

Digitalising and transforming the European economy

Recommendations on policies for a new era: DAAD EU Alumni Summit 2022

Dear honorable representatives of the European Union,

We are in the midst of a deep and far-reaching technological revolution, driven by a variety of new technologies and business models emerging in the Information and Communication field (ICT). A revolution we have yet to bind by corresponding regulations to foster and link technological growth with societal benefit.

To both address the challenges and harness the potential of the development in the ICT sector in the ongoing decade, the European Commission has drafted the EU Digital Compass, formulating a number of goals encompassing digital skills, information infrastructure, business enhancement and the transformation of government services. The 2022 DAAD EU Alumni Summit has dedicated a workshop to the reflection of these goals by connecting experts from a variety of different fields and different EU member nations. This workshop has led to this proposal, which seeks to expand the existing EU Digital Compass and help decision makers at both the EU and national levels to make the right decisions for the digital decade.

The following learnings and guiding questions may be used to evaluate existing legal frameworks and those in development:

Learning 1: Digitalisation is a strategic tool not a strategy itself

Digital technologies are tools that hold the potential of greatly aiding the European Union in its pursuit of strategic goals across all disciplines: Economic growth and integration, mobility (including of the labor force), enhancement of democratic values and the European way of life and the green deal. It is crucial to embed digital strategies in the European Union's strategy as opposed to setting an independent agenda for it. Looking at strategic pursuits, it is necessary to answer how digitalisation may accelerate the pace and impact of governmental agendas. To illustrate the discussion: While it is amable to set targets for prominent technologies, we may ask how Artificial Intelligence itself adds value to a diverse group of businesses, people and governments and whether it is needed in all use cases. Whenever developing legal frameworks to foster digitalisation it is worth asking: How do we enhance the European Union's strategy and the life of people within by using said technology?

Learning 2: The European Union is a pioneer of digital human rights

The European Union should have more tech unicorns and trending technologies, such as AI, are often brought to life at universities and tech hubs in the United States and the United Kingdom. We have, however, one major advantage that makes us attractive for a highly educated labor force that is fostering technological advancement: We truly believe in and defend human rights. It is therefore not only through technological progress we establish greatness but rather in the methodology of how we approach it. Setting global standards for data protection with legislation such as the GDPR and the currently developed Data Act and Digital Markets Act is where we truly succeed. Whenever developing legal frameworks to foster digitalisation it is worth asking: Are human rights and European Union's values accurately reflected and at the core of each law?

Learning 3: Technological advancement requires a human-centric approach

In tech, we derive the most promising digital solutions through design thinking, a

methodology putting users at the center of innovation. Technological advancement is not an achievement by nature, it may become so through fulfilling the needs of users. Digital strategies to accelerate EU targets and strengthen EU values should put its citizens at the center of innovation, too. Whenever developing legal frameworks to foster digitalisation it is worth asking: Are the citizens of the European Union at the center of innovation?

Learning 4: The European Union thrives through multidisciplinary dialogue

While it is often perceived as a weakness, the time we take for dialogue among institutions and governments is what makes us strong. Whenever seeking to establish new policies and allocate funds, European Union representatives may seek counsel from academia, business and civic society. Establishing a council of leaders from these groups to actively participate in the creation of policies does not only lead to greater results through diversity and multiperspectivity, it also highly relates to the democratic values of the European Union. Whenever developing legal frameworks to foster digitalisation it is worth asking: How can multiperspectivity and participation of academia, business and civic society shape the democratic dialogue?

We have then set out to put a selection of concrete ideas into practice:

Idea 1: Create a digital safety hub for EU citizens

The GDPR has laid outstanding groundwork for the strengthening of data rights. We propose to extend the GDPR by leveraging EU values and human rights and critically reflecting whether those core ideas are sufficiently protected in the regulatory framework. One leading question that we discussed was: Who owns data of European Union citizens? Art. 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly states 'No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.' Our experience in the digital world reflects quite the opposite. Besides the extension of legal frameworks, it may also prove valuable to make the submission of claims easier to relieve European Union citizens of some of the burden that comes with claiming back their rights (see Schrems I and II).

Idea 2: Support platforms with similar values

Global players have established large, impenetrable monopolies in the market. Meanwhile, players exist that adhere to European Union values (Google vs. Ecosia). It is necessary to carve out space for those businesses to thrive, so that we do not foster the success of businesses that largely remain neutral to our policy and belief systems but rather those whose vision we truly support. Private-public partnerships may be one method to make sure digital entry points to information are gateways to democratic ideas and important public information is ranked among the first pages of a search algorithm.

Idea 3: Re-define the labor market

Digitalisation and technology were meant to relieve us from burdens and make the lives of citizens easier. It has caused a shift in the labour force with those who gained through digitalization and those who were deprived by it. Even though we are wealthier and more productive than ever, we work 40 hours or more. It is mandatory that we mitigate the challenges of this development. We could do so by creating digital dividends, financed by a digital tax, paid out to citizens. As working remotely becomes more prominent, we also need to re-think insurance and taxation policies and make mobility of employees even easier.

Idea 4: Re-think education

Digitalization affects all professions throughout all sectors and it requires life-long

learning. We can teach basic competencies in schools and universities by adapting curricula but we also need to find practical solutions for adult learning. We suggest providing financial assistance such as tax-deductible allowances for digital training on top of what exists and increase the time frame for educational leave for digital competencies. A national holiday for learning could aid in making the mindset a reality. As not all citizens have necessary skills and physical hardware to profit from open education platforms and it is a human need to come together and learn, we should translate the hubs of knowledge of the past, libraries, to hubs of knowledge of the present, past and future. Instead of quietly reading, these hubs should foster co-learning and dialogue. Librarians evolve to digital guides and lead citizens through the entry points of the digital space. Increasing the quality of provided equipment also solves challenges of digital equality.

Idea 5: Make open source and access the pillars of digital business in the EU

Europe's strength in ICT lies within strong SMEs and a very vivid open source community. Enabling these players further will enable the EU to greatly improve future ICT products while also making them accessible to both EU and global citizens, helping to spread European solutions around the world.

Idea 6: Ensure the strength of the EU market

Regulatory frameworks and citizen-centric approaches may lead to the impression that the EU market could become unattractive for global players. It is therefore necessary to even out responsibilities with opportunity that may be derived from the strength of the EU: We offer access to a highly educated labor force, a strong and open market and academic cooperation. Simplifying the possibilities to access those resources provides real value for corporations. We do, however, need to re-think administrative procedures and aim at reducing the complexity of registration. This could include: A legal form for digital start-ups, simplified mobility for corporations inside the EU.

Idea 7: GovTech should enhance citizenship not endanger citizen rights

While Estonia is a great role model in the space of digital government services, we would like to protect critical systems, most namely voting, from external pressure by remaining within a secure analogue process. However, we strongly support the digitalization of all services that have minor risks and a high bureaucratic burden on both citizens and employees of the state. Prioritizing these by needed input and seeking out ways how digital tools can minimize this burden, while ensuring accessibility to services for all, is the way to shape the digital future of the EU administration.

Idea 8: Green IT should extend far beyond the edge of the network

The EU Digital Compass specifically mentions the climate neutrality of to be installed edge nodes. We strongly encourage the EU to extend this vision/regulatory plan to all expansions of the infrastructure to realize the 2030 vision in a sustainable way that protects both the climate and lessens our dependence on third country energy suppliers.

We would like to thank you for your thoughtful consideration of our recommendations and are looking forward to receiving your feedback and thoughts.

Yours sincerely,
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