

Winning Essay of the Special Prize for Schools in Moldova in the 2024 School Competition of the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations

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European Democracy's Digital Journey

All roads lead... not to Rome, but to the European Union, towards defending and strengthening democracy, which is the only form of social organisation that can be identified with the fundamental values of freedom, equality and respect for human rights. It is a road that must, at the same time, lead towards a united community in which democracy guarantees not only everyone's right to express their opinion, but also a framework in which diversity is appreciated and protected. The European Union is committed to protecting these values by strengthening democratic institutions, supporting transparency and promoting a strong rule of law. This is the road being taken by those of us who form part of the educational community located at the intersection of geographic coordinates $47^{\circ}02'N$ $28^{\circ}51'E$, with the aim of building a stable and fair future for all citizens. With this in mind, we are increasingly embracing the common values and ideals of the European Union, looking with hope towards a more prosperous future marked by deeper integration. However, the road we are on is full of obstacles, bends, ups and downs. The crossroads between digitalisation and democracy is the most important of crossroads, brimming with challenges and opportunities. And this challenge is impossible to ignore in the context of the recent political events in our country. In an increasingly digitally connected world, challenges and opportunities intertwine in a landscape that requires us to tread carefully. How can we maintain a balance between technology that is transforming society and the fundamental values of democracy? This is the key question we are trying to answer, in a context where the European Union has pledged to build a digitalised and democratic future.

Digitalisation plays a crucial role in transforming the relationship between citizens and state institutions, changing the dynamics of governance and social interaction. Digital technologies offer significant opportunities for connectivity and transparency, enabling citizens to participate actively and directly in decision-making. These technological advances pave the way for a more inclusive

and participatory democracy, where the voice of every citizen can be heard and taken into account.

A standout example of this transformation is Barcelona's *Decidim* platform. This open-source platform, launched in 2016, allows citizens to propose public policies, vote on specific projects and participate directly in the process of drafting laws or local initiatives. In a city with a population of around 1.6 million, *Decidim* provides a way to connect the local government with its citizens in a transparent and interactive way. The platform allows anyone who wishes to, to access relevant information, express their views and play an active part in shaping political decision-making.

A key aspect of this platform is that decision-making is no longer restricted to a narrow circle of officials or civil servants, but involves the whole community. Thus, citizens are not simply politicians' subjects, but active participants, contributing ideas and solutions that better meet their needs. For example, in 2021, more than 400 000 users of Barcelona's *Decidim* platform participated in public debates on urban planning and the allocation of the city's participatory budget, leading to efficient and sustainable decisions.

Barcelona's *Decidim* model is not the only one of its kind, but it is certainly a good example of how digitalisation can turn local governance into a more effective participatory democracy. This model could be replicated in other cities and regions of the European Union and tailored to the specificities of each community, in order to stimulate open and participatory decision-making.

There are in fact a number of digital platforms that have been developed to strengthen democracy and encourage civic activism. Change.org is a global online petition platform that allows citizens to create and sign petitions on various political and social issues. This is an effective method of digital civic activism, as it allows a large number of people to be mobilised quickly to influence political, economic or social change. For example, Change.org petitions have had a significant impact in campaigns for human rights, environmental protection and other areas of public interest.

These digital platforms play a part in strengthening democracy and civic activism by promoting transparency, making it easier for citizens to engage in political processes and ensuring continuous dialogue between authorities and civil society.

Digital technologies have the ability to revolutionise the accessibility of democratic processes, and electronic voting is a telling example of this. This innovative system allows citizens to participate in elections in a simpler and more efficient way, thus removing physical and geographical barriers that could limit access to voting. A case in point is Estonia, where electronic voting has been taking place since 2005, making it easier for citizens from remote areas and persons with disabilities to participate in elections. In this way, digitalisation democratises electoral participation, making it inclusive and accessible to all, regardless of people's circumstances.

However, this model also poses new challenges, in particular as regards the security of the electoral process. Voting that takes place in an unsupervised environment can jeopardise the freedom to vote and voter secrecy, which can, in turn, compromise electoral integrity. This year's presidential elections showed how vulnerable we are in the decision-making process, especially those who lack a solid voter education.

Another major risk to the democratic process in the era of digitalisation is the lack of digital skills, a key factor for citizens to be able to navigate effectively through an increasingly tech-driven world. In this context, unequal access to digital technology and education becomes a significant barrier to active participation in democratic life. According to a 2021 study carried out by the Pro Didactica Educational Centre, around 26 % of pupils in rural areas did not have access to suitable digital devices to participate in virtual classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. This accessibility gap has led to significant disparities in digital education, leaving many pupils and teachers in a vulnerable position. In addition, digital education has been a challenge not only for pupils, but also for teachers, who have had to do additional training to learn to use educational platforms and adapt teaching methods to the virtual environment. This has highlighted the urgent need to invest in ongoing digital training for pupils and teachers alike to ensure equitable education and support effective democratic participation in the digital age.

Another significant risk associated with digitalisation is *manipulation, public disinformation and the dissemination of fake news*. In the Republic of Moldova, a survey carried out by the Institute for Public Policy (Institutul de Politici Publice) in 2022 revealed that more than 60 % of citizens do not check the source of the information they consume online. This behaviour creates fertile ground for manipulating public opinion and disseminating conspiracy theories, which can seriously undermine citizens' trust in public institutions and democratic processes. In a digital world where information circulates rapidly but is not always accurate the ability to distinguish between credible and fake sources becomes crucial for protecting democratic values and building an informed and resilient society. Distorted information and rumours that spread rapidly online have fuelled uncertainty and eroded social cohesion; meanwhile trust in government authorities and international institutions has significantly decreased.

Despite these challenges, the digital path of European democracy is still full of opportunities. In this regard, it is essential for the **European Union** to invest in *digital education, media literacy and secure technologies* to ensure a democratic future in the digital age. Investing in these three areas will not only help citizens to participate actively in democratic processes, but will also provide them with the tools they need to deal with the challenges of an increasingly interconnected world.

In the face of these challenges, the road to a strengthened digital democracy is not easy, but it is certainly full of potential. As we progress through the digital age it is essential that we balance innovation and respect for the fundamental principles of democracy. Let us not forget that the digital transformation of democracy is a collective journey that requires long-term commitment, responsibility and vision. In this process, each of us has a role to play, because the change we want to see in the world starts with us. Small steps lead to big change. .

Reflecting on the content of this essay, we discovered that our involvement in this project is an extraordinary opportunity to experience and understand the essence of democracy in the digital age. This journey has not only given us the opportunity to learn and think deeply about the fundamental values of democracy, but also the chance to work together in a harmonious way, contributing to a more conscious, connected and engaged future. We are convinced that technology and democratic values can coexist in perfect harmony, building a more open, inclusive and connected society. The success of this process depends on our commitment – that of the citizens of the European Union and beyond – and on how much we invest in the future. What are the resources necessary for achieving this? We strongly believe that people are democracy's number one resource and we, as people, believe in the power of education. Another resource is work. As the great literary critic and historian George Călinescu said: *'Only labour, in all its forms, from the sowing of wheat to the harvesting of great ideas, confers human rights.'* This is the path we need to follow, with its valuable lessons and challenges that make us stronger, working side by side to build a prosperous future. Onwards and upwards!