Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments
Background information on Session I

Digitalisation is one of the core topics of our time. It has already taken hold of many areas of our lives and will in the future lead to fundamental changes to the economy, government, society and to all of our daily lives. New digital means of communication change the public sphere and, with it, the basis of our representative democracy. Politicians and citizens use the internet to obtain information, express their opinion or to enter into a shared discourse. This opens up many opportunities for a lively culture of debate. At the same time, neologisms such as *fake news, hate speech and microtargeting* describe the dark side of this digital transformation.
What risks and opportunities for representative democracy are posed by the changing public sphere in the digital age? Is it enough to shift existing democratic processes into the digital realm? How can parliaments actively shape the internet and improve it to create a more democratic space?

Digitalisation as the accelerating factor in the changing public sphere

The wide range of public discourse spaces on the internet, the changes to established rules of play – such as character limitation, broadcast times, journalistic methods and what one can say in public – can lead to the unleashing of the political public sphere that also has a particular impact on parliaments. Online debate cannot be regulated with the same instruments as the print and media sectors, in particular because it also has a global dimension. There is a risk that public discourse could be harmed and insecurities within society exploited in order to control the political debate (e.g. migration, terrorism, the climate crisis and the pandemic). *Does the shift of the public sphere into social media represent a risk to democracy, as has been suggested since the revealing of disinformation campaigns in the context of democratic processes, in particular elections and referenda?*

Global internet platforms lead to a large number of fragmented segments of the online public sphere, causing opposing opinions to drift further and further apart. Increasingly, we see how artificial intelligence is fed with large volumes of data to create attention bubbles in which users are confronted repeatedly with the same content and where polarizing issues are disproportionately highlighted. Algorithms amplify hate speech and a coarsening of the dialog between users. The unfiltered distribution of content in these social networks does not contribute towards the debate becoming more objective – on the contrary, uncertainty and disintegration

dominate. Information prepared by journalists appears alongside individual statements – truths, half-truths, untruths. Freedom of the press is increasingly under pressure.
How can parliaments, as a place of convergence, focus and concentration, create a renewed culture of discussion and information online, for and with media-literate, engaged citizens? How can we support a varied, high-quality media landscape?

Manipulation of opinions as an attack on parliamentary democracy

Social media was supposed to give people a voice, enabling access irrespective of previous economic or educational barriers. It made it easier to connect with like-minded individuals, discuss controversial points of view and create a "global village". On the other hand, the internet is also used by extremist groups with the help of algorithms and bots to fuel the fears and concerns of the population. The storming of the Capitol in Washington showed how mass distribution of disinformation and hate speech can become a systemic threat to democracy. Political parties also benefit from new forms of addressing voters and manipulation in the form of microtargeting and social bots, which contributes to the rise of populist and right-wing forces in Europe. In the worst case, this process leads to election successes that changes the core tenets of representative and liberal democracy.
The radicalization that can be observed in some parts of society is in part an expression of changing orientations within it. The possibility of framing every "like" as an opinion and providing a (radical) political minority with an unprecedented platform is, among other things, the product of digital networks. *What new instruments could be used or developed to make democracy stronger and more resilient? Can parliaments and political parties be obligated to self-regulate to a greater extent and to introduce ethical principles in digital communication?*

E-Participation as an opportunity for digital democracy

Despite the digital opportunities offered by e-government, which make administrations more efficient and public services more tailored to individual requirements, digitalisation has not fundamentally changed the legislative work of parliaments. Online elections are not (yet) possible in the majority of places, due to constitutional requirements and security and data protection concerns. However, elements of online participation by citizens are present in the form of e-petitions and in the work of the committees and study commissions.

Participation in the public debate could grow further still through digital participation opportunities. There are examples of e-participation across various political levels. In Germany, a digital citizens' assembly initiated by civil society and under the patronage of the German Bundestag examined the issue of Germany's role in the world. The climate crisis has also been the subject of (digital) citizens' debates, for example as part of the French project "Convention citoyenne pour le climat" from 2019 - 2020 or within the new citizens' assembly on climate policy in Germany. On Europe Day, 9 May 2021, what is expected to be the most important and ambitious dialogue for European democracy will begin with the "Conference on the Future of

Europe". The corresponding multilingual online platform was launched on 19 April 2021, inviting European citizens to directly submit their proposals for the EU of tomorrow.

Opportunities to actively shape global standards in digitalisation

Today, the task before us is to set the course in a way that makes Europe more innovative in the field of digitalisation. In light of the enormous concentration of power with a few US-based and Chinese technology companies, what matters for Europe is also political and economic sovereignty. *Can we retrieve the European data produced by our citizens as a public good, for example, by using the market power of European users to enforce the protection of personal data around the world?* This could, in line with the fundamental right to informational self-determination, represent a real social value for better informed policy-making. *How can a European Internet Governance Strategy be jointly developed in which the people are the focus of digitalisation policy? Can high standards for democracy and human rights protection be ensured online too? Digitalisation and the changing public sphere – that is a question that represents major challenges for our democracy and which parliaments can also play a key role in answering.*