

ACT FOR DEMOCRACY

*Policy solutions
for the future*

Yara El Turk

*Building bridges, not walls: An EU strategy for
"Digital Democratic Infrastructure" in the Eastern
and Southern Neighbourhood*

Student contest winner.



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Author



**Yara
El Turk**
PhD Candidate in
Diplomacy and Consular
Relations, Peace
Ambassador

Yara El Turk is a PhD Candidate in Diplomacy and Consular Relations, specialising in intercultural emotional intelligence and narrative-building within transitional societies. A recognised Peace Ambassador and Project Lead for UN SDSN Youth, she translates her research into participatory policy frameworks and artistic interventions for global youth engagement.

Introduction: A crisis of proximity and trust

The statement "Democracy is at risk" resonates equally strongly both within the European Union and the neighbouring regions. While the EU is experiencing internal polarisation and a loss of trust in its institutions (Foa et al., 2020), countries in Eastern Partnership and Southern Neighbourhood have experienced extreme levels of democratic backsliding, often supported by digital authoritarianism, which is the use of technology to enhance state control through surveillance, censorship, or disinformation (Gunitsky, 2015). Therefore, as noted by Diamond (2021), this democratic recession is more than just a shared challenge; it represents a defining moment in the evolution of EU foreign policy. The fundamental question must shift to how EU actors will support democratic governance and resilience in the digital public sphere?

Traditionally, democracy aid from the EU included election observation and financial assistance for civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as instituting political conditions for the fulfillment of broader, more significant international commitments via the EU's transactional approach. Although, these tools are insufficient in dealing with contemporary concerns: they place donor in a state of dependence on foreign funding rather than establishing local ownership; they provide fragmented support and do not contribute to establishing a sustained civic culture; they do not address the digital aspect of authoritarianism today. As neighbouring states use technology to suppress dissent and control access to

information, empowering civic actors with digital tools that will enhance participation and transparency allow for an increase in accountability within democratic processes. The current model emphasises short-term, project-based activities, which limits the potential for substantial impact in democratic support as it does not establish sustainable civic structures (Hintz & Milan, 2021).

Therefore, the purpose of this policy paper is to provide an argument that for the EU to be able to increase its support for reversing the decline of democracy in the countries adjacent to its borders it must begin to make the transition to using a new strategic approach. Rather than simply funding independent projects, it should be co-investing rapidly with a focus on Digital Democratic Infrastructure (DDIs) as part of its foreign policy objectives. DDIs are defined as modular, non-proprietary digital public goods that can include anything from participation platforms to transparency toolkits.

The features of DDIs can be developed and represented by multiple programming elements. The core of DDIs is developed as an open-source element which allows DDIs to be created, revised and used by the community as a common resource. The EU has the capabilities to build an NDDF (Neighborhood Digital Democracy Facility) to support the creation of DDIs and strengthen democracies by establishing partnerships with local actors and helping these groups grow strong local participatory cultures while forming a stronger partnership with the citizens of those countries.

The conceptual cornerstone: defining Digital Democratic Infrastructure

Digital Democratic Infrastructure (DDI) is conceptualised as an interoperable ecosystem of open-source digital public goods that facilitates civic empowerment and government transparency, rather than merely a singular online platform. DDI's generative character enables members of the local democratic community (such as local governments and local civil society organisations) to create customised applications for civic engagement. Unlike traditional models, these usually depend upon either commercially available software products or closed systems that require donor funding to be developed (Morozov, 2013). Analytically, this framework can be broken down into four building blocks:

First, secure civic engagement platforms are a key element of the framework, as they support local governments in engaging with citizens through participatory processes, including but not limited to budgeting and service delivery. Civic engagement platforms should be built on open-source platforms such as Decidim, Consul etc; they should be designed and developed with a primary focus on the preservation of data sovereignty and the protection of users' privacy.

Second, DDI includes accountability and transparency toolkits that respond to public needs by enabling monitoring and oversight. These toolkits consist of modular applications for tracking government spending, comparing expenditures against publicly available budgets, and visualising complex fiscal

data for use by the media, auditors and civic watchdog organisations.

Third, DDI incorporates media intelligence and resilience platforms, comprising open-source tools that support collaborative fact-checking, detection and analysis of manipulated media (including deepfakes), secure communication channels for journalists, and delivery of educational opportunities in digital literacy focused on local disinformation issues (Tucker et al., 2018).

Lastly, DDI includes digital deliberation and assembly frameworks that provide structured spaces for meaningful online discourse and enable the creation of sortition-based citizen assemblies, or structured stakeholder consultations regarding specific policy issues, even in highly risk-averse or fragmented environments (Fishkin, 2018).

Decisions about localisation, user interface design, priority of features and function, as well as how it connects with existing civic engagement platforms will ultimately lie in the hands of the communities that engage with it (Bria, 2018). In this way, the DDI can combine security and functionality with local ownership, supporting sustained use beyond the grant-funded period.

A three-pillar action plan: launching the Neighborhood Digital Democracy Facility

In order to realise this strategy, the European Commission should set up an operationally independent, rapid-action Neighbourhood Digital Democracy Facility (NDDF) that is run by the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) in cooperation with the

Directorate-General for International Partnerships (INTPA). The NDDF will act as a focal point for coordinating the functions of the two European Commission services, collecting technical and financial resources, administering grants, and building a network of practitioners and researchers working together in the field of digital democracy. The NDDF will work according to three main pillars of activity.

Pillar 1: Fostering co-creation and local technological ownership

Sustainable infrastructure cannot be delivered alone; it must be created through collaboration. The NDDF's primary function is to develop ecosystems of co-creation in which skills, governance, and maintenance responsibilities are transferred along with software delivery. In this regard, this paper proposes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1.1: Create regional Civic Tech Labs to serve as formal consortia that connect EU technical universities - specifically those with expertise in software engineering and digital governance - and digital democracy NGOs with their counterparts in neighbouring countries. These labs will be co-funded by the NDDF and the host institutions and would serve as centres for the adaptation of the DDI core tools to the local legal, linguistic, and cultural context. They would serve as centres for innovation, training, and provision of technical assistance, resulting in them helping to develop the next generation of civic technologists.

Recommendation 1.2: Develop an EU Digital Democracy Fellowship

Programme. This programme will embed software developers, digital policy experts, and independent journalists from neighboring countries into relevant European digital democracy NGOs, and municipal partner governments for six to 12 months. This would support in-depth technical and strategic exchanges, develop long-term professional relationships, and ensure that fellows return home as leaders in local DDI implementation efforts.

Pillar 2: Building systemic digital resilience against authoritarian tools

To effectively foster democracy, it is essential to counteract the tools used to undermine democracy and to assist in the creation and distribution of DDI components that build the societal capacity to resist the digital threats of today. In particular, this paper proposes recommendations 2.1 and 2.2, focusing on building resilient civic spaces in the digital world.

Recommendation 2.1: Create and fund the collaborative development and localisation of open-source digital literacy curricula and toolkits. Focused on developing citizens' skills related to investigative digital journalism, source verification, and identifying sophisticated tactics to manipulate information, these resources will be made available for use by independent media schools, universities, and civic education NGOs throughout the neighbourhood. This will help build the human capital necessary for a resilient civic sector.

Recommendation 2.2: Support the establishment and sustain secure "digital sanctuary" infrastructure. Through targeted funding, the NDDF

will help ensure that trusted local digital rights organisations can build, update and maintain privacy-protecting communication tools, encrypted data storage, and digital security training for human rights defenders, investigative journalists, and vulnerable civil society groups. This will contribute to protecting critical civic space from surveillance and harassment.

Pillar 3: Creating new channels for transnational participatory linkages

Not only should DDIs enhance and bolster democracy within the EU, but they should also expand upon and evolve how the EU and its neighbouring states connect with one another by establishing new communication channels that do not rely exclusively on intergovernmental diplomacy. In this regard, the paper provides recommendations below:

Recommendation 3.1: Test structured digital participatory diplomatic communications. The EU can develop a variety of transparent methods through which committees of the European Parliament (for example, AFET and DROI) and other relevant Directorates-General can directly receive verified submissions from accredited civil society organisations, citizen assemblies, or municipal councils. These submissions would focus on specific legislative issues and policy ideas affecting those partner states. The process would be facilitated via integrated DDI consultation modules that are interoperable across the DDI networks of the EU's Member States.

Recommendation 3.2: Develop and promote digital municipal

partnership agreements. In addition to the symbolic status of such partnerships, the EU should provide financial and technical assistance to pair EU cities with cities in neighbouring countries and focus those partnerships toward the development of joint DDI platforms. Such "Digital Twins" would allow for real-time sharing of experiences and joint efforts to resolve shared local governance challenges (for example, waste and transport management, social inclusion, and climate change adaptation), creating resilient grassroots democratic solidarity.

Anticipating Challenges

When implementing this strategy, there may be some predictable challenges that must be proactively managed. Additionally, due to the entrenched nature of digital divides within many regions, it is essential that DDI investments are linked to similar EU initiatives focused on enhancing availability and affordable broadband access as well as providing basic digital skills training. There is a real risk that authoritarian governments may adapt or co-opt these tools; as such, the use of open-source DDI tools is one way to mitigate this risk because they allow independent security audits and forking. However, in order to fully address this concern, additional support must be provided by way of a robust digital safety support system for partner organisations, as well as a demonstrated willingness to partner with sub-national actors in the event that national governments are overtly resistant or hostile to the efforts being undertaken. Finally, there is a possibility that institutional inertia within traditional EU foreign policy channels may impede the adoption of an

innovative, more flexible, and infrastructure-focused approach. As such, there is a clear need for the establishment of the NDDF to create and maintain a dedicated, innovative entity with streamlined procedures and sufficient flexibility to engage closely with non-traditional partners, including communities of civic technologists.

the development of democratic digital public goods.

Conclusion

To sum up, we cannot rely solely on the technological tools developed in the 20th century to successfully confront 21st century challenges. While authoritarian governments have been making substantial and systematic investments in fully enclosed systems of digital infrastructure, which enable them to exercise control over individuals and communities through the use of coercive techniques, the democratic world has not engaged in similar efforts. This lack of strategic vision must change if democracy in Europe is to remain viable. To do this, the European Union should make progress toward developing Digital Democratic Infrastructure that will be created through cooperation among all stakeholders rather than being imposed as a "top-down" approach from a position of power and privilege. The proposed strategy seeks to create a more modest and sustainable framework for EU external actions that prioritises the enhancement of democratic resilience in neighbouring countries. Central to this framework is the EU's commitment to providing a shared technological infrastructure that underpins transparent, inclusive, and citizen-engaged communities, founded on trust and accountability rather than mere diplomatic statements. In this context, the EU is encouraged to assume a leading role in

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