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EUROPEAN TECHNOLOGY FORUM 4 SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY

PANEL 2 – TECHNOLOGY – AI, BLOCKCHAIN, BIGDATA

What are the Risks & Opportunities for Democracies & Citizens?

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SUMMARY

The panel was part of the one-day conference of the European Technology Forum 4 Sustainable Democracy, presenting a forum of various personalities from different backgrounds and fields related to technology and its impact on the civil society, with the conference promoting civic involvement through participation in sustainable developments in democracy.

Speakers were **Nele Leosk**, Ambassador-at-Large for Digital Affairs in the *Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, as well as **Vera Soares**, Government Advisor at the *Ministry for Digitalization for the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg*, and **Dr. Senka Krivić**, Research Associate at the *King's College* in London with a PhD in Machine Learning, Robot Learning, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and AI planning; the panel was moderated by **Philippe Linster**, CEO of the *House of Startups* in Luxembourg.

Nele Leosk presented Estonia as a digital state, with 99% of public services available online for citizens; Estonia quickly digitalized after its independence, especially due to right timing with coincidence of the country's independence and the invention of the Internet, as well as transparency by making data accessible for the public and allowing participation. Nonetheless, risks do arise, but Nele Leosk stated that “*dealing with every risk will not take us further*”. However, the influence of big tech companies, also in the public service sector, should be kept in mind, as this influence is not necessarily in the country's hands, although those companies are shaping public space. Moreover, the speaker claimed that democracy has become a shared responsibility, and is no longer a question of government and people, but rather of different actors and developments of the society. Given this, the question arises: who should be responsible for democratic innovation? Finally, Estonia established a so-called “digital embassy” in Luxembourg, which takes up the aforementioned risks as government data is stored abroad and is a flagship innovation in the export and combination of digital services, “removing borders”.

Vera Soares highlighted succeeding in digital government, raising awareness on the prerequisites for a successful set-up of digital services. The speaker reminded to keep the aspect of digital inclusion in mind, e.g., through user-friendly designs and by giving people the skills and therefore the ability to participate and use these services, resulting in a general trust for digital public services.

As a matter of fact, when implementing new services, public actors should respect differences in user requirements and backgrounds such as language or culture, as illustrated by Luxembourg: Government services are usually available in four languages, being German, French, Luxembourgish, and English, although not yet all services are available in every language. Furthermore, the speaker points out that innovation should observe the actual needs of people and business, while also promoting internal and external relations of government institutions. Luxembourg set up the so-called “GovTechLab”, which represents a co-working space for innovation in government through creating innovation partnerships, where companies issue suggestions for the government, ultimately enlarging participation through “simplifying together”.

Dr. Senka Krivić mentioned the importance of trust in public digitalization, mentioning that AI may be used by governments to create trust, although limits arise, e.g., due to limited trust in AI through users, especially keeping in mind possible inaccuracies in social spaces. Moreover, when used in public services, any AI should be “fair” and explainable for users, which creates a problem as especially high-performing AI is rather difficult to explain. What’s more, challenges arise from the field of ethics when using AI services, as the discussion of the accountability of AI is not yet solved. Additionally, risks also materialize in this field, as AI in public government services must be lawful, but may be affected by, e.g., law changes, thus needing a multidiscipline approach as well as possible adaption to societal changes. Finally, no AI can be totally independent or autonomous, as some human connection is given at any point, all in all requiring further research and development in this field.

CONCLUSIONS

The general conclusions resulting from the discussion are the following:

- In general, Big Data brings opportunities, but also risks and threats.
- The technological and digital advancement of Estonia became visible in public service, representing learning experience for other governments and its actors.
- Strategies are needed for the implementation of digital tools, which are influenced by transparency and trust; governments need also to understand technologies.
- Citizens must be involved in the process, which also poses a risk behind technology: if people are not using it, the development is irrelevant.
- AI is a part of digital networks, but must be explainable and accountable, especially in case of government mistakes with the problem of possible decline in decision acceptance through citizens.
- Level of research on AI and the interrelation of AI laws is not the same, needing updated frameworks.