

The Future of Digital Transformation in Europe

Event Report

ECAS Brussels, 6 October 2021



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1. WELCOME

On 6 October 2021, civil society representatives and policy makers convened to discuss how digital transformation policies at the EU-level should look like. They also exchanged views on the main issues that hinder digital transformation policies. The event marked the official launch of the consultation process at the national and local levels of the Civil Society Convention's Digital Transformation Cluster.

1.1 Introductory Remarks

Assya Kavrakova, Executive Director of ECAS, and **Albin Keuc**, Director, SLOGA platform, opened the conference with some introductory remarks.

Ms. Kavrakova highlighted that the ECAS European Democracy focus area is paying particular attention to the potential of technology and different ICT tools in order to enhance the possibility of citizen participation in the decision-making process at the local, national and European level. This has led to ECAS taking an active role as an executive board member and general member of the Civil Society Convention on the Future of Europe in leading the consultation process on digital transformation policy (Europe in the Digital Age). She concluded by stating that the purpose of the Civil Society Convention on the Future of Europe is to be able to capitalize the expertise and knowledge accumulated throughout years by CSOs and make sure it will feed into the conclusions and recommendations of the conference.



Assya Kavrakova

Albin Keuc, Director, SLOGA platform, opened the conference with his introductory remarks. Mr. Keuc highlighted that although the development and humanitarian aid field is not at the forefront, the world is facing digitalisation everywhere at all levels and policy fields. This triggered the question: *How should Europe address digitalisation in its development framework and how to implement a global instrument of digitalisation?* Mr Keuc emphasized that although Europe is the weaker global power in the digital industry compared to China and the United States, the EU is taking a strong stance on digital governance and regulation. Europe is directly competing with the state-centric vision of digital sovereignty in China and Russia. He also underlined the issue of digital colonialism that has materialized through the digital dependence of the Global South. According to Mr Keuc, it is vital for Europe to pay attention to what is happening globally regarding digitalisation and the possible negative impacts digital transformation has on countries. There are



Albin Keuc

issues about digital extractivism that need to be addressed, and solutions need to be found.

2. PANELLISTS INTRODUCTORY INTERVENTIONS

The opening of the conference was followed by panellists' introductory interventions, moderated by **Klemen Balanč** from Network Mama.

The first panellist was **Peter Jenko**, Acting Director-General, Information Society Directorate, Ministry of Public Administration of the Republic of Slovenia.



Klemen Balanč

Mr Jenko mapped out four main objectives of the digital transformation agenda of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU:

1. Coordinate the European approach to Artificial Intelligence, which is based on excellence and trust;
2. Find better ways to use big data in relation to innovation;
3. Create a general framework for the regulation of the field of Artificial Intelligence;
4. Formally define Artificial Intelligence and understand its risks.

Mr Jenko emphasised that the EU's ambition is to focus on the ethical and human-centric aspect of Artificial Intelligence. He reiterated that it is essential to transition society into using advanced technologies and fix the disparities exposed by the pandemic. As examples he flagged, the lack of digital infrastructure in the EU and the digital divide between member states and within member states, i.e., rural vs. urban. He also remarked that the real digital transformation begins with trust between the EU, its member states, European citizens, and businesses. Mr. Jenko underlined that the EU has the opportunity to become a global leader in digital transformation with a European approach. He concluded by stating that every aspect of this agenda needs a proper legal framework in order to be implemented.

The second panellist was **Milosh Ristovski**, Co-Chair, Civil Society Convention on the Future of Europe.

Mr Ristovski explains that the aim of CSO Convention of the Future of Europe is to create a space for CSOs to participate formally in the COFOE and ensure the voices of CSOs are heard. The CSO Convention of the Future of Europe is organised thematically, and digital transformation is one of the five thematic pillars that CSOs address. Mr. Ristovski emphasises that this Convention is not a space for self-promotion. It is a space to represent many diverse voices which

is needed in order to create an effective and inclusive digital transformation policy.

The third panellist was **Simon Delakorda**, Director, Institute for Electronic Participation, Network NVO-VID.

Mr Delakorda underlined four gaps in digital transformation where digital technologies are not providing added value to EU citizens: (1) Digital skills, (2) Internet Infrastructure & Digital Connectivity, (3) Trust in Digital Technologies, and (4) Impact of Digital Technologies on Mental Health. He elaborated briefly on each gap. For digital skills, Mr Delakorda explained that the EU focuses too much on building digital skills for a competitive and global digital economy. He argues that some of this focus should be reoriented towards building skills on digital competences and digital literacy. This would strengthen the understanding of the impact of digital technologies on society. Regarding the second gap, Mr Delakorda emphasised that it is crucial to build bridges between urban and rural areas and counter inequality between Member States. Some governments are struggling to implement internet infrastructure & digital technology connectivity goals due to lack of implementation capacities. Mr Delakorda explained that the EU needs to address this inequality amongst member states concerning digital transformation. He remarks that it is also important to discuss how civil society will digitise itself. In response to the third and fourth gap, Mr Delakorda argues that the EU should invest in educating the public on the role of digital technologies in their everyday lives. Besides, transparency would allow citizens access to understand how much of their lives will be digitised/affected by digital transformation.



Simon Delakorda

The fourth panellist was **Maša Malovrh**, Beletrina Publishing Institute, Network NVO-VID.

Ms Malovrh emphasised that to build trust among EU citizens in digital technologies, they must be made accessible to all citizens. In order to ensure accessibility, four principles must be followed: perceivable, understandable, operational, and robust. Ms. Malovrh remarks that with accessibility comes trust in digital technologies. She concludes by stating that it is also essential to monitor the accessibility of digital technologies to ensure that there are no disparities or inequalities between Member States.

3. PRESENTATION OF THE FIRST RESULTS OF THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION CLUSTER

Elisa Lironi, Senior Manager of European Democracy, ECAS presented the Convention's Digital Transformation Cluster, which is crowdsourcing CSOs' proposals on digital transformation. There are five different topics in this crowdsourcing questionnaire:

1. Digital democracy,
2. Digital education,
3. Digital safeguards,
5. Defending rights and freedoms online, and
6. Digital economy.

The aim of this Digital Transformation Cluster is to ensure that civil society organisations ideas are compiled and put forward on the European level. The Digital Transformation Cluster is split into four phases. The first phase will be the questionnaire which collects the ideas from CSOs. In the second phase, the CSOs' will select the top ideas. The third phase will be policy formulation, followed by the fourth phase, which is resolution and the adoption of the final document. It will be presented to the CSO Convention on the Future of Europe, and then to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Click on this [link](#) to access the crowdsourcing platform and answer the questionnaires.



Elisa Lironi

4. ROUND OF QUESTIONS TO PANELLISTS

The presentation was followed by a round of questions to the panellists moderated by **Assya Kavrakova**, Executive Director, ECAS.

1. **Peter Jenko**, Acting Director General, Information Society Directorate, Ministry of Public Administration of Republic of Slovenia

Q: According to the findings of the Special Eurobarometer 2017 (Attitudes towards the impact of digitisation and automation on daily life), one quarter (25 %) of respondents thought that the most recent digital technologies have a negative impact on society. In your view, how can we address these concerns of technology having a negative impact on society? What should digital transformation advocates do in order to remedy this situation?

According to Mr Jenko, fears concerning the negative impact of digital technologies should be addressed by promoting and stimulating the demand for digital technologies. In other words: make citizens aware of the benefits of technology. In order to do this, policy on digital transformation must be inclusive. This counts especially for older generations, the socioeconomically disadvantaged, persons with disabilities, and those in rural areas. To achieve this inclusivity, Mr. Jenko emphasises that governments need to implement comprehensive strategies and supporting measures. Those would then ensure equality, human centricity, transparency, security, and safety of digital public services. Furthermore, governments and businesses should invest in the education and training of all citizens in relation to digital technologies.



Peter Jenko

2. **Simon Delakorda**, Director, Institute for Electronic Participation, Network NVO-VID

Q: There are a lot of promising outcomes of democratic innovation projects that use technology in order to advance democracy. This is taking place mostly on a local level, some at a national level. However, they still seem to remain as isolated experiences. What needs to be in place to ensure a sustainable learning curve, which can lead eventually to both mainstreaming and upscaling of these democratic innovations at the EU level?

Digitalisation alone, according to Mr. Delakorda, will not fix democracy. We need to be patient about digital transformation in regard to democracy. There is growing evidence of successful digital democracy practices, i.e., participatory budgeting in Scotland, e-voting in Estonia, even the EU has seen an increase in e-participation, especially in drafting regulation on climate change. These seeds of successful digital democracy practices will grow over time, become sustainable, and create a spill over effect of good practices. Those could reach other countries and different decision-making levels. However, to achieve such spill over effects and fully exploit the potential of digital technology, we need to adjust political, social, and cultural conditions. Mr Delakorda concludes that digital technologies can benefit democracy. However, in order to achieve this, there needs to be a change in the current way we are understanding and handling politics.

Simon Delakorda

“You cannot fix a broken democracy by introducing an app”

3. **Maša Malovrh**, Beletrina Publishing Institute, Network NVO-VID

Q. When it comes to digital transformation, equality and inclusion are big challenges. What needs to be in place to ensure that no one is left behind and how can we measure and take stock of both progress and results?

Ms Malovrh reiterated the four main principles of accessibility: perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust. Following these principles, it is important to actively and periodically assess the accessibility of digital technologies. There are two ways Ms Malovrh highlights in which we can assess accessibility: the first is through using automotive tools to evaluate and gather statistics on the website's accessibility. The second is conducting studies with people that will also act as a learning exercise as the participants in the study will become conscious of web-accessibility. Ms Malovrh concludes that the key to these studies will be to include persons with different disabilities. This will highlight the weaknesses in accessibility as each person deems accessibility in different ways.



Maša Malovrh

4. **Milosh Ristovski**, Co-Chair, Civil Society Convention on the Future of Europe

Q. The results of the first citizen panel are quite interesting when it comes to digital transformation: we have “an ethical and safe digital transformation” as one of the five streams in terms of recommendations but the digital aspect also features quite prominently in each of the other four streams: e.g. digitalization at work under Working in Europe or digital education under Learning in Europe. Do you see the digital transformation as a horizontal, mainstreamed policy or as a separate independent one?

Mr Ristovski highlighted that in order to achieve digital transformation there needs to be a central space for digital transformation policy. He shared that there need to be minimum standards set for digital transformation, and discussions on digital transformation should not only be made in expert circles. Finally, the pandemic has made countries jump forward 10 years in digital development. It has highlighted the importance of creating a structure for a transversal process of digital transformation policy.



Milosh Ristovski

5. FINAL INTERVENTIONS & CONCLUSIONS

After the round of panellist questions, **Helmut Scholz**, MEP, The Left (DE), Executive Board COFOE, provided his final intervention and conclusions. Mr Scholz highlighted the need for a deeper link between the convention and

citizen panels, as well as the plenary of the conference. Mr Scholz also emphasised the importance of discussing with EU citizens where citizens want EU competence on digital transformation. He concludes that citizens should insist on their rights to shape the multilevel governance structures of the EU. According to him, the key to this is transparency between all parties.



Helmut Scholz, MEP

6. EVENT AGENDA

6 October 2021 | 14.00 CET

- 14:00 – 14:10 *Welcome / Opening by Organisers*
- **Assya Kavrakova**, Executive Director, ECAS
 - **Albin Keuc**, Director, SLOGA platform
- 14:10 – 14:30 *Panellists Introductory Interventions*
- Moderator: **Klemen Balanč**, Network MaMa
- **Peter Jenko**, Acting Director General, Information Society Directorate, Ministry of Public Administration of Republic of Slovenia
 - **Milosh Ristovski**, Co-Chair, Civil Society Convention on the Future of Europe
 - **Simon Delakorda**, Director, Institute for Electronic Participation, Network NVO-VID
 - **Maša Malovrh**, Beletrina Publishing Institute, Network NVO-VID
- 14:30 – 14:40 *Presentation of the first results of the Digital Transformation Cluster*
- **Elisa Lironi**, Senior Manager European Democracy, ECAS
- 14:40 – 15:00 *Round of questions to panellists*
- Moderator: **Assya Kavrakova**, Executive Director, ECAS
- **Peter Jenko**, Acting Director General, Information Society Directorate, Ministry of Public Administration of Republic of Slovenia
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 - **Simon Delakorda**, Director, Institute for Electronic Participation, Network NVO-VID
 - **Maša Malovrh**, Beletrina Publishing Institute, Network NVO-VID
 - **Milosh Ristovski**, Co-Chair, Civil Society Convention on the Future of Europe
- 15:00 – 15:20 *Q&A with Audience*
- 15:20-15:30 *Final Intervention & Conclusions*
- **Helmut Scholz**, MEP, The Left (DE), Executive Board COFOE

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Report

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