens' lifeworlds without reducing their activities to promotional work or uncritically reproducing institutional framings. In doing so, youth-led CSOs emerge as central actors in strengthening the communicative resilience of the European Union, helping sustain meaningful engagement under conditions of fragmentation, contestation and cognitive demobilisation.

Their selective use of digital tools—and their early, cautious experimentation with generative AI—further illustrates an emergent communicative repertoire marked by hybridity and adaptive reflexivity. At the same time, this repertoire exposes a sensitive and largely under-analysed domain, one that requires systematic monitoring and cross-sectoral reflection as AI-driven systems increasingly shape the conditions under which public communication and civic engagement unfold. Understanding how civil society actors negotiate these transformations is essential for theorizing communicative resilience in a post-digital environment where analogue and digital logics coexist, intersect and mutually condition one another. The findings also show that youth-led CSOs play an important role in enhancing the depth and quality of public debate through practices of civic education, critical awareness-raising and disinformation mitigation. These initiatives do not originate within institutional strategies but emerge organically from bottom-up mobilization. This civic-pedagogic dimension is one of the study's central contributions, reframing EU communication as a formative practice oriented toward cultivating critical dispositions, interpretive capacities and democratic agency. In the wider post-truth context—marked by contested epistemic authority and the erosion of shared truth anchors—these practices help rebuild interpretive clarity and trust, thereby addressing another core driver of cognitive demobilisation. Yet as youth-led organizations become more embedded within EU communication ecosystems, questions arise regarding their autonomy. Growing institutional anchoring—via funding schemes, capacity-building initiative and structured participation—may inadvertently constrain their ability to articulate counter-narratives or challenge dominant frames.

This tension is particularly relevant given that these actors do not necessarily represent the socio-economic, cultural, or territorial diversity of Europe's youth. Such dynamics reveal deeper asymmetries within participatory governance frameworks and persistent inequalities in recognition, access and resources across civil society. Future research should examine how these dynamics evolve as the EU further adapts its communicative architecture to post-truth and post-digital pressures. Comparative analysis extending beyond Europe—particularly in regions of the Global South with different media ecologies and state-society configurations—would help clarify whether the patterns identified here reflect broader global transformations or remain specific to the EU context. Understanding these variations is essential for advancing research on

communicative resilience and for identifying how youth-led civil society can continue to enrich democratic discourse under increasingly complex communicative conditions.

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