

SUMMARY RECORD

Working Group on 'Digital Transformation', Chaired by Ms Elina Valtonen, national Parliaments (Finland)

Friday 21 January 2022, 10:00 to 12:00

1. Introductory remarks of the Chair

This third meeting of the Working Group was chaired by Ms Elina Valtonen, national Parliaments (Finland), taking over from Ms Riina Sikkut, national Parliaments (Estonia), and was held in hybrid format. The meeting was web streamed. The Chair started the meeting off with a short introduction and a presentation, which provided an overview of the process and of the topic of discussion for the day: 'Empowering people', which included the themes digital identity, digital health, e-democracy and cross-border movement (digital tools). The Chair gave an overview of the input received so far on the digital platform and in the orientations of the European Citizens' Panel and described ongoing initiatives at European level to set the stage for the discussion.

2. State-of-play of the discussions in the European Citizens' Panel dealing with Digital Transformation

Representatives from the European Citizens' Panel gave an overview of the discussions in the Panel so far and the orientations under discussion. They underlined the importance of digital skills and literacy and respective tools (such as learning platforms for both older and younger people). Basic access to digital education was considered key and training needed to fight against fake news and disinformation and online harassment. It was considered crucial to ensure high quality internet access across the Union, including in rural and less advantaged areas. Citizens also considered that there was a need to accelerate the development and implementation of an EU-wide e-ID system.

Citizens shared their own experience with working from home during COVID and the many problems that came with that. The move to remote ('smart') working because of the pandemic had affected individuals' health and well-being. Thought should be given to ensuring safeguards for employees when using 'smart working', including control of working hours and the right to disconnect, the right to appropriate furniture and equipment, and avoidance of relocation of employment purely on grounds of cost. A European framework to protect the work-life balance was needed.

A representative of the national panels and events stressed the need to make the EU more entrepreneurial and attracting world talent through different incentives, including migration from non-EU countries. The importance of EU wide identification was stressed and the opportunities for e-voting in EU elections

It was also suggested that the successful multilingual digital platform established for the Conference on the Future of Europe should be maintained, to support citizens across the EU on an ongoing basis.

3. Discussion on key current input from both from the Digital Platform and European Citizens' Panel regarding theme of Empowering People

In the discussion, many of the suggestions made by the citizens were taken up and supported by members of the group and the following issues were raised:

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The importance of **digital health** in the work place in the context of health and safety at work and social dialogue, pointing to current ways of remote working leading to exhaustion and fatigue. There was a call for reviewing the legislation in place in particular on teleworking.

This point was reinforced by many speakers pointing to the detrimental effects of extended hours of teleworking and too much screen time more generally on **mental health** and calling for a right to disconnect and an EU framework that protects work-life balance.

Others pointed to the opportunities that come with **digital health** to make services more available in rural areas, but highlighted the need for digital skills for professionals and citizens for this to work.

The need to boost **digital skills** and **literacy** were recurrent suggestions and the importance of digital literacy was raised in a number of different contexts. There is a need to close skills and knowledge gaps and empower people. The importance of digital literacy in protecting children and the more vulnerable users of the internet was raised.

The challenges relating to **accessibility and combating the digital divide** and ensuring that no one is left behind were underlined, suggesting that access to the internet should be a fundamental right. In this regard shortcoming of the Multilingual Digital Platform itself in terms of accessibility were pointed out.

One member relayed the results of the German citizens' panel, which had recommended the introduction of '**Digi Check**' that would measure to which extent companies and public administrations use digital innovation and respect citizens' data. Another recommendation related to the creation of a Platform integrating scientific information from TV and radio stations, options of exchange on information with translation, a 'European Facebook' and a kind of European ARTE.

Ensuring **access to the internet** also in rural and remote areas was seen as a priority, as was the need for harmonisation of digital standards to ensure economic growth.

Transparency of algorithms to make sure citizens' understand what happens with their data was brought up as well as missing transparency of private tools and the need to better control private companies. The need to speak with a single voice when **dealing with digital giants** was raised and to show that Europe has expectations that digital giants exercise in full transparency their social responsibilities beyond paying taxes.

Some members suggested that the EU needs to be a standard setter to ensure **digital sovereignty**, strategic independence and global competitiveness. The EU should set the rules for respecting human rights online, another suggestion was a digital rights charter. Investments are needed in infrastructure to provide safe access to digital services and to fully benefit from the digital potential.

In relation to **e-voting**, while some suggested piloting electronic voting systems (e.g. in next European Parliament elections), others considered that this does not really increase participation in voting. Crowdfunding of pilot projects to make more systematic and sustainable use of e-democracy in parallel with normal consultations was proposed.

The **digital wallet** and **digital ID** in EU were supported, as well as cross-boarder E services, which could allow EU citizens to log in to applications without having to go through big digital platforms that use their data for their own commercial purposes.

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Language barriers were identified as an issue also in the digital world.

Importance of **'smart city'** and e-government initiatives for empowering citizens in the digital transition were mentioned as well as developing automated e-services providing information and answering citizens' questions, e.g. on healthcare or other issues.

As regards the need, recognised by several speakers, for clarity on what action is already under way at EU level to address the concerns raised, a useful tool was the European Parliament's Legislative Train Schedule on the Parliament's website, which provides information on the state of progress of ongoing work. It was however also underlined that ongoing legislative initiatives in the digital area (e.g. Artificial Intelligence Act, Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act) are not the end of the story and do not render the suggestion unnecessary, but are part of an ongoing process.

Concluding remarks of the Chair

The Chair thanked all for the fruitful discussion. The next working group meeting is planned to address the third theme identified for the digital transformation, namely **'Strengthening the Economy'**, focussing as in this meeting on input received on this theme via the Digital Platform and citizens' panels. Once the European Citizens' Panel made its recommendations (25-27 February in Dublin), the working group would meet to discuss those recommendations in March and would present its work at the plenary in March/April.

ANNEX: List of members of the Working Group on Digital Transformation

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