

Quinta edizione del Tech Summit:
Europe and the Tech Oligarchs: Reclaiming Democracy and
Sovereignty in the Digital Age

Report finale del progetto realizzato dall'Ufficio di Roma dello
European Council on Foreign Relations

Il progetto è stato realizzato attraverso le seguenti attività:

1) Una conferenza a Torino, dal titolo **“Europe and the Tech Oligarchs: Reclaiming Democracy and Sovereignty in the Digital Age”** svoltasi il 25 e 26 febbraio 2026, con 51 partecipanti a livello complessivo provenienti dall'Italia e dall'Europa (lista dei partecipanti e agenda a seguire):

- Una **dinner discussion**: “Tech” united, do we stand? How to unlock Europe’s potential (25 febbraio 2026)
- Tre **sessioni di lavoro policy-oriented** (26 febbraio 2026):
 - a) Tech power and the global order: is Europe already late?
 - b) Private power, public risks: Tech oligarchs and Europe’s democratic challenge
 - c) Europe’s last frontier: Defending technological sovereignty in the age of corporate power

2) **Nota finale** dell'incontro (a seguire)

L'evento è stato organizzato dall'Ufficio di Roma di ECFR con il sostegno di Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo; Advisor Scientifico: Fondazione CSF e del Ministero degli Affari esteri e della Cooperazione internazionale.

Tra i partecipanti: I consiglieri ECFR **Armando Barucco**, **Nicolò Russo Perez**, **Fabrizio Tassinari**; 6 esperti pan-europei di ECFR; 3 pan-European fellows ECFR-Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo-Fondazione CSF; **Alberto Alemanno**, Jean Monnet Professor of European Union Law presso HEC Paris; **Jim O'Brien**, già US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs e Distinguished Visiting Fellow di ECFR; **Valbona Zeneli**, Nonresident Senior Fellow presso l'Europe Center e la Transatlantic Security Initiative dello Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security dell'Atlantic Council; **Katja Muñoz**, Senior Research Fellow, Center for Geopolitics, Geoeconomics, and Technology, German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP); **Kalypso Nicolaïdis**, Chair in Global Affairs presso la School of Transnational Governance dell'EUI; **Cornelius Adebahr**, Co-Executive Director dell'Institute for Strategic Dialogue; **Vera Franz**, Founder e Executive Director dell'Economic Democracy Project; **Johannes Späth**, Research Associate, Austrian Institute for International Affairs (OIIP).

Per il Maeci, ha partecipato **Alessandro De Pedys**, Direttore Generale Direttore Generale per le Questioni Cibernetiche, l'Informatica e l'Innovazione Tecnologica.

TECH SUMMIT – 5th edition
EUROPE AND TECH OLIGARCHS: Reclaiming Democracy and Sovereignty in the Digital Age
25-26 February 2026

DAY 1 – 25 February 2026

19:30 – 21:30 Dinner discussion: “Who governs the digital world? European democracy in the age of tech empires”

Technology is reshaping the foundations of democracy, changing how citizens engage and who truly hold power. With tech giants expanding their influence beyond the virtual sphere, European democracies face now a last-call moment. How can the EU and its Member States uphold and protect their values in this context?

Welcome remarks: Nicolò Russo Perez, Director, Fondazione CSF/Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo; ECFR Council Member

Alberto Alemanno, Jean Monnet Professor of European Union Law, HEC Paris; Founder, The Good Lobby

Jim O’Brien, Former US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs; Distinguished Visiting Fellow, ECFR

Valbona Zeneli, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Europe Center and Transatlantic Security Initiative of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Atlantic Council; Senior Fellow, Friends of Europe

Chair: **Barbara Carfagna**, Journalist, RAI; Scientific Committee Member, Fondazione CSF

DAY 2 – 26 February 2026

09:00 – 09:15 Welcome remarks: Arturo Varvelli, Head, ECFR Rome Office and Senior Policy Fellow, ECFR

09:15 – 10:30 PANEL 1: Tech power and the global order: is Europe already late?

From Starlink’s role in Ukraine to digital infrastructure deals across Africa, private Tech companies shape security and development far beyond national borders. Tech oligarchs have become geopolitical actors, and this should imply a response from Europe to protect its values and maintain its influence in the areas of strategic interest. Is Europe already late in tackling this dynamic?

Alessandro De Pedys, Director-General for Cyber Security, Information Technology and Technological Innovation, Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Leo Litra, Senior Policy Fellow, ECFR

Katja Muñoz, Senior Research Fellow, Center for Geopolitics, Geoeconomics, and Technology, German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)

Kalypsos Nicolaïdis, Chair in Global Affairs, School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute (EUI); Director of Research, Transnational Democracy Programme, EUI; Emeritus professor, University of Oxford

Chair: **Maria Tadeo**, Head of EU News, Euronews

10:30 – 11:00 Coffee break

11:00 – 12:15 PANEL 2: *Private power, public risks: Tech oligarchs and Europe's democratic challenge*

Who are today's tech oligarchs, and what do they aim at? From election interference and disinformation to the use of private digital infrastructures in conflicts, their influence already reaches deep into Europe's democratic and security systems. If and how is the European political system reacting? Which partners do they have inside the EU?

Mattia Caniglia, Affiliate Lecturer, University of Glasgow; Senior Intelligence Analyst, Global Disinformation Index (GDI); Pan European Fellow, ECFR

Jeremy Cliffe, Editorial Director and Senior Policy Fellow, ECFR

Teresa Coratella, Deputy Head, ECFR Rome Office and Policy Fellow, ECFR

Johannes Späth, Research Associate, Austrian Institute for International Affairs (OIIP)

Chair: **Eleonora Mongelli**, Vice President and Secretary General, Italian Federation for Human Rights (FIDU)

12:15 – 13:30 PANEL 3: *Europe's last frontier: Defending technological sovereignty in the age of corporate power*

The growing alliance between US political power and its tech oligarchs poses new challenges to European autonomy. Defending technological sovereignty is no longer a technical matter but a democratic imperative. How can the EU resist tech and political coercion? Are regulation, investments, and diplomacy still effective to defend Europe's interests and preserve democratic control over technology?

Cornelius Adebahr, Co-Executive Director, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)

Vera Franz, Founder & Executive Director, Economic Democracy Project

José-Ignacio Torreblanca, Senior Adviser and Distinguished Policy Fellow, ECFR

Chair: **Giorgos Verdi**, Policy Fellow, ECFR

13:30 Closing remarks by Arturo Varvelli, Head, ECFR Rome Office and Senior Policy Fellow, ECFR

Light lunch and departure of participants

TECH SUMMIT – 5th Edition
EUROPE AND TECH OLIGARCHS: Reclaiming Democracy and Sovereignty in the Digital Age

Turin, 25-26 February 2026

List of Participants

1. **Cornelius Adebahr**, Co-Executive Director, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)
2. **Alberto Alemanno**, Jean Monnet Professor of European Union Law, HEC Paris; Founder, The Good Lobby
3. **Luca Barana**, Senior Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI); Pan-European Fellow, ECFR
4. **Armando Barucco**, Secretary General, European University Institute (EUI)
5. **Davide Bergami**, Advisor to the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation on Economic and Financial Affairs
6. **Claudio Bertolotti**, Associate, Italian Army Post Conflict Operations Study Centre; Executive Director, START InSight
7. **Luiza Bialasiewicz**, Professor, Director, Ca' Foscari School for International Education, Università Ca' Foscari
8. **Piero Boccardo**, Director, Ithaca; Professor, Politecnico di Torino
9. **Mattia Caniglia**, Affiliate Lecturer, University of Glasgow; Senior Intelligence Analyst, Global Disinformation Index (GDI); Pan European Fellow, ECFR
10. **Barbara Carfagna**, Journalist, RAI; Scientific Committee Member, Fondazione CSF
11. **Gabriele Carrer**, Journalist, Linkiesta
12. **Jeremy Cliffe**, Editorial Director and Senior Policy Fellow, ECFR
13. **Claudia Colla**, Head, Representation of the European Commission in Milan
14. **Michelangelo Conoscenti**, Professor, University of Turin
15. **Teresa Coratella**, Deputy Head, ECFR Rome Office and Policy Fellow, ECFR
16. **Fabrizio Coticchia**, Professor, University of Genoa
17. **Salvatore Custureri**, Researcher, T6 Ecosystems
18. **Alessandro De Pedys**, Director-General for Cyber Security, Information Technology and Technological Innovation, Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
19. **Michela Favaro**, Deputy Mayor, City of Turin
20. **Vera Franz**, Founder & Executive Director, Economic Democracy Project
21. **Massimo Gaudina**, Special Advisor to the Director, European Training Foundation (ETF)
22. **Beniamino Irdi**, Non-resident Senior Fellow, Global Power Shifts, German Marshall Found of the United States (GMF)
23. **Daniela Irrera**, Professor, Centro Alti Studi per la Difesa (CASD); Chair, European Consortium for Political Research
24. **Leo Litra**, Senior Policy Fellow, ECFR
25. **Viktors Makarovs**, Special Envoy on Digital Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia
26. **Aurora Martella**, Policy Analyst, Future Proof Society
27. **Francesco Mascolo**, Head of Institutional Affairs, International Subsidiary Banks, Intesa Sanpaolo

28. **Eleonora Mongelli**, Vice President and Secretary General, Italian Federation for Human Rights (FIDU)
29. **Katja Muñoz**, Senior Research Fellow, Center for Geopolitics, Geoeconomics, and Technology, German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)
30. **Kalyso Nicolaïdis**, Chair in Global Affairs, School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute (EUI); Director of Research, Transnational Democracy Programme, EUI; Emeritus professor, University of Oxford
31. **Jim O'Brien**, Former US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs; Distinguished Visiting Fellow, ECFR
32. **Alberto Oddenino**, Professor, University of Turin; Board Member, Fondazione CSF
33. **Alberto Orsi**, Group Public Affairs and Policy, Unicredit S.p.a
34. **Nicolò Russo Perez**, Director, Fondazione CSF/Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo; ECFR Council Member
35. **Enrico Petrocelli**, Head of International Institutional Relations, Cassa Depositi e Prestiti
36. **Stefano Sacchi**, Professor, Politecnico di Torino; Board Member, Fondazione CSF
37. **Pietro Sala**, Pan European Fellow, ECFR
38. **Nikola Schmidt**, Head, Centre for Governance of Emerging Technologies, Prague Institute of International Relations
39. **Johannes Späth**, Research Associate, Austrian Institute for International Affairs (OIIP)
40. **Monika Sus**, Part-time Professor, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute (EUI); Associate Professor, Polish Academy of Sciences; Visiting Professor, Center for International Security, Hertie School
41. **Maria Tadeo**, Head of EU News, Euronews
42. **Fabrizio Tassinari**, Executive Director, School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute (EUI); ECFR Council Member
43. **José-Ignacio Torreblanca**, Senior Adviser and Distinguished Policy Fellow, ECFR
44. **Gabrielė Valodskaitė**, Programme Coordinator, European Security Programme, ECFR
45. **Arturo Varvelli**, Head, ECFR Rome Office and Senior Policy Fellow, ECFR
46. **Michele Vellano**, Professor, University of Turin; Board Member, Fondazione CSF
47. **Giorgos Verdi**, Policy Fellow, ECFR
48. **Marco Zatterin**, Journalist; Board Member, Fondazione CSF
49. **Valbona Zeneli**, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Europe Center and Transatlantic Security Initiative of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Atlantic Council; Senior Fellow, Friends of Europe
50. **Angela Ziccardi**, National Office Assistant, Rome office, ECFR
51. **Astrid Ziebarth**, Deputy Managing Director and Senior Fellow, GMF Technology Programme, German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF)

TECH SUMMIT – 5th edition
EUROPE AND TECH OLIGARCHS: Reclaiming Democracy and Sovereignty in the Digital Age
25-26 February 2026

Dinner discussion: “*Who governs the digital world? European democracy in the age of tech empires*”

The dinner discussion started unpacking the growing convergence between major technology companies and political power in the US, particularly as digital firms increasingly depend on governments both economically and strategically. This dependence ranges from public procurement and defence contracts to social media platforms. What emerged was the perception that many of today’s tech giants are no longer primarily driven by innovation, but rather by the preservation of highly profitable and deeply entrenched positions of power. Their alignment with specific political factions was presented as a means to safeguard the disproportionate political influence deriving from their economic dominance.

Against this backdrop, the debate focused on Europe’s challenge of achieving genuine technological sovereignty while facing these tech oligarchs. It was argued that good intentions and regulation alone are insufficient unless accompanied by concrete capabilities.

In particular, two key strategic vulnerabilities emerged. The first concerns Europe’s inability to fully develop integrated digital infrastructures comparable to those provided by companies such as Palantir Technologies: while Europe possesses many of the technological and industrial components required in the defence and security sectors, it still lacks the capacity to effectively aggregate, integrate, and operationalise data at scale. This capability gap was described as central to Europe’s ambition to engage with the US on equal footing in matters of security and technological governance.

The second vulnerability relates to the societal impact of social media platforms, particularly on younger generations. It emerged that EU governments are increasingly expected to reassure citizens that digital platforms are no longer able to exploit addictive design mechanisms unchecked. While limiting usage may play a role, the discussion emphasised that the deeper challenge lies in changing the commercial incentives that drive platform behaviour.

A central theme throughout the discussion was the unprecedented nature of the power accumulated by contemporary tech oligarchs. Unlike traditional economic elites, these actors exercise infrastructural control over the platforms through which political communication, information exchange, and public discourse now take place. This grants them not only economic power, but also a peculiar form of constitutional power, as they increasingly shape the rules governing democratic participation itself. The concentration of control over digital infrastructures in the hands of a very limited number of individuals was described as historically unique.

This concentration of power is further reinforced by a shared ideological orientation among many leading technology actors, characterised by anti-regulatory, techno-libertarian, and anti-system positions. Combined with their growing capacity for direct political intervention, this creates a new fusion between infrastructural dominance and political agency that existing European regulatory tools struggle to address.

In this context, it emerged that the current European regulatory framework – including instruments such as the GDPR, the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act – remains insufficient because it focuses primarily on regulating specific corporate activities rather than confronting the broader concentration of corporate and

political power. The debate suggested the need for a more holistic approach capable of addressing the overall influence exercised by these entities across multiple domains simultaneously.

Another limitation identified was the excessive decentralisation of enforcement within Europe. Regulatory fragmentation among member states risks producing a form of “regulatory federalism,” where national governments compete to appear toughest on digital regulation without contributing to a coherent European strategy. This fragmentation weakens the Union’s overall capacity to act effectively.

At the same time, participants pointed to a growing public awareness across Europe that the current approach toward major technology companies is inadequate. Public demand for stronger European action on social media and digital platforms appears significant, yet this latent political demand has not been effectively translated into a coherent political project capable of advancing deeper European integration and stronger common capabilities. The discussion emphasised that individual political leaders are unlikely to act decisively in isolation without visible public support at the European level.

The transatlantic dimension of technological competition also featured prominently in the dinner discussion. Technological dominance – particularly in artificial intelligence, cloud infrastructure, data governance, and digital infrastructure – is increasingly perceived not simply as an economic issue, but as a matter of geopolitical power. In the context of growing strategic competition between the United States and China, American technology companies are increasingly viewed by Washington as strategic national assets.

By contrast, Europe occupies a structurally weaker position. The European Union remains heavily dependent on American digital infrastructures and lacks globally dominant technology champions in key sectors such as AI and cloud computing. While Europe retains significant regulatory leverage due to the size of its market – often described through the “Brussels effect” – concerns were raised that excessive regulatory burdens could ultimately weaken European companies themselves, particularly if regulation is not accompanied by substantial industrial investment.

As a result, the discussion stressed the importance of complementing regulation with proactive industrial policies aimed at supporting European technological champions, particularly in advanced manufacturing, automation, and strategic technologies. Mobilising both public and private investment was presented as essential if Europe wishes to reduce dependence on foreign technologies and compete internationally. A recurring idea was that Europe cannot sustainably regulate technologies that it does not itself possess or control.

Finally, the debate raised broader geopolitical questions regarding the feasibility of pursuing greater European technological independence while the war in Ukraine continues and while European leaders seek to preserve cooperation with the US on security matters. Although there appears to be broad agreement within the European leadership on the need to strengthen strategic autonomy, concerns remain about how far Europe is willing to push economic or trade tensions with Washington in the current geopolitical context.

Panel 1: “Tech power and the global order: is Europe already late?”

The first panel focused on the relationship between technological power and the evolving global order, questioning whether Europe is already too late to compete effectively in the new geopolitical and digital

landscape. Throughout the discussion, it emerged that Europe is increasingly aware of the scale of the challenge, both at the level of the EU institutions and within national governments.

A recurring theme was that Europe's response cannot rely solely on regulation. While the European model remains strongly rooted in values-based governance and standard-setting, participants emphasised the need for a broader strategy built around three pillars: investments, trusted partnerships, and infrastructure. However, it was also stressed that all these alone are insufficient without a clear political vision and robust accountability mechanisms.

The debate highlighted the importance of coalition-building among democratic actors and identifying common areas of interest with international partners. At the same time, concerns emerged regarding Europe's structural dependencies on external technological actors, particularly in the fields of digital infrastructure, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and defence technologies.

The war in Ukraine was cited as a revealing case study for understanding both Europe's vulnerabilities and the broader transformation of technological power. The conflict has demonstrated how private technological infrastructures can become indispensable components of modern warfare and state functionality. The extensive reliance on Starlink system for Ukrainian communications illustrated how a private actor can effectively exercise strategic influence over military and geopolitical dynamics. This raised broader concerns about the risks associated with depending on privately controlled infrastructures whose availability may ultimately be shaped by corporate interests rather than public accountability.

The discussion suggested that Ukraine remains significantly behind in both hardware and software sovereignty. On the hardware side, building autonomous European satellite systems and secure digital infrastructures was described as a long-term but necessary objective. On the software side, the rapid integration of artificial intelligence into military operations — including navigation systems, target recognition, intelligence analysis, and automated guidance technologies — highlighted Europe's dependence on external actors for advanced digital capabilities and data processing.

Beyond technological capabilities, the panel explored the cultural and ideological dimensions of the current technological race. It emerged that Europe risks defining its ambitions primarily through imitation of the US, rather than through the development of an autonomous strategic vision rooted in European priorities and values. The influence of prominent technology figures associated with techno-libertarian or anti-democratic ideas was discussed as part of a broader phenomenon in which economic and political power increasingly reinforce one another.

The concentration of technological power in the hands of a small number of actors was framed as part of a wider process of privatisation of strategic power. Whereas states traditionally exercised control over key infrastructures and security capabilities, today these functions are increasingly mediated by alliances with private digital platforms and technology companies. This creates multiple layers of dependency: infrastructural dependence on chips, cloud services, and large language models; commercial and regulatory dependence on foreign markets and standards; and defence and security dependence on external technological systems.

Against this backdrop, a central question emerged: can Europe develop technological strategic power while remaining aligned with its democratic values, human dignity principles, and social model? Participants argued that Europe must pursue this path if it wishes to preserve its identity as a political space grounded in fundamental rights and democratic accountability and scepticism was expressed regarding the long-term

effectiveness of relying predominantly on the so-called “Brussels effect”. Rather, it emerged that regulation without industrial and technological capacity risks becoming insufficient. Europe was described as needing to export not only rules, but also technologies, infrastructures, and strategic capabilities.

The discussion also emphasised the need for a more coordinated strategy to address the growing influence of oligarchic structures linked to technological power. This would require not only government action, but also cooperation involving academia, philanthropic actors, civil society organisations, and initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic resilience. Participants suggested that democratic actors may need to adopt more sophisticated and coordinated instruments comparable to those used by powerful technological actors themselves.

Another important theme concerned public awareness and political narratives. It emerged that reclaiming sovereignty from privatised technological power cannot rely exclusively on regulation, but also requires reshaping public understanding of how digital platforms and concentrated technological power affect quality of life, democratic participation, and social cohesion. In this context, regulation was framed not merely as an external geopolitical tool, but also as an internal instrument aimed at improving social protections and preserving the European social model.

At the same time, participants rejected the idea that Europe lacks innovation altogether. Instead, the problem was identified as Europe’s difficulty in scaling up innovation and transforming scientific excellence into globally competitive industrial ecosystems. While the US was portrayed as particularly effective at combining innovation with large-scale commercialisation, Europe was described as strong in research and regulation but weaker in providing the financial support, market conditions, and investment environment necessary for technological growth. The lack of scale-up capacity, combined with insufficient funding and fragmented markets, emerged as one of the central obstacles preventing Europe from fully leveraging its scientific and innovative potential.

Overall, the panel conveyed a sense that Europe is not necessarily too late in terms of knowledge, talent, or technological potential, but that time is rapidly narrowing. Without stronger political coordination, large-scale investment, industrial ambition, and strategic clarity, the EU risks remaining structurally dependent on external powers in the technologies that increasingly define both economic competitiveness and geopolitical influence.

Panel 2: “Private power, public risks: Tech oligarchs and Europe’s democratic challenge”

The second panel explored the growing influence of tech oligarchs on democratic systems in Europe and beyond, focusing on the intersection between political polarisation, hybrid threats and the rise of populism. The discussion framed the current moment as a “perfect storm”, where democratic institutions face simultaneous internal and external pressures amplified by technological infrastructures that often operate without sufficient accountability.

A central theme of the discussion was the ambiguity of large technology actors. The participants highlighted how these companies increasingly move between being market actors, infrastructure providers, and geopolitical players, while remaining outside traditional democratic oversight mechanisms. This blurring of boundaries was identified as a defining feature of contemporary hybrid threats, where distinctions between public and private power, domestic and foreign influence, and information and manipulation become increasingly difficult to trace.

The panel emphasised that the battle over information integrity has become one of the most urgent democratic challenges. Without trustworthy information ecosystems, citizens risk becoming disengaged or vulnerable to manipulation. Participants argued that disinformation, emotional polarisation, and algorithmic amplification contribute to more extreme political environments and weaken democratic resilience.

Several speakers stressed the need for a stronger European democratic response. This would require not only protection against external interference, but also safeguards against internal democratic backsliding. The discussion underlined that democratic defence cannot be limited to security measures alone: it must also involve long-term investments in civic education, democratic culture, and public awareness, acknowledging the increasingly psychological dimension of political conflict.

Italy was discussed as a particularly relevant political laboratory whose dynamics may anticipate broader European trends. The panel identified different forms of political and economic pragmatism that facilitate cooperation between governments and tech oligarchs. On one hand, ideological convergence exists around themes such as anti-woke narratives, freedom of speech rhetoric, demographic anxieties, and scepticism toward European regulation. On the other hand, economic dependency on foreign technological capital encourages governments to welcome private actors as drivers of innovation and digital modernisation, especially in contexts where national digital infrastructure remains weak.

Participants also noted the absence of a broad public debate on these issues in Italy. Discussions around digital sovereignty and the political role of tech companies often remain confined to policymaking circles, despite their broader democratic implications. The panel suggested that the strategies of tech oligarchs align effectively with narratives promoting the transformation of Europe “from within,” particularly through fragmented political systems.

Another major topic was the growing dependency of states on private technological infrastructure. The discussion described how governments increasingly outsource critical digital functions to private companies, prioritising efficiency and ready-made technological solutions over long-term public capacity-building. This shift transforms the state from a protector of digital sovereignty into a consumer of private technology.

Examples discussed during the panel illustrated how public institutions, including security and law enforcement agencies, may become operationally dependent on private companies whose technical expertise exceeds that of democratic institutions themselves. This creates asymmetries of knowledge and influence, raising concerns about accountability, national security, and democratic control.

The conversation also linked the rise of tech oligarchs to broader transformations in European politics. The participants described contemporary European politics as increasingly characterised by volatility, fragmentation, and populism. Radical and hard-right political forces were presented as particularly capable of exploiting crises and adapting their narratives to changing political conditions. In parallel, tech actors were described as having consolidated their influence during periods of instability and crisis.

The discussion highlighted the compatibility between populist politics and the rhetoric of technology companies. Tech corporations often present themselves as direct representatives of “the people” and as alternatives to inefficient state structures, a narrative that resonates strongly within populist political frameworks.

Despite these concerns, the panel did not frame fragmentation and political volatility solely as threats. Instead, participants argued that these dynamics are likely to remain structural features of European politics and should

therefore also be approached as opportunities. Fragmented political environments may create space for new coalitions and for the development of a stronger European agenda on technology, democracy, and sovereignty.

In terms of policy responses, the discussion pointed to several priorities, including stronger antitrust enforcement, fairer taxation regimes, and democratic renewal policies aimed at reducing inequalities that fuel populist resentment. However, participants stressed that technical regulation alone is insufficient. Effective action must also be anchored in a broader political narrative capable of mobilising citizens around democratic values, collective responsibility, and European agency.

The panel concluded by emphasising that addressing the democratic challenge posed by tech oligarchs is not only a matter of institutional strategy, but also one of political sensitivity, public engagement, and democratic imagination.

Panel 3: “Europe’s last frontier: Defending technological sovereignty in the age of corporate power”

The final panel focused on possible tools to defend European sovereignty from political and economic coercion. The discussion started from the assumption that the current moment of heightened public and political awareness represents a significant policy window for advancing sustainable policy solutions.

Participants pointed out how digital policy can no longer be considered a niche topic, as it now lies at the centre of geopolitical struggles. The concentration of power in the digital sphere represents a concentration of political power, since major technology companies control the flow of information on which democratic systems depend. Therefore, rather than just fighting them back, the response should focus on building the democratic world emerging around these phenomena, emphasising the importance of education and democratic culture.

The panel reflected on the structural causes of the current situation, arguing that in recent years policymakers have mainly focused on the downstream effects of Big Tech’s power – such as disinformation, electoral interference, and insufficient content moderation – rather than on the upstream consolidation of political and economic power by tech oligarchs themselves. He also highlighted the absence of a shared European understanding of sovereignty, noting that there is still no consensus on what sovereignty means, where it should apply, or how it should be achieved. At the same time, he warned that Big Tech companies continue to adapt and consolidate their influence.

The conversation then turned to possible solutions. First, it was argued that there is need for stronger political will: tech sovereignty should be framed as directly connected to two of the main priorities of European political leaders: economic stability and security. The major technology companies were not simply described as dominant actors, but as extractive ones, noting that a large majority of EU member states rely on US-based Big Tech companies for critical national security functions.

Participants also discussed the role of public power, highlighting that many European citizens — particularly parents — support stronger government action to limit the influence of Big Tech. The discussion stressed that the issue is not merely one of market imbalance, but of structural dependency. The dominance of a handful of companies was described as creating “choke points” by design, making genuine competition difficult to emerge spontaneously.

Several regulatory proposals were examined. One suggestion was to expand the European Union Digital Markets framework to reduce user lock-in on dominant social media platforms. The objective would be to provide users with genuine choice and create room for safer alternative platforms instead of trapping users within toxic ecosystems controlled by large technology companies.

Another key issue concerned cloud infrastructure, currently dominated by Amazon, Microsoft, and Google. Participants argued that simply increasing public or private investment in technology would not be sufficient in the absence of credible alternatives to hyperscalers. Rather than creating a European equivalent of AWS, the discussion focused on the need to build more open and competitive markets. One proposal was the creation of a “European Digital Resources Exchange,” conceived as a marketplace in which cloud providers would compete on transparent, standardised, and interoperable terms. This, participants argued, could reduce vendor lock-in and switching costs while fostering genuine competition. It was argued that the challenge is not to convince technology companies to exercise their power differently, but rather for Europeans to reclaim their own power.

The discussion also focused on the geopolitical dimension of the issue and stressed the importance of framing and language. He argued that the United States currently has an illiberal government that perceives the European governance model as an obstacle and collaborates with actors seeking to reshape Western and global governance according to their own interests and values. According to him, the US increasingly approaches trade through a mercantilist logic and considers European trade and climate regulations illegitimate. He also pointed to the extensive lobbying efforts aimed at shaping European public discourse and warned that technological infrastructures are increasingly being weaponised.

From this perspective, participants argued that European national security strategies must evolve. He identified three main objectives: sustaining European policies and preferences, deterring coercion by external actors, and developing the capacity to retaliate when coercion occurs. Achieving these goals, he argued, requires not only instruments and strategies but also political coalitions.

The panel also examined existing emergency instruments. Participants mentioned the EU Anti-Coercion Instrument, describing it as frequently referenced but rarely used, and discussed the potential relevance of Article 122 TFEU for national security purposes.

Concrete examples were also raised. One participant referred to the agreement obtained by the Ukrainian government with Starlink, arguing that such capabilities should ideally have been provided by the European Union itself. The discussion also touched on the need for stronger action during elections, with participants calling for greater consistency in enforcing EU regulations and for more direct engagement with digital platform operators.

Final Remarks

The summit closed with a broader reflection on Europe’s future in the digital age. It was highlighted that Europe stands at a crossroads: whether to imitate the US model, abandon liberal constraints, or instead reinforce its constitutional vocation and demonstrate that democracy can deliver even under the conditions created by digital technologies. The discussion ultimately raised questions about the kind of society Europeans want to build and live in, also emphasising the importance of communicating these risks and challenges both “upwards” to institutions and “downwards” to citizens.