UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Photo: UNDP Moldova

DIGITAL HORIZON

— MOLDOVA'S YOUTH ON THE DIGITAL FUTURE THEY WANT TO SEE, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

DIGITAL HORIZON — Moldova's Youth on the Digital Future They Want to See, in Their Own Words

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UNDP is the leading United Nations organization fighting to end the injustice of poverty, inequality, and climate change. Working with our broad network of experts and partners in 170 countries, we help nations to build integrated, lasting solutions for people and the planet.

Context

Moldova has been making significant strides in its digitalisation process in recent years. The *Moldova – Digital Transformation Compact*[1], published by UNDP in collaboration with the ITU in September 2021, places the country in the runner-up category of "countries with clear strength in digital transformation and foundational elements in place". While Moldova's e-Governance Agency (eGA) has been introducing important digital tools like MPay and MCabinet since 2013, the appointment of a designated Deputy Prime Minister on Digitalisation, Iurie Țurcanu, in August 2021, has marked a pivotal turn and showed the new government's reaffirmed dedication to digital transformation. UNDP Moldova, equally committed to this goal, particularly through its "Accelerating digital transformation in the Public Sector of the Republic of Moldova" Programme, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Moldova *"for accelerating the country's digital transformation*", on 6 October 2021.

With the eGA team, DPM Iurie Țurcanu, and a group of UNDP experts jointly working on a new National Digital Transformation Strategy, young people's perspective on digitalisation is an especially valuable resource. Young people are particularly attuned to the thrum of innovation and their insights should help shape our country's digital horizon. The following study centres on young people's outlook on digital transformation in Moldova and seeks to understand the digital needs and challenges which they encounter, as well as their grassroots vision for a better digital future.

Research Methodology

UNDP Moldova partnered with The Cynefin Company to capture young people's individual experiences of digital transformation in Moldova. SenseMaker®, a mixed methods ethnographic research tool, was used to collect micro-narratives about using digital tools and services. The online SenseMaker® survey was complemented with a series of interactive workshops held at high schools, where students analysed the insights generated from the survey and supplemented them with further commentary and suggestions.

1 https://www.undp.org/moldova/publications/compact-digital-transformation-moldova

Participants, aged between 14 and 34, were asked to begin by sharing a recent experience of using a digital service or product and to elaborate on whether technology played a positive or negative role in their experience. Using a marker, respondents then situated their stories on triads and dyads to provide quantitative data. This allows the researcher to identify clusters and patterns in the stories. Triads are designed to explore the balance between three interrelated concepts. Each dot on the triangle represents where the participant placed their story and, in data analysis, patterns and aggregations are quantitatively investigated. Dyads, based on Aristotle's Golden Mean, are designed as a form of hidden hypothesis testing. In data analysis, the results are displayed as a histogram where you can observe deviations from the mean. It is the respondent, and not the researcher, who interprets the meaning of the story through these geometric shapes. This is essential to eliminating the biases of the researcher. The power of meaning is in the hands of the storyteller, giving us an honest snapshot of the way people think on the ground. The researcher can filter stories along demographic lines, comparing the responses of, for example, different age brackets, genders, Moldovan residents/Moldovans in the diaspora, etc. This comparative analysis is possible due to the multiple-choice questions section at the end of the survey which is used to 'slice and dice' the data. For example, an individual triad or dyad can be filtered to show only responses from young people living in rural areas and how the responses differ from those living in a suburban or urban area.

Demographic Findings

The survey was distributed through schools and universities, youth clubs and NGOs, as well as through the programme Tekwill in Every School, and at the Startup Picnic event by Technovator. Additionally, the link to the survey was posted on all UNDP Moldova social channels, as well as those of UNFPA Moldova, Startup Students, USMF and UTM.

A total of 731 stories have been collected between 11 January 2022 — 9 August 2022. A slight majority of respondents identified as female (53%) and three-quarters of participants were aged between 14 and 19.

Figure 1. **Age**

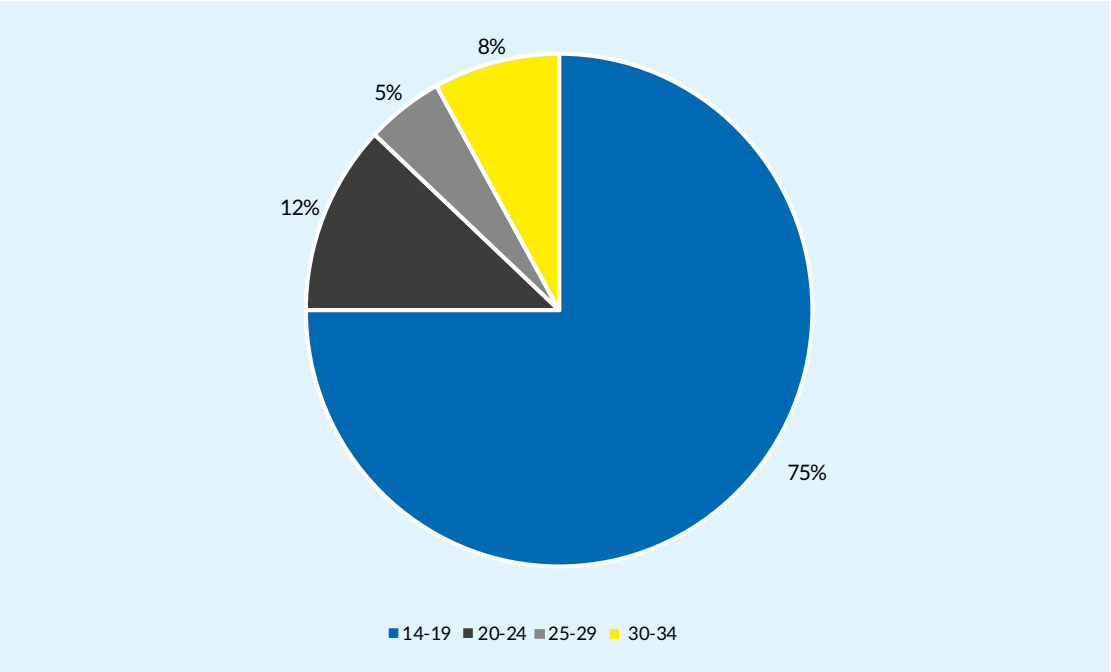
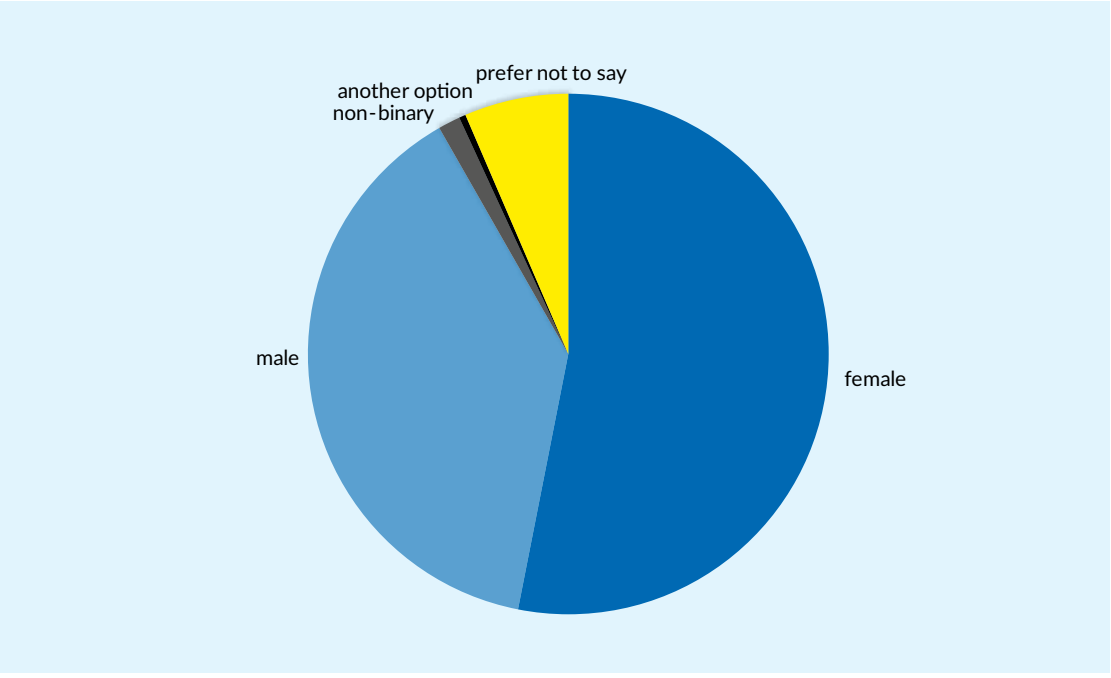


Figure 2. **Gender**

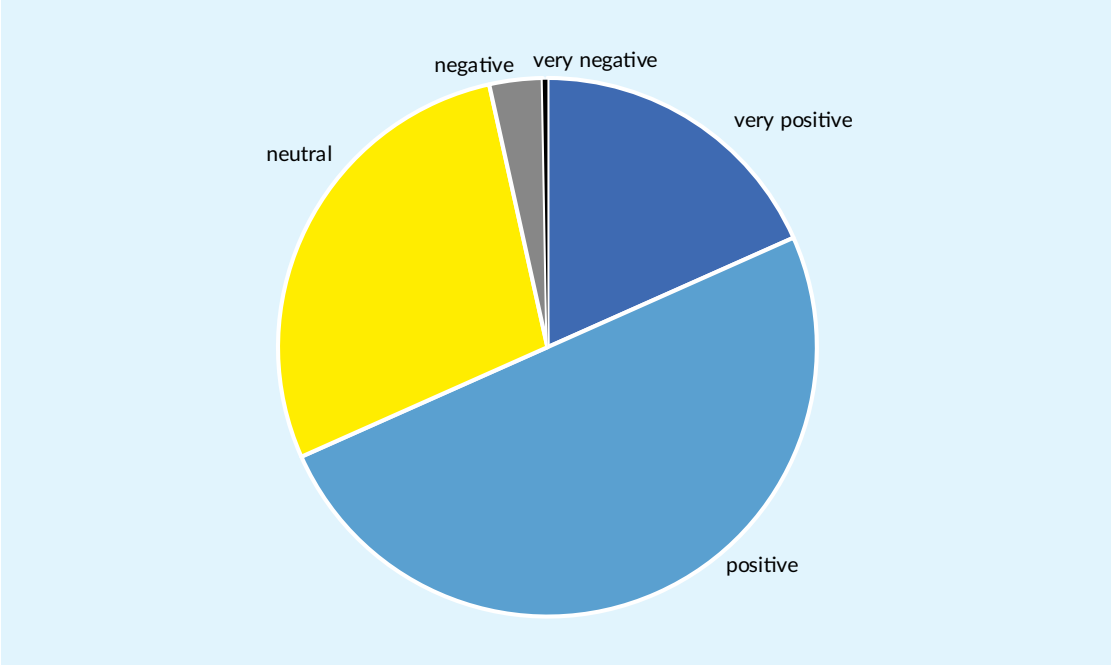


The majority of micro-narratives came from an urban location (80%). 3% of respondents were disabled, and 12% identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Ethnicity-wise, 74% of respondents identified as Moldovan, with smaller pockets of Ukrainians (7%), Russians (8%), and Romanians (5%). Just over 1% identified as Roma.

68% of stories were marked on the positive spectrum (positive and very positive), whereas only 4% were marked on the negative spectrum (negative and very negative).

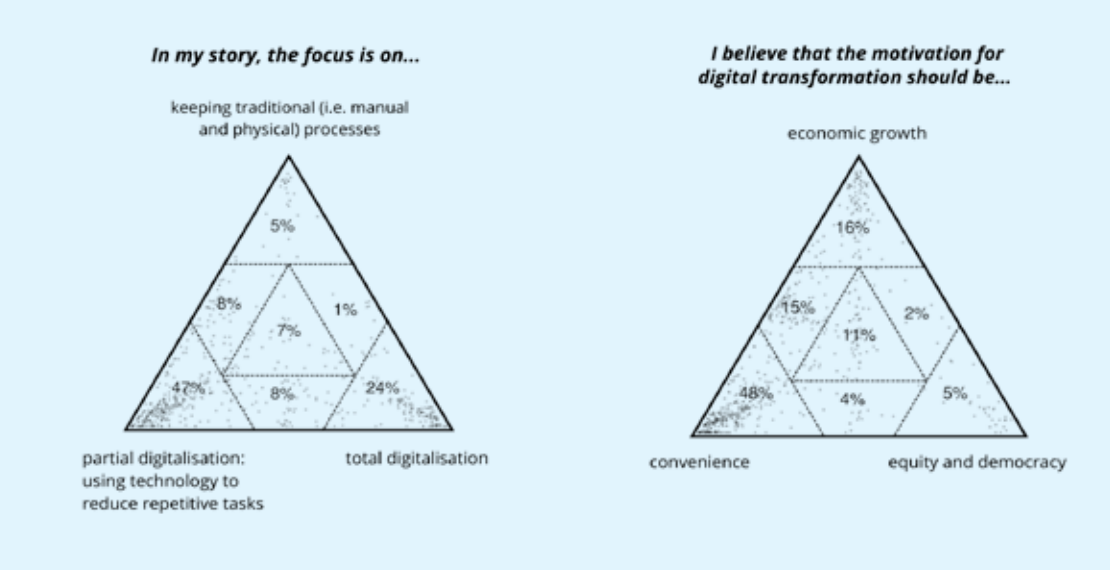
Figure 3. **The emotional tone of my story is...**



Key Quantitative Findings

Technology is used to augment not replace

From the findings we can see that respondents desired to use technology to augment their day-to-day experience, largely feeling its purpose was to reduce repetitive tasks (47%) and make things more convenient (48%). Reducing repetitive tasks was of particular concern to those with disabilities (62%), implying that this particular demographic may see technology as a way to address the limitations or issues caused by their disability. Interestingly, very few respondents felt a desire for complete digitalisation (24%) speaking to the want to retain more human-led processes. Given that only a tiny minority of respondents (5%) felt that keeping traditional processes should be the focus of technology it is clear that there is a strong appetite for change.



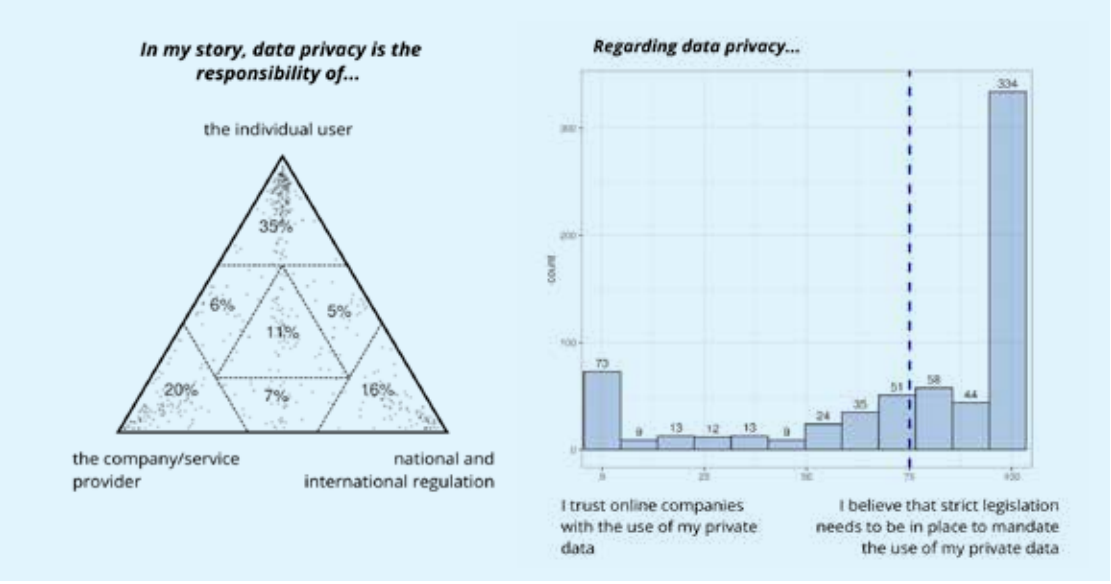
Roma voice/representation lost

Interestingly Roma people's answers to the purpose of digital transformation diverged from other ethnic groups. 43% of Roma felt promoting equity and democracy was the focus of technology-usage. All other ethnic groups hovered between 4% and 5%. It can be inferred that Roma people see technology as a way to access representation and have their perspectives heard by the wider community.

Responsibility for data privacy proved divisive

The question of who is responsible for data privacy proved divisive. There were relatively small percentage differences in those who thought it was the individual (35%), the company (20%) and the legislature (16%). Teenagers were much more likely than older age groups to see the individual as solely responsible (43%). This implies that either they are less aware of the role of the company or the legislature or they have a more individualist outlook.

While discussing this subject during workshops, students justified the aforementioned dominant trend with the explanation that everyone is responsible for what they post online. After exploring the issue further, less visible aspects came into focus, such as the architecture of social media networks and their practice of selling user data to advertisers for commercial gain. Here, the vast majority agreed — a regulatory body should legislate data privacy. This sentiment is also evidenced by the responses to dyad 5, appearing later in the survey, where a clear majority (334) answered in favour of data protection legislation.

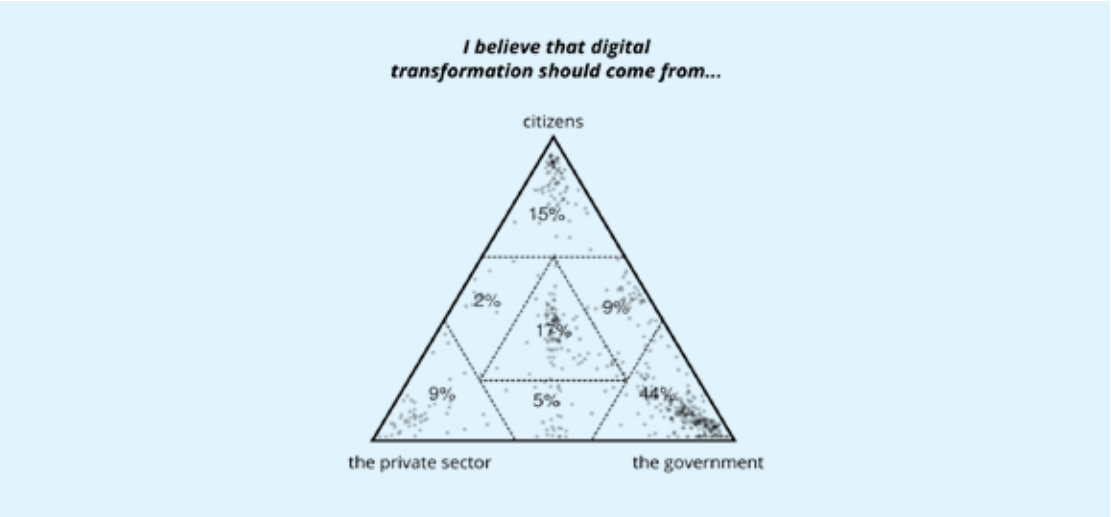


Myriad of origins for digitalisation

The origins of digitalisation were seen differently by many respondents. With a slight lead, 30% of participants saw the government as the source of digital transformation; 26% saw it as a more grassroots, citizen-led process, while 21% saw it as furthered by the private sector. In stories with a negative or very negative emotional tone, the government was more likely to be driving digital transformation (55%), while positive and very positive stories were distributed more evenly. Although this comes from a minority of stories (22), it suggests that the government's digital offering is incomplete or inefficient in some aspects.

Digital Transformation should come from the Government

The majority of respondents felt that the government should be behind digital transformation in the future. 30% saw the government driving digitalisation in the present, whereas 44% wanted the government to drive digitalisation in the future.



Narrative Findings

Ambivalent attitudes toward online learning

Online learning was featured in a lot of micro-narratives, coupled with a variety of perspectives. While a minority expressed preferring online school to in-person learning, others were more ambivalent, citing several disadvantages (difficulty concentrating, a lower level of digital skills among older teachers, too much screen time, and isolation from classmates). However, the majority agree that incorporating digital tools (interactive whiteboard, videos, podcasts, PDFs etc.) into learning, be it in-person or online, enriches the learning process by adding a multimedia dimension. High school students largely appreciate the platform **studii.md**, where they can check their timetable and assigned homework, and upload homework.

University students, on their part, mentioned some technical difficulties such as learning platform Moodle being overwhelmed by the sudden increased demand during the first pandemic months. Otherwise, they were favourable towards online learning, as it is more convenient for those with young families.

While imperfect in some respects, online learning was seen as crucial in providing continued education during pandemic lockdowns. All in all, the importance of having a working online learning mechanism as an alternative option emerged as the most shared position among otherwise diverging parties.

> *"Am folosit serviciile online în timpul cînd am studiat la distanță, folosind diverse aplicații. După părerea mea, tehnologia a încurcat la ducerea lecțiilor online, deoarece totuşi studierea în mod fizic este mai efectivă, dar ca modalitate de rezervă este bună şi studierea la distanţă."*
>
> *"I used online services when I was studying online, using different apps. In my opinion, technology acted as a barrier to learning in this case, because in-person studying is more effective. However, online school is good as a back-up option."*
>
> *(Male student, 14-19 years, suburban area)*

Digitalisation halted by technical issues

A significant percentage of micro-narratives highlight an intermediate or transitional aspect of digitalisation in Moldova: certain services, while digitalised on paper, don't technically perform smoothly in practice. The examples were varied: booking a time slot for the driving examination online, but waiting half a day on the day of the examination with no candidates passing on their pre-booked time; technical issues with the electronic medical record system and the healthcare tool **sia.amp.md**; certain public agencies and commercial banks not accepting the digital signature; being unable to buy a bus ticket on **autogara.md**, despite the interface resembling a booking tool. In workshops, young people complained of the tiring practice of keeping both physical and electronic records, which is required of healthcare workers, teachers, and some civil servants — another example of the halfway nature of digital transformation in certain fields.

This narrative insight explains why the majority of negative stories were government-related — incomplete digital services cause inefficiency and frustration for the final user. Nevertheless, other public services, such as MPay (frequently mentioned as a favourite among respondents), are well-functioning and easy to use. This explains why the majority wanted the government to drive digitalisation in the future — while some creases need to be evened out, there is trust in government-led digitalisation.

"Am încercat să mă programez online pentru o consultație la medic prin sistemul SIA AMP. Deși a fost ușor de găsit printr-un search pe Google, portalul SIA AMP nu mi-a permis să mă programez la medic. Am putut să mă identific ușor (prin IDNP), sistemul a identificat ușor medicii clinicii la care sunt înscrisă, dar nu am putut selecta/alege nicio oră din cele ce au fost vizualizate pe ecran. Astfel, nu am putut face programarea. Butoanele se pară că nu erau funcționale."

"I tried to book a doctor's appointment online through the site sia.amp.md. It was easy to find with a simple Google search. I was able to log in easily using my ID number, the system identified the doctors and the clinic where I am registered, but I could not select/choose any time slot from those that were displayed on the screen. Thus, I could not make an appointment. The buttons didn't appear to be functional."

(Woman, 25-29 years, urban area)

Convenience, accessibility, and connection — appreciated by young people

Some digital services appear repeatedly throughout the 731 stories: online shopping, using social media to connect with friends and relatives, paying taxes and utility bills online, receiving social welfare benefits electronically, and planning public transport journeys through mobile apps. These improve accessibility for those with mobility impairments, help save time and avoid queues, and keep young people informed and connected — the overwhelming majority of respondents see digitalisation as a positive phenomenon.

"Положительный опыт использования онлайн оплаты коммунальных услуг, онлайн покупки, пользуюсь социальными сетями, во время карантина пользовалась дистанционным обучением. Очень удобно и облегчает жизнь!"

"My positive experiences include online payment for utility services, online shopping, use of social media, and remote learning during quarantine. All are very convenient and make life easier!"

(Female student, 14-19 years, urban area)

Most requested digital solutions

Mid-way through the survey, participants were asked the open question *"If I could change one aspect of Moldova's digital transformation, it would be..."*. While the answers were fittingly varied for our diverse pool of respondents, some requests were distinctly recurrent: reduced bureaucracy; the promotion of digitalisation through educational campaigns so as to better inform those who are more averse to digital transformation; legally enshrined data protection; and the digitalisation of public transport (the ability to pay via card/mobile phone for the ticket, as well as electronic panels showing the real-time schedule of buses in more stations).

Directions of intervention and solutions

Improve existing digital public services

- As the majority of positive micro-narratives show, the government is on a good path in the digitalisation process. However, while some digital public services are used widely and favoured among young people, others suffer from certain last-mile delivery issues which lead to frustration for the final user. Therefore, the government's mission should be to review, fine-tune, and upgrade its existing offering, rather than embark on a large-scale reform mission.

Protect data privacy

- Although the topic of data protection initially appeared to split opinions in the triad question, the subject resurfaced later in the survey, through the answers to the open question and to the fifth dyad, and in workshops. All in all, most young people agree on the importance of robust data privacy legislation, to go hand-in-hand with the country's continuous digitalisation.

Promote digital transformation with a focus on inclusivity

- Some micro-narratives featured requests for digital services which already exist in Moldova, revealing a lack of awareness of certain services. The government should pair the introduction of new digital services with informational campaigns to keep citizens up-to-date, increase digital literacy, and persuade digitalisation sceptics.
- Champion digital-by-default to avoid doubling the workload of public servants, and medical and teaching staff, but maintain a range of in-person services to accommodate everyone. The Unified Public Service Centers (CUPS) represent a good mixed-use approach.