

Cities, villages and regions strengthen cooperation with the European Commission to bridge the digital divide in Europe



The 2021 Broadband Platform kick-off meeting underlined that digitalisation and digital connectivity must be a top priority for local communities in their recovery from the pandemic.

The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and the European Commission pursue their common effort to help digital transformation and high-speed broadband reach all European territories, including rural and sparsely populated areas.

The members of the Broadband Platform, a policy dialogue initiative between the European Commission and the CoR, meet twice a year to address issues that hamper the connectivity of underserved areas. The 2021 kick-off meeting, that took place in a fully virtual mode today, served as an occasion for the [13 members](#) of the CoR and the European Commission to take stock of the big transformations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and to define the work programme for this year. □

[Michael Murphy](#) (IE/EPP), head of the CoR's Irish delegation, chair of the commission for Economic policy and of the Broadband Platform, opened the meeting by highlighting that *"It is difficult to imagine a more timely context for such a meeting than the one we have these days. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic we have all seen an accelerated digitalisation in our daily lives. Digital technology has become imperative to ensure continuity in our working and private lives, be it through teleworking, home-schooling, e-commerce, e-health, e-government, digital democracy or digital entertainment. As a result, local and regional authorities are challenged to make connectivity and digital transformation work for citizens. We are concerned with closing the gaps in connectivity where they exist and with making use of opportunities that digital technology offers for rural areas"*.

Ricardo Castanheira, Counsellor for Digital and Telecom of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, Anthony Whelan, Digital Policy Adviser to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and Directors from the European Commission joined participants to discuss the EU policy strategy and the funding available for connectivity policy and digital transformation. Investments in the digital transformation will be one of the main pillars of the [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#), the EUR 672.5 billion instrument designed to support EU countries in carrying out reforms and investing in the EU's common priorities, also known as the Recovery Fund.

As outlined by the [EU Annual regional and local Barometer](#) published in October, the prominent role of digital technology in COVID-19 resilience and response has highlighted shortcomings in digital infrastructure and digital literacy, and has made the digital divide between cities and regions ever more pronounced.

Background:

In 2017, [the Committee of the Regions and the European Commission jointly launched the Broadband Platform](#) with the aim to help high-speed broadband reach all European regions, including rural and sparsely populated areas where there is not enough market-driven development. Since then, the Platform has been a key instrument in making the voice of local and regional authorities heard through the important added value of the CoR and its members, feeding into the European Commission's policymaking process.

In October, the CoR adopted the opinion [A Strategy for Europe's Digital future and A Strategy for Data](#), drafted by [Mark Weinmeister](#) (DE/EPP) Secretary of State for European Affairs of the Land of Hesse, which recognizes the central role of digital transformation in the EU's response to COVID-19. Please find the press release [here](#).

The European Committee of the Regions is currently working with the European Commission and ESPON on a measuring framework for digital transformation of cities as part of the [Join Boost Sustain initiative](#). Interested cities can find more information [here](#).

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[Press release – Foreign and security policy: MEPs call for unity and strategic autonomy](#)



The EU has to be able to defend its interests and values, and champion a rules-based international order that guarantees multilateralism, democracy and human rights, MEPs stress in their annual report on the implementation of the [Common Foreign and Security Policy](#).

Strategic cooperation with third countries

Europe needs to work closely with its allies and establish more strategic cooperation with third countries based on trust and mutual benefit, they say, adding that transatlantic cooperation remains crucial in EU foreign policy. MEPs condemn in the strongest terms the “mob assault” on the US Congress by rioters, which was “incited by President Donald Trump’s conspiracy theories and baseless claims that the presidential election of 3 November 2020 was rigged”, adding that they are alarmed by the rise of populism and extremism on both sides of the Atlantic.

Europe also has to work more closely with the UN and NATO, and jointly tackle regional and global security challenges such as conflict situations, health crises, hybrid threats, cyberattacks and disinformation. To increase the effectiveness of the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy, MEPs call on member states to urgently consider whether [decisions should be taken by majority and not unanimity](#), at least on human rights issues and sanctions.

Quote

Rapporteur [David McAllister](#) (EPP, DE) said: “The EU has untapped potential regarding its Common Foreign and Security Policy. We can only step up our leadership on the international stage as the preferred ‘partner of choice’ for third parties if we are united and work together.”

The report was adopted by 340 votes for, 100 against and 245 abstentions.

A more robust defence policy

In their annual report on the implementation of the [Common Security and](#)

[Defence Policy](#), adopted by 387 votes for, 180 against and 119 abstentions, MEPs underline the vital need to intensify the EU's efforts to be more strategically autonomous.

MEPs stress that the EU can actively contribute to overcoming and settling conflicts around the world through [CSDP missions and operations](#), in particular in the EU's neighbourhood. They urge the Commission to present and implement an ambitious strategic work programme for the [European Defence Fund](#) designed to strengthen collaborative actions and cross-border cooperation throughout the EU as well as for military mobility. Finally, recalling that effective international arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation regimes are a cornerstone of global and European security and stability, they point to a worrying trend of non-compliance with, withdrawal from, or the non-extension of, global arms control treaties.

Quote

Rapporteur [Sven Mikser](#) (S&D, ET) said: "We are committed to strengthening a rules-based international order and effective multilateralism. The EU must take on a stronger role in providing security and prosperity in its neighbourhood. It will only be able to do so if the member states contribute the necessary assets and forces to Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations. The EU has to continue developing its autonomous capacity, as well as strengthening its resilience to hybrid and cyber threats."

[Press release – Human rights and COVID-19: MEPs denounce measures taken by authoritarian regimes](#)



In their annual report assessing the human rights situation in the world, adopted on Wednesday, MEPs highlight that several authoritarian regimes have used the pandemic to justify exacerbated measures aimed at weakening democratic principles and fundamental freedoms, severely undermining human rights, repressing dissent and limiting space for civil society.

Growing aspirations and mobilisation of citizens

While noting that many negative trends persist and are on the increase, they also welcome citizens' growing aspirations. Younger generations in particular are mobilising to bring about political and societal change in support for human rights, democratic governance, equality and social justice, more ambitious climate action and better protection of the environment.

Strengthening democratic institutions

The report asks the EU and its member states to continue supporting the strengthening of democratic institutions, transparent and credible electoral processes worldwide, to fight against impunity, to ensure that civil society organisations can continue to work and to combat inequalities.

It also urges them to develop an explicit strategy to counter increasing state withdrawal and pushback against the international human rights framework.

EU human rights sanctions mechanism

MEPs finally push for the new EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime to be implemented urgently, as an essential part of the EU's existing human rights and foreign policy toolbox. Such a mechanism should serve to strengthen the EU's role as a global human rights actor, they say, allowing for targeted sanctions against individuals and state or non-state actors and other entities responsible for or complicit in serious human rights violations around the world.

The text was approved by 459 votes in favour, 62 against and 163 abstentions.

Quote

“As MEPs, it is our duty to speak out, loudly and clearly, when it comes to human rights and the need to protect and recognise all those who work tirelessly and in difficult situations to uphold them. To achieve true credibility as the European Union, it is vital that we act and speak with a strong and unified voice on human rights. We should not fail those who look towards Europe with hope”, said rapporteur [Isabel Santos](#) (S&D, PT).

Additional information

Members [discussed the content](#) of the new report with EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell on 19 January. The text was originally prepared by MEPs in the [Subcommittee on Human Rights](#).

[Press release – Guidelines for military and non-military use of Artificial Intelligence](#)



The report, adopted on Wednesday with 364 votes in favour, 274 against, 52 abstentions, calls for an EU legal framework on AI with definitions and ethical principles, including its military use. It also calls on the EU and its member states to ensure AI and related technologies are human-centred

(i.e. intended for the service of humanity and the common good).

Military use and human oversight

MEPs stress that human dignity and human rights must be respected in all EU defence-related activities. AI-enabled systems must allow humans to exert meaningful control, so they can assume responsibility and accountability for their use.

The use of lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS) raises fundamental ethical and legal questions on human control, say MEPs, [reiterating their call](#) for an EU strategy to prohibit them as well as a ban on so-called “killer robots”. The decision to select a target and take lethal action using an autonomous weapon system must always be made by a human exercising meaningful control and judgement, in line with the principles of proportionality and necessity.

The text calls on the EU to take a leading role in creating and promoting a global framework governing the military use of AI, alongside the UN and the international community.

AI in the public sector

The increased use of AI systems in public services, especially healthcare and justice, should not replace human contact or lead to discrimination, MEPs assert. People should always be informed if they are subject to a decision based on AI and be given the option to appeal it.

When AI is used in matters of public health, (e.g. robot-assisted surgery, smart prostheses, predictive medicine), patients’ personal data must be protected and the principle of equal treatment upheld. While the use of AI technologies in the justice sector can help speed up proceedings and take more rational decisions, final court decisions must be taken by humans, be strictly verified by a person and be subject to due process.

Mass surveillance and deepfakes

MEPs also warn of threats to fundamental human rights and state sovereignty arising from the use of AI technologies in mass civil and military surveillance. They call for public authorities to be banned from using “highly intrusive social scoring applications” (for monitoring and rating citizens). The report also raises concerns over “deepfake technologies” that have the potential to “destabilise countries, spread disinformation and influence elections”. Creators should be obliged to label such material as “not original” and more research should be done into technology to counter this phenomenon.

Quote

Rapporteur [Gilles Lebreton \(ID, FR\)](#) said: “Faced with the multiple challenges posed by the development of AI, we need legal responses. To prepare the Commission’s legislative proposal on this subject, this report aims to put in place a framework which essentially recalls that, in any area, especially in the military field and in those managed by the state such as justice and

health, AI must always remain a tool used only to assist decision-making or help when taking action. It must never replace or relieve humans of their responsibility”.

[Video message by President Charles Michel on the day of US President Joe Biden's inauguration](#)



I want to warmly congratulate President Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States, and Kamala Harris, the first woman to become Vice-President. I wish them my very best, as they strive to heal the American people and lead their country out of the pandemic.

Like people of all nations, the American people deserve leaders who take their hopes and concerns to heart. And I trust President Biden and Kamal Harris will do just that.

I am putting a proposal on the table: Let's build a new founding pact. For a stronger Europe. For a stronger America. For a better world.

I believe we should work together on five priorities. Boosting multilateral cooperation. Combatting Covid-19. Tackling climate change. Rebuilding our economies, ensuring fair trade and promoting a digital transformation. Finally joining forces on security and peace.

The EU and US, we have our differences. Friends have differences. Our alliance was sometimes questioned, on both sides of the Atlantic.

But now it's time to bring back conviction and common sense. Now it's time to rejuvenate our cooperation. We invest and trade with each other more than with anyone else. The ties between our people are deep.

Today, our partnership is more vital than ever, as our shared values are being challenged. Our cooperation is in the best interest of both our peoples. And in the best interest of the world.

On our side, we are committed, we are ready.

[Video message on the day of US President Biden's inauguration](#)