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Digitalisation and democracy: the role of digital in the new social contract

EVENT REPORT



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Introduction

This report reflects statements and questions made during a two-hour afternoon debate hosted by Friends of Europe on 15 June 2022 to promote dialogue on digitalisation, as part of talks about a Renewed Social Contract for Europe.

Europe must promote freedom, security and open debate as everyday activities move online, the audience heard at the event. Experts discussed the new relationship between digitalisation and democracy, particularly considering the accelerated digitalisation of society caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Social problems facing society existed long before the internet, speakers said, but Europe was too slow to prepare for malicious online activity. A Renewed Social Contract should be used to promote the values of the European Union, including both freedom and security.

Suggestions for how to renew the social contract included promoting investment in connectivity through a new policy approach and looking at how Europe has successfully encouraged online debate.

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) was a good example of participative democracy online, one speaker said. Any rethink of the policy framework should look at how state aid rules could encourage investment, suggested another.

The audience heard experts debate on subjects and questions including:

- Who is responsible for the digital transition of our societies, including interaction between governance and citizens, how businesses operate and grow, trade and diplomacy, and all other aspects of life?
- How can the private sector – big and small – help the state digitalise faster and more successfully?
- What should the role of the EU be in creating this Renewed Social Contract and supporting member states to adopt it?

Recommendations

- EU institutions should help equip citizens to protect themselves from malicious online behaviour, through education and training
- Civil society, national governments, the EU, the private sector and other experts should work together to promote the participatory design of technologies, in line with user expectations

- The roll out of high-quality resilient broadband across all regions is needed to build an inclusive democratic debate
- Action must be taken early and by all stakeholders to build EU values into technologies at the design stage
- EU policy, including state aid rules, should enable investments into connectivity

Event summary

Old problems in a new world

“Technology is not the problem,” said **Eva Maydell**, President of the European Movement International, Member of the European Parliament and 2015-2016 European Young Leader (EYL40). “Most of the failure existed before, it has just moved online now.”

“We have failed to improve democracy using technologies,” she added. This is because “autocratic, malign actors” move faster than democratic societies. Maydell called for focus on media literacy, civic education and basic technology skills to better prepare society to deal with malicious online activity and manipulation.

Trisha Meyer, Director of the Centre on Digitalisation, Democracy and Innovation at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) Brussels School of Governance, agreed that digitalisation challenges are manifestations of much broader social problems. “Online disinformation is a technological problem, but it is really a manifestation of a societal problem. How do we deal with that?”

Faced with this challenge she said more commitments from technology platforms were “incredibly important” but warned that “we also need to tackle the underlying drivers of the problem.” We need to change the way we search for information and the way we educate people, Meyer said, while also asking, “what do we want the social contract to look like? What do we want to emphasise? Then we can shape the digital to reflect that.”

Why the EU matters

During a Q&A session, one audience member asked why there is a perception among non-EU powers that the EU is weak.

Speakers said the EU is in fact a strong role model for democratic digital societies. The EU approach of working closely with a broad range of stakeholders, including civil society, NGOs, academia and other experts, is more important than ever if a truly inclusive democracy is to flourish online.

Colin Scicluna, Head of Cabinet to European Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica, said the CoFoE had been a good experiment in direct citizen participation,

promoting “participative and deliberative democracy”. Thanks to the pandemic, it had also been “mainly a digital exercise”, he added. This meant that “literally anyone could debate with anyone, in their own time and their own language.”

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Challenges faced by the CoFoE included making sure that people taking part in events online can participate as fully as people in an event room. Online access also remains a problem for large parts of Europe and the rest of the world. “Institutions still have an obligation to make sure these kind of exercises are not only available to a portion of the population,” Scicluna said.

A careful balance

The EU, private sector and rest of society must now work quickly to develop a Renewed Social Contract to allow for digitalisation and a changing world, speakers agreed.

“Democracies should regulate technologies now, not only when they exist – when it’s too late,” said **Alice Stollmeyer**, Founder & Executive Director of Defend Democracy. “Values should be built in [to the regulation of technologies] by design. The cost of not doing that now is too high.”

“ Freedom is the strength of democracy. I don’t think security should be at the basis of it

Erika Staël von Holstein, Chief Executive of Re-Imagine Europa

For technology to strengthen and not weaken democracy it needs to be co-designed with citizens, Stollmeyer said. This process of “participatory design” actively involves as many citizen stakeholders as possible at an early stage to make sure the end product meets the user’s emotional and practical needs. Participatory design can also be used “to develop technologies that better protect our freedoms right now,” she said. This means, for instance, involving experts in privacy and data rights at an early stage, to develop “technologies that have privacy by design”.

Erika Staël von Holstein, Chief Executive of Re-Imagine Europa, said the protection of privacy must be balanced with freedoms cherished by Europeans. “When it comes to freedom of expression, the benefit outweighs the risk,” she said. “Democracy is inherently vulnerable, but let’s cherish the benefits.”

“Freedom is the strength of democracy. I don’t think security should be at the basis of it,” said von Holstein. Instead, the EU should focus on “how to strengthen European values of freedom of speech, not follow the path of countries we do not want to become.”

“ Connectivity is clearly a lifeline for citizens and for business

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

When it comes to striking the right balance for a Renewed Social Contract, technology itself “is fundamentally neutral”, suggested an audience participant from Google. “This about the actors behind technologies. How do we make sure bad actors do not skew the model?”

Erzsébet Fitori, Group Head of EU Affairs and Relations at Vodafone Group, said public-private cooperation had emerged very quickly during the pandemic, with lessons for both the private sector and the future of Europe.

“There is a need to adjust the policy framework to enable investments quickly into connectivity,” she said, including in 5G for rural areas. “Connectivity is clearly a lifeline for citizens and for business.” This could also involve rethinking state aid policy, where it is “crucial to crowd in rather than crowd out private investment.”

Getting the balance right for digital connectivity will have many indirect benefits, she added. For instance, high quality, resilient and secure broadband connection could help rural farmers to solve the food crisis. “We cannot waste time,” concluded Fitori. “This has to happen now.”

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