

EESC 9th civil society days: The digital era needs human skills and a proper legal environment



Citizenship, Democracy and Culture in a digitalised Europe was the motto of the 2018 Civil Society Days, organised by the Liaison Group at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on 24 and 25 May in Brussels. In six workshops, participants discussed living together in a digital Europe in the future and concluded with the adoption of seven [key recommendations](#). Panels focused on culture and education, identities and polarisation, cybersecurity and data protection, digital democracy and citizen participation, overcoming the digital divide and artificial intelligence as a common good.

In his opening address, EESC President **Luca Jahier** stressed the importance of the Civil Society Days – which is why he had proposed organising this event on the very same day as the EESC's 60th anniversary celebration. "We represent Europe at work. This has given the EESC the authority to advise the other institutions for the past 60 years. You can be assured that the recommendations you are drafting today will not remain on paper only but feed in the European policy work."

He also highlighted the fact that for the first time civil society organisations were joining forces to debate the complex issue of digitalisation in a comprehensive way and that they were here to help shaping the digital world we are living in by asking the right questions and proposing answers for the common good.

In his keynote speech, **Andrea Renda**, Chair in Digital Innovation at the College of Europe, underlined the key role civil society has to play in shaping Europe's future: "We need to put our strength and resources together and craft our future in a sustainable way", he said. For the medium term, he predicted a lot of destruction accompanying digitalisation, not least because of the tremendous speed of change. However, in the long run he was convinced that: "We will work less and differently, with better subjective well-being. In the future work will be more rewarding".

MEP Ana Gomes stressed the importance of steering digitalisation at European level and referred to the key role of education: "Nothing replaces human sensitivity; we need to continue to invest in human education".

According to **Ray Pinto**, policy director at DIGITALEUROPE, access to the internet should be a fundamental right. Digitalisation, if used properly, could help create a unified democratic, transparent, digital Europe, where citizens can voice their views and take a more active role in decision-making.

But technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) needed experts to handle

them. In Europe there was a shortage of around half a million experts. Only 16.7% of ICT experts were women, while 83.3% were men (compared with 54% men/46% women in the workforce as a whole).

Furthermore, while the US and China were registering huge increases in AI patents, Europe was lagging behind. 83% of external investment in AI was being absorbed by the US and China.

Maarit Palovirta from the Internet Society whose mission is to keep the internet open and neutral, globally connected, secure, trustworthy and accessible for everyone acknowledged that this mission had been challenged by incidents such as online crime episodes, fake news, etc. She said: "We cannot ignore this, but no business and no government can tackle these problems alone. As internet users, as civil society we need to use our power to influence policies and take responsibility for the future of the internet. Our job is to bring back a positive approach towards the internet, including transparency and ethics".

Dr Beate Wagner, managing director of the Global Young Academy, belongs to a group of 27 people who are promoting a Digital Charter for the EU. "It is not about inventing new fundamental rights but rather of reformulating rights partly in the light of the digital era", she explained. The goal was to commit state and non-state actors. Since Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others form a public space it was in the group's view necessary to address this challenge accordingly. "When it comes to automated decision-making, it needs human beings to take the responsibility", Dr Wagner emphasised.

Also **Alessandro Mantelero**, Professor of Law at the Polytechnic University of Turin, emphasised the huge impact of algorithms on decision-making and recommended a particular focus on risk management. "When it comes to artificial intelligence, we don't need to consider just whether it is legally compliant but also whether it is socially compliant", he said. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) must contribute to creating a digital environment which is not a mere data ecosystem but primarily a rights-based, value-oriented and participatory environment.

In his conclusions, Secretary General of SOLIDAR and co-chair of the liaison group **Conny Reuter**, who moderated the event referred to the great European philosophers Kant, Hegel and Rousseau, stressing that digitalisation is also about ethics and the social contract of our society and honoured those member organisations of the EESC Liaison Group which had organised the six interactive workshops.

The Civil Society Days, which the EESC organised this year for the 9th time, are intended to highlight and foster the important role that civil society plays in building a European Union which is more in tune with citizens' aspirations – a European Union that people can make their own.

More on the speeches and presentation as well as the recommendations of these workshops can be found on the EESC's webpage.