




Empowering  
young people

A stylized map of Europe is shown in a light blue color, overlaid on a dark blue globe. The globe has a yellow arc along its top edge. The map shows the outlines of European countries, including the British Isles, Scandinavia, and the Mediterranean region.

**Policy Paper - Making EU language  
more accessible for young people**

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## **About the YES Forum**

Founded in 2002, YES Forum is a European network of organisations working with and for young people facing challenging situations. By promoting their social inclusion and developing their professional skills, we act to improve the life chances of vulnerable young people. YES Forum aims to create an environment where young people and youth professionals have equally accessible learning and work-related opportunities in Europe and beyond.

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## Introduction

This policy paper aims to address the challenges of applying effective EU communication and raise the awareness of the need to make EU language more accessible and understandable. The topic of accessibility is commonly associated with people's need for an easy-to-read language. However, in this research, we consider language accessibility from the perspective of an easy-to-understand approach<sup>1</sup>, and we focus on a specific target group; namely young people with different levels of education, language skills, and abilities.

Moreover, the document contains recommendations on how EU language can be adapted to respond to its young audience. Considering that the EU has 24 official languages, this policy paper focuses only on the English language, as one of the main working languages and the most used in an international context.

The first part of the policy paper starts with general information on the EU's initiatives to improve its communication style. In the second section, there is an elaboration of arguments related to the importance of the EU communicating effectively when addressing young people. Finally, we share policy recommendations on how EU language accessibility can be enhanced when communicating with young people.

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<sup>1</sup> See page 9-10 of this paper for a detailed explanation on the difference between easy-to-read and easy-to-understand language

## What has been done so far to improve EU language accessibility?

The European Union (EU) recognises the importance of using accessible language to ensure a diverse audience understands its messages. In a statement, the European Commission declared that:

*“Working in the EU environment can make you jargon-blind. You might recognise e.g., ‘subsidiarity’ or ‘countervailing duties’ as technical jargon – but EU language is full of many less obvious jargon terms, influenced especially by legal/diplomatic terminology. For example, when did you last negotiate your accession to a gym or sports club, or go on holiday to a third country?”<sup>2</sup>*

Despite acknowledging “jargon-blindness”, communicating in a clear and easy-to-understand language remains a challenge due to the subject matter’s complexity and the multicultural context of the EU. Over the years, the EU has taken various initiatives to promote the application of a clearer and simpler language in its communication. Below, there is a brief overview of the key EU initiatives and their effectiveness in improving language accessibility within the EU.

1. [Joint Practical Guide for persons involved in the drafting of EU Legislation](#) (see European Commission, Legal Service, 2015): In 2015, the European Parliament, Council, and Commission issued the second edition of the Joint Practical Guide for Drafting EU Legislation. This guide emphasises the need for clear and precise language in legislation to enhance democratic transparency and minimise disputes. However, it allows for the use of legal or bureaucratic language in legislative texts, recognising its necessity in specific contexts.
2. [Clear English Tips for Translators](#) (see European Commission 2014): The European Commission published the Clear English Tips for Translators in 2014, offering detailed guidance to translators, especially non-native speakers, on writing in correct and plain English. This handbook expands on the recommendations provided in the European Commission’s guide; “How to write clearly”.
3. [Clear Writing for Europe](#) (2010): The European Commission launched the “Clear Writing for Europe” initiative in 2010. This initiative aims to encourage Commission staff to write shorter, simpler, and jargon-free texts. A team of editors, with support from colleagues across the Commission, provide practical advice and online resources to authors. These resources include the “How to write clearly” booklet available in 24 official languages (see European Commission, Directorate-General for Translation 2015). The initiative includes a weekly clear writing tip, an email helpline, and an annual Clear Writing Award for clearly written Commission texts. Additionally, the European Commission organises training and awareness-raising events for staff.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/resources-partners/europa-web-guide/design-content-and-development/content/web-writing-guidelines/jargon-and-clear-writing-alternatives\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/resources-partners/europa-web-guide/design-content-and-development/content/web-writing-guidelines/jargon-and-clear-writing-alternatives_en)

4. **English Style Guide and "Fight the Fog" Campaign:** In 1982, the European Commission published the English Style Guide, a handbook for authors and translators in the European Commission, with subsequent editions, to improve writing style (see European Commission 2023). The "Fight the Fog" campaign, was launched 15 years later, and provided the "How to write clearly" guide, offering recommendations for plain language. The guide emphasises the importance of direct, engaging, and concise writing, suggesting tips such as focusing on the reader, using active verbs, and avoiding jargon.

Despite the EU's efforts to promote accessible language, challenges persist in achieving consistent clarity in communication. Research indicates that EU communication, including press releases, remains complex and technical, resembling scientific discourse rather than plain language. This complex communication style is present in all policy areas and has not substantially improved over the years. The EU's ambiguous institutional roles and complex subject matter are additional barriers to clear communication.

In conclusion, while the EU has made notable efforts to promote accessible language, challenges related to institutional culture, subject complexity, and multilingualism continue to influence the clarity of its communication. Achieving widespread adoption of plain language within the EU requires ongoing commitment and potential shifts in communication strategies, especially when engaging young people.

## **Why is there a need to make EU language more accessible to young people?**

In its simpler form, the communication process consists of a sender and a receiver. It is the sender's interest to effectively convey a message to the receiver in a communication style that is audience-centred, removes communication barriers, and is more comprehensible. Applying clear and plain language is not only about communicating a piece of information but also implies caring about the message's recipient.

In the realm of good governance and effective citizen engagement, the importance of using clear, easy-to-understand, and accessible communication by public institutions cannot be overstated. When public institutions communicate in a straightforward and transparent way, they empower individuals to actively participate in civic life, have the necessary information for taking decisions, and hold those in power accountable. In this context, communication is crucial in bridging the gap between the complexities of government operations and the citizens' understanding of these political processes.

When considering the EU and its institutions, because of the complex governance system, diversity of members, and distance to its citizens, the significance of clear, easily understandable, and accessible communication is particularly amplified. The EU operates within a more complex framework than national governments, which can often appear distant and less familiar to its citizens. These characteristics can create barriers to effective understanding and engagement of citizens. Consequently, the need for transparent communication becomes even more pronounced in the EU, as it strives to bridge the geographical and informational gap between itself and the public.

Young people are an important communication audience. As EU citizens, by age sixteen, they can vote in European elections (e.g., Germany, Belgium, Malta, Austria). Therefore, accessible language is necessary as it can enhance the inclusion of young people, regardless of their background. Moreover, it can contribute to a more vibrant democracy and participation. Effective and audience-centred communication promotes positive EU sentiments among young people, reduces Euroscepticism and combats disinformation. Hence, it is paramount for the EU to communicate effectively to young people since they are the shapers and future leaders at the national and European levels.

### **Language accessibility enhances inclusion and understanding regardless of background**

Do young people understand the EU language and feel understood?

According to the latest European Parliament Youth Survey 2021, young people confirmed that their understanding of the European Union is lower compared to their understanding of respective national governments. It is alarming that **a majority (55%) of respondents said that they do not understand much or anything about the EU** (see European Parliament 2021). Specifically, young people said they do not participate in the European elections because of a lack of interest, a belief that decision-makers do not listen to them, and a lack of understanding of the issues at stake. The feeling of exclusion and barriers in understanding the EU emphasise how imperative it is to enter into a dialogue with young citizens and “speak” their language.

Presenting and communicating information in an audience-centred way can ensure that young people with different backgrounds understand the EU system of governance. Also, it can encourage them to participate in political processes and have their voices heard. Accessible communication can ensure that people from diverse backgrounds, including those with different levels of education, language skills, and abilities, can understand and engage effectively with EU information. By avoiding technical jargon and presenting information in a relatable way, EU institutions foster trust and inclusivity, leading to a more informed citizenry. This clarity encourages more young people to get involved in civic matters and creates an environment where young citizens can contribute meaningfully to policy discussion, advocate for their needs, and collaborate with authorities to influence positive change in their communities.

### **Language accessibility promotes positive EU sentiments and European values**

Considering the fact that the EU's political impact has grown, and its policies and actions directly affect the lives of millions of people within its territory (and beyond), it is important for the EU to continue nurture its relationship towards its citizens through effective communication. The EU is changing, and the context and sentiments towards the EU are shifting. In particular, enhanced levels of Euroscepticism and the spread of disinformation are fuelling negative sentiments towards the EU and European values. Brexit is an example that shows how harmful the consequences of such trends can be, even threatening Europe's social cohesion.

These dynamics make effective communication between the EU and its citizens vital. The EU's complex structure and policies can sometimes distance it from its citizens. When people are less informed, misunderstandings and false information can take root, fuelling doubts about the EU and its values.

Without well-informed citizens, these challenges can grow. Therefore, the EU needs to enhance its communication efforts. By using clear language, the EU can bridge the gap between its operations and citizens' understanding. Consequently, using clear language can nurture a sense of unity and shared responsibility, countering the risks of misinformation and disconnection. In the complex fabric of the European project, clear communication emerges as crucial for sustaining a solid and harmonious union.

### **Language accessibility contributes to a more vibrant democracy and youth participation**

Moreover, clear and accessible communication encourages youth participation and contributes to a more vibrant democracy. *Age emerges as one of the strongest predictors of voter turnout and, along with income and education, is one of the most robust explanations for differences in voter turnout* (see Zukin et al. 2006; Stolle and Hooghe 2009). European Election Studies (see Schmitt et al. 2015; Schmitt et al. 2019) reveal a shocking reality of voter abstention in EU Member States, especially among the youngest eligible voters. In addition to this alarming trend on the national level, abstention in European elections is particularly high (over 70 per cent). Moreover, the gap between young and older voters has widened significantly across the democratic world, pointing to a problem with low political participation among young people not only in elections but also in institutional politics. According to studies, young people currently participate less in institutional politics than other age groups, and less than cohorts of young people decades ago, which calls for immediate action.

The absence of youth in institutional politics also affects youth representation. On one hand, low youth participation in politics means that their needs are not articulated, which leads to low expectations from their government. On the other hand, the absence of youth representation implies that politicians are less likely to be held accountable if they do not prioritise policies that benefit the youth. Studies show that the percentage of young MPs in parliaments (under the age of 30), rarely exceeds 2 per cent and is particularly unfavourable for young women (see Deželan 2015; Tremmel 2006).

The European Union's struggles with popularity and low turnout rates in its elections further underline the urgency of clear communication. By breaking down abstract processes and jargon, EU institutions can demystify their operations, and make them more understandable to citizens. This, in turn, encourages a higher level of visibility and public participation, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and ownership over EU affairs. In such a context, clear communication becomes not only a practical necessity but also a vital tool for revitalising democratic engagement within the European Union.

Young people are interested in the EU and national politics, and can exercise their citizenship rights when provided with the right opportunities. Through our projects, we aim to bring young people closer to understanding the EU, and we have witnessed that the EU treaties which form the basis of the functioning of the EU, are still very far from the reality of young people. With this policy paper, we aim to tackle this disconnection. With our recommendations, we invite the EU to ensure that its provisions are available and understandable to young people, encourage young people's autonomy in searching for information, enhance their ability to understand the functioning of the EU, and support them in being informed and in advocating for their social rights within the European context.



## How can EU language become more accessible to young people?

This section provides several [recommendations](#) to EU institutions and policymakers on communicating better with young generations. These recommendations are based on the expertise and research of the YES Forum and direct recommendations from young people who are members of the YES Forum, and other young people who participate in our projects.

### Be aware of the difference between easy-to-read and easy-to-understand language

Both easy-to-read and easy-to-understand language aim to enhance comprehension, but their focus, application and target groups differ from each other. Easy-to-read language is designed specifically for individuals with cognitive or reading challenges, while easy-to-understand language targets a broader audience by simplifying complex ideas. In this policy paper, our definition of accessible language resonates with the easy-to-understand language. While the EU commonly offers information in easy-to-read language, the information in easy-to-understand language is still lacking. We recommend that the EU differentiates between easy-to-read and easy-to-understand language, and makes information and communication more visible in an easy-to-understand, accessible language for a broader audience, considering the specific target group.

On the one hand, the more widely known concept [easy-to-read language](#) refers to the use of simple words, sentence structures, and formatting to make content more accessible to individuals with cognitive or reading difficulties. The goal of easy-to-read language is to ensure that a wider range of people, including those with learning disabilities, limited literacy, or non-native language proficiency, can comprehend the information. The target audience includes individuals with various cognitive and reading challenges, including those with learning disabilities or low literacy levels. Content in easy-to-read language often involves larger fonts, shorter sentences, bullet points, simple vocabulary, and visual aids like images or icons to aid comprehension. Easy-to-read language may also use techniques like chunking information into smaller sections for easier processing.

On the other hand, [easy-to-understand language](#) involves presenting information in a clear and straightforward manner that is easily grasped by a general audience. The emphasis here is on clarity, coherence, and avoidance of unnecessary jargon or complexity. The primary goal is to make complex concepts or ideas accessible to a broader audience without requiring specialised background knowledge of the subject matter. The target audience comprises the general population, including individuals with average to above-average literacy levels and varying degrees of subject knowledge. This type of content focuses on clear organisation, logical flow, and coherent explanations. It avoids unnecessary jargon and provides context where needed. While formatting can also play a role, the emphasis is more on well-structured prose than specialised formatting techniques.

### **Include an easy-to-understand approach within the EU's communication strategies**

The EU, its institutions and policy-makers should make reliable information on the EU easily accessible and understandable in an inclusive manner to all citizens, regardless of their background. In particular targeting young generations can be achieved by using more easy-to-understand language, and avoiding technical terms and jargon in their communication. While doing this, they should avoid being oversimplistic, and maintain the quality and expertise of the given information.

The EU should find a balance of quality and clear information in their communication. To achieve this, the content of EU documents and communications should not include too much or too complex information, but it should also not be too short or oversimplified. Additionally, the content should be truthful and honest, not only mentioning the good sides of the EU but also highlighting the shortfalls while suggesting solutions to improve them. This kind of transparency from the EU institutions would also in return increase the trust from its (young) citizens.

The content should be flexible and adaptable to different communication platforms and target groups. To do this, it is always important to provide the context and background information on the topic. To avoid information overloading, further resources, documents, or news can be given as a reference or a link on digital channels. This would ensure that a part of the audience interested to know more details can access references, without overwhelming the audience that already knows enough about the topic.

Based on our experience with young people, they prefer institutional communication not to be overly formal, abstract, complex or simple. Instead, it can be beneficial to find a balance and use a story-telling approach, including the personal experience of young people on the specific topic, to create a personal and emotional connection. In this way, the EU should emphasise the presence and impact of the EU on young people's everyday lives. This connection can also be formed by showing young people backstage footage of life within EU institutions, to bridge the formal gap between young people and EU institutions themselves.

### **Communicate with the young generations' language**

The EU should use new online and offline communication approaches to be closer to young people's preferred way of communication. Specifically, such approaches could include reaching out to young people through digital media, youth movements, and various 'ambassadors' (organisations and individuals) explaining the EU project, its benefits and values.

The EU should consider explaining the complex EU terminology with shorter and non-formal language using infographics, glossaries, memes, etc., which is important for explaining the essentials of the EU, including its values, functions, and institutions.

In online communication, The EU could involve young influencers or trainees at EU institutions when producing materials targeting young people. Another way to be closer to young people is to involve them in developing communication strategies by asking for their feedback and suggestions. Also, to promote

young people's voices, the EU could showcase in its content and pictures young people engaged in the content creation of EU communication. This would contribute to the personification of the content in contrast to complex and abstract ideas. Moreover, the EU can enhance its interaction with a young audience and connect with the European youth through contests, challenges, surveys and polls, online treasure hunts, games, and an EU chatbot.

In offline communication, young people's voices should be heard through consultation processes or exchanges with schools that can provide feedback on how the EU is perceived from the perspective of the younger generations, including recommendations on how EU communication materials can be age-appropriate and accessible. The Europe Direct centres at the local level can also play an important role in the consultation processes with young people.

### **Diversify the EU's communication channels**

To effectively engage with the younger generation, the European Union should diversify its communication channels by embracing innovative approaches and leveraging new technologies. The EU must adapt its communication strategies to cater to changing preferences and habits of young people. These strategies can include implementing school programs to promote EU awareness using non-formal methods such as political simulations, collaborating with influencers who resonate with the youth, and venturing into untapped platforms such as TikTok and Instagram to reach the digitally native generation. Additionally, the EU should explore non-text communication avenues, like short videos, memes, podcasts, and infographics, as these formats are more likely to capture the attention of young audiences. Furthermore, developing a user-friendly mobile application designed to deliver information about EU policies in clear language would enhance accessibility and understanding among the youth. The EU should also provide its website in easy-to-understand language.

The EU should support educational programs and partnerships focusing on digital literacy and language learning. Doing this would empower young people to access EU content in their preferred language and foster a sense of ownership and participation in EU affairs. To achieve this, the EU could promote collaboration with tech companies and start-ups to innovate communication methods, such as AI-driven chatbots, virtual assistants, or interactive mobile applications. However, the EU must be conscious of the risks of using these technologies and take appropriate precautions when communicating with young people through these channels.

By embracing these recommendations, the EU can bridge the communication gap and build stronger connections with the younger demographic, ensuring their active involvement in the European project.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this policy paper underlines the crucial need for the European Union to make its language more accessible and understandable to young people through a targeted approach. The risks of not doing so are substantial and encompass a lack of engagement, increased Euroscepticism, misinformation, and a growing disconnect between the EU and its youth. Specific recommendations have been shared, to address these challenges and promote a more active and informed young citizenry.

The EU's ongoing efforts to improve language accessibility are commendable, but persistent challenges remain, including institutional culture, subject complexity, and multilingualism. The proposed recommendations aim to address these challenges and revitalize the EU's communication with its younger audience.

By adopting a clear and easy-to-understand language approach, the EU can bridge the gap between its complex operations and citizens' understanding. This will not only empower young people to participate actively in civic life but also nurture positive EU sentiments and European values. Moreover, it can pave the way for a more vibrant democracy, increase youth participation, and ensure that their specific needs and voices are heard.

The recommendations outlined in this policy paper call for a differentiation between the easy-to-read and easy-to-understand language, the inclusion of an easy-to-understand approach in EU communication strategies, and the adaptation of communication methods to the language preferences and communication platforms of young people. By embracing these strategies and leveraging new technologies, the EU can enhance its connection with the younger generation, fostering a more informed, engaged, and active citizenry. Ultimately, these measures will contribute to a stronger and more harmonious European Union in the future.

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