



ECI DAY 2020
Today and Beyond | 25.02.2020



VICE PRESIDENT FOR DEMOCRACY AND DEMOGRAPHY

Dubravka Suica

Thank you Bruno; thank you President Jahier,

The EESC has announced that all of today's questions and arguments will feed into the civil society recommendations that it will draft after the debate. Thank you for your contributions.

Today I will address the Democracy part of my portfolio in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

We will meet again 18 March to discuss both Democracy and Demography and I look forward to it.

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!**

But let me be clear – **technology has the potential to improve democracy.** To make it more efficient; more open; more responsive; more transparent; more available. For citizens. For policy-makers. For all of us.

Technology causes **both excitement and fear.** It has the ability to liberate and to enhance, but it also has the potential to be manipulated and put to malicious use.

The Conference on the Future of Europe provides opportunities to look at the digital revolution from different angles. We need to use technology to reach out to people; to engage with a broader and more diverse audience. To reach the citizens that are difficult to reach. It is important to reach everyone. Here **technology is a tool.**

We need to ensure that this revolution is accessible to all and that if technology can improve lives, it must improve the lives of all; here **technology is an aspiration.**

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We also need to discuss technology's place in our society. It is no longer for a small number of people. It has become mainstream. Not all of us are digital natives but the number of them is growing by the day. Here **technology is a theme that we must streamline into most aspects of our lives.**

But we must also **take care of peoples' security. We must ensure that these wonderful opportunities are not appropriated** in a way that appears to broaden our horizons, but actually limits our choice.

We have seen how **the misuse of data or data collected in a dishonest manner, can impact democratic choice.** It can be used by those who wish to influence, or even determine, democratic outcomes in a way that dramatically skews choice.

We cannot sit by when these things are happening. We cannot! That's why we need to be **on the side of open, yet well regulated technology.** This is why we need to encourage innovation, but also provide a value-context for this to happen. Values are important. Our European values are part of what holds us together.

There are many ways to look at the digital age. I have been on a **listening tour of the EU.** I have been to the Czech Republic, to Ireland, to Spain. To Latvia. Also Estonia. In Estonia, the National Digital Adviser said at our citizens' dialogue in Tartu that **the future is analogue; digital is just there to support.** A fascinating view in a country where 99% of public services are on-line. Not just Monday to Friday but 24/7.

Digital technologies are not a replacement for the analog world. We aim at using a multitude of channels for the Conference. We want people to be free to participate in the best way they can.

I should also say that we are working on keeping **the online channels for the Conference secure.** I would also see the Conference – and with it the digital channels that we will provide – as an empowerment of citizens.

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Active citizen participation should always come with **critical thinking and deliberation**. Digital tools might lower the hurdle or effort of participating. It does not take away the opportunity and duty of critical examination and informed choices.

I have spoken about technology but allow me some words and details on the Conference on the Future of Europe. First question. **Why are we doing this?** The answer to this key question is important. **Citizens want to have a greater say in policy-making** beyond elections. We must respond to this call.

CONTEXT

On **22nd of January**, the Commission adopted a **Communication** tabling our contribution to the Shaping of the Conference on the Future of Europe. It is based on President von der Leyen's Political Guidelines and the European Council's Strategic Agenda.

The European Parliament has adopted its resolution. The Council is advancing in its work. There is no time to lose.

There is broad agreement to **officially launch the Conference on 9 May**. Our wish would be to launch it from **Dubrovnik** under the Croatian Presidency of the Council.

The next step must **focus on the Joint Declaration**. Why? Because it will **formalise the details** on the Conference. It will bring together the three institutions, all focused on a common goal. Others can also commit to its guiding principles. President Jahier, let me take this opportunity to invite you and the EESC to consider signing up to the Declaration.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me be clear. The European institutions do not own this process. It belongs to all of us. It is vital that each and every one of us takes **ownership** of the Conference. Each one of us with our own valuable contribution and role in the process. Including the European Economic and Social Committee and civil society.

I believe that we can already agree that the **process must be guided by principles** such as **inclusiveness**, **openness**. It must be **interactive** and **structured** in order to make it a **legitimate success**.

Most of all, I believe that **predetermining the outcome** would cause more damage to democracy than if we did nothing at all. Of course, some guidance is necessary in order to structure the debate to allow citizens to discuss and give us feedback. This does not restrict the issues for discussion. It does not pre-empt the outcome.

From the discussions we have had already, experts have made clear **the importance of the design and methodology** of the Conference. We must get this right. It is what underpins the success of the Conference.

We must take our time to reflect on the best way of actually doing deliberative democracy at the EU level. We have not done this before. But we do not need to have answers to all these questions before we launch the Conference; we must continue to fine-tune and adapt as we go along.

This is important because it has the potential to lay the ground for a new type of politics. For a new dynamic between representative democracy and citizens for generations to come. Certainly not to replace representative democracy but to complement it.

The task ahead is a real challenge. But we are not starting from scratch. We have **1,850 Citizens Dialogues held over the last 5 years**. Let's build on them.

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The **feedback mechanism** of the process is important and a missing element in the Citizens' Dialogues. We must ensure that citizens can see the impact they have had on policy-making. This will be our **benchmark for success**. President Von der Leyen has committed to ensuring follow-up and I intend to see it through.

Of course for today's debate I must mention the **new multilingual digital platform**. We see this as the **one-stop-shop for all information** on the Conference and related events. It should ensure maximum transparency and openness for all citizens.

WHAT DO WE DISCUSS?

So what do we talk about? How do we decide this? These are important questions too. We must provide structure to enable discussion and feedback.

TWO CATEGORIES

POLICY & INSTITUTIONAL

We agree on two clear categories – one is policy and the other is institutional. These provide a broad framework for discussion and for citizens to make their voices heard and to receive feedback afterwards. After all this is the purpose of the exercise.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Another complementary tool to representative democracy is the European Citizens' Initiative. This tool allows citizens to request the Commission to submit a legal proposal. New rules in place since 01 January make it even easier to apply.

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ECI relies on digital tools. This is the only way organisers can connect to other citizens. On the ECI Forum citizens can find plenty of information and discuss ideas. A new version was also launched last January. Social media is used to promote ECIs. And of course ECI works in line with standards on data protection.

And of course the Commission is organising a conference in Brussels on 6 March under the motto of “Design, Engage, Impact”. We want to speak with stakeholders to see how we can come together to make the European Citizens’ Initiative more known and used by citizens. You are all welcome to register to join us.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I end by reminding you of why we are doing the Conference on the Future of Europe. Citizens are feeling left behind and blaming democracy itself. So we need to change. As I said earlier, this is no longer politics business-as-usual. We need change. Like Einstein said “We cannot solve our **problems** with the **same** level of **thinking** that created them”.

Citizens ask us to think differently. Let us take this opportunity.

Thank you.

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