***ESU CONFERENCE :*** ***The era of digitalization: from communication highways to disinformation and infodemic. Opportunities and potential risks***

Dear President,

Dear An,

Dear friends,

Thanks to Patrick for his extremely interesting contribution. We are all together on this fascinating journey and we should make sure that indeed no one will be left behind and that in particular older, vulnerable citizens are fully on board while entering this digital transition.

It’s needless to mention that for the EU Commission the digital transition is at the core of its political priorities - including for the Recovery and Resilience Facility which foresees huge investments in all EU Member States. The digital and green transition will be the two main drivers of that far reaching economic recovery programme.

Allow me use this opportunity to make the connection to four ongoing EU initiatives that are very relevant and important in order to address the opportunities and challenges of the fast moving digital society for older citizens**.**

**1.GREEN PAPER ON AGEING and the ongoing consultation.**

The Green Paper explicitly underlines that there are two policy concepts, in particular, that can enable a thriving ageing society: healthy and active ageing, and *lifelong learning*. Both approaches work best when they start at an early age, as they are relevant for the entire life-cycle. Importantly, high levels of education and good health are mutually reinforcing.

There is a large potential for developing the skills of older people. We all know that adult education and training helps to improve employability in a changing world of work as evolving skills needs in particular due to green and digital transitions bring potential for new jobs.

Lifelong learning - investing in people’s knowledge, skills and competences throughout their lives - forms part of the response to the challenges of ageing. Continuous investment in learning has many positive effects: acquiring and updating skills helps people remain employable and succeed in job transitions, but continued learning also helps to prevent cognitive decline related to old age. It is also a way for older people to play an active role in society. Developing citizenship competences is important for lifelong democratic participation.

This is all at the core of the implementation of the European Skills Agenda recently adopted by the Commission. In addition, with the creation of a European Education Area by 2025, we are working towards access to quality education for all, taking particular account of those more at risk of underachievement and social exclusion.

The GP consultation invites all stakeholders to participate, among others also on the inequalities faced by rural communities in accessing digital services, inequalities that have been further enhanced by the pandemic, in particular for vulnerable citizens and/or for elderly citizens who are living in remote regions.

This brings me to the second initiative, that is upcoming:

**2.COMMISSION’S PLAN FOR RURAL AREAS**.

The EU Commission is preparing a new Vision plan on the future of rural areas and the crucial role they can play in our society. This initiative will set out a vision for the future of rural areas and gather views covering challenges such as:

* demographic change
* connectivity
* low income levels
* limited access to services.

It will also explore innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions in the light of climate and digital transformation and the COVID-19 crisis.

Connectivity, in particular digital connectivity, is crucial for citizens living in rural, remote areas. The pandemic has, obviously, exacerbated this need. But COVID has also created new opportunities for rural areas: citizens all of a sudden have started to appreciate more outdoor space; the increase of remote working has also increased exponentially the charm of rural areas. When we succeed in responding to these trends in a positive manner, we will be able to tackle the devastating trend of depopulation that rural areas are faced with; and this can indirectly entail that public authorities will be enclined to invest more in services for these regions, including for older citizens.

Needless to add that 5G connectivity for rural areas also opens additional opportunities for older citizens, with regard to remote health screening in particular.

**3.CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE**

These are crucial issues for older Europeans. We expect them to be raised at the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe, which has gotten the green light recently, and which will be launched soon. The digital transition and the challenges and opportunites for our society and for elderly citizens in particular will be without any doubt on the agenda. And you can put it on the agenda, by means of the interactive digital platform that will be launched soon. It offers a unique opportunity for ESU, for all stakeholders that are active in this field to discuss these challenges and to come up with concrete proposals and recommendations for the European level.

The Conference finally can kick-off now. Presidents Sassoli, von der Leyen and Council President Portuguese Prime Minister Costa, will chair the Conference. The Executive Board will be convened for the first time on the 24th of March. From the EU Commission side, work will be coordinated by Vice-President Šuica. The Conference will start with debates and events on the local, regional and national level and from then onwards citizens from all over the Union will meet (hopefully also in person) across borders, in European citizens’ panels, to discuss and draft concrete policy proposals for the EU.

These proposals will subsequently be debated at Plenary sessions, where after concrete recommendations will be addressed at the relevant institutional bodies.

This Conference is open to all European citizens and civil society organisations.

This Conference invites citizens, partners, associations, ngo’s and public authorities to participate in a Europe-wide exchange of ideas and proposals.

It will be more than just a citizens’ dialogue. President von der Leyen has committed to follow up on the recommendations of the citizens and to translate them into concrete policy action (we should know more in 1 year, by Spring 2022).

**4.EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY ACTION PLAN**

The Conference on the Future of Europe aims at strengthening our European democracy. We all are aware of the serious problems that democracy is faced with, also within the EU.

It is important, and the pandemic has even much increased this need, to listen to citizens and to give them the guarantee that they will be more involved in policy-making, not just once in 4 or 5 years, at the ballot-box.

This exercise is a concrete model of participative democracy that will be rolled out, and that is precisely meant, not to replace but to strengthen our representative democracy.

The Commission’s recent EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY ACTION PLAN has underlined how digital tools and social media can be a real threat to our democracy (needless to refer to what happened in Washington in the last week of former President Trump’s mandate). But these threats are also very much present in the EU too.

We are convinced that the best recipe to tackle these threats is actively listening to citizens, to involve them and to discuss with citizens the value of digital literacy. This is true for citizens of all ages (starting from primary school).

Digital tools are not only a threat to democracy; we will actively use the digital interactive platform of the Future Conference to involve citizens of all backgrounds and living in all areas of the EU, to have this debate on the future of Europe, and to know which issues are a priority for our citizens.

Obviously, this exercise is not only meant to collect opinions of citizens who are fans and enthusiastic about the European project. Criticism and negative voices about the EU will also be part of the exercise.

Only hate speech, discriminatory voices and racist opinions will be banned from the platform.

Summarising: disinformation and fake news are a huge challenge. We are ready and able to counter it, by investing in an active and interactive dialogue with citizens, without fear to be confronted with critical voices.

We suppose that a lot of stakeholders, including ESU, and individual citizens will use this opportunity to express their concerns and their views on the future of Europe, on climate, on migration, our position vis-à-vis China or Russia,…..

We are looking forward to this ambitious exercise, to the outcome and to the policy responses that the EU and the national authorities will have to come up with.