# Europe’s digital ambitions hindered by lack of democratic accountability



Europe’s public AI and information technology capabilities are the product of decades of government support to private companies, alongside substantial science and technology policy investments. However, despite the continent’s ambitions to bolster its technological sovereignty and compete with global powers such as the United States and China, a critical issue persists: inadequate democratic accountability within the governance and operational frameworks of these initiatives.

William Burns, a fellow at Tech Policy Press, provides an analysis of the European Union’s digital industrial strategy, highlighting the contrast between lofty goals and the governance structures that underlie them. He emphasises that the central problem is not necessarily a lack of planning or insufficient funding but the minimal transparency and elite-dominated decision-making processes that complicate efforts to develop “trustworthy, human-centric” artificial intelligence and digital technologies.

Burns explains that the European Commission’s strategy is centred on building significant digital infrastructure, including what has been described in various official documents as the “CERN of AI,” “AI factories,” and “AI gigafactories.” These terms invoke images of world-class scientific enterprises and large-scale production facilities. This strategy seeks to leverage Europe’s existing EuroHPC (European High-Performance Computing) network, a system pooling supercomputing resources across member states, supported by an annual operating budget of around one billion Euros. Alongside EuroHPC, the initiatives Chips and Smart Networks and Services aim to boost the electronic components and wireless infrastructure sectors, respectively.

Despite these efforts, the governance of these joint undertakings remains opaque. EuroHPC, legally termed a “joint undertaking,” is jointly controlled by the European Commission—holding 50% voting power—and member state governments. The private sector and academic research bodies participate in an advisory capacity without decision-making power on the governing board. Burns points out that these arrangements have historically excluded broader public involvement, with accountability mostly limited to ex-post scrutiny through European Parliament procedures focusing on fraud detection rather than strategic direction.

Other complexities arise in the pooling of digital assets, where legal frameworks concerning intellectual property, trade secrets, and ownership lack transparency and clarity regarding obligations towards societal benefit. Burns highlights this as “unmapped legal territory,” where public accountability is not yet well defined.

The governance of joint undertakings includes representation from a diverse array of stakeholders: government officials from member states and associated countries such as Turkey, and since 2023, Israel, the only non-European country involved. Israel's inclusion is officially based on accessing expert knowledge in technology and innovation, though the impact of this partnership remains unclear.

Considerable financial investment into new supercomputing infrastructure derives from the Digital Europe Programme, which has allocated approximately eight billion Euros for such purposes. Yet, even in assessing social progress metrics such as gender equality, the Commission admits that the programme’s impact is “not yet clear,” a point that has drawn little public attention.

A case in point within the public industrial complex is SiPearl, a chip development initiative spun out from the French IT firm Atos, the main contractor for EuroHPC. This company and its operations lack any evident civil society representation on its board, which underlines the broader pattern whereby industrial strategies tend to reproduce existing commercial and bureaucratic hierarchies without measurable gains in social democratic accountability.

Hardware supply for the supercomputer network is mainly provided by BullSequana systems from Atos, with supplementary equipment from Hewlett-Packard, Lenovo, and Fujitsu. The complex supply chain ultimately connects down to microchip factories in Taiwan and raw material extraction worldwide. Decisions on hardware procurement and supplier participation remain largely opaque, as the detailed contractual negotiations and procurement rationales are not publicly accessible.

Burns notes that endorsing Atos, a European-based firm, as the primary hardware supplier could be interpreted as a statement of technological sovereignty. Meanwhile, the involvement of global firms like Lenovo potentially represents a bridging of European interests with other major technology ecosystems, including China. Nonetheless, the decision-making process—behind the scenes and influenced by various political, financial, and technological factors—remains largely undisclosed to the public, limiting insight into how Europe’s digital future is being shaped.

On the scientific front, the development of technologies such as secure data transmission at supercomputing scale is still in its early stages, adding an inherent uncertainty to policy outcomes. As physicist Richard Feynman famously said, “For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for Nature cannot be fooled.” Policymakers are thus confronted with the challenge of navigating this scientific uncertainty with limited knowledge and control.

Burns argues that turning scientific research and development policy into effective industrial strategy is particularly challenging because industrial policy typically inherits a language and structure dating back to coercive regimes such as the American military-industrial complex and its Asian offshoots in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Such models offer limited inspiration for those pursuing equitable and socially just outcomes in democratic contexts.

In conclusion, Burns underscores the need for reconfiguring Europe’s existing science and industrial policies to embed strong democratic controls, involving labour and civil society in governance. Without this, policies risk perpetuating existing inequalities and fail to deliver on their promises of a “progressive future.” The analysis stresses that the true issues at stake are not about the size or focus of industrial policy per se, but how to adapt these frameworks so technology and society evolve together under democratic oversight.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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