Europe at a Crossroads: Governance, Business, and Policy Transformation in a Changing Global Economy. Proceedings of the International Conference EU-PAIR 2026

DOI:10.47743/eu-pair.2026-1-16

EUROPE'S DIGITAL INDEPENDENCE: GOVERNANCE, STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND REGULATORY TRANSFORMATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract
In an increasingly fragmented global economy, digital technologies have become central not only to economic competitiveness but also to political influence, institutional resilience, and strategic autonomy. The European Union's growing dependence on non-European digital infrastructures, technological platforms, data ecosystems, and external digital providers has intensified debates concerning digital sovereignty and Europe's capacity to exercise autonomous strategic decision-making. This paper examines Europe's digital independence as an emerging dimension of European governance and analyses the regulatory transformation through which the European Union seeks to strengthen its strategic autonomy in the digital sphere. Particular attention is devoted to the evolution of the EU regulatory and policy framework, with reference to the Digital Services Act, the Digital Markets Act, the Artificial Intelligence Act, and broader EU digital strategies aimed at ensuring technological competitiveness while safeguarding democratic values, market fairness, and citizens' rights.
Adopting a doctrinal and policy-oriented approach, the paper explores the relationship between governance, regulation, and strategic power, arguing that digital independence should not be understood as technological isolation or economic protectionism. Rather, it reflects the development of institutional capacity, regulatory coherence, and strategic resilience intended to reduce structural dependencies and reinforce the European Union's position within an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment. The paper concludes that Europe's pursuit of digital independence represents a broader transformation of governance and regulatory power, illustrating how law and public policy have become essential instruments through which the European Union seeks to preserve both competitiveness and strategic autonomy in the twenty-first century.
Keywords: *digital independence; digital sovereignty; strategic autonomy; EU digital regulation; regulatory maturity.*
JEL Classification: K23; K24; O38; L51.

1. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed a profound transformation in the sources of economic and geopolitical power. While access to natural resources, industrial production and financial capital traditionally determined the strategic position of states, the digital economy has introduced a new category of strategic assets: data, artificial intelligence, cloud infrastructures, semiconductor technologies and advanced digital networks. Control over these resources increasingly influences not only economic competitiveness but also institutional resilience, national security and the capacity of governments to exercise strategic autonomy in an interconnected global environment (European Commission, 2026a).

The acceleration of digital transformation has simultaneously generated unprecedented opportunities and significant structural vulnerabilities. The growing concentration of digital infrastructures and technological capabilities in the hands of a limited number of global actors has exposed the European Union to multiple forms of external dependence. In response, European digital policy has gradually evolved beyond its initial objective of creating a Digital Single Market. Today, the European Union seeks to strengthen its digital independence by developing technological capabilities, reducing strategic dependencies and reinforcing its regulatory capacity in areas considered essential for Europe's future competitiveness and security (European Commission, 2026b).

This evolution reflects a broader change in the function of European regulation. Legislative instruments such as the Digital Services Act, the Digital Markets Act, the Artificial Intelligence Act and the Data Act are no longer intended solely to improve the functioning of digital markets or protect consumers. Increasingly, they constitute elements of a comprehensive governance strategy through which the European Union seeks to promote technological resilience, strengthen critical digital infrastructure and enhance its capacity to act independently within an increasingly fragmented global economy. The adoption of the European Commission's Communication on European Tech Sovereignty in 2026 further confirms this strategic transition by placing technological capacity, digital infrastructure and innovation at the centre of the Union's long-term policy agenda (European Commission, 2026c).

In this paper, digital independence does not denote technological isolation, economic protectionism or the complete absence of foreign technologies. Such an objective would be unrealistic in an economy characterised by globally integrated supply chains, cross-border data flows and technological interdependence. The concept is instead used to describe the Union’s capacity to transform dependency into governable interdependence: to determine the legal and institutional conditions under which technologies, platforms, data and critical digital products operate within its jurisdiction, while developing strategic capabilities of its own.

Against this background, the present paper examines how the European Union is constructing its digital independence through the progressive transformation of its regulatory framework. It asks whether, and under what conditions, EU regulatory power can reduce structural technological vulnerabilities without producing technological isolation or undermining openness, innovation and competitiveness. The paper argues that recent legislative and policy developments demonstrate that European digital regulation has evolved beyond market governance and increasingly functions as an instrument of strategic autonomy. Adopting a doctrinal and policy-oriented approach, the analysis considers the principal legislative acts governing the European digital ecosystem together with the latest policy initiatives on technological sovereignty, examining both their distinct legal objectives and their cumulative strategic function. Following this introduction, the paper traces the transition from Digital Single Market integration to digital independence, analyses the emerging European regulatory architecture, evaluates regulation as an instrument of strategic autonomy and, finally, considers the movement from regulatory expansion towards regulatory maturity. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate that regulation has become one of the principal mechanisms through which the European Union pursues long-term digital resilience, competitiveness and geopolitical influence.

2. FROM DIGITAL MARKET INTEGRATION TO DIGITAL INDEPENDENCE

For more than two decades, the European Union's digital policy was organised principally around the completion of the Digital Single Market. Its objectives were to remove barriers to cross-border digital services, facilitate the free movement of data and services, protect consumers and preserve fair competition. Within this model, digital regulation performed a recognisably economic function: it supplied the legal conditions for market integration and treated technological development primarily as a source of growth and efficiency. Questions of infrastructure ownership, supply-chain exposure and foreign technological dependence remained comparatively peripheral.

Geopolitical and technological developments have altered that hierarchy of concerns. Dependence on non-European providers of cloud services, artificial intelligence, semiconductors and other critical infrastructures has shown that technological capability is also a component of economic security, institutional resilience and strategic autonomy. EU policy has accordingly expanded from regulating transactions within the internal market to addressing the conditions under which that market depends on external technologies and providers. The shift is therefore one of scope rather than abandonment: market integration remains important, but it is now evaluated alongside security, resilience and the

capacity to act in strategically significant digital sectors (European Commission, 2026a).

The resulting policy tension is not between openness and complete technological self-sufficiency. The Union continues to depend on international trade, cross-border data flows, foreign investment and globally distributed supply chains. The relevant distinction is instead between ordinary interdependence and dependencies that become structurally difficult to replace, diversify or govern. The Commission's concern is that excessive reliance on a limited number of external providers may constrain policy choices, expose critical services to disruption and weaken the Union's bargaining position. Digital independence thus adds a resilience test to the traditional criteria of market efficiency and competitiveness (European Commission, 2026b).

This interpretation is consistent with scholarship that treats European digital sovereignty as an attempt to reconcile open markets with the reduction of excessive external dependencies. Christakis identifies the difficulty of navigating between the Union's global regulatory influence and its search for strategic autonomy. The distinction is important: the capacity to impose rules on firms operating in the European market does not by itself establish technological leadership, but it can preserve regulatory choice, constrain private concentrations of power and create conditions for European capabilities to develop. Regulatory influence and technological capacity are therefore related, but they are not interchangeable (Christakis, 2020).

The transition is visible in the cumulative development of the European regulatory framework. The Digital Services Act, the Digital Markets Act and the Artificial Intelligence Act address different legal problems, yet each also limits forms of private power capable of shaping the European digital environment. The DMA is particularly illustrative: its immediate purpose is to secure fair and contestable markets by regulating gatekeepers, not to create technological autonomy directly. As has been noted in recent scholarship, contestability rules respond to the structural influence of major platforms and may widen the practical space in which competitors can operate. The strategic contribution of such legislation is therefore indirect and must be assessed through its effects rather than inferred from its adoption (Irinescu, 2024).

The move from Digital Single Market integration to digital independence consequently changes the questions asked of EU law. It is no longer sufficient to determine whether a measure corrects a market failure or harmonises national rules. The additional inquiry is whether the measure reduces a strategically relevant vulnerability, preserves meaningful institutional choice or contributes to capabilities that the Union can sustain. This analytical distinction provides the basis for examining the regulatory architecture in the next section.

3. BUILDING A EUROPEAN DIGITAL REGULATORY ARCHITECTURE

The European Union has not pursued digital independence through a single legislative instrument. It has developed an incremental architecture addressing different sources of power and vulnerability within the digital ecosystem. The Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act govern platform responsibility and market power; the Artificial Intelligence Act addresses technological risk; the Data Governance Act and Data Act regulate access to and use of data; the Cyber Resilience Act concerns the security of products with digital elements; and the Chips Act targets semiconductor capacity. These measures do not share a single legal basis or immediate objective, but together they connect market structure, data availability, technological safety, cybersecurity and industrial capacity (European Commission, 2026b).

A systemic interpretation is especially relevant because the European Union does not possess technological dominance comparable to that of the principal global technology powers. Its strongest established asset is its ability to set standards for access to a large internal market. Bradford's 'Brussels Effect' explains how firms may extend EU requirements across their international operations, thereby giving European rules an influence beyond the Union's borders. In the digital sphere, this externalisation of standards can support autonomy by preserving the Union's authority to define acceptable market conduct. It should nevertheless be distinguished from control over infrastructure, intellectual property or production capacity (Bradford, 2012).

The contribution of each instrument must therefore be identified with precision. The DSA increases the accountability of intermediary services and very large platforms. The DMA imposes ex ante obligations on gatekeepers to protect contestability and fairness. The AI Act establishes a risk-based system for AI development and deployment, while the Data Governance Act and Data Act seek to make data more accessible and usable within the European economy. The Cyber Resilience Act introduces horizontal cybersecurity requirements for connected products, and the Chips Act addresses the material foundations of digital production. Romanian scholarship on the DMA likewise emphasises the importance of responding to the structural power of platforms. The architecture is complementary, but complementarity does not eliminate differences in enforcement, institutional responsibility or capacity to produce measurable strategic effects (European Commission, 2026a; Regulation (EU) 2022/1925; Regulation (EU) 2022/2065; Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, 2024; Irinescu, 2024).

The architecture also distributes authority among EU institutions, national regulators, courts and private platforms. This is particularly visible under the DSA, where public supervision coexists with platforms' own rules on content moderation, recommender systems and risk management. Because those private rules affect the exercise of fundamental rights, digital governance cannot be

reduced to a conventional relationship between regulator and regulated undertaking. Its effectiveness depends on coordination among multiple actors, adequate supervisory resources and judicial review. Fragmentation at the level of enforcement may therefore weaken an otherwise coherent legislative design (Golunova, 2026).

Research on European digital sovereignty identifies foreign dependencies, fragmented governance and security vulnerabilities as distinct but interconnected policy concerns. The regulatory architecture addresses them unevenly. It can establish conditions of market access, data use, accountability and security, but it cannot by itself manufacture semiconductors, create competitive cloud infrastructure or guarantee access to critical inputs. Its strategic value should therefore be assessed according to the dependency targeted, the legal mechanism employed and the institutional or industrial capacity available to implement it. This prevents the existence of a broad legislative corpus from being treated as proof that autonomy has already been achieved (Anand et al., 2026).

EU digital policy increasingly combines internal-market objectives, fundamental rights considerations, and geopolitical interests. This produces a hybrid model rather than a replacement of economic regulation by geopolitical policy. A measure may protect competition or rights while also increasing resilience, but those effects should not be assumed to coincide in every case. Requirements that strengthen accountability may impose compliance costs; restrictions on dominant firms may improve contestability without ensuring that European competitors emerge. The dual function of regulation is therefore a source of strategic potential as well as possible policy tension (Broeders, Cristiano and Kaminska, 2023).

The architecture is also subject to revision once implementation reveals conflicts among ambition, administrative capacity and competitiveness. Regulation (EU) 2026/1744-Digital Omnibus on AI, illustrates this adaptive dimension by amending the implementation of the AI Act. Its adoption shows that an integrated regulatory architecture is not a finished structure but an iterative system whose rules may require adjustment when complexity impedes enforcement, innovation or legal certainty. Whether such adjustment constitutes mature recalibration or regulatory retreat cannot be decided merely from the fact of amendment; it depends on the content and effects of the changes, a question examined in Section 5 (Regulation (EU) 2026/1744, 2026).

European digital governance has thus developed from sector-specific interventions into a connected, though not fully unified, regulatory architecture. Its instruments govern different objects, rely on different institutions and contribute to autonomy through different causal pathways. Their cumulative strategic significance lies in the possibility of coordinating market contestability, platform accountability, trustworthy AI, access to data, cybersecurity and industrial capacity. The next question is not whether regulation forms part of the

Union's autonomy strategy, but under what conditions regulatory power can translate into durable strategic capability.

4. REGULATION AS A STRATEGIC INSTRUMENT OF EUROPEAN DIGITAL AUTONOMY

To describe regulation as a strategic instrument requires more than identifying geopolitical language in EU policy documents. Regulation contributes to digital autonomy only where it produces at least one of three effects: it preserves the Union's freedom to make and enforce collective choices; it reduces exposure to coercive or irreplaceable external dependencies; or it supports the development of technological and institutional capabilities within Europe. This functional test separates strategic effect from regulatory ambition and makes it possible to evaluate different legal instruments on comparable terms.

The first mechanism is normative and jurisdictional. By conditioning access to the internal market, the Union can impose ex ante obligations before private market structures become irreversible. The DMA limits specified gatekeeper practices, the DSA requires systemic-risk governance and the AI Act determines the conditions under which certain AI systems may be developed or used. These rules do more than correct harm after it occurs: they allocate responsibility and establish boundaries for technological development. In that sense, anticipatory regulation preserves public authority over choices that might otherwise be determined principally by dominant firms.

The second mechanism concerns resilience. Rules on portability, interoperability, access to data, cybersecurity and supplier obligations can lower switching costs, diversify access and make disruption easier to absorb. Yet the legal creation of alternatives is not equivalent to their economic availability. A right to move data has limited strategic value where no viable alternative infrastructure exists; cybersecurity duties cannot remove dependence on a concentrated supply chain. Regulation is most effective strategically when legal rights are matched by enforcement capacity, investment and credible substitutes.

The third mechanism is the projection of standards beyond the Union. The Brussels Effect can induce multinational firms to adopt European requirements across their operations and thereby extend EU normative influence. As highlighted in recent legal scholarship examining Europe's geopolitical ambitions, however, normative power does not automatically overcome material technological dependence. Global standard-setting may strengthen the Union's voice while leaving essential infrastructure, capital and intellectual property controlled elsewhere. Regulatory reach is therefore one dimension of autonomy, not a substitute for technological capability (Broeders, Cristiano and Kaminska, 2023).

Regulation can consequently support digital autonomy, but it can also generate countervailing effects. Complex or unstable obligations may raise entry costs, discourage investment or burden smaller European firms more heavily than established global actors. Conversely, under-regulation may entrench private power and deepen dependence. The relevant policy choice is not between regulation and innovation, but between regulatory designs with different distributive and strategic consequences. European digital autonomy therefore requires a combination of proportionate rules, effective enforcement, industrial investment, research capacity and international cooperation.

5. THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN DIGITAL GOVERNANCE: FROM REGULATION TO REGULATORY MATURITY

The entry into force of Regulation (EU) 2026/1744 - Digital Omnibus on AI, provides an early test of whether European digital governance is moving from regulatory expansion towards regulatory maturity. That conclusion is plausible but not self-evident. Amendment may demonstrate an institution's capacity to learn from implementation, yet it may also expose weaknesses in the original design or reflect a political shift in the balance among protection, competitiveness and innovation. Regulatory maturity should therefore be treated as an evaluative standard rather than as an automatic consequence of legislative simplification.

The case for interpreting the Omnibus as recalibration rests on its stated objective of simplifying implementation while preserving the safeguards of the AI Act. The changes respond to practical difficulties faced by businesses, regulators and innovators and seek to improve timelines, legal clarity and proportionality. On this view, stability does not mean legislative rigidity. A mature framework must be capable of correcting excessive burdens and aligning obligations with available administrative and technical capacity without abandoning its underlying objectives (European Commission, 2026d).

The contrary interpretation cannot be dismissed. Legal scholarship on the Omnibus debate indicates, simplification may reopen substantive political choices embedded in the original regulatory settlement. Changes presented as technical can redistribute risks, compliance costs and institutional authority, while repeated amendment may reduce predictability for regulated actors. The relevant question is therefore not whether the framework has become lighter, but whether the revised allocation of obligations remains legitimate, coherent and capable of protecting the public interests that justified regulation (Beckers, 2026).

Four criteria are useful for assessing the outcome. First, revised rules should remain coherent with the objectives and fundamental-rights safeguards of the wider digital acquis. Second, simplification should improve implementability for supervisory authorities as well as compliance for firms. Third, it should reduce

unnecessary burdens without shifting disproportionate risks to citizens or smaller market participants. Fourth, it should contribute to innovation and investment through greater legal certainty rather than through the simple removal of obligations. These criteria connect regulatory maturity to observable institutional performance.

The future of European digital governance will consequently depend on the quality of implementation and review. Formal coherence among legislative instruments must be accompanied by sufficient expertise, resources and coordination at both EU and national levels. Enforcement outcomes, market entry, infrastructure investment, switching possibilities and the resilience of critical services offer more meaningful indicators of autonomy than the number of regulations adopted. The transition to maturity will occur only if the Union can use such evidence to refine its framework without subjecting regulated actors to continuous and unpredictable redesign.

The Digital Omnibus should therefore be understood as a test, not proof, of regulatory maturity. It may represent a constructive second phase in which the Union reconciles ambition with implementability, but that assessment depends on subsequent enforcement and market effects. More broadly, European digital autonomy will require the regulatory framework to remain coherent, adaptable and proportionate while operating alongside industrial policy, scientific investment and resilient infrastructure. Maturity lies in the capacity to preserve essential objectives through evidence-based adjustment, not simply in adopting more rules or fewer rules.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that the European Union's pursuit of digital independence is changing the function of digital law within the integration process. EU regulation continues to organise markets and protect rights, but it also increasingly preserves institutional choice, addresses strategic dependencies and shapes the conditions under which digital technologies operate. Digital autonomy is therefore not a separate field of legislation; it is a strategic dimension that cuts across competition, platform governance, data, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and industrial policy.

The analysis also establishes a necessary limit to the concept. Digital independence cannot plausibly mean technological isolation or complete self-sufficiency. It is better understood as the capacity to govern interdependence: to identify dependencies that create unacceptable vulnerability, diversify or reduce them where possible and retain sufficient legal, institutional and technological capability to make autonomous choices. This definition is consistent with an open economy while distinguishing openness from exposure that cannot be managed.

The principal legislative instruments contribute to that capacity through different mechanisms. The DSA and DMA constrain forms of platform power; the AI Act structures technological risk; the data legislation affects access, sharing and switching; the Cyber Resilience Act addresses security; and the Chips Act supports material capacity. Their existence does not itself prove autonomy. Their strategic value depends on enforcement, coordination and whether the legal framework produces viable alternatives, resilient infrastructure and competitive European capabilities.

Regulatory power consequently remains both an advantage and a constraint. It enables the Union to project standards and protect public interests despite the absence of technological supremacy, but poorly calibrated or unstable rules may impose costs that weaken innovation and investment. Strategic autonomy requires regulatory design to operate together with research, industrial development, capital formation, skills and international cooperation. The decisive issue is the alignment of these instruments, not the predominance of law over technological or economic policy.

The Digital Omnibus illustrates the next institutional challenge. Its simplification of the AI framework may constitute mature recalibration, but only if implementation demonstrates greater clarity and effectiveness without eroding fundamental safeguards. The future position of Europe in the global digital order will therefore be determined less by the volume of its legislation than by its capacity to translate coherent rules into enforceable choices, technological capability and resilient economic structures. On that measure, digital independence remains a project under construction rather than an accomplished condition.

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