



**ECI DAY 2020**  
**Today and Beyond | 25.02.2020**



## Afternoon session I

### Beyond the ECI: the future of EU citizens' participation in the digital age

#### Welcome speech by Luca Jahier

The President of the European Economic and Social Committee, Luca Jahier, welcomed the ECI Day 2020 participants. In his speech, he traced the evolution of the European Citizens' Initiative, emphasising in particular the EESC's continued engagement in support of this tool. As of January 2020, new rules applied to make the ECI more accessible. He reminded participants that many of the new changes and developments had been announced at the previous ECI Days, including the launch of the revision of the ECI Regulation. He then placed the question of citizens' participation in the larger context of the digital age and its impact on society. He argued that we needed to take better control and overcome anxiety regarding digital transformation. Mr Jahier encouraged citizens to be part of the process of participatory democracy in the EU. He quoted David Van Reybrouck, citing an African proverb: "Whatever you do for me but without me, you do to me", stressing how important it was to consciously embrace societal change. In his words, "the most exciting question for the two afternoon sessions is: are we ready to believe that citizens who have so far only been governed can step into the world of professional politics and govern as efficiently as traditional politicians?". Mr Jahier then welcomed the high-profile panellists and opened the discussion.

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## **Dubravka Šuica**

European Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica began by saying that democracy was not only the name of her portfolio, but also the main subject of the Conference on the Future of Europe. "Democracy is having a hard time these days. People feel left behind. Who do they blame? They blame democracy itself! But democracy is the best invention. There is nothing better. Not even technology!" she said. She argued that technology had great potential to make democracy more efficient, more available, more transparent, more open, more responsive, more trusted for everyone. However, she continued by observing that digital technology had the potential to liberate, but also to be manipulated. Technology could serve to reach out to people and citizens who were difficult to reach, but technology remained a tool that not everyone in our societies today could use, even though the number of digitally-competent users would grow with the new generations of digital natives.

Vice-President Šuica also said that technology affected many aspects of our lives, which was also why we should make sure that the way they were construed respected our European values. She then argued that the future of Europe was analogue, and digital was only a tool which could not and should not replace real life. She underlined the importance of active citizen participation and the role of critical thinking and deliberation. She stressed once more the importance of common values by saying: "Values are important, because European values hold us together." Vice-President Šuica emphasised the role of the ECI as a tool of participatory democracy, which facilitated the participation of citizens with an adequate level of data protection. Ms Šuica underlined the importance of interactive dialogue with citizens, at the same time highlighting how its application would become easier from the 1 January thanks to a new multilingual digital platform, among other things. She believed that a feedback mechanism was important to show citizens their real impact on the EU agenda.

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To conclude, Dubravka Šuica observed that citizens were feeling left behind and they blamed democracy for this. She confirmed that a change was needed. In her final words, she said that a different way of working within the institutions was necessary, which was also the reason why the idea of the Conference [on the Future of Europe] had started and was taking shape. She promised to do what was in her power in the European Commission to highlight the conclusions and the portfolio of the ECI and its future of it.

### **Jamie Susskind**

Jamie Susskind started by looking at how the digital technologies might transform the way we practised democracy. Digital technology had a threefold effect on power. Firstly, technologies constrained us when we used them through the rules contained in their code. Secondly, the way these technologies scrutinised us, through data collection, was in itself a form of power. For the first time in history, almost everything about our lives could be captured, processed and stored. Online and offline, real and cyber space, claimed Mr Susskind, were mixing and we could be the last generation to see a clear distinction. Thirdly, technologies controlled our perception of the world. We relied on them to gather and filter information.

Jamie Susskind briefly described several types of democracy and then focused on two of them. In a direct democracy, the people voted directly on the issues rather than electing politicians to decide for them: it was democracy at its purest. In a data democracy, while the ultimate political power would rest with the people, some political decisions would be taken on the basis of data rather than votes.

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He then asked "But what do the data say about us as a society? Do they represent how we actually live or what we want?" Mr Susskind asked what it was that we loved so much about democracy, answering that most likely it was the principle of equality. Furthermore, he recognised the principles of freedom and quality that eventually made our lives better.

Jamie Susskind then referred to his book *Future Politics. Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech* in which he explained that digital technology was increasingly eroding the assumptions and conditions that had underpinned democracy for centuries. Technological change brought intellectual, moral and philosophical challenges. Technologies might not necessarily make democracy more representative, but maybe more efficient. He ended his statement by asking the audience: "What is the moral and philosophical justification for the steps we are currently taking? Unless we start our intellectual work now, the technologies will be faster than our ideas."

## **Elisa Lironi**

Elisa Lironi started by stressing how digital technologies were becoming increasingly ubiquitous with their downsides becoming more apparent. Digital service providers were becoming overly powerful monopolies, and digital technologies were exerting an unhealthy influence over the media.

Firstly, Ms Lironi stated that technologies were here to stay, and they changed not only our daily lives, but also the political and democratic way of living. People used the technologies asking them for quick solutions to problems. But tech giants such as Google, Amazon, and Facebook not only solved problems, they also created new ones: online privacy and online disinformation.

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According to Ms Lironi, we were now facing these problems, as populism used digital media to generate and spread simple but false ideas. It was necessary to regulate such situations.

Secondly, Ms Lironi described some examples of the potential of participatory democracy in Europe. Citizen participation was enhanced by the use of information and new technologies, which could contribute and give access to the decision-making processes at local, regional, national and even European level. Crowdsourcing had the potential to help enhance legitimacy by creating more trust in the decision-making process. Information and communication technology could therefore be used to implement more participatory mechanisms and foster democratic processes.

Thirdly, Ms Lironi underlined the importance of policy regulations, especially at European level, and stressed the improvements in ECI regulation in place since 1 January. She highlighted several successful experiments recently carried out in a number of European countries (participatory budgeting in France, national citizens' initiatives in Latvia and Finland, crowdsourcing in Iceland and Finland) with the help of digital technology. The Conference on the Future of Europe could have a special place in this exceptional process.

Elisa Lironi concluded by saying that in order to revitalise democracy and make it a transparent mechanism, we still needed to collect more data first. Then on that basis we could shape European democracy and effectively collaborate with policy makers in order to save democracy and face the challenges of the new global digital world. Ultimately, we needed to rethink participatory democracy with new channels and make sure that every voice could be heard in this new system.

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## Afternoon session II

### Beyond Europe: institutionalising citizens' participation around the globe

#### Caroline Vernailen

Caroline Vernailen began by saying that democracy was ultimately about how we treated each other and about respect for other people's rights and opinions. So a true democracy could only exist where citizens had the opportunity and the tools to participate in public life. By developing and using new knowledge, tools and approaches, we changed people's lives and improved democratic assistance in fundamental ways.

Caroline Vernailen asked about the philosophy behind democracy. The basic principle was that citizens had the power to influence decisions. So now the main idea behind the World Citizens' Initiative was that the citizens of the world must be active and not passive, and have an influence at global level. The Campaign for the World Citizens' Initiative was formally launched at a meeting at the United Nation's headquarters in New York on Thursday, 14 November 2019. Initiated by Democracy Without Borders, Democracy International and global civil society alliance CIVICUS, "We The Peoples" aims at bringing citizens' concerns closer to the UN.

Two proposals had current been submitted at the UN to member states for their feedback. Caroline Vernailen stressed the importance of this opportunity. While the ECI offered a strong example to draw upon, conceptualising a UN project on the World Citizens' Initiative would come with its own challenges, as, of course, the EU and the UN differed in many fundamental ways.

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## **Mireia Borrell Porta**

At the beginning of her statement, Mireia Borrell Porta noted the reasons why institutionalising citizens' participation was so important in order to face the crisis that Europe was going through. She quoted some common opinions about the European Union, such as the widespread conviction that European decisions were made somewhere in Brussels, without taking into account the opinion of its citizens. To avoid this, citizens needed to take a more active part in the decision-making process. Yet, the solution was not easy and what was needed was a substantial change in the democratic culture. That meant actually transforming administration in line with concepts such as open data, transparency, and data accessibility in a form understandable to ordinary citizens. Ms Borrell Porta stressed the importance of local and regional authorities in this process: in the regions, towns and cities, there were many samples of the use of new technologies in democratic processes. Yet, since ultimately all levels of administration needed to get involved, she proposed to create a network of open participatory governance on at least three levels: local, regional and European. At the outset, deliberative processes would be needed, with open sessions in which participants could debate and brainstorm freely. Then their ideas should be translated into concrete proposals. The European Commission and European Parliament could be involved in the plural debate and their regional offices could cooperate with the regional authorities for the actual change at the local and regional level, which was trusted by citizens.

Ms Borrell Porta underlined that we needed to be ready for the change and we needed to involve citizens more. According to her, small regions were the ideal scale for pilot testing of innovative ways.

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## **Nathan Gardels**

Nathan Gardels spoke about citizen initiatives and democracy around the world. Deliberative democracy was gaining ground. For citizens, deliberation offered a robust platform for their voices to be heard and heeded. Regarding the good governance of society, it helped to avoid the populist sins of ignorance, demagoguery and utopian fantasies by introducing expertise and practices of reasoned deliberation into the great opening toward citizen engagement, enabled by digital connectivity. Populist politics receded when deliberative democracy advanced as a more responsive and effective alternative.

A major question, according to Mr Gardels, was about restoring public trust in government. The best existing response was a new form of citizen engagement – participation without populism. Deliberative democracy involved ordinary citizens from various backgrounds by using scientific sampling methods. They came together to debate key issues in calm and sober settings. Mr Gardels quoted examples from Chile, Iceland and France and quoted the French president, Emmanuel Macron who had said "People want more democracy. They don't just want to follow the laws, but to participate."

Mr Gardels also warned that, if unmediated, direct democracy in the digital age would resemble social media. It would encompass the good, the bad and the ugly. He questioned where democracy was heading. Many new initiatives were providing part of the answer. In the face of these innovative forms, the challenge was to strike a balance between public participation and government action.

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