Europe Digital Sovereignty: where are we ?

With:
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- Liviu Stirbat, EC Head of Unit for AI in Science,
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Catherine Vieilledent:
Good morning, everyone. I'm very happy to have you to discuss a big issue for everybody, EU officials but EU citizens as well, which we call EU digital sovereignty. It is a major issue today and we have the pleasure and honor to have with us Mr. Stirbat who is Head of Unit in charge of AI in science in the European Commission, DG Research. I know you are very busy so thank you very much for being with us. We also have Mr. Domenec Devesa with us, President of UEF and former MEP. He has a lot of knowledge about European policies including that one. Thank you for coming, Domenec. And we have Mr. Christophe Leclercq, who founded Euractiv and is very active in *EuropeMediaLab*. There were very busy days in the Residence Palace discussing the Trusted European platforms.
So, now I let the floor to Domenec Devesa who will introduce the debate and then both participants present their angle to the issue, then we will turn to several questions. We have some 80 people registered for online watching and we also have some very interested stakeholders like Mr. François Leray online. Mr. Devesa, the floor is yours.

Domenec Devesa :
Thanks a lot, dear Catherine and to the group UEF Europe which is organising this event, thanks for the opportunity of being here in my capacity as President of UEF but also former MEP, on this important topic of digital sovereignty. And thanks also to the revue GRASPE that helps organising.
It is good to mention François Leray, because my first mention will be the resolution that we adopted as UEF in our federal

committee meeting which François drafted. I will not go into the details, maybe François can explain later. But I think it is important to mention and to read it because we, as federalists, bring attention to this policy dimension in the big institutional picture that we always look at. But we know that sovereignty is a multi-dimensional concept. It was not so much used in European *lingo* until the speech by E. Macron at the Sorbonne about European sovereignty, and some people also named it “strategic autonomy”. Sometimes we get too taken up into the nominal discussion or “what is the difference between one and the other…I don’t think we should get too much into that. I think both convene, maybe “European sovereignty” in a stronger way, that we want to be self-reliant in some key elements of our policies. This multi-dimension you can find it in terms of geopolitical sovereignty, in terms of economic sovereignty, energy sovereignty, even food sovereignty, health sovereignty and of course digital sovereignty, just to name a number and put it in the context.

Political sovereignty is a very current topic and you can have it when you have the others and an important one is the digital dimension. Why ? because political sovereignty means that you can take decisions without undue pressure from other actors. Which is precisely what we have seen from the past year. January 20th is almost here and in one year of Trump's presidency, we had the threat to invade Greenland, the famous 5% of defense expenditure, the attacks on national strategic security last November, a former commissioner being sanctioned to travel to the US… All these things point to a lack of sufficient political sovereignty. It is also a question of strategy but I think also the strategy of appeasement that the leadership of the Union, the Council in particular, but also the Commission in my view, has been implementing for the past years, is the wrong strategy. But it is a bit connected to this perception that we are not sufficiently strong in terms of our strategic assets to face him. Then, what are we lacking? As I mentioned, we also lack military and defense sovereignty in the traditional sense. We are also focused on technology, artificial intelligence and digital tools. Of course these technologies are essential in defense, security and welfare but don't have sovereignty in the most common understanding of territorial defense because we have not activated art.42.2 on common defense, and even if Trump is threatening to invade Greenland, it seems that we still want to keep NATO. Not that I want to dissolve NATO but it is obvious we cannot put all the eggs in the basket of NATO. So we need a defense and security pillar and it is still not there in terms of territorial defense.
In the pandemic, not even one gram of paracetamol was manufactured in Europe. Almost all the production was in India

so if there were restrictions or if they decided not to send any to Europe it would have been a big issue. So that is a lack of sovereignty.

On digital and AI, I saw that the EU adopted an important document in Berlin on digital issues with member states and it is an important point of reference. What I would like to say is that we know we are dominated by US products, we have in some cases alternatives to US companies but for credit cards they are only US companies for instance, and that could cause a huge problem. Another very practical example: as you know Trump has sanctioned the judges of the International Court of Justice. They are facing financial barriers now and it has not even been decided by a court and we have no alternatives to offer in these cases. We mentioned some ideas like open-source solutions, the EU institutions are already moving to that and this can be generalized. We are all using ChatGPT, Gemini etc. but we have some equivalent in Europe like Mistral (LeChat) and maybe they are not as widely used because they are not as good but maybe it is because we have not heard about them enough. So, I think digital Europe is a key topic and DSA & DMA are not sufficient because it is regulating what is here but because it is providing us the assets we need: self-reliance.

Catherine Vieilledent:
Thank you M. Devesa. The first thing perhaps now is to have the angle of AI experts who may have some responses to our concerns. As citizens and as EU officials, we are not in control of the digital environment or can we look forward to being in control ? We certainly have expertise but do we have levers, financial and others, to have an autonomous strategy for AI and for digital tools ? Mr. Stirbat, the floor is yours.

Liviu Stirbat :
Many thanks Catherine for the invitation, for the possibility to join you and share a bit of this angle which I find quite positive and quite encouraging so I will add some positive spin to the tape. For me, the inventory of issues and problems is very correct but to enlarge a bit the picture and the scope, it would also be nice to add a bit of balance to focus also on the positive. And that is where I'm coming in. As I was introduced, I am the Head of a Unit dedicated to the use of AI in scientific research. It is a bit narrower than AI in general, we have an entire department that we call "AI office", over a hundred people who work on AI specifically, its legislation and its development. Here we focus on AI applications in the short line, and we have full sovereignty on the applications that we have and a lot of strategic advantages as well, leverages where others depend on us. In short, my team was created rather

recently. I am always proud to say that it was created before ChatGPT and we are rather in the scientific domain: physics, chemistry, biology, sociology, even less known like volcanology or specific domain of archeology. So we were starting to speak about AI uses in science before ChatGPT.

In October 2025, the Union adopted a dedicated strategy for the use and the promotion of AI in scientific research. It was adopted on the same day but as a stand-along document with a broader strategy focused on down streams, on applications in industry take-up, on how to apply AI. We had two strategies adopted on the same day as part of the AI package. One focusing on downstream and industrial deployment and the other one, the one I was in charge of, focusing on the underpinnings of all of this, how to make sure that the science that Europe produces and funds remains competitive, for a competitive science which is the bedrock of economic competitiveness overall. So, maybe one word of what brought us to realise that we need a dedicated strategy for it and now we also enlarge the scope because we spoke a lot about the US and of course it is hard not to speak about the elephant in the room, that particular… partner, ally, "friennemy"? But triggering us gave rise to an analysis that we did on all the scientific publications worldwide (bibliometrics), we looked at the publications, the more cited ones, the most impactful ones and we were very proud to be ahead of the US in terms of the use of AI in scientific research. Then we enlarged the scope of the analysis and we noticed China being higher than the US and the EU put together in terms of the use of AI in scientific research. We spoke a lot to China experts who explained to us that China has developed expertise and strategic advantage in AI itself and they are using it as a leverage in other domains to catch-up. That was one of the reasons why China has leaped ahead of the EU in scientific research in domains where they have never been active before. In chemistry, or the strategic and historical domain of dominance of Europe, now China is just behind us or ahead already, thanks to the use of AI. So, this was a realization that we were at risk of losing the next generation of science, of being confronted with materials we had not even thought of. That is why we needed to inject a bit of energy into this and to facilitate the take-up of AI by European scientists.

In parallel of course, we need to make sure that science becomes companies, innovations, and products. I don't need to speak about that, it would be an entire conversation on its own. On the science side, we had this huge effort nevertheless. So we are like a flagship into this strategy that I mentioned, creating a European resource, a virtual pan-European institute dedicated to the use of AI in science in all the disciplines where we pulled together data, funding and talents, the most important ingredient in sovereignty, in particular for AI, and also computing capacity which is really important and an area where we are quite advanced. The EU has for a decade been investing in super computers that are jointly owned by the Union and the member states, that run amazing sequences of calculations and have been used for physics or climate modeling and we are now already before the public attention and hundreds of billions US big tech is investing. We are already at the AI age, we have AI factories now and soon we will have AI gigafactories. So again, we are well positioned there and because we use a lot of technology and we develop a lot of chip technology ourselves and a very green and efficient production, definitely the greenest one. To make it more concrete for you, there is one operated in Finland called Lumi at the north of the country and it is climate positive, in the sense that it is not just climate neutral but the excess heat and energy consumption is redirected to nearby towns.

We develop a lot of models ourselves so the reliance on the technology is not just what you see everyday, the big models like ChatGPT or Gemini but in scientific domains there are specialized models and I think the most famous one is the one that won the Nobel price in 2024 for chemistry and that was Alphafold, developed by Google Deepmind. There are a lot of others for specific uses but the Union is, together with Germany and France, at the forefront of funding the development of these models ourselves. So, we are in a good place to have our own chemistry, physics AI model and advanced materials. We happen to be advertising this rise of resources for AI in Europe, it was launched by the Danish Presidency and the European Commission in November in Copenhagen. We had as an opening speaker Mr. Joshua Bengio, who was one of the three godfathers of AI, he is Canadian and engaged with the Canadian government. His institute "Low zero" is looking to establish a presence in the EU as well, so it was fantastic to see other views and he was very supportive of the Union's efforts in science. He was supporting the AI Act as well. You can see that even in the top layers, the Union works with the best and the US is not the only one. I will stop here on this kind of illustration but maybe we will go further after.

Catherine Vieilledent:
Thank you Mr. Stirbat, are there some questions in the room?

Domenec Devesa :
There is one comment that I think is important: I think we are not sufficiently aware, I put myself in that list, of our advantages in supercomputing and AI for scientific research, the modern

sectors. There is a science competition but at the same time we don't have European companies in, let's say, the top 20. The social networks everyone uses are American, X, Facebook… For AI it is much more US than European. So I am not saying that what you describe is a niche but we are weaker in some generalist fields.

Liviu Stirbat :
Absolutely, and I think you are right but I was trying to say that it may be niches indeed but a lot of them invested for Europe's strength. If I can just give you another example, with chips. Chip manufacturers, by far the biggest ones are Taiwanese but the technology that they do cannot operate without the technology Europe produces. You need chips but at the end of the day, it is just a tiny bit of technology and you need to power it, operate it, link it to the other chips and so on. For this, European companies are in a good place. Europe has a lot of cards even if we may have lost visibility on competition, indeed ChatGPT is bigger than Mistral in terms of users, for now, but we have a lot of other uses and we need to keep that in mind.

Catherine Vieilledent:
Thank you. Good thing to hear that science is pushing for research and is trying to push-on the applications. Now I pass the floor to Christophe Leclerc, who has been very busy these days and can tell us more about democratic processes and media.

Christophe Leclerc:
Thank you. I will start with a short intro in French, to use a language that is common to most of us, and then I will continue in English.
[In French]
First, I'm very pleased to be invited here by the UEF. I am a member of the UEF and of the European Movement. I have a few activities on the side; people here in Brussels know me as the founder of Euractiv. I now run the think tank Europe Media Lab. We have two main activities. One is very practical: tripling the number of press correspondents from Eastern Europe here in Brussels, because there were far too few, none from Moldova, very few from Georgia or Armenia, and not enough from Ukraine. So that is the practical side. And we also have a more policy-oriented, strategic strand, which currently focuses on trusted European platforms, I will come back to that.
But to connect with what was said earlier, I'm fully aligned, and actually quite reassured by what I'm hearing: that policymakers and major NGOs like ours are fully aware of the importance of strategic autonomy and sovereignty, two slightly different concepts, and I will come back to that as well. I believe we need

to do everything possible to convince all governments, and not only the European institutions, which are in some sense already “pre-convinced.” I am also reassured by the fact that Europe was already ahead in certain areas of AI, and by the fact that in B2B domains we are not doing so badly. The problem is B2C, and that is what I will try to address, rather than from an AI angle, from the angle of the information space. In a way, the question we have to ask is: how are we going to protect our democracies? And I think we are at the heart of an important issue, not only for us federalists, but for all Europeans who are attached to democracy.

My short presentation will have 5 main points : Past regulation, Policy, Political context, European platforms and finally the next steps. You will find plenty of next steps online, notably on my LinkedIn profile or on the website EuropeMediaLab.

First of all, past regulation. I think the EU institutions and of course the other parties, government etc, have done a good job in the past mandate, so I subscribe to DSA, DMA and Media freedom Act. I suggest also reading the Media Action Plan which people had forgotten. My main point is that sovereignty is not just the ability to set our laws and to enforce them, which is a regulation aspect, but it is also strategic autonomy, which means having resilient and big enough actors in order to choose the services that we use. I don’t mean this in a protectionist way, despite my heavy French accent, I do mean that we need to compete. And by the way, I was a competition official a long time ago so it is still part of my DNA in a way.

The political context for the past year now. You talk about Macron’s speech that did not have much impact at the time ; more recently he said something more specific, he said “We are incredibly naive to entrust our democratic space to social networks that are controlled by large American or Chinese entrepreneurs.”. And I think it is a good reference and based on that, there was the Berlin summit on digital sovereignty. By the way it was not conceived as an EU summit but many people, including myself, said “Virkkunen has to be there and many others” and in fact it is useful because the EU is a bit slow, for many reasons which we can regret, but it is a fact.

A number of good documents have been published around the same time and the strategy already has something interesting about social media platforms with a strong MediaLab, that was a good start and in the Democracy shield, there are a number of good things. Frankly it is a lot of a summary of things that are in process, civil society oriented, so pleasing a lot of actors in the sectors which is not bad but I would not say that this is a very clear strategy and there are some points which are essential for what we discuss now, strategic autonomy. So, the intention is clear but what is missing is the action, where you have action is

mainly on things which have a possible connection with MFF, money etc. But in this area, I don't think that it is only about money. It is a lot about the market, using regulations but in a smarter way, not having a 5-year process of ping-pong between the Commission and the Parliament. We need that, but we need other things as well and I will try to explain it.
Since the arrival of Trump, I have been thinking a lot about what we can do. I sold the company Euractiv, so for two years I have been more free, I am not retired, I am very active with EuropeMediaLab, and I was thinking about our new policy in tech so I talked to a lot of people, media organizations, but also the people making the social media platforms which is essential tool for any kind democratic debate, and its advertising. I hardly ever hear about advertising in this town, it is not necessarily bad actually. People in the advertising circles are thinking a lot about ethics and don't want to connect with some brands and bad stuff. Five years ago, there was a wonderful initiative called "Global alliance", responsible media, and it was big brands like Unilever etc., telling the big platforms "you need to self regulate yourself, to have fact checking, moderation etc. Otherwise, we withdraw our advertising." And that was very effective. A lot of my friends in the EU institutions, and a whole ecosystem thinks that it managed to control the social media platforms but believe me, money talks, it was more on the advertising that influenced it. That is why we have to work a bit more closely with them. To make a long story short, we thought that what we need to develop is an alternative to the social media platforms from the US and China. It sounds hugely ambitious and indeed it has not been tried before. But now it is a must, not just an opportunity.
Five years ago, the RRT Foundation, which later became the European Media University, together with IDAC, an institute that has been growing significantly in France, won a tender to carry out a visibility study for DG Connect. This was in fact triggered by the European Parliament, by your colleagues, very smart people, who thought that we needed a European Facebook. It was a dream that I somewhat shared. We then conducted many interviews, carried out quantitative analyses; it was quite scientific. At the end of the day, we concluded, much like Thierry Breton did in his assessment, that we had to focus on B2B, because B2C would not work. Media companies were reluctant to share their brands and to have competitors in their own markets, which is a typically European syndrome. So we recommended a content-sharing platform for media, focused on the quality of media content. This led to a tender. And now you have an excellent alliance between news agencies, called the European Union. It works well, but it is limited to B2B. When I heard the new head of public affairs at Facebook give a speech in January, just after Trump's inauguration, - he had replaced Nick

Clegg, someone we know better and who had been here - when I heard the way he addressed the audience, with MEPs in the room, basically telling them, “I don’t care,” and “if you have a problem, talk to Daddy Trump and see what happens,” I thought: my God, we really need to go back to the question of creating alternatives to American social media platforms. I won’t speak too much about this because, as you know, the situation has only worsened.

On the B2B side, however, there has been significant progress recently. I would like to highlight Eurostack. It is an alliance of around 300 companies providing services for cloud data centers and related areas. They have done a great job engaging with the Parliament, the Commission, and at the Berlin Assembly, where they gained strong visibility. There are now good guidelines. I believe the entire European sovereign cloud sector is going to grow. In this area, as in others, we are seeing what I would call “fake sovereignty.” Amazon, Microsoft, and others have recently developed so-called sovereign cloud offerings, typically in Germany and for technical reasons elsewhere. They now claim to provide sovereign solutions. I even saw that the French Ministry of Defense has signed something with one of them. So, in my view, in the future there will be three types of offers. First, clearly foreign offers. Second, semi-sovereign offers, where providers say in the contract that they will never follow orders from Washington or elsewhere, but this depends on contract compliance, which, as we know, is not always guaranteed. And finally, there will be truly sovereign offers. In the specific area of social media platforms, this is what we are now trying to develop.

Alongside the Berlin Summit, there were a number of fantastic events. One was organized by an open-source developers’ association. I was invited to speak there, together with Alexandre Alizé and others. I was very impressed by the participants. I expected young coders, the typical profiles you might imagine. In reality, about half of them were former employees of Amazon, Google, Facebook, and similar companies, people in their 40s and 50s who wanted to do something better for Europe. We therefore decided to work with Eurostack, the organizer, and to follow its model while accelerating our advocacy. We have had influence in the democratic field, although progress on social media platforms takes longer. These platforms must be European, and therefore multilingual. This is more complex than what you see in the AI application strategy. That strategy remains very general. Many paragraphs include an action box with concrete next steps, but here there are none. So we are interacting with the Commission. I have just come from the event we held on Sunday, the Transformudia event. At the previous event, we had the pleasure of presenting the AI strategy. This time, the focus was much more on debating with key stakeholders, not only institutions, what these trusted European platforms could be. We had a plenary session, followed by meetings with heads of cabinet, directors-general, and others.

More importantly, we had senior representatives from the media sector: for example, the EBU, the European Broadcasting Union; startups; and two leading players from the media industry. Basically, they all said: yes, it is possible, and there is a market need for this. So, what is TEPS? It is a piece of legislation. It defines a standard for what a trusted platform is, specifically a trusted European platform. If you meet the criteria, subject to a process still to be defined, you receive the label of “trusted European platform.” I don’t think this will make much difference for users. Users are driven by features and content. But it could make a difference for two other important actors. First, investors, equity, venture capital, and possibly sovereign funds, because it then becomes something that can be invested in through InvestEU or national equivalents. Most importantly, it will make a difference for the advertising sector. How much advertising money will they be willing to allocate to such platforms in the future? That will depend on reach, of course. This raises the question of what resources are needed to bring these platforms to the millions of users required. It also depends on how much advertising becomes trust-driven.

That is why we are suggesting that the Commission carry out a feasibility study to define the scope. Some argue that a feasibility study is unnecessary because initiatives already exist. That is, in my view, incorrect. Part of the Commission’s mandate is precisely to help shape the market by defining standards and producing a reference study, which could be done very quickly. Before my Brussels career, I worked at McKinsey. Such a study can be completed in three months. We know McKinsey well, both positively and negatively, but for this type of work, they can deliver solid results. The other thing we are suggesting to the Commission is to establish an expert committee, as is done in many other fields. I myself was part of the High-Level Expert Group on disinformation seven years ago. Many commitments were made at the time by American social media platforms, but they were not fulfilled. So now we need to be more assertive and do it ourselves. This expert committee is needed to clarify in more detail the criteria for trust and for being European. I can address those criteria during the Q&A. We held a workshop after the plenary, and I will conclude shortly. Giorgio participated, as did many others, and these technical criteria are already being further developed.

So the next steps, three points. First, engaging with major players. For example, the EBU and the European Round Table of Industry are very interested. That reassures me: this is not just about young startup founders. Second, at a high level, several people have told me that there should be a reference to this in the Council conclusions in March. Yes, that is doable. It relates to competitiveness and defense and sits at the crossroads of both. We have allies. And finally, this may surprise you, what excites me most is that on January 30 we will have a hackathon here in Brussels. You may not have heard of FOSDEM. It is an organization that brings together 8,000 open-source developers every year, and this year it is in Brussels. They want to create an open-source village focused on European issues. When I heard this, I suggested organizing a hackathon on defining the features of trusted European platforms, and that is what we are doing. I like the idea of having, on one side, the European Council, and on the other, a hackathon, and trying to build a bridge between the two. Voilà. Thank you.

Catherine Vieilledent :
Thank you. We also have the consumer and media-driven approach, which is positive. When the EU is not making sufficient progress, it is not only the institutions; it is also the Member States, moving at different speeds. That is a problem. So let us emulate the fastest ones. Yes, absolutely. Thank you. I don't know whether there are questions from the room, or if anyone would like to react. The discussion has been very positive and encouraging, and I think it goes in the right direction. I took notes, I learned a lot, and that is the value of this event. I am grateful to be here. People are pushing. We also have someone online, François Leray, who authored the resolution mentioned earlier. I believe he is also convinced that you can contribute. Mr. Leray, are you ready?

François Leray :
I will try to introduce the resolution in a very concrete and practical way. Here you can see that I am using the Vivaldi browser, which is Norwegian. I no longer use Gmail. Here is my drive. You can also find video meeting tools instead of Zoom, if you are looking for alternatives. I have my calendar, my emails, about 95% of my use cases, as a former Google power user, are covered. You can leave Google. There are now digital alternatives in Europe. I will show you what this looks like on a smartphone. On the left, you see a smartphone with GAFAM applications in a professional context, Slack, DocuSign, and so on. On the right, you see a selection of European-based alternatives that already exist and could replace them. There is a sense of urgency, as Domenec said, because of geopolitical developments. Every day

we use Google, we must be clear about the context we are in. European alternatives already exist. They may not cover 100% of use cases, but I use them, and it is worth trying. We are also activists. As activists, these are choices we can make to help small European companies grow. It is also a way to put pressure on the US digital sector, which relies heavily on European consumers.
Because we lack a European public space, we do not think at the right scale. We remain confined to national public spaces and forget that across Europe there are many initiatives. Here is a small personal selection of European applications. In France, we are often unaware of what exists in Norway, the Baltics, Poland, Germany, or Switzerland. When I worked on the resolution for the UEF Federal Committee, I was surprised by these facts. I personally use mailbox.org from Germany instead of Gmail. I use Mistral every day instead of ChatGPT, only occasionally do I need ChatGPT. How can you find these alternatives? There are websites that aggregate them. I invite you, as activists and policymakers, to explore them and see what European alternatives already exist. Finally, a point from the resolution: policy matters. There is one issue I would like to highlight for the Commission. Often, when services recommend platforms like Amazon or Uber, they never suggest European equivalents. For example, my provider Orange recommends Amazon as a marketplace, but there are European alternatives. Legislators could consider requiring that when a European company recommends a non-European service, it also proposes a European equivalent, such as Bolt instead of Uber, or FNAC alongside Amazon.
That is all I wanted to present. Thank you for your attention.

Catherine Vieilledent:
Thank you, François. Perhaps you could circulate the links you showed so people become aware of the available services. Visibility is a key issue. We have many small initiatives, but unless national administrations and European institutions actively select and promote some of them, based on legal criteria such as competition, nothing will change and we will continue using Zoom, WebEx, or Teams. There needs to be a strong public push to give visibility and information. Personally, I want reliable information. I don’t want to test 20 platforms; I want trusted guidance from public authorities to help us make this urgent transition.

Christophe Leclercq:
Yes. I liked the intervention, and it gave me two ideas. One is about procurement, and the other about broader policy. On procurement, a lot of people advocate for a “European preference.” It already exists, in a way, in certain areas. And that

was one of the main messages of the Berlin Summit you mentioned. And perhaps we should reframe it, because it sounds protectionist and it creates all kinds of problems. There is also an issue with the WTO, because the WTO still exists, whatever some people may think. We could call it the "European comparison act." It's like in any kind of procurement: you have to show that you are doing something for diversity, that you have thought about gender, and so on. There could be something in any public procurement procedure that would be a bit like what François said: you can choose an American computer, but you must explain why it is better than a European computer. So you have to do the intellectual exercise of comparison. So I think, as a slogan, "European comparison" would be pro-choice, pro-market, about comparing options. The other point is about policy. One thing I didn't mention when I spoke about trusted European platforms is the fear that exists in this city, and we have run into it.. I hope we're off the record, so I can say that the main issue is in the cabinet of the President of the Commission. And I can see why it's a problem: if you have to choose between continuing to send weapons to Ukraine and the risk of upsetting Moscow and some people in Silicon Valley, you might choose Ukraine. I have helped a lot with that, so I understand it.

But we should think back. Some of you are as old as I am, and you remember "Television Without Frontiers." It started with the French and a few enthusiasts who wanted to protect their cinema from Hollywood. And if I fast-forward, the compromise was that Europe could subsidize its film industry, but the market would remain open. And I think it's the same in this area. And it's not so much about subsidies; it's about saying: yes, the market remains open. I saw in a LinkedIn discussion that some people were saying we should boycott Google and Microsoft, well, good luck. We should start by promoting our own offers, as François said. Personally, I'm going to move my personal uses to Vivaldi and Cotton. For Europe Media Lab, we are waiting, because it's more complex. So things happen in steps, and then people become more aware. But the main message is: pro-choice, pro-competition, pro-market, something the Americans can hardly object to.

Catherine Vieilledent:
Thank you, Christophe. Perhaps we don't entirely agree, you and I, because I think one of the EU's strengths is that it has parameters and values, and we can use regulation to promote new products and startups, to encourage and try to invest, which is very necessary, but also to have clear language on how to regulate the market. We do not want platforms that promote hate and

disinformation. You are not arguing against values and regulation, are you?

Christophe Leclercq:
No. I'm saying it's not enough. That's the problem.

Catherine Vieilledent:
Because there is, of course, an attack right now under the big tech lobby, and of course the United States has a €139 billion surplus in services, mainly those royalties coming from platforms. So there is a huge economic stake in this. And there is a very strong campaign trying to "simplify." I don't know whether we should simplify or whether we are restricting the impact or the scope of our personal data rules. There may be room for adjustment, but on the other hand, under pressure, we don't want to give too much leeway to major tech players to train their systems. And AI is part of that too, because AI needs a lot of data. And I still remember, five years ago, a woman saying that in AI and technology, quantity is quality. Of course, there is no limit to the amount of data. So what happens with quantity? There isn't value in quantity alone, but there is value… I don't know what is happening with personal data and AI training. What balance is the EU trying to strike to facilitate innovation, promote our competitiveness and leadership, and strengthen our European ecosystem? I don't know if you have a view on that.
Is there another question?

Audience:
That wasn't a question; it was in response to what you said. I was really surprised on Sunday, at a conference on European platforms, to discover that one of the solutions being offered, BlueSky's "atmosphere," the "Euro-atmosphere" for different social media, uses values as one of its main selling points. The logic of this organization, because it is an activist-driven company in the United States, is that they have 16 million users… or 40 million, compared to 300 million for Twitter. There is an order-of-magnitude gap with Twitter, but with 40 million users. In the BlueSky app, Twitter-like, but there are others, they embed values. They offer technical solutions for any company that wants to build something like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok. They provide technologies that make it easier for entrepreneurs, under two conditions.

First: values, transparency, the ability to do research, and clarity about what is allowed and what is not. Second: a "poison pill," as you call it, meaning the company cannot be sold to Silicon Valley. If you have been supported by the BlueSky community, which is now developing in Europe as "Eurosky," this is not secret, it is

happening now, it means that if you are sold to one of the Silicon Valley champions, you lose access to the technology. So it’s as if everything disappears. And a major plus is portability. The image they use is like mobile phone providers: you would be outraged if, when switching, as I did, from Scarlet to Orange, you had to rebuild all your contacts from scratch. That’s what happens on Facebook, Instagram, etc.: if you leave the platform, you lose all your contacts. BlueSky is fully interoperable. That is the technical side. So when I signed up to BlueSky, I got a “portal” that could be used in the future, Instagram, Facebook, whatever the app may be. They call it an “atmosphere,” which is a good image, because that’s where you get oxygen. You have the values, and you have the poison pill, so that it doesn’t happen like Twitter, which was originally developed by, let’s say, pro bono, good communication people, and then eventually the board said, no, we sell to Elon Musk because there’s too much money. If that happens, boom, the technology disappears. And those values are a real proposition for Europe.
Thank you for your attention.

Liviu Stirbat:
I think it confirms my enthusiasm for being here. I think the conversation is extremely valuable and very important. And perhaps just to react on procurement: it’s something we, at the European Union, are looking at. The procurement framework was reviewed this year, and there has already been a lot of debate across sectors and packages about European preference, or “buy European,” for different reasons. All of this will feed into the broader procurement package. I think it is really, really valuable to talk about this and to compare ideas. It’s quite refreshing.

I can give you an example. In the Biotech Act, which was adopted at the end of the year, we had discussions about restricting certain procurement or giving preference to European providers for biotech services, based on something very important that should be mentioned here, and that I have had the opportunity to address: economic security. This policy was launched in the previous College, and it introduced a new approach: looking at specific technologies and assessing risks linked to them. We started with four: semiconductors, AI, biotechnology, and I’m forgetting the fourth, but several more follow, like advanced materials, and so on. We look at value chains, identify Europe’s dependencies, so that we are not surprised when these dependencies are weaponized by other actors, and also identify reverse dependencies to protect and strengthen them.
A positive example, where we should remember, as Europeans, that we have many strong cards in our hands, to use Trump’s imagery, is the semiconductor industry: ASML is a Dutch crown

jewel that global chip production relies on. And economic security at EU level was, if you like, an expansion of EU action into an area where the EU has limited competence. The reason the European level began acting in economic security was precisely because the Americans told a Dutch company, ASML, what it could export and what it could not. That was an intrusion into sovereignty. That is the example of intrusion into sovereignty. As a result, that Dutch crown jewel was blocked by the US government from exporting to China. So we have economic security. We are examining many other technologies. One of them is biotechnology. As part of this biotech analysis, we identified several cases where European citizens' biological data, such as newborn screening tests, are DNA-sequenced in China, because the Chinese offer is much cheaper than Europe's. So it is a situation where our genetic data is, in effect, stored in China. You can see the implications. We are looking for WTO-compliant ways to address and reduce this potential dependency. Procurement is a very clear and useful example.

On visibility, and I really appreciated the presentation, I will look at the goeuropean.org offer. Very often, markets come up with solutions and responses to market situations. And now we are in a situation where the market is becoming less "market" than it used to be. The Americans have deviated from market orthodoxy. The US government buys shares in Intel and other tech companies. That's a situation where markets are distorted, and the European market is rising to the challenge and offering solutions. I wanted to give an example. I'm not in advertising, but I think cloud services are a very good example. For a long time, cloud services were dominated by American hyperscalers, Amazon AWS, Google Cloud, Microsoft Azure, and others. But as a result of sovereignty concerns, and distortions when the US government begins saying these companies must handle data in certain ways, an unexpected European champion emerged: the Schwarz Group, the owner of Lidl and Kaufland, which is now selling cloud services, sovereign, genuinely sovereign, not the "third thing" you identified. A food retailer is now offering cloud services, real sovereign services, coming from a sector that was not pushed by government, not politically mandated by anyone. The European market has strength and it responds well to market signals, and the distortions we now see are market signals.
And perhaps just to conclude my reaction to the concerns you raised, indeed, around the simplification drive and the omnibus series, what I can tell you is that we work on these topics very carefully, with a lot of reflection. Also, on the amendments in the digital omnibus adopted in November last year, we have huge consideration for the rights and values that already exist and must continue to be protected. But we also have to find the right

balance, in line with the Draghi analysis: we must be able to keep all these rights, benefits, and protections while continuing to improve competitiveness. That is why we must find the right balance, and I am convinced that, with the time we have, and in the hands of the Council and Parliament, it will continue, perhaps even be improved. And the very last point I wanted to make is, once again, about the media landscape. We talk a lot about the United States, and as you heard, the United States is not a monolith; it does not speak with one voice. There is one very loud voice, and companies too, Meta has shifted overnight and is now doing certain things, but there are also other companies like BlueSky, and many alternatives. The United States is quite rich in such alternatives, and it's very interesting to see them. There is a lot of incoherence and inconsistency in what the United States is currently doing. The Trump administration tells us to respect market forces, but they accuse us of censorship while they themselves censor, by demanding access to social media data from people who want to travel to the United States. That is why we must stay the course, pursue our own interests, focus on our strengths, and keep going, doing what we are doing well, while adjusting and fixing what needs fixing.

Catherine Vieilledent:
Now, I think there is a request for a question from this gentleman, Mr Andrea Mairate. Please keep it short, because I believe there are questions online too, or they are more or less covered. Yes. Somebody else as well, you come from Nantes and you came to Brussels to discuss sovereignty, among other things,

Audience:
I was wondering, regarding BlueSky: if they target Silicon Valley as a place they cannot sell to, can they sell to other countries or other companies? In other words, is it targeted against the United States, or is it more broadly targeted, so that they cannot be sold to other companies outside the EU?

Christophe Leclercq:
Yes. There has been… Let me clarify a few things. Eurosky is essentially a network of open-source experiments. And I think, Giorgio, you were speculating a bit, and you might be right, but I'm not sure they are the equivalent of BlueSky in Europe. They cooperate. BlueSky is two different things, as Giorgio said, but let me put it even more clearly. On the one hand, it is a commercial company with an interface you can use, with its 40 million users, competing with Twitter. One day, it could be acquired by Silicon Valley. I was on stage in Berlin with the number two at BlueSky. They are very good people, with values, and so on, but still, they are trying to build something. But behind

them, there is the BlueSky “atmosphere” that Giorgio described well: a set of open-source tools that can be used by anyone, whether in Europe or elsewhere, who wants to build social platforms. And that is why the hackathon we are doing at the end of the month, and many other, more important things, are based on that kind of open source. And perhaps because we are in a world of big organizations and people who respect big companies, some think: “Oh, if it’s done by small organizations, maybe it’s not good.” That is not true. And you probably have more examples than I do, but sometimes, for key platforms, small organizations are absolutely decisive. So I think a microblogging platform will emerge in Europe from this technology, in cooperation with BlueSky, but it won’t be BlueSky itself. And probably there will be several competitors, but that’s OK because there is interoperability. There will be a debate about multiple platforms sharing the same infrastructure.

Catherine Vieilledent:
Andréa, I think you had a question.

Andrea Mairate (Graspe):
Well, I'd like to bring to the discussion one element that maybe was not discussed. I think as part of the sovereignty debate, we should talk about investment. And in Europe, we don't have or we haven't achieved a critical mass of investments. Well, if you think that I'm an economist, so I'm not an expert in AI or whatever. We have a saving rate of 15% more or less. The saving rate is quite high. Which means, globally, we have 40 trillion in savings in Europe. 40 trillion. This is double EU GDP. OK. The problem is that we have fragmented capital markets. They are not efficient. They are relatively small. And they rely essentially on bank financing. So, not all the sources, equity, venture capital, and so forth. So, the problem is as the Letta report that you all know put it, how you can mobilize those savings into investment. Because this is a problem. If we want to be fully independent or sovereign or autonomous, we need to mobilize investment. I mean, to a scale that is sufficient. The U.S. has come up with a plan of $500 billion for AI.

In China, they also invest a lot. And they are relatively independent in terms of digital infrastructures, and they have big national champions as well. So, I think this is, if we don't address that issue, I think we can discuss technical solutions. There are a lot of ideas, a lot of interesting things. But otherwise, we will not sort out the problem. So, either you do it with borrowing, but this is ruled out. So, we have the capital market solution. But this is still in the Council. I mean, it has been there for 20 years. Five action plans. So, last year, 2024. Why is it that it's not making...

It's very complex. I mean, you have cross-border investments. I was going to say, when are we going to have a digital single market? If you want sovereign digital infrastructure, you have to invest.

Catherine Vieilledent:
But, actually, how do you weaponise this huge amount of European savings, a big part of which goes to the United States? And why... Well, is it because we don't have a unified single market? That is, we have 27 jurisdictions and they want to keep their capital with themselves or what is the problembehind this absence of progress in terms of the capital markets union?

Audience:
I've worked so long on this topic. I think we must remain coherent with the European story. The structures that we have there are there for a reason. We cannot just hope it will happen. For the last 30 years, since the European project started, Europe, from its structure, has always favored market access over other policy approaches. Europe is the only economic area in the world that has actually applied or proclaimed to apply standard textbook economics, yeah, of competitive markets. No other area has done this. The Americans have never done that. The Americans have, for example, always been more Canadian than the Europeans. Always. The Americans have always used state craft to scale domestic industries. The Internet is one of them. It was a military project in the beginning. It's not the only one. Japan has massively used state craft to scale high-end technologies. They have scaled five generations of computers until Bill Gates came and killed them with the PC, and so on. China has never done anything else. China is a state craft to scale technology and has never really opened its market to international competition, and that's it. So now it's really a massive challenge for the European model because the European model allowed rather small European companies to compete worldwide because we always favored market access.

We're the only economic area in the world that has a legally binding unilateral commitment to free movement of capital. There's no other place in the world. With a legally binding commitment, you can go to court and you immediately win if you can show that one of our governments has hindered you to invest in one of our economies. You win immediately, hands down. It's not even a point to go to court because everybody knows this by now. There have been famous cases in the 70s and 80s and no government has even tried to do something like that. So I think this model is now challenged because we had many European small and medium-sized companies who were in their market niche: monopolies, duopolies, maybe three or four. So in my home country, in Austria, there are plenty of companies who were monopolies in their niche.

Of course, you only produce a very little thing for the international production and supply chain. But in that niche, you are the best and you are the only one. So Europe actually allowed itself to compete on the most ambitious economic model where you have to be the best in your sector. And that worked. But now, if we lose market access, then this model breaks down. And for us, this is a huge challenge because we have not learned any other model. This is the model we know. We know to be the best on a very small thing, even be a monopolist on a world market. But suddenly, if we don't have access to China market, to US markets, to Latin America, because all over the place, not only the state craft, the state industries, but now also trade barriers are erected, then our model is directly challenged. And this is a huge, huge, huge challenge now for us. And we have not found so far really an answer to that. And I think Christophe mentioned the other big problem, why it's so difficult in Europe to use state craft and scale industries like the Chinese or the Japanese or the US, because we cannot decide politically on how to distribute the benefits.

If you want to scale something, you have to pick a winner. So if the Commission, for example, decided tomorrow, which I hope someday will happen, to not use Microsoft Word any longer, which is the crappiest software ever invented, and Microsoft is much flying under the radar in all these discussions. For me, Microsoft has done by far the biggest damage, way more than Google and Facebook and all the others combined. Microsoft Word is the biggest innovation killer in the 20th century, flying completely under the radar. I can explain to you in a separate session. But we cannot pick winners. Politically, we are not able to pick winners, but I think we have to start trying and have the courage to pick winners and to scale them on the European side. And, of course, the public institutions should start with that.

Catherine Vieilledent:
Thank you, I'm sorry I have to interrupt you. Thank you for this challenging economic perspective. This is a provocation, but because we said we would keep going, we will keep going.
Thank you very much.