

High level thematic session 'The impact of digitisation on politics, public trust, and democracy'

Messages

- Digitisation can empower citizens, strengthen institutions, and promote more inclusive democratic participation and policy making. But it can also lead to information disorder, public mistrust, and the manipulation of public opinion. There was broad support for the idea that we should avoid over-focusing on the risks, and rather put emphasis on maximising the positive aspects of digitisation.
- Trust in public institutions and policy making processes remains a matter of concern, and digitisation can act both as a solution and as a threat. Many emphasised that core principles – such as accountability, transparency, legitimacy, and openness – are needed to consolidate or restore trust. Digital technologies can help put these principles into practice.
- 'Fake news' continues to be in focus, but many noted that the term is confusing, and 'disinformation' or 'misinformation' could be used instead. While the phenomenon is not new, it now has a wider effect due to digital technologies. There were diverse views on the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders. Some noted that governments are mainly responsible, and should invest in education and media literacy, instead of building new institutions and policies. Governments were called upon to abstain from content regulation and censorship. Some were in favour of intermediary responsibility and the need for regulation in this regard, while others argued that platforms cannot be solely responsible for countering misinformation.
- There was general agreement on the crucial role that education and literacy have in equipping individuals with a critical mind, and the ability to make informed choices and distinguish trustworthy information from misinformation and/or manipulation.
- While acknowledging the importance of education, several other remedies were proposed for addressing the challenges of misinformation in the digital space: strengthening quality journalism, rebalancing the relation between traditional and new media, fact checking, and providing alternative positive stories.
- Finally, it was broadly agreed that multistakeholder cooperation is key in making sure that we, as a society, use the digital space to the best of our abilities. While the digital future is characterised by uncertainties, and facing the unknown is a challenge, relying on long-term principles (such as accountability and transparency) combined with having flexibility in implementing and finding tailor-made solutions to face new challenges would be the most appropriate way forward.