**Developing a 'Digital Democracy' Module**
**Terms of Reference**
**Version: FN_EX**

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**Introduction & Background**

Digitalization is fundamentally reshaping the landscape of political participation, representation, and governance. Digital transitions are increasingly affecting democratic institutions and processes. From the use of artificial intelligence in service delivery to internet shutdowns and the role of platforms in political discourse, the governance of digital spaces is becoming an urgent and complex political issue.

For NIMD, engaging with digital democracy is essential to move beyond fragmented or tactical support (e.g. digital campaigning, addressing online political violence) toward a more intentional, strategic, and structural approach. While tactical engagement focuses on how to use digital tools for political activity, structural engagement examines how digitalization itself reshapes democratic norms, institutions, and power dynamics. This includes analyzing digital governance frameworks, platform accountability, AI policy, and civic infrastructure, and enabling political actors to shape and influence these developments.

In our collaboration with the European Partnership for Democracy, the development of the Digital Democracy module falls under the **Digitalise Youth Project**, part of the broader **Digital Democracy Initiative**, which was launched in January 2025. The project aims to counter the shrinking civic space and widespread disinformation in the **Sahel and neighboring regions** by empowering youth activists and civil society organizations. It focuses on enhancing digital skills, promoting civic tech innovation, and raising awareness about online political engagement. By connecting human rights defenders and the tech community, the project equips young people and media actors to navigate the digital ecosystem, resist surveillance, and advocate for digital rights. Within this framework, NIMD is responsible for developing and piloting a **Digital Democracy module** tailored to political actors participating in our democracy education programs, offering a conceptual foundation and practical entry points for engaging with the political dimensions of digitalization.

**It is important to distinguish between digital democracy and digital governance.** Digital democracy refers to how democratic practices and values are expressed, challenged, or redefined in digital contexts—including participation, elections, freedom of expression, and civic engagement online. Digital governance, meanwhile, refers to the rules, institutions, and frameworks through which digital technologies and platforms are managed and regulated—such as data rights, content moderation, digital ID systems, and AI policy. This module addresses both dimensions, focusing on how political actors can understand and engage with them from a democratic perspective.

While it will be designed as a reusable and adaptable component of NIMD's broader democracy education curriculum globally, the module will be piloted in the Sahel and neighboring countries, shaped by the region's specific political dynamics, digital landscape, and security challenges.

**Objective and Products**

The objective of this project is to develop a training module on digital democracy that supports political actors in:

- Understand how democratic practices and values—such as participation, elections, freedom of expression, and civic engagement—are being transformed in digital spaces;

- Contextualize digital trends and challenges within their specific political systems;

- Engage structurally with digital democracy by exploring how digitalization reshapes political institutions, norms, and power relations;

- Bring diverse perspectives and reflect on how to respond to these challenges and opportunities through informed political positioning, policy advocacy, and democratic action.

The final product will be a ready-to-use training module aligned with NIMD's participatory education methodology. It will combine political and conceptual grounding with practical exercises and reflection activities and be adaptable to different national and regional contexts.

Additionally, the module will introduce some key concepts of digital governance as part of a broader understanding of how digital transitions are regulated and governed **in the specific context the module is taking place as part of the Digitalise Youth project.** A secondary objective is to help participants:

- Identify and assess existing digital governance mechanisms (e.g. regulatory bodies, global frameworks[1], national policies);

- Understand the scope and limitations of these mechanisms;

- Explore how political actors can contribute to decision-making or regulatory processes concerning digital platforms, rights, and infrastructures.

This module is meant to equip political actors to engage structurally—not just tactically—with debates around digital democracy. Rather than focusing on the use of digital tools (e.g. social media strategies or digital security), the module emphasizes critical reflection on how digital transitions shape, constrain, and open new spaces for democratic engagement.

What does this structural approach mean in practice? The methodology should prioritise:

- Critical thinking over technical training: Participants will explore how digital infrastructures (AI systems, platforms, data governance, surveillance technologies) influence participation, representation, and accountability.

- Contextual framing: The module invites actors to interrogate who controls digital tools and how power is distributed through platform governance, algorithmic systems, and regulatory regimes.

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[1] If relevant, this could include how to engage with international/regional regulatory processes on internet freedom or open government.

- Immersive learning: To complement the module's conceptual and contextual grounding, fictionalized case studies—based on real dynamics from the region—will be developed to create immersive exercises. These will allow participants to step into specific roles (e.g. policymakers, civil society actors, regulators) and engage in decision-making scenarios that reflect real challenges in the digital democracy space.

- Reflexivity and positioning: Participants are encouraged to reflect on their own roles and the strategies available to them within their contexts to influence digital governance.

The module will combine short lectures, guest speakers, facilitated dialogue, group reflection, and scenario-based exercises to promote collective learning. Emphasis will be placed on grounded discussion of real-world developments and questioning assumptions about technology neutrality and universality.

**Main Components:**

- **Basics of the module**: background, objectives (knowledge, skills, and attitudes), approach, and target group.

- **Content development of module:**

  - **Part 1: Framing and conceptual foundations**
    This section introduces core definitions and concepts to support a structural understanding of digital democracy. Rather than offering guidance on how to engage with each topic, it outlines how democracy is broadly being shaped by digitalization across different spheres of political and public life. The written module would likely develop maximum 5 of the following key areas, and when piloting the module would be best to focus on 3 or 4 that are relevant to the context;

    - Political Power in the Digital Age: platforms, algorithms, digital public infrastructure and governance
    - Internet Governance & Platform Accountability
    - Freedom of Expression & Regulation (e.g. online rights and freedoms, public accountability)
    - Surveillance, Data Rights & Digital Sovereignty
    - Electoral Integrity in the Age of Disinformation (e.g. Internet shutdowns
    - Inclusion & Digital Access: marginalization and opportunities
    - Policy Engagement & Advocacy in Digital Governance (e.g. regulatory gaps, policy readiness, usage...)

  - **Part 2: Case-based application**
    The module will zoom in on selected case studies to illustrate how these conceptual issues manifest in specific political contexts via fictionalised case

studies. The rationale behind working through case studies is because digital tools are used differently by political and civic actors in different types of regimes. These case studies should:

- Offer examples of political actor responses or civic resistance;

- Prompt participants to reflect on how their context compares, and where opportunities for democratic engagement exist.

**Didactic Design:**

- Duration of the module and suggested session structures

- Suggested teaching methods: participatory workshops, simulations, group work, role plays, case studies, reflection exercises

- Types of exercises to reinforce learning

- Resources: multimedia, articles, regional case studies

- Trainer profile and necessary expertise

**Materials to be Developed:**

- PowerPoint slides for facilitators

- Trainer manual with background notes and facilitation tips

- Scenario-based case studies inspired by real developments, designed to prompt role-play and decision-making (incl. facilitator brief, participant handout/role sheets, reflection guide)

- Recommended reading/resources

**Phase 1: Content development**

- Desk research on existing content, frameworks, and relevant case studies

- Interviews and consultations with:
  - Regional and thematic experts on digital democracy and digital governance
  - Partner organizations
  - NIMD country offices in the Sahel and neighbouring regions

- Conduct 1–2 country-level **contextual assessments/country snapshots** to map the digital democracy and governance landscape in the pilot countries. These short scoping notes will summarize key trends, political dynamics, actors, and entry points relevant to digital democracy in each context, and help tailor the module's framing and delivery.

- Output: concept note and content outline for feedback

**Phase 2: Didactic development and material creation**

- Develop methodology for the training

- Develop training materials

- Output: full draft module including materials

**Phase 3: Testing in Practice**

- Pilot implementation with Democracy Schools

- Evaluation of test run and feedback integration

- Output: final version of the module ready for broader use

**Ideal Profile / Requirements**

We are looking for a consultant to support the development of NIMD's Digital Democracy Module under the **Digitalise Youth programme**. The consultant will work closely with NIMD staff in the conceptual and content development process, particularly on pedagogical design and thematic structuring. This is a short-term assignment ideally starting in **early August**, with a piloting and refinement phase concluding by **October 2025**.

**Required Experience and Competencies:**

- Proven expertise in digital democracy, digital civic and political rights, and related themes such as online civic engagement, disinformation, AI governance, and platform regulation.
- Experience in curriculum design, teaching, or training on digital democracy topics—particularly with a focus on pedagogy and applied learning.
- Technical familiarity with digital tools, platforms, and trends that shape democratic participation and political processes.
- Solid understanding of international frameworks and debates around digital governance, freedom of expression, and digital rights.
- Experience working in or with the **international cooperation or democracy support sector**, especially on **capacity strengthening of political actors**, such as parties, elected officials, or youth in politics.
- Desirable: direct experience working in the **Sahel region**, or a contextual understanding of political systems and digital dynamics in that region.

**Timeline:**

- **Start:** Early August 2025
- **Module development phase:** ~4–6 weeks
- **Pilot and review phase:** September–October 2025
- **Finalization:** End of October 2025

**Budget** NIMD has allocated a budget of up to €6,500 for module development, including both content and materials, and piloting the training (e.g., trainer travel, facilitation).