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Digital and space, and the Renewed Social Contract

BRIEFING PAPER



Introduction

Friends of Europe is committed to playing its part in promoting the participation of citizens and a broad range of stakeholders in the democratic and civic life of Europe, not least by defining a Renewed Social Contract for Europe. A broad programme of activities in 2022 allowed us to continue steps towards building-up and defining a vision of a Renewed Social Contract for Europe. This included taking a close look at what **digital and space** mean for the social contract.

Europe must continue to promote freedom, security and democracy as everyday activities move online. This shift raises novel questions about a new relationship between digitalisation and democracy, particularly considering the accelerated digitalisation of society caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Meanwhile, space exploration – with its capacity, competition, infrastructure and role as a new market – will prove to be a defining issue for our planet over the next decade and beyond. There is an opportunity to learn from mistakes we have made on earth, where government policy has struggled to keep up with innovations in the private sector. There must be a conversation about how to protect citizens and their interests, whilst ensuring they reap the rewards from emerging space policies.

A Renewed Social Contract should promote EU values, including both freedom and security. This means that the role of citizens, the EU and the private sector must urgently be addressed to ensure a fair digital transition for all of society, on earth and in space.

Over the course of 2022, nine core events focused on the urgent issues of digitalisation and space in the context of a Renewed Social Contract. Chronologically listed, the activities were:

- Europe's role in space, Debate, 23 February
- Addressing the weaponization of digitalisation, Debate, 29 March
- The future of culture: using AI to support the arts, Debate, 29 April
- The role of digital in the new social contract, Debate, 15 June
- European security in space, Report, 20 June
- Making Space Matter, Summit, 22 June
- Digital Inclusion and Training, Roundtable discussion at State of Europe, 27 October
- Space traffic management, Dinner debate, 9 November
- How can business and financial policy get us out of the economic crisis and value greater societal resilience?, Debate, 5 December

Facing a new challenge - fast

Social problems facing society existed long before the internet, but Europe was too slow to prepare for malicious online activity. The EU, the private sector and the rest of society must now work quickly to develop a new social contract to allow for digitalisation and a changing world.

“ There is a need to adjust the policy framework to enable investments quickly into connectivity

Erzsébet Fitori, Group Head of EU Affairs and Relations at Vodafone Group

The EU is a strong role model for democratic digital societies. The Conference on the Future of Europe was a good example of direct online citizen participation, promoting participative and deliberative democracy through a mainly digital exercise.

Experts and audience participants at a Friends of Europe event in June on the role of digital in the new social contract set themselves to think about who is responsible for the digital transition of our societies, how the private sector can help the state digitalise faster and more successfully, and the role of the EU in creating this new social contract.

“There is a need to adjust the policy framework to enable investments quickly into connectivity,” said **Erzsébet Fitori**, Group Head of EU Affairs and Relations at Vodafone Group.

During the event, suggestions emerged on the way forward for digitalisation and democracy, particularly in the context of a Renewed Social Contract. These included: a roll-out of high-quality, resilient broadband across all regions to build an inclusive democratic debate; working together with civil society, national governments, the EU, the private sector and other experts to promote the participatory design of technologies, in line with user expectations; building EU values into technologies at the design stage; and EU support to help citizens protect themselves from malicious online behaviour through education and training.

Waking up in turbulent times

Recent and current global crises are the background against which Europe must create more resilient, robust digital societies. These crises are simultaneously a challenge and an inspiration for developing secure, sustainable and economically viable digitalisation. Examples can be seen of digitalisation bringing practical support to citizens facing war in Ukraine. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted gaps and inequalities in society, but the swift development of vaccines showed how much can be achieved through focus, application and solidarity.

Experts and audience participants at Friends of Europe events considered how digitalisation could and should help us find a path through global, geopolitical, health, economic and security crises that are impacting the world.

“ 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

a participant at our event on space traffic management

The concern in Europe is to maintain influence – with technological superiority as a driver for competitiveness and influence. Often in Europe there is, however, a gap between technological ambition and outcome, despite years of EU investment in research and innovation. By better working together, drawing on the talent and resources in both the public and private sectors, innovation can better be promoted in the EU and beyond.

“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,” commented a participant at our event on space traffic management.

As a result of rapid digitalisation, people are likely to require a lifelong learning approach, with regular upskilling and retraining to keep abreast of technological developments. By making culture accessible from anywhere and by anyone, innovation in technology also continues to democratise art, reaching out beyond the traditional museum visitors and concertgoers.

Debates in March, June and October heard a range of suggestions on how to navigate successful digitalisation policy through today's global crises. These included: promoting a long-term vision for the telecoms sector over prescriptive short-term political cycles; designing EU guidelines for websites; developing a new contract between governments, the private sector and civil society to encourage productive collaboration; offering programming courses in schools at an early stage of education; hiring local and national government officials with a knowledge of IT; and rewarding officials who follow digital transformation courses.

Space for citizens

Europe's role in space should be as a strategic leader with an increased share of international space markets. This means bringing space benefits to citizens and fostering the growth of space SMEs. A Friends of Europe space summit in June heard that every aspect of our lives has the potential to be impacted by the way Europe and its partners approach the new questions of space.

Space is not as unregulated as a first glance suggests, with several international regulations – as well as training opportunities – in place for decades. Private sector interest means space exploration, challenges and opportunities are now very different,

requiring a new approach to manage problems such as safety and space debris. This means both developing a coordinated, international space policy at the highest level and learning from the EU approach to other global challenges, notably climate change.

“We are taking care of our planet. We also need to care about what is happening in space,” said **Elodie Viau**, Director of Telecommunications and Integrated Applications at the European Space Agency (ESA).

To bolster a green digital transition and reduce inequalities in space, expert participants and audience members put forward several ideas over a series of events. These ideas included: boosting connectivity across Europe to bridge the digital divide through direct EU and national support for satellite operators; learning from the lessons of tackling climate change to address problems in space at an early stage; and encouraging small start-ups and entrepreneurs to stay in Europe by fostering bottom-up and regional dialogue.

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Elodie Viau, Director of Telecommunications and Integrated Applications at the European Space Agency (ESA)

To boldly go, through consensus

A landmark report on European security in space reminded readers that a non-geographical and extra-terrestrial frontier has become as important to security as the more traditional borders on land, sea and air. Yet, Europe is falling behind in many key areas regarding the race to utilise space for the benefit of its population and of mankind and to protect its interests, despite major space technology achievements such as Galileo and Copernicus. A European approach of moving forward through consensus, rather than through bans and binding treaties, should be fostered internationally.

“ A European approach should be the first step but ultimately there has to be a solution at the global, probably UN, level

one participant

In this spirit of dialogue, a November dinner debate considered ways to manage space junk safely, reducing the risk of satellite collisions with debris or of debris falling to earth. Diners heard that ten of the EU's 27 member states have no space law at all, making a Europe-wide set of rules all the more important.

The business of teamwork

“ We need to cocreate the future

Eimear Creaven, President of Western Europe at Mastercard

As well as building on the best of EU experience and style when it comes to policy, Europe needs to work hand in hand with business and the financial sector to promote a Renewed Social Contract in a digital domain. A year of events closed with experts debating the use of business and financial policy to foster societal resilience through crises. Collaboration, cooperation and co-creation were the words that occurred most often. This means working across the public, private and civil society sectors, as well as addressing the age divide, by addressing climate challenges for a digitally savvy young generation.

With this in mind, a broad range of ideas of relevance to the digital and space policy emerged for potential development by policymakers and business. These included: drawing a clearer line between EU and corporate interests; a shift from income tax to behavioural taxes; a democratic debate about divesting from fossil fuels; and encouraging business to educate consumers in sustainability.

Conclusion

Openness to a multitude of new ideas will be vital if Europe is to promote a safe, sustainable Renewed Social Contract online and off-planet. A year of conversations around digital and space policy showed that some solutions already exist and many more are emerging.

Given the speed and unpredictability of developments in two major new arenas and potential markets – the Metaverse and outer space – an alert and responsive approach must, however, be maintained at all times.

This should also mean promoting an inclusive digital and space policy, offering lifelong learning and opportunities to overcome any digital divide.

In many cases, challenges that seem novel at first glance are, in fact, simply old problems moving online or into space. In others, however, the EU and international community are facing threats that were unimaginable a few years ago.

The EU is well placed to face this challenging situation both by learning from past mistakes and by sharing best practice. Climate change has taught Europe of the need to react swiftly and sustainably in response to international challenges, with many of the most inspiring examples of climate leadership having an EU origin. The EU approach to negotiation through consensus can and should also be translated to international efforts to develop and protect values online and in space.

Friends of Europe

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Friends of Europe is a leading think-tank that connects people, stimulates debate and triggers change to create a more inclusive, sustainable and forward-looking Europe.

