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‘Having Your (Digital) Cake and Eating It’: Reconciling EU Strategic Narratives on Connectivity and Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the EU’s evolving narratives concerning the governance of digital technologies, focusing on the intersection of geopolitical challenges and internal policymaking through the lens of the strategic narratives approach. This compares two key EU narratives relating to digital policy: on the one hand, the narrative on ‘digital connectivity’ which advocates collaboration, engagement and market inclusion, and on the other hand, the more recent development of a defensive ‘digital sovereignty’ narrative emphasising the need for EU-based digital industries, diversified supply chains and reduced reliance on external powers. Through an analysis of the official documents, strategy papers, public speeches and legislative initiatives on digital policy launched by the EU during the term of the first von der Leyen’s Commission (2019–2024), we highlight how these two narratives evolved to coexist, determining the EU’s unique approach to digital governance. The paper finds that both narratives may be less incompatible than one would think at first sight. They have transformed over time, in response to the increase in geopolitical competition, reaching a point of convergence in the mid-2020s when the EU appeared to succeed in reconciling the contending aims of openness and autonomy in digital policy. The paper concludes with observations on the interplay between narrative constructions and the policymaking process and an outlook on the ongoing challenges confronting the EU.

1 | Introduction: The Evolving Digital Policy of the European Union

In recent years, the approach of the European Union (EU) to economic and digital governance has undergone significant transformations in response to shifting global dynamics (Carver 2024; Farrand et al. 2024; Bellanova et al. 2022). For several decades, market regulation policies in the EU had been framed around multilateral approaches towards trade liberalisation and support for global governance (Warloutzet 2017). However, as the EU’s regulatory activity expanded beyond trade in goods and services to include also digital technologies, the development of a digital single market has been a key milestone (European Commission 2012), finding multilateral solutions in this strategic field has become challenging. This is the case

amid a phase of risks to supply chains and more broadly, the fragmentation of trade and investment along geopolitical fault lines (Gopinath et al. 2024).

This shift has provoked what has been called the EU’s ‘geopolitical turn’, highlighting a need for strategic autonomy over competition and openness (Schmitz and Seidl 2023; Juncos and Vanhoonacker 2024; McNamara 2024, 2026). It involves promoting in public discourse the idea of ‘European sovereignty’ (Roch and Oleart 2024)—a concept which extends also to digital technologies, defined as ‘technologies, infrastructures, data, and content based on and/or using electronic computing techniques’ (Peters 2016, 94). As such, this domain spans a number of different sectors including trade (e-commerce), health (e-health), public administration (e-Government), education

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Policy implications

- **Balance Sovereignty and Openness:** The EU's pursuit of digital sovereignty should not be understood as the equivalent of a search for autarchy, but rather as a way of reconciling strategic autonomy with continued focus on (more selective) connectivity. Achieving these goals requires sustained investment in European innovation capacities, particularly through the implementation of digital infrastructure, industry and research, while maintaining an open market and a commitment to trade liberalisation. By doing so, the EU can reduce its vulnerabilities without undermining the benefits of interdependence.
- **Embed Security in Digital Connectivity:** Digital cooperation with third countries should increasingly incorporate security logics. Agreements need to embed economic, cyber and military-security considerations, reflecting the EU strategic priorities. This would allow the EU to strengthen resistance to coercion, disinformation, malign cyber interference and technological dependencies, while projecting a coherent geopolitical posture.
- **Mitigate Structural Dependencies:** A central priority is the systematic mapping of vulnerabilities across critical supply chains, notably semiconductors, cloud services and next-generation networks. On this basis, diversification strategies are essential in order to limit exposure to economic coercion from any direction and across various domains in order to enhance the resilience of European markets, societies and political systems.
- **Consolidate the EU'S Norm Entrepreneurship:** The EU should leverage its expanding regulatory instruments—such as the DMA, the DSA, the Data Act, the AI Act and its cybersecurity frameworks—to project standards and develop multilateral governance mechanisms. In doing so, it can shape the governance of strategic technologies and anchor digital cooperation in its normative agenda. Aligning connectivity with sovereignty enables the EU to reinforce its credibility as a geopolitical actor, offering a model that balances openness with security and autonomy.

(e-learning) and even agriculture (smart farming) (Bonnamy and Perarnaud 2023). Beyond consumer electronics, digital applications are vital in security and defence, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), drones and surveillance technologies (Calderaro and Blumfelde 2022; Farrand and Carrapico 2022). In this era of geopolitical rivalry, digital technologies have therefore become critical battlegrounds in international politics.

The EU constitutes a peculiar case in this realm of global digital contestation. While often seen as lacking in innovative capacity, independence and competitiveness in the digital realm, the EU has nevertheless established itself as a global regulatory powerhouse. European firms and consumers rely on technologies produced elsewhere, particularly in the emerging AI domain, which makes the EU weak in areas such as semiconductor manufacturing, cloud computing and digital ecosystems. In contrast, EU efforts to govern the use of these technologies have seen a surge in regulatory activity, particularly in the 2020s (Carrapico and

Farrand 2025). During the first term of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, the EU's digital governance agenda expanded significantly, and also evolved consistently alongside the changing geopolitical landscape, while striving to maintain EU interests and international identity. This resulted in contradictory yet complementary approaches that influenced the development of EU digital policy during the tenure of the first von der Leyen Commission (2019–2024), which we explore in this article.

Building on the concept of 'strategic narrative' as elaborated by Miskimmon et al. (2017, 2024), we analyse EU digital policy through the lens of two dominant strategic narratives: 'digital connectivity' and 'digital sovereignty'. The *connectivity narrative* promotes deeper integration with global networks and open markets (European Commission 2015a; 2023a). It reflects the strategic objective of deeper engagement with third countries, aligning with a liberal-institutionalist perspective on the EU's global role (Heidebrecht 2024, 208). It also advocates for greater interconnectedness, strengthening global links to enhance economic opportunities and expand the EU's soft power. The *digital sovereignty* narrative focuses instead on protecting digital data and users, as well as infrastructure to mitigate external dependencies (Merkel 2019; German Presidency 2020). It calls for a strengthening of the EU's home-grown digital industries, the diversification of critical supplies and the relocation of value chains within the EU—objectives more in line with a sceptical stance on globalisation and a neo-mercantilist approach to trade and foreign investment (Farrand and Carrapico 2022). Digital sovereignty highlights the risks of excessive reliance on external trade or investment, advocating for reducing interdependence through policies like 'de-risking' and supply chain diversification (e.g., Flonk et al. 2024; Heidebrecht 2024).

Against this background, this article interrogates the coexistence of two dominant, yet apparently competing, discourses, namely that of connectivity and that of strategic autonomy. Each of these has a strong digital component, namely 'digital connectivity' on the one hand, and 'digital sovereignty', on the other. The analysis of these strategic narratives will help to unpack how the EU defines and pursues its digital policies in a manner that is coherent with its identity as a liberal-institutional and normative actor, while also pursuing the geopolitical objectives with regard to autonomy and innovation. With few exceptions (e.g., Coletti et al. 2025; Vanhoonacker et al. 2026), this represents an under-explored dimension in the existing International Relations (IR) and European studies literatures.

At first sight, the EU's commitment to these competing goals appears contradictory: how can the pursuit of deeper engagement with third countries through a strategy of—digital—connectivity be reconciled with the search for greater—digital—autonomy, a strategy that would imply less reliance on external cooperation? In declaring—and investing in—these apparently opposing objectives, the EU seems to want to have its proverbial cake and eat it (Wikipedia, n.d.)—hence, the reference to this idiom in the title of this article. However, as the analysis presented here demonstrates, the EU's narrative strategies with regard to connectivity and digital autonomy have managed to reconcile these distinct objectives to an extent that belies the apparent impossibility of achieving both.

Going beyond earlier research, which has largely approached digital connectivity and sovereignty as separate discussions (e.g., Bellanova et al. 2022, 3; Falkner et al. 2024; Broeders et al. 2023; Pohle 2020; Pohle et al. 2025; Santaniello 2026), this article breaks new ground by approaching the study of both narratives in a unified manner. Our analysis demonstrates the prominence of a digital dimension that is present in both narratives, and which significantly influenced the formulation of EU digital policy during the first von der Leyen Commission (2019–2024). Specifically, the article addresses the question of how seemingly divergent strategic narratives can coexist within the European context, and what does this potential coexistence reveals about the European Union's role as a 'geopolitical actor'.

In the following sections, we proceed by first explaining the concept of 'strategic narrative' (Miskimmon et al. 2017, 2024) and how it is being applied here in the context of studying the EU's digital policy. Methodologically, the article is based on a study of official documents and speeches, primarily released by the European Commission. We focus on the Commission as it occupies a privileged position in the production and diffusion of strategic narratives within the EU, notably through its agenda-setting role, its monopoly over legislative initiative and its capacity to articulate overarching policy frames that structure subsequent interinstitutional debates in the field of digital policy. Indeed, the Commission is widely portrayed as the central EU digital policy entrepreneur (Bonnamy and Perarnaud 2023; Bérut 2025; Coletti et al. 2025). While the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union play a crucial role in the legislative process, they are less central to the initial framing of policy objectives and narratives in this issue area. To account for broader dynamics, the dataset is complemented by declarations from national leaders of European member states, should they have contributed to advancing the debate on digital policy within the EU. This framing is then employed in an empirical comparative analysis of these two strategic narratives, examining the impact they have had on the EU's evolving digital policy and normative initiatives adopted during the period under study, representing the core of our contribution. While our work is built around the concept of strategic narratives, the novelty of our contribution is primarily empirical. We illustrate how the EU has articulated apparently opposing strategic goals through these narratives, regarding both as integral to its public discourse on digital matters. However, our analysis demonstrates that these two narratives have first coexisted and ultimately converged, collectively steering the Union's digital policy towards connections that are established with the geopolitical needs of increased autonomy in mind.

2 | Conceptualising EU Strategic Narratives in Digital Policy

Our understanding of strategic narratives is largely informed by a constructivist perspective on IR, which explains politics through a social lens, emphasising how ideational factors, such as values, identity, beliefs, perceptions and, indeed, narratives shape interactions among actors and, by implication, affect the construction of international order (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019; Hopf 2000; Miskimmon et al. 2017; Subotić 2013, 2015; Suganami 2008; Wendt 1999). Narratives

are here conceptualised as stories that add meaning to social experiences by explaining, through a causal emplotment in which facts are selectively told, how certain events or actions should be interpreted (Somers 1994; Suganami 1999). This reconstruction can be influenced by the perspective of the narrative entrepreneur, who strategically frames social reality to convey a particular understanding of it. When designed to advance policies, conduct diplomacy, create identities or legitimise (the use of) power, narratives are defined as 'strategic' (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 2017, 2024; see also Roselle et al. 2014). Such narratives can also be key instruments of policymaking, because strategic narratives are 'storytelling devices along the spectrum of persuasion' (Tyushka 2022, 119). By embedding values and beliefs within these narratives, actors can seek to justify their preferred policies, using resources—ranging from political and social to military or economic pressure—to promote a version of reality compatible with their interests (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, 416). Furthermore, strategic narratives are crafted to increase the likelihood that recipients interpret causality in ways that align with specific aims (Khoury 2018, 371). This purpose-driven process is far from 'value-neutral' and may reflect 'various power interests' (Murray 2003, 99), while necessitating a qualitative rather than a quantitative, interpretive methodology to uncover who crafts strategic narratives, their intended audience and objectives (see also Subotić 2013, 306). Analysing competing strategic narratives thus offers a heuristic tool to understand policy development, requiring a comprehensive examination of their formation, projection and reception (Miskimmon et al. 2024, 449).

In our analysis, we argue that strategic narratives are essential for understanding EU policy in the governance and implementation of digital technologies. To examine the EU's strategic narrative entrepreneurship in digital technology, a database of 64 relevant texts was compiled (see Annex 1), most of which were obtained from the websites of European institutions, followed by a qualitative-interpretative content analysis of these documents. All documents were selected and examined according to references to either 'connectivity' or 'digital sovereignty' or both and were then examined according to their *framing*—namely how connectivity and digital sovereignty are discursively constructed, problematised and linked to particular representations of risks, opportunities and international order—policy *context*—referring to the institutional and normative settings in which these discourses are produced and circulated—and *attributed strategic objectives*—understood as the economic, normative, security goals associated with these narratives.

In detail, a first subset of the database includes official speeches and statements by European and national leaders primarily from the period 2019–24. Therefore, we analysed all State of the Union speeches delivered by Commission President von der Leyen, who has been the key narrative entrepreneur on EU digital policy and the Union's connectivity agenda. Moreover, these speeches were complemented with statements from the previous Juncker Commission's term in order to identify potential shifts in the narratives. As head of member States are key actors in EU governance (Schramm 2026), in addition, we examined relevant speeches of the French President Macron and the German chancellors Merkel and Scholz, who were the most active national leaders contributing to the relevant debates. A second important set of sources are

EU policy documents. We built a corpus of texts related both to the EU's geopolitical policy response more broadly as well as on digital policies more specifically. We include these broader texts related to the EU's geopolitical turn as they often included references to digital policies, next to several other policy areas such as trade. For the study of the connectivity narrative, special attention was paid to the Union's connectivity strategy documents and the documents laying out the 'Connectivity partnerships' concluded with several third countries. These comprised the third part of our database. We then compared and contrasted the prevalence and evolution of these narratives across different types of documents—speeches, policy strategies and partnership texts—tracking shifts in their meaning over time and across institutional and geographical contexts.

The following sections present the detailed findings of this empirical analysis in separate sections dedicated to the EU's narratives on, first, 'connectivity' and, subsequently, 'digital sovereignty'. Each section delves into the origins, evolution and key messages contained in these strategic narratives, followed by a comparative perspective and the analysis of the wider significance of these findings for the EU's geopolitical stance in the digital field more generally.

3 | The EU'S Strategic Narrative on 'Connectivity'

While the catchphrase 'connectivity' is relatively novel, the idea is not. Notions like interdependence and globalisation capture similar phenomena, but, as Pieterse (2021, 8) argues, in the past two decades 'the language of globalization became digital and metamorphosed as interconnectedness and connectivity'. At its core, '[c]onnectivity is about bringing countries, people and societies closer together [... it] facilitates access and is a means to foster deeper economic and people-to-people ties' (ASEAN 2017). The notion encompasses both 'hard' and 'soft' dimensions, from physical infrastructures to socio-cultural contacts (Ries 2019). In the abstract, connectivity as a narrative entails positive-sum cooperation in pursuit of shared interests guided by values like transparency, equal access and sustainable development. However, connectivity pursuits often involve geopolitical and geoeconomic wrangling, foster inclusion and exclusion (Gaens et al. 2023) and raise concerns over agency and local ownership (Karjalainen 2023). Most of the relevant EU connectivity forays, both internal and external, harbour an explicit digital dimension, which has been emphasised alongside other key domains, namely transport, energy, health and people-to-people ties (European Commission 2018, 2021a). This article is concerned with the outward-looking dimension of the EU's connectivity policies in the digital domain and the concomitant digital connectivity narrative. The latter cannot, of course, be dissociated from broader connectivity discussions, also unfolding in other relevant spheres.

During the term of Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the European Commission (2014–2019), the narrative on digital matters remained broadly positive, reflecting how connectivity was largely equated with globalisation and free trade. The 2015 'Trade for All' Communication, for instance, applauds digitalisation for 'sweeping aside barriers of geography and distance' and creating new trade opportunities thanks to 'a global e-commerce market'

(European Commission 2015a). Although risks for privacy and the need for improved EU integration in global value chains are mentioned, the accent is on policies facilitating digital trade liberalisation, such as harmonisation of standards and multilateral cooperation. This perspective also highlights the completion of the digital single market and the importance of multilateralism, as emphasised in Juncker's (2016, 2017, 2018) State of the Union speeches. A market-led approach towards the digital domain thus originally predominated the narrative.

From the beginning, the EU's broader connectivity agenda has been tied to the most important change in the global power constellation over the past decades, namely the rise of China. Granted, Beijing was initially perceived as a rising economic power with which Europe should engage commercially and strengthen connections (e.g., European Commission 2015b) but the EU's turn to connectivity also emerged as a thinly veiled counteraction to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (see e.g., Karjalainen 2023; Soler i Lecha 2025). Yet, the digital domain was hardly mentioned in the EU's early connectivity forays towards China—instead, emphasis was placed on transport and the development of the TEN-T transport network (e.g., European Commission n.d.-a). The PRC, for its part, unveiled the Digital Silk Road (DSR) already in 2015 as 'an umbrella branding effort and a narrative for Beijing to promote its global vision across a range of specific core technology sectors' (Gordon and Nouwens 2022, 15). Only much later would it become clear that of all the components of the BRI, the DSR constitutes perhaps the most potent challenge to the EU's long-term strategic goals (Okano-Heijmans 2024, 34).

By the 2016 EU Global Strategy, the Union had tied connectivity to its role as a global player, 'an agenda-shaper, a connector, coordinator and facilitator within a networked web of players' (EEAS 2016, 43; emphasis added) and also stressed its aim for 'greater [EU-China] cooperation on high-end technology' (EEAS 2016, 38). In line with the general tendency in the mid-2010s, expectations of positive synergies and economic opportunities were thus baked into the digital realm. The EU's first dedicated strategy document on connectivity, *Connecting Europe and Asia—Building blocks for an EU Strategy*, argued, in 2018, that by deepening economic interdependencies and addressing infrastructure investment needs, 'Europe and Asia, together, can be the engines of a more cooperative approach to world politics, global stability and regional economic prosperity' (European Commission 2018, 1). The EU envisaged that 'bilateral cooperation with individual countries should be adapted to their specific situation'. This meant that with China the EU would focus mostly on 'hard connectivity', namely 'infrastructure and development cooperation initiatives', seek 'market access and a level playing field' and pursue 'international standards within initiatives on connectivity' (European Commission 2018, 7). Yet, the strategy also allowed for promoting digital cooperation under the EU-China Connectivity platform (European Commission 2018, 9).

Less than six months later, *EU-China—A Strategic Outlook* reflected the gradual onset of an EU-wide narrative shift that would characterise the EU's communications in the early 2020s. Reflecting the hardening geopolitical climate, including the shift by the first Donald Trump administration to treat China unambiguously as a 'great power competitor', the EU famously

dubbed China a ‘partner’, ‘competitor’ and ‘systemic rival’ (European Commission 2019, 1). The Union was now much more categorical about the prospects—and limits—of cooperating with Beijing. In the Strategic Outlook, the digital domain was thus mainly addressed in conjunction with ‘[s]trengthening the security of critical infrastructure and the technological base’ and securitised explicitly: ‘[f]oreign investment in strategic sectors, acquisitions of critical assets, technologies and infrastructure in the EU, involvement in EU standard-setting and supply of critical equipment can pose *risks* to the EU’s security’ (European Commission 2019, 9–10, emphasis added).

This change in tone was since reflected in the evolution of the EU’s connectivity agenda, which gained greater urgency in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. A January 2021 European Parliament Resolution pushed the Union to adopt a global—rather than merely Asia-oriented—connectivity agenda, strengthening links to fellow democracies and prioritising digital connectivity (European Parliament 2021). The notion had high-political cover from Commission President von der Leyen (2021; see also Soler i Lecha 2025), whose State of the EU address linked connectivity to geopolitics, security and urgency—a continent ‘connected to the world by narrow straits, stormy seas and vast land borders [...] knows better than anyone that if you don’t deal in time with the crisis abroad, the crisis comes to you’ (von der Leyen 2021). She also unveiled the creation of a new ‘trusted brand’, the *Global Gateway*, one that would be ‘values-based’ and ‘create links and not dependencies’ (von der Leyen 2021). Ultimately launched in December 2021, the founding documents of this grand connectivity initiative make no explicit mention of China, but the entire exercise can be read as a reaction to Beijing’s growing influence across the globe (Karjalainen 2023; Heldt 2023).

The Gateway covers not only the Indo-Pacific but also the Union’s neighbourhood, Latin America and especially Africa, which is a key priority with €150 billion in envisaged investments through the *Team Europe* model (Tagliapietra 2024, 1330–1331). A shift in the Union’s connectivity narrative is evident in the first sentence of the document: ‘[d]emocracies and the values that underpin them must demonstrate their ability to deliver on today’s global challenges’ (European Commission 2021a, 1). Notably, democracy was not even explicitly mentioned in the initial 2018 connectivity strategy. In this vein, the Gateway endeavours to ‘provide trusted connectivity and build capacity in the face of [...] physical, cyber or hybrid threats, and economic coercion for geopolitical aims’, while pledging to protect people from ‘unwarranted surveillance by public authorities or private companies’ (European Commission 2021a, 3). Thus, the EU’s shift to more explicitly values-based rhetoric in connectivity is not a function of idealism but reflects strategic and security considerations; of a *geopolitical* rather than *normative* power Europe (cf. Haroche 2023; Heldt 2023; Manners 2002).

Specific to the digital domain, the Global Gateway promises to engage partner countries in building both hard and soft sustainable connectivity, considering ‘underserved regions and populations’ (European Commission 2021a, 4). This includes ‘digital networks and infrastructures such as submarine and terrestrial fibre-optic cables, space-based secure communication systems as well as cloud and data infrastructures’. AI, high performance

computing, cybersecurity of 5G networks, shared standards and protocols, and data protection are also key concerns (European Commission 2021a, 4). As former Executive Vice President of the European Commission Margrethe Vestager and HR/VP Josep Borrell argued, the Union envisages:

A global coalition around a shared vision of human-centric digitalization [...] effective democratic governance over technology and the digital economy [...] open to all who are ready to defend an open, decentralized model of the internet and the principles of fairness in digital markets, security in cyberspace, and individual freedoms online.

(Vestager and Borrell 2021)

In keeping with its narrative shift, the EU has intensified connectivity partnerships with other actors as its China relationship has grown more complicated. The Gateway is explicit in this, naming Japan, India, the United States, Canada, ASEAN and the Republic of Korea as like-minded connectivity partners, specifically in the digital domain (European Commission 2021a, 12). Specifically, the Union launched a ‘Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure’ with Japan in 2019 and a similar initiative with India in 2021. The EU-US Trade and Technology Council (EU-US TTC), launched in June 2021 after the Biden administration took office, also fits into this burgeoning array of initiatives.

Beyond bilateral activities, the Union is engaged in multilateral connectivity forays, for instance the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII)—previously Build Back Better World (B3W)—at the G7 and the Blue Dot Network under OECD auspices. In 2020, the EU–ASEAN ministers issued a joint statement on connectivity (ASEAN 2020), preceded by a statement on Cybersecurity Cooperation (ASEAN 2019). More specific to the digital domain, the EU has negotiated digital partnerships with Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Canada and a group of Latin American and Caribbean states (European Commission, n.d.-b). The *Digital4Development* hub brings together EU member states and partners in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean and the EU’s neighbouring countries in digital cooperation, while an agreement has also been reached on digital transformation between Smart Africa (41 African states) and the European Commission (2024a). All these initiatives link digital policy to values central to the EU, as laid out in, inter alia, the European Green Deal, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Digital Decade Policy Programme and the Digital Compass (European Commission 2021b). The collection of EU digital partnerships thus covers a wide range of digital questions, like AI, 5/6G, semiconductors, high performance computing and quantum, submarine cables and cybersecurity (European Commission 2023a).

Taken together, these agreements were intended as the opening salvos in the ‘development of a global architecture of interoperable standards at regional and multilateral levels’ (European Commission 2023b), striving to embed ‘a democratic governance model based on high levels of privacy, data protection and *security*’ (European Commission 2023c, emphasis added). The EU–US Trade and Technology Council is perhaps most reflective of

how the Union's digital connectivity narrative marries together cooperation with like-minded states and geopolitical imperatives. The council partners envision cooperation across a broad spectrum of issues, like 'secure, trusted, and resilient digital connectivity and information and communication technology', including in third countries, alongside enhanced sustainability through digital solutions. Both the EU and the US pledge to work coordinately on 'export controls and investment screening', while also 'diversify[ing] strategic supply chains [...] to reduce vulnerabilities, including those caused by other countries' non-market policies and practices' (European Commission 2024b). The EU-US TTC has fallen by the wayside in Donald Trump's second term, subsumed by the EU-US Framework Agreement on reciprocal, fair and balanced trade, which—on top of capping US tariffs on European goods at 15% and pledging \$600 billion in European investments to the United States by 2028—includes provisions on supply chain security and reduction of barriers to digital trade (European Commission 2025a). These formulations reflect the Trump administration's concerted criticism of the EU's burgeoning technology regulation but also illustrate how the current US sees the EU less as a partner in providing trusted connectivity and more as a geoeconomic competitor.

The above overview of the EU's strategic narrative on connectivity, particularly in the digital domain, shows how it has evolved from a full-throated endorsement of the principle of interconnectedness to mitigate this with a focus on security, in line with the intensification of geopolitical challenges and the reorientation of the EU's priorities. Interestingly, the Union's normative framing of connectivity, founded on core values in a trusted connectivity model, and the creation of connectivity partnerships, is justified as a security bulwark. The targets of this strategy are the increasingly assertive and, at times, aggressive conduct by authoritarian states and their connectivity forays—especially China's, but also Russia's—which create unwanted dependencies for third countries, pose security challenges for Europe and foster the entrenchment of authoritarian practices in the digital sphere (Lucenti and Saari 2025; Flonk 2021). The more complex the geopolitical landscape becomes, the more a business-oriented narrative becomes intertwined with a security-dominated narrative (Kruck and Weiss 2023; McNamara 2026). Central to these efforts in the digital realm is the concept of digital sovereignty, which more clearly frames the EU's ambitions to shape its digital future while seeking to balance the objectives of connectivity and autonomy. The next section explores this other strategic narrative.

4 | The EU'S Strategic Narrative on 'Digital Sovereignty'

The EU's narrative on digital sovereignty emphasises the EU's capacity to act independently, in line with its values (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling 2024; Christakis 2020; Roberts et al. 2021). This aspiration concerns the innovation, design and manufacturing of hardware components as well as the development of software applications, including operating systems and digital platforms. In other words, it concerns both the physical layer, as well as the code (standards and design) and the information (data and content) layers (Falkner et al. 2024). Digital sovereignty, as a concept, is linked to the broader idea of 'strategic

autonomy', a common reference in defence and trade, but less frequently used by EU actors in the digital area. Timmers (2024, 577), for instance, defines strategic autonomy as 'the capabilities, capacities, and control to decide and act on essential aspects of our economy, society, and democracy'.

The first references to digital sovereignty already emerged in 2015 when Guenther Oettinger, the then European Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society, presented plans for the digital single market (Wenzelburger and König 2025). However, the use of the term 'digital sovereignty' only became more widespread later, during the first von der Leyen Commission (2019–24). In the earlier mentioned 'Trade for All' Communication of 2015 and Commission President Juncker's State of the Union speeches (2016, 2017, 2018), the term 'digital sovereignty' was absent. References to European sovereignty were confined to the areas of security and defence (Juncker 2018). At that time, the Commission prioritised the combat against digital protectionism by third countries, including through the negotiation of a series of free trade agreements. This approach reflected the generally negative perception of digital sovereignty among EU member states, where the concept was often linked both to autocratic regimes and to controversies surrounding global surveillance and whistleblowing (Pohle 2020). Given the growing geopolitical competition, the EU strategic narrative on digital matters evolved. Increasingly, digital sovereignty was no longer seen as reprehensible but rather as a legitimate and indeed desirable policy goal. Nonetheless, the concept was deliberately framed as ambiguous to allow for a high degree of flexibility and enable the EU to build political consensus while accommodating the divergent national interests of its member states (Carrapico and Farrand 2025). In particular, Germany and France led the debate on digital sovereignty at the EU level (Pohle 2020; Lambach and Oppermann 2022). During its 2020 EU Presidency, Berlin prioritised the EU's digital sovereignty as 'a *leitmotiv* of digital policy', defining it as a priority area. It referred to the aims to 'increase our prosperity, protect our security, and uphold our values' (German Presidency 2020). To 'bolster security in cyberspace' was mentioned but not further elaborated (German Presidency 2020). The initiative aligned with the Commission's European data strategy, pleading for 'Europe's technological sovereignty in key enabling technologies and infrastructures for the data economy' (European Commission 2020e). This contributed to the development of a digital sovereignty narrative that had both economic, security as well as normative components. Yet at the time of Juncker's Commission, the narrative of liberal interconnectedness was still prevalent.

The narrative of digital sovereignty grew stronger with the first von der Leyen Commission (2019–24), primarily in terms of enhancing the EU's competitiveness and safeguarding its economic interests. The Commission President called for a 'Europe fit for the digital age' and announced initiatives like the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the completion of the Single Digital Market (SDM), while protecting EU values concerning citizens' privacy and safety in the digital space. However, von der Leyen (2019) only referred to technological sovereignty in the context of critical technology areas. In her 2020 State of the Union address, the Commission President even envisioned 'Europe's Digital Decade', prioritising the development of a real data economy, secure e-identities and improved infrastructure

(von der Leyen 2020). Clearly, the predominant discursive narrative at the start of the von der Leyen Commission still very much emphasised market integration and economic competitiveness.

The 2020s were a pivotal moment, marking the importance of the digital sovereignty narrative in restoring safeguards to EU's values and fundamental rights. The impact of the pandemic served as an important accelerator: not only did the crisis show the immense potential of digitalisation, but it also revealed risks in terms of data protection and the EU's dependency on non-European technologies. In its February communication on *Shaping Europe's Digital Future*, the Commission (2020a) defined the sovereignty goal more concretely. Unlike Emmanuel Macron (e.g., Macron 2023) and Angela Merkel (e.g., 2019), who spoke of digital sovereignty, the Commission preferred the term 'technological sovereignty', emphasising the need of 'reducing our dependency on other parts of the globe for the most crucial technologies'. The document identified three goals for the EU's digital future: 'a technology that works for people', 'a fair and competitive economy' and 'an open, democratic and sustainable society'. This perspective suggested a combination of a normative and economic discourse, focusing on protecting European social and governance models while creating a level playing field for businesses and a European data space. The urgency to become more active in the digital area was also addressed in the European Council. In October 2020, during the German Presidency, the European leaders tasked the European Commission to develop a *Digital Compass* outlining the EU's ambitions in this field for 2030, including the development of 'a monitoring system for European strategic digital capacities and capabilities'. In addition, they assigned at least 20% of the Resilience and Recovery Fund to support the EU's digital transition. At the international level, they aimed to 'leverage its tools and regulatory powers to help shape global rules and standards' (European Council 2020). By the end of 2020, the Commission launched the first proposals on the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and the DSA, respectively, aimed at preventing large tech companies monopolising the market and providing a new legal frame for cross-border digital services (European Commission 2020b, 2020c), and it also presented its White Paper on AI (European Commission 2020d).

The connectivity dimension, however, was not entirely disregarded; rather it was reoriented to serve sovereignty-driven objectives. When the Digital Compass was subsequently adopted in March 2021, further contributing to the EU's digital agenda, it identifies key objectives for a Europe that is 'digitally sovereign in an interconnected world' (European Commission 2021b). This document illustrates the link between connectivity and digital sovereignty in its strategic narratives and actual policies. The EU not only aimed to enhance its digital sovereignty but also combined this approach with parallel attempts to build connections with like-minded parts of the world, demonstrating clearly that the understanding of 'digital sovereignty' was different from digital autarchy. In doing so, the EU also establishes a model of digital policy that can be projected outward and employed to strengthen its influence on the global stage. Thus, while most of the actions in the Compass were internally oriented, focusing *inter alia* on skills development and infrastructure, their ultimate purpose was to make the EU more resilient and less dependent on third country providers and

serve as a reliable model for actors that, like the EU, seek digital sovereignty without compromising a liberal approach. The security dimension, while already present through a European Cybersecurity Strategy, was less central than the economic and socio-political aims (European Commission 2020a). However, the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 constituted an important turning point, highlighting the security risks associated with reliance on digital technologies provided by strategic rivals. The security aspect of this narrative, initially confined to the need for strengthened cybersecurity, was thereby expanded. The Versailles Declaration adopted at the informal European Council meeting of 10–11 March, identified three key pillars underpinning greater 'European sovereignty' (European Council 2022). Besides the areas of defence and energy, it also called for a more robust economic base to address security threats. This also included several actions in the digital sphere like further investments in AI, a European cloud and 5G as well as further developing EU production capacity of semiconductors through the EU Chips Act, proposed by the Commission one month earlier (European Commission 2022). While these actions were mentioned under the economic pillar of the Declaration, the narrative went beyond a mere framing in terms of competitiveness. In the Strategic Compass, adopted just a couple of weeks after Russia's full-scale aggression, the European leaders agreed to 'invest in capability development in order for Europe to benefit from an autonomous access to space' (EEAS 2022, 36). There now was a consensus that the EU also needed to become more 'resilient' in terms of security. From 2022 onwards, political leaders in Brussels and in member states framed digital sovereignty as indispensable for the EU's security and defence. On the one hand, the Russian invasion had very well illustrated the high dependence and key role of private American companies, like Space X and underscored the ongoing space race between China and the US (e.g., Bode et al. 2025). As stated by the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, 'space has become a key enabler not only for our European societies and economies, but also for security and defence' (Borrell 2023).

In his speech in September 2022 at Charles University, the German chancellor Olaf Scholz went one step further. He explicitly linked digital sovereignty with Europe's security and defence. In light of the war in Ukraine, showcasing the crucial role of satellites in tracking troop movements and facilitating missile early warning systems, he pleaded for 'independent access to space, modern satellites and mega-constellations'. For the German chancellor, there was no doubt that 'sovereignty in the digital age will depend on space-based capabilities' and that it is crucial for European security (Scholz 2022). Analogously, at a European Space Conference hosted by the Belgian Presidency in January 2024, Commissioner Breton pleaded for a 'sovereign Europe' to 'reduce its dependencies, ensure its security and defence, particularly in space and cyberspace' (Breton 2024). All of these quotes illustrate how after February 2022, the dominant narrative about economic competitiveness and trade was increasingly complemented by a strengthened security narrative, establishing a coexistence of connectivity and sovereignty. By 2025, in her annual "State of the Union Address", Commission President von der Leyen went so far as to refer to the current era as an 'independence moment' of a Europe caught 'in a fight' against external and internal enemies, with the digital agenda

and the search for ‘tech sovereignty’ being a critical element in this existential battle (von der Leyen 2025). One more concrete indication of the effects of the evolving narrative on digital transformation and digital sovereignty has been the appointment of Henna Virkkunen as Executive Vice President in the second von der Leyen Commission as EU Commissioner in charge of *Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy*. This clearly demonstrates the enhanced profile that digital sovereignty now occupies in the EU executive (von der Leyen 2024).

This increasingly security-driven narrative for greater ‘digital sovereignty’ has not remained rhetorical: in the first half of the 2020s, a whole range of legislative acts have been adopted by the EU, ranging from the DMA (2022) and DSA (2022) to the Chips Act (2023), the Data Act (2023), the European Cyber Resilience Act (CRA) (2024) and several others. The cherry on the EU’s digital cake was the adoption, in August 2024, of the EU AI Act. This globally first comprehensive legal framework on the use of AI was hailed by Commission President von der Leyen as a ‘historical moment’, ‘guaranteeing the safety and fundamental rights of people and businesses’ (von der Leyen 2023; see also von der Leyen 2024). As of mid-2025, further regulatory activity (e.g., a Cloud and AI Development Act, an Industrial Accelerator Act) as well as public investments in AI gigafactories, quantum computing and a ‘Scaleup Europe Fund’ were pending. Evidently, the growing narrative emphasis on the concept of digital sovereignty has paved the way for accelerated regulatory activity and the allocation of fiscal resources at the EU level.

5 | Conclusion

The present examination of the strategic narratives surrounding digital connectivity and sovereignty reveals a significant evolution in EU digital policy over the past decade. Thus, from a theoretical standpoint, this article contributes to demonstrating how narratives can be constitutive of foreign policy choices with a focus on the technological dimension (cf. Bode et al. 2025; Winkler 2025). Empirically, it argues how connectivity was originally conceived as an open and inclusive concept aimed at enhancing links with other players as an important trading partners. However, the increasing prevalence of strategic competition and crises in world politics has shifted the focus in the EU towards connecting specifically with ‘like-minded’ countries, limiting engagement with systemic rivals and autocracies. While not always explicit in the official discourse, the process was first evident in specific relations with China: the earlier interest in responding to joint opportunities in the context of the BRI has given way to selective antagonism and a drive to offer third countries EU- and Western-centric alternatives via the Global Gateway and other connectivity initiatives. Indeed, the narrative of connectivity takes on different implications primarily due to the deterioration in relations with China—as articulated in the triad of ‘partner, competitor and systemic rival’ of the 2019 *Strategic Outlook*. With regard to digital sovereignty, in turn, it was the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which constituted a crucial turning point and triggered a growing awareness of Europe’s potentially harmful dependencies on external digital infrastructures. Our research reveals the significant transformations that both strategic narratives on digital connectivity and on digital sovereignty

have undergone, shedding light on the EU’s policy action and motivations behind it. It also innovatively demonstrates that the two narratives, intuitively opposing, are actually complementary and interrelated and can therefore coexist.

Having initially developed separately, and representing rather opposing policy directions, digital connectivity and digital sovereignty eventually transformed in a way that allowed them to be regarded as elements of the same strategic agenda. Growing concerns in the EU about the (lack of) competitiveness of European industry in the face of Chinese imports, and the vulnerabilities in European security that have become more apparent with the declining reliability of US guarantees, combined to shift both narratives. The overarching goal has become the achievement of a greater degree of strategic autonomy, both in terms of trade and in defence, through a more targeted cooperation with trusted allies and domestic investments. Consequently, initiatives to enhance connectivity now include mechanisms intended to safeguard sovereignty and vice versa. In this sense, connectivity becomes a means of projecting sovereignty, while sovereignty provides the normative and strategic justification for reshaping connectivity. Taken together, both narratives encapsulate and project the EU’s effort to balance different policy objectives: maintaining the EU’s traditional openness towards global markets, while at the same time safeguarding European values and security and reducing the dependence on third countries.

This comparison of the two strategic narratives leads us to two key conclusions that represent the original innovative contribution of our work. First, by delving into the formation and evolution of both narratives, this article demonstrates how the EU has managed to reconcile different narratives that might at first sight appear to be opposing. Recognising that digital sovereignty does not equate to digital autarchy, the EU simultaneously acknowledges the need for its digital policies to remain ‘open’ and has further developed the narrative to refer to ‘open strategic autonomy’ as its objective in trade policy (European Commission 2021c) and in its external relations posture more generally (European Commission 2021d). Arguably, this stretching of the original concept comes at a price, and critical observers have asked whether this effort is actually more an illusion than a reality (Steinberg 2024). However, our present analysis, identifying overlaps between the sovereignty and the connectivity narratives, also agrees with their conclusion that despite the ‘aspirational’ nature of the commitment to open strategic autonomy, ‘the EU has demonstrated adaptability and progress, indicating a dynamic response to evolving global dynamics’ (Steinberg 2024). At this point, a strategic reorientation towards connectivity with key partners—replacing earlier efforts to engage systemic rivals—has created a discursive space in which openness and sovereignty are not mutually exclusive but actually serve to reinforce one another. In this regard, the concept of EU strategic autonomy can be understood as a diffuse strategy to reduce reliance on others—both partners and rivals—in order to enhance the long-term prospects for security and prosperity.

The second observation arising from our analysis is the recognition of the EU’s search for a ‘middle way’ between two extremes: between an unquestioning—yet increasingly outdated—pursuit of globalisation, on the one hand, and the unilateralism of de-coupling from global trade—as embraced

by the US under the second Trump administration—, on the other. The EU's approach seeks to balance continued economic engagement with other powers, despite associated risks, with the growing caution and selectivity in maintaining such ties. While aware of potential dependencies, especially in the digital realm, the EU's policy-mix aims to avoid the kind of rupture in economic engagement that is implied by the de-coupling efforts of other global powers. What follows from these observations is the conclusion that the EU's strategic narratives in the digital field have evolved in a way that manages to address conflicting aims. Alongside the call for—selective—connectivity with other parts of the world, the EU's search for digital sovereignty—understood in the context of *open* strategic autonomy—appears credible.

A key issue remains, however, the question whether the EU has the capacity—the resources as well as the political will—to adopt the concrete policy choices required to meet its ambitious narrative in the context of rapidly changing circumstances. The EU's purposeful stance towards digital connectivity and digital sovereignty does indeed match the wider developments of the EU's geoeconomic and geopolitical turn (Herranz-Surrallés et al. 2024), in the course of which it has mutated from a 'laggard' to 'institutional innovator' (Bauerle Danzman and Meunier 2024), but the proof of its ultimate commitment will be in the willingness to actually apply these instruments in order to induce or deter other global players.

This observation leads to a final point, namely, to note that this discursive framework will not remain static but likely evolve further. Recent developments suggest that a further evolution in the EU's digital narrative strategy is emerging, characterised by mounting concerns about the regulatory burden and the need to boost competitiveness that have been articulated about the European economy as a whole, not least in the influential Draghi Report (European Commission 2025c). The objective to enhance European competitiveness by lessening the regulatory burden has dominated the EU's legislative agenda under the second von der Leyen Commission, with a series of so-called 'omnibus packages' being adopted to revise previous laws and regulations.

The digital domain is also deeply impacted by this trend, with both digital and AI 'omnibus' proposals signalling an emerging deregulatory impulse designed to recalibrate the balance between regulation, innovation and strategic autonomy (European Commission 2025b; see also Avril 2025). This raises important questions about how the existing narratives of digital sovereignty and connectivity will respond to pressures for 'simplification' and regulatory restraint, and whether they will be rearticulated, diluted or reinforced in the future (Torreblanca 2025).

This domain—the evolution of EU digital policy and the corresponding strategic narratives about autonomy and connectivity—continues to evolve in response to shifts in both internal politics and external pressures. Future research will therefore need to monitor the extent and the direction of the EU's regulatory ambitions, how these interact with its established digital strategies, and whether they lead to changes in its priorities, normative instruments and external engagement.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Annex 1.** Overview of database.