



**European Committee
of the Regions**

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OPINION

Digital Cohesion

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- recalls that the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) highlighted digital cohesion as a key anchor in creating inclusive societies in the EU: "digital cohesion" is an important additional dimension of the traditional concept of economic, social and territorial cohesion defined in the EU Treaty¹;
- notes that the scope of measures to take to address digital divides overlap several policy areas, making digital cohesion a horizontal endeavour. Therefore welcomes the COFE's recognition of digital cohesion as complementary to economic, social and territorial cohesion²; considers that digital cohesion is a component of economic, social and territorial cohesion and that it has to be addressed as a public service good;
- notes that digital skills and digital infrastructure are key for the development of all the other dimensions of the Digital Compass and thus recommends that the European Commission undertake and commit to a dedicated long-term strategy, resources and coordination mechanisms, leveraging large scale projects based on Member States cooperation, to ensure every citizen has up-to-date digital skills and infrastructures;
- suggests that a robust and comprehensive system of local digital indicators measuring digital maturity be developed to serve as background for decision-making, including as criteria for determination of resources for economic, social and territorial cohesion within the meaning of the Common Provisions Regulation currently in force;
- proposes that the European Commission and the European Committee of the Regions shall cooperate to move toward a Digital Compass that concretely takes into account the territorial dimension. This will allow moving from the assessment of progress in terms of digitalisation and digital transformation in Europe to the evolution of digital cohesion across territories.

¹ EU annual regional and local Barometer, Chapter IV – The digital transition at local and regional levels, page 63.

² Conference on the Future of Europe, Report on the Final Outcome, May 2022, 12. Proposal: Enhancing the EU's competitiveness and further deepening the Single Market, Measure 14, page 56.

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Reference document

N/A

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Digital Cohesion

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Introduction

1. reiterates from the outset that economic, social and territorial cohesion is one of the main objectives indicated by the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Article 174) to precisely achieve harmonious and balanced development across the European Union (EU) and its regions;
2. stresses that the "digital cohesion" concept calls for the recognition of the essential role that technology plays in our life, and requires the integration of the Cohesion objectives in the digital rights, principles and policies of the Union, calling for Article 175 TFEU to be reviewed accordingly;
3. recalls that in the 2021 EU Annual Local and Regional Barometer report, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) highlighted digital cohesion as a key anchor in creating inclusive societies in the EU: "digital cohesion" is an important additional dimension of the traditional concept of economic, social and territorial cohesion defined in the EU Treaty³. Digitalisation can help to reduce the social and territorial inequalities by reaching out to citizens who would otherwise be excluded from certain services or underserved;
4. recalls that the concept of digital cohesion⁴, and the input needed to concretely lead to its attainment, as outlined in a major recent European Committee of the Regions foresight study⁵, entails every citizen in Europe having decent access to the internet and to digital services and that the sovereignty and resilience of the EU's digital infrastructure be enhanced;
5. emphasises that the EU needs to work to make the digital transformation as accessible as possible to all EU citizens and to pay particular attention to help the less developed regions as well as those suffering from permanent natural or demographic disadvantages, such as archipelagos, outermost regions, islands, cross-border and mountain regions, to speed up their digital transformation, given the unique challenges they face while maximising their assets, and the importance of peer to peer collaboration;
6. acknowledges that, while technology is a key tool to help us adapt to challenging situations affecting all spheres of society, the prominent role of digital technology in responding and

³ EU annual regional and local Barometer, Chapter IV – The digital transition at local and regional levels, page 63.

⁴ CoR opinion, SEDEC-VI/053: "Digital Europe for all: delivering smart and inclusive solutions on the ground" (Rapporteur: Anne Karjalainen, FI, PES).

⁵ Fontana, Susana, Fabio Bisogni (Fondazione FORMIT), Simona Cavallini, Rossella Soldi (Progress Consulting S.r.l.), Territorial foresight study in addressing the digital divide and promoting digital cohesion, 16 May 2022 (draft).

building resilience to COVID-19 has highlighted shortcomings in digital infrastructure and literacy, and has made the digital divides in the EU even more pronounced;

Challenges to be addressed

7. recalls that "digital divide" is a term that refers to "different levels of access and use of information and communication technologies and, more specifically, to the gaps in access and use of internet-based digital services"⁶; underlines that high-speed connectivity for everyone in the European Union from cities to rural and remote areas must be a service of general interest and treated accordingly;
8. underlines that digital forms of communication also create new challenges for democratic processes. Many people get most of their news from social media, the operators of which rarely carry out fact checks. The digital debate on social media can lead to social polarisation and fragmentation, and there is significant potential to exert influence, in particular through the use of algorithms that steer user behaviour;
9. stresses that digital cohesion must address the reasons behind the growing digital divide in the Union and the challenges encountered in regions which, while striving to bridge the digital divide, are nevertheless still lagging behind, even though the widening of the digital divide is not officially recognised as a threat to the cohesion of the EU;
10. emphasises that the outermost regions, islands, cross-border and mountain regions and those that are facing demographic challenges⁷ have specific geographical, economic, demographic and social characteristics, which entail unique challenges. These include limited size (surface, population, density, economy), limited local market and difficulty in achieving economies of scale, high costs of transport, poorly developed inter-industrial relations, deficits in entrepreneurial skills, infrastructure and supply of services for businesses (compared to continental ones) and reduced social and training services to citizens. Moreover, archipelagos that have double or triple insularity, face another level of burden as specified most recently by the European Parliament's report on "Islands and cohesion policy: current situation and future challenges"⁸;
11. is concerned that existing digital gaps are not diminishing, but, are in fact growing around the following key components of digital transformation in the EU⁹:

⁶ OECD (2021), Bridging Connectivity Divides, OECD Digital Economy Papers, No 315, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1787/e38f5db7-en>.

⁷ A total of 17.7 million people live on 362 islands with over 50 inhabitants in 15 European countries; in these regions GDP per capita is under 80% of EU average and a significant part of them still belong to the under-developed region category. (Source: <https://www.regione.sicilia.it/la-regione-informa/estimation-insularity-cost-sicily>).

⁸ (A9-0144 / 2022-159), [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2021/2079\(INI\)&l=de](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2021/2079(INI)&l=de).

⁹ Source: 2021 EU Annual Local and Regional Barometer, Chapter IV – The digital transition at local and regional levels, A. The state of the digital transformation, page 69.

- data on the level of basic digital skills is not available at local and regional level. Instead, a proxy indicator of individuals' ability to use the internet daily has been used. While in some western EU Member States the urban-rural digital gap is being closed in terms of digital skills (DE, SE, NL, BE), it is still significant in all other Member States;
 - in the area of connectivity and digital infrastructure, rural areas are still lagging behind in terms of Next Generation Access (NGA) coverage and the total coverage of households with high capacity networks;
 - the digital transformation of businesses is measured through the number of unicorns (a start-up with a total market value of over USD 1 billion) located in the EU, showing these are largely concentrated in the continental part of Europe and in capital regions;
 - from 2019 to 2020, the gap in the digitalisation of public services increased between individuals living in cities and those in urban areas;
 - the specific situation of the outermost regions must not be overlooked, the unique and complex reality of which requires European policies to be adapted to their specific characteristics (as recognised by Article 349 TFEU), in the interest of not only the principle of economic and social cohesion, but also digital cohesion;
12. notes that the scope of measures to take to address digital divides overlap several policy areas, making digital cohesion a horizontal endeavour. Therefore welcomes the COFE's recognition of digital cohesion as complementary to economic, social and territorial cohesion¹⁰; considers that digital cohesion is a component of economic, social and territorial cohesion and that it has to be addressed as a public service good;
13. highlights that the digital divide impacts services provided at the local level in the following areas:
- Healthcare: lack of access to e-Health services; reduced awareness and more exposure to COVID-19 and any future pandemic for disconnected people.
 - Education: unequal access to educational resources; standstill in the educational process; students have difficulties in getting technological support from their family environment.
 - Other key services: increase of financial exclusion due to the trend towards a cashless society; the population that is disconnected has restricted access to public benefits due to the use of digital-only services. Socio-economic conditions: increase in the socio-economic gap between those who could work remotely through digital means and those who could not work.
 - Increase in social exclusion: the digital divide might prevent people from participating in social initiatives that take place online and exercising their democratic rights.
14. when designing digital services, public administrations and other organisations providing digital services should cater for accessibility for people with some form of sensory disability or digital skills impairments, ensuring that these services are accessible from connections with constraints in the area of access infrastructure;

¹⁰ Conference on the Future of Europe, Report on the Final Outcome, May 2022, 12. Proposal: Enhancing the EU's competitiveness and further deepening the Single Market, Measure 14, page 56.

15. finds it regrettable that the inclusion of a principle on digital cohesion to ensure that no region or person is left behind in terms of connectivity and accessibility was not formally part of the EC proposal for a "European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade"¹¹;
16. welcomes targeted actions such as the recent amendment to the General Block Exemption Regulation, amending provisions on granting state aid for fixed broadband networks and the ongoing revision of Broadband Guidelines. The CoR, nevertheless, asks to add more clarity on the application of state aid rules on digital infrastructure and their additional simplification¹²;
17. points out that more CO₂ savings can be achieved through the targeted use of digital solutions. However, a major challenge is the growing energy consumption of data centres, terminal equipment and transmission networks. Digitalisation without a social and environmental framework would be negligent. Digitalisation itself needs to be accompanied in order to limit resource consumption and avoid rebound effects, where efficiency gains lead to increased consumption;

Achieving Digital Cohesion

18. notes that digital skills and digital infrastructure are key for the development of all the other dimensions of the Digital Compass and thus recommends that the European Commission undertake and commit to a dedicated long-term strategy, resources and coordination mechanisms, leveraging large scale projects based on Member States cooperation, to ensure every citizen has up-to-date digital skills and infrastructures;
19. recommends that proper digital skills should be included in all lifelong learning efforts in order to empower all the European citizens to benefit from the general right of access to the internet. In this context, education should not be understood simply as training, but should enable citizens to be active participants and to take a reflective approach to information acquisition;
20. stresses, in this regard, that particular focus is needed on digital empowerment of the most vulnerable groups, such as older people, ensuring that they have at least some basic skills and also to support youth in less developed regions whose education performance was mostly affected by the crisis due to the digital divide and the lack of access to appropriate online education in several regions. EU policies should put more emphasis on regional differences – in particular on less developed regions – when it comes to the allocation of the education budget to respond to the educational emergency, as it was in the recent years. Digital education content should also integrate the possibilities for children of national minorities, assuring equality by this means for all social backgrounds;

¹¹ Declaration on European Digital Rights and Principles, 26 January 2022.

¹² See RegHub report *21st Century Rules for 21st Century Infrastructure – Overcoming obstacles to transport, digital, and green infrastructure deployment*, available at <https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/Documents/RegHub/RegHub%20report%20on%20the%2021st%20century%20rules.pdf>.

21. stresses that another indispensable part of digital literacy for all sections of the population is sufficient media literacy to assess the reliability of information, particularly in the areas of health, finance and current affairs. This is particularly true due to the increase in phenomena such as fake news and hate speech;
22. proposes, as a follow-up to the recently issued Declaration on European Digital Rights and Principles, that the European Commission put in place a comprehensive framework, legal acts and instruments to enforce European digital rights and foster closer cooperation with European citizens to ensure that digital principles are shared and respond to societal needs. Indeed, a revision of the EU Charter for Fundamental Rights established in 2000 should be envisaged, taking into account the newly proclaimed digital rights;
23. welcomes the recommendation put forward by the Conference on the Future of Europe, on establishing equal access to the internet as fundamental right of every European citizen. In this regard, having a reliable access to the internet and to digital services through a sovereign and resilient EU digital infrastructure is key. Measures should be taken to ensure to fair and open competition and to prevent monopolies and general abuse of market power, vendor lock-in, data concentration and dependence on third countries in relation to infrastructure and services;
24. suggests, in line with the recommendation put forward by the Specific recommendations for National Regulatory Authorities, from the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications¹³ that infrastructure sharing (between telecom operators and other service providers such as electricity companies, railways etc.) to reduce costs of deploying broadband networks and remote areas be fostered;
25. points out that many regions have positive experiences with public-private partnerships both to increase digital infrastructure and to reduce the digital divide, and stresses the role of regional digital hubs in rolling out digitalisation;
26. strongly underlines that the European Commission and Member States should leverage the opportunities provided by decentralised working, by promoting living in rural areas, islands and mountain regions and areas with very low population density and dispersed populations, and by leveraging the advantages of living in these areas, which could result in a more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable and affordable living if, amongst other basic requirements, digital cohesion is guaranteed, thus meaning with the full availability of key digital services;
27. points to the merits of sharing best practice examples, from across European regions, of policies allowing for sustainable decentralised working possibilities, to ensure that decentralised working is a permanent feature in the workplace in a way that maximises economic, social and environmental benefits;

¹³ Iclaves & Esade, *Study on post-COVID measures to close the digital divide*, Final Report, October 2021.

28. emphasises the role of local and regional schools, universities, research centres and local and regional ecosystems in taking part or even leading Digital Innovation Hubs, as these are often not coordinated by regional policies and thus extensive know-how and brain power is often wasted; in this context, measures to avoid brain drain must be put in place and decentralised working, under fair conditions, can be part of the solution, in particular for disadvantaged areas;
29. stresses that concerning SMEs, more needs to be done to support them in digitalising. They lag behind larger companies with greater resources and a new skill-set needs to be developed. The administrative burden to access EU funds (not only related to digital) for SMEs and in particular micro-enterprises must be significantly reduced. The administrative requirements must be proportionate to the size of the company, while ensuring fair treatment of SME owners when receiving EU funds¹⁴. The European Commission should carry out an SME test for the current practices and put forward proposals to reduce the administrative burden especially for micro-enterprises (e.g. audit exemptions);
30. the allocation of Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) funds to digital initiatives and to SMEs in particular should be closely monitored, and it should be assessed if the amount of funding allocated to SMEs is proportionate to the SMEs' contribution to national (and regional) GDPs;

E-government, digital resilience

31. is in favour of the European Commission promoting a more targeted awareness-raising campaign, addressing citizens, on the existing e-participation platforms at EU, national, regional and local level, through better coordination with Member States and local and regional authorities (LRAs) and an exchange of best-practices;
32. suggests that Member States devote specific resources to the rollout of public-private partnerships, awareness raising campaigns and training to prepare citizens, especially the younger generations, businesses and the public sector to face cybercrime as a horizontal issue of digital transformation. The post-crisis support-funding programme should also include investments related to digital education, broadband connectivity, the acquisition of necessary equipment, as well as the training of teachers for such situations. Content management within digital education should be properly reconsidered as well, taking into consideration the challenges and problems that could arise from using digital, online content;
33. suggests that the European Commission and the Member States address cross-national regulatory and interoperability barriers preventing the full implementation of the Digital Single Market and hindering the scaling-up of business and technologies in Europe. In addition, LRAs shall facilitate the outlining of a common model through, for example, the Broadband Platform;

¹⁴ Declaration of direct personnel costs for SME owners who do not receive a salary and other natural persons who do not receive a salary are based on unit costs equivalent to a salary for researchers (https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021_2027/common/guidance/unit-cost-decision-sme-owners-natural-persons_en.pdf).

34. recommends that interoperability of regional and local public IT systems with those at national level should be a starting point for any digital initiative in particular where EU ICT standards, or common EU technical specifications already exist. Interoperability should always be coupled with technology neutrality of solutions and services also to avoid vendor lock-in; in addition, an SME test should be carried out for any digital public service targeted at them; representatives of LRAs should be members of relevant committees at national level and be given advisory roles in key interoperability initiatives;
35. highlights the importance of the availability of open source software and moreover public open data for all the high-value datasets, as identified in Directive (EU) 2019/1024 on open data and the re-use of public sector information, should also be considered a digital right of EU citizens to ensure their empowerment; citizens science should also be fostered and in this context the key communities should be mapped at the EU level and leveraged accordingly, including but not limited to gathering "local" data for monitoring digital cohesion and recommendations on how to achieve it;
36. insists, in line with its recent CoR opinion on the Artificial Intelligence Act, that the European Commission broaden the impact assessment on the implications of AI technologies for citizens, in particular for vulnerable groups, by obligatorily involving LRAs and/or their representatives in the consultation and by defining stricter transparency and information requirements for high-risk AI technologies¹⁵;

Monitoring and measuring the digital divides

37. underlines that the European Commission together with the Member States, Eurostat, national statistical offices and JRC shall promote a gradual, but continuous, increase of the geographical breakdown of existing data and widen the information scope to properly include aspects of the digital economy and of the digital society. The European Committee of the Regions shall be involved as the key actor to put forward the needs of LRAs in terms of data and information and suitable tools to measure digital maturity;
38. suggests that a robust and comprehensive system of local digital indicators measuring digital maturity be developed to serve as background for decision-making, including as criteria for determination of resources for economic, social and territorial cohesion within the meaning of the Common Provisions Regulation currently in force;
39. proposes that the European Commission and the European Committee of the Regions shall cooperate to move toward a Digital Compass that concretely takes into account the territorial dimension. This will allow moving from the assessment of progress in terms of digitalisation and digital transformation in Europe to the evolution of digital cohesion across territories.

Brussels, 12 October 2022

The President

¹⁵ CoR Opinion 2682/2021 on *European approach to artificial intelligence – Artificial Intelligence Act* (revised opinion), rapporteur Guido Rink (NL/PES), adopted on 2 December 2021.

of the European Committee of the Regions

Vasco Alves Cordeiro

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Petr Bližkovský

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Digital cohesion
Reference(s)	N/A
Legal basis	Article 307 TFEU
Procedural basis	Rule 41(b)(ii) RoP
Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter	N/A
Date of Bureau/President's decision	25 January 2022
Commission responsible	Commission for Economic Policy
Rapporteur	Gaetano Armao (IT, EPP)
Analysis	30 May 2022
Discussed in commission	8 July 2022
Date adopted by commission	8 July 2022
Result of the vote in commission	Majority
Date adopted in plenary	12 October 2022
Previous Committee opinions	Digital Europe for all: delivering smart and inclusive solutions on the ground ¹⁶ A Strategy for Europe's Digital future and A Strategy for Data ¹⁷
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	N/A

¹⁶ [OJ C 39, 5.2.2020, p. 83.](#)

¹⁷ [OJ C 440, 18.12.2020, p. 71.](#)