

# AI, Digital Transformation, and Democratization: Towards an Ethical and Inclusive Future for the Western Balkans

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## ABSTRACT

Following the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles (2022) and the 2023 AI Treaty signed by the European Commission, the European Union has reinforced its commitment to digital transformation, emphasizing ethical use, inclusive access, and democratic governance. Drawing on the Venice Commission's foundational insights into democratization in Central and Eastern Europe and the broader Agenda for Democratization, this article explores the intersection between AI, human rights, and institutional development in the Western Balkans (W.B.). By addressing gaps in digital infrastructure and skills, especially in education, and acknowledging both democratic deficits and societal resistance, the EU aims to build a resilient, digitally empowered region.

**Keywords:** AI Treaty, Digital Skills, Democratization, Western Balkans, eID, Human Rights, European Union, Public Sector, Education, Infrastructure

## Introduction

The democratization of states, historically guided by the Venice Commission's reports and codified through instruments such as the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), is now undergoing a new phase under the pressure of digital transformation. The AI Treaty (2023), in response to the 2022 European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles, provides a policy framework to close the technological and ethical gaps that challenge both democratic institutions and civic life.

As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, democracy is not merely a feature of state structures but must also be reflected in societal values and citizen behavior. This challenge is heightened in today's AI-driven era, where technology intersects with education, administration, and civic engagement. In the Western Balkans, digital inequality persists, reflecting both infrastructural

and ethical concerns that hinder institutional stability and the consolidation of democratic governance.

## Democratization and Digitalization: A Dual Challenge

The EU's Digital Decade goal—achieving basic digital skills in 80% of citizens aged 16–74 by 2030—is facing setbacks. As of now, only 59% of EU citizens meet that threshold. In the Western Balkans, the situation is more critical. Public sector digitalization, while promising, is hampered by infrastructural gaps, lack of digital education, and limited access to internet services in rural and underserved areas. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BaH), for example, over 500 primary and secondary schools, serving approximately 14,000 students, remain without internet access.

The digital divide deepens democratic deficits by limiting equal participation in public life. Without access to modern digital tools, both educators and students are excluded from the opportunities that the digital era offers—raising concerns over long-term political polarization, inequality, and social disintegration.

### AI in Public Administration and Education

AI, when applied ethically and transparently, offers vast opportunities to enhance efficiency and responsiveness in public administration. However, its integration across the Western Balkans remains inconsistent due to weak institutional frameworks and insufficient training. Digital public services, including licensing, business registration, and certification, must become more accessible through unified eID (electronic identification) systems—seamlessly integrated into mobile platforms.

In education, AI tools and Big Data can improve curriculum development, student assessment, and teaching methods. But for this to be sustainable and inclusive, investment in teachers and digital infrastructure is critical. A notable example is MTEL's initiative in October 2023, which funded internet access in 76 remote schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, costing 200,000 BAM. However, the overall infrastructure need remains at 9.12 million BAM, reflecting a pressing funding gap.

### Building a Digital Community in the Balkans

The 2024 Digital Summit emphasized the need for a Western Balkans Digital Community, modeled after successful regional cooperation frameworks like the Energy and Transport Communities. Such a community would unify standards, pool resources, and accelerate progress in digital education, connectivity, and governance.

Crucially, this digital transformation must remain rooted in human rights and ethical governance. Children, often the silent victims of societal violence and neglect, must be protected and empowered through safe digital environments. Investing in teacher training and children's digital literacy is not only a moral imperative but a strategic one for the future of democratic societies.

### Conclusion

The convergence of AI, digitalization, and democratization requires a coherent, values-based strategy. Europe's digital transition must uphold human rights, reduce political polarization, and promote inclusive access to technology. In the Western Balkans, this means addressing infrastructural gaps, fostering digital skills, and building trust in democratic institutions.

The development of secure eID systems—enabling mobile access to public services—symbolizes this new model of governance. But beyond technological solutions, the real

challenge lies in cultivating democratic societies: as Tocqueville reminds us, democracy is as much a societal mindset as it is a governmental system.

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