Global Digital Regulation: The Role of the European Union and the UN Digital Compact

In a world where new technologies advance at a rapid pace, the European Union and the United Nations are leading global digital regulation, seeking a technological space that is safe, inclusive, and respects human rights

Introduction

The European Union recently launched an initiative called the Digital Decade for Europe, and the United Nations decided this past September to include a Global Digital Compact (GDC) as part of the upcoming Summit of the Future. Both initiatives underscore the international community's deep interest in adapting to a rapidly evolving field. Technology has advanced incredibly fast in recent years, and its importance was underscored during the COVID-19 crisis, particularly in fostering remote interactions in work, leisure, and education. After the pandemic, society came to realize the critical role of technology in our lives. However, the rapid development of artificial intelligence has also highlighted the need for control mechanisms to protect fundamental rights, such as privacy and human rights, ensuring that technology is

neither exploited for individual interests nor creates new inequalities.

These challenges concern the entire international community, as they threaten fundamental rights and impact all areas tied to sustainable development goals. And they even pose potential challenges to state sovereignty

The EU's digital decade

Through the *Digital Decade* initiative, the European Union seeks to strengthen its digital sovereignty by 2030, focusing on four main areas: digital education for all citizens, secure and effective digital infrastructure, digital transformation for businesses, and the digitization of public services. This plan is outlined in a joint declaration by the European Union's three main bodies: the European Parliament, the
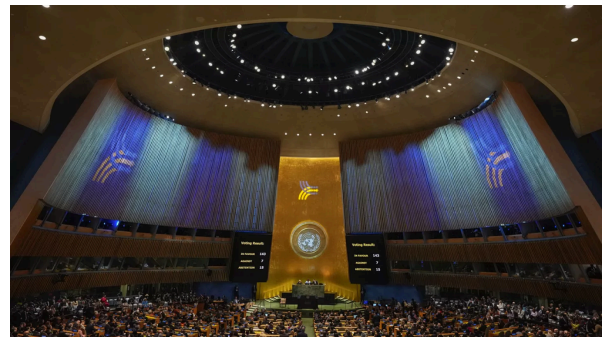
European Council, and the European Commission. According to the Commission, the *European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles* aims to promote a digital transition shaped by European values, with people at the center of this change.

The EU aims to achieve a digital transition that demonstrates its leadership in digital regulation. Its structure promotes the development of cross-sector solutions within a common framework. With the progressive adoption of digital regulatory treaties, the EU has shown its ability to gradually expand its scope of action. The first treaty in digital matters, signed in March 2020, addressed an industrial strategy with the dual objective of achieving climate neutrality and digital leadership. In this way, digital development became part of the European agenda through its strongest point: economic collaboration. Four years later, the European Union leads the digital sector once again with the development of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act.

The EU in the Global Digital Compact

The *United Nations Global Digital Compact* was part of the Summit of the Future held on September 22-23 in New York. The need to establish a Global Digital Compact setting out regulatory

principles for new technologies was first reiterated in the report *Our Common Agenda*, presented by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in September 2021. In this report, Guterres highlighted that "the time has come to protect the digital space and strengthen its governance" and proposed a Global Digital Compact "with common principles to achieve an open, free, and secure digital future for everyone."

Frank Franklin. (2024). Euronews.
https://images.app.goo.gl/RSnRQ7zaZSXuoWtY9.

A key aspect of the compact is the involvement of all relevant actors in decision-making regarding digital space governance: governments, the UN system, the private sector, especially tech companies, civil society, grassroots organizations, academic institutions, and individuals. In other words, everyone is invited to participate in drafting this agreement.

The EU, as an organization within the international system, participated in the development of the compact and sought to

project its digital regulatory model globally through its involvement. Last year, the EU issued a statement highlighting its objectives for the Summit of the Future, emphasizing respect for human rights and reiterating that rights apply equally online and offline, necessitating an open, accessible, and secure internet that counters misinformation and information manipulation. The EU also advocates for digitization as a method to improve public services and provide sustainable solutions to current problems. Consistent with its commitment to human rights protection, it also stresses the need to close the digital divide to ensure everyone has internet access.

These objectives are grounded in the *European Declaration of Digital Rights* mentioned earlier, where citizens are placed at the center of digital evolution.

A year later, in February 2024, the EU participated in drafting the GDC text, focusing on four priorities. Among these priorities are calls for matching principles with concrete and specific actions, reiterating the need to place human rights at the core of digital development, and emphasizing a multilateral approach.

The EU's main interests in the GDC are based on people-centered technological development, as demonstrated in the 2021 AI Act. This Act categorizes AI systems based on the potential risks to individuals, adjusting regulations and policies to each level.

The Global Digital Compact

The primary goal of the Global Digital Compact is to establish a common foundation for all states' digital transitions and outline a shared path for regulating new technologies. Its necessity is evident given the growing influence of the digital domain, which now affects all aspects of our lives. As stated in the compact, "our cooperation must be agile and adaptable to the rapidly evolving digital landscape."

The Global Digital Compact is organized around five main objectives: closing all digital divides and accelerating progress on all Sustainable Development Goals; expanding digital economy inclusion and benefits for everyone; fostering an inclusive, open, and secure digital space that respects, protects, and promotes human rights; encouraging responsible, equitable, and interoperable data governance approaches; and enhancing international AI governance for the benefit of humanity.

MBD Analytics. (2022).
https://images.app.goo.gl/78KUeicNgJ44ymWb7.

The EU has played a key role in drafting this compact, drawing on its experience and leadership in digital regulation. Among the EU's priorities for the GDC, the most challenging has been establishing measures that align with the compact's ambitious objectives. This has been formalized through a series of commitments aimed at 2030, such as investing in resilient digital infrastructure to close the digital divide and ensuring systematic collaboration among national digital security institutions.

The European Union's first priority in digital transformation —respect for human rights— has been clearly emphasized in GDC's third objective. Despite its clarity, the 2030 goals remain general enough that they may require further refinement. Many are based on future regulatory mechanisms, such as point 31.e, which outlines the need to "develop effective methodologies for measuring, monitoring, and countering all forms of violence and abuse in digital spaces" in consultation with relevant stakeholders. However, it's also worth noting that this objective includes key points such as reiterating the importance of the Internet Governance Forum and active participation in it, supporting GDC's commitment to multilateralism.

Towards Inclusive and responsible digital governance

Digital regulation, led by the European Union and the UN, is crucial in addressing the challenges posed by rapidly evolving technology. The EU's Digital Decade and the Global Digital Compact represent significant advances toward a digital space that prioritizes human rights, inclusion, and security. However, achieving these goals will require ongoing collaboration among governments, businesses, and civil society, as well as adaptation to continuous technological and social changes.

The future of digital governance depends on institutions' ability to develop agile regulations that promote innovation without neglecting ethics or social justice. As we approach 2030, the international community will need to address emerging challenges and refine the goals outlined in the GDC, establishing a solid foundation from which to update these agreements in the future. This will involve not only

technical requirements but also the ethical and social values that should guide new technology development.

In this context, the EU has the opportunity to position itself as a model, demonstrating that digital leadership can be achieved from a sustainable and, above all, human-centered perspective.

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