

# CONNECT UNIVERSITY: Digital Decade Report 2024 - Setting the scene for the new EU's digital policy agenda

## *Minutes*

### 1. Introduction

- We are living in a key moment:
  - Digital has gained increasing importance in the field of security, which has become paramount (challenges such as climate change, geopolitical conflicts, and supply chain vulnerabilities).
  - Digital is not only the driver of growth and competitiveness, but also for ensuring that our democratic values are protected.
  - Speed and scale matter more than ever.
- In this context, it is increasingly important that we become more future-oriented, more strategic. This requires having a comprehensive overview of all digital aspects, urging strategic long-term planning and collaboration.
  - This is exactly the story of the Digital Decade: it aims to have a long-term view, with common objectives, cooperation among Member States (MS), a bottom-up approach where MS take the lead (i.e. through the Digital Decade Board (DDB)), and concrete projects that enable MS to have the infrastructure to enable their digital transformation (European Digital Innovation Consortia (EDICs)).

### 2. The State of the Digital Decade Report 2024

- The report serves as a wake-up call, highlighting the gaps in achieving 2030 targets related to competitiveness, greening, and resilience.
- It is also a document that takes stock on the national roadmaps, highlighting the role of MS in this process.

#### *Overarching messages:*

- The EU has set itself as a global digital innovator, and made progress with its industrial strategy. However, **there is still limited progress noted in many of the dimensions of the Digital Decade.**
- Competitiveness:
  - Lack of connectivity, and not only of network, also a lack of take-up
  - Security is an overarching concern
- People and Society:
  - We are not on track when it comes to digital skills and ICT specialists
  - We are behind in the take-up of e-ID schemes, despite improvement in the provision of public services online

- Green and Digital:
  - There is a need to invest more in sustainable networks, sustainable infrastructures
  - Digitalisation can also help in addressing the greening of our society
- Coherence and synergies
  - Creating better synergies among EU programmes
  - Striving for a more effective re-tape free implementation of the digital regulatory framework
  - Taking into consideration also cities and regions (local level and not only national level)

*Recommendations & way forward:*

- Implementing and enforcing the regulatory framework
- Mobilising investments
- Completing the Digital Single Market to strengthen competitiveness (but also reducing the administrative burden)
- Disseminating technologies
- Providing for the common good – ensuring the online space is safe and healthy
- Fostering cooperation between MS and with local level of society: we are not going to succeed if we don't harness action from all levels of society
- All the above points show **there is a clear alignment between the Digital Decade and President von der Leyen's priorities for the next 5 years, encompassing defense and security, sustainable prosperity and competitiveness, democracy and social fairness.**

3. Panel Debate

*Georg RIEKELES (European Policy Centre)*

- Highlighted the **urgency of addressing security challenges** in the digital landscape.
- If anything, Draghi **understates the risks and the urgency**: a multifront security situation, deep division or fragmentation of the international economic order - and strong capacity of influence of external powers on the EU.
- If economic policy in the previous mandate was about the twin transition, this mandate is about the **triple transition: digital, green and economic security.**
- Where we are in Europe:
  - **"Make or break"** moments at macro level but also in specific fields and sectors;
  - But also, positives: we have an **army of startups** that we need to help to grow, e.g. in quantum technologies.

- It's a question of speed and scale when thinking about digital transformation – Europe's **tech ecosystems have a 'can do' attitude but agency requires that policies will follow.**
- Argued that we need to **rethink the EU industrial policy:**
  - RRF: billions of euros available for semiconductors, in parallel to Chips Act --> but we are putting this money into ecosystems that don't exist (e.g. Spain). **We cannot spread technology everywhere; we need to focus on where there is capacity.**
- Agreed that **enforcement is key.** E.g. GDPR: the problem is not that we have or don't have it, it's not been effectively enforced (because of governance & IE Data Protection Commission)--> **importance of translating what we do into a clear how.**

*Léa AUFFRET (BEUC, European Consumer Organisation)*

- Welcomed the report's focus on connectivity and the need for synergies between the digital and green transitions, but **raised concerns about consumer trust in digital environments**, especially regarding the uncertainty of how their data is being used and manipulation through dark patterns.
- Emphasised the need for a **balance between protecting consumers and empowering businesses** (even when we strive to be more competitive).
  - Recommendation on the telecom sector consolidation: she argued that we need to be careful about this, because they can come at the expense of consumers. This will likely result in higher prices for consumers and degradation of the quality of services.
- Highlighted the **importance of implementation through a strong enforcement strategy.**
- Noted that the report should look more into **the dimension of international trade, especially digital trade agreements.** She warned about the risks of new rules on access to source code of software in EU trade agreements that could limit the ability of authorities to enforce the AI act. She mentioned that even the United States are now changing their trade policy and no longer include these rules in their trade agreements to preserve their policy space.

*Niclas POITIERS (BRUEGEL)*

- Provided feedback on the report, **emphasising the need for clearer goals and benchmarks for measuring progress.**
  - He would wish for goals to be better defined and the policies to be more targeted to reach these goals.

- **On the Digital Decade: he argued that not all targets are specific and relevant and some of them are not achievable** (for example, the Chips target). Sometimes the targets only represent a political ambition.
- Another example he gave was on the AI uptake: it is not always clear what this means in practice --> how do you ask a company if they are adopting this particular technology/what does it mean in practice?
- Argued that it is not always a failure of digital policy, rather of the single market: the single market should be more in the agenda
  - Currently, it is **hard for startups to scale up** because of the **complexity of regulation, the difficulty of getting financial support**
  - **We will not catch up on AI if we do not finish our capitals markets union**
  - **Many of the things we are doing in digital are not possible because we have other “unresolved” issues**

***Conclusions: what are the 2/3 key elements you would highlight more in the Digital Decade?***

*Niclas POITIERS (BRUEGEL)*

- **Digital security** should be highlighted more going forward
- **Putting a benchmark for public administration:** a lot of opportunity to deliver here (a lot of tools already such as the EU Digital Wallet)
- **Building/helping scale-ups to innovate:** shared concerns over this, including with respect to a perceived backtracking on this (see for example some countries backtracking on funding education and research)

*Lea AUFFRET (European Consumer Organisation)*

- Having a clearer enforcement strategy
- Abolishing fees for intra-EU calls

*Georg RIEKELES (European Policy Centre)*

- We should not lose our courage when it comes to “going after Gig Tech”: it's not about being protectionist, but there are some real cross-society and cross-economy stakes that are not being properly addressed.
- Key issues at stake: digital security and supporting SMEs (building that culture and mentality in our ecosystem).
- The panel showed large consensus on the diagnosis: success will not happen automatically and it will take a long time, whatever the solution and direction.

- To achieve a successful digital transition is an ambitious choice, and that is why we have ambitious targets and objectives.