

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Strengthening local governance and representative democracy via new digital technology instruments

(2021/C 37/08)

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. acknowledges that governments and public authorities at all levels are faced with increasingly complex and unprecedented challenges ranging from globalisation, economic development and the impact of technology, through climate and demographic change, to security, disinformation, health issues and radicalisation;
2. welcomes the policy priority of the European Commission to make 'Europe fit for the digital age' and the call of President von der Leyen for a transition to a new digital world built on European strengths and values; supports the 'New push for European democracy' policy priority and the commitment of the Commission's President to work for more democratic participation and increased transparency in EU decision-making;
3. welcomes the European Commission's commitment to supporting the green and digital transitions, as this is reflected in its new proposal for a Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027, and the allocation of EUR 8,2 billion to the Digital Europe programme ⁽¹⁾;
4. supports the proposal of the European Parliament in its position on the Conference on the Future of Europe, adopted on 15 January 2020, to include 'digital transformation' as one of the policy priorities for the Conference; agrees with its position that citizens' participation in the Conference process and consultations should be organised using the 'most efficient, innovative and appropriate platforms, including online tools, in order to guarantee to any citizen a say during the work of the Conference'; underlines that the Conference should serve as a testing ground to develop some form of structured and permanent dialogue with citizens on EU matters, which will have to rely to a substantial extent on digital means and innovative processes, not least given the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic;
5. reiterates the relevant and contextual positions from the earlier opinions of the CoR:
 - Opinion *Local and regional perspective on promoting public sector innovation via digital solutions*, adopted by the CoR Plenary on 30 November 2017 ⁽²⁾. The CoR looks at the digitalisation of administration as a means to provide better services to citizens and affirms the key role that LRAs must play in modernising the public sector. It urges the public sector to commit to innovation focused on users' needs and giving indiscriminate access to digital services for everyone and every business and underlines the need for cooperation and exchange of good innovative practices between administrations and across borders.
 - Opinion *eGovernment Action Plan 2016-2020*, adopted by the CoR Plenary on 11 October 2016 ⁽³⁾. The CoR endorses the principle that 'digital' should be the default method used by public administrations for delivering services, and stresses that long-term efforts must be made to increase digital inclusion so that more people can access the infrastructure and acquire skills they need to enjoy the opportunities offered by digitalisation. The CoR recognises that transparent administrations providing data and services openly and securely are important for increasing transparency

⁽¹⁾ The EU budget powering the recovery plan for Europe (COM(2020) 442 final).

⁽²⁾ COR-2017-03529-00-00-AC-TRA (OJ C 164, 8.5.2018, p. 34).

⁽³⁾ COR-2016-02882-00-01-AC-TRA (OJ C 88, 21.3.2017, p. 54).

and efficiency, but at the same time points out the need of high level of protection for certain types of information and personal data. Further, the CoR supports the principle that public administrations' e-government services should be cross-border by default, and stresses that LRAs in border regions can play a crucial role in identifying and developing cross-border services that are relevant, efficient and seamless.

— Opinion *A New Skills Agenda for Europe*, adopted by the CoR Plenary on 7 December 2016⁽⁴⁾. The CoR calls for investment in digital skills and training and sees digitalisation as an opportunity to address many educational challenges;

6. stresses that it is not technology that must motivate the digital transformation, but rather that changes must be based on citizens' needs and expectations, to which the most transparent, most inclusive, most user-friendly, most secure and most cost-effective responses have to be developed. This means that the new challenges require changes also at local and regional level, the implementation of which depends not least primarily on the managers' ability to identify those needs and the readiness to implement the most appropriate changes. It is not enough, in a modern democracy, that representative democracy is exercised on a regular basis: the members of the community, interest groups and organisations must be involved constantly. Inclusion and participation lead to better decisions and strengthen democracy, people's sense of community and willingness to do their bit for the development of the region;

7. notes that while traditional relationships between citizens and politicians are changing significantly, a new digital political arena is emerging where new digital technology instruments can help in finding new solutions and response to challenges, foster innovation and economic growth, improve public service delivery, increase citizen participation in new and different ways, improve local governance, and complement and reinforce democracy;

8. considers that democratic processes should evolve and adapt to the changes and grasp the opportunities associated with new digital technology and ICT tools which have the potential to improve the quality of decision-making, promote participation, communication and dialogue, foster active citizenship and engagement in political life, improve transparency and accountability, and enhance the legitimacy of our democratic system;

9. considers going digital in local and regional authorities an excellent opportunity to provide people with high-quality public services in an efficient way. The use of electronic forms alone will save time for citizens and public authorities, allowing staff to devote more time and attention to other administrative tasks. The various digital apps available also enable members of the community to participate in the decision-making process and to monitor government in their local authority in real time;

10. considers that local and regional tiers of government are the natural areas for applying 'digital transformation'; reiterates that the use of new digital technology instruments gives the opportunities to create a new environment for consultation and participation, provide high quality information, analyse public response, extend efforts to remote areas, reach out to the most disadvantaged citizens, incorporate the skills, knowledge and expertise of citizens, and 'co-create' policies according to their needs and expectations;

11. encourages local and regional authorities to put the digital transformation into effect and exploit the full potential of digital technologies to further facilitate citizens' participation in policy- and decision-making. To this end, new digital technologies should be brought to bear that improve the transparency, inclusiveness and responsiveness of the decision-making process, and the trust and dialogue necessary for good governance should be built. It is essential that this be accompanied by teaching of digital skills;

12. reiterates the importance of incorporating citizens' contributions in the decision-making process and ensuring follow-up; stresses that the lack of responsiveness from decision-makers leads to disappointment and distrust and points out that for a functioning local democracy citizens' trust in public authorities is fundamental;

⁽⁴⁾ COR-2016-04094-00-01-AC-TRA (OJ C 185, 9.6.2017, p. 29).

13. emphasises that citizens' participation should be founded on effective and non-discriminatory access to information and knowledge; points out the need to narrow the digital divide by empowering people through education and training, including education and training on digital skills and media literacy, prioritising digital training programmes for all demographic groups with a special focus on elderly people and other vulnerable or marginalised groups, and expanding training and education to rural and remote areas;

14. stresses the need to engage young people in public life; notes that the new generation of digital natives has the skills in terms of technology and media literacy; considers that the use of new digital technology approaches to policy and decision-making processes can be an effective tool for enhancing their engagement and participation;

15. notes that 'going digital' is resource-consuming; calls on all levels of government to devote adequate financial, human and training resources to these goals, and ensure affordable and high-speed digital infrastructure, particularly in peripheral regions and rural and economically less developed areas, and to guarantee that it is accessible to all, including to people with disabilities and old people. Reiterates to this effect that 'the term "digital cohesion" is an important additional dimension of the traditional concept of economic, social and territorial cohesion defined in the EU Treaty ⁽⁵⁾;

16. stresses that the use of digital technology relies on data usage, enabled by data collection and data generation; calls to this effect for respecting the right to privacy and data protection, requesting and using the minimum personal data that should be relevant and necessary for the specific purposes to be achieved, promoting a safe and secure internet environment and digital services, and providing adequate information to citizens with regard to the use of their data and related security measures and effective means of redress in case of violations of these rights, including a strong European legal framework, to avoid citizens' mistrust and dissatisfaction. Underlines to this effect the need to harness artificial intelligence so that it remains human-centred and is used in a way that fosters smart citizenship and open government, thus strengthening democracy;

17. warns that social media platforms facilitate the spreading of disinformation, misinformation and hate speech, which can undermine democracy and trust in public institutions; calls for more commitment to teaching digital skills and encourages local policy-makers to use existing digital tools, online platforms and media to communicate and engage positively with citizens and other stakeholders;

18. considers it important that local and regional authorities use appropriate digital channels of their own to communicate with the public in a more interactive and faster way, with a view to ensuring that the information provided is reliable and relevant to local and regional needs;

19. believes that, beyond the profound effects of digitalisation on people's social life and the world of work, education or culture, to name a few, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of factual and up-to-date information and the importance of the communication channels that disseminate it. It has also become clear that local and regional authorities and the public must be able to interact with one another and that appropriate digital tools must be in place to tackle disinformation and misinformation. These tools must always respect people's ability to fully exercise their freedom of expression;

20. urges that attention focus on equal and unhampered access to digital services;

21. notes that the young 'digitally native' generation is one of the most targeted groups of disinformation and hate speech; considers that their particularly intensive use of social media, a lack of critical media competence, especially among those with lower levels of education, together with the creation of homogeneous opinion bubbles (echo-chambers) generated by social media can make younger users even more vulnerable to political manipulation; highlights the need to use digital technology instruments that are not only user-friendly but also understandable and attractive, both in terms of content and design, and adapted to the social and digital skills of young people to increase their critical awareness of the risks and opportunities of new media and digital technology;

⁽⁵⁾ CoR Opinion on Digital Europe for all: delivering smart and inclusive solutions on the ground (COR-2019-03332) (OJ C 39, 5.2.2020, p. 83).

22. believes that the COVID-19 crisis has illustrated the potential value of teleworking, and encourages local and regional authorities to look at ways of broadening teleworking arrangements for their own staff;
23. reiterates its call for strong cooperation and sharing of best practices between all levels of government to achieve better use and further upscaling of digital transformation of cities and communities; acknowledges that many national, regional and local cases can be taken as good examples of how digital technology tools can be used for the benefit of participatory democracy;
24. notes that the introduction of new technologies is also hampered by lack of the necessary knowledge and skills at the level of the public authorities, which could benefit from using digital means. It is therefore useful first to take stock of the digital skills available in local and regional authorities, then identify the technology shortcomings within and between local and regional authorities, and then define the need while making sure to distinguish between process and technical solution. Compatibility (interoperability) also needs to be ensured between the different datasets and databases;
25. highlights the importance of online tools for facilitating the partnerships among local and regional authorities in the EU, and between them and partner countries; considers that a renewed online European portal of decentralised cooperation would provide a substantial added value by supporting matchmaking and the exchange of good practices; affirms its readiness to work with the European Commission on the development of such a digital tool;
26. expects that the introduction of various digital practices by local and regional authorities, which could entail a need for significant, one-off investment, will be part of the overall considerations of the new EU budget within the framework of the digital transformation;
27. echoes the Association Civic Tech Europe (ACTE) position paper from March 2020 that 'the diversity of civic techs' business models is the key to provide quick solutions that are citizen-centric at the right scale' and shares the concern that local and regional authorities across the European Union do not always have easy access to these tools as they are often developed Software as a Service (SaaS) platforms⁽⁶⁾, which are subscription-based;
28. proposes that the European Committee of the Regions come up with measures to motivate and reward local and regional authorities so that they stiffen their commitment to the principles of open and inclusive administration. This could create a new quality criterion in the future so that the degree of democracy in local communities can be measured and best practice pooled;
29. calls for funding to be made available across Europe to improve people's digital and media literacy through educational and training programmes for the different levels of school, as well as for local and regional authority staff and office-holders, in order to improve their skills and knowledge of the options available for using and applying modern digital solutions;
30. recommends that local and regional authorities prioritise the introduction of digital tools in all funds and programmes;
31. calls for funding for digital educational tools and equipment in order to ensure European-wide equal access to quality digital learning and teaching;
32. recommends, if necessary, revising the eligibility criteria so that local and regional authorities can bring in new digital solutions and platforms in a simpler and more economical way, including access to EU funding for SaaS platforms.

Brussels, 10 December 2020.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS

⁽⁶⁾ Position paper, Association Civic Tech Europe (ACTE), March 2020.