



Deutscher Bundestag



Bundesrat

Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments

Minutes of the video conference, 10 May 2021

The Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments was held in Berlin on 10 May 2021, in the form of a video conference.

The parliamentary Speakers of the Troika – Finland, Germany and Slovenia – and the European Parliament met beforehand, as has become traditional, to discuss the provisional agenda and the intention to coordinate the conclusions afterwards among the Troika parliaments.

The Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments opened with a welcome from Wolfgang SCHÄUBLE, President of the German Bundestag. Wolfgang SCHÄUBLE pointed to the new opportunities for participation opened up by the digital transition. He cautioned, however, that more opportunities for participation did not necessarily translate into more participation *per se*, or greater public acceptance. The digital world represented a challenge for the system of representative democracy, he said, and the conventional media were losing their function as filters and mediators of news. He suggested that the business models of major Internet companies needed to be reviewed, considering that they largely rejected any responsibility for hostility and hate speech online.

Reiner HASELOFF, President of the Bundesrat, used his opening address to emphasise that European fundamental values were deeply rooted in our societies. Europe, he said, had long been part of normal life for people whose lives spanned borders. He saw the Conference on the Future of Europe as a chance for the EU to transform itself and continue evolving. Nonetheless, he added, parliaments must remain the beating heart of democracy in the digital world, so rules for the digital sphere needed to be created to ensure that Europe could stay united in diversity in future.

Wolfgang SCHÄUBLE outlined the agenda, which was adopted unanimously. He pointed out that there would only be conclusions from the Conference Presidency after the event and that these would be coordinated among the Troika parliaments. Given the virtual format in which the conference was being held, he explained, the usual intensive coordination of conclusions among all participants would not be possible.

Session I: The digital transition and the changing public sphere – danger and opportunities for representative democracy

The topic of session I was introduced by two experts, Professor Jeanette HOFMANN of Freie Universität Berlin and Francesca BRIA, President of the Italian national innovation fund. The subsequent discussion was conducted by the journalist Anke PLÄTTNER.

Jeanette HOFMANN presented three theses to illustrate her thoughts on the subject of social media. Firstly, she averred, algorithms specialised in reinforcing statements but did not create any themselves. Secondly, she argued that platforms like Facebook and Twitter were key infrastructure for our democracies. These platforms knew more about members of the public than any other institution, she said, and their power therefore had to be constrained. Thirdly, Jeanette HOFMANN proposed there should be a kind of broadcasting board for the digital age, drawn from across society and tasked with regulation. Overall, however, she saw social media as more of an opportunity than a danger. She cited empirical studies as demonstrating that some 90% of the hostility, hate speech and disinformation comes from less than 1% of users.

Francesca BRIA, President of the Italian national innovation fund, gave various examples to show how governments, parliaments and EU institutions could use digital tools to involve the public more effectively in the decision-making process. Particularly after protests, she said, citizens' councils, citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting could serve as a bridge and foster new trust between society and political decision-makers. As she saw it, the COVID-19 pandemic had demonstrated what power digital autocratic systems like China could unfold. Now it was Brussels's turn, she urged, to show what open societies could achieve with the aid of digital tools that placed the common good, inclusion for all and climate change front and centre.

Wolfgang SOBOTKA, President of the Austrian National Council, underscored how social media had caused a meteoric increase in the speed of political communication and made it possible, on the positive side, to communicate directly with the general public. But, he said, the digital transition also brought with it great challenges for representative democracy, as a result of which a legislative framework had to be established for digital matters. Following the example of the conventional media, he concluded, the providers of social media platforms should commit themselves to the principle of editorial control.

Maria Elisabetta Alberti CASELLATI, President of the Italian Senate, underlined the point that the new digital networks and media were changing the parliamentary process. Representative democracy, she said, was the only form of government that could speak for our pluralist society.

Andries GRYFFROY, Deputy Speaker of the Belgian Senate, warned that all members of society had to have access to the digital sphere, with access to the Internet being of particular importance. For him, the opportunities outweighed the risks or challenges with regard to data privacy.