

FUTURE OF EU DIGITAL POLICY

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

RECALLING

- The Council conclusions of 7 June 2019 on the future of a highly digitized Europe beyond 2020 entitled "Boosting digital and economic competitiveness across the Union and digital cohesion",
- The Commission Communication of 18 February 2020 on A European strategy for data',
- The Council conclusions of 5 June 2020 on Shaping Europe's digital future,
- The Declaration of 8 December 2020 on Digital Society and Value-Based Digital Government,
- The Council conclusions of 11 December 2020 on Digitalisation for the Benefit of the Environment on 11 December 2020,
- The Ministerial Declaration of 19 March 2021 on A Green and Digital Transformation of the EU,
- The Commission Communication of 21 April 2021 on Fostering a European approach to Artificial Intelligence, and its Annex entitled "Coordinated Plan on Artificial Intelligence 2021 Revision",
- The Commission Communication of 2 February 2022 on An EU Strategy on Standardisation - Setting global standards in support of a resilient, green and digital EU single market,
- The Declaration of June 2022 'Toulouse Call for a Green and Digital Transition in the EU',
- The Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 establishing the Digital Decade Policy Programme (hereafter 'Digital Decade Programme'),
- The European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade of 23 January 2023,

- The Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 on a European Year of Skills,
- The Commission Communication of 15 June 2023 on the implementing of the 5G Cybersecurity toolbox,
- The Joint Communication of 20 June 2023 on a European Economic Security Strategy,
- The Council conclusions of 26 June 2023 on EU Digital Diplomacy,
- The Commission Communication of 11 July 2023 on An EU initiative on Web 4.0 and virtual worlds: a head start in the next technological transformation,
- The Commission Recommendation of 3 October 2023 on critical technology areas for the EU's economic security for further risk assessment with Member States.

The Council of the European Union

1. UNDERLINES that the digital transformation offers significant opportunities for a better quality of life, economic growth and sustainability and is essential to contribute to an innovative, resource-efficient and fair economy and society in the Union.
2. STRESSES that a successful digital transformation of our societies can only be founded on trust between companies, Member States and among citizens and UNDERLINES the importance of pursuing our European approach to digitalisation based on principles such as transparency and accountability.
3. RECALLS the EU's commitment taken in the Digital Decade Programme to ensure a digital transformation based on technological leadership and on a human-centric approach, creating a safe space where the EU values, including rule of law and inclusiveness, are promoted and the fundamental and digital rights are protected.

4. HIGHLIGHTS the EU ambition to play a leading global role in the digital transformation and digital governance that promotes democratic values, sustainable digitalisation and puts people and their universal human rights at the centre, in line with the EU Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles.
5. WELCOMES the Commission's efforts to build strong international digital partnerships and alliances that reflect and promote European values and support a resilient, green and competitive digital market and that promote the EU approach to digital governance, enhance EU economic security and competitiveness, as well as the Commission's efforts to strengthen cooperation with likeminded partners in relevant multilateral and multistakeholder fora. HIGHLIGHTS the importance to ensure that this work in the international fora is developed and conducted by Member States, the European External Action Service and the European Commission, in close cooperation. WELCOMES the aim to increase European leadership in the development of global interoperable standards to drive greater impact from European research and innovation activities and using standardisation as an international scaling platform for European values and innovations.
6. REAFFIRMS that digital sovereignty is essential for the Union to chart its own path in the digital transformation, to enhance the Union's open strategic autonomy and resilience, to strengthen its economy, and to promote a sustainable technological development across the Union. RECALLS that digital sovereignty must be viewed in light of the Union's commitment to a fair, open and values-based global digital market.

7. EMPHASISES that the digital transformation needs combined and coordinated investments at EU level. These investments, in particular from the Digital Europe Programme and the Connecting Europe Facility, are essential to foster innovation, digital skills, infrastructure and the development and uptake of digital technologies across the EU. CALLS UPON the Commission to promote synergies between digital research endeavours under Horizon Europe and practical deployment initiatives within the Digital Europe Programme, as these programmes are instrumental to achieve the goals of the Union's Digital Decade Programme.

Digital rules and governance

8. NOTICES the significant number of EU legislative acts that have been adopted in the digital field in recent years and STRESSES the need to prioritise in the coming years their effective and efficient implementation. UNDERLINES the need to carefully assess any new legislative act with a view to preventing the risk of hampering the establishment of an agile and innovation-friendly European ecosystem.
9. ACKNOWLEDGES the setting up of several EU boards to ensure the coordination of the national competent authorities as well as EU enforcement role such as in the Digital Services Act, the Digital Market Act, the Data Governance Act, the Data Act and the Artificial Intelligence Act. UNDERSCORES the need for the Commission and the Member States, to explore synergies and adopt a holistic approach in enforcing those acts, with a view to ensuring convergence, coherence and coordination and to avoiding the fragmentation of the EU's digital ecosystem as well as to ensuring legal clarity and security and to reducing the administrative burden, in particular for SMEs.

10. UNDERLINES the importance of an effective and efficient implementation and enforcement of the Artificial Intelligence Act to develop and promote trustworthy artificial intelligence (hereafter ‘AI’). EMPHASISES in this regard that a close cooperation between the AI Office, the AI Board and the advisory forum is key and INVITES the Commission to also reflect upon the future role of the European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency beyond the Digital Services Act.
11. EMPHASISES the importance of harmonised standards and certification requirements, in particular in the context of AI, cybersecurity, digital identity, data sharing mechanisms and services and common European data spaces in order to further promote and stimulate the adoption of digital technologies aligned with European legislative requirements. ENCOURAGES the Commission to issue standardisation requests in a timely, open and coherent manner, involving Member States and stakeholders appropriately, facilitating Member States’ and businesses’ compliance to the largest extent possible.

Digital and cutting-edge technologies

12. RECOGNISES the importance of a common European approach to innovative digital technologies such as virtual worlds, advanced semiconductors, generative AI, quantum technologies, blockchain infrastructure, digital twins and to any future technologies, as enablers for technological sovereignty and competitiveness of the EU at a global level, as well as for economic development, social and environmental benefits. ENCOURAGES the promotion of dynamic ecosystems around key digital technologies supporting their development, deployment and uptake among EU businesses, based on openness and a level playing field, particularly for SMEs and start-ups and scale-ups.

13. UNDERLINES the importance of supporting and enabling a greener, digital, more secure, resilient, and sovereign European ecosystem in semiconductors and microelectronics and HIGHLIGHTS, in this regard, the swift start of the implementation of the Chips for Europe Initiative.
14. STRESSES the economic and strategic potential of quantum technologies for the scientific and industrial competitiveness of the EU and CALLS on the Commission and the Member States to continue efforts to create synergies between research and development activities, support joint initiatives and encourage further investments for EU quantum companies from the public, academic and private sectors.
15. ACKNOWLEDGES that the current legal framework introduces important elements such as compliance by design, interoperability and regulatory sandboxes which constitute key tools for the development of digital technologies and should be further used in future legislative initiatives, as well as in the enforcement of existing legislation. UNDERLINES the importance of pursuing a balance between innovation and regulation through guidance and tools which may accompany businesses, governments and consumers when navigating through the continuously evolving digital landscape.
16. RECOGNISES the importance of European Digital Infrastructure Consortia (hereafter 'EDICs') for developing strategic multi-Country Projects that pool resources to achieve large-scale projects that no single Member State can tackle on its own. EDICs and other implementing mechanisms for multi-Country Projects are essential for serving businesses and citizens and their further development should be supported.

17. RECALLS that the European approach to economic security is based on promoting the Union's competitiveness by bolstering its single market, innovation, technological and industrial capacities; protecting the Union's economic security through a range of existing and new instruments; partnering with like-minded international partners who share EU concerns with a view to strengthening international rules, institutions and economic security through diversified and improved trade agreements, and investing in sustainable development. EMPHASISES the importance for the Union's competitiveness of ensuring the security of critical emerging technologies resulting from significant research, development, and investments made in the Union and of protecting against the risks of technology leakage, while preserving maximum levels of economic openness and dynamism.

Democratic and societal effects of digitalisation

18. ACKNOWLEDGES the existence of a delicate balance between on the one hand fostering innovation, entrepreneurship and capital market development and on the other hand establishing safeguards regarding risks and challenges related to digital technologies, including disinformation, illegal content online, fake profiles, identity theft, data protection issues and security breaches. STRESSES the importance of the new rules framing obligations for online platforms and online search engines, notably through the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act. ENCOURAGES the Commission to further pursue and enhance the implementation of these landmark rules and their enforcement and to further address issues linked notably to recommender systems and dark patterns, in order to ensure on the one hand that societal risks stemming from such systems are tackled, in particular for the protection of children, and on the other hand that existing obligations are not circumvented.

19. INVITES the Commission to examine potential gaps in the EU's current legal framework, such as the General Data Protection Regulation and the Digital Services Act, in relation to the privacy of electronic communications.

20. HIGHLIGHTS that in return for access to digital services, users often provide vast amounts of data without fully understanding how their data is used and the implications thereof. ENCOURAGES the Commission to consider measures to address issues related to excessive online tracking and data harvesting following from the use of tracking technologies by providers of digital services, and, in this regard, CALLS for special attention on the well-being of children and youth, limiting their exposure to certain types of content, safeguarding their data, and protecting their privacy as essential elements of their online safety.
21. CALLS for the development of concrete tools to support users, online platforms and national authorities in the verification of digital identity, such as a system of verified and non-verified users. CALLS upon the Commission to offer guidance, establish safeguards and develop harmonised policies and tools in close cooperation with Member States to ensure secure and interoperable digital identity solutions.

Data strategy

22. EMPHASISES the significant steps made towards the development of a robust EU data governance which improves the free flow of data within the Union and with third countries. RECOGNISES the importance of the data economy as a key enabler for Europe to prosper in the digital age and HIGHLIGHTS the importance to continue the development of sectorial data spaces, which are a key element to facilitate data sharing.
23. UNDERLINES that cloud infrastructure and services are an essential aspect of the European digital sovereignty and competitiveness and thus important for the EU to fully benefit from the data economy. ACKNOWLEDGES the important steps towards the development of interoperable, trusted, safe and secure European cloud services and CALLS upon the Commission to continue its efforts and further assess the way to promote interoperability and portability and to ensure a fair and balanced access to cloud solutions among business and SMEs. INVITES the Commission to continue its work on stimulating cloud-targeted investments and the development of new EU cloud services.

Digital infrastructure

24. EXPRESSES the importance of attaining the Digital Decade Programme targets and supporting an innovative digital infrastructure ecosystem, i.e. to ensure all EU households have access to Gigabit speeds and 5G or equivalent mobile technology by 2030. In that regard, CALLS on the Commission and the Member States to stimulate and facilitate secure and resilient joint roll-out of 5G and edge, fiber networks, infrastructure sharing and uniformising procedures. UNDERLINES the importance of leveraging the single market to facilitate the investments needed to ensure such joint roll-out.
25. AGREES with the Commission's continued efforts to ensure sovereign, secure and resilient digital networks and infrastructures across the Union and globally, including with regard to 5G networks and submarine cables and ENCOURAGES the Commission and the Member States to thoroughly analyse the hurdles within the regulatory landscape, to ensure a robust future of Europe's digital infrastructure that can foster innovation, including through the growing convergence between telecommunications and cloud services, anticipating the review of the Electronic Communications Code, and to ensure level playing field and competition in electronic communications markets to the benefit of end-users. INVITES the Commission to re-define a long-term vision on digital networks and prepare the ground for possible policy and regulatory actions to complete the single market for electronic communications services, as well as to look into the security and resilience of submarine cables.
26. ENCOURAGES the Commission and the Member States to establish an attractive policy framework for 6G research, development and deployment, based on the appropriate assessment of coverage and capacity requirements for 6G use cases and the early identification of spectrum needs.

27. ACKNOWLEDGES the Commission's efforts via the European High Performance Computing Joint Undertaking to coordinate European investment in major supercomputing infrastructures and accompanying software solutions, which will be fundamental to secure European leadership in a huge range of scientific and industrial applications, and WELCOMES the broadening of the Joint Undertaking's mission so that it also invests in AI-oriented supercomputers, in the creation of AI factories, whose resources should be made available to European AI start-ups to train their large AI models and generative AI systems.
28. ACKNOWLEDGES that the current legal framework introduces important elements such as security and resilience by design, in light of the growing importance of digital connectivity, including Internet of Things. ENCOURAGES identifying and addressing the security weaknesses of all digital products and processes.

Sustainable digital transformation

29. STRONGLY UNDERLINES that the digital transformation should go hand in hand with the green transition. The development of digital technologies such as generative AI, cloud computing, blockchain and high-performance computing as well as the increased amount of data and data centres requires large amounts of resources including energy and critical raw materials, therefore exerting pressure on the environment.
30. ENCOURAGES to urgently reduce the environmental footprint of the ICT sector and to support its transition to climate neutrality by 2050. UNDERLINES the need to promote awareness and develop solutions for businesses, public sectors and consumers to reduce their digital footprint and e-waste in order to avoid inefficient consumption and in line with the principle to reduce, reuse and recycle.

31. STRESSES the importance to deploy and combine digital and green solutions for future innovation and growth in all industries and public organisations that have measurably net positive environmental impact.
32. CALLS for developing evidence-based assessment methodologies for measuring the digital environmental footprint as well as the digital enablement and ENCOURAGES the Commission, Member States and stakeholders to use these methodologies to explore and harness the enormous potential of digitalisation to assist the EU in achieving its goal of transitioning to climate neutrality by 2050 and the energy efficiency targets for 2040.
33. RECALLS the review of the EU's Digital Decade Programme and INVITES the Commission and Member States to reflect on adding a target related to a greener digital transition with the aim to incentivise the deployment of innovative technologies to the benefit of climate action.

Digital skills

34. STRESSES the need to increase efforts to bridge the digital divide by developing digital awareness, knowledge and skills of all citizens, with a particular attention to vulnerable groups. UNDERLINES the role of the Digital Decade Programme in ensuring that the digital transformation responds to the needs of the European society and labour market, including through regional and local networks. INVITES all institutions to support these efforts and to support the development and uptake of solutions to better equip and accompany European citizens and businesses through the digital transformation.

35. STRESSES the need for an enhanced focus on ways to attract and retain talent in the EU in order to reinforce the competitiveness of the European Union and its positioning as a global digital player. CALLS on the Commission to develop a multifaceted strategy to support Member States in attaining the digital skills objectives of the Digital Decade Programme, notably through academic and industrial partnerships, lowering barriers to attract and employ digital talent as well as adopting European recognition schemes for the adoption of auto-certification or micro-diplomas.
36. EMPHASISES the need to promote regular and non-regular education in ICT and Scientific Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics ('STEAM') areas to further develop digital skills, with a particular attention to women, since the severe and persistent gender gap in the digital sector undermines how digital solutions are designed and deployed, with proven negative consequences for social equality and welfare overall.

Digital governments

37. UNDERLINES the need for digital governments, driven forward by the human-centric, data-driven and AI-enabled transformation of the public sector, while embedding interoperability, inclusiveness and sustainability as their core principles.
38. INVITES the Commission to continue its support for the development of interoperable public digital services and the cross-border interconnection of public administrations' cloud infrastructures to achieve their increased resilience, efficiency and sustainability, and to further reflect on their technical, legal and operational barriers.
39. EMPHASISES the need to consider digital and interoperability implications of policies from the outset, in order to ensure the smooth implementation of legislation and reduce the reporting burden. In this regard, INVITES the Commission to put digital-ready policymaking in practice through guidelines, tools and trainings.