Shaping the digital future of Europe: removing barriers to the functioning of the digital single market and improving the use of AI for European consumers

2020/2216(INI) - 20/05/2021 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 571 votes to 17, with 105 abstentions, a resolution on shaping the digital future of Europe: removing barriers to the functioning of the digital single market and improving the use of AI for European consumers.

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) brings many benefits but also risks and raises concerns about the ethics, scope and transparency of the collection, use and dissemination of personal data. There is a need to strengthen public trust in AI by providing for respect of fundamental rights, consumer protection, data protection and data security as a default, as well as by encouraging innovation in Europe.

Removing barriers to the functioning of the digital single market

Members believe that the EU's digital policy should create the foundations for Europe's public and private sectors to lead the world in reliable, human-centric digital innovation. A common European strategy is needed to remove unjustified national barriers and provide consumers and businesses with legal clarity that benefits European citizens and enhances competition.

The resolution stressed that the digital transition and emerging technologies such as AI can contribute to achieving the objectives of the EU industrial strategy and the Green Deal and to overcoming some of the difficulties created by the COVID-19 crisis. The Commission is invited to support the adoption of sustainable technology in the realisation of the Green Deal, including by assessing the environmental impact of data sharing and the infrastructure needed to ensure sustainable digital deployment.

Parliament called on the Commission to adopt a balanced, future-proof and evidence-based approach to legislation, respecting the principle of subsidiarity, in order to create a digital single market that delivers public services and is competitive, fair, accessible, technology-neutral, innovation-friendly, consumer-friendly, human-centric and trustworthy, thus building a secure data society and economy.

Stressing the need for substantial investment in AI and other key new technologies, Parliament welcomed the use of EU funding programmes to support the digitalisation of society and industry. It called for increased investment under Next Generation EU, as well as public and private funding.

Members suggested increasing the availability and sharing of non-personal data while ensuring that the risks of increased access to non-personal data, such as de-anonymisation, are limited. Access to more data for SMEs should be encouraged.

In addition, EU legislation should help to support innovation, ensure a high level of consumer protection and improve the rights, trust and security of online users. Clear responsibilities, more transparency and due diligence for online markets would be needed in this respect.

The Commission should update consumer protection legislation to take account of the impact of new technologies and the potential harm to consumers, in particular for the most vulnerable groups, and taking into account the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Improving the use of AI for European consumers

In order to benefit from AI, the Commission, Member States, the private sector, civil society and the scientific community must all work together effectively to create an ecosystem for safe human-centric AI that will benefit the whole society.

Parliament drew attention to the fact that citizens do not always understand the processes by which advanced algorithmic and artificial intelligence systems make decisions. Consumers therefore need a clear and predictable legal framework in the event of a product malfunction.

Members stressed the importance of ensuring that there is an appropriate degree of human control over algorithmic decision-making, ensuring that effective redress mechanisms are in place and empowering consumers by training them in basic AI skills. A mandatory information provision should indicate whether consumers are interacting with AI systems.

Parliament called on the Commission to regulate AI technologies in a comprehensive way to prevent unfair or abusive use of these systems. Any regulatory framework for AI should aim at creating an internal market for safe and reliable products, applications and services. This framework should be based on an ethical, human-centric and fundamental rights-based approach throughout the design, production and life cycle of products.

Members believe that AI used in a high-risk context should only be deployed for specific purposes, in full compliance with applicable law, and be subject to transparency obligations. Furthermore, AI should avoid biases leading to prohibited discrimination.

Parliament called on the EU to cooperate more closely with its partners, for example in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the WTO, to establish global standards for AI. It supported cooperation on international regulations, including the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence, and in this context supported work on a transatlantic agreement on AI.

The resolution also highlighted the immense potential of AI in the transport sector and its ability to increase automation in road, rail, waterborne and air transport. It called on Member States to include projects on the digital transition of transport in their recovery plans.

AI will play a key role in solving agricultural production and food supply problems.

Monitoring with automated and digital tools can help reduce the environmental and climate footprint of agriculture. Members called for increased resources and investment in the agricultural sector for these purposes.

Lastly, pointing out that the fourth industrial revolution will depend, among other things, on access to raw materials such as lithium and rare earths, Parliament called for the EU to reduce its dependence on such imports by limiting its absolute consumption and building on its own environmentally responsible mining activities. It suggested a more proactive circular economy policy applied to digital devices and semiconductors.