

**PRESS RELEASE
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Shaping our digital future in Europe:
Diplomatic, economic, and security perspectives on digital transformation**

Geneva, Switzerland, 21 March 2017. Over 100 students and professors from the College of Europe in Bruges and Geneva-based diplomats gathered at the Geneva Internet Platform for a discussion on the digital future of Europe. The discussion, which has become an annual event, outlined the main challenges and opportunities that digital transformation brings to users, organisations, and European societies in general.



In his welcoming address, **Mr Olivier Coutau**, Delegate for International Geneva, Republic and State of Geneva, described Geneva as a global hub, hosting a concentration of global players. He anchored digital governance in Geneva's long tradition of bringing the international community together to explore technology's benefits for humanity. Mr Coutau concluded that what is agreed in Geneva affects people worldwide, using the example of mobile phones, which rely on the policy work of Geneva-based organisations to function, including the International Telecommunication Union, the World Intellectual Property Organization, and the World Trade Organization.



Drawing on Malta's experience in digital aspects, **Ambassador Olaph Terribile**, Permanent Representative of Malta to the United Nations in Geneva, explained how digital diplomacy can help us find new points of convergence in Europe. Malta is a leader in digital and broadband, and has increased substantially the digital footprint of its citizens. Capacity development programmes by DiploFoundation – a Swiss-Maltese organisation – are recognised and appreciated worldwide. Despite its small size, the country has found innovative ways of thriving in a globalised world.

Referring to the digital transformation of the Internet and technology on diplomatic practice, Amb. Terribile said that social media is an important tool during consular crises, from communication requirements, to taking immediate action. Diplomatic protocol and etiquette have also undergone a transformation, even though they remain necessary rituals.



In a keynote address, **Mr Philipp Metzger**, Director General of the Swiss Federal Office of Communications, referred to the benefits of digitalisation as well as need to address negative aspects, such as the spread of child sexual abuse material. The national strategy adopted by the Swiss government last year focuses on the impact of digitalisation on the economy, employment, and education – among other aspects.

The digital transformation has also had an impact on diplomatic practice (how diplomacy works), on the formation of public opinion (including the spread of fake news), and on the digital divide (how to connect the unconnected).

Digitalisation gives rise to many policy questions. The answers should be carefully developed in order to ensure digital growth while addressing the risks, such as cybersecurity. Mr Metzger invited students and policymakers to join discussions on digital transformation during the upcoming Internet Governance Forum in December, which will take place in Geneva.

A panel moderated by **Dr Jovan Kurbalija**, Director of DiploFoundation Head of the GIP, discussed in more detail the diplomatic, economic, and security perspectives of the digital transformation. In a zoomed-out view of the current situation, **Ms Megan Richards**, Principal Adviser, Directorate General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, European Commission, explained that the European Commission's 2015 plan for a Digital Single Market focused on three pillars: (1) giving users and consumers better access to digital goods and services across the EU; (2) shaping the right environment for a digital network, and improving data protection rules for Europeans; and (3) ensuring fast broadband for all users.

Ambassador Thomas Hajnoczi, Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations in Geneva, said that Austria was among the main sponsors of an important resolution on privacy, adopted by the UN Human Rights Council (UN HRC) in 2012, which declared that people enjoy the same rights online as they do offline. The right to privacy, both offline and online, is regulated by the UN Human Rights Declaration and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the UN HRC also established the Special Rapporteur for Privacy. While privacy rules offline also apply online, it now remains to be seen if existing mechanisms will be sufficient for the effective protection of data and privacy online.

Mr Antonio Gambardella, Director of FONGIT, a hi-tech business incubator in Geneva, said that discussions on the digital transformation often focus exclusively on tools. Companies which are not only economic actors but also political and social actors need to be taken into account, too. The economic power of some of these companies – such as Apple, Google, and Microsoft – could be compared to the economic power of some advanced economies. The EU and Switzerland have a major role to play in balancing digital growth by providing analogue supplements, such as education and social context. Geneva cannot, and probably should not, try to become another another Silicon Valley. It should find its unique role by leveraging its advantages: diplomatic representation, the Swiss educational system, and a highly qualified labour market, among others.

The annual discussion for College of Europe students, hosted by Diplo and the GIP, allows students to familiarise themselves with emerging digital diplomacy which takes place in International Geneva.

* * *

For Editors:

- Press release available at <https://www.diplomacy.edu/pr/shaping-our-digital-future-europe>; photo gallery available at <https://diplo.smugmug.com/Events/2017/Shaping-our-digital-future-in-Europe>
- Press contacts: Dr Roxana Radu, roxanar@diplomacy.edu