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How Technology Could Save Democracy in Europe (draft title)

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Thank you, I am honoured to be part of such a distinguished panel. My ECI partner organisations offered to me the opportunity to sit here today to represent us – I'm so grateful that I actually prepared a speech this time! I sat down yesterday evening and I thought about 3 things I'd like to say today and these are the three things:

1. Technology is here and changes not just our daily life but also our political life, whether we are ready for it or not.
2. There are several examples of the great potential of digital democracy, but we have not learned all we need to learn about them yet.
3. Policy and regulation should focus on harnessing the potential of these tools rather than constraining it.

1. Technology is here.

People are increasingly using digital technologies to reach out to friends, customer representatives and politicians, asking for solutions to their problems. Our representative democracy which is based on elections occurring every 4-5 years, comes across as slow, sluggish and rigid in this context, in which citizens expect agile and fast responses.

However, these digital technologies do not come without problems of their own; tech giants, such as Google, Amazon and Facebook, are offering their features and services in exchange for people's personal data. As digital technologies have become an evident part of our everyday life, they have not only solved but also created new problems that decision-makers are struggling with – such as online privacy, online disinformation, the rise of tech monopolies and influence over the media. Populist and extremist parties are using digital technologies by rapidly generating and spreading simple (but false) answers to complex problems.

Europe has made efforts to tackle some of these issues, but does so mainly through regulation that seems driven by fear of the disruptive and destructive potential of the challenges of the digital world and the tech giants that represent it. Financial Times on the AI White Paper "The EU has chosen to prioritise data protection over AI investment." Fear can bring decision-makers to ban, regulate, and constrain what they believe they cannot control.

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This fear is understandable. Disruptive digital forces seem to have carved their way into society, much like a wild river finds the path of least resistance as it slowly takes its course. Although such brute force may be threatening to regulators and cause a reflex toward constraining it, policy-makers should not overlook the huge potential digital solutions have to power positive change in society. **Indeed, much like a wild river, we can and should harness the power of these digital innovations and channel them into a positive force that brings about beneficial societal change.**

2. Great examples of digital democracy

Nowhere is this potential of digital solutions clearer than in the examples of digital democracy all over the world, as digital tools are used to reinvigorate and improve citizen participation in democratic decision-making. E-participation - the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to foster democratic processes by allowing citizens to access and engage with information on specific policy issues and contribute to decision-making processes - is increasingly being implemented at local, regional and national level in Europe.

Participatory budgeting, for example, allows citizens to decide on how public funds are allocated. More than 1,500 participatory budgets have been implemented worldwide. This practice has proven in many cases to be deeply empowering, as citizens take control over agenda setting and decide projects they want their local policy-makers to deliver upon. One current European case is Paris's Budget Participatif – the official platform that lets Parisians decide how to spend 5 percent of the investment budget from 2014 to 2020, amounting to around 500 million euros.

Citizens' e-initiatives are another example. Latvia and Finland have websites that allow citizens to propose, submit, and support legislative initiatives. Latvia's online platform, ManaBals.lv has been recognized around the world as a success story –over 300 citizens' initiatives were launched since 2010 and around 68 percent of initiatives submitted to the Latvian parliament were adopted into law. Finland's New Citizens' Initiative Act adopted in 2012 has led researchers to conclude that these e-initiatives can enhance participation by involving citizens in policy-making, increase youth engagement, contribute to civic education and encourage innovative ideas for shaping policies.

Countries have also been experimenting with crowdsourcing methods to reduce the gap between political elites and citizens through co-decision-making. Crowdsourcing focuses on collecting citizens' ideas for policy formulation and online deliberation, and was used for example for the Icelandic Constitutional reform in 2010 and 2011 and in the Off-Road Traffic Law in Finland in 2012. Both the Icelandic and Finnish cases were ambitious and imperfect but have revealed the potential of crowdsourcing in policy-making processes. They brought new perspectives, based on the crowds' experience and expertise-based knowledge, to constitutional and policy discussions, empowered citizens to strengthen the legitimacy of the political system, and enhanced the transparency and inclusiveness of decision-making.

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Lessons learnt at the EU level

At the EU level, we can also see how the ECI and online public consultations are fulfilling transnational participation by exploiting the potential of technology. (OCS)

Although there have been improvements through the new ECI regulation and guidelines on improving the consultations, the EU's participatory toolbox is still ineffective and incomplete today. Ineffective because there are still challenges these tools face – mainly accessibility to citizens, representativeness of the contributions and weak impact on EU policy-making. Incomplete because it does not include a formal channel for citizens to co-create policies with their representatives.

The Conference on the Future of Europe should take advantage of the lessons learnt from these existing tools – they must especially contribute to the development of a credible process in the next two years. Furthermore, the Conference on the Future of Europe could be an important opportunity to experiment with a multilingual digital platform not only to give easy access to citizens to information but mainly to allow citizens to use the platform to co-create policies with EU decision-makers. This could pave the way to having a more structured and permanent crowdsourcing mechanism, parallel to the online public consultations (too technical today).

3. Policy and regulation should focus on harnessing the potential of these tools rather than constraining it.

All these e-participation mechanisms reveal how new technologies can be used to revitalize democracy by developing more responsive, informative, transparent, and participatory decision-making processes. Although many countries have started exploring e-participation, there is still a need to gather more evidence and further investigate whether they succeed in meeting these objectives. Most e-participation initiatives are currently limited and often short-term experiments. We need to organize more experimentation with e-participation, analyze these processes attentively, and draw lessons from the good and the bad experiences, so that we will be able to assess whether and how new digital platforms can truly contribute to increasing the quality of policy-making and reshaping European democracy.

However, this will not happen if policy-makers focus on constraining tech giants' worse impulses, instead of channeling the power of the digital world to benefit the public good. Policy-makers should encourage grassroots e-democracy initiatives; develop new, structured participatory channels to allow citizens to effectively collaborate with policy-makers; and create public policy and public governance mechanisms that harness the power of the technology sector. This is how democracy can be safeguarded: not by fearfully shielding it from the challenges of this global digital age, but by courageously upgrading democracy to channel the opportunities those challenges bring. Just like we harness a river's power to bring electricity and light to our cities, it is time we harness the power of the digital to enlighten our democracies.

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