

SPRING 2022

Connected Europe: Addressing the weaponisation of digitalisation

EVENT REPORT



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How can digitalisation help us find a path out of the current health, economic and security crises that are impacting the world? And who needs to work together to bring about real change?

These global challenges and the current geopolitical upheaval were discussed at an event hosted by Friends of Europe on 29 March against the backdrop of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. The discussion took place under Chatham House rules and as part of the Connected Europe initiative, in partnership with Vodafone.

Bringing together senior leaders from European and international public and private sectors, the event aimed to discuss these opportunities, challenges and threats, and address what bold action is required. If Europe can show leadership, strategy and global competitiveness, everyone stands to gain from it.

Turbulent times

Digitalisation is moving at pace and EU investment is striving to create more resilient, robust digital societies. At the same time, the current health, economic and security crises are deepening inequalities across Europe, and cybersecurity is centre stage as one of the most significant public security concerns of our time. The challenge for digitalisation is to enable the creation of secure, protected societies that can still be economically viable, sustainable and resilient.

This comes amidst the current period of turbulence that, participants heard, is not likely to be over quickly. Indeed, the geopolitical struggle for global supremacy and power will continue.

“ The perfect storm is ahead of us because the huge transformation of world affairs – competition, technological revolution, climate change, the human condition – is so massive and so unprecedented... Until we find a new balance in the world, these will [...] not get easier.

The concern in Europe and ‘the West’ is to maintain its influence – with technological superiority as a driver for competitiveness and, ultimately, power. Yet countries like China are forging ahead, and there is a fear that our leadership and technological edge is being eroded.

“ This is the time to kill old taboos, to dare, to question what we have done in the past and to think about doing things fundamentally differently.

The EU may be resilient - help to refugees and support for social cohesion attest to this – but having not reacted to the warning signs in the last decade, Europe can ill-afford to continue sleepwalking into the next crisis. Participants shared the view that we must all learn lessons not only from the COVID-19 pandemic but also from the Russia-Ukraine war. These must serve as a serious wake-up call.

The key questions we need to address are: what should we learn from the current crises? And how can we make strategic choices, based on foresight, vision and evidence?

“ To quote the famous phrase, ‘Never let a good crisis go to waste.’

Tackle the barriers and recognise the risks

Our experience of the COVID-19 pandemic showed the gaps and inequalities present in society. But at the same time, we do have ready solutions. The example of vaccines shows what can be achieved with focus, application and the right people brought together.

However, participants recognised the many barriers to effective progress and collaboration: short termism; the speed of decision-making; the need for scale and reach to encourage investment; layers of regulation; lack of foresight; and the difficulties in bringing all actors, public and private, together early enough. A consensus of opinion was that more trust is needed.

“ If we look at this competition for global supremacy... we are still too parochial, too divided, too fragmented – and still too romantic about the toughness of this era. It’s going to be tough, my friends.

It was acknowledged that often in Europe there is a gap between technological ambition and outcome, despite years of EU investment in research and innovation. It was felt by some that, despite a strong tech ecosystem, European excellence is not promoted enough and that disruptive tech is not allowed to grow organically.

Resilience, reliability and relationships

Tech companies have stepped up. Some networks and platforms have the necessary scale, reach, and ability to react and adapt quickly. Some current examples from Ukraine, shared by participants, highlighted real, practical digital applications providing much needed support to citizens in a time of crisis. But in the longer term, more resilient networks are needed, and interoperability remains an issue.

“ The true trans-Atlanticist relationship will be fundamental to overcoming this crisis, be it on a public sector level, be it on a private sector level.

It was reiterated that the private sector has much to offer to public bodies: innovation capabilities, scalable operators, and long-term investors – as well as being companies with a strong purpose. In some cases the private sector is already providing invaluable collaboration and support to public bodies, such as insight on cyber security threats.

There is great scope to build these relationships and share resources, optimising the dynamism and expertise in the private sector, and with public entities holding the political legitimacy and, in some countries, a high degree of trust.

Another area where Europe does well is in space with the Copernicus Earth observation system. EU investment in this field is actually greater than that in the US and represents huge potential opportunities. Earth observation data can be used, for example, to monitor crop yields globally and help avoid a future food crisis.

A long-term vision

Participants from the private sector called for governments and politicians to adopt a long-term perspective, rather than be constrained by short-term political cycles. A strategic vision is needed for the telecoms sector, given its underlying importance to so many areas of the economy and to society as a whole. The example was made of China's investment over decades and its strategic choices – we, in Europe, must do likewise or risk lagging behind in telecoms, as well as in many other fields of technology and research.

We must also think differently about connectivity and telecoms, according to the private operators. Nowadays the conversations with customers, policymakers and small businesses alike are less about blackspots and affordability, but more about network reliability, security and resilience, and universal coverage. To achieve these customer priorities, the industry requires scalable operators, long-term investors and effective innovation capabilities. But the telecoms operators present emphasised that nothing less than a shift of mindset is needed in Europe to tackle the short-termism and the layer upon layer of regulation in the sector.

“ Everyone is clear about the principles, the urgency, the values that the crisis is demanding from all of us. We need to move to doing things concretely. What are the key objectives in the short, medium and long term that we want to define and pursue together – and to hold each responsible for achieving?

Desire for real cooperation

Participants expressed a desire to see real systematic cooperation and leadership, between the public and private sectors, and at all levels, from international to local. A common thread throughout the debate was that we should concentrate on what we are good at – and work at making collaboration productive and effective.

“ If somebody is doing a good job, we shouldn't have to replicate it – we should subcontract it. We should strive to make collaboration work.

One suggested way forward is to create a 'war room' mentality to make progress, provide focus and bring all actors together. It was emphasised that the private sector needs to be involved – and that a mutual trust must be at the heart of any collaboration.

The evening concluded with a proposal, made in a spirit of openness, for the participants to keep the conversation going, and with the aim of creating one or two pilot projects to take forward some of the ideas which had been shared. Despite the current crisis and challenges ahead, the final message struck a note of optimism: we are ready to engage – let's get something done!

Recommendations

- Enable innovation and growth: in the telecoms industry, short termism and regulation can be suffocating and inhibit progress. Regulators and policymakers should compare the economic model to other industries and attempt to peel away some layers of regulation.
- Harness our resources and knowledge: the public and private sectors together have enough talents, smart people and resources to better harness our innovation ecosystem – though the significant obstacles must be acknowledged and overcome.
- Effect real collaboration: a new contract between government, the private sector and civil society is needed to encourage real collaboration, which is effective, productive and practical.
- Acknowledge our position in the world: governments and politicians have to redefine profoundly the way in which we in Europe engage the rest of the world – it is not 'the West' and 'the Rest'.
- Be concrete: the public and private sector participants aim to establish one or two projects to take forward the ideas and the conversation, and create a real impactful collaboration.

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