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From:	Presidency
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	Disinformation, manipulation and threats in cyberspace and their impact on the lives of young people - <i>Policy Debate</i>

Delegations will find attached a Presidency steering note on the above subject, with a view to the policy debate at the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) on 12 May 2025.

‘Disinformation, manipulation and threats in cyberspace and their impact on the lives of young people’

The digital transformation of society has brought about both opportunities and challenges for young people. Across Europe, digital technologies have reshaped communication, education, access to information and civic engagement.

While these advances foster learning, global connectivity and participation in various spheres of life, they also pose significant risks — especially in the form of disinformation, manipulation of information and online threats.

Disinformation, i.e. the deliberate spread of false or misleading content, has become a pervasive issue, with online platforms serving as major amplifiers. Algorithms designed to maximise engagement often prioritise sensational content over accuracy, fostering an environment where false and harmful narratives spread rapidly.

Manipulative tactics, such as algorithmic targeting and echo chambers, together with the risks of misuse of generative AI technologies, exacerbate these challenges. Young people often encounter content that reinforces their existing beliefs and biases, and hence limits their exposure to diverse perspectives. This digital fragmentation fuels polarisation and weakens social trust, making informed decision-making more difficult.

This trend undermines trust in democratic institutions, making it difficult for young people to identify credible sources and manipulated and false content. The consequences can be severe, influencing perceptions of critical issues such as elections, climate change and public health, and potentially leading to disengagement or online radicalisation.

Beyond disinformation, young people face increasing risks from cyberbullying, hate speech and online radicalisation. The anonymity of the internet facilitates harassment and manipulation with minimal accountability. These threats have a profound impact on mental health, contributing to anxiety, depression and, in extreme cases, self-harm.

Digital exclusion heightens vulnerability to online threats. Ensuring equal access to high-quality and well-informed digital resources is essential, particularly for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The EU's commitment to inclusion and equality must extend to digital literacy initiatives, ensuring that all young people can safely navigate the online environment and are equipped with the critical thinking skills to make informed choices online.

To strengthen democratic institutions and foster an informed youth, coordinated action at both Member State and EU level is necessary. Initiatives such as the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027), the upcoming 2030 Roadmap on the future of digital education and skills, the EU Preparedness Union Strategy, the upcoming European Democracy Shield (EDS) and the EU Action Plan against Cyberbullying are crucial to addressing these challenges.

However, further measures are needed to:

- equip young people with critical thinking, digital and media literacy skills;
- encourage youth participation in shaping national and EU policies against the manipulation of information online;
- develop robust EU-level instruments to enhance youth resilience to disinformation.

In the light of the above, ministers are invited to reflect on the following guiding questions. We kindly ask that interventions be limited to a maximum of three minutes.

1. *How can Member States better equip young people with the digital skills, critical thinking skills and media literacy needed to assess online content and build resilience to disinformation and manipulation in the digital environment?*
2. *At the EU level, what instruments and actions can enhance young people's resilience to online disinformation and manipulation, promote positive and responsible engagement with digital tools and better prepare them for informed and active democratic participation in the digital age?*