Societal Challenges in Times of Digitalisation

The industrial society came into being only around 300 years ago. In Europe, we moved from hand-production methods to machines. This revolution was as much socio-cultural as it was centred around steam or machine technologies. It brought progress never before seen, leading to a totally different system of wealth creation, of values and, by consequence, of social organisation.

In the last 50 years, with the introduction of electronic and information technologies, production systems have made a qualitative leap. This change has entailed a shift from muscle-based to intellectual labour, making knowledge itself the central factor of production.

Today, a fusion of technologies is blurring the lines between the physical, digital and biological spheres. The speed of current technological breakthrough has no historical precedent. It is evolving at an exponential rather than a linear pace. It is disrupting almost every industry in every country. It is changing the way we see the world, the way we work, how we behave and learn. It is shaping our values, our society and even our democracy. The Digital Revolution is moving us towards a digital society.

Technological and social changes have always been intertwined — we cannot have one without the other. As in previous revolutions, we will witness economic and social changes as well. That is why we believe that **future prosperity will depend largely on how well society and governments master the digital revolution, for which modern, future-oriented education is key**.

Challenges spectrum

Europe faces diverse challenges, from high unemployment to demographic change, to uncontrolled migration, climate change and the consequences arising from globalisation.

We acknowledge that **globalisation** has created an imminent threat to, as well as great opportunities for, Europe. It has created millions of jobs, but also caused severe losses. It has reduced poverty in the world, but increased inequality. Nevertheless, we strongly believe that the flow of capital, people, goods and services in our open economies has contributed extensively to the public good. **We need to ensure an equality of opportunity and a fairer distribution of wealth; we need to reduce the risks of exclusion** — risks most likely borne by the least skilled and most disadvantaged.

Digitalisation is challenging our productivity, growth and competitiveness. **The Internet** has made distances shorter, faster and cheaper. It has allowed the exchange of information and the provision of services across borders so that **prosperity increasingly depends on the degree of physical and digital connectivity with the rest of the world**.

Digital technologies offer new solutions to societal challenges ranging from an ageing population to healthcare, to smart transport, security, energy and the environment. We must, therefore, **foster digitally-based social innovations as we apply new technologies to realise specific societal benefits:** for instance, in empowering and stimulating citizens to make informed decisions as consumers, or in fostering collective, environmentally savvy behavioural changes and more democratic participation.

During the industrial society, one of the most relevant factors in self-determination was job security. Both Millennials and members of Generation Z, unlike most of their parents, will face a new environment in which job security is a relic of the past. The digital economy represents a high-risk environment, but it can also accommodate the desire for more **work/life flexibility**, and ultimately for greater individual control and job satisfaction. But this will pose a new challenge as well: as **the talent pool becomes global**, those in developed countries will need to adapt more and more rapidly simply in order to stay competitive.

Today, the jobs most in demand in some industries and countries didn't even exist ten or even five years ago. As many as 65% of children entering primary schools today will likely work in roles which do not currently exist, even as many of today's roles will likely disappear.

Technological change will not necessarily increase inequality. Yet many routine physical and cognitive tasks will become automated, and workers will need other skills. **We must prepare our social structures to enable the mass movement of people from one profession to another.**

A key challenge in the years to come will be to **adapt employment and social policies to better meet the rapidly evolving labour-market needs generated by the digital economy**. This includes more autonomy and flexibility in work organisation, more possibilities to balance work and private life — especially for women, who still bear disproportionate responsibilities in childcare — improved health and safety and more learning opportunities.

Socio-cultural challenges

Digital technologies will change not only what we do but also who we are. They will affect our identity and everything associated with it: our perception of privacy, our idea of ownership, our work, leisure and consumption patterns, as well as how we develop our skills, meet people and nurture relationships.

Our smartphones, or other such devices, are becoming the centres of our personal and professional activities. 38% of adults now spend an equal amount of time online as they do face-to-face with others, as underlined by the 'New Family dynamics in a Connected World' report. The report also points out that 76% of parents allow their children to bring an Internet-connected device to bed, but only 23% of parents use software to monitor their children's activity — although 80% of parents are concerned about their children's potentially interacting with a social predator or cybercriminal.

Therefore, navigating these new dynamics is particularly important for young children as they grow up using digital technologies, and for parents as they learn to mediate this usage. Children quickly and easily acquire basic operational and online skills, but they are little aware of what being 'online' really means. In fact, this has resulted in an increase in cyberbullying, cyberviolence, cyberstalking, child abuse, sexting, identity theft, inappropriate content, online grooming, phishing and sexual exploitations cases — with children and women being the most affected. Considering a sample of 25,142 children, the 2011 EU Kids Online report found that 6% of children between 9 and 16 years of age had been bullied online across Europe, and 3% had carried out cyberbullying. From 2010 to 2014, among children aged 11-16, cyberbullying increased from 7% to 12%.

At the EU level, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the e-Privacy Directive, the Directive on security of network and information systems (NIS), the creation of the European Cybercrime Centre (EC3) and real and enforceable fundamental rights — which the EPP has strongly advocated — are lodestars, but **we must increase support for Member-State-led initiatives in order to tackle these problems**. This should **include coordinating or supplementing awareness-raising and educational programmes**, both inside and outside the school context, to prevent cyberbullying, to inform parents and kids of the dangers of the Internet and to encourage victims to report incidents. We must all fundamentally ask ourselves, as a society, **which values we want to retain and cultivate for the future**, and which values future generations will be willing to preserve. This will drive the design of future policies and technologies.

For the EPP, the message is clear: **the values of freedom and responsibility go hand in hand**. Every person has the right and the duty to be fully responsible for his or her actions — online as well as off. Thus, the capacity to act in a given environment or context, in addition to the duty of care, is a core value to be preserved while fulfilling our duty of vigilance in the context of rapid technological advance. We acknowledge that technology itself cannot solve or fix social failures, but with due respect for the value of the open Internet, **all stakeholders must be diligent in addressing societal issues which arise from use of digital technologies**, upholding our fundamental rights and values.

An ever-growing, 'always connected' way of life, in which the *virtual* impacts the *real*, is re-shaping and calling into question **the family structure** as we have traditionally conceived it. It is affecting our sense of time, and thus, our **critical-thinking** capacity to evaluate information gathered from a variety of sources, such as social media. This phenomenon makes integrating our beliefs and actions more difficult, as we can no longer rely on everything we read — in a **post-truth era**, bringing back accountability will be key. It is also causing shifts in our **standards of knowledge** itself: we have gone from relying on libraries to simply 'googling' what we need to know, fundamentally changing our perception of the world.

Preparing for tomorrow

We strongly believe in the major role of education and training as the safest ground for securing our future.

But we must first redefine what 21st-century illiteracy means. With the ever-growing pace of digital technologies' development, leading to basic changes in professional functions and expectations, more than ever we need educational and training systems which can teach one essential element: **learning agility**. Agility entails the *capacity* to **learn, unlearn and relearn**; this means being open to new perspectives and being able to appropriate the new knowledge which greater perspective affords. We should focus on building educational and training systems in which the ability to acquire new skills and knowledge, easily and quickly, becomes key to unlocking a person's 'change proficiency', enabling success in an uncertain, unpredictable and constantly evolving environment.

In parallel, both governments and industry should be responsible for developing new skills programmes and training for **lifelong learning**, **adult learning** and **continuous re-skilling**, all of which are vital for equipping the workforce of tomorrow.

The European Peoples' Party reiterates its commitment to being an active promoter of quality education and training and of continuous skills development as the best safeguards against an uncertain future. The EPP, therefore, calls on the European institutions to support Member States as they consider the following:

- Developing future-ready curricula, involving the whole educational community (teachers and students included) as well as government and industry, such that critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, entrepreneurship and skills of communication and collaboration are fostered;
- Attempting greater experimentation with new models — for example, Finland's reform replacing traditional 'teaching by subject' in favour of 'teaching by topic' — including early exposure to the workplace, with an emphasis on digital fluency, robust and respected technical and vocational education and an openness to innovation;
- Formulating well-defined plans for keeping teachers updated with regards to both knowledge and skills;
- Recognising talent support as a part of 'informal learning' and fostering EU-wide action to discover and help talented individuals in Europe, since talent and creativity form the basis for innovation and competitiveness, and since talent support enhances self-esteem, employability, social mobility and cohesion;
- Prioritising diversity and inclusion in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM);
- Fostering data-sharing and coordination with the private sector to better assess what we should be learning;
- Developing an award challenge for all European schools — 'The EU Future-Ready School Award' — such that schools must demonstrate the reforms undertaken, or planned, in

order to improve their ability to prepare students for a digital future; this challenge will include a financial award for all education levels, from primary school to university;

- Developing a common definition of cyberbullying in order to develop an action plan for combatting it in schools; this broader initiative should include a stronger awareness programme presenting the dangers of the Internet; it should also facilitate the sharing of best practices and data collections for more effective action; it should encourage cooperation with the private sector; and it should include a counsellor in every school to raise awareness and serve as an active listener to whom kids can report problems arising from cyberbullying;

- Empowering and supporting public libraries to offer digital education, by focusing on the development of knowledge-building and critical-thinking capacities, such as the ability to examine texts through further research as opposed to merely accepting them at face value;

- A dedicated programme, such as a help-line, to assist parents in understanding the dangers of the online world and how to identify, at the earliest stage possible, addictions or problems arising from the usage of new technologies and media; this would apply, for instance, to online games, social media or chat platforms;

- Focusing on digital inclusion by providing industry incentives which promote, for example, employee grants enabling lifelong learning, adult learning and continuous re-skilling and re-training opportunities.

Faced with the anxieties of an unpredictable world, leaders must not only learn new means and methods: they must also be willing to experiment. To be sure, concerns exist regarding the changes brought on by the digital era; but many opportunities also abound. We must embrace change to preserve Europe's competitiveness and way of life, directing it towards a future that works for all of us, but also a future which reflects our common objectives and values — putting people first, and empowering them.

No nation will escape this future. It will be up to us all to work together.

'It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.' — Charles Darwin