

Civil society organisations and individuals views and recommendations

(Digital Decade fact-finding meeting, Ljubljana, 13th February 2024)

I. Kersnikova Institute, BioTehna (<https://kersnikova.org/en>)

1) Views relating to digital skills

- Digital competences should include understanding technology, not just learning how to use it - evolving critical thinking.
- We know that it does matter which tools and platforms are being used for teaching digital competences and digitalisation- example Na-prostem.si.

2) Views relating to public services online/e-health/eID

- eID - it still doesn't work on linux (it ought to work in the Autumn 2023), public money public code - limiting the vendor lock-in effect, use of open formats, digital accessibility - Explicit reference to digital accessibility standards and strict adherence to international European standards, Digital services ought to be inclusive for all users.
- Slovenia's sovereignty, and thus the EU's - technological neutrality, ethicality of tools we use (to know where the data is going to and what is being done with it)

3) Views relating to digital solutions for green transition

- Public money, public code - re-using the software source (because it is open source) resulting in software evolution and optimisation of software.
- Systemic sustainability plan for used computers from ministries, etc. (Microsoft is planning to stop support for "old" computers - we have a great non-for-profit association Duh Časa, which already renew the computers, install open source software and donate them to socially vulnerable groups.

II. National Youth Council of Slovenia (<https://mss.si/en/>)

The National Youth Council of Slovenia (Mladinski svet Slovenije – MSS) is an umbrella organization linking all national youth organisations irrespective of their various interests, ideological or political orientations. As a non-profit and non-governmental organisation, it represents the opinions of Slovenian youth at the national and international level.

The key purpose of MSS is to defend the interests of young people and to promote their participation in policy making process in the fields which have a significant impact on their lives and work.

MSS strives to create an environment in which young people can become autonomous, responsible, sympathetic and active individuals and members of society. It also endeavours to improve the position of young people as a specific social group.

1) Views on Digital Skills

The current perspective on digital skills is understood narrowly, often not emphasizing enough digital citizenship and media literacy. There is a noticeable absence of support for initiatives with long-term impacts, favoring one-time events that merely count participants. These events are often rigidly defined, hindering the flexibility necessary for CSOs to leverage their unique approaches effectively. Furthermore, the emphasis tends to remain on knowledge acquisition rather than cultivating the essential skills and attitudes integral to competency development.

2) Views on E-Democracy and E-Elections

In discussions surrounding democratic engagement in the digital realm, there's a tendency to prioritize traditional forms of participation, overlooking the significant unconventional involvement of young people. Creating digital spaces that enable young individuals to activate and collaborate effectively to foster positive social changes is crucial. Furthermore, we advocate for concerted efforts towards the implementation of e-elections, with a specific emphasis on developing mechanisms to safeguard against result manipulation and enhancing the user experience of e-democracy portals.

3) Perspectives on Financing Digital Transformation

The current financing strategy for digital transformation is imbalanced, showing a clear bias towards benefiting companies and formal educational institutions. Recognizing CSOs as relevant stakeholders in this transformation is essential and must also be financially supported. Moreover, while two calls for developing the digital skills of young people outside formal education systems were identified, their stringent terms deterred some organizations from participating in future rounds.

III. Association for Computing Machinery - Slovenia Chapter (<https://www.acm.si/>)

We are living in a completely new age, an age of digital technology (DT, it includes not only devices but more importantly also applications and a variety of never seen before technologies like AI). DT is the first technology that helps human in his thinking process. Obviously the societies that will better understand and use the DT will be better off. However, creative and more involved use of DT requires new knowledge (not skills) (cf. <https://video.arnes.si/watch/yplcmghnbt7r>, Mark Priestly, Curricula development). This brings us to the recommendation by Margrethe Vestager, EC Executive Vice-President (https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/press-conference-by-margrethe-vestager-ec-%20executive-vice-president-and-mariya-gabriel-commissioner-f_20230418-1500-SPECIAL-PRESSER). Her recommendation was in particularly addressing the issue of a gap between those young in EU that have Informatics education (fundamental knowledge in Computing) and those that do not. Annusca Ferrari from EC wrapped up the message by re-emphasizing the importance of Informatics fundamental knowledge education (<https://video.arnes.si/watch/b8ngj0nxjrc3>).

Indeed, the Informatics (or computer science or computing) is a subject about the fundamental principles behind the DT and moreover behind the driving forces of 21st century. Informatics as a

subject is getting the same role as the role physics, chemistry or biology (M. Caspersen, Informatics as a Fundamental Discipline in General Education: The Danish Perspective, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-86144-5_26, Michael E. Caspersen, Judith Gal-Ezer, Andrew McGettrick, and Enrico Nardelli. 2019. Informatics as a fundamental discipline for the 21st century. Commun. ACM 62, 4 (April 2019), 58. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3310330>). Unfortunately in Slovenia the young are deprived of this knowledge (<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/informatics-education-school-europe>) with far reaching consequences. The first one is that they are less successful in their own profession (engineering, medicine, art, social sciences, ...) as they are not capable to creatively use DT without its fundamental understanding. The colleges are trying to negotiate this by introducing 101 courses on informatics at the expense of courses on the core discipline – that is, in countries that do have a proper education of informatics in K12, and this is in most of European countries, students do not need these courses and hence they can spend more time on core discipline studies. The second consequence originates from the fact that young in K12 never really touch upon Informatics, which makes this discipline far less attractive for studying. Similar problem was described in UK (<https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/projects/computing-in-schools/report/>) and resolved by introducing mandatory subject computing. This brings us to one of the core problems in Slovenian educational politics why there is no move to open the door of future for Slovenian young by introducing informatics. It is clearly expressed by the Minister for digital transformation, who said: “Informatics will not be the subject in K12 education as it is not Electrical Engineering.” The statement clearly shows a great misunderstanding of the role of Informatics; namely the statement is equivalent to the statement “Physics will not be the subject in K12 education as it is not Electrical Engineering” (see references above).

This opinion combined with an opinion that the topic is too complicated to be addressed as the solution will require compromises, is a driving force to no-changes situation in Slovenia. Indeed there is some understanding that the situation needs to be addressed and the furthest Slovenian educational policy came was to try to include DigComp competencies development in all subjects. Similar move to the one Austria made before 2010 and replaced it because of its inefficiency by a mandatory subject on informatics in 2018 (From Non-Existent to Mandatory in Five Years – The Journey of Digital Education in the Austrian School System, ISSEP 2022). Also, since DigComp addresses predominantly skills additional though should be given considering Mark Priestly’s remark above. One last possible change originates from a recently published Nacionalni program vzgoje in izobraževanja za obdobje 2023–2033 (*National program of educationn 2023-2033 – Draft*). It sets the strategic goal 1.5 to *Development of digital education (literacy)*. In simple terms, this goal is not following the recommendation by Ms. Vestager which was to introduce Informatics. Indeed the goal has a subgoal 3 “Placement of fundamental knowledge of Informatics in the complete [K12] education. However, when the document discusses the activities to achieve the subgoal, moves away from Informatics. In grades 1-4 it proposes to include fundamental knowledge in other subjects, which is in general deprecated approach (see EURYDICE report above, Caspersen report on Danish experience, and report by Linda Manilla on Swedish experience). Further, in grades 5 and 6 envisions a mandatory subject with a content on role and influence of informatics in a contemporary society – clearly no fundamental knowledge of Informatics. In grades 7 to 9 the subject is optional. It is really a pity that Slovenia is missing an opportunity to give its young possibility for a bright future in the digital world.

To wrap up, Slovenian young are due to lack of adequate education deprived in comparison to their peers elsewhere in EU and globally. Moreover, also inside Slovenian society those who can not afford to get the Informatics education are deprived against those who can.

IV. Institute for Electronic Participation (<https://www.inepa.si/english/>)

Institute for Electronic Participation is non-governmental organisation established in 2007.

Digital democracy research & development is focusing on grassroots e-democracy, citizens on-line participation, digital citizenship, electronic government and open governance.

Information society policy activities are oriented on advocacy and networking of NGOs in the area of digital skills and literacy, digital inclusion, digital transformation of the civil society sector, open software, internet governance and open data. INePA is an advocacy coordinator at the Network of NGOs for an inclusive information society in Slovenia (NVO-VID). The network is addressing public policies in the field of digital transformation and societal aspects of digitalisation.

Granted public interest NGO status in the field of information society development.

1) Views relating to digital skills

- government measures aiming to achieve the Digital decade targets are not well thought and often implemented in a hurry (e.g. digital skills trainings for elderly lasting only 4 hours - the case of Mobile Heroes; often unrealistic conditions for implementing the digital skills workshops in the field; many examples of instant approach to education and trainings with questionable long term effects on improved digital skills);
- lack of evaluation of government measures in the field of digital inclusion undertaken by the Ministry of digital transformation or transferred via public financing to the private organisations;
- different actions and measures in the field of digital inclusion supported by public funding are lacking governmental coordination (the case of buying 13.000 laptops for socially vulnerable);
- Slovenia should accelerate its efforts in the area of digital skills. But the question is - what sort of digital skills, for what purpose and in what way? For example the Mobile Heroes are focused on learning digital skills by using software of big tech corporations which rises an issue of technological neutrality and of digital sovereignty. The project is now heavily supported by public money from the Ministry of digital transformation and the mobile units used are promoting logos of Google and Huawei. Which rises a question of a fair, ethical and good digital transformation;
- there is a lack of focus on active citizenship and media literacy skills in connection to the digital technologies (citizens should not be trained as passive consumers of digital technologies only);

- thinking outside the box in relation to the EU digital transformation agenda which is heavily focused on digital economy and market competition;
- preserving simultaneous analogue and digital way of living for people not willing, able or interested to take part in digital transformation (analogue communication as a human right).

Improving the digital skills of NGOs and digital transformation of the NGO sector

- The Ministry of digital transformation is ignoring the Article 17 of the Promotion of Digital Inclusion Act which states that “The competent authority may, in accordance with the rules on public finances and the law governing NGOs, award grants for the implementation of projects of thematic networks of NGOs for information, advice, education, research, advocacy, networking, promotion and support activities for the benefit of all NGOs in the field of the use and development of digital technologies and digital competences” - the NGOs are waiting two years now for the corresponding public call for proposals to be published;
- Measures for NGOs in the National Programme to Promote the Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Republic of Slovenia by 2025 addressing 7.6 Support for networking and coordination of NGOs to participate in AI research, development, deployment and application activities at national and EU level and 7.7 Promote NGO projects to ensure public confidence in AI are not being implemented;
- The Ministry is not taking into consideration the needs of NGOs for innovative/digital supportive environment which would enable the digital transformation of the NGOs sector (Article 17 of the Promotion of Digital Inclusion Act).

Democratic deficit in strategic planning and implementation deficit of digital transformation policies / digital decade targets (inexperienced digital transformation leadership)

- Limited time frame (14 days) for public discussion on Digital Slovenia 2030 Strategy and National strategic plan for Digital Decade. Limited involvement of the experts into the policy process, proposals from civil society in general not taken into consideration. No public discussion enabled relating to the Action Plan for Digital Public Services Strategy;
- Limited implementation of provisions of Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications Act (accessibility of digital public services on a local level and of public institutions), Electronic ID not available for Linux users, the National Programme to Promote the Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Republic of Slovenia by 2025 not being implemented, there is still no draft Action Plan for Digital Slovenia 2030 Strategy available for a public discussion;
- Lack of structured dialogue among the government and the NGO sector on addressing the issues of digital divides, skills, public services, on-line participation, green & digital transition, digital transformation of NGO sector etc.

- Lack of cross sectoral collaboration among digital transformation stakeholders in Slovenia. Slovenian digital coalition is not active any more, it also had severe issues with transparency and accountability of its operation. The Ministry of digital transformation initiated the multi-sectoral Strategic Council for the Digital transformation with a dominating role of the government and the minister in person.

2) Views relating to digital infrastructures

- Gigabit infrastructure in rural areas – lack of capacities in smaller local municipalities to undertake gigabit connectivity projects and to find investors in collaboration with the national government.

3) Views relating to digital public services for citizens

- Slow digitalisation of public services relating to democratic life and lack of progress in the area of electronic participation. There are no digital solutions for the submission of signatures of support for candidates in presidential elections, for the submission of petitions to the National Parliamentary Commission on Petitions, Human Rights and Equal Opportunities, and the submission of signatures of support for non-partisan mayoral candidates and non-partisan citizens lists in local elections. Also, there is a lack of up to date and advanced digital solutions for citizens participation (crowdsourcing public policies, on-line petitioning, participatory budgeting etc.)
- Electronic identity card not available for users of computers with Linux software.

4) Views relating to digital & green

- There are only 4 measures included into National digital decade roadmap contributing to green and digital transition (lack of government ambition and coordination among ministries responsible for both policy areas).
- No measures for involving citizens in addressing green and digital transition and achieving the objectives of the European Green Deal (tackling digital consumerism, supporting Digital clean up day, promoting the re-use and ensuring the recycling of digital devices).

5) Best practices

- Slovenia's Na-prostem.si project - FOSS for the digital inclusion of NGOs and its users (<https://joinup.ec.europa.eu/collection/open-source-observatory-osor/news/slovenias-na-prostems-project>).

V. Additional contributions

1) Agora Company proposals:

- Improving digital literacy for adults;
- Achieving 60% participation of adults in lifelong learning to update knowledge, skills and competences for work and life, and
- providing support to improve employment opportunities (Principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights) and the right to education and training (Charter of Fundamental Rights),

We propose that the following is included in the document Digital Slovenia 2030 and the National Strategic Plan for the Digital Decade in the area of Digital Competences, based on the recommendations of the European Council, the missing chapters should be supplemented with objectives and actions:

- **Individual learning accounts** (recommendations at [2022/C 243/03](#));
- **Micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability** (recommendations at [2021/0402\(NLE\)](#)).

The implementation of the missing chapters will mobilise and involve all citizens, accelerate the implementation of the stated objectives and improve life in Slovenia.