

Transport, energy and services of general interest as drivers of sustainable European growth through the digital revolution

In this opinion we tried to reply to the question: How can the digitalization of energy, transport and SGI lead to sustainable development which will protect our environment, address the problem of climate change while guaranteeing economic welfare. Sustainable development should be all inclusive. No one should be left behind: Employees, Businesses, Consumers – especially vulnerable ones - , Farmers, Pensioners, Vulnerable consumers, People with disabilities etc.

The new digitalized and smart environment must be able to deliver economic growth, prosperity, job opportunities, peace and justice, and fight against poverty, inequality, climate change, as required by the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The active participation and engagement of EU citizens - as workers, consumers, prosumers, entrepreneurs, producers, investors and final users - must be at the centre of policy options and actions.

The completion of the EU Single Market still remains one of the most important pillars to enhance European digitalized growth. Enforcement and correct implementation of the existing legislation is necessary both for businesses and consumers. The review of the Single Market White Paper is necessary in order to devise a strategy to complete the Single Market by 2025, for stronger businesses, wider worker and consumer protection in the fields of interconnected and interoperable smart European transport, energy and services of general interest.

The free flow of data is essential. Effective solutions that eliminate the problems associated with the accessibility, interoperability and transfer of data, while securing adequate data protection and privacy, **fair competition and wider consumer choice are needed**. Consumers should be in control of data produced by connected appliances so that consumers' privacy is ensured.

The EC and Member States should allocate enough resources and powers to efficiently monitor and enforce existing legislation. Further, Member States should swiftly adopt the EC's proposal for an EU collective redress scheme.

Artificial intelligence is about to transform all sectors and gives rise to a number of challenges. For instance, guarantees are needed in relation to the **transparency of automatic decision-making and the prevention of discrimination against consumers**. All automated systems, however sophisticated they may be, must operate according to the principle of human control over the machine.

The EC must publish guidance and clarifications on the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to achieve uniform enforcement and a high level of data and consumer protection, including connected and automated cars and Mobility-as-a-service, and to revise product liability and insurance rules to adapt them to a situation where decisions will increasingly be made by software. Cybersecurity is of utmost importance in order to guarantee a safe and accepted transition.

The EC has to develop an appropriate framework for digitalized national healthcare systems to share the health data of EU citizens in compliance with the GDPR, i.e. under strict conditions of privacy and anonymity, for the purposes of research and innovation carried out by EU institutions and companies. Digitalization has the potential to deliver better disease prevention, diagnosis and treatment. Given the growing use of cross-border digital health services and products, it is also key to harmonize the approach to liability for such services and products across the EU. Legislative measures such as strong market surveillance and law enforcement, as well as efficient redress tools for digital health products and services, must be put in place to contribute to the effective protection of EU consumers.

Although the use of 5G is very important for the European competitiveness, in order to be able to assess the potential risks of electromagnetic radiation to human health and the environment, the Commission should conduct a biological impact assessment of 5G radiation.

The digital transformation of the European energy and transport systems demands new skillsets for workers and employees at all levels and underlines the need for stronger links between education and training providers and industry. Education and training is also necessary for citizens and consumers so that they are not excluded from the digital market because of a lack of access to the electronic communications network or due to digital illiteracy. There is a need to improve cyber hygiene also through awareness campaigns among individuals and businesses. Cybersecurity is of utmost importance in order to guarantee a safe transition.

In order that EU stays at the leading point of worldwide progress and competition in a digitalized market of the energy, transport and SGI investments of about 9-10% of EU GDP are needed. So we need to create an investment friendly environment.

Consumers also need to have access to simple and standardized products, especially for consumers who are not experts, elderly consumers and all those in vulnerable situations.

The transport sector has problems to fulfill the SDGs 2 as well as the objectives of the Paris Agreement. Transport is the only sector which has seen its emissions rising in the past decades. Decarbonizing the transport sector is thus of utmost importance if we want to reach the objectives of the Paris agreement.

Electrification of transport, especially for road transport, is probably the most promising technological option to make progress towards zero-emission mobility. With regard to the technology-neutral approach, propulsion technologies other than electricity, such as hydrogen or completely fossil-free liquid fuels such as HVO100, also provide great potential for clean mobility. Beyond technological progress, a modal shift toward public transport and active modes of transport (walking, cycling, and the so-called “micro-mobilities”) are also active means of climate protection. Manufacturing electric batteries will be a factor for energy independence.

Transport policy-making also needs to focus on the completion of a fair, effective and fully digitalized Single Market which brings tangible benefits for all. Today it is still a patchwork.

Digitalization will also be the key for the development of new market models, including various types of platforms and the sharing economy, which is far from being completely developed and will most likely not cover rural areas where public transport is not available. The EC has to guarantee the safety of shared means of transport, starting with electric scooters.

By introducing automatic driving, it should be possible to reduce fatalities significantly. However, driverless cars will only be accepted when they provide the same level safety as other passenger transport systems such as trains or large aircrafts.

Connected and automated mobility solutions across transport modes, including public transport, represent an important area of innovation where the EU has the potential to become a world leader. This can be developed only through cooperation by public and private efforts and investments.

Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS) describes a shift away from personally-owned modes of transportation and towards public transport and mobility solutions that are consumed as a service. The key concept behind MaaS is to offer travelers mobility solutions based on their travel needs.

In the automotive industry, fair access to in-vehicle data will be crucial to ensure that consumers have access to competitive, convenient and innovative mobility services.

All Europeans should have access to secure, sustainable and affordable energy.

Distributed energy solutions and smart controls are becoming cheaper. Smart grids are a key component of this emerging system; with digitalization, they will help to link up new energy environments. The smart energy systems of the future will not develop in isolation: they will connect – digitally and physically – different types of energy and transport networks, with increasing opportunities. Electricity is likely to be the first energy sector impacted. Digitalization will enable stronger connections to the heating and cooling sector, will enhance participation of stakeholders in local, regional and European levels. Local communities and prosumers can get involved in energy communities and energy transactions, boosting European innovation and businesses.

More steps towards eradicating energy poverty are needed. Concrete measures should be taken to facilitate the renovation of buildings and solar panels should be installed for those in, or at risk of, energy poverty. The EU should bear in mind that the poor cannot afford such measures.

The main strategic line is to implement a people-centered approach to delivering services of general interest as drivers of sustainable European growth. The 20th and final principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights deals with "access to essential services" and states that everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications. To take effect, specific sustainable development and cohesion measures are needed.

Digitalization will help move towards e-government, e-health, e-procurement and e-invoicing, allowing public services to share information and making it easier for citizens and businesses to interact.

There is a risk that elderly, or digital illiterate, consumers are excluded as a result of the complete digitalization of SGI. Consequently, some conventional delivery points for these services should be maintained.

The European Semester should include provisions regarding the accountability and transparency of the allocation of services of general interest in Member States as well the access and proper functioning of the services.

Lack of access to SGIs may depend on a range of factors: it may be economic, geographical, social (unequal treatment), physical (due to disability) or the fact of being inappropriate to needs and/or technical progress (mismatch/inadequate level of quality and/or safety). Digital technologies can help overcome some of these challenges.