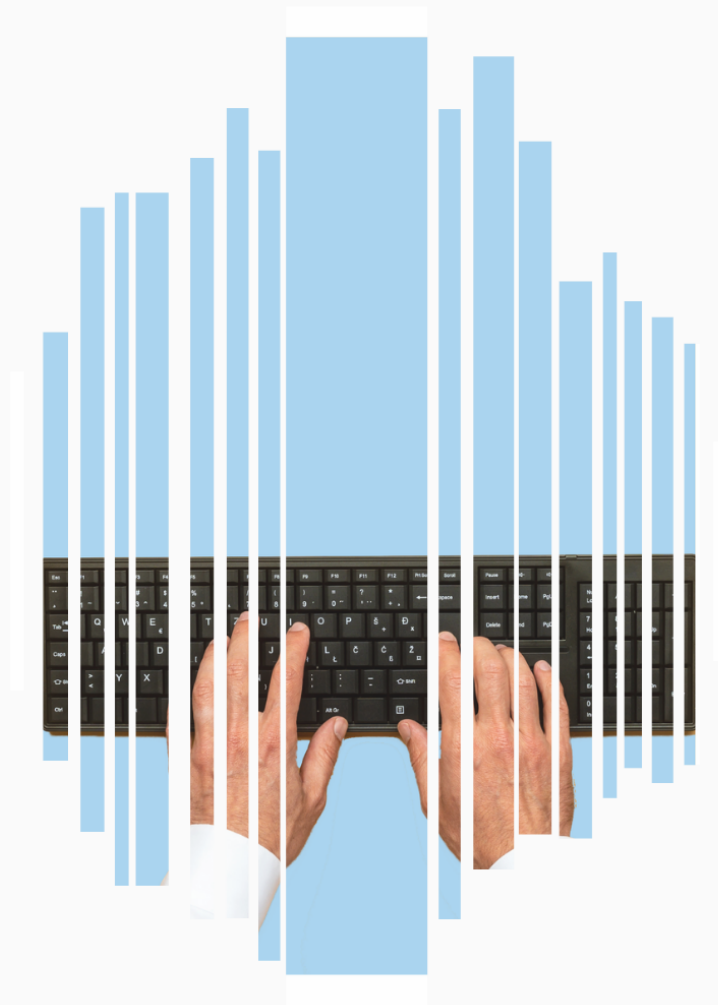


**EVENT
MINUTES**



EPAC
PROMO-2021



TACKLING DIGITAL DISPARITIES IN THE EU: PERSPECTIVES AFTER COVID

FREE ONLINE EVENT | 22 JUNE 2021 | 6:00 PM (CEST)

EXPERTS PANEL:

Dragoş Tudorache | MEP & Chair of the AIDA Special Committee
Paulo Variz | Attaché at the Permanent Representation of Portugal to the EU
Alejandro Moledo | Policy coordinator for the European Disability Forum

CONTACT :

EPAC@IHECS-ACADEMY.BE
WWW.IHECSACADEMY.BE

EVENT MINUTES

Introduction to the overall topic of the event: **Digital disparities in the EU and main challenges after Covid** and presentation of the guest speakers Mr Alejandro Moledo, Dragos Tudorache and Paulo Variz.

Mr Moledo is Policy Coordinator at the European Disability Forum (EDF), where he leads and coordinates EDF's advocacy and policy work at EU level.

Mr Tudorache is a MEP for Renew Europe Group, from the Romanian delegation, and Chair of the Special Committee on Artificial Intelligence in a Digital Age (AIDA), as well as member of some other Committees like the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE).

Mr Variz is attaché for Transport and Telecom at the Permanent Representation of Portugal to the European Union.

About 60 people took part in the event.

Mr Tudorache believes that digital disparities exist in the EU and that they have deepened during the Covid pandemic. The EU and its Member States should invest in reskilling workers and in the accessibility of digital tools and services. Mr Moledo confirms that disparities exist for PWD (persons with disabilities) when accessing technologies and reminds that the UN recognized the right for PWD to access IT.

Digital inclusion - how to enter the new era of digitalization without leaving anyone behind?

Mr Tudorache explains that algorithms are furthering biases towards women, alongside historical and social biases. He recalls the importance for the public to invest in infrastructure for better coverage: the internet should be almost a basic right and access to the internet should be guaranteed to every citizen.

According to Mr Tudorache, the MFF can be used to support infrastructure investments. Furthermore, digitalisation is also transforming professions: access to basic digital tools becomes more important as many professions stabilize to a virtual format even after Covid.

Digital inclusion is the trademark of EU institutions; however, it is not harmonized across the Union. **What can be done at the EU level to overcome digitalization gaps across Member States?**

Mr Variz explains that initiatives have been taken to address digital exclusion at the EU level: e.g. the European Electronic Communication code, alongside an ongoing debate on the internet as a basic service. More recently, debates have focused on ubiquitous infrastructure, digital education and competencies, inclusiveness of online public services. Mr Variz claims that internet access is not only a matter of social policy but rather a basic right to participate in the single market and enjoy its benefits.

Mr Moledo recalls the importance of availability, affordability and accessibility when talking about infrastructure. The European Accessibility Act sets accessibility requirements for the development of new technologies. For coherence to the single market, accessibility should be a pillar of legislation. Mr Moledo also identifies the need for investment in digital skills and jobs of the future and to change the mindset to a universal design approach to technology.

Mr Tudorache underlines the importance of re-skilling: the EU needs to decide how the society and the economy will look like in 10/15 years and adapt curricula and education systems across the Union accordingly. The labour market needs reskilling: every job is impacted by digitization. Through digitalization and accessibility, there would also be potential to support PWD in the job market. The handling and usage of personal data are also important topics in this debate.

According to Mr Moledo, there is a need for more accessibility experts/professionals in the job market. Therefore, the EDF is calling for inclusion of accessibility in education programs. Digital tools need to be accessible in order to enable PWD's professionalization.

On digitalization and ageing population, Mr Variz explains that the elderly have been greatly affected in their access to public services during the pandemic. Before Covid, the elderly had the possibility to access physical alternatives when claiming public services; however, the sudden rise of digitalization during Covid has eliminated such physical options.

What has been the impact of the Covid crisis on digitalisation?

According to Mr Variz, the European Digital Scoreboard, which will be released on 23 June 2021, will confirm that Covid has increased digital disparities. On this matter, a central role will be played by Member States' Recovery and Resilience Plans and the further work of the Commission to assess whether Member States' policies will be sufficient in the area of digital inclusiveness.

How can we protect citizens and make sure nobody is left behind?

Mr Moledo claims that the pandemic has been dramatic for PWD. The sudden digital transition left many people behind. Many children with disabilities lost access to education during the lockdown. Many didn't have the tools to keep working and some others were still forced to go to the office in the worst moment of the pandemic due to the lack of appropriate digital tools. This is due to wrong purchasing decisions of companies and governments that are not planned on the needs of PWD, but rather based on a "best-price" principle.

What is the contribution of the EU to the mental health of young learners? Does the EU have a coordinated approach to tackle the digital divide?

Mr Variz explains that education policy is still in the hands of Member States and that the capacity of EU institutions to intervene in education is still very limited. There is however room for policy coordination in the context of the EU semester, where the Commission can address recommendations for the inclusivity dimension of its actions. The Commission is also looking at what the OECD is doing regarding education. Mr Moledo recommends checking out the Digital Education Action Plan.

Introduction of the second part of the event. **Can digitalisation foster social inclusion?**

Moderator asks for the participation of the audience. Poll: "On a scale from 1 to 5, how confident are you that Digitalisation can trigger inclusiveness in the EU? 1 being pessimistic and 5 being very optimistic. In other words, do you trust tools that go along with Digitalisation such as AI? The audience remains quite sceptical about the use of digitalisation as a tool to foster inclusiveness.

Can technology be a means of inclusion? Can you share some examples of digital solutions fostering inclusion for PWD?

Mr Moledo explains that the fact of thinking about PWD can actually bring innovation, i.e. type-rating machines, subtitles, remote control of TV, virtual assistance such as Cortana or Alexa, etc. There is an opportunity to design for all of us but there is also a risk of not including everyone. A good example of how the pandemic fostered inclusivity is working from home, which gave flexibility to PWD and companies are generally more flexible now.

Mr Moledo adds that the advantages of this should not prevent us from seeing the downside of digitalisation. We also see that this push for AI, such as robotics, may exclude some parts of society.

An example of this can be found in transport services. Algorithms calculate how you can connect from one transport mode to another but that time might not be the same for someone living with disabilities.

Has the policy discussion paid attention to this kind of solution with AI?

Mr Moledo agrees that we have to focus on the purpose of AI, on the reason why algorithms can facilitate public services or improve them and choose in which sectors we want to invest.

Examples of the way digital can provide inclusive solutions in transportation?

Mr Variz points out the limitations of algorithms. Accordingly, user cases should be the focal point. There is a new wave of attention to transport inclusiveness, e.g. at DG MOVE they talk about co-operative mobility instead of connected and automated driving, transport poverty has been mentioned for the first time in the Council. Eventually, transport solutions should be human-centred and inclusive, with a focus on children and PWD.

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Mr Variz argues that before financing individual passenger cars (that are only available to the ones that can afford them), efforts should be put into investing in public transports. People in inaccessible areas would be the ones benefiting the most from this. Depending on the case it should be a priority for those who don't own a car and still need to rely on public transports. Make sure the priority is inclusiveness also in AI and transport.

Mr Variz mentions that public transport is not only the most inclusive but also the most environmentally friendly. Member States agreed with this approach, therefore Council's conclusions were approved by unanimity, which made it possible to suggest to European Commission to add more inclusivity in their proposals.

The audience asks a question on **data protection and autonomy**.

Mr Moledo points out that accessibility and data protection are perfectly compatible. Tech companies are clearly pushing against this approach: EDF was previously approached by tech lobbies to stop some accessibility services.

How can AI increase inclusion? Examples of new technologies that could help societies go in the direction of more inclusivity?

Mr Variz mentions the example of the proposal from the European Commission about the creation of the EU Digital Identity: every citizen would have available means of digital identification to access public services. All big platforms in the private sector want to be part of this. This initiative would promote digitalisation.

Mr Moledo believes that it is important to have a coherent approach to digital, with consistent accessibility requirements.

Moderator indicates that the event is about to be closed and proposes the audience to vote for three of the main recommendations gathered during the event, which will be sent to the Conference of the Future of Europe.

Mr Moledo thanks the organisers of the event and the audience. He adds that this event can provide important contributions to the Conference of the Future Europe.

Mr Variz points out that awareness is increasing for what concerns affordability, inclusiveness, and digital sovereignty. All these topics are now on the top of the list for policy makers.

The event closes with a group picture of all the participants.

Recommendations:

- Make digital skills a key component of all **social inclusion and rehabilitation programs**.
- Launching awareness raising campaigns on the **risks linked to digital services and social media platforms**.
- Financing **projects in the sector of AI** in order to provide innovative solutions in order to avoid leaving anyone behind.
- Helping low income families gain access to **free/low-cost internet access and computers**.
- Providing **digital literacy training** through a number of programs.
- Programs aiming at removing **sociocultural, psychological and pedagogical barriers** that restrict **women's and girls' interests**, preferences and choices.
- Inclusion of accessibility in the curricular of higher education, to train **digital accessibility professionals**.
- Make sure that **digital legislation** includes accessibility as a core element.
- Change the mindset in the **IT industry** and bring a **universal design approach** in order to achieve a greater technologies inclusion.
- Address **transport poverty** and **accessibility to transports for all**.

Hereby are the five most voted recommendations during the event

1. Make digital skills a key component of all **social inclusion and rehabilitation programs**.
 2. Helping low income families gain access to **free/low-cost internet access and computers**.
 3. Providing **digital literacy training** through a number of programs.
 4. Programs aiming at removing **sociocultural, psychological and pedagogical barriers** that restrict **women's and girls' interests**, preferences and choices.
- Make sure that **digital legislation** includes accessibility as a core element.

