



# Europe's digital future: Navigating opportunities and challenges

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The digital and technological revolution is already well underway. As Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, declared in her 2021 State of the Union speech, ‘digital is the make-or-break issue’ (von der Leyen 2021, 6). Tangible proof of this statement is the 20% of Community funds earmarked for the digital space under the NextGenerationEU recovery programme. Such commitments by the member states and the institutions prove that digital solutions will be instrumental to the EU’s road to recovery and to safeguarding its competitive position in the global economy. Therefore, this issue of the *European View* could not have been timelier. It gathers together seven contributions on the overarching theme of ‘digitalisation and the future’ from practitioners, academics and researchers who explore the implications for policy, society and industry.

Before venturing into a discussion of the future and long-term potential of the digital transformation that is happening in the workplace, the economy, governance and education, it is necessary to take a step back. No one had expected or anticipated the digital overhaul that took place overnight in March 2020, when the whole continent was plunged into a state of paralysis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I experienced this first-hand when I suddenly found myself unable to travel to Brussels for my usual engagements and—like millions of people across the world and Europe—had to adapt *tout de suite* to a new, exclusively digital state of working, interacting and socialising. Networking events, in-person meetings and conferences all came to a sudden halt and were soon moved to an online format. This not only altered the very nature of such interactive happenings but brought with it a whole array of novel difficulties and challenges. Although

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it suddenly became possible to hold a real-time debate with people physically present in different corners of the world, this was often hampered by an unreliable Internet connection and inadequate network encryption. As the world is gradually returning to a state of pre-pandemic normality, it is becoming increasingly evident that this ‘new normal’ is more digital: some remote working is still in place, and hybrid (semi-physical, semi-online) events are currently preferred.

Nonetheless, what this experience has shown us is that technology has advanced to such a level that we—individually and collectively—can carry on regardless of any kind of disruption. This seismic shift towards digitalisation and the acceleration of new technologies brought to my mind an old slogan we used to have when promoting the structural reforms in Slovakia: ‘people should be given fishing hooks, not fish’. Today I tend to paraphrase this: people should be given a computer, a fast Internet connection and training. And not only people currently in employment, but also children from less well-off families, people living in regions with high unemployment rates, and people living along our borders and in the countryside. What makes this even more urgent is the staggering 42% of European citizens who, according to the Commission’s Digital Economy and Society Index (European Commission 2020), lack basic digital skills.

The sea change brought about by the pandemic has been matched by a range of new EU strategies and legislative proposals that both amplify and harness this paradigm shift: the EU tool-box on secure 5G, the EU digital strategy, the European strategy for data, the White Paper on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and subsequent proposal for an AI Act, and the flagship dual regulatory package of the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act. This high volume of legislative activity and policy initiatives over the past two years highlights that it is not by chance that the Commission has declared this ‘Europe’s digital decade’. Legislators in the European Parliament and member states must live up to the challenge of reshaping Europe’s digital landscape by ensuring that the EU remains a safe and healthy environment in which individuals and businesses can thrive. The Parliament’s decision to set up the Special Committee on Artificial Intelligence in a Digital Age, tasked with analysing and scrutinising the impact of AI on the EU economy, is already yielding positive results and has provided valuable input to the public debate.

Capitalising on this momentum in policymaking circles, this issue of the *European View* focuses on the impact of digitalisation on the future of Europe: on the economy, society, political systems and the direction of the European project itself. When it comes to future-proofing the digital transition, the path that policymakers have to tread is uneven, with multiple twists and turns, and this issue’s author contributions reflect this reality. In his article, Dimitar Lilkov unpacks the voluminous text of the Commission’s AI legislative proposal, through which the EU aspires to become the first global player to adopt a comprehensive regulatory framework for AI. Eline Chivot argues that the existing European rules for online platforms have not been designed to

anticipate the challenges posed by the growth of digital markets and the nature of competition therein. It is with this in mind, she reveals, that our political family—the European People’s Party—remains committed to the passage of the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act, with the ultimate aim of benefiting both European companies and European consumers. In a similar vein, Jan Czarnocki talks about the importance of the emerging movement for EU digital constitutionalism: a Union-wide effort to address the challenges posed by digitalisation through regulation, which would then pave the way for striking a transatlantic digital accord. Iva Tasheva builds the case for a more ambitious European cybersecurity agenda that puts EU values at its core as a way to combat the growing number of malicious attacks effectively. She argues that the bloc has three instruments in its arsenal to achieve this: legislation, research and investment, and the mandate to act. Kai Zenner draws on the parliamentary activity record on EU digital governance to argue that, despite its enhanced legislative powers, the European Parliament still struggles to be recognised as an authoritative and reliable political actor. Contributing to the philosophical dimension of the discussion around digitalisation, Jana Mišić stresses that moral evaluation is necessary in the technological governance debate and needs to be incorporated in a non-superficial but anticipatory manner. Following a similar logic, Michał Boni advances the importance of grounding human–machine collaboration in ethical principles, regulated by law and managed by oversight.

Whilst digitalisation—as one of the key political priorities of the von der Leyen Commission—is the crux of this issue of the *European View*, contributions on other current developments that are altering the European political landscape have not been omitted. Janne Leino discusses ways for the EU to counterbalance China’s ambitions of becoming a global soft (super)power. Raluca Csernatonu delves into the challenges to the transatlantic relationship posed by technological innovation. Igor Merheim-Eyre makes a compelling case for renewing the transatlantic agenda as a way to defend democracy. Giselle Bosse maps out a future EU policy towards Belarus that takes a stronger stance against the Lukashenka regime. Robert Pszczel argues that the current state of Russian society does not allow for an ambitious EU engagement policy. Finally, Svetoslav Malinov lays out a critique of the concept of the democratic deficit of the EU.

It is my hope that the contributions to this issue of the *European View* will enable us to better navigate the challenges lying ahead as Europe enters its digital decade, a period of great possibility and opportunity for people and the economy alike. As the authors have illustrated, the Union has the tools to make this new reality a prosperous one and to translate its digital ambitions into tangible results—just as it has done before.

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### Author biography



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